about his poetry, that one critic said about his final years, "Browning dinnered himself away." Rather than working on his poetry, he was enjoying too much the life of just being a celebrity. His son, Pen, married a rich woman from New York when he was thirty-eight, and Browning realized that no matter how mediocre an artist Pen was, he would always be provided for. This relief from a father's burden freed Browning in one sense; he died not long after. You would of course expect that he would be buried next to his beloved Elizabeth in Florence. But he was not, because by the time of his death he was so renowned as a poet that the English wanted his body brought back on a barge from Italy to England to be buried where the greatest artists are buried, in Westminster Abby.

And so today Elizabeth Barrett Browning is pretty much known as the wife of Robert Browning, and the one who penned those immortal *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, where anybody can find a spiritual soul mate in those beautiful rhymes. Robert Browning's reputation, on the other hand, has continued to grow. Many people who like him as a poet see him as a philosopher and religious teacher, because in his poetry the doubts that troubled other Victorian authors, such as Tennyson and Dickens, are resolved due to his basic optimism. People who want to be uplifted by literature turn to Robert Browning in a way they cannot turn to someone like Charles Dickens, who presented so many gloomy predictions about what was going to happen to society. Browning is viewed as a relief, an escape from gloom to where you can still be inspired. I think Elizabeth Barrett Browning would be proud today to realize that what she predicted, that her husband's neglected reputation would rise, has come true.

Charles Dickens

(1812–1870)

I admit I sometimes feel guilty lecturing upon Charles Dickens, because of all the authors we study in school, he really doesn't need much more publicity. Other than William Shakespeare, his is the most recognized name in the history of our language. Yet Dickens does suffer from a problem in reputation that no other author seems to have.

The problem is not, of course, that we don't know about Charles Dickens; the problem is that we have the wrong idea about him. By this I mean that he is the only author who, for eleven months out of the year, we can ignore as we go about our business; then, come December 1, we cannot avoid Charles Dickens if our lives depend on it. Come December we are *Christmas Carol*ed ad infinitum (and some would say ad nauseam). If you have a little theater group in your town, in December—for the thirty-seventh time in a row—they will perform *A Christmas Carol.* You may pick up a newspaper in December and see advertisements featuring caricatures of Ebenezer Scrooge wearing everything from headphones to toenail polish. If you turn on the television, there will be seven different movie versions of *A Christmas Carol* to choose from. In December, all we can ever think about in literature is *A Christmas Carol,* and then

come January, Dickens is gone again, not to reappear for another eleven months.

Now, I would be the last person to say that *A Christmas Carol* does not deserve the tremendous reputation it has today. Many people call it the greatest expression of the Christmas spirit in secular literature, and I would hardly disagree. Charles Dickens, however, would undoubtedly be frustrated at the thought that, more than a hundred years after his death, he is known only for that one small short story he tossed off in six weeks of a writing career that lasted for more than thirty years.

If you know much about Charles Dickens, you should be thinking, "But wait a minute. Isn't he the same author who wrote *Oliver Twist, Great Expectations, A Tale of Two Cities*?" Of course he is. It is rather impressive, more than a century after Dickens is gone, that he is known for such enduring works. And yet Dickens would still not be happy if he thought he were known in our day for only those four, because he wrote fifteen major works, and believe it or not, people in America and England knew all fifteen equally well. Every novel and story he wrote was devoured on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet today he is known for just the four I've mentioned. What has happened to his reputation?

Unfortunately, of Dickens's major works, all but four are eight hundred pages long or longer. The four works Dickens wrote that are less than eight hundred pages are *A Christmas Carol, A Tale of Two Cities, Oliver Twist,* and *Great Expectations.* Today, we do not read the best of Dickens or the worst of Dickens, we read the least of Dickens. We pick up a book of his, and if it's eight hundred pages, we toss it aside. We don't have time.

Even if you did read every book Dickens ever wrote, however, you still wouldn't have a clue to his greatness, because Charles Dickens's life is far more fascinating than any book he ever wrote, yet people know virtually nothing about his life. There *is* an exception to that ignorance. A large group of students at my university know all about Charles Dickens's life; they are in my freshmen composition course, in the fall. On the first day of class I announce to my students that I am a Charles Dickens expert and we will be studying Dickens in this section. My students don't even blink. They've all seen a late-night movie version of *A Christmas Carol* and figure, "What else is there to know about this particular author?" I wait about three weeks, then announce to my students that I want them to read a typical Dickens novel. Since the typical Dickens novel is over seven hundred pages long, we won't be doing *A Christmas Carol* or *Tale of Two Cities.* In fact, I always assign the same typical Dickens novel to my freshmen—*The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit,* which is 942 pages long. Even my colleagues at my university say it is cruel and unusual punishment to assign a nine-hundred-page Dickens novel to freshmen. But I'm not stupid. I always make the assignment the day after the drop-and-add deadline, when students cannot wriggle out of a class unless they're willing to pay a hefty fee.

