***David Copperfield***

***Chapter 6 – I Enlarge My Circle of Acquaintence***

***Summary:***

* After about a month of this, Mr. Creakle and the students of Salem House start to return from the summer holidays.
* Before bedtime one night, Tungay fetches David and takes him to Mr. Creakle's part of the building.
* Mr. Creakle is waiting with Mrs. Creakle, his wife, and Miss Creakle, his daughter.
* Mr. Creakle's face is red and horribly angry-looking, but he speaks in a tiny whisper (kind of like boxer Mike Tyson) that makes him all the more intimidating.
* Mr. Creakle tells David that he knows David's stepfather, Mr. Murdstone.
* He also tells David that he is "a Tartar" – a violent person – who gets things done.
* When his own flesh and blood (here he looks at Mrs. Creakle) offends him, he'll get rid of it.
* Mr. Creakle asks Tungay if "that fellow" (6.18) has been around Salem House?
* Tungay says no.
* Finally, Mr. Creakle says that David can go.
* David asks Mr. Creakle if he can take off the sign before the boys come back.
* Mr. Creakle leaps out of his chair, frightening David so much that he runs straight back to his bed.
* The following day, another teacher comes back: Mr. Sharp, who is Mr. Mell's superior.
* Mr. Sharp is delicate and wears a wig.
* The first boy to come back is Tommy Traddles, which is lucky for David, because Traddles doesn't take the sign too seriously, mostly just treating it like a game. This is a little embarrassing for David, but nothing like the social death he expected.
* Next up is James Steerforth, a good-looking older boy, who tells David that his sign is "a jolly shame" (6.30), which makes David adore him.
* Steerforth asks David if he has any money, which he does – 7 shillings from Peggotty's purse.
* The older boy encourages David to spend some of that money on treats for the other boys in their dorm room, which Steerforth then distributes as though he were their host. But David doesn't mind this – he's a bit in awe of Steerforth.
* The boys all start talking about the masters at Salem House: Mr. Creakle is, indeed, supposed to be a violent jerk who will happily beat the boys if he wants to.
* The wooden-legged man, Tungay, works for Mr. Creakle because he has been in his employment for a long time, mostly doing dirty work. Tungay hates everyone at Salem House, except Mr. Creakle, and enjoys making all of their lives miserable.
* Apparently, Mr. Creakle has a son who used to teach at the school, but Mr. Creakle tossed the boy out of his home when the kid protested at the way that Mr. Creakle treats Mrs. Creakle. (This explains that scene in the beginning of the chapter about discarding his own flesh and blood when it offends him!)
* There is one boy who Mr. Creakle never beats: James Steerforth.
* Steerforth is the only "parlor-boarder" (6.52) – the only of the boys who gets to eat with Mr. Creakle – and he seems to have some sort of weird authority over both the teachers and the students alike.
* The boys all gossip about how poor Mr. Mell is and about Mr. Sharp's badly fitting wig. They also talk about Miss Creakle, who is supposed to have a crush on Steerforth.
* David thinks of the breakfast he had with Mr. Mell's mother, but doesn't say anything about it.
* When the boys all go to bed, Steerforth tells David good night, and that he'll take care of David.
* David thanks him.
* Steerforth asks if David has a sister, because if David does, Steerforth would guess that she would be a pretty, shy, bright girl.
* David says no, he doesn't, and Steerforth thinks it's a shame.

***Brief Summary:***

Preparations are made for the school to reopen. The headmaster, Mr. Creakle, returns to the school and meets with David. Mr. Creakle is an old friend of Mr. Murdstone's and rules the school by inspiring fear in the students. The first student to return is friendly and kindhearted Tommy Traddles. Steerforth arrives later. He is the head student and leader of the schoolboys. He tricks David out of his remaining money, which he spends on a feast of cakes and candy. The boys gossip about the school and its staff. The gossip generally involves Mr. Creakle, who recently changed occupations from beer maker to schoolmaster and who had thrown out his grown son after a disagreement about the use of physical punishment at the school. These conversations help David to establish friendships with the other boys and settle into his new home.

