

The Fire Motif in *Great Expectations*

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THE fire imagery in Dickens' *Great Expectations* has been referred to as either "the cliché contemplative fire" used as "a prop to externalize a mood of contemplation, brooding or reminiscence", or as "a symbol of the hearth, the happy home."¹ Yet what strikes the reader of *Great Expectations* is not so much the variety of the fire images as the functions of the various fire scenes and situations. The "contemplative fire," which is present — though in various degrees — throughout the novel, is combined in the third part of the novel with the "fire of experience", and is not exactly a symbol of "the hearth, the happy home" for Pip knows no such thing. Rather it is a symbol of the power and value of the heart. As the fire motif is part of the fabric of *Great Expectations*,² I shall analyse the presence or absence of fire, and the attitude of the characters towards it, in the various settings, in order to relate its meaning to the larger theme of Pip's development.

There are three important settings in the first part (or "First Stage") of the novel : the marshes, the forge and Satis House. The marshes are a grey, damp wilderness of misty land and water, churchyard and river; there Pip becomes aware of "the universal struggle" in life which his brothers and sisters early "gave up" (p. 35), and also becomes aware of himself as "a small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry" (p. 36). It is the place where society lumps its refuse: the dead and the convicts. Here Pip meets Magwitch, who seems to Pip to rise from the dead, and who, though filling Pip with terror, also awakens his innate sense of pity for a man "who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by

briars, who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled" (p. 36); and it alarms Pip to see Magwitch walking towards the gibbet, for he thinks he might go and "hook himself up" (p. 39). It is on the marshes however that Pip gives life, warmth and liberty to a fellow sufferer: he brings Magwitch food and brandy, a file and something to live for.³

Pip's "home" is the forge, where he lives with his sister and her husband Joe, the blacksmith. Joe is closely associated with fire both in his trade at the forge and in his private life, lighting and tending the fire in the kitchen; Mrs. Joe, with the bib of her apron full of pins and needles (p. 42), never is; on the contrary she is presented as alien to the fire⁴ and what it may stand for: "It's bad enough to be a blacksmith's wife without being your mother" (p. 41). She knows nothing of the warmth of the family fire, only its fearful and destructive force: rebuking Joe, she asks him: "What are you looking at? Is the house a-fire?" (p. 81). She is a disruptive force in the house: when she is "on the rampage" or speculating with Pumblechook about Miss Havisham's intentions concerning Pip's future, Joe sits "with the poker on his knees thoughtfully raking out the ashes between the lower bars" and she "[dives] at him, [takes] the poker out of his hands, [shakes] him, and [puts] it away" (p. 125). The only time we see her in the forge she is in a fit of hysterics, breeding trouble between Joe and Orlick. Similarly, Uncle Pumblechook is associated with the destructive aspect of fire: when, sitting in the chair of honour by the fire, he discusses Pip's prospects, he drags Pip from his stool and puts him "before the fire as if [he] were going to be cooked" (p. 125), which foreshadows Orlick's more drastic threat to Pip that he should look upon himself as fuel for "it was necessary to make up the fire once in seven years with a live boy" (p. 140), and his later attempt to punish Pip and revenge himself on him by burning him in the kiln. Pumblechook, pretending to be the "architect of [Pip's] fortune" (p. 125), definitely appears

as an imposter "supervising [him] with a depreciatory eye" and thinking "himself engaged on a very unremunerative job" (p. 125), thereby joining Mrs. Joe in the chorus at once lamenting and aggressive accusing Pip of ingratitude.

The Christmas dinner is eaten in the same heartless atmosphere : it is not a family celebration — there is no mention of the fire — for Pip and Joe keep silent and feel uneasy; only Mrs Joe, treating her friends and relatives to a superb dinner so as to impress them with her qualities as both housewife and martyr, gets any pleasure out of it. Pip is either ignored or else made the butt of such derogatory remarks as that he is "Naterally wicious" (p. 57). Joe too feels uncomfortable; he does not take part in this performance but keeps showing his sympathy to Pip by repeatedly pouring gravy into his plate to compensate for the increasing pain and vexation the boy has to endure.

