Having given an account of narrative creativity by analogy with the experience of reading narrative, it is incumbent upon me to say something more about reading itself. More particularly, I want to address the reading issue that, perhaps more than any other, underlies discussions of fictionality: the issue of reader involvement. Critical practice often defines itself in opposition to the reading experience, even (or especially) where it incorporates a notion of that experience as part of its object. This dichotomy may be formulated in a number of ways: between immersion and critical distance; between literalism and various strategies of figurative or symptomatic interpretative recuperation; between the reading process and synoptic thematics. The common assumption, though, is that an awareness of fictionality necessarily produces critical detachment, and this is the assumption I want to question. My point is not to disallow thematic, theoretical, and historicist discourses, but to make possible an attention to the reading of fiction that does not define it as oblivious to such frames of reference. My alternative proposal is that awareness of fictionality is always involved in the reading of fictional texts, and that its rhetorical force is necessarily always in play. A familiar objection to my emphasis on fictionality is that it militates against belief in fiction and therefore cannot account for one of fiction’s most striking rhetorical effects—its power to engage the emotional involvement of its readers. To counter this argument, I want to consider in detail a famous instance of emotive fiction—one with a historical dimension that I think further underlines the need for a rhetoric of fictionality: the story of Dickens’s Little Nell.

Several critics have noted, rather scathingly, that when Dickens warmed to the pathos of a scene he had a tendency to slip into blank verse. This
was first pointed out in 1844 by R. H. Horne, who gave the following lines, set directly from a passage in chapter 72 of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as one of his examples:

Oh! it is hard to take to heart
The lesson that such deaths will teach,
    But let no man reject it,
For it is one that all must learn,
And is a mighty, universal Truth.
When Death strikes down the innocent and young,
For every fragile form from which he lets
    The parting spirit free,
A hundred virtues rise,
In shapes of mercy, charity, and love,
    To walk the world and bless it.
Of every tear
That sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves,
Some good is born, some gentler nature comes.

But Horne’s intention was not to disparage; he considered the lines “profoundly beautiful,” and “worthy of the best passages in Wordsworth” (1844: 1:67). It is a passage to which Dickens himself attached some importance. In America, in the period of unprecedented celebrity following the novel’s success, he regularly copied it out for autographs, and in a letter of 1842 he referred to the same paragraph as the best justification he could give for Nell’s death (House et al. 1965–2002: 3:68n, 80). He was a little defensive when this inadvertent versifying was brought to his attention—“It is not an affectation in me, nor have I the least desire to write them in that metre; but I run into it, involuntarily and unconsciously, when I am very much in earnest” (4:113)—but he nonetheless dismissed the risk of appearing “turgid or bombastic,” arguing that the effect must depend on the sentiments expressed. Indeed, Horne’s enthusiasm for these lines was explicitly grounded on the “deeply truthful sentiment” he found in them. Dickens’s (justified) confidence in this last respect is striking, given that the death of Little Nell has become a notorious example of the lachrymose excesses of early Victorian sentimentalism. It emphasizes the steep decline in the novel’s reputation since its first reception, which was a triumphant demonstration of the full extent of fiction’s power to enlist the emotions of its readers.

Dickens’s pathetic strain had begun to attract criticism by mid-century, and certainly by the time of the obituary notices of 1870 it was a source of
some embarrassment; in 1895 Oscar Wilde’s famous quip, “One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing,” was hardly outrageous (Ellmann 1987: 441). My concern in trying to account for this reversal is primarily theoretical, but I want to acknowledge immediately the importance of a certain cultural context, if only to place within parentheses any direct appeal to its explanatory relevance (although I shall return to the question of the novel’s situation within cultural discourse in my conclusion). Nell’s critical fortunes are certainly part of a broad cultural change to which specifically literary questions are incidental: the sentimentality of the early Victorians extended far beyond the confines of literature and has come to seem equally strange to later generations in all its forms. It was a product of their idealist temper—an inheritance from romanticism, but wound up to a higher pitch in reaction against Benthamite Utilitarianism and advancing industrialization and commercialism. The resultant cult of sentimental benevolence helped promote early Victorian charity and social legislation, and in this respect it was perhaps as significant as the sterner ethic of moral earnestness, grounded in Evangelical Puritanism and the general sense of religious crisis that emerged at the same time. The latter, however, was ultimately influential in a general repudiation of overoptimistic appeals to the sentiments, in favour of the rule of conscience. These aspects of the context within which *The Old Curiosity Shop* was written obviously need to be kept in mind, as do other matters more directly relevant to the story. Death in the family, and in particular the death of a child, was a relatively common experience. It is striking to note how many of those moved by the death of Nell had themselves mourned the early death of a favourite. The tears of both W. C. Macready and Lord Jeffrey, two well-documented instances, might be ascribed to such a source. Macready recorded in his diary that “I never read printed words that gave me so much pain. I could not weep for some time. Sensation, sufferings have returned to me, that are terrible to awaken [probably the death of his three-year-old daughter Joan in November 1840]; it is real to me; I cannot criticise it” (Collins 1971: 99). Jeffrey, found weeping in his library, exclaimed “I'm a great goose to have given way so, but I couldn't help it. You'll be sorry to hear that little Nelly, Boz's little Nelly, is dead” (Young 1871: 2:111); he had himself lost a son a few weeks old in 1802. Dickens himself, of course, had lost Mary Hogarth; and he claimed to reckon by dozens the letters he had received from mothers, telling him they had lost “such a child at such a time, and where she is buried, and how good she was, and how, in this or that respect, she resembled Nell” (Collins 1971: 144). The idea that such children were possessed of an inno-
cence and purity too good for this world was a commonplace of consola-
tion: Dickens expressed it himself in a letter of condolence written in 1839
which also strikingly anticipates the sentiments of The Old Curiosity Shop
(House et al. 1965–2002: 1:515–16). Ruskin noted the general belief and
its prevalence as a literary subject, but also that “the power of the fiction
rests, I suppose, on the fact that most persons of affectionate temper have
lost their own May Queens or little Nells in their time” (Collins 1971: 101).
In this view, then, modern readers ought to bear in mind the cultural and
social context within which Dickens was writing. His sentimentalism was
perfectly attuned to the emotional needs of his age, and to condemn him
for it would be a failure of historical imagination.