***Brief Analysis:***

This chapter introduces the reader to both Tommy Traddles and James Steerforth, two individuals who will have a lasting relationship with David. Tommy Traddles is shown to be good and kind, although unlucky most of the time. Steerforth is immediately seen as domineering and in control. His authority is unchallenged and everyone looks up to him. From the reader's perspective, however, Steerforth's individual actions are manipulative and often mean spirited. David's unquestioning admiration of him will later prove to be problematic.

***Critical Study:***

Mr. Creakle, the headmaster, returns to the school and summons David. The bald, reddish Mr. Creakle, who never raises his voice above a whisper, warns David that he will beat him for any misbehavior. David is terrified of Mr. Creakle. The headmaster’s wife and daughter, however, are quiet and thin women, and David supposes that they sympathize with the boys Mr. Creakle terrorizes.

Tommy Traddles, the first boy to return from holiday, befriends David, which helps David befriend the other boys as they return. James Steerforth, the most respected of the schoolboys because of his wealth, intelligence, and good looks, takes David’s money on the pretense of holding it for him. Steerforth convinces David to spend the money on a tremendous banquet, which he splits evenly among the boys in the dorm that night. David considers Steerforth to be his protector and friend but not his equal. David is submissive to Steerforth and refers to him as “sir.”

Although some of Dickens’s characters manage to improve their social class, social hierarchies are extremely powerful in David Copperfield. For example, even though Peggotty loves David and his mother more than anyone else loves them, both mother and son always treat Peggotty as a servant. On the other hand, David reveres James Steerforth, a scoundrel, largely because he is wealthy and powerful. Tommy Traddles, who is kind and gentle to David and shows him much more loyalty than Steerforth, never even comes close to attaining Steerforth’s exalted status. The other boys also naturally obey Steerforth, apparently not because he deserves their respect but because none of them can match the confidence and arrogance that stem from his class status. This social structure that the young students establish continues throughout the novel, as characters judge each other on their class status rather than their merits.

Dickens depicts English social hierarchies as inevitable but acknowledges that they are not ideal. David respects the strict class system, as do most of the secondary characters. David sincerely wishes to seem genteel, enjoys commanding servants about, and draws judgments entirely on the basis of class. Nevertheless, Dickens also shows how the power relations of the class system can be inverted—most notably in the case of the servant at the inn who tricks David into giving up his meal. Likewise, Steerforth is rich yet cruel while Mr. Peggotty is poor yet good-hearted. These two characters demonstrate that Dickens does not believe that class always corresponds to moral status. On the whole, although Dickens recognizes imperfections in the English class system, he does not actively challenge it in his writing.

Although Clara’s failure to protect David is disturbing, the difficult situation of her marriage provokes our sympathy and understanding. Clara does allow her husband and his sister to inflict cruelty on David, which we may find reprehensible. But at the same time, as Mr. Murdstone breaks Clara’s spirit more and more, and Miss Murdstone convinces her that she is a worthless girl in desperate need of reform, we cannot help but pity Clara. David, for his part, never condemns his mother—in fact, he displays unwavering faith in her. Ultimately, as Clara transforms from beautiful and carefree before her remarriage to beaten-down and frightened afterward, her inexperience and good intentions become clear, and she emerges as a sympathetic character.

The books to which David retreats when his life at his house becomes unbearable bring an element of fantasy to Dickens’s novel and fuel David’s sense of romantic idealism. Though David Copperfield as a novel offers a realistic depiction of the harsh aspects of daily existence for women, children, and the underprivileged, David himself often romanticizes his world. He frequently gets wrapped up in a sense of adventure and high emotion. His description of events that happen to him reveals that he sees his love affairs as tempestuous and his escapades as wild and adventurous. David’s vivid imagination is both an asset and a handicap, for it simultaneously sustains him through hard times and subjects him to the treachery of those who would take advantage of a boy’s trusting nature.

