David Copperfield

Question Book:
Year 6, pages 12-13

Author / Source:
Charles Dickens (adapted)

Genre:
Classic fiction — novel extract

Cross-curricular links:
• History (Victorian Britain)
• Drama (stage directions)

Introduction

This extract from David Copperfield has been adapted to make it more accessible to Year 6 pupils, but it still retains much of Dickens' original language and his distinctive writing style. David Copperfield tells the story of its titular character through retrospective narration. This extract is from an early part of the novel, when David is told that his mother has died. To draw attention to the way Dickens sets the scene, pause after reading the first paragraph and ask pupils to predict whether something good or bad might happen to David.

Answers

1. E.g. The text is partly based on real events from Charles Dickens' life and partly fictional.
2. E.g. Words like “ghostly” and “bleak” make the setting seem lonely and depressing. The author chose this setting to create a suitable mood for the bad news David is about to receive.
3. E.g. The phrase “surprisingly softly” suggests that Mr Sharp is usually quite blunt.
4. E.g. Mrs Creakele feels sad and uncomfortable. She is sad because David's mother has died, but she also feels uncomfortable because she has to break the news to David.
5. E.g. The “mist” is tears forming in David’s eyes, which are stopping him from seeing properly.
6. E.g. hopeless; miserable; bleak; dismal
7. E.g. Candles are used to light the room rather than electric lights. The extract uses old-fashioned language like “parlour” and “mamma”. The news of David’s mother’s death was sent by letter, rather than by a phone call or an email.

Extra Activities

• Drawing on pupils’ answers to question 7 and other details in the text, challenge pupils to work out what time period David Copperfield is set in. As a class, discuss how life for a child like David in Victorian Britain might have been different to daily life for children today.
• Ask pupils to rewrite the first two paragraphs of the extract so that it has a bright and cheery tone. Pupils should retain key elements of the text, e.g. they should use first person narration, write in the past tense and use the setting of a classroom.
• Get pupils to write a letter from Mrs Creakele to Peggotty, David’s old nurse, describing David’s reaction when he heard that his mother had died and how he has been coping in the days following the news.
• Ask pupils to imagine they are directing this extract in a stage version of David Copperfield. They should re-write the extract as a playscript, adding in their own stage directions. Encourage pupils to think about lighting, sound effects and the position of the characters on the stage.
• Victorian schoolchildren like David would have learnt to write in a type of handwriting called copperplate. Show children some phrases written in copperplate and ask them to try to copy them in the same style.