**Sentimentality and Realism**

But the objections to Nell are a little more forceful than that. Literary
appeals to the emotions are not subject only to the cultural relativities of
emotion and its expression, but also to the rigours of specifically literary
criteria. Sentimentality is perceived to be not just a culturally specific
response to particular social circumstances but also an artistically crude
appeal to reflex emotions. It is quite possible to grant the former and still
condemn on the basis of the latter, and so damn both the author and his
readers for the vulgarity of their taste. Dickens can be dismissed as the
“Mr. Popular Sentiment” of Trollope’s caricature. But although Nell was
certainly an extraordinary popular success in the 1840s, she also delighted
and distressed many sophisticated readers and critics. Even Margaret Oli-
phant, later so scathing about Dickens’s pathos, could write in 1855: “Poor
little Nell! who has ever been able to read the last chapter of her history
with an even voice or a clear eye?”(Collins 1971: 331). It is inappropriate
to assume that those who wept for Nell were not serious readers; criticism
should be able to do justice to their response. The use of the first-person
plural in literary criticism can be invidious, especially when discussing
such matters as emotional responses to literature; but I have used it in the
title to this chapter, not to assert the universality of any particular affect-
tive response to Dickens’s novel, but to insist upon the continuity (up to a
point) of the history of literary competence. However unaccountable Nell’s
initial reception may appear to modern critical assumptions, it cannot be
dismissed by confusing cultural remoteness with critical benightedness.
If a whole age appears critically naïve and subliterary in its tastes when
judged against a later standard, then the standard, not the age, is called
into question. My title acknowledges, in its use of the past tense, our historical distance from Nell’s first readers; it resists, in its first person, the temptation to look down upon their literary competence.

Nell’s reception is a problem to the extent that the term “sentimental” involves a pejorative literary evaluation rather than a cultural description. It would be possible to argue that such a literary evaluation is in itself historically located, and that it merely reflects the assumptions of another cultural moment. But the larger issue here is that of fiction’s capacity to appeal to the emotions, and a positive answer to the problem of Dickens’s sentimentality will need to address that issue in such a way as to accommodate Nell. Nell’s case is important, then, because it exposes in an acute form the problem of emotional response to a fictional narrative, a problem which is central to an understanding of the relation between fictional discourse and its cultural context.

The common assumption of Dickens’s detractors is that emotional responses to fiction are conditional upon certain criteria of mimetic adequacy. Aldous Huxley, for example, complains that “whenever he is in the melting mood, Dickens ceases to be able and probably ceases even to wish to see reality. His one and only desire on these occasions is just to overflow, nothing else. Which he does, with a vengeance and in an atrocious blank verse that is meant to be poetical prose and succeeds only in being the worst kind of fustian” (Ford and Lane 1961: 154). It is taken as axiomatic that the reader’s emotional involvement with fiction must be with its represented reality, and that the strength of feelings aroused therefore depends on the adequacy with which this reality is conveyed. If involvement depends on representation in general, then a fortiori it depends on the representation of character: character is the emotional focus of the novel, because caring about characters is the fictional equivalent of caring about people. In general, mimetic models of fictional character take characters to be imitation people about whom the narrative is understood to be offering, in various guises, pertinent information (a name, a description, words spoken, or deeds done). Of course, it is well understood that this fictional information is itself all there is to the mimetic illusion. But however sparse the information may sometimes be, imagination will augment it at least as far as the minimal assumption of fictional being: the unit of mimesis, as it were, must be the whole individual. The merits of this model of character are not slight. It seems commonsensical, and would probably gain the assent of most untheoretical readers today. It also provides an intuitive framework for explaining emotional responses to a fictional narrative: emotional involvement with the fate of a character is analogous to involvement with
a real person. But at this point, some criteria of representational adequacy
must necessarily be brought into play: the intensity of the emotion will be
conditional upon the intensity of the mimetic illusion.

This is the fundamental cause of Dickens’s (supposed) artistic failure,
the crude sentimentality of his appeal to the emotions of his readers. As
a character, Nell is not sufficiently realized to carry the emotional burden
with which the prose seeks to load her. Nonetheless, the strong emo-
tional response of Dickens’s contemporaries was, emphatically, a response
to character. Almost without exception, they couched their emotional
involvement in terms of a concern for Nell herself, for her trials and her
fate. Dickens’s sentimental prose, for his first readers, was a natural expres-
sion of the pathos inherent in his protagonist’s story. The problem cannot
be addressed by challenging the validity of any particular set of criteria
by which a realist perspective may judge characterization: any plausible
formulation of such criteria would give low marks to a large proportion
of Dickens’s characters. Where these are humorous or minor figures he
escapes censure, but that evasion will not help in Nell’s case. Rather,
the object of scrutiny should be the necessity of associating emotional
involvement with a mimetic model of character at all. A vindication of
the literary competence of Dickens’s first readers requires that the relations
of character, representation, and fictionality to emotional involvement be
called into question.

