Thematic Functions of Fire in *Wuthering Heights*

Graeme Tytler

One aspect of *Wuthering Heights* that deserves critical attention is the role and function of fire throughout the narrative. Prominent among references to this element are those underlining the utility of fires, fireplaces and their appurtenances in northern domestic life all the year round. But as well as sustaining the realism of Emily’s novel, some such references can be seen to be symbolically integral both to the presentation of Heathcliff and Catherine as individuals and to their problematic love story. Noteworthy, too, are some of the ways in which fireplaces play their part in the characterization of Hindley, Frances, Isabella and Linton Heathcliff. But though a reference to fire, including candlelight, tends to have a negative connotation, the author remains none the less mindful of the fireplace or hearth as a source of well-being, and nowhere more delightfully than through her delineation of the relationship between Cathy and Hareton.

**KEYWORDS** Emily Brontë, burning, candle, candlelight, fire, fireplace, hearth, psychological, realism, symbolism, thematic, *Wuthering Heights*

Conspicuous among Lockwood’s observations on Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange are his references to fires and fireplaces, some of these references indicating no little familiarity on his part with northern domestic life.¹ Thus, having already noticed ‘the huge fireplace’ in ‘the house’ on his first visit to the Heights, he finds on his second visit there the following afternoon that that same room ‘glowed delightfully in the radiance of an immense fire compounded of coal, peat and wood’ (*WH*, p. 7).² Lockwood’s knowledge of the very fuel being burnt in that fire is later matched by the following documentary detail he gives on his final visit to the Heights in September 1802, amid very warm weather: ‘Both doors and lattices were open; and yet, *as is usually the case in a coal district*, a fine, red fire illumined the chimney; the comfort which the eye derives from it, renders the extra heat endurable’ (*WH*, p. 273; italics mine). But if Lockwood’s interest in fires and fireplaces is partly aesthetic, his concern with them is, understandably enough, mainly due to his strong need for physical comfort, especially during cold weather.³ For example, it is because the afternoon of the day after his first visit to Heights ‘set in misty and cold’ that he has...
THEMATIC FUNCTIONS OF FIRE IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS

‘half a mind to spend it by [his] study fire, instead of wading through heath and mud to Wuthering Heights’ (WH, p. 6); and it is only on finding a servant-girl putting out his study fire that Lockwood determines on the latter course of action. Other instances of Lockwood’s attachment to fires may be noted on the morning after his night in the oak-panelled room: his enticing a ‘little flame’ to ‘play between the ribs’ (WH, p. 24) of the back-kitchen hearth so that he may doze on a bench nearby; his watching Zillah ‘urging flakes of flame up the chimney with a colossal bellows’ (WH, p. 25) in ‘the house’; and his remarking on the ‘cheerful fire’ (WH, p. 27) in his study at the Grange on arriving there after his laborious walk through the snow. It is also interesting to note that, on his return to Gimmerton in September 1802, Lockwood not only makes a point of telling the old woman looking after the Grange that all that is ‘necessary’ for his accommodation are ‘good fires and dry sheets’, but also mentions her bungling work at ‘the grates’ and even her ‘skurrying away with a pan of hot cinders’ (WH, p. 272). Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that Lockwood hears the first part of Nelly’s narrative (from Chapter 4 to Chapter 9) while enduring the onset of a bad cold by his study fire.

