

The image of fire english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



As a useful tool for warming, cooking, processing and so on, fire is an indispensable part in every aspect of people's life. Its importance is so obvious that since ancient times, " people considered fire one of the basic elements of the universe, along with water, air, and earth." [1] As an expressive image, fire has been favored by men of letters and used frequently in literature, which can be traced to the Prometheus myth. Prometheus tries to persuade Zeus to give man the secret of making fire to develop beyond a primitive state but is refused. Thus he gives fire to man secretly. Although he brings bliss to man who develops many skills using fire, disaster comes to himself when Zeus finds out the secret. Prometheus is seized and tortured day and night for some thirty thousand years. In people's daily life, while " fire can be a friendly, comforting thing, a source of heat and light, fire can also be dangerous and deadly, racing and leaping like a living thing to consume all in its path." [2] As an old saying goes: " Fire and water are good servant, but bad master." In religion and literature, fire appears both as a destructive, punishing force and as a creative, cleansing one, and generally speaking, positive aspects of fire outweigh negative ones. For example, " flames can bring punishment and suffering, as in the Christian image of hell as a place of fiery torment. Some myths of apocalypse also predict that the world will end in fire—but it may be a purifying, cleansing fire that will allow the birth of a fresh new world." [3] This paper will analyze both negative and positive aspects of the image of fire in literature, with *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Bleak House* as samples. One of the four great elements, fire is probably the most feared one because it can bring danger. In literature, it can represent dangerous things like passion, hatred, revenge,

destruction and so on. Like fire, passion is a double-edged sword: controlled, it can be a motive; uncontrolled, it will cause a ruin. The first time that Victor Frankenstein's monster got to know fire, he learns that while fire can warm you up, it can also hurt you. Victor's passion for knowledge of science begins after he witnesses a lightning striking a tree. " It was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribbons of wood. I never beheld anything so utterly destroyed." [4] The destruction of the tree by the lightning seems a charm of science to young Victor, thus the " stream of fire issue from the old and beautiful oak" triggers his passion for " the subject of electricity and galvanism". Since then, Victor sets foot on a road of no return. During his research, he flings all his energies into his work and the processing monster, ignoring his family, friend, and even his own health. The fire of passion consumes his heart wholly. " A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind." [5] The pursuit of knowledge is no exception to this rule. Therefore, even if Victor's cause is intentionally to be " an honorable undertaking" " for honor and the benefit of mankind" [6], it only brings disasters to other people and himself. Innocent people are killed, Victor suffers from regret, fear, and hatred as well as physical illness, even the monster is miserable with loneliness and hatred. When Prometheus steals fire for man, it means that man is trespassing on immortal territory. Victor also trespasses on immortal territory by bringing

death to life. He has no organ to be ripped violently every day like Prometheus, but he does suffer a similar form of prolonged torture. What's more, his misery begins with a fire, also ends with a fire since the monster promises that he will burn himself dead. Like passion for knowledge, passion for wealth can also be dangerous. Richard Carstone becomes passionate with the Jarndyce case like other inheritors. Everyone is obsessive with the case because it relates to a large sum of money. Although Richard is warned of the danger by others, he still keeps a keen eye on it and talks about it " in high spirits". He puts all his hope in this one basket and builds many castles in the air on no other foundation.[7]He can never set his heart on one career and stop everyone after only a while because he believes that he would become rich one day when the case is settled. Later he even stops trying careers and becomes absolutely absorbed in the case. His passion for the wealth of the case destroys his health and the happiness between him and Ada. After the case ends with nothing for him, he dies with regret, leaving his poor wife and child behind. Finally, his tears put out his passion with his life. Anger and hatred are fierce emotions burning in one's heart like fire. The monster kills Victor's beloved families and friend, so Victor hates him and spends the remaining life seeking for and killing him. " When I thought of him I gnashed my teeth, my eyes became inflamed, and I ardently wished to extinguish that life which I had so thoughtlessly bestowed. When I reflected on his crimes and malice, my hatred and revenge burst all bounds of moderation." [8]However, he does not achieve this goal, so he still feels " that burning hatred and ardent desire of revenge" in his deathbed, and " a feverish fire still glimmers in his eyes". [9]On the other hand, the monster