Models of Fictional Character

I say this in recognition of the fact that one strong current of narrative
theory in recent years has tended to consolidate the mimetic model, in
terms of the quite literal notion of fictional being. Narrative seman-
tics and fictional worlds theories have made fictionality into an abstract
ontological category, and novels into the means by which worlds in this
category—and the beings inhabiting them—are constructed. As a rational-
ization of the mimetic model, fictional worlds accounts of character also
make involvement consequent upon the imaginative realization of fic-
tional beings, and they take this imaginative collaboration in the mimetic
illusion to considerable lengths: “We, too, visit fictional lands, inhabit
them for a while, intermingle with the heroes. We are moved by the fate
of fictional characters, since, as Kendall Walton argues, when caught up
in a story, we participate in fictional happenings by projecting a fictional
ego who attends the imaginary events as a kind of nonvoting member”
(Pavel 1986: 85). This is symptomatic of a philosophical debate on emotional responses to fiction which has been almost exclusively confined to negotiations of the problem of belief in imaginary events and characters.\textsuperscript{2} The mimetic premise is also shared by empirical approaches grounded in cognitive psychology, which tend to maintain a sharp distinction between emotional responses to the literary artefact and to its representational content. Debate here centres on the extent to which the reader’s emotional involvement with characters is that of a witness, or a (more or less Freudian) form of identification.\textsuperscript{3}

In all these instances, emotional involvement is subordinated to a mimetic model of character, which inherently introduces the notion of involvement too late. It is made dependent on a sense of the character’s being—on, that is, the achieved mimetic product of representation—and the adequacy of this depends on criteria of realism which devalue such characters as Nell. There are competing views of character, notably within the formalist and structuralist traditions of criticism. A striking early example of the former was Edgell Rickword’s declaration that “‘character’ is merely the term by which the reader alludes to the pseudo-objective image he composes of his responses to an author’s verbal arrangements” (Rickword 1974: 233). The principle is an important one: the discussion of characters as if they existed independently is a critical repetition of the literary act, rather than an explanation of it. But merely insisting that novels are made of language is a rather unhelpful truism, a purely negative dissent that simply consists in the refusal to frame critical discourse in collaboration with the mimetic illusion. More radically, early structuralist models of narrative, concerned with the analysis of plot, reduced the concept of character to that of “actant.” The procedural move, however, was inseparable from an ideological motive: conventional notions of character were repudiated as the products of a delusively anthropocentric humanism. This position tended to conflate descriptive poetics with advocacy for the \textit{nouveau roman} and its attendant aesthetic dogma—character having been declared moribund by Alain Robbe-Grillet himself (1965: 60–61)—and might easily be dismissed as such, were it not for the fact that realist perspectives upon character would be vulnerable to analogous charges. But the problem with these approaches to character for my present purposes is that they devalue involvement in proportion as they devalue fictional being. The emphasis is rather hermeneutic, with the affective aspects of interpretation more or less dismissed as irrelevant by-products of a fallacious (mimetic) mode of reading. This is not to say that such approaches exclude affective response in any form, but that they can hardly account
for the sort of response represented by grief for the death of a character. As such, they offer no real alternative account of involvement at all.

Formalist approaches to character, then, do not go far enough to provide any basis for involvement and are in that respect reductive; the role of character is confined to the deployment of narrative meanings in a complex thematic, textual framework. And the early structuralist plot models are guilty of a similar refusal of the problem. However, later structuralist and structuralist-influenced accounts rediscovered character, as a semiotic product. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes acknowledged the need for this rapprochement: “From a critical point of view, therefore, it is as wrong to suppress the character as it is to take him off the page in order to turn him into a psychological character (endowed with possible motives): the character and the discourse are each other’s accomplices” (1975: 178). He accordingly offered a view of character as the combination of “semes”: “Sarrasine is the sum, the point of convergence, of: turbulence, artistic gift, independence, excess, femininity, ugliness, composite nature, impiety, love of whittling, will, etc.). What gives the illusion that the sum is supplemented by a precious remainder (something like individuality, in that, qualitative and ineffable, it may escape the vulgar bookkeeping of compositional characters) is the Proper Name, the difference completed by what is proper to it. The proper name enables the person to exist outside the semes, whose sum nonetheless constitutes it entirely” (191). Seymour Chatman developed an influential position along similar lines, describing character as a “paradigm of traits” where “trait” is used “in the sense of ‘relatively stable or abiding personal quality;’ recognizing that it may either unfold, that is, emerge earlier or later in the course of the story, or that it may disappear and be replaced by another. In other words, its domain may end” (1978: 126). Chatman grants more to a mimetic notion of character than Barthes does, but both perspectives recognize the effect of being that characters create without making it a priori: they are less a repudiation of the idea of fictional being than a demystification of it.⁴ I want to suggest that by invoking this tradition it becomes possible to account for emotional involvement without unwarranted concessions to realism or evasions of fictionality.