***Critical Analysis(Ch 1 – 5):***

Before the cart goes half a mile it stops, and Peggotty appears from behind a hedgerow. Without saying a word, she hugs David and gives him some cakes to eat and a purse containing money, the coins wrapped in a note in his mother's handwriting, saying, "For Davy. With my love."

Mr. Barkis, the cart driver (who is as slow moving as the horse he drives), consoles David, and during the ride David offers him one of the cakes which Barkis eats "at one gulp exactly like an elephant." Mr. Barkis shyly inquires about Peggotty's cooking and asks if she has any "sweethearts." When David replies that she does not, the cart driver asks David to inform Peggotty that "Barkis is wllin'" — a message David does not understand. (Later, David includes this unusual marriage proposal from Barkis in a letter to Peggotty.)

David sleeps in the cart until they reach Yarmouth, the first stage on his journey to London. Mr. Barkis drops David at an inn where eating arrangements have been made for him under the name of "Murdstone." He is served dinner, but the waiter tells him frightening stories about the food and then proceeds to eat most of David's meal himself.

The trip continues all night, but David is unable to sleep in the crowded coach. In the morning they reach London, "fuller of wonders and wickedness than all the cities of the earth," but no one is there to meet him. David, who is only "between eight and nine" years old, worries if he has been deliberately deserted. But some time later, a gaunt and shabby young man (Mr. Mell), one of the school's masters, calls for him. After David buys something to eat, they go to an alms-house (a poor house) where the schoolmaster visits his poverty-stricken mother.

This short visit over, they complete the journey to Salem House, David's new school. It is a dilapidated old structure with "ink splashed about it" and a general odor of decay. David is admitted by a brutish man with a wooden leg; then he learns that he has been sent to school early as a punishment because the other boys are home for the holidays. He reads the names of the students carved on an old door in the school yard and speculates on what they will be like.

A month passes before David is introduced to the sadistic Mr. Creakle, a former hop-dealer and now the proprietor of Salem House. He is a balding man who can only whisper when he speaks and is usually accompanied by the man with the wooden leg, acting "with his strong voice, as Mr. Creakle's interpreter to the boys." Mr. Creakle pinches David's ear, calls him the "young gentleman whose teeth are to be filed" (because of a misunderstanding, he believes that David bites other people), and informs David that he has "the happiness of knowing" David's stepfather.

Mr. Sharp, another schoolmaster and superior to Mr. Mell, returns the next morning, along with Tommy Traddles, a boy whose name David had read carved on the playground door. David is made fun of by the other boys as they arrive, but it is not as bad as he had expected, due largely to Traddles' help. David meets J. Steerforth, one of the senior boys and the acknowledged student leader, who states that David's punishment is a "jolly shame." Steerforth and David are in the same dormitory, and they become friends, primarily because David allows Steerforth to keep his money for him. Steerforth buys some wine and biscuits for them out of the money, and they dine on them as a treat in the evening. The other boys attend the "royal spread," and David enjoys talking about the school with them.

David's naiveté at the inn, in Chapter 5, is the first of many similar experiences which he will encounter in the world outside of Blunderstone Rookery. He becomes the butt of jokes both during the journey and at the school. He is homesick for Peggotty and his mother, and on his trip from Yarmouth, he observes children in the streets and wonders "whether their fathers were alive, and whether they were happy at home." David himself is unhappy and he looks forward to the opening of school with apprehension.

In Chapter 6, we are concerned with Steerforth's leadership — a quality implied in his name; his suave manner so impresses the naive David that he is unable to see that Steerforth is using David's money to feed the entire "bedroom." A foreshadowing of future action in this chapter occurs when Steerforth asks David if he has a sister, stating that if David has one, he would like to know her. Although David has no sister, we think of little Em'ly, who is very much like David, and we should remember that Steerforth has complimented David on the very qualities that he and Em'ly share.