Why do I assign a novel like *Martin Chuzzlewit* to freshmen? In self-defense I maintain I do not do it to be cruel. If you have ever taught English at the junior-high, senior-high, or college level, you know why I choose *Martin Chuzzlewit.* I assign it because I worry—just as high school English teachers worry today—that the students won't read it—they will head, of course, straight to the Cliff's Notes. But there are no Cliff's Notes to *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*

because nobody's read it but me and I'm not talking. My students have no hope. They have to read every page of this novel.

I'm an old-fashioned English teacher. I give a quiz every Monday. Since there are no Cliff's Notes, unless students read the book, they won't be able to pass. I wait until they have finished the entire novel before I start lecturing on it and on Dickens, because I feel it will mean more to them after they have read the novel. So the day after they have finished *Martin Chuzzlewit*, I begin lecturing on Dickens. I always open my first lecture by stating, "Charles Dickens's life was far more interesting than any book he ever wrote," and my students look up at me with an expression that says, "God, I hope so," having slogged through the nine hundred pages.

But even if you like Dickens, you will be hard-pressed to ever think that his books are more influential than his life. What is the most interesting thing about Charles Dickens? It is probably this: Charles Dickens earned $68 million as a writer, and that $68 million makes him the top-grossing author of all time that we still study in school. No one—not Faulkner, not Hemingway, not Shakespeare—earned $68 million and is regarded as a classic author in school. How did Dickens earn that $68 million?

That will be told in a few more pages. But the first question is *why* would Dickens become obsessed with earning such a fortune? The answer rests with his father, John Dickens. Had John Dickens given his family financial security, then Dickens would not have spent his entire adult life trying to earn more and more money. But John Dickens was a failure; he was a feckless father.

If I asked you what the adjective *feckless* means, you would probably answer, "Having no feck whatsoever." That's true, but more specifically it means irresponsible, and it was John Dickens's fecklessness that would change his son forever when Charles was twelve.

Dickens grew up thinking that he came from one of the wealthier families in the city. He noticed that his parents gave lavish parties with lots of food, wonderful drink (particularly lemon punch), and all sorts of money expended on gifts. Dickens thought he was living the life of a rather upper-crust, upper-class little boy. But on that terrible day in 1824, there was a loud knock on the front door. Charles Dickens's father opened the door, and there stood the biggest, meanest, ugliest policeman Dickens had ever seen. The policeman said, "Are you John Dickens?" And Dickens's father said, "Yes, I'm John Dickens." And the policeman said, "Then I am arresting you here, on the spot, for debt. You must come with me to the debtors' prison immediately."

What did Dickens's father do? Even in that hour of absolute grief, Mr. Dickens was always conscious of whether he had an audience; and he passed this on to Charles wholesale. He turned around, saw his twelve-year-old son sitting on the floor, burst into tears, and said, "The sun has set on our house forever. We are ruined!" And he was led away by the policeman. Mr. Dickens was nothing if not theatrical, and off he went to debtors' prison.

However, not only did John Dickens leave, but soon the entire Dickens family was thrown into debtors' prison. Actually, it's unfair of me to say they were thrown into debtors' prison. You weren't *thrown* into debtors' prison; you moved into debtors' prison. Because debtors' prison in

Dickens's day really wasn't a prison at all. What it was would be in our day a low-income apartment complex. The only way you'd never confuse debtors' prison with a low-income apartment complex was that you'd notice an iron gate all around the complex, and you didn't have the key to get out.

That brings up the question, how did you get out of debtors' prison? You got out of debtors' prison when you paid off your debt. But there is that catch-22: they wouldn't let you out of debtors' prison to do anything until you paid off your debts. Instead the British Crown, in its great wisdom, gave you two options. Plan A was that if you dropped dead while you were in debtors' prison, all your debts were forgiven and you were free to go. But alas, you were dead, so this was not the popular option. The popular option was B. If you had children, you looked over your brood and you picked out the one child you thought could most efficiently earn a living. Because your children, although in debtors' prison because they slept with you, were not confined there. They were free to go to school or work.

And so when Dickens was only twelve, he had to go out on his own, drop out of school, and rent a room so he could get to work early the next morning to support the entire family and earn enough money to get them out of debtors' prison. Dickens learned early in life a lesson he shouldn't have learned at all. Dickens was convinced, even at age twelve, that if people are going to like you, you better have status, and the only way to have status is to have money.

For the rest of his life he would be haunted by the mere six months he worked at a shoe polish factory to earn the money his imprisoned father could not. In fact, he was so ashamed that he never told a soul about it his entire life. It

wasn't until after Dickens's death, when his best friend, John Forster, published his biography on Dickens, based on his personal papers, that it became known. This humiliation of being among the working poor at age twelve would give him the creativity and drive to insure that by the time he was only twenty-three he would already be among the working rich.