It is therefore dangerous simply to associate fire with home togetherness, though this connotation in the fire symbolism is surely implied in the negation of homeliness. So far Pip and Joe are presented as starved of the warmth of a home, and their attitude to the fire reveals both what they lack in the outer world and what they have in themselves. At an elementary level and in the same way as the gravy poured by Joe into Pip's plate, the fire is what brings together Pip and Joe, the victims of heartlessness, hypocrisy and pretension, fellow-sufferers at the hands of Mrs Joe and her clique. The kitchen fire is a place of refuge for Pip and Joe, and it has the qualities of its tender. Joe is not the man in the house standing for authority and order, but the one who lights the fire, rakes the ashes out and replenishes it : through all tempests, natural or human, he keeps the unsophisticated fire of human generosity and sympathy burning. It is worth noting in this respect that, when the soldiers erupt into Joe's house on Christmas day to have the manacles mended, it is not Joe who lights the forge fire but the soldiers, the representatives of law and order; that while the company gets excited round the forge

fire at the prospect of the two villains being caught, Pip and Joe remain silent; and that both Pip and Joe take part in the expedition on the marshes not in search of the sensational, but avowing to each other their secret hope that the convicts may escape. When Magwitch, in order to clear Pip of the "crime," confesses after "looking thoughtfully at the fire" (p. 70) that he has stolen and eaten the pork pie, Joe's "God knows you're welcome to it" (p. 71) echoes Pip's remark to Magwitch on the marshes "I am glad you enjoy it" (p. 50). Magwitch's white lie definitely ranges him with the human sufferers who, whatever their "crimes", possess this innate generosity of heart, a generosity which characters like Mrs. Joe and Plumblehook completely lack: these go by society's code of values and blindly applaud and rejoice at the prospect of seeing the convicts re-manacled by the representatives of the law.

A place of retreat, the fire becomes a place of meditation. We often see Pip or Joe, or both, "looking thoughtfully at the fire." Joe's fireside conversation with Pip (pp. 76-80) about his unhappy childhood ends with praise for his parents despite their shortcomings, and for Mrs. Joe "as a fine figure of a woman" (p. 78). It tells us much about Joe's capacity to give and to forgive. All through this scene Joe keeps raking the fire with the poker, expertly kindling the fire of fellow-feeling. The fire, then, becomes the symbol of an honest confrontation with the self and with one's past, and of a sympathetic approach to others. Joe's attitude never changes; he is one of the fixed poles of the novel, closely associated and even identified with the forge and kitchen fires: his meditations and his reflected self in the fire have the qualities of the kitchen fire itself — its protective, comforting warmth — and illustrate the transforming power of the forge fire.

The case of Pip is slightly different; he wavers between two poles as he progresses from childhood to manhood. Pip's attitude to the fire and his fire meditations dramatize his private thoughts and bring out what differentiates him

from Joe, thereby pointing to his necessarily diverging path. First of all Pip is a child, and unlike Joe he is seldom seen simply "looking thoughtfully at the fire"; rather, in a more self-centred way, he is "looking in great depression at the fire" (p. 40) in search of consolation when, after his first meeting with Magwitch, Mrs. Joe welcomes him home with "Tickler;" or he "looks disconsolately at the fire" (p. 41) for, as a child unaware of the generosity of his attitude to the convict, Pip sees "the dreadful pledge I was under to commit a larceny on those sheltering premises [rising] in the avenging coals" (p. 41). The fire mirrors his troubled conscience where his innate generosity is stifled by the more limited and rigid sense of right and wrong he has been taught; yet this innate feeling is still vividly alive when, in the forge, the flaring fire of the law lighted by the soldiers kindles Pip's sympathy for "the poor wretches" (p. 64) out on the marshes. For Pip as for Joe, the fire is the medium of an honest confrontation not only with the self but also with one's intimates⁵: after his first visit to Miss Havisham and his fantastic report of it, Pip says to Joe: "Before the fire goes out, Joe, I should like to tell you something" (p. 99), and he confesses that he has lied about Satis House and tells him how miserable he feels because Estella despises him for "being common" (p. 99). While Joe accepts his condition and does not want to rise — "I an't a master mind" (p. 79) he says to Pip in front of the fire — even before Satis House is ever mentioned, Pip is anxious to learn and tells Joe that he would "like to be a scholar" (p. 75). Pip is also more imaginative than Joe, so that the fire, as a mirror of the self, reflects and enhances his fears and fantasies: when he comes home after meeting Magwitch, "the marsh winds made the fire glow and flare, [he] thought [he] heard the voice outside, of the man with the iron on his leg" (p. 44). His thoughts in front of the fire also mirror his imaginative sympathy, for instance, when he and Joe are waiting for Mrs. Joe's return from town:

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-out on the marshes, I thought. And then I looked at the stars, and considered how awful it would be for a man to turn his face up to them as he froze to death, and see no help or pity in all the glittering multitude. (p. 80)

