***David Copperfield***

***Chapter 4 – I Fall Into Disgrace***

***Summary:***

* David goes up to bed and feels so miserable that he can't stop crying.
* Mrs. Copperfield and Peggotty go up to look for David, and find him in bed under the covers.
* David's mother asks him what's wrong, and he says, "Nothing" (4.5).
* Mrs. Copperfield yells at Peggotty; she feels that Peggotty has turned David against her. Mrs.
* This is supposed to be Mrs. Copperfield's honeymoon, so she is furious with both David and Peggotty for being so unhappy with her new marriage.
* Mr. Murdstone comes in and tells Mrs. Copperfield to be firm with David and to dismiss Peggotty.
* When Mr. Murdstone is alone with David, he tells David this: that if Mr. Murdstone has a stubborn horse or a dog to deal with, he *beats* it.
* Mr. Murdstone tells David that he's an intelligent boy who should understand Mr. Murdstone very well.
* He makes David wash his face and then come down to speak to Mrs. Copperfield.
* The three of them – David, Mr. Murdstone, and Mrs. Copperfield – have dinner together. David notices that Mr. Murdstone seems very fond of Mrs. Copperfield, but David still hates him.
* When they all leave the dining room, Mrs. Copperfield hugs David in secret and asks him to love his new father, Mr. Murdstone.
* That evening after dinner, a serious-looking lady arrives at the house: Miss Jane Murdstone, Mr. Murdstone's sister.
* The first thing Miss Mudstone says to David is: "Generally speaking [...] I don't like boys" (4.38). This is not a good omen.
* Miss Murdstone is a suspicious lady who immediately takes charge of the household affairs.
* She lives in fear that the servants are trying to hide a man in the house, and searches for him regularly.
* Miss Murdstone takes the keys of the house from Mrs. Copperfield (who is, we may say, *extremely* weak-willed) and immediately starts bossing everyone around.
* Mrs. Copperfield starts to cry one evening from the stress of being bossed around by the Murdstones, but the two of them gang up on her and frighten her into shutting up.
* What is Mrs. Copperfield's great crime? She asks to be consulted about household matters once in a while.
* Miss Murdstone says that she's going to leave the Rookery immediately.
* Mr. Murdstone forbids Miss Murdstone from leaving. The two of them emotionally abuse Mrs. Copperfield until she begs Miss Murdstone to stay.
* Mr. Murdstone says that this whole scene is unfit for David to see and sends him to bed early.
* The next day, David overhears his mother pleading with Miss Murdstone for forgiveness. After this, Mrs. Copperfield never makes a single suggestion without asking if it's okay with Miss Murdstone first.
* David starts learning his lessons at the hand of Mr. Murdstone and his sister.
* He has to come in to the parlor each morning and recite whatever he's been assigned by memory.
* When he starts to trip up – as is inevitable, because the material is too hard for him – Mr. and Miss Murdstone immediately start criticizing.
* They also scold Mrs. Copperfield for trying to help David – they think she isn't firm enough in her treatment of her son.
* This treatment makes David sullen and grumpy (naturally).
* The only thing that saves him is his dead father's collection of novels, which give David an escape into imagination.
* These books are David's only comfort.
* One morning, David comes into the parlor, where his mother, Miss Murdstone, and Mr. Murdstone are waiting for him.
* Mr. Murdstone is holding a cane, which he swishes through the air a few times.
* Mrs. Copperfield is protesting weakly, but Mr. and Miss Murdstone totally shut her down: they say that Mr. Murdstone has often been flogged – whipped – and it's been good for him.
* Mr. Murdstone tells David that he has to be extra careful today with his lessons.
* Of course, David does terribly thanks to all the stress and finally bursts out crying.
* Mrs. Copperfield starts weeping, and Miss Murdstone scolds her for it.
* Mr. Murdstone brings David upstairs.
* Even though David begs him not to beat him, Mr. Murdstone grabs him around the neck and holds him down.
* David manages to twist around and bite Mr. Murdstone's hand as hard as he can.
* It's not enough to get Mr. Murdstone to let David free.
* Mr. Murdstone beats David as though he wants to kill him and then leaves him lying on the floor, locking the door of David's room from the outside.
* David eventually gets up; simply moving makes his injuries sting again.
* Night is falling. David has spent most of the day looking out the window, weeping, and dozing off.
* Finally, Miss Murdstone comes in with some dinner, glares at him, and leaves.
* David starts to wonder: is he a criminal? Is he going to be sent to prison?
* David goes to bed, and the next morning, he wakes up and remembers this weird burden of guilt.
* Miss Murdstone comes in and tells him he gets half an hour outside in the garden, but no more.
* David's kept more or less in prison like this for five whole days, without getting a glimpse of his mother or Peggotty.
* He's allowed downstairs once a day for evening prayers, but he can't speak to anybody. He sees that Mr. Murdstone's hand is bandaged from the bite.
* David remembers those five days of isolation like they were years.
* In the middle of the fifth night, a whisper wakes him: Peggotty is standing at the keyhole, but she has to be really quiet so they don't wake Miss Murdstone.
* She tells David that he is being sent to boarding school near London.
* Peggotty also assures David that he'll see his mother in the morning, before he's sent away.
* (Oh god, this part always makes us cry. In fact, this whole chapter is *so* brutal.)
* Peggotty promises David that she loves him. She hasn't wanted to show it too much because she knows that obvious affection would make the Murdstones' treatment of David (and Mrs. Copperfield) even worse. But she will write to him, and she will keep looking after Mrs. Copperfield as best she can.
* This parting makes David feel a deep affection for Peggotty, almost as though she were his mother.
* Miss Murdstone comes in the next day and tells David he's going to school.
* He gets dressed and runs to his mother, who looks like she's been crying.
* David asks for forgiveness from Mrs. Copperfield.
* Mrs. Copperfield tells him that she's disappointed that he's such a bad child, hurting someone she loves (Mr. Murdstone). She forgives him and asks him to be better.
* The Murdstones have convinced Mrs. Copperfield that David is a wicked boy.
* Mrs. Copperfield tells David that he is going away to school to become a better kid, and that he'll be back for holidays.
* Miss Murdstone escorts David out to the cart, where she tells him that she hopes he'll feel bad for what he's done, before he comes to "a bad end" (4.152).

