

Lewis Horne

### ***Our Mutual Friend* and the Test of Worthiness**

Shortly before he reveals his real name to her, John Rokesmith tells his wife Bella, "The time will come . . . when you *will* be tried,"<sup>1</sup> and with his warning articulates one of the central themes of *Our Mutual Friend*. Others are sounded throughout this dark work—themes of greed, money, identity—but the theme of trial, in this case a test of worthiness, provides a distinctive underpinning for the narrative and its events. The test I wish to discuss is self-imposed, directed toward the goal of domestic happiness, and concerns three male figures—John Harmon, Silas Wegg, and Bradley Headstone. In Harmon's case, the goal sets the novel apart from other works with a similar narrative pattern, that in which a central figure withdraws from activities in hopes of learning more about the moral qualities of those with whom he associates. The types range from a figure like Volpone with his malice-tinged roguery to someone like the morally engaged Duke in *Measure for Measure*. But for the three characters of this group, a reader finds a stronger analogue in the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*.

Although many features of the epic are missing from *Our Mutual Friend*—qualities of the central figures' personalities, the risky adventures of Odysseus, the magical apparatus and the appearances of supernatural beings, the proud and rowdy nature of the suitors—certain key elements overlap that make a comparison useful in exploring features of theme and unity in the novel. Dickens presents three Odyssean men, each trying to establish a home based on qualities conducive to Victorian domestic happiness. Each has different views of that happiness, faces different problems in his effort to achieve it. Each, in some manner, is a "disguised" guest. Each succeeds or fails not exclusively but primarily because of his own character and efforts, his efforts, in each case, involving the well-being of others. The Third Priest in *Murder in the Cathedral* says that "the steadfast can manipulate the greed and lust of others, / The feeble is devoured by his own."<sup>2</sup> If we see John Harmon trying to manipulate for the good of others,

manipulating others as a loving parent might be construed to "manipulate" his children, then we can see the man as a "steadfast" Odysseus-figure. On the other hand, if we consider the careers of Bradley Headstone and Silas Wegg, we find—in both dramatic (or melodramatic) and comic terms—the "feeble" Odysseus-figure being devoured by his own "greed and lust." The act of manipulating becomes an act of testing, both others and one's self, and the patterns of action involved find illuminating parallels in part of Homer's epic.

Homer's hero is himself large enough in variety of experience and character to encompass all three of the novel's male figures—John Harmon, the organizer and compassionate doer; Bradley Headstone, the self-destructive, obsessed, and wily man; Silas Wegg, the buffoon and trickster. No one of them combines all of Odysseus' attributes, appears as multi-faceted in achievement as W. B. Stanford finds Homer's hero to be—"the wise king, the loving husband and father, the brave warrior, the eloquent and resourceful *politique*, the courageous wanderer, the goddess-beloved hero, the yearning exile, the deviser of many ruses and disguises, the triumphant avenger, the grandson of Autolycus and the favorite of Athene."<sup>3</sup>

Yet John Harmon shows wiliness, courage, strength, can use the disguises and chicanery of the trickster—shows himself in many ways a Victorian Odysseus returning to his wife and hearth. If the wife is not yet his, she has been promised, and she must be won as Odysseus had again to win Penelope. In Harmon one observes in full nineteenth-century British measure the qualities Athene finds so important in Odysseus as he stands returned to the shore of Ithaka: he is civilized, intelligent, self-possessed.<sup>4</sup>

Michael Seidel has noted that "exiled heroes tend to remain apart from their tainted home until both they and the power they represent are ready to retake it."<sup>5</sup> As does Odysseus, so does John Harmon. He is prepared to leave London should Bella Wilfer fail his test rather than submit either her or himself to marriage without love. His identity held secret, he is known variously as the stranger, as Julius Handford, as the "man from Jamaica" (p. 54), the "man from Somewhere" (p. 55), "the man . . . whose name is Harmon" (p. 55). Noddy Boffin thinks of him momentarily as a piece of furniture. He is Lizzie Hexam's "unknown friend" (p. 587). Of himself, Harmon says, "I am nobody" (p. 140), and "I come . . . from many countries" (p. 141). His own comments and situation echo Odysseus, whether he claims to be "nobody" or "no man" to Polyphemus or whether he returns to Ithaka as a beggar, disguised, one so socially negligible in the eyes of nearly all the suitors that he is next to being "nobody."

