***David Copperfield***

### *Chapter 11 – I Begin Life on my Own Account, and Don't Like It*

***Summary:***

* As an adult, David isn't surprised by much, but he's still surprised to remember how young he was when he was thrown away.
* So, at *10 years old* (we can't get over this), David becomes a worker at Murdstone and Grinby's wine warehouse.
* David's job is to look at empty bottles, make sure they're not too flawed for use for bottling wine, rinse them out, label them, seal them, and pack them away in casks once they've been filled.
* The first day that David gets to the warehouse, Quinion sets an older boy to teach David his job: this boy's name is Mick Walker.
* Mick introduces David to a kid nicknamed Mealy Potatoes because he's pale like a potato.
* Spending time with these two working kids, David starts to miss the company of his old school buddies.
* David increasingly despairs of growing up to be a distinguished, educated man.
* At around 12:30, Quinion calls David into the counting house (his accounting office).
* There, David sees a middle-aged bald guy.
* Quinion introduces David to the stranger, whose name is Mr. Micawber.
* Mr. Micawber is David's new landlord.
* Mr. Micawber speaks to David in a very stiff, formal manner, but he also seems friendly. He offers to come meet David after work and walk him to the Micawber home so David won't get lost.
* Mr. Micawber leaves the counting house.
* Quinion explains to David that he will make six shillings a week (which is about U.S. $40 in today's money ([**source**](http://www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk/)).
* David uses a little bit of his first week's wages to pay Mealy Potatoes to help him with his trunk to Mr. Micawber's house (which is called Windsor Terrace).
* Mr. Micawber arrives to pick David up at the right time, and they walk over to Windsor Terrace together.
* The house is like Mr. Micawber: shabby, but attempting to look as good as it can.
* Mr. Micawber has a wife and four children: two infant twins, a girl of around three, and a boy of about four.
* There is also a girl who works for the Micawbers, whom they rescued from the poor house. She is "the Orfling" – the orphan.
* Mrs. Micawber is constantly breast-feeding one or both of these twins, which startles David a bit.
* Mr. Micawber is in a bad financial place right now; he tells David all about it. This is the reason the Micawbers are taking him on as a lodger.
* She continues to complain: the people Mr. Micawber owes money to can't get *blood* from a *stone*.
* David has no idea why Mrs. Micawber is confessing all of this family business to David – does she think he's older than he is? At any rate, the Micawbers totally take David into their confidence.
* Creditors – people who collect debts – visit the Micawbers all the time.
* These visits really embarrass Mr. Micawber, but he bounces back pretty quick: he threatens to kill himself one minute and then settles down to polishing his shoes the next.
* The same is true of Mrs. Micawber: she'll faint over their tax situation one minute and then eat a heavy meal the next.
* David is so young and childish at this point that he often can't resist buying a pastry in the morning, which leaves him with no money to buy dinner at night.
* Because David is such a child, sometimes the pubs worry about serving him because they think he has run away.
* David's condition is pretty appalling: when he's not working, he's got nothing better to do than hang around the streets.
* Even though he's so poor and unhappy, he has some status at the warehouse because his manners are so much better than those of the other boys. The boys call him "the little gent" or "the young Suffolker," because he's from the country county of Suffolk rather than London.
* David has absolutely no hope that his life is going to get better, so he doesn't reveal how unhappy he is in his letters to Peggotty.
* David does start to get attached to the Micawbers.
* There's a lot of sympathy between David and the Micawbers because they are all struggling with money.
* Finally, one Wednesday, Mrs. Micawber comes entirely clean: she and Mr. Micawber no longer have anything at all left to eat.
* David offers to lend her some of his (very little) money, and she refuses.
* What she wants is for David to go and pawn some of her things for her. She can't because she's busy nursing the twins, and Mr. Micawber won't because he has so much pride.
* David understands at last, and promises Mrs. Micawber that he'll pawn whatever she wants him to on his way to work.
* So, he starts visiting the pawnshop (Clickett's) almost every morning before work.
* Mr. Micawber also gets David to sell off Mr. Micawber's books for him.
* David becomes very well known at the local used bookstore and pawnshop.
* Finally, everything comes to a head, and Mr. Micawber gets arrested and sent to debtors' prison.
* (Debtors' prison was a nineteenth-century English institution. When people couldn't pay their taxes or other debts, they would be arrested and sent to these workhouses to stay for varying lengths of time. Even though it's called a "prison," these aren't prisons the same way we know them – while the people in them couldn't come or go freely, they could have their families to live with them.)
* The following Sunday after Mr. Micawber's arrest, David goes to visit him in prison.
* Mr. Micawber sends David up to Captain Hopkins, another debtor, to borrow a knife and fork.
* Captain Hopkins has his whole family in there: a woman to whom he's not married and their two children.
* David enjoys his meal with Mr. Micawber, even though he's eating with borrowed cutlery.
* When David goes back to Windsor Terrace, he comforts Mrs. Micawber, telling her that her husband seems to be in high spirits.
* Mrs. Micawber finally decides to move into the debtors prison with Mr. Micawber, and she hands over the keys of the Micawber house to their landlord.
* David moves to a small room near the debtors prison because he doesn't want to part with the Micawbers.
* The Orfling also moves to a similar small room in the same neighborhood.
* David quite enjoys his quiet new home.
* Throughout all of these upheavals with the Micawbers, David keeps doing to the same dreary, lonely work, day in and day out at the wine warehouse.
* The only changes David notices in himself is that, first, his clothes are getting worse and worse, and second, he feels relieved that the Micawbers are pretty safe inside their prison.
* In fact, the Micawbers are more comfortable in the prison than outside of it: at least they get regular food.
* David regularly goes to have breakfast at the debtors prison; he sometimes meets up with the Orfling at the wharves on the Thames river, and then in the evening, he returns to the prison to talk to (or play cards with) the Micawbers.
* David's not too clear on the details of Mr. Micawber's debt (he is, after all, ten, and can't really follow heavy financial details too well).
* All David knows for sure is that, one day, Mrs. Micawber informs David that she has persuaded Mr. Micawber to apply for freedom from debtors prison under the "Insolvent Debtors Act," which should make him a free man in about six weeks.
* Mr. Micawber is an energetic man who is never so happy as when he's working hard at something that won't make him any money.
* At this time, Mr. Micawber is busy preparing a petition to the House of Commons (the British equivalent of the American Congress) to change the law allowing imprisonment for debt.
* Mr. Micawber presents this petition to the other prisoners, who view Mr. Micawber as an authority because he is a gentleman.
* Captain Hopkins reads the petition aloud to the prisoners to persuade them to sign.
* They are all strongly in support of Mr. Micawber's petition.
* David looks back on his youth and wonders at what strange, romantic histories he invented for the poor, lowly people he knew back then.