The idea that would lead to his $68 million began to emerge when he was twenty-three. When Dickens was twenty-three, he was a nobody. He had a job that was so boring (a parliament reporter) that at night, he said, to keep his sanity he would simply wander the streets of London, and he would sketch. He didn't sketch with a pencil, however, he sketched with a pen. He wrote essays, sketches on people and places that caught his eye.

For example, let's say that he was walking down Piccadilly Circus and he saw a tree that had been blown over by the wind for so many decades that it looked like an old woman, all hunched over. Dickens would create a literary sketch about this tree that looked like an old woman. Who would pay an author to publish such a sketch? Nobody would. But if you were an unknown like Dickens—a twenty-three-year-old upstart—you would send the sketch to your favorite magazine; if the editor liked it, he would publish your sketch. The magazine didn't pay you anything; your reward was seeing your words in print.

Now, the one thing you never saw in print was your name, because if you were an unknown like Dickens, you couldn't use your own name on the sketch; you had to invent a pseudonym. Dickens thought up literature's most memorable disguise—he decided to call himself Boz.

Dickens borrowed the name Boz from his youngest brother, who was seventeen years younger than Dickens.

This brother was so adorable that his parents regretted the first name they had given him. They had named him Augustus, yet Augustus or Gus seemed inappropriate for such a cute child. They decided to nickname him Moses. Now, few of us would rank Moses in the top five of a list of cute names, but in Dickens's day, there had been a popular novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield* by Oliver Goldsmith, that had a minor character—a cute little boy—named Moses. Many literate parents thenceforth nicknamed their cute children Moses.

Everybody called Dickens's youngest brother Moses, except for Dickens's youngest brother, because he was just beginning to talk and he couldn't get out more than a syllable. So rather than calling himself Moses, he called himself Moz. But he had been born with a chronic sinus condition and his nose was perpetually stopped-up. He couldn't pronounce *M* to save his life. So *Moz* came out sounding like "Boz." Dickens took Boz from his adenoidal younger brother and put it on every sketch he sent out to magazines.

By the time Dickens was twenty-three, numerous publishers had accepted a total of thirty-six different sketches by him. Everything he sent out was published. Did this make Dickens happy? No, he was disgusted, because he wasn't being paid anything. He then came up with the practical idea of sweet-talking a publisher, John Macrone, into bringing out all thirty-six sketches in a book. So Dickens's first book was not *A Tale of Two Cities* nor *A Christmas Carol*; his first book is *Sketches by Boz*, because he was not "Dickens" yet. And was this the book that launched

Dickens's $68-million career? Hardly. I will let Dickens himself tell you how successful this book was; he wrote in a journal, "My first book, *Sketches by Boz*, fell stillborn from the press." *Sketches by Boz* sold poorly, yet its publication was the smartest thing Dickens ever did.

In his day—1836—if a publisher brought out a book that didn't sell, he could still make a decent profit on it. All the publisher had to do was send a complimentary copy to other booksellers, with an accompanying note that said, in effect, "This is one of our hottest best-sellers, but we respect your firm so much we want you to have a complimentary copy." Now, every bookseller in England knew what this meant: "We cannot sell this turkey. Please, take it off our hands," and every bookseller would willingly comply. If a publisher was burdened with a book that didn't sell and was willing to give it away to other booksellers so it could go on the shelf, he received from the British government a tax credit for each book. So although *Sketches by Boz* didn't sell to anyone, it was on every bookseller's shelf. Tit for tat—they knew they had to take in this turkey so when they had a turkey of their own, they could send it on and receive the tax credit. So *Sketches by Boz* was mailed out to other booksellers, who took a quick look at it and said, "Oh, no, not another book by some clever young hack kid." They would put these books on the very top shelf in the back of their bookstore where it wouldn't take up valuable space, and it would simply gather dust and die a quiet death.

But that is not what happened to *Sketches by Boz*. Unbeknownst to Dickens, six months after *Sketches by Boz* was published and fizzled, the finest illustrator of that era, Robert Seymour, walked into the publishing house of two

young, unknown, rather incompetent publishers named Mr. Chapman and Mr. Hall. Chapman and Hall were about to go bankrupt. They never claimed any good authors among their literary stable, and they never published books that sold respectably.

Seymour approached the penurious publishers with a request that seemed heaven-sent. He had just finished a picture book and wanted Chapman and Hall to publish it. Of course Chapman and Hall were ecstatic; any book with Robert Seymour's name on the title page would be an instant best-seller because of his reputation. It would save their firm. But they couldn't understand why the great Robert Seymour—who could have had Queen Victoria's own publishers, had he wanted them—had come to these two unknowns, Chapman and Hall.

What Chapman and Hall didn't know was that Robert Seymour was an alcoholic, a drug user, and a compulsive gambler. These vices had gotten him into such deep debt that he needed 85 percent of the profits on his next book just to break even. He knew too that no self-respecting publisher would give him 85 percent of any profits. Chapman and Hall were known to be in dire circumstances, so he told these two young men, "I'll let you publish my picture book, but I need 85 percent of the profits. Is it a deal?" Chapman and Hall had never had 15 percent of anything; they considered the offer generous and were ready to sign, but Mr. Chapman did say, "By the way, Mr. Seymour, what is this picture book you've written about?"