Harmon makes of himself the disguised guest, Odysseus to Bella Wilfer's Penelope. One might see Bella's vanity and desire for money—her “lust and greed”—as allegorical versions of the suitors that Odysseus/Harmon must vanquish in order to discover the loyal Penelope/Bella. With the help of Noddy Boffin, the two men “manipulate” conditions when they carry out their scheme to have Boffin act out Bella's own greed. But such allegorical labelling is only partly apt, since most of the decent forces reside within the girl anyway and need only be strengthened, brought to the front. Her affection for her father, her awareness of her own faults, her admiration for Rokesmith, though that admiration she herself fails to recognize for a time—these are redeeming features susceptible to Noddy Boffin's charade. They are expressed most revealingly in her talk with Lizzie Hexam after Betsy Higgins' funeral and in the effect that Lizzie's quiet strength has on her. She describes the latter to Rokesmith, telling him that

“...I feel as if whole years had passed since I went into Lizzie Hexam's cottage[.]”

“We have crowded a good deal into the day,” he returned, “and you were much affected in the churchyard. You are over-tired.”

“No, I am not at all tired. I have not quite expressed what I mean. I don't mean that I feel as if a great space of time had gone by, but that I feel as if much had happened—to myself, you know.”

“For good, I hope?”

“I hope so,” said Bella. (p. 593)

Not long after, Bella sees “The Golden Dustman At His Worst,” leaves the Boffins for her own home, and marries Rokesmith in “A Runaway Match.” The forces of her conceit and greed have been conquered by the forces of goodness she has held within for too long and also by the manipulations of Harmon/Rokesmith, those manipulations designed to test personal worthiness.

But other characters are not the only ones tested—in Ithaka or London. George deF. Lord has pointed out the importance of Odysseus' disguise to the hero himself, describing its significance as “inexhaustible”:

It enables him to test the charity of the suitors, and charity is one of the essential virtues in the world of the *Odyssey*. It suggests the fundamental weakness of all men and their dependence on their brothers. It dramatizes divine immanence in human affairs in accordance with the idea that the gods often take upon themselves the basest and poorest human shapes. It is a further demonstration that human worth is not graded according to rank or position or power. It represents the theme that all men are beggars, outcasts, and wanderers in some sense at one time or another, a theme that is traced through the fugitive Theoclymenus and such displaced persons as Eurycleia and Eumaeus. It is, finally, a test of Odysseus' own inner strength—his patience and self-restraint.<sup>6</sup>

If Harmon does not himself appear so severely tested as Odysseus, it is because we do not follow him through his period of tribulation but observe him at the end of that period, his lessons learned. Odysseus, as many critics have noted, is moving from the world in which the old heroic virtues, as characterized in the *Iliad*, are held as ideal, to a world in which domestic values are more significant.<sup>7</sup> The change he must undergo requires a dramatic shift from what was. Most of John Harmon's lessons of "patience and self-restraint" have already been learned. As Mortimer Lightwood tells the story, Harmon has shown strength in standing against his unjust father on behalf of his sister's marriage plans, is so "shocked and terrified" at the older man's response, so unable to "manipulate" the man's "greed and lust," as it were, that he "takes flight, seeks his fortune" and wins it to some degree as a "small proprietor, farmer, grower—whatever you like to call it" (p. 57)—in "the country where they make the Cape Wine" (p. 55). He survives not only calamity on his return but a crisis of identity as well. Attacked, robbed, left for dead, he can wonder, so strong is the impression of having lost his self, his being, about "the scene of my death" (p. 422). He feels as though he must rediscover himself. "It is a sensation not experienced by many mortals," he thinks, "to be looking into a churchyard on a wild windy night, and feel that I no more hold a place among the living than these dead do, and even to know that I lie buried somewhere else, as they lie buried here. Nothing uses me to it. A spirit that was once a man could hardly feel stranger or lonelier, going unrecognized among mankind, than I feel" (p. 422).

