

David Copperfield

by Charles Dickens, 1850

WORK AND AUTHOR

David Copperfield:

1. Published in 1850.
2. The most autobiographical of any of Dickens' works.
3. This work parallels many of the aspects of Dickens' life. David becomes a successful writer.

Charles Dickens:

1. A Victorian novelist believed by many to be the greatest English writer of all time.
2. His stories are known to almost everyone in the Western world.
3. Dickens' books have endured for more than a century. They still sell well and are widely taught in literature classes.
4. His style has been an inspiration to many writers who have followed him.

THEME AND CONTENTS

1. Set in England during the 19th century, this work deals with the life of an orphan and serves as a social commentary on children's rights at that time.
2. It focuses on:
 - Terrible schools.
 - Child labor.
 - Debtors prisons.
 - Brutality.
 - Love.
 - Death.
 - Lack of compassion for children, particularly poor children.

MAIN CHARACTERS

1. David Copperfield, an orphan who flourishes under affection and respect, but suffers terribly when treated cruelly.
2. Clara Peggotty, a servant who becomes David's surrogate mother.
3. Ham Peggotty, a nephew of Clara's brother, also an orphan.
4. Little Em'ly, another Peggotty orphan, who deserts Ham to run off with James Steerforth.
5. James Steerforth, who betrays David's friendship by seducing Em'ly.
6. Uriah Heep, a classic Dickens villain.
7. Agnes Wickfield, David's second wife.
8. Dora Spenlow, David's first wife.
9. Edward Murdstone, David's cruel stepfather.

STORY

1. After orphaned by the death of his mother, David is treated horribly by his stepfather.
2. David is hired out to a shoe-drying factory by his evil stepfather at age 10.
3. David runs away and finds refuge in his Aunt Betsy's house.
4. After finishing school, David signs on with a law firm.

5. Steerforth, a friend of David's from school, runs away with Em'ly.
6. David marries Dora Spenlow and starts writing fiction.
7. Dora and David lose a baby. Dora dies also.
8. Uriah Heep, who cheated Dora's father, is exposed for his evil deeds and sent to prison.
9. Ham and Steerforth, whom Em'ly has escaped from, both drown in a gale when Ham tries to save Steerforth.
10. David marries Agnes, who turns out to be his dream wife, and becomes a successful writer.

LASTING IMPACT

1. *David Copperfield* is rich in social commentary and morality.
2. It points out the abuses of the school system, prison system, and mental health system.
3. The novel supports the Protestant work ethic most people held at that time and was instrumental in building the United States. The ethic was built on industriousness, hard work, and sobriety. It held that financial and social success was earned through tireless effort and prudent behavior.
4. *David Copperfield* produces an outcome of optimism and hope. At the end of the book, all of the people who have been wronged are righted. This fairy-tale ending is Dickens' way of proclaiming his belief that goodwill, perseverance, humor, and honest work will all be ultimately rewarded.