**Emotion and Belief**

In the fictional worlds model, a novel is the equipment for the reader’s game of make-believe. But if involvement in fiction is an act of make-
believe, then either the emotions aroused are also make-believe, framed and qualified as part of the game, or they remain irreducibly paradoxical. Make-believe is not belief, but one of those expressions (of which “suspension of disbelief” is the archetype) designed to reconcile the irrelevance of belief to fiction with its apparent centrality to involvement; likewise, Walton’s appeal to “quasi-emotions” merely extends this strategy of mystification into the domain of emotional response itself (1990: 194–204). Such terminological hedges (“pretence” and “mimetic illusion” also have some currency) tacitly acknowledge that belief is not an option for any but the most naïve or misinformed reader of fiction. From such a perspective, emotional involvement in fiction can only be understood as pretended emotion—or conversely, as a confusion of fiction and reality. But while this assumes an irreducible conflict between a sense of character as being (which facilitates belief and hence emotional involvement) and a sense of character as narrative construct (which inhibits both), these two attitudes seem to have been unselfconsciously combined by Dickens’s readers. This is especially clear in some of the more indignant responses to Nell’s death, which tended to frame their reaction against this event as an attack upon Dickens’s narrative artistry. These readers’ responses strongly suggest a feeling that their emotional investment in the character had been betrayed, whether through incompetence or cynical sensationalism, by the author’s handling of his narrative. There is a shade of this in Ruskin’s accusation that Dickens killed Nell “for the market, as a butcher kills a lamb,” in which much hangs upon that emotionally charged simile. Daniel O’Connell, who flung the book away in disgust, seems to have similarly displaced his feelings: “It was obvious that the author had not sufficient talent to maintain Nell’s adventures with interest to the end and bring them to a happy issue, so he killed her to get rid of the difficulty” (House et al. 1965–2002: 2: x). It is hard not to read into these rather hot repudiations a similar emotional reflex to that betrayed by a less sophisticated reader, who “suddenly sprung from his chair, flung the book violently on the ground, and exclaimed ‘The Villain! The Rascal!! The bloodthirsty scoundrel!!!’ [. . . ] ‘Dickens,’ he roared, ‘he would commit murder! He killed my little Nell—He killed my sweet little child’!” To object here that it is “only a story” would not help at all: he could hardly blame the author without being well aware that it is a story. It is as a story—as one given such an ending—that it upsets him; Nell’s unreality is no impediment at all. This reader was certainly naïve compared with O’Connell and Ruskin, but it seems to me that their more carefully rationalized responses have essentially the same emotional import.
“Make-believe” and other such formulations fail to distinguish between two aspects of involvement: the evaluation of emotional significance, and belief in the actuality of an object or state of affairs bearing that significance. This is because in the mimetic model it is the represented actuality itself that is evaluated, so that some substitute for belief is necessary for there to be any occasion for emotional involvement. Evaluation does not have to be subordinated to representation, however. Affective responses to discourse need not wait for narrative; in fact, they may be brought into play by a single word in isolation (consider the emotional freight of the word “murder,” or the word “gentle,” or less obviously, the word “obviously”). The emotional power of narrative lies in its ability to draw out and particularize the affective charge of words (or images), but that charge is first generated in semiotic rather than narrative terms. Emotional response should be understood not as an effect of illusion, but as a corollary of the fundamental processes of textual comprehension. It is inherent in one of the most basic tasks of interpreting a text, which is the naturalization of its language—the evaluative placing of its language—in terms of the discursive contexts available to any given reader. Representation follows from, rather than precedes this comprehension—no longer as the means to a mimetic illusion, but merely as the product of the interpretative (and therefore tacitly evaluative) process. The concept of character as a unity, then, represents the complex of evaluative interpretations that arise directly from its discursive elements. Narrative puts these elements into play as the functional terms of its affective argument.

If representation is conceived of as the means to mimetic illusion, then character is a mimetic achievement, the product of characterization, held up for appreciation and response in holistic terms of identity, personality, consciousness. I want to acknowledge the legitimacy of this as a literary objective or effect, but at the same time to resist the tendency to make it a necessary and preliminary condition of emotional involvement, because to do so is to make involvement conditional not just on mimesis but also on the kind and degree of mimesis that broadly constitutes realism. If instead the process of representation is understood as already rhetorical, then character itself represents the value-laden terms which are operative in a particular case, and in which the reader’s involvement is already invested. This model does not make mimesis into a substitute for belief, but only an effect of the evaluative engagement that constitutes interpretation—and which in itself is the process of emotional involvement.

The model of involvement I am proposing, and the model of character it assumes, follow from the proposition that the reading of fiction requires
evaluative interpretation, but not belief or any simulacrum of belief. Emotional involvement is the recognition of values inherent in the discursive information given by a narrative rather than in the actuality of the characters this information generates. It is a response founded upon the idea of innocence, for example, rather than upon the innocent girl to which that idea contributes. Narrative representation is crucial to the articulation of this emotional freight, and it can acquire particularity only in narrative terms (indeed, different narratives may take it in radically different directions), but because it is grounded in semiosis rather than representational illusion, the issue of belief is irrelevant. Whereas mimetic models of character imply the priority of represented fact to evaluative response, this approach regards discursive information as already value-laden, and hence rhetorically charged in the offering. In this sense, character can be understood as integrating the mimetic paradigm of being with the textual paradigm of meaning: fictional being follows, and is itself the realization of, the evaluative emotional dynamic of fictional narrative. Character, viewed from a rhetorical perspective, is in fact no more than characterization itself. Fictional being might be described as the “objective correlative,” in global terms, of the affective argument of a novel, if that phrase were not burdened with too much critical resonance already. Fictionality itself would then be the generative means by which “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events . . . shall be the formula of that particular emotion”—to address an issue entirely neglected by Eliot himself (1951: 145).

I do not think this account can be accused of being too indirect or counterintuitive. Instead of saying that readers’ emotional responses to the fortunes of a character are the result of involvement with a represented person, it assumes that their emotions attach to the particular complex of meanings constituting that character. Of the two, it is the mimetic model that is indirect. It involves an interpretative movement from textual meaning to an extrapolated fictional world, which is then itself evaluated in order to charge it with emotional significance. Better to avoid this division between interpretation and evaluation, and say that the emotional significance is grounded in textual meaning, or the semiotic means of representation, rather than the conceptual product of representation. The fictional “world” is not the occasion of that emotional significance, but an effect of its articulation. This involves no radical distinction between the way our emotions are involved with fictional characters and the way they are involved with real people, but instead regards the latter as a special case of the former. In life, as in fiction, involvement is an accumulation of emotional significance; but whereas in life someone or something usually
exists as the object upon which that significance is bestowed, in fiction the significance itself suffices. This is not to deny that being has value in itself, only the logical priority of this value. In connection with an argument about the irreducibility of identity to attributes, Thomas Pavel cites Pascal’s *Pensées*, fragment 688: “if someone loves me for my judgment or my memory, do they love me? *me*, myself? No, for I could lose these qualities without losing myself” (1986: 154). But if this line is pursued, how would it be possible to love him at all? It’s asking too much of our lovers to be appreciated for a selfhood without qualities. In general people do not appreciate qualities in the abstract, either; they need to be instantiated. My suggestion is that representation provides for emotional investment in the rhetorical process of instantiation, irrespective of whether the product is assumed or imagined to exist. The equivalence of our ideas about actual and fictitious people does not work in terms of being, but in terms of evaluative meaning. While accounts founded upon mimesis tend to make involvement conditional upon the fulfilment of realist criteria, this line of thought leads to a more broadly rhetorical account that is able to accommodate Little Nell and her readers without convicting them of literary naïveté.