Seymour described his work thus: "I've invented an athletic club, a sports club, but it only has four fat, old men in the club and they're not athletes at all. They try to skate on

the ice—they're so fat they fall through. They try to shoot a bird—they're so incompetent they shoot someone's rear end off by mistake. I've drawn one hundred and fifty pictures of these fat and funny sportsmen, and that's my book. What do you think?" Well, Chapman and Hall thought it was the silliest thing they'd ever heard of, but they told Seymour in no uncertain terms that it was brilliant. They knew the name Robert Seymour on the title page would guarantee a best-seller. But it was Robert Seymour's next words that changed the history of British literature:

"Perhaps if we wrote humorous captions underneath my pictures, it wouldn't be just a picture book, it would be a joke book and we could charge double. Do you know of some clever young man we can hire for a little money to write amusing captions?" Chapman and Hall did not know of anyone—which is why they were going bankrupt. But, Mr. Hall tells us later, he was not about to tell Robert Seymour that they didn't know of some young, funny writer because they were afraid they would lose his business.

Mr. Hall decided on the spot, in desperation, that he would pray to God for a name to give Robert Seymour. As his eyes went up to heaven to pray, they passed the top shelf at the back of the store, and right at the front of that back shelf, in a red binding, was *Sketches by Boz*. Mr. Hall looked right at Robert Seymour and said, "Oh, yes, we are intimately connected with a delightful young man, a good friend of ours who would be perfect, but we just need a week to get back in touch." Which of course meant they needed a week to find out who in the world this "Boz" was. Seymour agreed to wait and left the shop.

As soon as he was gone, Chapman and Hall raced to the

bookshelf, took down *Sketches by Boz*, and frantically, fruitlessly searched for a name they could contact. But of course Dickens couldn't put his name on the book; it only said "Boz." And so, as the joke goes, for the next week they ran all over England crying, "Who the dickens is Boz?" Finally Chapman and Hall decided that if they went to the publisher of *Sketches by Boz* and offered him a bit of money, perhaps he would share the author's name. Well, of course Macrone was only too happy, for very little money, to tell them the fateful red-bound book was by some writer named Charles Dickens.

Thus literary history was made on February 8, 1836, when Robert Seymour, Mr. Chapman, Mr. Hall, and Charles Dickens all met to sign the agreement for the joke book that Seymour would draw and Dickens would caption. Dickens insisted that they all meet at his home. He was insecure and wanted the meeting to take place where he felt most comfortable. As soon as they had arrived, Dickens asked, "Now tell me, Mr. Seymour, what is your idea for the picture book?" and Seymour launched into his description of the antics of the sports club. Everybody assumed Dickens would rejoice, "Isn't that wonderful? Where do I sign?" They did not, however, know the twenty-three-year-old Charles Dickens, who wanted control in everything he ever did and wanted it even now. Dickens said instead, "May I have five minutes in my study to consider this proposition?" He walked into his closet (he didn't have a study in his apartment, but he didn't want them to know that). If we can believe Dickens, he took a candle into a closet area, wrote for five minutes, came out, and gave a list of five demands to Mr. Chapman and said, "If these five demands cannot be met, I do not wish to work on your project."

You would assume that Chapman, Hall, and Seymour would in unison have said, "Who do you think you are, Dickens, giving us these ultimata! Do you realize there are young men who would pay for the privilege of working for the great Robert Seymour?" But Mr. Chapman wisely read the list of demands and found one ultimatum so brilliantly conceived, they knew they would side with Dickens. What was this fateful ultimatum, this condition that would change British literature?

Dickens's idea was breathtaking in the simplicity of its innovation. Rather than publish Seymour's idea of four fat, old men as a joke book, release it as a novel, which Dickens would write and Seymour illustrate, and charge a hefty price for it. But—and this was the key—they would soften the blow to the reader's pocketbook by bringing out the novel once a month, three chapters at a time. Dickens said, "Ask readers to come to the bookstore in January and pay us one shilling. They give us a shilling and for that amount they will be given chapters one, two, and three of our novel. Then they will have to come back in February, put down another shilling, and get chapters four, five, and six. And they are going to have to come back again in March, put down another shilling, and get chapters seven, eight, and nine. I will make this novel so long, readers will be buying it for two years. We finally get all of their money, they finally get all of our book."

Mr. Hall was pessimistic that such a radical notion would work and explained the finances of publishing to Dickens. "It costs us a minimum of three shillings a copy to produce any book, even this new once-a-month, three-chapter-at-a-time idea you have. You just told me to sell your book for one

shilling a copy. When I sell your book, I lose two shillings each time."