Constituting as they do part of the realism of the novel, Lockwood’s references to fires and fireplaces are more or less linked with similar references made both by Nelly Dean and by some of the other characters in their respective narratives. Thus as well as being apprised of the presence of a fireplace in a kitchen, a back-kitchen, a living-room, a drawing-room, a parlour, a library, a bedroom, whether at the Heights or at the Grange, we are now and again informed of the nature or state of a fuel or of a relevant adjunct or appurtenance — coal-hole, coal-scuttle, coal, cinders, ashes, embers, ribs, grates, shovel, poker, hearth, hearthstone, hearthbrush, hob, fender, oven, chimney, chimneypiece, chimney stack, chimney corner, and so on. We are also made aware that, whatever the function of fires, whether for heating or cooking, or even for providing light, their setting or extinguishing is almost entirely the responsibility of servants. Noteworthy, too, as an aspect of realism is the presence of a fireplace as a background to those at leisure, as is touchingly illustrated by Nelly’s remarking on the fact that, during Mr Earnshaw’s mastership of the Heights, he and his family would spend their evenings together with the servants round the fireplace in ‘the house’. In this connection, mention should also be made of the inordinate importance of fireplaces and hearths in Joseph’s everyday life, more especially when he is not working. Also illustrative of realism are episodes in which characters are described seeking or being taken to a fireplace for relief from the cold they have been exposed to out of doors. Thus Nelly relates that, having arrived at the Heights after church on Christmas morning, Catherine ‘took a hand of each of the [Linton] children, and brought them into the house and set them before the fire, which quickly put colour into their white faces’ (WH, p. 51). Such a quest for a fireplace is as normal as when, having entered the Heights kitchen after walking all the way with Nelly from the Grange in very wet and frosty weather, Cathy ‘ran to the hearth to warm herself’ (WH, p. 208).

But whereas Cathy is here described going to a fireplace as she is in other contexts simply in order to recover her bodily heat, it is noteworthy how often a fireplace is resorted to in the novel for psychological reasons rather than for mere physical comfort. We see this, for example, in Hareton during the period of tension and hostility...
between himself and Cathy consequent upon his burning of the books. It is no doubt natural that after a long day of hard manual work Hareton should spend some of his evenings by the kitchen fire and, like Joseph, even smoke a pipe. Certainly that same hearth seems a suitable place for him to convalesce by after having accidentally wounded himself with his gun. For Cathy, on the other hand, anxious as she is, despite her constant teasing of Hareton at this time, to re-establish her friendship with him, it is puzzling ‘how he could sit a whole evening staring into the fire, and dozing’ (WH, p. 276). Even on the Easter Monday, shortly before he will be reconciled with Cathy, Hareton’s uncomfortable state of mind is still evident from Nelly’s significantly remarking that he ‘sat, morose as usual, at the chimney corner’ (WH, p. 277). And yet Hareton’s sitting by fires and staring into them, as recounted by Nelly in Chapter 32, marks but a brief unhappy phase in his otherwise contented way of life and is certainly not to be compared to, say, Linton Heathcliff’s inveterate habit of hugging fireplaces. That Linton’s dependency on fires seems to compensate him for the lack of love he thinks he suffers from is amply suggested by Heathcliff’s unnamed housekeeper’s following complaint about his selfish demands at the Heights: ‘And he must have a fire in the middle of summer; […] there he’ll sit, wrapped in his furred cloak in his chair by the fire’ (WH, p. 186). It is, moreover, through his chronic attachment to fireplaces that Linton Heathcliff proves to be temperamentally the very antithesis of Cathy. Indeed, when asked by Linton, at their first reunion, whether, instead of being shown the garden and the stable, she would not prefer to keep him company by the fire, Cathy’s response is to cast ‘a longing look to the door’ (WH, p. 192). In view of what we already know about Linton, we are not surprised to learn that he ‘kept his seat, and shrank closer to the fire’ (WH, p. 192). The fact that Cathy’s encounters with Linton at the Heights, both pleasant and unpleasant, occur for the most part at a hearth or on a hearthstone is ironically corroborated by her when, at their first official reunion on the heath, she rebukes him thus for his eccentric behaviour towards her: ‘Get off! I shall return home — it is folly dragging you from the hearth-stone, and pretending — what do we pretend?’ (WH, p. 235; italics mine).6