***Brief Summary:***

David's return home is not a happy one. His mother is offended by his negative feelings towards Mr. Murdstone. Mr. Murdstone presents himself as a strict stepfather and makes it clear that David must obey him or risk physical punishment.

Mr. Murdstone's sister comes to stay with them and to run the house according to her own paranoid delusions. The two Murdstones set rule with an iron fist and break the spirits of the others in the house, particularly David and his mother. One instance of this is David's schooling at home. The two Murdstones watch David and his mother during his lessons in order to catch the slightest sign of affection toward one another. These lessons usually end in violence against David for some perceived transgression. David takes comfort by escaping into stories that he secretly reads.

Tensions come to a head when David bites Mr. Murdstone's hand during a beating. David is locked in his room for a week before Mr. Murdstone suggests that he be sent off to boarding school. Peggotty tries to comfort David as assures him of her devotion. His mother sadly goes along with her husband's wishes.

***Brief Analysis:***

David's relationship with his stepfather quickly becomes violent. David can do nothing right in Mr. Murdstone's eyes, no matter how hard he tries. David constantly sacrifices his own feelings for his mother and accepts the brutal treatment. David's mother's napvety and childlike personality lead to many of her problems. She does not have a strong enough character to defend David and is easily bent to her new husband's will. Her character is a model for many women throughout David's life. Their lack of individual strength or practical knowledge will continue to be a source of struggle for David because he is helplessly drawn to this type of women.