**Nell’s Rhetorical Force**

Nell is one of the few literary protagonists who really justify E. M. Forster’s reductive distinction between flat and round characters, which was itself never much more than the expression of a realist aesthetic (1962: 73–81). Nell is flat because the operative values of Dickens’s art are in general simple rather than complex, and they are particularly so in Nell’s case, where purity is at a premium. It is not that Nell is “idealized”—there is no original of more humanly mixed qualities (Mary Hogarth, for instance) behind the representation; rather, it is an ideal that she represents. In this respect, the mode of characterization involved here is continuous with the idealistic culture of sentiment with which Dickens was engaged, and it is recognizably within the romance tradition in allowing literal and symbolic representational imperatives to predominate alternately (see Eigner, 1978). The happy coexistence of these requires that the reader respond to characterization not as a mimetic objective but as a rhetorical means. Its priority is not character in its own right, but as the site of the reader’s evaluative alignment. Nell’s characterization is not lacking an essential dimension because it is fully commensurate with the literary ends it serves—which
have very little to do with convincing mimetic realization. And the “roundness” of a character such as Joyce’s Bloom is, in terms of rhetorical means, a difference of degree, not kind: a difference of kind only obtrudes in the sense that mimetic realization is here a literary end in itself, and this is something achieved by a sophistication of means rather than being itself a categorical transformation of means. My claim is that such paradigmatically “flat” and “round” characters are a result not only of the same basic principles of characterization, but also of the same process of emotional involvement. Bloom, like Nell, does not invite emotional involvement as a character; he secures it in achieving characterhood. I should emphasize that my interest is not in Nell as a paradigm case, but as a marginal case: I am arguing for the superiority of a view that can incorporate her over one that excludes her. A mimetic perspective requires her expulsion from the class of characters—round characters—who are capable of eliciting the reader’s involvement. By taking seriously the evidence to the contrary, I want to see her as integral to a rhetoric of characterization which subsumes the mimetic tradition, without denying its predominance. My position can be usefully contrasted with that elaborated by James Phelan (1989), which is also rhetorical, but aligned with mimesis. Although I shall be going on to discuss Nell as an ideal of innocence, I am not arguing that Phelan’s “thematic” component of character always subsumes the mimetic. I prefer to make the distinction with reference to the terms “dimension” and “function,” by which Phelan contrasts an attribute of character “considered in isolation from the work” and “the particular application of that attribute made by the text through its developing structure” (9). He is careful to dissociate the logical priority here from any sequential model of the reading experience, but it remains a priority of representational means to rhetorical ends. This is true of thematic dimensions as of mimetic dimensions of character, since these are conceived of as, precisely, “representative” (rather than individual). My claim is that these dimensions of character are always rhetorical from the outset, and that rhetorical means are logically prior to any representational ends whatsoever.

In this light, it is possible to begin to make sense of certain late nineteenth-century tributes to Dickens that seem to fly in the face of the twentieth-century consensus. Adolphus Ward observed of him that “To no other author were his own characters ever more real” (an observation which, superficially at least, is borne out by several of Dickens’s remarks about Nell); while John Forster, referring specifically to the success of The Old Curiosity Shop, credited not just the pathos but also “the grasp of reality with which character had again been seized” (1969: 1:123). The pull
of realism and its privileged terms can be felt in these remarks, but their awkward fit with modern evaluations (can they really be touting Nell’s verisimilitude?) also suggests something at odds with realist assumptions, that what is “real” is the affective vitality of the characters—their “life” not as plausible beings but as rhetorical gambits. Reality is grasped not in terms of representational correspondence but in terms of truth of feeling (see Bell 1983).

Direct evidence for the compatibility of emotional involvement with the sense of a nonrealist, allegorical dimension of character is provided in an early review of *Master Humphrey’s Clock* by Thomas Hood. Commenting on the scene with which the first chapter of *The Old Curiosity Shop* ends, he observes that “it is like an Allegory of the peace and innocence of Childhood in the midst of Violence, Superstition, and all the hateful or hurtful Passions of the world” (Collins 1971: 96). The remark evidently flattered Dickens’s own conception of the novel. He later wrote to Hood saying how much he had been pleased by the review, and referred to it by way of tribute in the 1848 preface. He had also added, for the 1841 edition, four paragraphs at the end of the chapter to reinforce Hood’s impression (which was indeed originally formed more in response to Samuel Williams’s accompanying illustration than the text itself). Here, Dickens emphasizes the importance of allegory to the imagination: “We are so much in the habit of allowing impressions to be made upon us by external objects, which should be produced by reflection alone, but which, without such visible aids, often escape us; that I am not sure I should have been so thoroughly possessed by this one subject, but for the heaps of fantastic things I had seen huddled together in the curiosity-dealer’s warehouse. These, crowding upon my mind, in connection with the child, and gathering round her, as it were, brought her condition palpably before me. I had her image, without any effort of imagination, surrounded and beset by everything that was foreign to its nature, and furthest removed from the sympathies of her sex and age. . . . she seemed to exist in a kind of allegory” (1972: 1; 55–56). With this mediation of the image, Dickens virtually instructs his readers in the reading of the narrative that follows. That is not to say that *The Old Curiosity Shop* is to be read as allegory: the appeal of the term to Dickens is not as a mode of literary representation, but as an indicator of the diagrammatic simplicity of the emotional allegiances with which he is working. Allegory is conceived of here primarily in affective rather than hermeneutic terms: its appeal is to sentiment, in the context of a positive model of sentimentality. *The Old Curiosity Shop* does not offer a realist mode of characterization debased by sentimentality, but
romance characterization dedicated to sentimentality. Sentimentality, that is, as the communal affirmation of moral idealism against the prevailing materialistic forces of philosophical and scientific realism in an increasingly secular industrial age. This predisposition in Dickens is not escapist but embattled; it is not an unexamined emotional premise vulgarizing his representational means, but a rhetorical end to be gained only in the face of contrary emotional impulses. Dickens goes on to set his allegorical tableau in motion, anticipating the future course of the novel: “It would be a curious speculation;’ said I, after some restless turns across and across the room, ‘to imagine her in her future life, holding her solitary way among a crowd of wild grotesque companions; the only pure, fresh, youthful object in the throng’” (1; 56). This opposition of values accumulates an emotional charge the dangers of which are even here intimated by Master Humphrey: “I already saw before me a region on which I was little disposed to enter” (1; 56). The simplicity of the value scheme in *The Old Curiosity Shop* does not mean that its argument is without complexity. It does make for a very strong appeal to emotional allegiances; and the complexities follow hard upon that.