Linton Heathcliff’s self-indulgent attitude to fireplaces seems scarcely different in kind from that which Hindley and Frances Earnshaw have evinced in earlier episodes of the novel. No doubt their fondness for fires in part derives from the fact that, on her arrival at the Heights for the first time, Frances ‘expressed such pleasure at the white floor, and huge glowing fire-place’ (WH, p. 39). Not to be wondered at, therefore, especially in view of the couple’s exclusive devotion to each other, is Catherine’s mentioning in her diary that, during Joseph’s three-hour religious service, which she and Heathcliff had to endure in a cold garret one Sunday, ‘Hindley and his wife basked down stairs before a comfortable fire’ (WH, p. 16). Indeed, Heathcliff’s own awareness of this incongruity serves as the reason he gives Nelly for the illicit visit that he and Catherine have paid to the Grange later that day: ‘[…] we thought we would just go and see whether the Lintons passed their Sunday evenings standing shivering in corners, while their father and mother sat eating and drinking, and singing and laughing, and burning their eyes out before the fire’ (WH, p. 41; italics mine). Interesting, too, for signalling Hindley’s mental and moral decline after Frances’s death are accounts of his presence at fireplaces. For example, on the morning after
the storm described in Chapter 9, Nelly notes that Hindley ‘had come out, and stood on the kitchen hearth, haggard and drowsy’ (*WH*, p. 76) — a detail that aptly evokes the pathos of a man only dimly aware of what is going on in the household of which he is master. A similar pathos is to be felt in Isabella’s observation of Hindley’s eccentric demeanour relative to fireplaces during her short-lived sojourn at the Heights as Heathcliff’s bride. For example, in the immediate wake of his fight with Heathcliff, Isabella observes that, instead of acting on the latter’s advice to go to bed, Hindley merely ‘stretched himself on the hearthstone’ (*WH*, p. 158), such a posture being almost caricatural of much the same need for the psychological comfort of a fireplace we have noted in Linton Heathcliff. Not surprising, therefore, is the fact that on the following morning Isabella finds Hindley ‘sitting by the fire, deadly sick’ (*WH*, p. 158). Another instance of Hindley’s dependency on fireplaces, brought about this time, ironically enough, by his misguided resolve to remain sober for Catherine’s funeral, has been exemplified a day or two earlier in Isabella’s following account: ‘Consequently, he rose, in suicidal low spirits, as fit for the church as for a dance; and instead, be sat down by the fire, and swallowed gin or brandy by tumblerfuls’ (*WH*, p. 153; italics mine). Still, it should be said to Hindley’s credit that it is at a fireplace that he appears to have saved Isabella from possible death at the hands of Heathcliff in pursuit of her. As she says to Nelly Dean: ‘The last glimpse I caught of [Heathcliff] was a furious rush on his part, checked by the embrace of his host; and both fell locked together on the hearth’ (*WH*, p. 161).

The fact that Isabella manages to escape from her unhappy marriage and lead a life of her own in London for some twelve years afterwards might seem unimaginable during her early presentation as a highly strung young woman. And yet in spite of her restricted circumstances and the indifference or hostility of her fellow residents, Isabella shows a strong spirit of independence while living at the Heights. For example, having told Nelly in her letter that, after a futile search with Joseph for a bedroom on the night of her arrival there, she was eventually assured by the latter that she could have ‘the house’ all to herself, Isabella continues: ‘Gladly did I take advantage of this intimation; and the minute I flung myself into a chair, by the fire, I nodded, and slept’ (*WH*, p. 128; italics mine). (This is, ironically enough, precisely what Lockwood himself would also have gladly done had Heathcliff not forbidden it.) Isabella’s reference here exemplifies one of her very practical uses of fireplaces. Indeed, the fireplace proves to be an ideal setting for Isabella, given her lonely and loveless existence in her new home. As she says to Nelly: ‘When Heathcliff is in, I’m often obliged to seek the kitchen, and [Joseph’s and Hareton’s] society, or starve among the damp, uninhabited chambers; when he is not, as was the case this week, I establish a table and chair at one corner of the house fire’ (*WH*, p. 154; italics mine). The idea of the fireplace as Isabella’s habitual setting in the Heights is soon afterwards confirmed when, having warned Heathcliff not to enter the building on account of Hindley’s threat to kill him, she recalls this detail: ‘With that I shut the window, and returned to my place by the fire’ (*WH*, p. 156; italics mine). Again, noticing Heathcliff and Hindley by the fireplace in ‘the house’ on the morning after their fight, and finding that, of all three of them, she is to dine alone, at the same time as, casting ‘a look towards [her] silent companions’, she both ‘experienced a
certain sense of satisfaction and superiority’ and ‘felt the comfort of a quiet conscience within [her]’, Isabella goes on to say: ‘After I had done, I ventured on the unusual liberty of drawing near the fire, going round Earnshaw’s seat, and kneeling in the corner beside him’ (WH, p. 158; italics mine). Moreover, it is on the strength of that mood of almost overweening self-sufficiency that, while looking up from the fireplace at Heathcliff, who is himself, significantly, ‘leant against the chimney’ (WH, p. 158), Isabella will become bold enough to taunt and humiliate him both for his physical violence towards Hindley the day before and for his probable maltreatment of Catherine had she been his wife, thereby provoking him into a near-fatal pursuit of her that will end their relationship once and for all.