Dickens said, "No, I've done my homework and there is a way we can make a fat profit on one shilling." When I give this lecture to my students I pause here and point out that Dickens *always* did his homework—and he earned $68 million dollars. I don't know why I bother; it goes right over their heads. He walked over to his bookshelf and pulled off a book—any book would do—and said, "When someone buys a book, is it not true that whether the book has eight pages or eight hundred pages the reader is not paying for the pages?"

Mr. Chapman agreed. "Of course. Pages are made out of cheap paper pulp. They cost us almost nothing, so the price of the book is not determined by the pages."

Dickens said, "Isn't it also true that when someone buys a book, what he is actually buying is the front cover, the back cover, and the spine, because they are made out of wood? The wood is expensive and determines the price of the book." Chapman and Hall agreed.

And then Dickens said, "Why can't we invent a new kind of book for my once-a-month, three-chapter-at-a-time idea? This book will have the covers made out of the same thing as the pages—cheap paper pulp. We could call it paperback." Thus Dickens, at twenty-three, invented the mass-market paperback book, but this was not what made him rich. That is still to come.

The publishers said, "Let's pretend we invent this paperback book. We could then make a profit on one shilling, but we will still go bankrupt. Everyone will come the first month and buy the first three chapters. Some of them will

come back the next month and buy the next three chapters. Maybe some of them will come back the third month. But no one is going to come back every month for two years." Chapman and Hall maintained the public would get bored with the long, strung-out process and would quit reading. The publishers, however, would be obligated to keep on publishing Dickens's chapters even though no one was buying them.

Dickens was already one step ahead of them. "I guarantee readers will be throwing money at us, more eagerly at the end than in the beginning, because in each monthly installment on the last page, in the last paragraph, something incredible will happen." He went on to describe what he meant. "At the end of chapter three I'll have my hero start walking up a very steep cliff, but a formidable root will be growing out of that cliff. My hero, absentminded and nearsighted, will trip over the root and fall off the cliff. But my hero has forgotten to cut his fingernails for five years. As he starts to fall off the cliff, with his last ounce of energy he will grasp a fingerhold. So, in the second-to-the-last sentence of chapter three, he will be hanging at the cliff by his nails alone. And in the *last* sentence of chapter three I'll have someone start walking up that same cliff, but the reader won't know if that person is the hero's friend, who will pick him up and save him, or if he is the villain, who will slash off the hero's fingers and send him crashing to his death in the ocean below." Dickens delivered his last flourish: "You know how they find out? The readers come back and put down their money in February and buy chapters four, five, and six."

With that flash of inspiration, Dickens invented the form that every one of his novels would take. He never published

an entire novel first; he always published them once a month, three chapters at a time. He also thus invented *General Hospital, The Young and the Restless, The Bold and the Beautiful*—all of daytime TV but the talk shows. Charles Dickens was the first person to come up with the idea of suspense to link together a work of art. He did not call this principle "soap opera." He had a much better name for it, "procrastinated suspense," and that is exactly what it is and has remained for all these years.

Chapman, Hall, and Seymour himself thought Dickens's inspiration was an idea of genius. The next step was to give this novel approach to the novel a title. Dickens offered, "Why don't we call the sporting club the Pickwick Club? And we want to title the novel so people will know it is coming out for the first time in a new, cheap form of paperback publication. I want to call the novel *The Pickwick Papers.*" And they did.

Was *Pickwick Papers* a success? I would say so—it was the best-selling novel of 1836. And thanks to Dickens's idea, it was also the best-selling novel of 1837 because it was still coming out in 1837. In 1900 a survey found that the best-selling novel of the entire nineteenth century was *Pickwick Papers.* And by now you probably think you know exactly why it sold so well: because Dickens had invented the paperback and the soap opera—but you would be wrong.

As clever as those two innovations were, *Pickwick Papers* sold so many copies not due to what happened before it came out, but to what happened after. You see, for the first time people had to go to the bookstore every month and buy three chapters at a time, over and over. Yet what had they to show for two years of buying *Pickwick Papers?* Nothing.

Dickens and the publishers made sure the paper the novel was printed on was of such poor quality it fell apart if you read it too hard. The readers did not care—they were only paying a shilling, they did not expect paper of quality. What bothered them was this: when they had finished *Pickwick Papers,* they were left with nothing but flimsy, cheap paperbacks.

There were no public libraries at this point; the first public libraries came in the 1890s. The only library was in your house in a room reserved for books. When you finished a novel that you loved as much as *Pickwick* (and people *had* loved it, thought it was the funniest thing they had ever read), you put your novel on your mahogany bookcase and displayed it proudly. But now readers had a new problem. All they had from *Pickwick* was this pile of paperback trash. They tried to put the paperback *Pickwick* up against their beautiful edition of *Pride and Prejudice* or their leather-bound *Ivanhoe* and it looked terrible. What were they to do?

