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Dickens and Fire Imagery

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The image of fire seems to have gripped Charles Dickens throughout his writing career. The *Pickwick Papers*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* all contain passages of fire imagery in which the image assumes varying degrees of prominence. An examination of the manner in which Dickens refined and altered his conception of fire for philosophical and artistic purposes will, perhaps, lend some insight into the increasing ability of this great novelist to control the fruits of his poetic imagination.

In *The Pickwick Papers*, usually considered Dickens’ first great literary achievement, appear contrasting images of light and darkness, apparently quite deliberately, but he does not develop the central meaning behind the image of fire which would take on so much importance in his later novels. References to fire in *The Pickwick Papers* are scarce. In these infrequent references, fire has no symbolic significance. The narrator of “The Stroller’s Tale” mentions casually a “low cinder fire in a rusty unfixed grate,” as part of his general survey of the ailing actor’s quarters. (1) Not surprisingly, these references occur in the gloomiest portions of *The Pickwick Papers*, over which Dickens seems to have let his brooding artistic mind wander most freely. “A Madman’s Manuscript” produces some powerful and memorable scenes. In one paragraph of that tale, the author’s manipulation of the image of fire heightens the horror of the madman’s decision to kill his wife:

For many weeks I thought of poison, and then of drowning, and then of fire. A fine sight the grand house in flames, and the madman’s wife smouldering away to cinders. (I, 172)

In another paragraph, fire is used to indicate the internal, mental origin of the madman’s sickness as well as to add to the horror of his tale:

I kept my eyes carefully from him at first, for I knew what he [that is, the madman’s brother-in-law] little thought — and I gloried in the knowledge — that the light of madness gleamed from them like fire. (I, 174)

(1) All textual references are to the Gadshill Edition of Dickens’ works, ed. Andrew Lang and B.W. Matz (London, 1897-99). Here I, 44 is cited. Subsequent references will be within the text.
Clearly, however, Dickens' approach to fire in this tale is devoid of any philosophical conception. That the author aims primarily for the horrific value of the image is best seen in his description of Mr. Pickwick's reaction to the extinguishing of his candle as he finishes reading the manuscript:

Mr. Pickwick's candle was just expiring in the socket, as he concluded the perusal of the old clergyman's manuscript; and when the light went suddenly out, without any previous flicker by any way of warning, it communicated a very considerable start to his excited frame. (I, 177)

This rhetoric recalls the Gothic school of Mrs. Radcliffe and her successors, all of whom were familiar to Dickens. (2) Such traditional Gothic sensationalism recurs in the holocaust rhetoric describing the great fires in *Oliver Twist* and *Barnaby Rudge*. Thus while Dickens has realized intuitively the power of fire as an image, he has not yet formed the sophisticated conception of its figurative use that he develops through his subsequent writing. One indication, however, that the author has begun already to ponder the image of fire to elicit and to externalize a mood of contemplation, of brooding, or of reminiscence is his description of Alfred Jingle in prison: "...there sat Mr. Alfred Jingle, his head resting on his hand, his eyes fixed upon the fire, and his whole appearance denoting misery and dejection." (II, 228)

This last conception of fire — its usefulness to elicit and externalize a mood of reminiscence — is used quite frequently in *The Old Curiosity Shop*; it does, in fact, become a central melodramatic image in that novel. Dickens' powerful use of fire first becomes evident when Little Nell and her grandfather wander into a factory district and are helped by a strange man who brings them to a great furnace in one of the factories and urges them to sleep:

The man looked at Nell again, and gently touched her garments, from which the rain was running off in little streams. "I can give you warmth," he said, after a pause: "nothing else. Such lodging as I have, is in that house," pointing to the doorway from which he had emerged, "but she is safer and better there than here. The fire is in a rough place, but you can pass the night beside it safely, if you'll trust yourselves to me..." (XI, 64)

Initially the fire is pictured as a frighteningly dangerous source of light. Dickens describes the factory to which Nell and her

grandfather have come as a place where, "moving like demons among the flame and smoke, dimly and fitfully seen, flushed and tormented by the burning fires, and wielding great weapons, a faulty blow from any one of which must have crushed some workman's skull, a number of men laboured like giants." (XI, 65) This depiction of fire is not, however, the one that predominates. Slowly Dickens changes the atmosphere and focuses his attention upon the strange man who is gazing contemplatively, "resting his chin upon his hands," (XI, 65) upon those flames that were described so menacingly not long before. That gentle, sensitive individual reveals his fondness for the fire as he converses with Nell:

"I feared you were ill," she said. "The other men are all in motion and you are so very quiet."