also hates Victor – its creator. Victor abandons it as soon as it opens its eyes and leaves it to the mercy of the outer world. He turns his cold-shoulder against it and never fulfils his obligations to it as a parent. Besides, born innocent, the creature's pure heart is corrupted by the evil of human beings. He tries to get close to humans and be friends with them, but he is repelled and beaten even if he means to help. Thus, "inflamed by pain", he "vowed eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind." [10] After Victor's death, that is the disappearance of the cause of the fire, he says: Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace. [11] He lives because of the fire of revenge, and he dies in the fire of peace. When Jane is young, she undergoes a lot of bullying and injustice. Every time when she and others are unjustly treated, her anger bursts out like a fierce fire. When she is wrongly accused, she bitterly rebukes her aunt. She describes her "hated and hating position": "A ridge of lighted heath, alive, glancing, devouring, would have been a meet emblem of my mind when I accused and menaced Mrs. Reed." [12] It is the first time that Jane has tasted "something of vengeance". When Helen is punished to wear a word "Slattern" on her forehead, Jane tears it off, and thrusts it into the fire: "the fury of which she was incapable had been burning in my soul all day, and tears, hot and large, had continually been scalding my cheek." [13] Even standing before the one she loves, she does not hide the fierce side of her character, especially the time when she declares the equality between them. She is "the soul made of fire", and her anger can erupt like a volcano. In

Christian, fire can bring punishment and suffering, as the image of hell. If one does something evil, he will go to hell after death. For example, when Jane is still a little child, she learns that wicked people would suffer forever in the lake burning with fire and brimstone. Frankenstein's creature discovers the value and danger of fire. He represents Man in his simple state, being given this great gift -- fire. Unfortunately, though he is innocent of evil, his father does not help or guide him. He tries to do others good, but is never accepted. When he is finally refused by a family he respects and loves, he sets fire on the house which once carries his only hope. " With a loud scream I fired the straw, and heath, and bushes, which I had collected. The wind fanned the fire, and the cottage was quickly enveloped by the flames, which clung to it and licked it with their forked and destroying tongues." [14] The fierce fire destroys the flammable cabin as evil destroys fragile innocence. Since then, the monster almost loses all his hope, and he falls into the abyss of crime. When evil gains the upper hand, it becomes " a bad master" like fire. Everywhere he goes, there is kill, destruction and pain. Nothing survives on his way and everything becomes ruin, including health, happiness and even life. When Esther, Ada and Richard first meet in the Chancellor's private room, Richard jokes that " the fire, which had left off roaring, winked its red eyes at us... like a drowsy old Chancery lion". [15] The Chancery court and the Jarndyce case are truly greedy lions like fire. Fire was considered a truly living thing by the ancient people. It was born, it had to be fed to live, and it leaves waste (ashes) behind. The court feeds on the wealth and happiness of the Jarndyce inheritors. People die because of the case wave upon wave. Although it has been death to many, it is only a joke in the profession. "

Innumerable children have been born into the cause; innumerable young people have married into it; innumerable old people have died out of it... the legion of bills in the suit have been transformed into mere bills of mortality." [16] As Tom Jarndyce once says "it's being roasted at a slow fire" The fire swallows everything they have and leaves nothing behind "but confusion and failure". When the case is finally settled, the whole estate is found to have been absorbed in costs. The true legal inheritors Ada and Richard get a blank check and no money. Richard's life becomes destruction and he is finally freed at the expense of death. Although fire is feared, it is also respected because it can disperse darkness and coldness. In mythology, fire can be a creative, cleansing force. Therefore, fire is often used to represent warmth, love and purifying. People need warmth not only physically but also spiritually. The monster miserably endures darkness and coldness until he finds a fire. He is "overcome with delight at the warmth" [17] and his first instinct is to get close to it. After his body warms up, he begins to seek for mental consolation. He tries to communicate with human in order to be cared. After the first failed trials, he chooses a caring family with a delightful fire to learn language. "Fire" is one of the first words that he learns. Though observing the family, he knows the importance of company and affection. He longs more for interaction with others. When he makes up his mind to act, his kindness is misunderstood and even smashed. Even after that, he still tries to get close to human to make friends irrevocably just like a moth darting into a fire. After being hurt again and again by wanting of fire of care, he gives up the thought and asks Victor to create him a company. But even this request is also refused. Not cared by