Dickens, with his big heart, came to the rescue. In September of 1837, when the last three chapters of *Pickwick Papers* were published, everyone rushed to bookstores because they were eager to see how Dickens tied the novel all together in the end. But after they had bought the last three chapters of *Pickwick,* they noticed, on the other side of the bookstore, piled high to the ceiling, leather-bound, gilt-edged, silk-ribbon–markered editions of *The Pickwick Papers* in hardback. Here was a handsome keepsake, a presentable addition to their bookshelves. So everyone bought the expensive hardback edition of *Pickwick* when they bought the last three chapters of the paperback. Charles Dickens is the only author we know of who sold the same book to the

same people twice. They had to buy it in parts because they wanted to know what happened next. Then they had to buy the hardback, because they wanted it to display. But we are not finished; if you ever wondered how Dickens could invent anyone as greedy as Ebenezer Scrooge, read on. . . .

Once the hardback edition came out, Dickens began to wonder, "Now that readers have bought the hardback of *Pickwick*, what will they do with the cheap, three-chapter parts they have been buying for two years?" He knew what they were going to do, they were going to throw them away. People did not throw them away, however, because a few days after the hardback of *Pickwick* came out, a salesman would knock on the door and ask, "Have you bought the beautiful leather-bound edition of Charles Dickens's *Pickwick?*" and you would say, "Well, yes, so I am not going to buy another from you." And the salesman would say, "Oh, no, I do not want to sell you another book. But what are you going to do with the cheap parts of *Pickwick* that came out originally?" "Oh," you would reply, "I'm going to throw those away. I don't need them, because I have the display copy." "Oh, no," remonstrated the salesman, "don't throw them away! May I buy back each installment of *Pickwick Papers*?" He would pay you almost nothing for them, but whatever he paid was profit, because you had been going to toss them.

Now why would Dickens's firm buy back the cheap three-chapter parts of *Pickwick Papers*? Profit. They bought back the chapter parts, ripped off the front and back covers of each installment, put them together in chronological order, and sewed them into a gorgeous leather spine with a thin twelve-karat gold band around the edge. This "new" version was sold as *The Collector's Edition of Charles Dickens's*

Pickwick Papers, and it was advertised, "Printed on the original paper, when this world-famous novel first appeared." You may think, "Well, surely no one was gullible enough to buy the collector's edition. For goodness' sakes, they had bought it in parts, they had bought it in the hardback, why would they need it?" You would be too hasty. The collector's edition was hideously expensive, but anyone who could afford to buy it, bought it.

You, the reader, bought the collector's edition, but you didn't take it home—you already had one there—you took it to your bank and put it in your safe-deposit box. Dickens was now a world-famous author, and you had the original printing of when *Pickwick Papers* first appeared. You had an original work of art. You left the collector's edition in your safe-deposit box for a few years and it steadily gained in value as an investment in original art. Anyone who could afford to buy the collector's edition always bought it.

You realize, of course, what this means. Charles Dickens is the only writer to sell the same book to the same people three times: once in parts, once in hardback, and once in the collector's edition. It was a moneymaking scheme like no other. Dickens was only twenty-four years old and he had written the best-selling novel of all time. People thought *Pickwick* was so funny, they approached Dickens in the street to beg, "Please, consider writing another novel. Will you?" And Dickens would say, "You know the first day of next month? Go to the bookstores, my next book will be there." Dickens also told them his next novel was titled *Oliver Twist*. People heard the name *Oliver Twist* and thought, "*Oliver Twist*? That's the silliest name I ever heard—this novel will be funnier than *Pickwick*."

Readers rushed to buy the first three chapters of *Oliver Twist*, and what did they find to laugh about in chapter one? They found a beautiful, well-bred woman, obviously pregnant yet with no wedding ring, crawling to a workhouse in a rainstorm. And what was the big joke at the end of chapter one? She died giving birth to this instant orphan, Oliver Twist. By chapter two poor Oliver is apprentice to a coffin maker; in chapter three little Oliver is so ill-fed at the workhouse that he has to utter what became the third-most-recognizable line in British fiction: "Please, sir. I want some more."

(In case you're wondering, "What is the second-most-recognizable line in British fiction?" it goes, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Charles Dickens. And in case you are insatiably curious and want to know the most-recognized line in all of British fiction, it goes, "God bless us, everyone." Watch for it at Christmastime. Dickens has the top three lines most recognizable in all British fiction.)

Readers couldn't believe how abused poor Oliver was; they also could not wait to buy the next three chapters, to see how little Oliver is further maltreated. They finished the novel and they observed to Dickens, "You know, I have never cried so hard over any novel as I cried over *Oliver Twist*." And Dickens—not modest—pointed out, "Well, that is odd. In my first novel, I made you laugh harder than you have ever laughed. In my second novel, I have made you cry harder than you have ever cried. I have run the gamut of human emotions in two novels, both of which are world best-sellers. And I am only twenty-six."

But Dickens is not famous today for how he peddled his novels; few people even know the story I have just told you.