Harmon begins a long monologue in Chapter 13 of *Book the Second* with a statement suggesting the quality in himself that he must—through steadfastness—conquer. He came back to England "mistrustful," he tells himself.

'...I came back, shrinking from my father's money, shrinking from my father's memory, mistrustful of being forced on a mercenary wife, mistrustful of my father's intention in thrusting that marriage on me, mistrustful that I was already growing avaricious, mistrustful that I was slackening in gratitude to the two dear noble honest friends who had made the only sunlight in my childish life or that of my heartbroken sister.' (p. 423)

More than that, he thinks, "I came back, timid, divided in my mind, afraid of myself and everybody here . . ." (p. 423).

As a result of his mistrust, his timidity, he had formulated his plan of disguising himself with the treacherous George Radfoot, so he could "form some judgment of my allotted wife . . . [and] try Mrs. Boffin and give her a glad surprise" (p. 424). Radfoot killed, identities confused, Harmon is pronounced dead. Should he return from the grave? That is

the question Harmon faces. The answer depends mainly on Bella—on Bella's love of the man, not the name; on whether or not she would be better off to continue living as she is with the Boffins where she is already improving in character and charity, redeeming herself from the faults intensified in her by the older Harmon's will. By acknowledging the value of his own demise, Harmon wins a part of his own trial. He tests patience and trust, risks disappointment in Bella. He tests his own capacity for greed in his willingness to give up his inheritance to the Boffins. He tests his ability to *harmonize* his environment, reversing the impulse of his father to *harm one*. He wins Bella through his own deeds and merit and not through his father's *fiat*.

The harmony is of the kind Odysseus achieved, the harmony of reconciliation. Love wins over lust and greed. And the reconciliation is presented, however much a modern reader might squirm at the sentimentality of its presentation, through the triumph of domestic bliss—the family with its infant Telemakhos.

Harmon succeeds much as a Victorian Odysseus might. He even has his own Eurykleia, Mrs. Boffin, to affirm that he is not Nobody but indeed the man who will fulfill the destiny only he can. Turning to Silas Wegg, however, we find a figure who pretends to the worth of Odysseus and his destiny. Wegg is parody. He is a rogue marked with villainish features, though Dickens' comic treatment keeps him at some distance from becoming the criminal character that Rogue Riderhood approaches. He is a grand illustration of that Affectation Fielding sees as a source of the comic, a man who should wish to think of himself as acting "like a genteel person," who has "a prospect of getting on in life" (p. 127)—both of which aims would be commendable if they were not grounded so fully in fraud.

A related feature of the man is his belief in his own cause, his own self-delusion. So much has he come to look on the house that the Boffins buy as "Our House" that he can and does view its new owners as interlopers, can and does claim "to be in its [the house's] confidence" (p. 88). So strong is his sense in the rightness of his cause that he can scarcely look on Noddy Boffin.

"Every time I see him putting his hand in his pocket, I see him putting it into my pocket. Every time I hear him jingling his money, I hear him taking liberties with my money. Flesh and blood can't bear it." (p. 645)

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"... Was it outside the house at present ockypied, to its disgrace, by the minion of fortune and worm of the house . . . that I, Silas Wegg, five hundred times the man he ever was, sat in all weathers, waiting for a errand or a customer? Was it outside that very house as I first set eyes upon him, rolling in the lap of luxury, when I was selling halfpenny

ballads there for a living? And am I to grovel in the dust for *him* to walk over? No!" (p. 646)

Like Odysseus, Wegg waits for his moment. But one of the "feeble," he is "devoured by his own" greed and lust. Where Harmon has taken on the role of Nobody, of another, in order to verify the merits of others and, indirectly, of himself before becoming the Somebody that he truly is, Silas Wegg tries to become Somebody he is not, to take on a role that is not his. With his missing leg, with his stall, he is the mendicant. He sees himself as "an orphan" deserving aid from the Boffins, an orphan who has given up in the Boffins' cause "Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker" (p. 386). Noddy Boffin, he fumes, is "the Usurper" (p. 554). Noddy Boffin—and his wife with him—is the suitor who must be driven out of the home of his imagined family so he can take what he construes his rightful place to be. But when he tries the bow, as it were, when he tries to assert his claim through the device of the will he has discovered, he learns how far his greed has overextended itself, especially set alongside the love and generosity of the Boffins.