What we have seen in the foregoing, then, is that fires and fireplaces are practically indispensable in the everyday life of the two northern households portrayed, and that irrespective of times of the year or even weather conditions. The realism of such references is further pronounced by the different ways in which some of the characters disclose their psychology, their moral disposition or their personal circumstances through their relationship with fires and fireplaces. And yet it would appear that a good many such references are also invested with an essentially symbolic or thematic function. This is eminently true of references that are made to Heathcliff’s movements towards, his postures at, or his gazing into, fires and fireplaces. For example, on his first visit to the Heights, Lockwood relates that he ‘took a seat at the end of the hearthstone opposite that towards which [his] landlord advanced’ (WH, p. 4). This detail in some sense foreshadows the idea of fireplaces as normal settings for social intercourse in the novel. Yet there is a grimness about the word ‘advanced’ here, suggestive as it is of the psychological tension Heathcliff has usually manifested in earlier contexts when moving towards, sitting at, or even standing on a hearth. Thus we note that it is while seated in front of the kitchen fire, after his release from the garret, that Heathcliff thinks up ways in which he hopes to wreak vengeance on Hindley. Later, when Heathcliff suspects one afternoon that Catherine has dressed up in preparation for a visit from Edgar Linton, and, since Hindley and Joseph are absent, is therefore disinclined to work any longer, Nelly observes that he ‘lounged to the fire, and sat down’ (WH, p. 60; italics mine).

Like the words just quoted, others concerning Heathcliff and fireplaces seem symbolically to mark stages in his problematic relationship with Catherine, even beyond her death. For example, after being scolded by the latter in the Grange kitchen for making advances to Isabella, Heathcliff, we are told, ‘stood on the hearth, with folded arms, brooding on his evil thoughts’ (WH, p. 100). Again, momentarily unable to look Catherine in the face at their tryst in Chapter 15, Heathcliff ‘walked to the fire-place, where he stood, silent, with his back towards us’ (WH, p. 141). Several years later, when, having come to the Grange to fetch Cathy home, Heathcliff asks Nelly to have Catherine’s portrait delivered to the Heights, it is obvious from his elliptical utterance, ‘Not because I need it, but —’, that he is by then badly suffering from visual hallucinations of Catherine. Heathcliff’s tension at this point is further underlined when he presently ‘turned abruptly to the fire’ (WH, p. 255), words that form a kind of prelude to his long account of his visit to Catherine’s grave. That the tension is by no means over at the end of his account is evident from Nelly’s following detail: ‘Mr Heathcliff paused and wiped his forehead — his hair clung to it, wet
with perspiration; *his eyes were fixed on the red embers of the fire* (WH, p. 257; italics mine). Nor is that detail unrelated to the moment when, suddenly reminded of Catherine by the resemblance borne to her separately by Cathy and Hareton, both of whom can, incidentally, be clearly seen because ‘[t]he red firelight glowed on their two bonny heads, and revealed their faces’ (WH, p. 286), Heathcliff reacts thus according to Nelly: ‘I suppose this resemblance disarmed Mr Heathcliff: he walked to the hearth in evident agitation’ (WH, p. 287).