***Critical Study(Ch 3-4):***

Ham, Peggotty's nephew who was present at David's birth, is waiting for them at a Yarmouth public-house and leads them to the hulk of an old ship drawn up on land; it has been renovated into a sort of "real home" and that is where the Peggotty family lives. Although everything has a strong odor of fish, the boat is clean, and David's room (in the stern of the barge) is the "most desirable bedroom ever seen.

David is introduced to Mr. Peggotty, a bachelor brother who is the head of the house. David is puzzled about the relationship of Ham and of Em'ly (a young girl who lives there and is a little younger than David); he learns from Peggotty that they are both orphan children of relatives who died at sea.

The next morning before breakfast, David and Em'ly play on the beach and Em'ly tells him about her fear of the sea because it has taken so many of her relatives. She runs out on a timber jutting from the side of the pier where the water is deepest and David becomes alarmed that she will fall in. He comments much later that he has never forgotten this episode, and he wonders if it might not have been better if she had drowned while she was young and innocent. They return from the beach with shells that they have collected, and they exchange an innocent kiss before going to eat. David feels certain that he is in love.

The holiday ends, and David and Peggotty return home by the same carrier's cart. David is sad at having to leave Yarmouth, but he looks forward to seeing his mother once more. He is not met by his mother, however; he is met by a strange servant, and for a minute David is afraid something has happened to his mother. Peggotty takes David to the kitchen and admits that she should have told him earlier what has happened — David's mother has remarried; David has a new "Pa." He is then led into the parlor to meet Mr. Murdstone.

In Chapter 4, Dickens focuses on David's unhappiness. David thinks of little Em'ly and cries himself to sleep. In the morning, Peggotty and David's mother come to his room, and his mother accuses Peggotty of prejudicing the boy against her and her new husband. Mr. Murdstone appears and cautions his wife about the need for "firmness" in handling David. He sends both women from the room, but not before scolding Peggotty for addressing her mistress by her former name. "She has taken my name," he says, "Will you remember that?" Mr. Murdstone says further that unless David's manner improves he will be whipped with a strap.

After dinner, a coach arrives; Miss Murdstone, the sister of David's stepfather, has come to stay with the family. She is as hard and as austere a person as her brother, and she promptly informs everyone that she doesn't like boys. She observes that David obviously needs training with his manners, then immediately preempts the household keys and assumes all authority for running the household affairs. By degrees, she and her brother begin to intimidate David's mother until she becomes virtually an outsider in her own home.

One morning when David reports for his lessons, Mr. Murdstone is already there — with a cane, which he "poised and switched in the air." When the lesson goes badly, David is paraded upstairs, and his stepfather beats him, but not before David is able to literally bite the hand that feeds him (and in this case, restrains him). David is confined to his room for five days like a prisoner, and he is allowed out only for morning exercises and evening prayers. On the fifth day, Peggotty steals up to the room and speaks to David through the keyhole, informing him that tomorrow he is to be sent to a school near London.

The next morning David is sent away to school in the familiar horse-drawn cart. His grieving mother first implores him to "pray to be better," and then she blurts out, "I forgive you, my dear boy. God bless you!"

Analysis

The stay at Peggotty's home is one of the most idyllic experiences in David's life. The simple warmth of the poor family is in contrast to the coldness that David will encounter in his own home. Mr. Peggotty is a friendly man who sums himself up with his introductory phrase to David: "You'll find us rough, sir, but you'll find us ready." He is contrasted with Mrs. Gummidge, who lives there, and her often-repeated complaint: "I am a lone lorn creetur' and everythink goes contrairy with me." Dickens' characters invariably have one pet saying that, along with their names, indicates their personalities. Mrs. Gummidge later shows another side of her personality.

Note in Chapter 3 that Dickens foreshadows coming events when he says that it might have been "better for little Em'ly to have had the waters close above her head that morning . . ." This effect is overly melodramatic perhaps, but it is a common technique of Victorian novelists to sustain reader interest over the course of a long narrative.