As he does in other novels, Dickens doubles some of his characters. Through this device, we find emphasized how fully Wegg fails his test and the Boffins pass theirs. As Wegg's double, Noddy Boffin shows us the loyal family retainer Wegg likes to think he is, one who holds the position of trust in the family that Wegg claims with Miss Elizabeth and company, one with the sensitivity Wegg would profess to have. Boffin has the humility and charity Wegg lacks: he hopes to increase his knowledge; he tries to assist others. These are features a reader notices. But in Wegg's eyes, Mr. Boffin embodies qualities Wegg fails to see in himself—greed, guile, blindness to moral direction. Rather than establish harmony, Wegg wants to disrupt it. Rather than own the right of his claim, he pretends to it. A reader could feel anxious about the danger he poses for the Boffins, but Dickens treats the man comically, makes him a parody of John Harmon, so that the reader does not squirm with apprehension as he goes about his crooked business but smiles with amusement.

The case of Bradley Headstone is more complex. In terms of his personality, he is driven by two desires—his love of Lizzie Hexam, his determination to advance himself. In terms of his presentation, his character has two reflectors—Rogue Riderhood, who shows in an extreme and debased form what social position Headstone wants to escape, and Eugene Wrayburn, who stands higher socially than Headstone can ever hope to stand and, partly by his position, partly by his manner, partly by his being Headstone's rival for Lizzie's love, taunts

the schoolmaster, sometimes by cruel verbal jibes, sometimes by being simply who he is—and what Headstone would like to be. Yet Headstone, too, plays the Odyssean role, its parts more fragmented but still clear—Lizzie mirroring Penelope, Charlie Hexam Telemakhos, and Eugene Wrayburn the most insolent of the suitors. He is guest on the threshold of a world he cannot win, sometimes the proper and stiffly dressed schoolmaster, sometimes the rudely dressed workman. Which suit of clothes—or disguise—is more apt? Dickens raises the question, places Rogue Riderhood to suggest one possibility, Eugene Wrayburn another, but he does not provide an answer. If finally, Headstone fails, he fails not because Penelope fails the test but because he himself does. Though one might call him “steadfast” in his pursuit, that quality of character is flawed with a feebleness, moral and mental, that makes the man finally pathetic. He lacks the grandeur in his failure to evoke admiration but not the pathos to call forth pity.<sup>8</sup>

In Headstone, steadfastness becomes self-destructive obsession; prudence and reason give way to rashness and passion. The man's tormented awareness of Wrayburn's social position stiffens what is already a deforming restraint. Dickens provides telling details of his manner—emphasizing the word “decent” in describing the man's coat and waistcoat, shirt, tie, pantaloons, watch, and hair-guard for the watch; observing that “there was a certain stiffness in his manner of wearing this [kind of dress], as if there were a want of adaptation between him and it”; indicating the way in which Headstone has stored up a great deal of knowledge “mechanically,” bearing it all with “a constrained manner, over and above.” That “there was enough of what was animal and of what was fiery (though smouldering) still visible in him” is amply borne out in certain gestures the man uses (pp. 266-7).

Two of the most important that indicate his deterioration have to do with hands and blood. They connect clearly with Headstone's attempted murder of Wrayburn and with the death of Rogue Riderhood and Headstone himself, but earlier descriptions of them provide dramatic preliminaries. Headstone's hands show his feelings, whether he clasps young Charlie Hexam's arm on first hearing of Wrayburn's interest in Lizzie or whether “the respectable right-hand clutching the respectable hair-guard of the respectable watch” shows that under Wrayburn's taunting Headstone “could have wound it round his throat and strangled him with it” (p. 342). His hands gesture dangerously whenever Wrayburn is part of the conversation. Talking to Jenny Wren about Lizzie, knowing he is the weaker rival, he wrenches “at the seat of his chair with one hand, as if he would have wrenched the chair to pieces” (p. 401). Later, Lizzie herself starts “at the passionate sound of the last words [he spoke to her], and at the passionate action of his hands, with

which they were accompanied" (p. 452)—an action "which was like flinging his heart's blood down before her in drops upon the pavement-stones" (p. 453). Finally, with the despairing cry that "I hope I may never kill [Wrayburn]," he strikes a stone "with a force that laid the knuckles raw and bleeding" (p. 456).