"They leave me to myself," he replied. "They know my humour. They laugh at me, but don't harm me in it. See younder there — that's my friend."

"The fire?" said the child.

"It has been alive as long as I have," the man made answer. "We talk and think together all night long."

The child glanced quickly at him in her surprise, but he had turned his eyes in their former direction, and was musing as before.

"It's like a book to me," he said — "the only book I ever learned to read; and many an old story it tells me. It's music, for I know its voice among a thousand, and there are other voices in its roar. It had pictures too. You don't know how many strange faces and different scenes I trace in the red-hot coals. It's my memory, that fire, and shows me all my life." (XI, 66 our italics)

The association of fire and contemplation occurs frequently in the novel after this scene. However, Dickens does not stress elsewhere in The Old Curiosity Shop the function of fire as a prod of memory; the active, motivating aspect of fire is found only in this chapter on the strange man. Rather, the image of fire is used primarily to externalize a mood of reminiscence in an individual. The fire enhances a description of the schoolmaster who takes care of Nell and her grandfather in this fairly typical passage:

The schoolmaster sat for a long time smoking his pipe by the kitchen fire, which was now deserted, thinking, with a very happy face, on the fortunate chance which had brought him so opportunely to the child's assistance, and parrying, as well as in his simple way he could, the inquisitive cross-examination of the land lady, who had a great
curiosity to be made acquainted with every particular of Nell's life and history. (XI, 82) (3)

Fire as a memory stimulant is used fleetingly, but skillfully, in Dickens' description of Nell's dead countenance. The author's allusion to "the furnace fire" recalls the furnace of the strange man and reinforces the meaning of the image in the mind of the reader:

And still her former self lay there, unaltered in this change. Yes. The old fireside had smiled upon that sweet face; it had passed, like a dream, through haunts of misery and care; at the door of the poor schoolmaster on the summer evening, before the furnace fire up on the cold wet night, at the still bedside of the dying boy, there had been the same mild lovely look. So shall we know the angels in their majesty, after death. (XI, 339)

It should be noted that Dickens does not always associate memory with fire. There are several instances, even after the chapter about the strange man, in which a character's reminiscences are not stirred or accompanied by a reference to fire, such as the description of Nell's thoughts about her life:

By this time it was night again, and though the child felt cold, being but poorly clad, her anxious thoughts were far removed from her own suffering or uneasiness, and busily engaged in endeavouring to devise some scheme for their joint subsistence...

How every circumstance of her short, eventful life came thronging into her mind, as they traveled on... (XI, 57)

Again in Dombey and Son Dickens extends his use of fire to include any type of reverie, including remembrance. Fire apparently externalizes a vague type of musing which he somehow separates from the more specific thought processes of his characters. Little Paul's actions during his discussion with Mr. Dombey clarify this technique:

"If [money is] a good thing, and can do anything," said the little fellow, thoughtfully, as he looked back at the fire, "I wonder why it didn't save me my mama."