***Critical Analysis:***

Having returned home, David finds his house much changed. The change upsets him so much that he cries himself to sleep in his new room. His mother comes up to comfort him, but Mr. Murdstone finds them there and reprimands David’s mother for not being firm with her son. Mr. Murdstone dismisses David’s mother into another part of the house and warns David that he will receive a beating if he disobeys or upsets his mother again. That night, dinner is silent and formal, and David finds it very different from the old dinners he used to enjoy by the fire with Peggotty and his mother.

After dinner, Miss Jane Murdstone, Mr. Murdstone’s cruel sister, arrives to stay. She is dark and masculine, with eyebrows that nearly meet over the bridge of her nose. David observes that she is a metallic lady, with metal boxes and a metal purse. Miss Murdstone takes over the household organization, and when David’s mother protests that she can run her own house, Mr. Murdstone threatens her into submission. Whenever David’s mother voices her concern or anger about anything done in the house or to David, Mr. and Miss Murdstone tell her that her “firmness” is failing. They often refer to David’s mother, who is much younger than they, as a naïve, inexperienced, and artless girl who needs their training. David’s mother accepts the Murdstones’ molding of her, apparently because she is afraid of them.

David’s mother continues to conduct his lessons. However, because Mr. and Miss Murdstone snipe at David continuously throughout his recitations, his memory fails him during every lesson. His only comfort is his father’s small collection of adventure books, which David reads over and over in order to bring some friends and pleasure into his life. After one particularly poor lesson, Mr. Murdstone beats David savagely, and David, in self-defense, bites Mr. Murdstone’s hand. As punishment, David is locked in his room alone for five days. At the end of the five days, Peggotty comes to his door and whispers through the keyhole that he is to be sent away.

[David Copperfield](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/David-Copperfield/character-analysis/#David_Copperfield) feels alone and dejected when his mother, under Mr. Murdstone's influence, curbs her natural impulse to coddle and comfort her son. Clara Copperfield falls completely under the influence of Mr. Murdstone and his sister, Jane Murdstone, who moves in and takes over the running of the household from Clara. David escapes from his unhappy daily life by delving into his father's old books; through these books, he lives a life of fantasy and adventure. One day, Mr. Murdstone thrashes David for stumbling over his lessons. Shocked, David instinctively bites Mr. Murdstone's hand. For this, David is confined to his room for five long days. On the last night, [Peggotty](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/David-Copperfield/character-analysis/" \l "Peggotty) steals up to his room and whispers to him that in the morning he'll be sent away to a school near London. She assures him she'll take care of his mother and she loves him and will never forget him. David feels a rush of affection for Peggotty. The next day, his mother bids him goodbye, telling him she hopes he'll return "a better boy."***Summary and analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

As [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) sits in his room, thinking sadly about the cold welcome he has received, [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield) and [Peggotty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/peggotty) enter. David is unable to explain what's wrong to his mother, and Clara accuses Peggotty of turning David against her. She grows more and more upset until [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone) enters and reminds her to be "firm." He then sends Clara and Peggotty downstairs—though not before scolding the latter for mistakenly referring to Clara as "Mrs. Copperfield." Now alone with David, Mr. Murdstone threatens his stepson, saying that he deals with "obstinate horses and dogs" by beating them. He then orders David to wash his face and follow him downstairs.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Mr. Murdstone's emphasis on "firmness"—extreme self-discipline and decisiveness—is in many ways the dark side of the self-control and purposefulness David learns to practice as an adult. For Murdstone, "firmness" is simply a tool to bully and control those around him, often by denouncing any display of emotion as weakness. It's also clearly a tool used to shore up Murdstone's authority as a male head of household, since he uses it specifically to keep women and children in line.

***Summary Part 2:***

[David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) comes downstairs to hear [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone) consoling [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield). Reflecting on this in the present, David says he might have grown into an entirely different person, and even been grateful to Mr. Murdstone, if his stepfather had simply reassured him that he was still loved and appreciated in his own home.