Fewer, but no less important, are references to Catherine’s approaching or sitting at fireplaces as movements or postures somehow pertinent to her relationship with Heathcliff. We note, for example, that just before her long dialogue with Nelly about Edgar’s proposal of marriage and about the distinction she will draw between her love for Edgar and her love for Heathcliff, Catherine is described coming into the Heights kitchen thus: ‘She entered and approached the hearth’ (WH, p. 68). Such a movement is no doubt natural, given that Nelly is supposedly sitting by the fire with baby Hareton in her lap. Yet it can also be understood as symbolically prefiguring the content of the dialogue that is about to take place. Certainly Catherine’s distraught mental state is hinted at when, in reaction to Nelly’s asking her to give reasons why she loves Edgar, she complains that her interlocutor is ‘making a jest of it’ and being ‘exceedingly ill-natured’, at the same time as Nelly describes her at that moment ‘scowling, and *turning her face to the fire*’ (WH, p. 69; italics mine). It is, moreover, at the very same fireplace that, on the morning after the storm, Nelly will find Catherine still seated in damp clothes, presently noting that ‘her teeth chattered as she shrunk closer to the almost extinguished embers’ (WH, p. 77), as if the girl were seeking consolation for the loss of Heathcliff as much as she needs physical comfort. Significant, too, on the occasion of Heathcliff’s sudden arrival at the Grange, after a three-year absence from Gimmerton, is Catherine’s reaction to Edgar’s suggesting that the guest be shown to the kitchen rather than the parlour. Thus having accordingly asked Nelly with no little sardonic humour to set two separate tables in the parlour, one for Edgar and Isabella, ‘being gentry’, and the other for herself and Heathcliff, ‘being of the lower orders’, Catherine then asks Edgar: ‘Or must I have a fire lighted elsewhere?’ (WH, p. 84). Although with this snide rhetorical question Catherine implies that going to another room perforce means lighting a fire there, her words are of interest chiefly for symbolically portending the revival of her relationship with Heathcliff. And yet, even as in this context, comments made about Catherine relative to fireplaces practically all pertain to her problematic friendship with Heathcliff. One striking example may be noted when, intent on humiliating Isabella in Heathcliff’s presence for her infatuation with him, she ‘gaily’ welcomes his sudden arrival in the Grange library, at the same time as she is described by Nelly ‘pulling a chair to the fire’ (WH, p. 92). That Catherine will have doubtless rued her careless divulgence of Isabella’s talk is suggested by the virulent altercation she soon afterwards has with Heathcliff in the kitchen, at the end of which she warns him of the danger of not leaving Isabella alone. Significant, at this point, then, is Nelly’s following observation: ‘The conversation ceased — Mrs Linton sat down by the fire, flushed and gloomy’ (WH, p. 100).

It is interesting to note one particular reference to fire made at a climactic moment in Catherine’s dilemma between her two men. Thus, shortly after Edgar has ordered
Heathcliff to leave the Grange, Catherine locks the kitchen door so as to prevent the latter’s being evicted by some menservants, and then foils Edgar’s attempt to wrest the key from her grasp by flinging it ‘into the hottest part of the fire’ (WH, p. 102). Here fire as a destructive force seems as symbolically apt in this episode as Heathcliff’s presently making his timely escape by smashing the kitchen-door lock with a fireside appurtenance, namely, a poker. Appropriately symbolic, too, of problematic love, though in a quite different way, is Isabella’s own use of a poker when, in her mixed feelings about Heathcliff, she tries to destroy her wedding-ring, first by smashing it with one and then by dropping ‘the misused article among the coals’ (WH, p. 151) of the Grange parlour fireplace. But perhaps the most memorable instance of the destructiveness of fire as symbolic of problematic love or, as in this case, of frustrated love, happens when, humiliated for his illiteracy by the young woman to whom he is already attached, Hareton hurls ‘on the [house] fire’ (WH, p. 268) the books by which he has been teaching himself to read. Nor should we overlook the relevance of a like symbolism in Nelly’s burning of the love letters that Cathy has received from Linton Heathcliff.