He didn't ask the question of his father this time. Perhaps he had seen, with a child's quickness, that it had already made his father uncomfortable. But he repeated

(3) The spirituality so characteristic of several of Dickens' fire gazers other than the schoolmaster, e.g., Louisa Gradgrin in Hard Times and Lizzie Hexam in Our Mutual Friend, is understood by the implication in a glimpse at Pecksniff in Martin Chuzzlewit. Chapter V closes thus: "It was some time before Mr. Pecksniff dreamed at all, or even sought his pillow, as he sat for full two hours before the fire in his own chamber, looking at the coals and thinking deeply." (VI, 104) Not surprisingly, this arch-hypocrite receives no emotional sustenance from his fire.
the thought aloud, as if it were quite an old one to him, and had troubled him very much; and sat with his chin resting on his hand, still cogitating and looking for an explanation in the fire. (VIII, 115)

By contrast, one of the most important examples of a character’s mental life — Florence’s musings in chapter 23 — has no reference at all to fire:

But there was one thought, scarcely shaped out to herself, yet fervent and strong within her, that upheld Florence when she strove and filled her true young heart, so sorely tried with constancy of purpose. Into her mind, as into all others contending with the great affliction of our mortal nature, there had stolen solemn wonderings and hopes, arising in the dim world beyond the present life, and murmuring, like faint music, of recognition in the far-off land between her brother and her mother: of some present consciousness in both of her; and some knowledge of her as she went her way upon the earth. (VIII, 390)

It seems, then, that in divorcing musing from the more specific, rational forms of thinking, Dickens has developed the image of fire as a prop to indicate and reinforce a mood of reverie which he somehow feels is too indistinct or unimportant to present as he would more complex or crucial ruminations. The danger is that such a prop, if overworked, can easily turn into a vexatious cliché. Although Dickens does not use the image of fire so often in *Dombey and Son* that it becomes bothersome, the prop does become something of a melodramatic cliché. Witness the predictably sentimental backdrop of fire in the detailing of Alice’s attempts to collect her thoughts before she explains her feelings to Harriet:

Still upon her knees, and with her eyes upon the fire, and the fire shining on her ruined beauty and her wild black hair, one long tress of which she pulled over her shoulder, and wound about her hand, and thoughtfully bit and tore while speaking, she went on. (IX, 381)

After her speech, Alice again turns to the fire, a movement which indicates a thoughtfully melancholy mood:

Looking at the fire, as if she were forgetful, for the moment, of having any auditor, she continued in a dreamy way as she wound the long tress of hair tight round and round her hand. (IX, 382)

Fire occurs in this chapter a third time, to indicate the end of Alice’s reverie. Dickens notes that she raises her eyes “swiftly from the moody gaze upon the fire, to Harriet’s face,” says that
she is wasting time, and begins to talk of their present situation. (IX, 392)

Fire is also a standard, expectable prop in Bleak House. While many of the images in the novel are strikingly artistic (as seen especially in his use of fog and other water images), and while his portraiture of the psychological motivations of his characters is much more developed than in his earlier novels, Dickens has not progressed beyond the use of fire as a prop to externalize a vague combination of melancholy mood and rumination. Fire is referred to only about five times in Bleak House, and in those passages the image is used in essentially the same cliché manner as it is in this description of Lady Dedlock:

The man’s mind is not so well balanced but that he bores my Lady, who, after a languid effort to listen, or rather a languid resignation of herself to a show of listening becomes distraught, and falls into a contemplation of the fire as if it were her fire at Chesney Wold, and she had never left it. (XVI, 489)

Another bit of fieriness is usually noticed in Bleak House. The spontaneous combustion of Krook is interesting Gothicism, on the one hand, and it was to forestall quantities of adverse criticism directed toward its potential melodramaticism that Dickens emphasized the reality of such occurrences in his preface. There is also another side of the coin, i.e., that Krook’s death has functional significance in representing the decaying but potentially explosive destructiveness underneath English Society. Associations of “obsolence and divine judgement, extinction and damnation, pestilence and irresponsibility, and death by fire and water,” function symbolically in this vast panorama of defeated expectations. (4)

The cliché contemplative fire is also present in Great Expectations, as is obvious in Pip’s remark that he “could not help looking at the fire, in an obvious state of doubt” over Joe’s remark that Pip’s sister is “a fine figure of a woman.” (XXII, 53) However, another conception of fire also runs through the novel and even assumes central importance: the fire also becomes the symbol of the hearth, the happy home of such other familiar works in Dickens’ day as John Howard Payne’s “Home, Sweet Home” or Tennyson’s domestic idyls.

