***David Copperfield***

### *Chapter 18 – A Retrospect*

***Summary:***

* David looks back on his school days.
* David is not the least successful boy in school, but he's still a long way off from being the first one (Adams).
* Adams is not as superior as Steerforth, but David still wonders what he'll be when he leaves the school – he's sure that Adam will be amazing.
* David has a crush on Miss Shepherd, who boards at a school run by the Misses Nettingalls.
* The Misses Nettingalls' pupils go to the same church that Doctor Strong's students attend.
* Luckily, David and Miss Shepherd also go to the same dancing school.
* David gives Miss Shepherd little presents: brazil nuts, cookies, and oranges.
* Slowly, however, they grow apart: David hears that Miss Shepherd wishes David didn't stare at her so much.
* Worse still, Miss Shepherd has a crush on Jones, one of his schoolfellows.
* One day, David happens to walk past the Misses Nettingalls' girls and sees Miss Shepherd making a face at him and then laughing to her friends. He's done with her.
* David grows older, and decides that he's above the Misses Nettingalls' young ladies. He's too good for them and for dancing school.
* Doctor Strong calls David a promising scholar, and Mr. Dick and Miss Betsey are both very proud of him.
* A young butcher in the town threatens to beat up Doctor Strong's boys because they think they're so great.
* In fact, he stops a couple of the younger boys and punches them.
* This butcher challenges David directly, and so David decides to fight him.
* The butcher totally kicks David's butt, and he has to stay home for a couple of days to recover.
* Agnes nurses David. She agrees that David had no choice but to fight the butcher (his honor was at stake!).
* Adams graduates from the school and goes on to become a lawyer.
* David no longer thinks Adams is so very great: he suddenly seems very meek and not at all grand.
* Now David is head boy! He feels about a million miles away from the little boy he was when he first arrived at Doctor Strong's school.
* And Agnes has also grown up: she is like a calm, sweet sister to David.
* David has fallen in love yet again, this time, with the eldest Miss Larkins.
* Miss Larkins is a tall woman of about thirty, and David is head over heels for her.
* David plans to go to a ball that he knows Miss Larkins will also attend.
* When he can't be with Miss Larkins, he tries to catch the eye of her father, Mr. Larkin.
* David worries that, at 17, he may be too young for Miss Larkins. But so what! He'll be 21 soon!
* Fantasies run through David's head of Miss Betsey giving him her blessing to marry Miss Larkins and offering him a fortune of 20,000 pounds.
* Sadly, in real life, he also notices that Miss Larkins is very popular with the army officers in the town: he starts to worry that she won't even notice him.
* So, David finally makes it to the ball and asks Miss Larkins to dance.
* David tells Miss Larkins that he doesn't want to dance with anyone else.
* They do dance together, and David is pleased that he has snatched Miss Larkins from the arms of Captain Bailey.
* David asks Miss Larkins for a flower, which he then kisses and pins to his chest. (Seriously.)
* Miss Larkins tells David that he is very bold, and then asks to be escorted back to Captain Bailey.
* Miss Larkins later approaches David with a plain, somewhat older gentleman on her arm.
* She introduces David to Mr. Chestle, who is in the hops trade (hops are flower clusters that are key in the beer and ale brewing process).
* David thinks that Mr. Chestle must be some friend of the family, and is very proud of the introduction.
* He's absolutely thrilled at this attention from Miss Larkins.
* That is, until several weeks later, when Agnes tells him at dinner that Miss Larkins has just gotten married.
* To Captain Bailey? Nope, to *Mr. Chestle*.
* David is miserable, stops wearing his best clothes, and throws away Miss Larkins' flower.
* Tired of the whole dating scene, David challenges the butcher to another fight and beats him.
* He feels a bit better. And that's David's rise to the age of 17!

***Synopsis:***

David continues to do well in school and develops a series of romantic attachments to women of the neighborhood. David is growing up, and so is Agnes. David shares his romantic troubles with Agnes, and she teases him about the temporary nature of his affections. David recounts two crushes in particular. One is a local schoolgirl, who briefly returns his affection and then rejects him. The other is a much older woman who flirts with David and then marries another man.

David's memories of attending school in Canterbury revolve mainly around his various romantic attachments. This is a continuing theme in his life, in which his emotional world is taken over by one girl or another. The relationship between David and Agnes develops as he turns to her with all his romantic problems.