It is only natural that this imaginative boy, eager to know more and discover things and people, should be faced with other problems different from Joe's. His world widens out to include the world of Satis House. His self is at once enriched and confused by new longings and aspirations which are beyond the reach of Joe's understanding, though not of his sympathy. From then on, the fire ceases to be the medium of communion with Joe, but it remains the mirror of the battlefield in Pip's soul. The two worlds — the forge/childhood and Satis House/adolescence — mingle in Pip's soul. While singing "Old Clem" at the forge, he sees in the fire the face of Estella, whom he cherishes and who comes to embody his keen though distant aspirations. His fear of being found by Estella with black hands and face haunts him and, looking "towards those panels of black night in the wall", he "would fancy that [he] saw her just drawing her face away" (p. 136), with the result that he is ashamed of home and of working at the forge and comes to blame Joe for it. From then on, Pip is no longer presented as looking into the kitchen fire. Life becomes a torture and Jiggers' news gives Pip just the opportunity he wants to realize his aspirations. Back home Joe, Pip and Bidley gaze "at the burning coals . . . and nothing was said for a long time" (p. 169). The more Pip "looked at the glowing coals, the more incapable [he] became of looking at Joe" (p. 170). Whereas Bidley and Joe, with their eyes on the fire "became more at their cheerful ease again, [Pip] became quite gloomy" (p. 170) and, without actually knowing it and still less acknowledging it, "dissatisfied with himself" (p. 170). He

rejects the image of his ungrateful self reflected in the fire and, feeling offended by their looks, he [gets] "up and [looks] out at the door." His new aspirations triumph over his former more simple self, and, because he is deluded by appearance and dazzled by his anxious interest in gentlemanliness, "the very stars to which [he] then [raises his] eyes, . . . [he takes] to be but poor and humble stars for glittering on the rustic objects among which [he has] passed [his] life" (p. 171). Obviously Pip now *has* to leave the forge and is ready to start on the long way leading through errors (Second Stage) to maturity (Third Stage). Life and experience become the forge of Pip's new moral awareness. The scene in which his indentures are burnt in the kitchen fire expresses his severance from Joe and his simple honest attachments. Joe has never wanted to bind Pip to his trade, because his ties are of a different order, exemplified in their fire relationship. Yet now that his indentures have materially disappeared Pip "feels that he is free" (p. 173) and temporarily forgets that his ties with Joe are unbreakable. To compare this episode to a later one in which, before dying, Miss Havisham asks Pip to *write down* his pardon, is to realize the distance Pip has covered in the meantime: when Pip *kisses* her instead, he is well on his way, not back to the forge, but to a true assessment of the forge values.

Fire is almost absent from Satis House and when it appears it is no longer associated with protective warmth, with the acceptance of a painful past and present whose quality is transformed by the fire alchemy of a sympathizing heart, nor with the dynamic though painful fire-mirroring of the self. Fire is mentioned only twice, and the references come in the same scene, during Pip's second visit. When he is introduced into the dining room, occupied by spiders and mice, the dusty table and rotten wedding cake, "a fire had been lately kindled in the damp old-fashioned grate, and it was more disposed to

go out than to burn up, and the reluctant smoke which hung in the room seemed colder than the clearer air — like our own marsh mist” (p. 112). With nobody to tend it the fire cannot flare up in the damp room, which is never touched by the sun and inhabited by a witch-like creature. The smoke is as static and cold as the fire itself, and the room is associated through its dampness and coldness with the worst, most mysterious aspects of the marsh, its mist. It is in this room that, “looking” at this static heatless fire, Miss Havisham explains to Pip the present state of ruin and decay of the room and of herself, and vengefully extends this willed death-in-life state to the moment of her real death, which seems to be the only thing she is looking forward to:

“and when they lay me dead, in my bride’s dress on this bride’s table — which shall be done, and which will be the finished curse upon him — so much the better if it is done on this day.” (p. 117)

In this sunless surrounding deliberately set up by an anti-life creature, the static fire functions as a mirror of the vengeful self of Miss Havisham.

On Pip’s first visit to Satis House he is introduced into Miss Havisham’s bedroom, where, instead of a fire, a looking-glass plays the prominent role:

No glimpse of daylight was to be seen in it. But prominent in it was a draped table with a *gilded* looking-glass, and that I made out at first sight to be a *fine lady’s* dressing-table. (p. 87, my italics)

For Pip, Satis House, which he sees and describes accurately but which he can’t understand or assess, is a fascinating world of strange refinement and beauty.

Before she spoke again, she turned her eyes from me, and looked at the dress she wore, and at the dressing-table, and finally *at herself in the looking-glass*.