The facts that Joe Gargery is a blacksmith and that his forge (which depends upon fire) is an inseparable part of his home are stressed at the outset of the novel: “Joe’s forge adjoined our house, which was a wooden house, as many of the dwellings in our country were — most of them, at that time.” (XXII, 8)

The presentation of the busy familiar preparations for Christmas is accompanied by special attention to fire and the hearth and an awareness of the contrasting cold, dark world outside:

This was market-day, and Mrs. Joe was out on one of these expeditions.

Joe made the fire and swept the hearth, and then we went to the door to listen for the chaise-cart. It was a dry cold night, and the wind blew keenly, and the frost was white and hard. A man would die to-night of lying on the marshes, I thought...

"Here comes the mare," said Joe, "ringing like a peal of bells!"

The sound of her iron shoes upon the hard road was quite musical, as she came along at a much brisker trot than usual. We got a chair out, ready for Mrs. Joe's alighting, and stirred up the fire that they might see a bright window, and took a final survey of the kitchen that nothing might be out of its place... (XXII, 56)

This association by Pip of fire with home and togetherness takes on more significance as he leaves the forge and, because of his "expectations," becomes separated from Joe and the past he loves. The association returns in later years to haunt Pip's conscience, and Dickens emphasizes this occurrence in a manner which skillfully incorporates both conceptions of fire into the same sentence and thereby gives the trite conception of fire new power: "Many a time of an evening, when I sat alone, looking at the fire, I thought, after all, there was no fire like the forge fire and the kitchen fire at home;" (XXII, 316)

New power for an old image is what Dickens seems to have been striving for in his next-to-last novel, Our Mutual Friend, and he succeeds in large measure in realizing his goal. (5) The typical cliché use of fire is muted because of the more prominent functions of fire in the novel — as an activator of memories and as a symbol of a comfortable home. These last two functions of the image of fire are, of course, not new in Our Mutual Friend. They operate together with the usual Dickensian conception and serve not merely as melodramatic props but as the vehicles for some significant ideas which are important to the understanding of several characters in the novel.

Through Lizzie Hexam Dickens first brings the image of fire in Our Mutual Friend to our direct attention. Mulling over the past and the future in front of the fire, with her brother Charley,

(5) This novel has been considered by some "not only the greatest of Dickens's novels [but also] his most poetic." See Harvey Peter Sucksmith in NCP, XXVI (1971), 357, who quotes from Herman Daleski's Dickens and the Art of Analogy (p. 271) on this point.
she reveals an attitude which recalls that of the strange man in *The Old Curiosity Shop:* (6)

She placed her hands in one another on his shoulder, and laying her rich brown cheek against them as she looked down at the fire, went on thoughtfully:

‘Of an evening, Charley, when you are at the school, and father’s —’

‘At the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters,’ the boy struck in, with a backward nod of his head towards the public-house. ‘Yes. Then as I sit a-looking at the fire, I seem to see in the burning coal — like where that glow is now —’

**

‘...When I look at it of an evening, it comes like pictures to me, Charley.’

‘Show us a picture,’ said the boy. ‘Tell us where to look.’

‘Ah! It wants my eyes, Charley.’

‘Cut away then, and tell us what your eyes make of it.’

‘Why, there are you and me, Charley, when you were quite a baby that never knew a mother —’

‘Don’t go saying I never knew a mother,’ interposed the boy, ‘for knew a little sister that was a sister and mother both.’ (XXIII, 33-34)

These passages reveal that all three ramifications of the image of fire reside in the mind of the extremely sensitive Lizzie. Not only are her various musings stimulated by the flame as a whole, but certain aspects of her thoughts about the past and the future are stimulated by certain parts of the flame. In the manner of Pip’s recollection of the fire when he is far from home in spirit and body, Lizzie’s remarks are recalled many months later, at a time of sorrowful disagreement and estrangement between sister and brother:

‘What we have got to do is, to turn our faces full in our new direction, and keep straight on.’

‘And never look back? Not even to try to make amends?’