No, Dickens is known to students by the few short novels of his they read and by the few biographical facts doled out in school: by age eight, we might know all about his poverty-stricken childhood; by age sixteen we may know all about his angry social conscience due to the industrial revolution; and by age twenty we're trying to forget all of it as fast as we can.

What truly gives Charles Dickens his immortality is neither the life he lived nor the commercial genius that spurred enormous sales of his works. His immortality rests on the inimitable characters he created in his novels. And his method of creating those characters was unique. Do you realize that Dickens never gives us a believable character in a realistic setting, speaking as real people would in actual life? In one way, all of Dickens's characters are complete nonsense. Look at his most famous character—you know him as well as I do: Ebenezer Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol*. Is Scrooge realistic? Hardly. No one in real life is as stingy as Scrooge is at the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*. Furthermore, no one in real life is as Santa Claus-y as Scrooge at the end of *A Christmas Carol*, and no one in real life ever went from being that miserly to that benevolent so speedily, with the help of four ghosts in his bedroom overnight on Christmas Eve. That's not how this world has ever operated.

And if Scrooge is unrealistic, look at Dickens's second-most-famous character. You know him too—Tiny Tim, also from *A Christmas Carol*. Is Tiny Tim a good example of what a real five-year-old child is like? I'll let you decide. You may remember the famous scene in *A Christmas Carol* when Tiny Tim and his father, Bob Cratchit, come home

from church on Christmas morning. Mrs. Cratchit meets them at the door and says, "Well, Father, how was our son, Tiny Tim, in church on Christmas?" And Bob Cratchit says, "Oh, Mother, he was good as gold, even better." "Really?" says Mrs. Cratchit. "What happened in church?" "Well," Bob Cratchit says, "you remember how late it was, Mother, when we finally got off to Christmas service?" "Oh, yes," Mrs Cratchit says, "it was late." "Well," Bob Cratchit says, "by the time we got to church, we were so very, very late that everybody was already seated. So as we came down the aisle to get into our pew, everybody turned around to look at Tiny Tim because that wooden crutch of his made so much noise. So I looked at him too and I asked if the attention bothered him. And our son replied, 'Oh, no, Daddy, I love it. Everyone will look at me and see that I am a cripple and realize that they are not a cripple, so they will have a better Christmas. God bless us, everyone.'"

Most of us know real five-year-olds, and we know what they are really like. You walk in a room; they say, "What did you bring me?" If the answer is "Nothing," they do not care if you go out and vanish forever. Have you ever known a five-year-old who prayed to be crippled on Christmas so others could look at him and feel uplifted? And yet, and yet—there *is* something recognizable about Tiny Tim, Ebenezer Scrooge, Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Uriah Heep, Miss Havisham, Lucy Minette, the Artful Dodger, Fagin, and every other unbelievable character in Dickens. As we read a Dickens novel, somehow his characters seem more real to us than people in our own lives. How does Dickens get away with creating characters as unbelievable as these, and yet we eagerly accept them?

He does not give you realistic characters. Tiny Tim is not realistic at all. Instead, Dickens makes sure that his characters, rather than being real people, are walking, talking, living, breathing personifications of a universal feeling. Scrooge represents stinginess in everything he does. We have all felt stingy; we can identify with a Scrooge. Tiny Tim is not simply a five-year-old child; he represents the victory of benevolence over handicap.

You might wonder, "Why would Dickens have an entire character representing overcoming a handicap? I am not handicapped, I cannot identify with Tiny Tim." But of course Dickens knew that that is not true at all; he knew that all of us are handicapped in some way. Most of us are not physically handicapped, but Dickens understood very well that all of us are to some degree mentally handicapped—by attitudes, by fears, by minds that run in unproductive ruts over and over. Dickens knew that because we are human beings, we are often at the mercy of our worst emotions and therefore feel very disabled. But of all the characters Dickens created, the best one I can use to illustrate Dickens's technique of emotional personification is not in his most famous work, *A Christmas Carol*. This character is from *Great Expectations*, and I am referring to that maddening, pathetic, unforgettable woman he named Miss Havisham.

For those of you who have not read *Great Expectations* this past week, let me give you just a little background on Miss Havisham. Miss Havisham was a wealthy young woman who was happily engaged to a young man. But on the morning of her wedding day, as she was dressing for the ceremony, at exactly twenty minutes to nine she received a devastating message from her fiancé, jilting her. Do you

remember what Miss Havisham did? The moment she received news of her abandonment she stopped all the clocks in her house, at twenty minutes to nine, never to run again. She closed all the drapes to ensure daylight would never enter as long as she lived. She had already put on her wedding dress; for the rest of her life, she never removed that garment. She had had one wedding shoe on and was about to put on the other when she received the message—for the rest of her life, she hobbled about with one shoe on and one shoe off. The wedding cake had already been placed on the banquet table for the reception; she vowed no one would remove that cake, for the rest of her life. This was the only vow she could not keep, because when we come into the story fifty years later, the cake is being moved, crumb by crumb, by the spiders and mice that have nested in it all the decades. In other words, when Miss Havisham received the news of her jilting, she stopped the clock literally and metaphorically for the rest of her life.