***Synopsis:***

David goes to work for the firm of Murdstone and Grinby, a company chiefly involved in shipping wine and spirits. David's job is to refill old bottles and pack them for shipment. David goes to live in the spare room of the Micawber family. The Micawber family is plagued with debt but has high-class manners. David can barely make ends meet on his small salary and often goes hungry. He is soon pawning things for the Micawbers so that they can buy food.

Mr. Micawber is eventually arrested and put in Debtor's Prison. His family joins him there and David takes a cheap room nearby. The Micawbers slowly scheme their way out of debt, mainly relying on the charity of family members. David is very affected by the time he spends visiting them in the prison. Other than those visits, his life is very lonely as he goes to and from work.

David's new life is horrible and contributes one of the strongest images for a running theme throughout the novel: opposition to child labor. During this time, the reader is reminded that David is only ten years old. His hunger and poverty are in parallel to the Micawber family, who has sunk deep into debt despite their upper class beginnings. David and the Micawbers illustrate the hardships of life in the nineteenth century and the ways in which those more fortunate ignore the problems of the poor.

***Critical Analysis:***

After the funeral, the Murdstones fire Peggotty. Instead of trying to humiliate and punish David, they completely ignore him. When Peggotty tells David that she is returning to her family in Yarmouth, she suggests that he come with her for a visit in order to get out of the Murdstone house for a while. When the two of them go to Yarmouth, they ride with the same carriage driver, Mr. Barkis, who continues to drop hints about his willingness to marry Peggotty. When they reach Yarmouth, Peggotty asks David if he thinks it would be a good idea to marry Mr. Barkis. David is enthusiastic about the possible union.

David settles back into his routines at Yarmouth, and renews his crush on Emily. One day, David, Emily, Peggotty, and Mr. Barkis go on a picnic. One the way to the picnic, Mr. Barkis and Peggotty take a quick detour into a church and come out married.