‘It was all very well when we sat before the fire — when we looked into the hollow down by the flare — but we are looking into the real world, now.’

(6) In *Hard Times* (XXV, chs. iii and xvi) Louisa Gradgrind also gazes into her fire, as she sits before it with her brother Tom. To her the fire suggests many of the spiritually imaginative impulses she has been taught to repress. Far less loftily in his idealistic makeup than Louisa, young Tom scoffs: “You seem to find more to look at in it than ever I could find.” He does not recognize the emotional negativism implied in his own words, but readers do. He can not wonder, as Louisa can and does, and as if to point up Tom’s lack of imagination, chapter viii is, fittingly, entitled “Never Wonder.”
'Ah, we were looking into the real world, then, Charley!'
'I understand what you mean by that, but you are not justified in it...' (XXIII, 282)

The difference in the attitudes of Charley and Lizzie toward the flame reflects the fundamental differences in their characters. Lizzie, a sensitive, meditative girl, is drawn to the flames and to the reflective yet vital mood which they ignite in her. Charley, by contrast, is a purely pragmatic social climber who has neither time nor the need for thought or intuitive, vital goodness in his lifestyle.

Like Charley, Eugene is not shown to be much of a profound thinker, for his stirring of the fire coincides with thoughts only about insects:

Thereupon he stirred the fire and sat down on one side of it. It struck eleven, and he made believe to compose himself patiently... and then he started up.

'Invisible insects of diabolical activity swarm in this place. I am tackled and twitched all over...' (XXIII, 204)

By contrast, Jenny Wren, though not a profound thinker by any means, is intuitively sympathetic enough to appreciate Lizzie's imaginative and reflective powers:

'...Look in the — what was its name when you told fortunes with your brother that I don't like?'
'The hollow down by the flare?'
'Ah! That's the name! You can find a lady there, I know.' (XXIII, 434)

In Our Mutual Friend, as in the earlier novels, Dickens clearly seems to separate "musing" from what he apparently considers more present-oriented, rational types of thought. For example, a long passage describing Lizzie's thoughts about her father's death (the manner of which recalls descriptions of Florence's solitary thoughts in Dombey and Son) has no reference at all to fire (XXIII, 86).

This separation is no longer found in Dickens' final and unfinished novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood. In fact, Dickens seems to have radically altered his approach toward fire in a manner that adds new power and vitality to the image, even while maintaining some of its earlier characteristics. Perhaps the key to his new approach toward fire in Edwin Drood can be found in the description of Durdles' lighting his lantern as he ascends the cathedral with Jasper at night:

Durdles has lighted his lantern, by drawing from the cold hard wall a spark of that mysterious fire which lurks in everything, and, guided by this speck, they clamber up among the cobwebs and the dust. (XXXIII, 150 our italics)
Aside from indicating that Dickens is seriously and consciously working with the image of fire, this passage is also important in that it implies an internalization of fire. Unlike the fire in the other novels, which is chiefly outside the characters, the fire in *Edwin Drood* is seen as lurking in everything and everyone (e.g., Jasper).

One new direction of the fire metaphor for the state of a person's mind is found in Mr. Grewgious' comments to Edwin about love. (Dickens, nevertheless, also uses fire in his more conventional manner):

Edwin had turned red and turned white, as certain points of this picture came into light. He now sat looking at the fire, and bit his lip.

'The speculations of an Angular man,' resumed Mr. Grewgious, still sitting and speaking exactly as before, 'are probably erroneous on so globular a topic. But I figure to myself (subject, as before, to Mr. Edwin's correction), that there can be no coolness, no lassitude, no doubt, no indifference, no half-fire and half-smoke state of mind, in a real lover. Pray am I at all near the mark in my picture?' (XXXIII, 133)