“So new to him” she muttered “so old to me; so strange to him, so familiar to me; so melancholy to both of us! Call Estella.”

As she was still *looking at the reflection of herself*, I thought she was still speaking to herself and kept quiet. (p. 89, my italics).

Miss Havisham is self-centred; she only speaks to herself, and the cold, pitiless, looking-glass can't but reflect the decay of the room and Miss Havisham's dried-up outer self, just as the static fire reflects her lifeless though vengeful inner self.

When she asks Pip to sing, the forge song "Old Clem," celebrating at once the power of fire and the patron saint of the blacksmiths, comes to Pip's lips as an expression of his forge self; but when Miss Havisham, taking a fancy to it, no doubt as a kindler of the fire of revenge, sang it, "the whole strain was so subdued, even when there were the three of us, that it made less noise in the grim old house than the lightest breath of wind" (p. 124). As a place with no fire, a place devoted to revenge and death, Satis House and Miss Havisham are not only alien to the forge values but ready to distort and pervert them. The alchemy of the forge and kitchen fires is altogether absent, and the fire-mirror of the soul is replaced by another mirror image, that of the looking-glass. The protective warmth of the one is replaced by the self-centredness, revenge and death of the other and by the cold, distant light of a star, Estella.

In the dark world of Satis House Estella is a beautiful light that attracts Pip's attention and love, that gives an object to his adolescent need to idealize, and on which he focuses his adolescent yearning for beauty and purity. But as she has been brought up to be heartless she is a cruel light in Pip's enlarged world and newly-discovered sky, and to the reader⁶ she stands for the deceptive appearances of the world of social accomplishments which Pip is out to discover and finally assess. She gives no warmth or light and in this resembles the stars which Pip, significantly, sees gradually appearing in the sky as, bound for new horizons, he parts from Joe for the first time: "I could at first see no stars from the chaise-cart. But they twinkled out one by one,

without throwing any light on the questions why on earth I was going to play at Miss Havisham's" (p. 83).

The yard and garden of Satis House create the same impression of self-enclosure, inactivity, and waste. The house is sunless, the hearth fireless, and Estella is in the process of becoming a beautiful body emptied of its heart. The brewery that was the source of life and prosperity is now a ruin, and its decay is clearly related to its inactivity. Pip sees Estella "pass along the *extinguished fires* and ascend some iron stairs and go out by a gallery *high overhead* as if she were going out into the *sky*" (p. 93, my italics). The only life at Satis House is Estella moving about the dead place, but she ascends iron stairs until she becomes a fascinating inaccessible star in Pip's eyes. She becomes the point by which he takes his bearings in life, yet will tantalisingly twinkle in and out of his life till the moment (in the Third Stage) when the burning torture of her unhappy marriage will melt her iron, heartless self, and Pip's loving investigation of her parentage and discovery of himself will unhook her from his sky, the two separate processes bringing her down to earth as a possible companion to the chastened Pip.

In the First Stage, the action oscillates between the marshes and the forge, then between the forge and Satis House. The marshes are the naturally fireless, primeval wilderness on which Pip witnesses the ruthless fight between Magwitch and Compeyson, but on which both Pip the child and Magwitch the convict reveal their innate capacity for good, a capacity which in both cases is repressed by society's pitiless and rigid code: Magwitch is manacled by the soldiers, and Pip's conscience, impressed by the moral clichés used against him, is made uneasy, so that in the first stage of his development he is not sure what "the universal struggle" is: it may be that of society against the convicts, regardless both of their potential good and of the conditions of life that

were bound to turn them into criminals; or it may be an inner struggle to discipline oneself to forgiving rather than condemning (although Pip sees that Joe's disposition is innately forgiving). The simple, unsophisticated forge stands in contrast to Satis House, the mysteriously dark and lifeless place that is alien to the forge values of work and heart, but whose beauty, social accomplishments, money and education attract Pip, kindle his adolescent propensity to suffer for the girl he loves and seem to offer him a more sophisticated way of life and an opportunity to rise in the world. Though Pip's aspirations, embodied in Estella, lead him astray, they are also the dynamics of growth.

There are not many fire images or situations in the Second Stage of the novel. Indeed, Pip has grown into a self-centred snob. Deluded by his great expectations, leading an idle and expensive life based on social refinement, appearances and the rejection of the forge values of work and sympathy for the underdog, he is ashamed of his past at the forge and of his connection with a convict. He is ashamed of Joe, afraid of Bidley's logical mind, and eases his conscience by turning the blame on them.