David eventually must go home to the Murdstones after his pleasant vacation. At first the Murdstones continue to ignore him. Finally, Mr. Murdstone arranges for David to take a job at a counting house in London connected to the Murdstone family.

This chapter provides a pleasant interlude in David's misfortunes. His bonds with Peggotty's family grow stronger and will continue to be some of the dominant bonds he will form throughout his life. As for his new job in London, it is assumed that this will have some negative outcome because the job has some connection with Mr. Murdstone. The presence of Mr. Murdstone's old friends who participated in some of the deceptions surrounding the marriage between Murdstone and David's mother also bodes ill for David's future in London.

***Summary and analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

[David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) remarks that although he is less naïve than he used to be, he still finds it hard to believe that he was cast off at such a young age to become a "little labouring hind in the service of Murdstone and Grinby."

***Analysis Part 1:***

David's words here highlight a point made in the preceding chapter about the darker side of the Victorian emphasis on self-reliance and industriousness. Although David is ostensibly at Murdstone and Grinby for his own good, it's clear to him even at the time that his removal from school and his new position in the counting-house will stunt his growth and limit his prospects.

***Summary Part 2:***

Murdstone and Grinby turns out to be a warehouse in Blackfriars—a region of central London. The counting-house is on the Thames, and is constantly wet and dirty as a result. Most of its business comes from supplying alcohol to packet ships, and [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield)'s job is to clean, label, cork, and pack bottles. Although he shares this work with a few other boys his age, he feels "agony" and "shame" over his new position in life and misses his friends at Salem House.

***Analysis Part 2:***

David Copperfield is mostly concerned with upward mobility, but David's time at the counting-house is a grim reminder that it's possible to slide down the social ladder as well. David is now a member of the working classes, and without any hope of further education, his prospects for climbing back into the middle class are limited.

***Summary Part 3:***

On [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield)'s first day at work, [Mr. Quinion](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters) introduces him to [Mr. Micawber](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-micawber)—David's new sublettor. Micawber is a "stoutish, middle-aged person" who speaks in an ornate and over-the-top manner that nevertheless impresses David. Micawber returns later that day to escort David to his home, which is "shabby like [Micawber], but […] made all the show it could." He then introduces David to his family—four children and his wife, [Mrs. Micawber](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mrs-micawber), who looks tired and overwhelmed.

***Analysis Part 3:***

The Micawbers do not fit easily into the Victorian class system, and Mr. Micawber's appearance and mannerisms underscore that point: he dresses in a respectable style, but his clothes are shabby, and his ostentatious way of speaking seems intended to make himself seem more well-to-do than he actually is. The latter in particular is significant, because it implies that not everyone can or should aspire to rise in society: Micawber's attempts to craft a more genteel persona for himself come across as somewhat ridiculous.

***Summary Part 4:***

[Mrs. Micawber](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mrs-micawber) shows [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) his room and laments the necessity of taking in lodgers, implying that she grew up in more genteel circumstances. She also reveals that [Mr. Micawber](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-micawber) is in debt, and that her efforts to earn money to pay off their creditors have so far been in vain. David further explains that throughout his stay with the Micawbers, the couple received a stream of visits from creditors that would throw both of them into temporary fits of despair.

***Analysis Part 4:***

Like her husband, Mrs. Micawber constantly draws attention to her respectable and middle-class status in a way the novel implies a securely middle-class person wouldn't do. The fact that Mr. Micawber is in debt, meanwhile, suggests a reason why the Micawbers' poverty might be justified to the Victorian mind: the implication is that he lacks the self-discipline to work hard and/or the restraint to avoid overspending.

***Summary part 5:***

Throughout this period, [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone) pays for [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield)'s lodgings, but expects David to pay for his own food and other necessities. Being "young and childish," however, David sometimes spends all his money on a treat, forcing him to go without a meal later on. Even when he spends his money wisely, David is prone to being taken advantage of by older and more experienced shopkeepers.

***Analysis Part 5:***

Considering his very young age, David shows amazing self-control when it comes to spending his wages. Still, he isn't truly ready to take on the task of providing for himself and planning his own life. This doesn't necessarily reflect badly on him, however; Dickens was generally a critic of child labor, having worked in a blacking factory himself as a boy.

***Summary Part 6:***

Meanwhile, [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) continues to suffer silently at the counting-house. He quickly becomes proficient at the work, but his "conduct and manner" ensure that he remains somewhat estranged from the other boys. He is also preoccupied by the problems of the Micawbers, with whom he has grown very close. He is careful not to accept their offers to dine with them, however, for fear of making their financial difficulties worse.