Dickens is not content merely to use fire in the manner in which he has Grewgious use it — simply as a colorful metaphor. Just as the fire in *Our Mutual Friend* gives the reader insight into the temperament of the characters, so fire in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* reflects the mental state of the protagonists. Evil and intensely driven characters such as Jasper and the old woman are associated with a somewhat lurid and intense flame, while the good characters in the story, such as Mr. Crisparkle and Edwin, are associated with happier images of fire and light, such as the sun. Unlike *The Pickwick Papers*, the images of fire are an integral part of the images of light and darkness which abound in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Some types of fire, however, are associated with evil rather than with the good, healthy light. For example, Dickens specifically notes that the rays of the sun did not reach Jasper's room:

His room is a little somber, and may have had its influence in forming his manner... Even when the sun shines brilliantly it seldom touches the grand piano on the recess... (XXXIII, 10-11)

A flame is associated with Jasper, however. In introducing him to the reader, the author notes that Jasper has "lustrous, well arranged black hair." (our italics) This juxtaposition of adjectives could be considered coincidental, were it not for the fact that the haggard opium dealer is also described as "lustrous" — in respect to her face. (XXXIII, 71) In fact, Dickens makes the
internalization of fire even more explicit in the case of that strangely fascinating creature Helena:

There was a slumbering gleam of fire in the intense eyes, though they were then softened with compassion and admiration. Let whomsoever it most concerned look well to it. (XXXIII, 76)

There is in Jasper an emotional condition of an even more negative, destructive fieriness, most of the time repressed although occasionally flaming out. The horrifying encounter with Rosa in the garden is such an outburst of this flame, and the chapter detailing this scene (ch. XIX) is titled, significantly, "Shadow on the Sun Dial." Further subtlety in using firelight occurs in the scene where Grewgious tells Jasper about the end of Edwin and Rosa's betrothal: the old lawyer stands between Jasper and the firelight (as the illustration and the text emphasize), and so this man's deadly psyche is kept at a distance from the humanizing, communal symbol of man's mutuality, the hearth. Thus, after the manner of Lady Dedlock and Pip, who undergo their dark night of the soul far from the hearth and its cheerful firelight, Jasper moves ever farther into the shadowy realms in which there is no charitable impulse but only the nightmare of terrible spiritual isolation. In Martin Chuzzlewit (VI, 361) Mrs. Gamp suggests that firelight soothes the insane temperament: it "is the certainest and most compoosing." Jasper is, however, inevitably linked with shadows and darkness; thus his inflammatory temperament conflicts with good firelight. It seems certain that had Edwin Drood been completed, he would have been, finally, overwhelmed by these symbolic, destructive "shadows" in his own psyche.

The very names Crisparkle and Twinkleton are examples of Dickens' association of healthy images of fire and light with the very nature of his characters. Many examples of adjectives which describe characters in terms of the healthy rays of the sun can be found in The Mystery of Edwin Drood. The author says that Mr. Crisparkle "beamed at his books," for example, and Neville, who alternates between being kind and dangerously obstinate, is alternately described as being "red hot" (when he provokes a fight with Edwin) and as making Mr. Crisparkle "beam very brightly." As with so many other aspects of this tantalizing novel, the fire imagery carries a dual and ambiguous burden in Edwin Drood. Dickens' imagination is here bodied forth in a symbolic, poetic construct that signifies the tenuous division between the fire that is good and the fire that is evil. Like Yeats's paradoxical cold passion, here is what we may term Dickens' dark fires.

It can be seen, then, that the Dickensian fire in "A Madman's Manuscript" of The Pickwick Papers to indicate an internal
mental state — "the light of madness gleamed from them [his eyes] like fire" (I, 175) — is repeated with variations in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Whereas in the author's first novel the use of this image was almost surely intuitive and fleeting, his manipulation of fire imagery in his last novel bears the sure and confident mark of an accomplished artist. Charles Dickens seems not to have been able to let go of the image of fire. His conception of the image did not remain static; it expanded with his maturation into a great writer, it grew more subtle and poetic as his imagination waxed more profound.

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(7) One might well take issue with the opinion that *Our Mutual Friend* is, after all, the greatest of Dickens' poetical essays. Had *Edwin Drood* reached completion, it might have surpassed its predecessor in poetic excellence and subtlety. Mr. Fisher is presently preparing a study of the poetics of *Edwin Drood*. 