***Analysis Part 2:***

As a coming-of-age story, David Copperfield explores how its protagonist's experiences shape the person he becomes. In particular, the novel repeatedly suggests that family life is critical in determining one’s character, so it it’s unsurprising that David feels this one missed opportunity could have set his life on an entirely different course.

***Summary Part 3:***

After dinner, [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone)'s sister, [Miss Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/miss-murdstone), arrives. She is a stern-looking, unattractive, and "metallic" woman, who, upon meeting [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield), remarks that he lacks manners. By the following morning, it is clear that she intends to stay in the house permanently; at breakfast, she announces that [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield) is "much too pretty and thoughtless" to occupy herself with housework, and takes charge of the household keys.

***Analysis Part 3:***

Miss Murdstone's relatively "masculine" appearance and behavior are one way of hinting at her villainy; because nineteenth-century gender roles were so strict, any deviation from the norm might seem suspicious to a contemporary reader. Since Miss Murdstone also greatly resembles her brother, her own masculinity also reinforces the idea that Clara and David are now at the mercy of an especially cruel form of male authority. It's also significant that the Murdstones use Clara's "femininity" (her "prettiness" and "thoughtlessness") to further disempower her in her own home.

***Summary Part 4:***

[Miss Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/miss-murdstone) has been acting as housekeeper for some time when [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield) finally objects. She says that she knows she lacks the Murdstones' "firmness"—a quality [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) describes as "another name for tyranny"—but says that it is nevertheless "hard" not to have a voice in household affairs. Her protests are derailed, however, first by Mr. Murdstone objecting to her description of the house as "hers," and then by Miss Murdstone threatening to leave. Mr. Murdstone scolds his wife for not appreciating his attempts to "form her character," and Clara apologizes and drops the issue. From that point on, however, Miss Murdstone threatens to leave whenever she needs to bend Clara to her will.

***Analysis Part 4:***

Even by the standards of the time, Mr. Murdstone's treatment of Clara is heavy-handed and cruel. It does, however, reveal how vulnerable the position of a married woman was in nineteenth-century England. Clara theoretically ought to have a say in the running of the household; in fact, the domestic realm was supposed to be a woman's area of expertise. Since husbands gained control of their wives' property on marriage, however, Mr. Murdstone is technically correct when he scolds Clara for laying claim to the house: legally, the house now belongs to him.

***Summary part 5:***

Time passes, and [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) continues to be unhappy. Church now frightens him, because of the Murdstones' dour and unforgiving approach to religion. [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield) also seems to be growing sickly looking and sad, and David wonders if anyone other than him remembers how she used to look and act.

***Analysis Part 5:***

David has difficulty believing the evidence of his own eyes when it comes to the changes in his mother. Consequently, his hope that someone else might remember what she was like before seems to be a way of shoring up his own perceptions. Given that David generally considers himself an accurate observer of the world around him, his self-doubt here hints at the ways in which the Murdstones have chipped away at his self-esteem.

***Summary Part 6:***

During this time, [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) is being tutored by [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield). The lessons terrify David, because [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone) and Miss Murdstone are also present and use the sessions as a way of keeping Clara in line. On one particular day, David is especially thrown off by the Murdstones' presence and repeatedly botches his reading. Finally, Miss Murdstone scolds Clara for hinting at the correct answers, and Mr. Murdstone "takes the book, throws it at [David] or boxes [his] ears with it, and turns [him] out of the room." Other days, David manages to make it through his lessons without mishaps, but he is never allowed to enjoy his free time, as Miss Murdstone feels he should always be given work to do.

***Analysis Part 6:***

David's lessons, as well as Miss Murdstone's broader insistence that he be kept busy at all times, are a dark twist on the Victorian emphasis on personal responsibility and self-improvement. In both cases, the Murdstones' emphasis is less on the particular task being completed than it is on the work itself as a way of building character. This is consistent with an idea David repeatedly raises later in the novel—namely, that work is an inherently useful activity because it teaches qualities like patience and discipline. The Murdstones' actions, however, reveal the ways in which this ideology can be abused, or used to justify cruelty.