In addition to these violent gestures, many of them associated with blood and all of them called forth by thoughts of Wrayburn, is the evidence of surging blood in his body, the flushed and perspiring face, the quivering lips, the way "his face turned from burning red to white, and from white back to burning red, and so for the time to lasting deadly white" (p. 400)—this while he talked to Jenny Wren. Later, the effect is striking, but not surprising to the reader, when "a great spirt of blood burst from his nose" (p. 704) as he conspires with Rogue Riderhood.

He is driven further in his madness because his disguise signifies more than it conceals. While Harmon, like Odysseus, can be Nobody, knowing who he is without shame, and while Wegg lacks the self-knowledge to know that he is Nobody or to know anything but what, rightly or wrongly, he thinks himself to be, Headstone is trying desperately to escape being Nobody. When he balks angrily at giving Wrayburn his name, the latter capitalizes on the fumble and calls him Schoolmaster, refusing to acknowledge him with more explicit identification. When Headstone pursues him in the London streets, Wrayburn leads him down a No Thoroughfare, turns to retrace his steps and in so doing "pass[es] him as unaware of his existence" (p. 606), as though he were Nobody. How many readers can forget the description of Headstone at that moment—"the exhaustion of deferred hope and consuming hate and anger in his face, white-lipped, wild-eyed, draggle-haired, seamed with jealousy and anger, and torturing himself with the conviction that he showed it all"—but more telling still the way in which the Schoolmaster passed his tormentor "like a haggard head suspended in the air" (p. 608)? How vividly Nobody this man has become!

With Rogue Riderhood, he does attempt a disguise, masking the Schoolmaster as a criminal. In the process the Schoolmaster is lost. After Headstone's failed attempt to murder Wrayburn, Riderhood enters the classroom, and, wanting to learn his name, asks Headstone to write it on the blackboard. Stirred by Riderhood, the schoolchildren twice read it out. Then Riderhood shows the bundle of clothes with which Headstone had disguised himself and afterward flung into the river.



"... I drew this here bundle out of a river! It's a Bargeman's suit of clothes. You see, it had been sunk there by the man as wore it, and I got it up."

"How did you know it was sunk by the man who wore it?" asked Bradley.

"Cause I see him do it," said Riderhood.

They looked at each other. Bradley, slowly withdrawing his eyes, turned his face to the black board and slowly wiped his name out. (p. 867)

The implications of Headstone's simple act are strong. The Schoolmaster is no more. Even if he were to destroy Riderhood, Headstone the Schoolmaster could never be as he was. What he is now is the man Rogue Riderhood knows, the bargeman that in his madness and through disguise he had tried to become—that through his death and Riderhood's he finally succeeded in becoming. As Bradley Headstone, Odysseus never freed himself of his beggar's weeds.

Each of the three men has endeavored, as it were, *to enter*. What it is they try to get into is what sets them apart from others in the novel and gives them their kinship with Odysseus: their objective and the associated concern with identity. Many in the novel want to achieve the "center" of some kind—of power, political or financial; of social standing—but what Harmon, Wegg, and Headstone want, each in his own way, is the center of the family and home: "the place of Peace," as John Ruskin describes it in *Sesame and Lilies*, "the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division . . . , a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods."<sup>9</sup> For Harmon, the sacred place is touched by memories of childhood, both hopeful and despairing but finally at the novel's conclusion hopeful—and blissful. Wegg's is imaginary, the "Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker" of his fancy given a kind of obsessive reality that supports his greed. Headstone's hopeless passion for Lizzie is a Tristan-like fixation, but shading and coloring it are hints of domesticity—whether in the strange half-brotherly, half-fatherly concern Headstone shows for young Charlie or in Miss Peachum's doll-house environment placed so close to Headstone's self-concern that a reader sees not only what the Schoolmaster rejects but also what he seeks albeit through a different tenant.