In London Pip shares Herbert's flat but the fireplace is rarely mentioned for their interests take them away from what the fire signifies. Herbert is "looking around for capital." Pip is concerned with becoming a gentleman thanks to money he hasn't earned and whose origin he does not know, with serving "his lady" Estella, and idly waiting for his benefactor to reveal "herself." Yet it is with their feet on the fender and Herbert repeatedly gazing at the fire that they discuss their loves, Estella and Clara, and Herbert kindly but vainly tries to make Pip understand that Estella is not meant for him. This scene round the fire brings out, if not Pip's redeeming features, at least those that keep us interested in him — his love for Estella in spite of the sufferings it entails and his sincere

affection for Herbert, whom he nonetheless leads into idle and expensive habits. It is round the fire that Pip's better self is allowed to break through; though this is not presented dramatically, the older Pip — whose role as narrator is more important here than in the other parts — tells us that

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 at home. (p. 291-2)

Yet it is when Pip is crushed under the weight of his bad conscience about Joe and Bidly and the pains inflicted on him by Estella that he wishes for the simple life of the forge. These longings are a kind of retreat, and though in his fire meditations he becomes temporarily aware of the pure values of the forge fires and that he has sinned against those values, he is unable to practice them in his present life. Joe's visit to London and Pip's visit to the forge for his sister's funeral are fiascoes, and he is still unsympathetic towards the convicts he meets. Urged by his blind love for Estella, idly relying on appearances and social graces, he most of the time "disguise[s] from [his] recognition" (p. 291) the bad effects of his great expectations, which accounts for the scarcity of fire situations in Pip's London life.

The numerous fire situations in the Second Stage are centred on Wemmick's home at Walworth. All the fire paraphernalia are present : the Aged Parent is comfortably seated by the hearth, looked after by a loving son, the kettle is on the hob, toast and sausages are being prepared. Here Pip is warmly welcomed, advised and helped, and Miss Skiffins finally finds her place as Wemmick's devoted bride. But Wemmick, the architect of this world — a projection, in a fantastic and comic mode, of the private life — has another self, a public one that is linked to his work in London and to the acquisition of "portable property". Each exists in its own world: Wemmick raises the drawbridge once he enters his private fortress. The fire here is neither a stimulus to meditation nor a mirror of the soul, for Wal-

worth stands for one aspect of life only, which excludes any possibility of fruitful tension or integration of the two selves. Wemmick's divided self testifies to the impossibility of reconciling the demands of the private and the public selves, and thereby throws light on Pip's difficulty.

Jaggers also exemplifies this difficulty. He is often seen at work in Little Britain. His success as a lawyer rests on his distant and unemotional attitude to clients and judges alike, and on his complete reliance on facts and evidence, which, if necessary, he manipulates behind the scenes. Emotions must not and do not interfere; they play no part in his life, which is completely devoted to his work. His home, indeed, resembles his office, as if he had no private haunt at all. He is seen standing on the hearth rug at home and taking "a searching look" at Pip's friends as if they were interesting criminals (p. 234). There must be a fire in the room, but it is not mentioned, and, just as he does in his office (p. 305), Jaggers always stands before the fire, blotting out its light and warmth, a stance in keeping with his icy search for factual evidence. This does not of itself mean that Jaggers is completely alien to the world of emotions; we have hardly any means of knowing his feelings nor are we intended to know them. Jaggers works by the crude light of facts, not that of the heart, and this is presented as a necessity in the world of criminals in which he lives.

Satis House and Estella remain the centres of Pip's hopes and delusion. When Estella comes back from the Continent as an accomplished lady, Satis House still strikes Pip as a place of "cold hearths" but one which, in spite of Estella's warnings that she has no heart, he sees himself as pledged "to set a-blazing" again (p. 253). Towards the end of the Second Stage, just before Magwitch's return, Pip witnesses a scene which brings Miss Havisham's expectations to an end and which, again, fails to enlighten him as to the validity of his own expectations. The cold, reluctant Satis House fire of the first part is now deceptively "flickering" in Miss Havisham's dark room and Pip notices the anti-life fire

burning in her "wan bright eyes" (p. 321) as she prides herself on "the beautiful creature she has reared" (p. 320) and as she rejoices at the revenge on men she has brought about. Yet Estella, cold-bloodedly looking into the fire and without any compassion for her foster mother, shows her that she has no heart to love her in return for her "burning" yet destructive love.

In the Second Stage of the novel the fire images and situations are significantly not predominant. Pip is dazzled and deluded by his great expectations. Refusing to consider Herbert's and Estella's warnings and blind to any facts that might undermine his idle hopes, Pip sinks morally in the process of his social advancement as a "gentleman" of leisure. Yet the fire situations in Wemmick's and in Jaggers' lives throw some light on the difficulty there is in finding a true balance between private and public values, between the demands of the heart and those of society.