What is, however, striking about the acts of burning referred to above is that some of them are performed by those in a frame of mind that seems more or less bordering on insanity. This is perhaps hardly surprising when we reflect that the figurative language in the novel entailing the nature and effects of fire is sometimes resorted to by one or two characters in an extreme emotional state. Consider, for example, Catherine’s utterances both just before and during her delirium, later to be diagnosed as ‘a brain fever’ (WH, p. 118). Thus, having gone up to the parlour immediately after the showdown between Heathcliff and Edgar in the Grange kitchen, and amid much rambling talk, Catherine says this to Nelly about the latter: ‘To this point he has been discreet in dreading to provoke me; you must represent the peril of quitting that policy, and remind him of my passionate temper, verging, when kindled, on frenzy —’ (WH, p. 104; italics mine). Again, after telling Nelly of her subsequent blackout and, on awakening from it, of her painful realization of her present situation in life, she suddenly says: ‘Oh, I’m burning! I wish I were out of doors —’ (WH, p. 111; italics mine). Of like interest here is Nelly’s recourse to fire in descriptions of Catherine’s delirious talk and behaviour at this time. Thus at one point Nelly says: ‘[...] our fiery Catherine was no better than a wailing child!’ (WH, p. 110; italics mine). Similarly, while vituperating Nelly for sneaking on her to Edgar about her conduct in the past several minutes, Catherine is described as follows: ‘A maniac’s fury kindled under her brows’ (WH, p. 114; italics mine). Nor without relevance here are Nelly’s references to Heathcliff’s eyes after his return to Gimmerton. For example, part of his physical appearance as depicted at the Grange on his unexpected arrival there includes these details: ‘A half-civilized ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire’ (WH, p. 84f; italics mine). Nelly also notes Heathcliff’s shocked reaction to the sight of Catherine’s facial appearance soon after he has arrived in her bedroom for the tryst in Chapter 15: ‘And now he stared at her so earnestly that I thought the very intensity of his gaze would bring tears into his eyes; but they burned with anguish, they did not melt’ (WH, p. 139; italics mine).10

That Heathcliff’s association with fire is, symbolically speaking, almost invariably negative is corroborated by references to candles and candlelight as made in contexts
THEMATIC FUNCTIONS OF FIRE IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS

involving his physical presence or bespeaking his influence on events. Consider, for instance, how in her bewilderment at Heathcliff’s sudden appearance at the Grange after his three-year absence, Nelly at first hesitates to announce his arrival to Catherine and Edgar, until, in the end, she ‘resolved on making an excuse to ask if they would have the candles lighted’ before opening the parlour door. Nelly’s quandary is momentarily worsened by the fact that she nevertheless ‘shrank reluctantly from performing [her] errand’ and that she was ‘actually going away, leaving [the announcement] unsaid, after having put [her] question about the candles’ (WH, p. 83). Again, consider the reference made to candlelight (and to fire) by Isabella one night at the Heights as an eerie portent both for Hindley’s imminent disclosure to her of his plan to kill Heathcliff and for the subsequent fight between both men: ‘There was no sound through the house but the moaning wind which shook the windows every now and then, the faint crackling of the coals, and the click of my snuffers as I removed at intervals the long wick of the candle’ (WH, p. 154; italics mine). No less interesting here is Nelly’s recalling that, having already put Linton Heathcliff to bed on the night of his arrival at the Grange, she ‘had come down, and was standing by the table in the hall, lighting a bed-room candle for Mr Edgar’ (WH, p. 178; italics mine) when a maid announces the unexpected advent of Joseph, who has been sent by Heathcliff to take the boy with him back to the Heights. Also symbolically portentous of Heathcliff’s appearance at the Grange to fetch Cathy home to the Heights is Nelly’s following detail about the moon shining into the library: ‘We had not yet lighted a candle, but all the apartment was visible, even to the portraits [of Catherine and Edgar] on the wall’ (WH, p. 253; italics mine).

More obviously symbolic, on the other hand, are references to candlelight in descriptions of Heathcliff’s personal appearance and demeanour. Take, for example, the sentence with which Nelly prefaces her detailed depiction of Heathcliff’s physicality as observed by her in the Grange parlour in Chapter 10: ‘Now fully revealed by the fire and candlelight, I was amazed, more than ever, to behold the transformation of Heathcliff’ (WH, p. 84; italics mine). Significant, too, it seems, are several references to candlelight and fire in Heathcliff’s pathetic dependency on these two sources of heat and light during the last few days of his life. Especially memorable among such references is one whereby, in timid reaction to Heathcliff’s grim facial appearance, Nelly accidentally lets the candle she has just brought in to him ‘bend towards the wall’ (WH, p. 293), thereby extinguishing it. Such a curious detail is somewhat redolent of Heathcliff’s own behaviour in Chapter 3, in so far as, having been aroused by Lockwood’s scream, he enters the oak-panelled room ‘with a candle dripping over his fingers, and his face as white as the wall behind him’ (WH, p. 21; italics mine), and is presently observed by Lockwood ‘setting the candle on a chair, because he found it impossible to hold it steady’ (WH, p. 22; italics mine). Tragically revelatory as they are of Heathcliff’s acute mental disorder, both details also have their comical counterparts in Lockwood’s own problems with candles. We see this first at the moment he discovers that the candle by which he has been able to read texts whose content will have partly determined his two nightmares has ‘roasted’ (WH, p. 15) a calf-skin book cover; and then again when, having groped his way downstairs in the dark, he reaches the back-kitchen, from whose ‘gleam of fire’ he manages to ‘rekindle
[his] candle’, which, given to him by Heathcliff, has been blown out upstairs by ‘the snow and wind’ (WH, p. 24). 11