***Critical Analysis (Ch 15-18):***

In retrospect, the adult David recounts several years in Doctor Strong’s school and his two love interests during his time there—a young girl named Miss Shepherd and an older woman named Miss Larkins. David also recalls a fistfight he had with a young arrogant butcher. Eventually, to his surprise, David rose to be the top boy at the school. When he was seventeen, he graduated.

The retrospective Chapter XVIII marks the end of David’s boyhood and his entrance into the world as a man. Throughout his childhood, David’s character traits remain fairly constant. Although his life changes radically and frequently, often in cruel ways, David remains for the most part the naïve, hopeful boy he is in the first chapters of the novel, when his mother is alive. As David later observes when speaking of Uriah Heep, a miserable childhood can easily turn a boy into a monster. David’s resilience, in contrast, is striking. Nonetheless, for all his pride in his growth, David remains gullible. This innocence lends a freshness to the narrative’s perspective—a freshness that has prompted many critics to label David Copperfield the finest portrayal of childhood ever written. As David grows older, he does remain somewhat simple-hearted and maintains a startling faith in humanity, but his narrative perspective does mature alongside him. David gradually leaves his childhood romanticism behind and looks at the world in more realistic terms, and the novel’s narrative tone reflects this change.

Mr. Dick, who is both a man and a boy, contrasts with the other adult male characters in the novel, who tend to be harsh and gruff. In a story focused on the process of maturation, Mr. Dick is a model of a mature adult who is not jaded by the cruelties of the world. Like Miss Mowcher, who appears later in the novel, Mr. Dick might be described as a young mind in an adult body. Like a boy, he is unable to control his impulses or order his thoughts. Furthermore, as an innocent character, Mr. Dick demonstrates the power of love over cruelty within the moral framework of the novel. Mr. Dick’s love for David and Miss Betsey gives his character moral credibility throughout the novel. In the closing chapters of David Copperfield, Mr. Dick becomes heroic in his own right, demonstrating the supremacy of simplicity and gentleness over cunning and violence. In this way, he shows that craftiness does not signify maturity or adulthood—an important lesson for David as he becomes a man.

At one point or another, each of the admirable adult characters in the story becomes slightly crazy, allowing Dickens to explore the relationship between intelligence and insanity. Miss Betsey’s obsession with donkeys makes her eccentric to the point of madness. Most of the characters consider Doctor Strong’s faith in Annie to be lunatic. Later, Mr. Peggotty’s faith in Little Em’ly leads some to consider him a raving madman travelling the countryside in search of his niece. Although the outside world would dismiss many of Dickens’s characters as insane, within David Copperfield, characters who are crazy are often of high moral quality. This contrast emphasizes Dickens’s rejection of the logic of the external world, which he sees as flawed. In the same way that Dickens rejects class as a marker of a good heart, he likewise rejects sanity as a marker of maturity. Instead, he focuses on the purity of his characters’ intentions and their willingness to follow their convictions.

***Critical Study (17-18):***

David, in corresponding with Peggotty, returns the half guinea she loaned him, and he learns from her that the Murdstones have moved from the house in Blunderstone, leaving it "shut up, to be let or sold."

At school, David is visited, occasionally, by his aunt and also by Mr. Dick on alternate Wednesdays. On one of Mr. Dick's visits, he tells David about a strange man who has been hanging around the Trotwood house frightening Aunt Betsey and causing her to faint. Unaccountably, Mr. Dick has seen her give money to the strange man.

Uriah Heep asks David to have tea with him and his mother, if their "umbleness" doesn't prevent him. David accepts the invitation, and that evening he meets Mrs. Heep, "the dead image of Uriah, only short." Although there has been a considerable lapse of time since Mr. Heep's death, Mrs. Heep is still wearing "weeds" (black mourning dresses).

Mrs. Heep and her son proceed to "worm things out" of David, first about his past life, and then about Mr. Wickfleld and Agnes. David has begun to feel "a little uncomfortable" and to wish himself "well out of the visit," when Mr. Micawber suddenly appears. He has been walking down the street and through the open door, he spied David. David introduces Micawber to Uriah and his mother.

The next evening, David looks out of the windows and is surprised to see Mr. Micawber and Uriah Heep "walk past, arm in arm. He learns, the next day when he dines with the Micawbers, that Mr. Micawber went home with Uriah and drank brandy and water at Mrs. Heep's. Micawber is much impressed with Uriah and says that if he had known him when his "difficulties came to a crisis . . . my creditors would have been a great deal better managed" than they were.