In the Third Stage the nature and function of the fire situations become more subtle : fire tends to leave the fireplace and becomes a testing force — the fire of experience, of awareness and of commitment to life that leaves its imprints on the individual.

Of course we still find the fires of warm, unsophisticated generosity, duly imaged in Magwitch, Wemmick and Clara. When Magwitch, a huge lump of violent heart, capable of endless gratitude to Pip as well as of intense hatred for Compeyson, comes to Pip's lodgings, he immediately takes possession of the fire and of his gentleman : "He sat down on a chair that stood before the fire" (p. 333); a little later, he "took a live coal from the fire, . . . lighted his pipe," and with his knife ready to hand "turned round on the hearth-rug with his back to the fire and went through his favourite action of holding out both his hands for mine" (p. 346). It is while sitting by the fire that Magwitch tells the story of his life to Pip and Herbert (p. 360). It is before Wemmick's fire at Walworth that Wemmick tells Pip about the arrangements he has made with Herbert concerning Magwitch's

security, and it is here that Pip, warned not to go home, falls asleep, and at night leaves the Aged Parent "preparing the fire for toast" (p. 386). Similarly, it is before Clara's fire that Pip and Herbert ask Magwitch whether he trusts Wemmick (p. 391). These fires are, on the whole, no longer meditation fires or mirrors of the soul's debates, but rather centres for plans of action inspired by generous feelings. They reflect the emotions of fairly static characters, but in the Third Stage of the novel fire also is related to Pip's development.

Over twenty-one now, Pip has not yet taken his life into his own hands. Yet, at the end of the Second Stage, aware of the bad effects his expectations have on him and on Herbert, he has taken some steps to help Herbert financially. With Magwitch's return the bottom falls out of Pip's world and he is plunged into darkness : Estella is not for him, Miss Havisham is not his benefactor, he is deep in debt and has a criminal on his hearth. From this point on the fire will no longer be associated with anything innate but will suggest Pip's maturation and mark the building up of his new awareness. Pip's generosity and fellow-feeling will be re-established through the shock of Magwitch's return, and his moral values will be assessed in the fire of experience.

Significantly, Pip is alone when Magwitch comes back to him, and the fire he lights while Magwitch is asleep in the next room burns "with a pale flare" (p. 344) in the early morning of his new awareness. At this early stage Pip's pushing-match with Drummle in front of the Blue Boar fire reveals that Pip is still self-centred — Drummle standing in front of the fire "became an injury to me" (p. 369). The contest can be compared with Pip's former altercation with Drummle at the Finches' Grove, when he reacted rashly as an offended gentleman on the assumption that Estella, being promised to him, could not be acquainted with Drummle. Now he knows that Estella is not his, that Drummle is courting her yet his impulsive reaction — "I felt inclined to take [Drummle] in my arms . . . and set

him on the fire" (p. 370) — is still vain and immature. The scene is frankly comic, with the two scuffling for a place in front of the fire and Pip "squaring his shoulders, . . . determined not to yield an inch" (p. 569) while carrying on an aggressively polite conversation. This scene dramatically presents Pip's self-delusion, for in the reader's eye his rejection of Magwitch does not make him much worthier than Drummle to stand before the fire. Indeed, though the quarrel is actually about Estella, Magwitch's story is still in the reader's mind, and if Drummle — rightly spotted by Jaggers' expert eye as "one of the true sort" — is a potential Compeyson and stands for evil under the cover of gentility, Pip is associated with goodness corrupted by money and a gentlemanly concern for appearance. Dickens emphasizes the vanity of their preoccupations and behaviour by having them retreat when "three thriving farmers came into the coffee room unbuttoning their great-coats and rubbing their hands . . . as they charged at the fire" (p. 371).

