

# David Copperfield

*Of all my books, I like this the best. It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love them...But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is DAVID COPPERFIELD.* —Charles Dickens, 1867

Told from a first-person point of view, *David Copperfield* is Dickens' most autobiographical work, a *bildungsroman* that traces a boy's struggle to find his place in the world and to master his "undisciplined heart." Like all of Dickens' novels, *David Copperfield* bursts with memorable characters (the ever-hopeful Wilkins Micawber, the creepy Uriah Heep) and probes the social injustices of the time. But *David Copperfield* is, most significantly, a book about memory. Through it Dickens confronts the most painful time in his own life—his experience working at a blacking factory when he was 12. Like David, who calls it "a period of my life, which I can never lose the remembrance of," Charles Dickens (who shared the same initials as David Copperfield—D.C.—but reversed) believed that this one experience marked him forever, which perhaps explains why there is a helpless or persecuted child at the center of so many of his novels. But in *David Copperfield*, which follows David's journey from birth to a successful adult life as an author, it is David's ability to use memory to make sense of and integrate all his experiences, whether happy or traumatic, that make him, in the end, truly "the hero of [his] own life."

## Discussion Questions

1. The famous first line of *David Copperfield* is, "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." How might this film be seen as a response to that first line? What five events from the novel or film would you choose as the most important in this quest? Why?
2. Throughout the novel, David Copperfield is called by several names and nicknames, each one emblematic of how he is seen by the namer and/or of a particular stage in his life. By what names is David known, and what does each tell about who he is or how he is perceived? By what names have you been known, and what does each say about you? Which of your names best represents you? Least represents you?
3. *David Copperfield* is famous for its scene-stealing secondary characters, many of whom Dickens makes memorable through a signature catchphrase, a unique physical

characteristic, a notable hobby, a pet peeve, or an accessory. The filmmakers also captured the idiosyncrasies of each of the following characters. As you watch, or after you have finished, identify what bit of “shorthand” Dickens used to make each unique. How do the actors make each character come alive?

Miss Murdstone	Mrs. Micawber	Mrs. Gummidge
Mr. Barkis	Mr. Creakle	Aunt Betsey
Wilkins Micawber	Uriah Heep	Mr. Dick

- David Copperfield* is a classic *bildungsroman* in which the main character grows from child to adult through a long and arduous journey of psychological, moral, and social self-understanding. What factors from your past and family background do you think most make you who you are today? Why? Do you think the process of “coming into one’s own” means separating oneself from the expectations of other people, whether family or society in general?
- Not only was *David Copperfield* Dickens’ favorite book, it was also the book that was closest to his own life experience. How important do you think it is to know about an author’s life in order to understand his or her works? Do you think an artist can “work through” personal trauma via his or her art?
- NOVEL TO FILM: Compare the written and filmed versions of the famous blacking factory scene. How does the film translate its horror? What happens when Mr. Micawber comes on the scene? How do both the book and film convey the change in tone? (Read through paragraph 21 of Chapter 11 “I Begin Life on My Own Account, and Don’t Like It,” which can also be found at Bartleby.com at [bartleby.com/307/11.html](http://bartleby.com/307/11.html).)
- David Copperfield* was also Freud’s favorite novel. (For background on Freud, visit Sigmund Freud—Life and Work at [www.freudfile.org](http://www.freudfile.org) and click on “Theories.”) Why do you think this novel was so interesting to Freud?
- When told about his engagement to Dora, Aunt Betsey calls David “Blind! Blind! Blind!” about love. Do you think this is true? About which other relationships do you think he is “blind”? About which past or present relationships in your own life might an observer say you are or have been “Blind! Blind! Blind!”

For more information, check out the [MASTERPIECE David Copperfield Web site](#).

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