The Emotional Argument of *The Old Curiosity Shop*

The exact nature of the emotional danger is not immediately apparent, however. The terms of the narrative are simple in the extreme: the purity and innocence of Nell are set against all that contradicts them, the forces of the grotesque and malign that will by the third chapter be epitomized in the figure of Quilp. The narrative invites obvious allegiances and seems to promise that they will be vindicated by its own future course. But the first seeds of an uneasiness have already been sown. Master Humphrey, as host and narrator in the opening chapters, is the authorized mediator of concern for Nell’s vulnerability—yet he himself, within moments of their meeting, is provoked by his interest into deceiving her. “I really felt ashamed to take advantage of the ingenuousness or grateful feeling of the child for the purpose of gratifying my curiosity,” he protests. “As I had felt pleased at first by her confidence I determined to deserve it” (1; 46). In spite of these scruples, somewhat double-edged in themselves, he takes her home by an unfamiliar route to prevent her running ahead, so that he might gain admittance to her home and learn more of her circumstances. It is significant that his interest is also the narrative interest: even after his retirement as narrator, the story itself continues to risk complic-
ity with the threats to Nell that constitute its interest as a story. Master Humphrey withdraws as narrator at the end of chapter three, with a matter-of-fact directness quite disarming to realist cavils about the narrative transmission: “And now that I have carried this history so far in my own character and introduced these personages to the reader, I shall for the convenience of the narrative detach myself from its further course, and leave those who have prominent and necessary parts in it to speak and act for themselves” (3; 72). Dickens’s original conclusion, which identifies Master Humphrey with the single gentleman, is only an exacerbation from this point of view. The real logic of this withdrawal is rhetorical: Master Humphrey, having served to invest the reader’s interest a little ambiguously in Nell, has become an encumbrance as a character in his own right. Dickens immediately avails himself of his new narrative freedom by turning to the domestic and inner life of Quilp. The contrast between Quilp and Master Humphrey, superficially absolute, is muted by the discordant possibility that Quilp’s monstrosity is just Master Humphrey’s deformity writ large. Quilp’s appeal as a literary creation is obvious enough: he is a Richard III, an Iago, yet more bestial, more exuberantly physical. It is a critical commonplace to suspect Dickens’s own unconscious sympathy with his character, but this is to say too much and too little. There is no sympathy here, but antipathy constantly undermined by a fascination that is not at all unconscious, but open and freely indulged. Although Quilp’s role in the plot is motivated by a range of vices (lechery and greed with regard to Nell and her grandfather; a trumped up jealousy with regard to Fred Trent and Dick Swiveller; petty rivalry and malice with regard to Kit), he is essentially a malign principle, awaiting its occasions. This undermotivation keeps him open to imaginative appropriation; it renders his malevolence more sinister, but also harder to disown. The extent to which the novel insinuates the reader’s complicity with Quilp is apparent in the frequency with which he articulates opinions of Nell that demand assent, even as they acquire sinister overtones in his mouth: “Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud, neighbour;’ said Quilp, nursing his short leg, and making his eyes twinkle very much; ‘such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell!” (9; 125).

While Nell and Quilp represent opposite poles, the novel takes every opportunity to discomfort the simple emotional alignment this would seem to invite. “Everything in our lives, whether of good or evil, affects us most by contrast,” Dickens declares (53; 493); but a little later, expanding on this theme as Nell emerges into the sunlight on the tower of the ancient church, he writes, “It was like passing from death to life; it was drawing
nearer heaven” (53; 496). As the affirmation of life is appropriated to the ideal, beyond death, so the terms of the contrast collapse and the way is paved for Nell’s ascension. The power of Dickens’s effects of contrast depends in large part on the instability of the extremes, on the difficulty of keeping them isolate from each other. Every solicitous interest in Nell is itself turned into a threat to just that innocence and purity for which she is valued. These are qualities to be preserved, to be left well alone: Nell develops so little as a character because, in her, development is fatal. Her grandfather’s fond ambition to make her a lady itself already constitutes a threat, and when their relationship is inverted following the collapse of his affairs, it establishes the fundamental tension that fuels her pathos, loading her with cares that constantly testify to her goodness and constantly threaten her innocence. While her grandfather continues to endanger her with his renewed gambling and intentions of theft, others who would rescue her are rendered dangerous to him, and so to her. Quilp’s machinations make Kit potentially fatal to the old man’s health: the mysterious single gentleman, in his enquiries after the fugitive pair, becomes the embodiment of those well-meaning pursuers they fear would pronounce the old man senile, and part them (19).