At Satis House Pip sits in Miss Havisham's chair. Now that his expectations are ruined he resembles her in her state of arrested life; yet unlike her he does not resort to revenge. He speaks his mind out clearly, faces the stark reality of his having been manipulated by Satis House and, not hiding his present misery, he thinks of others : he asks Miss Havisham to help Herbert and his family, begs Estella for her own sake not to marry Drummle, and through the open-hearted conversation he has with Estella provokes in Miss Havisham "a ghastly stare of pity and remorse" (p. 378). Pip's wish to help Herbert and his forgiving and blessing Estella mark the beginning of his development away from self-centredness but only the first stage in his rise to maturity. His progress is marked by the gradual changes in his attitude to Magwitch. At first he evades the problem altogether and wants to "enlist for India as a private soldier" (p. 353), then he helps Magwitch because he does not want to be responsible for his death. But the

better he knows Magwitch the more sensitive he becomes to the convict's boundless gratitude, and he now acknowledges his own unworthiness and ingratitude to Joe, so that gradually he is emotionally involved with Magwitch. Yet, while facing his responsibilities towards Magwitch, he also takes the further moral initiative of refusing Magwitch's money though he is pressed by creditors. This gradual process, involving the conquest of a natural revulsion — shared by Herbert — from Magwitch's coarseness, violence and "crimes" is combined with an approach to life based on a due concern for facts but guided by intuition or tempered by a warm unselfish heart. Indeed, while Pip's heart warms to Magwitch's unsophisticated goodness and makes plans for his escape, Pip, determined to know the truth about Estella's parents, unswervingly tries to trace her parentage and finally discovers what Jaggers, concerned exclusively with facts and evidence, had failed to unearth — that Magwitch is Estella's father. In a word, Pip goes beyond deceptive appearances, whether repulsive or attractive, and, like Herbert when nursing Pip's burnt arms, will prefer firelight to daylight (p. 416) when he comes to consider and assess the result of his investigation.

Two important scenes in the Third Stage allow us to measure Pip's progress : his rescue of Miss Havisham and his confrontation with Orlick on the marshes.

When summoned to Satis House to discuss Miss Havisham's help to Herbert, Pip is moved to compassion when he sees her alone, "sitting on the hearth in a ragged chair, close before, and lost in the contemplation of the ashy fire" (p. 407). Robbed both of her instrument of revenge, since Estella is now married, and even of her very wish to revenge, since the last meeting of Pip and Estella has made her realize the harm she has done, Miss Havisham contemplates the ashy fire of her life. She then prostrates herself at Pip's feet or bewails the harm she has done to him and to Estella. Pip absolves her of her guilt about him but suggests that to undo "any scrap of what you have done

amiss in keeping a part of [Estella's] right nature away from her . . . will be better . . . than to bemoan the past through a hundred years" (p. 411). Pip advocates action rather than vain penitence and remorse. In fact, by asking Miss Havisham to help Herbert Pip offers her a means to achieve a limited redemption, for, with no life left in her now that the fire of revenge is out, only her money can be used to serve others. No wonder then that, when Pip comes back to her room in the grip of a revived childhood impression that Miss Havisham means death, he should find her turned into a blazing torch of fire. Is this suicide, punishment, or, more simply, the natural primitive fire of life feeding on its sapless dried up plants? At any rate, the intuition of the child becomes, under the pressure of experience, the awareness of the man. What is important now is that Pip commits himself to action, to a fight against death and destruction, showing his capacity to suffer for others. Just as he used Miss Havisham's vain remorse to help Herbert, he now drags the old useless table-cloth, disturbing the rot and dirt and death, to wrap Miss Havisham and extinguish the fire. It is also significant that after the struggle Pip "held her . . . as if I unreasonably fancied . . . that if I let her go, the fire would break out again and consume her" (p. 414). Miss Havisham is death, no longer as a perverted, death-giving force but as the inevitable and natural result on the death-giver.

This scene may be viewed as a test of Pip's determination to commit himself to life and to action. Here, against a natural, pitiless law of life, just as later, in his attempt to save Magwitch, he opposes himself to the pitiless law of human justice. This scene is also a test of his capacity to suffer for others : Pip's arms are burnt, and they are kindly nursed by Herbert, who "changed the bandages more by the light of the fire than the outer light" (pp. 416, 419).

During his confrontation with Orlick on the marshes Pip seems to be sentenced to death by fire. With his wounded arms caught in a running noose, he experiences the burning