***Summary Part 7:***

[David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield)'s one consolation during this period is the library left behind by his father. He reads these novels voraciously, loses himself in their characters, and even begins to associate the stories with places and objects in his own neighborhood.

***Analysis Part 7:***

Although David certainly isn't thinking of writing as a possible vocation at the time, the time he spends reading as a child paves the way for his eventual career. This is a prime example of how David learns to turn even unhappy and painful experiences to good effect.

***Summary Part 8:***

One morning, [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) comes downstairs to find [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield), [Miss Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/miss-murdstone), and [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone) already assembled. Mr. Murdstone, holding a cane, defends the wisdom of beating children to Clara, and then warns David that he must be especially "careful" during his coming lesson. David, however, makes several mistakes, causing his mother to become distressed and Mr. Murdstone to escort David from the room. David begs Mr. Murdstone not to flog him and explains why he can't concentrate on his studies. The two struggle, and David manages to bite his stepfather's hand, but this only angers Mr. Murdstone, who beats David "as if he would have beaten [him] to death."

***Analysis Part 8:***

Corporal punishment was fairly routine in nineteenth-century England, and often used as a way of "correcting" children's behavior. In this scene, however, Dickens implies that the effects of such punishment on a child's development are overwhelmingly negative: when Murdstone says that he himself was flogged as a child, Clara questions whether it "did him good." Miss Murdstone quickly silences Clara, but the strong suggestion is that Mr. Murdstone's cruelty and violence stem in part from the cruelty and violence he experienced as a child.

***Summary Part 9:***

Mr. Murdstone leaves [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) locked in his bedroom. He remains there, frightened and angry, for the next several days; Miss Murdstone brings him meals and allows him out for evening prayers, but he is otherwise left alone. When five days have passed, David hears [Peggotty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/peggotty) whispering to him from outside the door. Peggotty reassures David that [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield) is not angry with him, but says that he is going to be sent to a boarding school outside London the following day. She further explains that she has been avoiding David in an effort to protect him, but promises to take care of his mother while he is gone. The exchange leaves a lasting impression on David, and Peggotty fills "a vacancy in [his] heart."

***Analysis Part 9:***

Although David never stops idealizing his mother, he recognizes on some level that she can’t protect him from the Murdstones. What's more, her own fear of her husband and sister-in-law prevents her from even comforting her son. As a result, David comes to see Peggotty as a kind of surrogate mother. The fact that he's able to find makeshift relatives in this way is presumably one reason why his troubled home life doesn't have a more negative impact on his development.Home and Family Theme Icon

***Summary Part 10:***

Miss Murdstone fetches [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) from his room the next morning and brings him downstairs, where [Clara](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/clara-copperfield) urges him to "try to be better" in the future. However, she embraces her son before he leaves, over the objections of Miss Murdstone. David is then taken away in a cart driven by [Barkis](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-barkis).

***Analysis Part 10:***

As a coming-of-age story, David Copperfield is in many ways about teaching its protagonist to "be better." The Murdstones' cruelty, however, clearly isn't teaching David anything useful.

***Quotations:***

***Quotation 1:***

God help me, I might have been improved for my whole life, I might have been made another creature perhaps, for life, by a kind word at that season. A word of encouragement and explanation, of pity for my childish ignorance, of welcome home, of reassurance to me that it was home, might have made me dutiful to him in my heart henceforth, instead of in my hypocritical outside, and might have made me respect instead of hate him. (4.31)

***Explanation:***

When David returns to his home made strange by his mother's marriage to Mr. Murdstone, the narrator goes into this long speculation about his entire life might have been different and better if Mr. Murdstone had offered him one word of encouragement at this key moment. This seems to be the key tragedy of this novel: there are a thousand moments when a single word can make all the difference in improving (or ruining) that kid's life. But you can only know in retrospect, looking back on the event, what would have made things better.