others, he kills all that his creator cares. In Jane Eyre, the warmth of fire is frequently mentioned. When she is put into the red room, she is chilled and feared because the room seldom has a fire, when she finally gets out of it, she feels relieved and comfortable with Bessie's care in the red glare of the nursery fire. As Jane feels happy and cared, she often uses beautiful words to describe fire, like "cheerful", "brilliant", "excellent", "genial", "generous" and so on. For example, when she is with Helen, Miss Temple and Mr. Rochester, the radiance of fire makes these people more charming and the interactions more harmonious. When she leaves Rochester, she spends a few days in the wild nature. No one gives her help and care until one night she totters towards a light "shining dim but constant through the rain", which is her "forlorn hope". At last, she is received by the kind Rivers. The sisters' charm and kindness gives the house more warmth along with "the redness and radiance of a glowing peat-fire".[18] Fire witnesses the development of the love between Jane and Rochester. The first time they meet formally, "the fire shone full on his face" Every time they chat in the dining-room, Jane observes him in the light of fire, and their love grows with it. Gradually, Jane finds "his presence in a room was more cheering than the brightest fire." The night when she saved him from the flaming bed, their relationship develops further. "Strange energy was in his voice, strange fire in his look." The accident is a catalysis that turns the sparkle of their love into fire. However, Jane does not confirm Rochester's love until he dresses up as an old Mother Bunches. "She stirred the fire, so that a ripple of light broke from the disturbed coal: the glare, however, as she sat, only threw her face into deeper shadow: mine, it illumined." The fire here is a metaphor of love. While

Jane exposes her feelings towards Rochester clearly, he knows nothing about his feeling. That is, while she is in the light, he is in the shadow, his love is hidden. She says, " Don't keep me long; the fire scorches me." Actually, she is asking him to respond to her love because an unrequited love is torturing. But after their relationship gets clear, the two fire-spirits kindle fiercely.

[19]The first time Esther meet Ada and Richard, the two cousins are in the court's private room, " standing near a great, loud-roaring fire." [20]It is a hint of their later precious love burning firmly in the tempest of hardship brought by the case. When others first realize their intimate relationship, it is in the romantic atmosphere produced by fire: The room in which they were, communicating with that in which he stood, was only lighted by the fire. Ada sat at the piano; Richard stood beside her, bending down. Upon the wall, their shadows blended together, surrounded by strange forms, not without a ghostly motion caught from the unsteady fire, though reflecting from motionless objects. [21]Their bumpy future is exactly reflected by the fire. When Ada admits their love to Esther, the firelight shines in her thoughtful eyes They go through difficulties together and give each other help and care. It is " a love that nothing but death could change" [22], it is a fire that never extinguish till the last ember burns out. During metal processing, fire works as a purifier. Metal like gold is plunged into the heart of the fire where fire is harshest and turns blue, and being kept there until it loses any resemblance to what it once was. Having been purified, the gold can be molded at the will of people. [23]The Bible also reminds people that faith will be refined and tested by fire. The fire in hell is not only a way of punishment for the wicked to repent, but also a baptism to burn away their sin and

impurities. Like purified gold, they would be reborn as a new man according to God's will. Phoenix is another example related to fire in Early Christianity which is adopted from Greek mythology. Associated with the sun, a phoenix obtains new life by arising from the ashes of its predecessor. Thus a phoenix can be long-lived since it is cyclically regenerated or reborn. The bird born of fire is highly respected and a reminder of luck, loyalty, nobleness and other good imageries. The fire that burns down Thornfield is such a cleansing one. Although it destroys Thornfield and most of Rochester's estate, it also causes Bertha's death, thus "liberating Rochester from his shackled past". Generally speaking, Bertha is the greatest obstacle between Jane and him. While he can not get rid of Bertha by himself, her fire of revenge which leads to her own death sets him free and is a relief to all. Rochester is reborn from this fire and he is a different person now. Physically, he becomes half-blind and lame as a punishment of his concealment. Spiritually, he is no longer so proud and superior to Jane. This fire also helps Jane see that "he is now dependent on her and erases any misgivings she may have about inequality in their marriage".[24] In this way, Rochester is a new-reborn phoenix that just loses his gay feather. But with the help of Jane, he can restore his confidence and fly freely once more. As an ordinary thing in daily life, fire is an everlasting image in literature which deserves scrutiny. Almost in every piece of literature, fire appears frequently both as a setting of the environment and as a mood of the characters. Because of its feared and respected feature, once appropriately used, it can convey different emotions and force, such as passion, hatred and love. Thus an excellent effect can be

achieved to set off the atmosphere. As long as fire burns on the earth, it burns in literature.