As we have seen in the foregoing, a good many references made to fire in its various forms and manifestations have largely negative implications in Wuthering Heights, notably when they are considered from a symbolic perspective. Such an aesthetic treatment of fire is to some extent comprehensible enough when we are reminded now and again in the narrative of the hazards and dangers of fire to persons and property alike. 12 Yet as in accordance with the principle of contrast inherent in the structure of her novel, Emily also makes references to fires and fireplaces that have utterly affirmative, not to say lyrical, connotations. This is especially true of Nelly’s account of Cathy’s relationship with Hareton. We note, for instance, that after her long search for Cathy (in Chapter 18), Nelly finds her at the Heights ‘seated on the hearth’ where, with ‘her hat [...] hung against the wall’, she ‘seemed perfectly at home, laughing and chattering, in the best spirits imaginable, to Hareton, now a grand, strong lad of eighteen’ (WH, p. 170f; italics mine). And though, as we saw above, Cathy will shortly afterwards find herself in conflict with Hareton, and will remain in conflict with him for some time to come, the passage just quoted already prefigures in somewhat poetic fashion a happy ending for both of them. Noteworthy among episodes leading up to that happy ending are those in which they are observed at varying distances from each other in relation to a fireplace. Thus after having spent several days in a cold garret in the wake of Linton Heathcliff’s death, and, prompted by Heathcliff’s absence from the Heights, having now come down to ‘the house’, Cathy is invited by Hareton to ‘come to the settle, and sit close by the fire’, for he ‘was sure she was starved [frozen]’ (WH, p. 262). Instead of accepting such a thoughtful offer, however, Cathy gets ‘a chair for herself’ and places it ‘at a distance’ (WH, p. 262) from Hareton and Zillah. But though, after Nelly’s return to the Heights as Heathcliff’s housekeeper, Cathy is in a good position to maintain her detachment from Hareton through being allowed to use the parlour as a sitting-room, she soon prefers to be in the kitchen where, like Hareton himself, she finds herself disposed, even compelled, to live out her everyday life. Moreover, it is, ironically enough, the more or less forced proximity of the cousins to each other in the Heights kitchen, and not, say, the unrestricted freedom offered by natural surroundings outside, that helps to bring about their eventual reconciliation. At the same time, it is above all at the kitchen fireside where, despite Hareton’s dogged resistance to Cathy’s blandishments at first, and amid her nervous movements to and from that same hearth, that the cousins will renew their friendship, just as it is ‘upon the chimney-piece’ (WH, p. 280) that Cathy will leave the book which Hareton has unwrapped as a gift from her only a few moments earlier.