The sexual aspect of the threat to Nell is always close to the surface of the narrative—unsurprisingly, given that sexuality is a major element of what is at stake in the idea of innocence. Critics have noted the dominance of the male perspective, from Master Humphrey’s slightly ambiguous interest right through to the all-male group of mourners at Nell’s funeral. The sense of her sexual vulnerability is strongly intimated in the account of her grandfather’s predatory intrusion into her bedroom (30); it is there also in the advice of the woman at the races who from bitter experience bids her to “keep at home for God’s sake” (19; 214). Quilp, of course, is very aware of Nell’s emergent sexuality and knowingly commits the symbolic violation of sleeping in her bed. Interest from other quarters is happily turned aside: Kit’s is distracted by Barbara before it takes on a sexual character; Dick’s is diverted to the Marchioness, allowing his subplot a comic resolution in which extremes are reconciled, a meagre reality successfully glossed over by unbridled fantasy. But there remains the passage of time, against which Nell’s childhood is not proof. Time is the responsibility of the narrative itself, and once again the reader’s interest is implicated.

In these terms, the necessity of Nell’s death is clearly intimated. Forster, who claimed to have first perceived it, recalled that her fate was sealed by his appeal to essentially the same logic: “I asked him to consider whether it did not necessarily belong even to his own conception, after taking so
mere a child through such a tragedy of sorrow, to lift her also out of the commonplace of ordinary happy endings, so that the gentle pure little figure and form should never change to the fancy. All that I meant he seized at once, and never turned aside from it again” (1969: 1:123). The readers of *Master Humphrey’s Clock* were sensitive to Dickens’s foreshadowings of this end, although Hood, writing at the beginning of November 1840, too optimistically exclaimed “How soothing the moral, that Gentleness, Purity, and Truth, sometimes dormant but never dead, have survived, and will outlive, Fraud and Force, though backed by gold and encased in steel!” (Collins 1971: 96–97). But by the 24th of November, after the appearance of chapters 52 and 53, Dickens recorded in a note to his publishers “I am inundated with imploring letters recommending poor little Nell to mercy.—Six yesterday, and four today (it’s not 12 o’Clock yet) already!” These letters convey something of the extent of readers’ emotional involvement with the story, as well as their strong sense, enhanced by serial publication, of the author’s control of its as yet indeterminate outcome.

That Dickens himself was emotionally involved, his letters of the period amply testify. But he repeatedly couples his expressions of distress with cool assessments of the artistic necessity of the painful denouement: “All night long I have been pursued by the child; and this morning I am unrefreshed and miserable. I don’t know what to do with myself. . . . I think the close of the story will be great”; “I am slowly murdering that poor child, and grow wretched over it. It wrings my heart. Yet it must be” (House et al. 1965–2002: 2:144, 180). The exact nature of the necessity is never articulated, but there is no denying that it took emotional strength to adhere to it: there is no case for cynical hackery or sentimental self-indulgence on Dickens’s part. The memory of Mary Hogarth was bound up with his feelings for Nell, of course, but emotion and artistic self-consciousness coexisted throughout: “Old wounds bleed afresh when I only think of the way of doing it: what the actual doing it will be, God knows. I can’t preach to myself the schoolmaster’s consolation, though I try. Dear Mary died yesterday, when I think of this sad story. . . . I have refused several invitations for this week and next, determining to go nowhere till I had done. I am afraid of disturbing the state I have been trying to get into, and having to fetch it all back again” (2:181–82). The editors of the Pilgrim letters are surely right to cite this as evidence against an emotional obsession (2:xii): Dickens’s literary objectives are distinct from and more general than his grief for his sister-in-law.

The “schoolmaster’s consolation,” from chapter 54, is that “there is not an angel added to the Host of Heaven but does its blessed work on earth
in those that loved it here” (54; 503); it anticipates the sentiment of the (as yet unwritten) passage Horne set as verse. Both formulations are concerned with the effect on the bereaved, and both, despite the gesture towards a religious vocabulary, frame the consolation in strikingly secular terms: the world is better for the tender feelings that arise out of grief. Dickens’s neglect of specifically Christian sentiments here is obtrusive enough to have provoked censure: the reviewer for the Christian Remembrancer objected that “not a single Christian feature is introduced.” Dickens’s presentation of Nell’s death is “one tissue of fantastic sentiment, as though the growth of flowers by one’s grave, and the fresh country air passing over it, and the games of children near it, could abate by one particle the venom of death” (Schlicke and Schlicke 1988: 41). Christian consolation, as understood by the Christian Remembrancer, focusses on dying rather than being bereaved. It is irrelevant to Dickens here because the “venom of death” is not at all his central concern. Certainly, one of the functions of the deathbed scene in the Victorian novel was to present an image of the gentle death, most particularly when an angelic child is concerned, and Dickens does provide such a scene in The Old Curiosity Shop. It is the death of the schoolmaster’s favourite, who passes on with all due demonstrations of goodness and serenity. Nell is present at the occasion, and the schoolmaster later quite explicitly transfers his emotional allegiance to her (46; 435), but this exemplary deathbed scene proves not to be a dress rehearsal for her own. It must come as a surprise to anyone for whom the notoriety of Nell’s death precedes acquaintance with the novel itself, that Dickens provides her actual dying with no scene at all, treating it only in a couple of brief, retrospective paragraphs in chapter 72. Nell doesn’t die as an exemplar but as a loss, and Dickens’s attention is wholly taken up with the experience of loss: for her grandfather; for the schoolmaster, Kit, and the single gentleman; for himself and his readers.