Central to this idea of domestic happiness are the Boffins. Though childless, they have kept a family together, provided the basic grounding for the harmony to be found in Harmony Jail, have helped to transform the implications of the name. Through his treatment of the Boffins, Dickens presents one more test, it might be construed—this one for the reader. A reader feels cheated at what looks like trickery on Dickens' part in keeping Noddy Boffin's testing of Bella and Wegg a

secret from the reader, not letting a hint of his motives and real feelings slip through.<sup>10</sup> But perhaps the trickery is of another sort. Perhaps in hindsight we catch the narrator sitting back and winking. *Were you deceived? Could you really think Noddy Boffin would lapse so? And going further: Where is your faith in humanity? If Noddy could fail—well, what hope have we?* With the Boffins, home and happiness is possible, Dickens would seem to say.

The Odysseus-figure with which we are concerned is not the exile or the adventurer but the homecomer. As Penelope's returned husband is not Odysseus, her pre-Trojan husband, but rather an amalgam of the warrior, the wanderer, the beggar, so is John Harmon not the John Harmon decreed to marry Bella but rather an amalgam of the Caribbean planter, the nearly drowned man, the disguised sailor, Julius Handford, John Rokesmith. The test he passes is aptly posed by P. J. M. Scott: "can the younger man avoid being implicated in the ethics of the world all around him, in the morality of which his parent's career was so unrelenting an embodiment?"<sup>11</sup> Of which, one can continue, Silas Wegg is colorful and comic embodiment, one of the "feeble" forcefully drawn. Unlike Harmon, the self-effacing and melancholy man who becomes the very model of a Victorian gentleman, Wegg is unchanging, shows no moral growth. His shabby activities repeat themselves. In contrast, Headstone, so desperate to change, is driven by his own deep passion from the entrance of the circle he worked so hard to approach. Harmon lives within narrow moral limits. Driven, Headstone breaks destructively through them and in so doing annihilates any hope for the home that was his goal.

In this novel, the wicked come apart, but the center holds, in the domesticity not only of Bella and John Harmon but also of Lizzie and Eugene Wrayburn, Jenny Wren and Sloppy—all of those who are bonded through a love that survives trial and transcends self.

## NOTES

1. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 815. All other citations in the text refer to this edition of the novel.
2. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), p. 177.
3. *The Ulysses Theme*, 2nd ed. (1963; Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 211.
4. See Stanford's discussion in Chapter 3, "The Favorite of Athene," in *The Ulysses Theme*. The translation he uses of the passage in question is E. V. Rieu's: Odysseus has "civilized gentleness, intuitive intelligence, and firm self-possession" (p. 65).
5. "Crusoe in Exile," *PMLA*, 96 (May 1981), 364.
6. "The *Odyssey* and the Western World," *The Sewanee Review*, 62 (Summer, 1954), 425.

7. See deF. Lord, p. 420.
8. Some critics see Headstone's "decent" clothes as something false to him rather than as something alien or uncomfortable, suggesting that his efforts to rise in society, to improve in education, are negative features. For example, in "The Intelligibility of Madness in *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*," *Dickens Studies Annual*, 5 (1976), Lawrence Frank suggests that the man's death frees him from "his respectable suit of clothes and his respectable life" (pp. 192-3). But such a view ignores the tremendous drive and will that it must have taken Headstone to achieve what he has. Indeed, such a view tends to deny achievement. To deny that achievement is to wish Headstone to remain what he was—at best a Charley Hexam, at worst a Rogue Riderhood.
9. *The Works of John Ruskin*, Vol. 18, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1905), p. 122.
10. Joseph Gold maintains that "Dickens never fooled us for a minute. We know him and Boffin too well for that . . ." (*Charles Dickens: Radical Novelist* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972], p. 272). Among other defenses of Dickens' treatment of Boffins, one might note Rosemary Mundhenk, "The Education of the Reader in *Our Mutual Friend*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 34 (June 1979), 41-58, and Robert Newson, "'To Scatter Dust': Fancy and Authenticity in *Our Mutual Friend*," *Dickens Studies Annual*, 8 (1980), 33-60.
11. *Reality and Comic Confidence in Charles Dickens* (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1979), p. 16.