***Significance:***

Mr. Creakle, the headmaster, returns to Salem House just ahead of the students, and interviews David Copperfield, who is frightened by Creakle's violent manner. When the other students arrive, they tease David less than he'd feared, thanks to the friendliness of Tommy Traddles and an older boy, [James Steerforth](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/David-Copperfield/character-analysis/#James_Steerforth). Handsome and engaging, Steerforth is widely respected by the other boys and quickly gains David's admiration. Steerforth convinces David to give him all his money, and Steerforth purchases a feast for the boys who share their dormitory bedroom. At this secret banquet, David learns that Mr. Creakle and his assistant, Tungay, are shady, brutal men who make a habit of beating the students. Steerforth, the only student who escapes being beaten, assures David he'll take care of him. Steerforth idly says it would be nice if David Copperfield had a sister because she'd probably be "a pretty, timid, little, bright-eyed sort of girl"—just the sort of girl he'd like to know.

[Charles Dickens](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/David-Copperfield/author/) is a master of *showing*, rather than *telling*, as he describes the changes at Blunderstone in Chapter 4. The roles of Clara and [Peggotty](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/David-Copperfield/character-analysis/#Peggotty) are diminished as the Murdstones take over the household, and the atmosphere changes to one of gloom and misery. Clara Copperfield is too naive and childish to recognize her mistake in marrying Mr. Murdstone. Instead, she constantly seeks his approval, repressing her own instincts and overlooking the needs of her son. The image of Clara and the Murdstones walking home from church, arm-in-arm, while David lingers "behind alone," effectively shows how successfully the Murdstones have marginalized him. David, for his part, shows early signs of the perseverance that will be so important to him throughout his life. He finds a way to endure his situation through reading the books his father had collected. He reads novels of adventure and fantasy, many of which feature heroes that rise above dire circumstances to achieve success and happiness. Although David compares himself unfavorably with these heroes, the example of his heroes' perseverance and resilience will inspire him in later trials he faces.

[David Copperfield](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/David-Copperfield/character-analysis/#David_Copperfield)'s encounter with the opportunistic waiter at the inn illustrates his tendency to always think the best of people. It doesn't even occur to him the waiter might have an ulterior motive. David's naïveté and childish trust will lead him to make poor judgments in interactions with strangers as well as with friends. His trait of perseverance, however, can be seen in his response to the suspicion—when no one meets him in London—that he's been taken to London to be abandoned. Almost immediately, he begins to consider different courses of action he might take to survive on his own.

During the Victorian era, boys from well-to-do families were sent away to boarding schools around age 10. Salem House is typical of the non-elite type of boarding school (not on the level of Eton or Harrow), run for profit, often by shady owners such as Mr. Creakle. It wasn't unusual for boys in these schools to be beaten, poorly fed, and poorly taught. Even one of the masters at Salem House, Mr. Mell, is paid so poorly he can't afford to buy new boots or support his mother.  
***Summary and analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

After a month has passed, [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) notices the man with the wooden leg cleaning the school in preparation for the arrival of students. That evening, David is summoned to see [Mr. Creakle](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-creakle). David is intimidated by the headmaster, who has a habitually angry expression and always talks in a whisper (the man with the wooden leg repeats most of what he says in a louder voice). A cross-examination ensues, with Mr. Creakle asking how David has behaved so far, warning him that he knows [Mr. Murdstone](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-murdstone), and describing himself as a "Tartar." As proof of this, Mr. Creakle warns David that he would disown his own wife and daughter (who are in the room) if they disobeyed him. As he leaves, David dares to ask to take the placard off, and Mr. Creakle lunges at him in answer.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Even more than Mr. Murdstone, Mr. Creakle reveals just how tyrannically a husband and father could be if he chose to abuse his authority; he appears to take great pleasure in terrorizing his wife and daughter, who have few (if any) places to turn for help. Given this, it's not surprising that Creakle proves to be such a sadistic headmaster: anyone who would behave so viciously to his own family certainly won't hold back in the more cutthroat world outside the  home.