Forster’s biography records that he “never knew him wind up any tale with such a sorrowful reluctance as this” (1969: 1:122). The reluctance clearly arose from the emotional significance attached to Nell, yet the necessity of her death also arises from this emotional significance. She embodies an ideal of pure and innocent goodness which is under threat, not only from the malevolent force of Quilp, but also from those who care for her; from the interest of Kit and the single gentleman, pursuers whose well-meaning intent is to reintroduce her, ruinously, to society and the city; and from the interest of his readers, in their complicity with that narrative prospect. Dickens kills her to save her. The burden of his description of her corpse is one of danger averted, of an ideal innocence restored,
preserved from the encroaching corruption of life: "Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose" (71; 654). The emotional challenge of the novel is to accept the rightness of this, despite all it does to make that hard to do, including the expression of a directly contradictory view of death: “Where, in the sharp lineaments of rigid and unsightly death, is the calm beauty of slumber . . . ?” (12; 146). In spite of this and other foregrounded discords (the bird that presumes to have life when she does not; the grotesque injustice of the old outliving her), Dickens invites his readers to respond not with an immoderate grief like her grandfather’s, which itself tends only towards death, but “with a softened feeling, and with consolation” (House et al. 1965–2002: 2:188). That is, to live up to the sentiment that moves Dickens to blank verse in chapter 72, and take to heart the hard lesson that, “Of every tear that sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves, some good is born, some gentler nature comes” (72; 659). Nell’s death is right because she is too good for this world, she is ideal—unreal-istic, if you like. To accept it is to admit the power of Quilp and the fallen state of human nature (or more specifically, perhaps, of male affections), but in doing so also to affirm and cleave to the ideal. The precondition for the sacrifice of Nell is the death of Quilp: its necessity at this level accounts for and supplies the striking lack of motivation for the event in realistic terms. When his time comes, he merely stumbles and falls into the dark river, but a villain was never more openly pushed. His dying is ruthlessly punitive and is followed by the mortification of his body, described with an intensity that underlines its emotional significance: the river “toyed and sported with its ghastly freight, now bruising it against the slimy piles, now hiding it in mud or long rank grass, now dragging it heavily over rough stones and gravel, now feigning to yield it to its own element, and in the same action luring it away, until, tired of the ugly plaything, it flung it on a swamp . . . and left it there to bleach” (67; 620). Quilp is not defeated so that Nell may be restored—he is repudiated so that she may be renounced. One of the most cool-headed contemporary literary assessments of the novel was that of Lady Stanley, who wrote to her daughter-in-law, after reading Quilp’s death, “Will Nelly die? I think she ought” (Mitford 1938: 2). Dickens himself felt strongly for Nell and found it hard renouncing her, but he held fast to his design for the same reason and demanded as much of his readers. He concludes the fatal chapter with a direct challenge to waverers: “say, if one deliberate wish expressed in solemn terms above this bed could call her back to life, which of us would utter it!” (71; 654). The
emotional power of the novel was much more than a sop to popular sentiment: it was a demanding struggle through a widespread contemporary experience of grief in order to secure a humane consolation; and it was a vindication of idealistic sensibilities in the face of an inevitable complicity with the debased forces opposing them. Forster’s response is a fitting tribute to its rhetorical achievement: “It is little to tell you that I think it is your literary masterpiece. The deeper feeling it has left with me goes beyond considerations of that kind. . . . I was about to say that I had felt this death of dear little Nell as a kind of discipline of feeling and emotion which would do me lasting good, and which I would not thank you for as an ordinary enjoyment of literature” (House et al. 1965–2002: 2:187n).

Dickens’s success in engaging the emotions of his readers with Little Nell was not based on a crude manipulation of vulgar sentimental clichés, but on his ability to shape a rhetorical argument to the end of a powerful achieved sentiment. He was able to do this because those readers were receptive to a treatment of character in which mimetic objectives are subordinate to rhetorical objectives, the idealist temper of which in this case was incompatible with realist representation. This does not imply a need for two separate models of reading: realist representation, too, is a rhetorical end of fiction, and the same account of emotional involvement can accommodate both realist and romance characterization. The inaccessibility of Nell’s emotional power to modern readers is a consequence, beyond the cultural remoteness of the sentiments themselves, of the subsequent collusion between realist literary programmes and critical assumptions about character and representation. Once the explanation of emotional involvement in fiction is put upon a broader footing, in terms of fictional rhetoric rather than mimetic representation, the Little Nell phenomenon falls into place, and (if we are so inclined) we can weep freely again.

Of course, we are probably not so inclined. I have argued for the integrity of Dickens’s literary engagement with early Victorian sentimentality, not for the revival of that sentimentality itself. This account has sought to show that Little Nell’s reception can be justified, not by treating it as symptomatic of the emotional climate of a particular cultural moment, but by understanding this novel, and fiction in general, as a direct and deliberate contribution to cultural discourse. Fiction is not a second-order phenomenon of the kind which a mimetic framework necessarily implies, but an integral part of a culture’s discursive exploration of itself. Fictionality is the inaugurating move of a specific rhetoric, which enables a process of imaginative exploration of values; in this case, a process which pursues the logic of sentiment beyond its specific occasions towards a principled
idealism. Dickens does not simply invoke or exploit the sentimentality of his culture but addresses it and works through it. This is why the emotional response to this novel is a touchstone for the cultural role of fictional discourse in general: it enforces the recognition that the means of fiction’s relation to its readership are rhetorical rather than representational, and that representations are therefore not the object of the reader’s engagement, but rather a corollary of that engagement.9

An account of fictionality as a rhetorical orientation properly ends with the reader, though I have only addressed one key element of the theoretical implications of such an account for our understanding of narrative reception. I hope, however, that I have done enough to show that the view of fictionality advanced throughout this book can indeed accommodate, in principle, the range of theoretical issues that accompany the reception of narrative fictions, from the emotional involvement of individual readers to the role of fictions in culture at large, and that in doing so such a rhetorical account offers significant conceptual advantages. Necessarily, what I have said can only gesture towards the global reconceptualization and redescription of fictionality in context that it implies, and highlight a few of the more obvious points at which that effort secures a critical dividend. But if the gesture carries any conviction, then perhaps you’ll agree that the approach itself merits further consideration.