tortures of hell, soon succeeded by the acute and horrifying vision of his past errors and the agony of having to leave the world without making reparation for them. His brush with death is the opportunity for him not to lament over his past errors as Miss Havisham did, but to be acutely aware of them and of what is to be done to amend them. At this stage Pip is no longer a self-centred snob, for though he is worried about what people will think about him it is no longer public opinion he minds now, but the opinion of those whom experience has taught him to place first in his new hierarchy of values and who are the living images of the virtues he has trespassed against. It is significant on the one hand that it is the awareness of his mistakes and the presence in his heart of the people and the virtues he has sinned against that make him face Orlick's threat with dignity and courage, and, on the other hand, that he is rescued by Herbert, Startop and Trabb's boy, the very representatives of the virtues he has now learned to value most. Now sure of, and made strong by, his newly-assessed moral bearings, he is ready to fight and kill the evil Orlick — "even in dying I would have done it" (p. 437). Yet awareness of his unworthiness and of man's proneness to err have made him humble, and the seriousness of his situation in Orlick's hands urges him, for the first time in the novel, to "beseech pardon . . . of Heaven" (p. 437), to which, when the danger is over, he duly addresses his thanks (p. 441). This reference to God very late in the novel is not gratuitous but in accord with Pip's development. The notion of God comes to top Pip's scale of human virtues, thereby expressing his humility, and to give the victims of human error their last and definite chance. This clearly appears in the trial scene : after thirty-two men and women have been set before the judge and sentenced to death together, Pip, seeing the sun striking in through the glittering drops of rain upon the windows of the court, realizes that "it made a broad shaft of light between the two-and-thirty and the Judge, linking both together, and perhaps reminding some

among the audience, how both were passing on, with absolute equality, to the greater Judgment that knoweth all things and cannot err" (p. 467).

The form of Pip's confrontation with Orlick makes it appear to us as a caricature of human justice. Pip is accused and condemned by Orlick, just as Magwitch was, on evidence based on appearances (the leg iron). Orlick calls Pip a criminal for a crime he himself has committed. He repeatedly addresses Pip as "wolf" (pp. 435, 36, 37) just as Pip was called animal names by Mrs. Joe and Pumblechook, just as the convicts on the marshes were called "beasts" by the soldiers, and the "black hulk lying out a little way from the mud of the shore" appeared as a "wicked Noah's ark" (p. 71) to young Pip's heightened imagination. In fact it is Orlick, with his "hot breath" and his "mouth snarling like a tiger's" (p. 436) always growling close to Pip's face, who is the revengeful beast. The evidence leading to the death sentence Orlick pronounces on Pip is as deceptive as that on which Magwitch was sentenced to fourteen years' imprisonment while the really guilty one, Compeyson, got away with seven years.

Fire in the hands of Orlick is an instrument of destruction, of revenge. For Pip the threat of death by fire projects on his inward eye the vision of his errors and of what needs to be done to make amends for them. His moral agony is an incentive to the clear focusing of his new moral awareness, which is not to be confused with his redemption.

Pip's progress in the world has taken him through errors and delusion, but he finally sees through the misleading appearance of social accomplishment and the deceptive satisfaction of self-centred idleness. Awareness of the moral "crimes" of the "social" gentleman and commitment to life have taken him down to the hell of moral and physical sufferings. Pip's redemption, however, is achieved not when he confesses his errors and forgives others for theirs, but when he acts in accordance with his

new moral awareness : not when, during the episode of Magwitch's escape, Pip and his friends necessarily act in the dark, but when he acts in the open, as when, during and after the trial scene, he stands by the accused Orlick and condemned Magwitch to the very last, regardless of public opinion and of the people "pointing at him," and holds his hand.

In the light of his burning awareness and experience of evil in the world, in man, and in himself, Pip cannot go back to the primary values of the forge and kitchen fires. He has outgrown that stage, and, taking his life into his own hands, guided by both a desire for truth and a sympathetic approach to others, he can now set his chastened self to work — not exploiting people but making just enough money to lead a frugally comfortable life, this being the synthesis produced in and by the forge-fire of experience.

The kinds of fires I have discussed are indeed clichés : the fires of generosity, love, work, suffering, and experience, versus the destructive fires of evil, revenge, death or a pitiless law. But what seems more important is how Dickens has used these various fires to chart the development of a child to manhood, and to show the forging of a conscience in the fires of experience.

NOTES

¹B. F. Fisher and J. Turrow, "Dickens and Fire Imagery," *Revue des Langues Vivantes*, 40 (1974), 359-7. See especially p. 365.

²All references are to the Penguin English Library edition.

³Magwitch, moved by Pip's generosity and sympathy — he has brought unasked-for brandy and has warmed his heart with "I hope you enjoy it" (p. 50) — will work hard to pay him back and enable him to be a "gentleman."

⁴She is never seen looking at the fire. When she is violently struck by Orlick she is "facing the fire" and her position defines not her attitude to the fire but the treachery of Orlick's assault.

⁵A principle openly violated by Pumblechook, the hypocrite and usurper: when Pip and Joe come back from Satis House with the money, he "nodded at Mrs. Joe and at the fire, as if he had known about it beforehand."

⁶For the reader she is also associated with the light of a candle (p. 86) when she moves along the dark corridors and staircases, a candle that she takes away with her, leaving Pip in the dark.