The next morning, David receives a note from Mr. Micawber saying that there is no hope of receiving the money from London, and indicating that Micawber will soon be returning to debtors' prison. David, on his way to school, hurries toward the hotel "to soothe Mr. Micawber with a word of comfort." However, he meets "the London coach with Mr. and Mrs. Micawber up behind, Mr. Micawber the very picture of tranquil enjoyment." David is both relieved and sorry at their going.

David reminisces about his school days. He remembers being in love with Miss Shepherd, "a little girl . . . with a round face and curly flaxen hair," and how "all was over" when she made a face and laughed at him one day. He also remembers the boys at Doctor Strong's school and how the Doctor "waylaid the smaller boys to punch their unprotected heads."

In time, David becomes the head-boy at the school, and he feels that the boy he was when he first came to the school is no longer part of him. "That boy is gone"; also gone is the little girl he "saw on that first day at Mr. Wickfield's . . . In her stead, the perfect likeness of [her mother's] picture — a child-likeness no more — moves about the house, and Agnes . . . is quite a woman."

Again David is in love, this time with Miss Larkins, a woman of about thirty. Although she has many officers as admirers, David dreams of winning her. He dances with her at a ball, and for several days afterward, he is lost "in rapturous reflections." One day Agnes tells him that Miss Larkins is to be married to an elderly hop-grower, Mr. Chestle. David is "terribly dejected for about a week or two." He is now seventeen.

In Chapter 17, we have the first of several far-fetched coincidences that appear in the novel. The possibility of Mr. Micawber's just happening by at a time when David is in an awkward position, and wishes to escape, is very remote. It may be argued that such things do indeed happen now and then in real life, but they happen so rarely that when a coincidence is used in a novel — just to further the plot — it does seem artificial, especially to today's readers.

Also artificial (for today's readers) is Dickens' use of a mysterious stranger, whose identity is not revealed for some time (although it is not impossible to guess at once who he is). The stranger was used by Dickens to heighten reader interest and to add an element of suspense to the story; the novel, remember, was originally published in serial form and many of the conventions that you are reading here were original with Dickens and were borrowed by many lesser and later writers.

With Chapter 18, we are now at the end of what many readers believe is the finest part of the novel — David's childhood and school days. We have watched him grow from babyhood to the age of seventeen, and he has become, through Dickens' great sympathy for him, a truly believable character. In fact, David may well be the only truly believable character in the novel; most of the others merely possess exaggerations of the traits we meet every day.

***Significance:***

David Copperfield looks back on memories of his school days. He sees himself giving little gifts and kisses to Miss Shepherd, his partner at dancing school. But she rejects his attention and he focuses on his school work. He challenges a young butcher who bullies Doctor Strong's boys. He loses the fight but is nursed and consoled by [Agnes Wickfield](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/David-Copperfield/character-analysis/#Agnes_Wickfield). Time passes and David becomes the head boy at school, barely recognizing the boy he was when he first arrived there. Agnes, too, has changed and is now a young woman. David thinks of her as his "sweet sister" and "better angel." At age 17, David falls in love again, with Miss Larkins, a woman of 30. He dances with her twice and flirts with her at a ball. He thinks his fantasies about her are about to come true, but his hopes are dashed when he learns she's going to marry an elderly hop-grower. After spending some time moping, David challenges the butcher to another fight, and this time he wins.

In Chapter 16, there seems to be a suspicion of an improper relationship between Jack Maldon and Annie Strong, and this suspicion will cast a shadow over Annie for some time before it is resolved.

In Chapter 17 when [David Copperfield](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/David-Copperfield/character-analysis/#David_Copperfield) notes, in describing Mrs. Heep, "she still wore weeds," he's referring to the black clothing worn by a widow for a year after the death of her husband. Because Mr. Heep has been dead for many years, there's a suggestion here she's being misleading in presenting herself as grief-stricken and humble; by extension, Uriah's humility is also suspect. Later, David is "uncomfortable" when Mr. Micawber mentions he's met with [Uriah Heep](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/David-Copperfield/character-analysis/#Uriah_Heep) and is impressed by his competence. David's discomfort may have more to do with his instinctive distrust of Heep than with his fear Micawber will say too much about David's past. The surprise reappearance of Mr. Micawber and his introduction to Uriah Heep will lead to interesting developments for several people in David's circle. Heep continues to become more repulsive and sly, always lurking in the background, gathering information, and barely concealing his jealousy of David. His interest in Mr. Wickfield's financial situation, in David's past, and in David's future plans makes David, even in all his naïveté, uncomfortably aware that there is something to be mistrusted here. David is even more uneasy when he learns about Heep and Micawber having drinks together.