***Quotation 2:***

Mrs. Clara Copperfield

"It's enough to distract me," cried my mother. "In my honeymoon, too, when my most inveterate enemy might relent, one would think, and not envy me a little peace of mind and happiness. Davy, you naughty boy! Peggotty, you savage creature! Oh, dear me!" cried my mother, turning from one of us to the other, in her pettish wilful manner, "what a troublesome world this is, when one has the most right to expect it to be as agreeable as possible!" (4.10)

***Explanation:***

When David comes home to find Mrs. Copperfield married to Mr. Murdstone, he's not exactly overcome with joy. And in her disappointment at David's reaction, Mrs. Copperfield strikes out at David and Peggotty for being "naughty" and "savage" at not being happy for her. Mrs. Copperfield can't understand why there is still suffering in a world when "one has the most right to expect it to be as agreeable as possible." The thing is, why do we have a right to expect the world to be nice? Not to sound like our crotchety grandparents or anything, but who says life is fair? Maybe Mrs. Copperfield's assumption that she's owed a good life makes her all the more disappointed and unhappy when she suffers.

***Quotation 3:***

Mr. Murdstone

"I tell you, Clara," said Mr. Murdstone, "I have been often flogged myself."  
  
"To be sure; of course," said Miss Murdstone.  
  
"Certainly, my dear Jane," faltered my mother, meekly. "But—but do you think it did Edward good?"  
  
"Do you think it did Edward harm, Clara?" asked Mr. Murdstone, gravely. (4.92-5)

***Explanation:***

When Mr. Murdstone plans to beat David, he tells David's mother that he has often been beaten as though that is supposed to be a comfort to her. But obviously Mr. Murdstone has learned to be cruel by example; someone was once cruel to Mr. Murdstone. What enables David to escape this cycle of cruelty? Is it just that he gets away from the likes of Mr. Murdstone and Mr. Creakle soon enough? Is it luck? Is it because he's the main character of this novel, and we have to find him appealing?

***Quotation 4:***

Mrs. Clara Copperfield

I hand the first book to my mother. Perhaps it is a grammar, perhaps a history, or geography. I take a last drowning look at the page as I give it into her hand, and start off aloud at a racing pace while I have got it fresh. I trip over a word. Mr. Murdstone looks up. I trip over another word. Miss Murdstone looks up. I redden, tumble over half-a-dozen words, and stop. I think my mother would show me the book if she dared, but she does not dare. (4.74)

***Explanation:***

Before David falls into the hands of the Murdstones, he shows a love of reading – remember Peggotty's crocodile book! But once the Murdstones are watching him like hawks while he recites his lessons, just waiting for him to mess up, suddenly all of David's smarts dry up. This is the most basic lesson of this book: treat a kid cruelly, and you'll get nothing out of him. Treat him kindly, and you'll get a happy and productive kid.

***Quotation 5:***

David Copperfield

[Mr. Murdstone] beat me then, as if he would have beaten me to death. Above all the noise we made, I heard them running up the stairs, and crying out—I heard my mother crying out—and Peggotty. Then he was gone; and the door was locked outside; and I was lying, fevered and hot, and torn, and sore, and raging in my puny way, upon the floor.  
  
How well I recollect, when I became quiet, what an unnatural stillness seemed to reign through the whole house! How well I remember, when my smart and passion began to cool, how wicked I began to feel! (4.111-2)

***Explanation:***

This scene is awful. We have to admit that this is probably the most painful part of the novel for us, when Mr. Murdstone takes a switch and whips his poor, defenseless eight-year-old stepson for the "fault" of not having learned his lessons properly. It's just disgusting. The worst thing about this moment might be that, as David recovers from his beating, he feels "wicked." Beating makes its victim feel evil, as though the only way David can handle being whipped is to try and find ways to blame himself – as though that would make it justified or fair.