We have seen, then, some of the principal ways in which the author enhances both the realism and the symbolism in Wuthering Heights through her sundry references or allusions to fire. We have also seen that, far from being mere aspects of ‘local colour’ arbitrarily placed here and there in the text, such references practically always serve some thematic function. This is no less true when the references seem purely incidental. Thus when in Chapter 7 Nelly Dean tells of ‘making the house and kitchen cheerful with great fires befitting Christmas eve’ (WH, p. 48), or when on entering
the Heights kitchen with Cathy at the beginning of Chapter 25, she notices that Joseph 'seemed sitting in a sort of elysium alone, beside a roaring fire' (WH, p. 208), it should be obvious, if only in retrospect, that both statements are meant to have some ironic pertinence to Heathcliff’s presentation or situation at the time they are each made. Even references to something as mundane as pipe-smoking, however minor they might appear to the reader, seem to have a particular thematic significance. For example, whereas, on the one hand, pipe-smoking seems symbolically to bespeak the gloomy atmosphere of the Heights under Heathcliff’s dominance, it seems, on the other hand, to betoken a new and happier era for both households when, on his return to Gimmerton in September 1802, Lockwood observes that an old woman, presently to be identified as the person keeping house at the Grange, ‘reclined on the horse-steps, smoking a meditative pipe’ (WH, p. 272). It is this sort of detail about a seemingly casual aspect of fire which, all too easily overlooked in our concern with the famous love story, helps to make us aware of the consummate art with which, word by word, Emily Brontë constructed her masterpiece. If, however, there still remain things to be said about our chosen topic, then perhaps a start might be made with the contention that, notwithstanding popular notions about the setting of Wuthering Heights as sustained in part by reproductions of paintings or photographs of landscapes on the covers of its paperback editions, the most important phases of the action take place much less often on the Yorkshire moors than within the four walls of a fire-lit room.

Notes

1 Although some Brontë scholars have now and again remarked on Emily’s treatment of fire in Wuthering Heights, no detailed study has, to my knowledge, been published on this topic hitherto.
2 For quotations from the novel, see Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights, ed. by Ian Jack and Helen Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); hereafter WH. For the sake of convenience, the first Catherine will be referred to as ‘Catherine’, the second as ‘Cathy’.
3 See Wuthering Heights, pp. 7, 11, 30, 54.
4 See Wuthering Heights, pp. 24, 208, 221, 277, 283, 299. The importance of fires in everyday life is tellingly corroborated by Isabella’s following allusion to Hareton on her arrival at the Heights as Heathcliff’s bride: ‘By the fire stood a ruffianly child, strong in limb and dirty in garb’ (WH, p. 121).
5 This reference is ironically foreshadowed in Nelly Dean’s account of Mr Earnshaw’s physical decline, whereby she recalls that ‘when he was confined to the chimney-corner he grew grievously irritable’ (WH, p. 35). It is, incidentally, ‘by the fire-side’ that Mr Earnshaw ‘died quietly in his chair one October evening’ (WH, p. 37).
6 For other references to Linton Heathcliff’s proximity to fireplaces, see Wuthering Heights, pp. 190, 194, 212, 218, 223.
7 For other links between Isabella and fireplaces, see Wuthering Heights, p. 150f.
8 Consider, for example, the similarity borne to that sentence by the one used by Nelly in Chapter 29, just after Heathcliff has unexpectedly turned up in the Grange library to fetch Cathy back to the Heights: ‘Heathcliff advanced to the hearth’ (WH, p. 253). Of like interest here is Nelly’s recalling an earlier occasion when, having locked Cathy and herself in the Heights, Heathcliff ‘approached the fire, where my mistress and I stood silent’ (WH, p. 241).
9 This detail is somewhat foreshadowed when, on the morning after his night in the oak-panelled room, Lockwood notices, on entering ‘the house’, that Heathcliff ‘stood by the fire, his back towards me, just finishing a stormy scene to poor Zillah’ (WH, p. 25).
10 Interesting by way of contrast is the affirmatively metaphorical use of ‘sparkle’ and its cognates with respect to both Catherine and Isabella. See Wuthering Heights, pp. 40, 44, 182, 190.
11 The negative symbolism of candlelight (including lanterns) is manifest chiefly in contexts of hostility, dissipation, mental illness and even death. See Wuthering Heights, pp. 21, 37, 41, 44, 92, 109, 111, 120.
12 For references to such hazards and dangers, see Wuthering Heights, pp. 65, 67, 81, 153, 241, 274.
Notes on contributor

Graeme Tytler was born in Yorkshire, educated at St Edmund Hall, Oxford University and the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana, and taught Modern Languages, English and Latin in England and the USA. His publications include *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces & Fortunes* (Princeton University Press, 1982) and several articles on English, French and German literature. He has also co-edited a collection of essays entitled *Physiognomy in Profile: Lavater’s Impact on European Culture* (University of Delaware Press, 2005).

Correspondence to: Dr Graeme Tytler, 17 Dovehouse Close, Oxford OX2 8BG, UK. Email: sachiko@tytler.plus.com