In Chapter 18, the narrator uses present tense to indicate that the older David is looking back and recalling some of the milestones of his school days: his unlucky choices of love interests, his attempt to play the hero in challenging the butcher, and his academic success. [Charles Dickens](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/David-Copperfield/author/) moves through these memories as a series of vignettes, almost like a slide show, in which David views himself at different stages of his growth.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield)'s time at [Doctor Strong](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/doctor-strong)'s passes by almost without him noticing it, although certain incidents and impressions stand out. He is in awe of the head boy, for instance, and cannot imagine ever becoming the head boy himself (though [Agnes](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/agnes-wickfield) says he might). He is also infatuated with Miss Shepherd—a girl at a nearby boarding school who attends the same church services as David. He eventually meets her at a dancing school, and the two carry on a youthful romance, exchanging presents and, at one point, a kiss. Eventually, however, David learns that Miss Shepherd prefers another boy over him, and the two drift apart.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Although he can't quite picture himself as head boy, David's admiration of the current head boy reflects his desire for self-improvement and his ability to set goals for himself. The fact that Agnes encourages these hopes is an indication of the role she plays in David's life, gently pushing him to better himself and grow.

***Summary Part 2:***

Now slightly older, [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) enters a phase where he finds the boarding school girls irritating. He is doing quite well at school, but is troubled by the appearance of a bully: a "young butcher" who dislikes the students at [Doctor Strong](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/doctor-strong)'s and beats several of them up. David decides to fight the butcher and is badly defeated, but takes comfort in [Agnes](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/agnes-wickfield)'s support.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Although David doesn't say so explicitly, the rivalry between the butcher and Doctor Strong's students likely grows out of class tension; the butcher seems to feel personally insulted by the middle-class students, presumably because he senses that they look down on him. Agnes, meanwhile, continues to act as a model Victorian woman, offering comfort and support to David when the outside world overwhelms him.

***Summary Part 3:***

Time passes, and the former head boy returns to visit [Doctor Strong](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/doctor-strong)'s. He is studying to be a lawyer, but [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) no longer finds him as impressive as he once did. In fact, David himself becomes head boy soon after this, and begins to take a "condescending interest" in the younger boys, who remind him of his former self.

Memory and Nostalgia Theme Icon

***Analysis Part 3:***

As David grows older, his perceptions of the world and his place in it shift. Because David now realizes that he is capable of similar success, he doesn’t find the former head boy so intimidating. That said, his fondness for the younger students, however patronizing it is, also speaks to some nostalgia for his younger self.

***Summary Part 4:***

[Agnes](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/agnes-wickfield) has also grown up, though she remains [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield)'s "counscllor and friend." David, however, is preoccupied with a new love interest: the eldest Miss Larkins, who is roughly 30 and implied to be a bit of a flirt (David is particularly distressed by the fact that Miss Larkins knows several officers). David's entire life revolves around Miss Larkins: he dresses with her in mind, finds himself fascinated by anything remotely connected to her, and fantasizes about saving her from a house fire.

***Analysis Part 4:***

David's infatuation with Miss Larkins is a sign of how much more growing up he still has to do. David pokes fun at himself as he describes his past feelings, implying that they were both excessively passionate and lacking in depth. What's more, he's so carried away with romantic fantasies that he fails to recognize the fact that Agnes is essentially already functioning as his wife by providing him with unwavering support and companionship.Home and Family Theme Icon

***Summary part 5:***

Eventually, [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) is invited to a party Miss Larkins will be attending; he prepares for this event obsessively in the hopes of declaring his love for her. David does in fact manage to dance with Miss Larkins, and as they sit together afterwards, he asks for one of the flowers she's wearing in her hair. He spends the rest of the night in a state of "unspeakable bliss." Afterwards, however, he does not see Miss Larkins for several days. Finally, [Agnes](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/agnes-wickfield) informs David one evening that Miss Larkins is marrying a hop-grower the following day, which sends David into a fit of depression. Within a few weeks, however, the prospect of once again fighting the butcher brings him to his senses.

***Analysis Part 5:***

David's quick recovery when he learns Miss Larkins has married is another indication that his feelings for her weren't really mature love. One of the main lessons David learns over the course of the novel is that romantic love alone isn't enough to sustain a marriage, and that factors like compatibility also need to enter into the decision.