***Analysis Part 6:***

Despite being functionally working-class at this point, David's middle-class upbringing remains a barrier between him and his fellow workers. This is another indication of the limits the novel places on social mobility: whether due of innate differences or learned ones, the middle and working classes remain distinct.

***Summary Part 7:***

One day, [Mrs. Micawber](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mrs-micawber) approaches [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) and confesses that the family has run out of food, and David offers to give her the money he has in his pocket. Mrs. Micawber refuses, but begins to describe all the items she has pawned or sold, and how painful it has been. David, taking the hint, offers to carry out the transactions for her, and soon disposes of the Micawbers' "more portable articles of property," including [Mr. Micawber](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-micawber)'s books. This is not enough to put an end to the family's troubles, however, and Mr. Micawber is eventually arrested for debt.

***Analysis Part 7:***

The items the Micawbers begin to sell off are in many ways markers of middle-class status. Micawber's books, for instance, aren't basic necessities, but rather items that make the Micawbers' lives and household more comfortable. The fact that they can no longer maintain the appearance of middle-class life is a sign of just how desperate their situation is becoming.Home and Family Theme Icon

***Summary Part 8:***

[David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) goes to visit [Mr. Micawber](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-micawber) in prison, and Micawber warns him not to mismanage his money as he himself has. Immediately after this, however, he borrows a shilling from David, and the two have dinner together.

***Analysis Part 8:***

Although Mr. Micawber theoretically realizes the importance of discipline and restraint, he doesn't seem capable of applying that knowledge to his own life. Given Micawber's melodramatic tendencies, it seems likely that his words to David are less about sharing advice than they are about cultivating an image of himself as a long-suffering victim.

***Summary part 9:***

The Micawbers sell off the rest of their furniture, but this is still not enough to secure [Mr. Micawber's](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-micawber) release. [Mrs. Micawber](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mrs-micawber) therefore moves into prison with him, and [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) moves to a room nearby to keep them company. The Micawbers are in some sense better off in prison, where they receive assistance from their relations, and this in turn relieves some of David's anxiety. He is still unhappy and lonely at work, but he will eventually consider himself fortunate not to have associated too much with the other workers.

***Analysis Part 9:***

The fact that the Micawbers are more suited to life in debtor's prison than life outside of it reveals just how unforgiving Victorian society is of anyone who fails to live up to its ideals of hard work and determination; prison is ultimately preferable to freedom under the constant threat of poverty and homelessness. Meanwhile, David's anxiety about spending too much time with lower-class boys reveals a degree of disdain for the working classes, as well as a fear that working-class traits or behaviors are contagious.

***Summary part 10:***

Eventually, [Mr. Micawber](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-micawber) decides to apply for release under the "Insolvent Debtors Act." In the meantime, he drums up the other inmates' interest in a petition to change the laws surrounding debt and imprisonment. [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) is there when the prisoners sign this document, and mentally invents backstories for all of them. Many years later, David recalls these events and pictures himself as a young boy, "making his imaginative world out of such strange experiences and sordid things."

***Analysis Part 10:***

Even during one of the bleakest periods of his life, David is (unwittingly) developing habits that will later lead to his success as an author. By contrast, Mr. Micawber is also hard at work, but not on anything that's likely to advance his own prospects. David remarks that this kind of misdirected determination is typical of Mr. Micawber, revealing one more way in which Micawber is at odds with Victorian ideology.

***Quotations:***

***Quotation 1:***

1. I wonder what they thought of me!

***Explanation:***

David expresses this feeling of curiosity in Chapter XI while relating his boyhood trials working in the wine factory. Specifically, the adult David thinks back on how the people near the public house must have perceived him, a young boy eating his bread alone. As the narrator, looking back on his life in retrospect, David often makes such remarks, indicating how pathetic he finds himself as a small boy with nothing to eat, nowhere to go, and no one to care for him. The adult David feels sympathy for himself as a young, abused boy, and as he writes, he often reflects both on his own failings and on the cruelties the world visits on him as a boy. This introspection shows how the older David has learned from the experiences of his life. In particular, the early period of David’s life described in this passage closely mirrors the life of Dickens himself, who may have written these lines in honest self-reflection, picturing himself alone in London at age twelve, left alone to fend for himself as best he could.