Now, none of us is likely to meet a Miss Havisham in our life. Her behavior is not normal, it is not anything you would see in any human being, but that does not make it unrealistic. It is only unrealistic in that no one would ever *behave* thus, but it is exactly realistic to what happens to all of us emotionally, internally, mentally, in our feelings when we are devastated in some way. If Scrooge represents stinginess and Oliver Twist represents neglect and Tiny Tim represents overcoming a handicap, Miss Havisham represents a much more complex emotion, something that unfortunately happens to all of us, usually more than once in our lifetime. She is a living, breathing personification of rejection. All of us have been rejected. Do we then behave as Miss Havisham

does? Do we stop all the clocks, draw all the drapes, and wear the same clothes? No—yet, what we do immediately after we are rejected is similar; what we do, of course, is withdraw. We do not literally stop the clocks, we metaphorically do. The hurt is sometimes so painful we cannot move on; we want to get underneath the covers and never come out again. We are so hurt and so humiliated that a person we love does not return that love that, although we do not behave in Miss Havisham's exaggerated way, we carry out in a small way what Dickens's characters do in a big way. And we feel it as hugely as his characters do.

But what makes Miss Havisham so brilliant is not just that she captures the immediate response we have to rejection; she also captures what inevitably happens to us after we have been rejected for a while. What do we do when we have been rejected? At first we do withdraw, we are depressed; we do not want to see anyone. But eventually we tell people we are close to about how awful this person has been to us, how terrible we feel, and our friends (if they are patient) sympathize. But eventually we get bored with the process, and our friends get bored too. Rejection eventually becomes boring because there is nothing you can do: you are not going to get the person back and how long can you talk about it?

Then, after a little while, we start thinking about this person we loved so much. We start thinking about the despicable thing this person did to us, and suddenly we are not depressed anymore. Suddenly a brand-new emotion sweeps over us, an emotion that is much more fun. Suddenly there is only one thing we want in life in order to die happy: we want revenge! We do not want to hurt the person as much as

the person hurt us—there is no fun in that—we want to hurt the person *more!* We want that person to learn once and for all that he or she cannot get away with rejecting someone as lovable and wonderful as we are.

But as Dickens teaches us in *Great Expectations,* the great irony is that we can never avenge ourselves on someone who does not care about us. You cannot hurt someone who does not care. So you have to seek revenge, if you can, in an indirect way, a way that we call today, with our sociological and psychological jargon, passive-aggressive behavior. And this is where Dickens, in creating Miss Havisham, shows himself to be so brilliant. Just as we do, she becomes depressed at first, but eventually she begins to hate her ex-fiancé. She is wise enough to realize she can never avenge herself upon the young man himself because he does not care. What does she do? She goes out and buys a child, Estella, and raises her as her daughter. But perversely she raises Estella for one reason only. She makes sure the girl has no heart, never feels love for anyone. Miss Havisham realizes this little girl is going to be beautiful, and that when Estella becomes a lovely young woman, handsome young men will fall wildly in love with her, and she will break their hearts. In her own warped way Miss Havisham will have achieved her revenge on the one young man who broke her heart. She uses Estella as a vengeful tool to make sure young men are as miserable because of her daughter as she was miserable because of the young man. Of course it makes no realistic sense, but we believe every detail of Miss Havisham because we have felt as she felt.

Many critics today carp at Dickens for his extreme personifications. They say Dickens never explains what the character is thinking and why. Dickens was far too subtle for

such explicitness. He took the *inside* of a character's mind, the psychology, and he put it on the *outside;* he made the setting and the symbols what we remember. That decaying wedding cake, that tattered dress, the mice, the spiders, the gloom, the stopped clocks—those symbols enlighten us far more effectively than hundreds of pages of psychological analysis. Symbolically Dickens put the psychological mood of Miss Havisham in all the bizarre things around her.

You may wonder why Dickens gave her the rather dull, upper-class name of Havisham. Why not symbolically name her? Ah, but he did. Miss Havisham wasted her life in revenge, using other people to exact retribution, and it was the most narcissistic thing she could have done. Dickens teaches us by her sad ending that this is not what you should do. She lived her life as a lie, a sham. He named her for what she was: "have a sham," Havisham.

Ultimately, the secret of Charles Dickens is that his characters will live forever because they never lived in the first place. They were not real when he invented them, they are not real today. They will not be real in the twenty-fourth century, but I would bet Dickens will be read in the twenty-fourth century because his characters represent unchanging human emotion and feeling. In this way, his characters are similar to Shakespeare's because they are timeless. Like Shakespeare, Dickens bursts through the age in which he lives. This Dickensian imagination, which we call grotesque, by its very nature of being so exaggerated represents a realism that we feel inside ourselves in a way that no "realistic novelist" could ever achieve. This is why Charles Dickens remains today as great a novelist as Shakespeare was a dramatist.