***Summary Part 2:***

The next day, the head teacher, [Mr. Sharp](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters), returns. A student named [Tommy Traddles](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/tommy-traddles) arrives and tells [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) that Mr. Sharp's luxuriantly wavy hair is actually a wig. Traddles and David quickly strike up a friendship, with Traddles helping smooth the issue of the placard over with the other students when they arrive.

***Analysis Part 2:***

In addition to being David's first real friend, Traddles will eventually become a foil to David. Although the two characters end up in a similar place—happily married, with thriving careers—Traddles follows a much more straightforward path there, without the missteps and false starts that plague David.

***Summary Part 3:***

A student named [James Steerforth](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/james-steerforth) returns. The boys have been anticipating his arrival so they can present [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield) to him: Steerforth is older, good-looking, and rich, and therefore the unofficial leader of the group. When Steerforth meets David, he tells David that he ought to give him his money for safekeeping, and then asks him whether he'd like to use some of it to buy a bottle of wine Steerforth has. In this way, he tricks David into buying not only the wine but also cakes, biscuits, and fruit.

***Analysis Part 3:***

David's first interaction with Steerforth establishes a pattern that will hold for the rest of their relationship. Although Steerforth isn't exactly cruel to David, the combination of his charm and David's impressionability is a bad mixture. David is so in awe of Steerforth that he allows himself to be taken advantage of and led into various questionable activities. Even setting Steerforth's frequently amoral behavior to one side, this is problematic, because it prevents David from learning to exercise his own will and judgment.

***Summary Part 4:***

That evening, [Steerforth](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/james-steerforth) lays all the food out on [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield)'s bed and the boys stay up feasting and gossiping—an episode David remembers as magical to the present day. Through their talk, David learns more about the school—for instance, that [Mr. Creakle](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-creakle) and [Tungay](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/tungay) (the man with the wooden leg) used to work together trading hops (an ingredient in beer) and view the school mostly as a moneymaking venture. Both are consequently cruel with the students, although Mr. Creakle never dares to beat Steerforth. [Mr. Mell](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-mell) and [Mr. Sharp](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters), meanwhile, are badly paid, and the former is particularly poor, having grown up in poverty.

***Analysis Part 4:***

David's fond memories of his nights at Salem House are another example of the nostalgia that colors his descriptions of experiences he has had to outgrow. This section also continues to develop the novel's treatment of class-related issues: Creakle, for instance, is eager to stay in the good graces of the wealthy and upper-class Steerforths.

***Summary part 5:***

After the talk dies down and most of the boys have gone to bed, [Steerforth](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/james-steerforth) reiterates that he will "take care of" [David](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/david-copperfield). He also asks whether David has a sister, since he imagines she would be a "pretty, timid, little, bright-eyed sort of girl." David says that he does not, and continues to think about Steerforth as he falls asleep—though not, he says, because he had any premonition of Steerforth's future.

***Analysis Part 5:***

Part of what makes David and Steerforth's relationship "problematic," from a Victorian perspective, is its homoerotic subtext. In this exchange, Steerforth is apparently romantically interested in a (hypothetical) female version of David. The passage also underscores the idea that the friendship stands between David and adult masculinity by reinforcing his more "feminine" (that is, passive) traits: Steerforth's description of David's "sister" as "timid" and innocent is transparently a description of David himself.

***Quotations:***

***Quotation 1:***

I heard that Mr. Creakle had a son [...] who, assisting in the school, had once held some remonstrance with his father on an occasion when its discipline was very cruelly exercised, and was supposed, besides, to have protested against his father's usage of his mother. I heard that Mr. Creakle had turned him out of doors, in consequence; and that Mrs. and Miss Creakle had been in a sad way, ever since. (6.50)

***Explanation:***

Schools are hotbeds for gossip. We are sure you guys are aware of that. Here, these gossips speculate that Mr. Creakle had a son who he disowned for protesting Mr. Creakle's abuse of his family and the students. How seriously do you think we are supposed to take this bit of gossip about Mr. Creakle's family? Is there evidence elsewhere in the book that Mr. Creakle has a son?