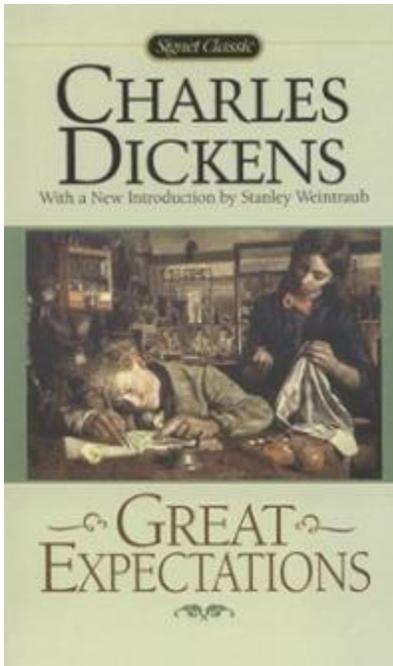


The Two Elements of Nature (Water and Fire) Used as a Symbol by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*

Dr. M. Manopriya



Abstract

According to Northrop Frye, a symbol is any unit of any work of literature which can be isolated for critical attention. The meaning, the structure, the setting of the novel and the insight into the psyche of the characters involved can be apprehended by the exploration of the imagery. An image, a symbol or a cluster of images occur in the artistic creation to give a suitable backdrop to the story. An image or a symbol can act as a monad, when it is taken out and treated as the archetype, in comparison with other similar images or symbols occurring in other literature. In the novel *Great Expectations*, Dickens makes use of the various symbolical meanings for water and fire according to the situation. Starting with Pip, Miss. Havisham and Magwitch, most of the characters are affected by water and fire. This paper discusses the events in the novel and brings out the deeper meanings involved in the symbolism. This paper attempts

to compare and bring in various examples of symbolism in other literature, as well as explaining the significance of water and fire as the major symbols here in this novel.

Keywords: Symbol, Image, Artistic creation, Water and fire, Symbolism

Mrs. Joe's Demise and the Symbol of Water

Pip, the protagonist, depressed because of his sister Mrs. Joe's demise, is in need of consolation. In order to get consolation from his dead parents and brothers, namely, Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger he goes to the graveyard; and from there he looks at the river and he says, 'the low leaden line beyond was the river' (2).

Water here stands as a symbol for the collective unconscious. The river is seen from afar, a slight leaden line. The presence is not felt, but the assurance of a body of water is there. Here the river water stands for the collective consciousness of Pip. Pip who stands alienated, literally and figuratively from his family and will in the end get support from Magwitch, the escaped convict, who comes by way of the river, later on in the novel.

Fire Symbolism

Pip stands in great awe of his sister, but Joe his uncle, in contrast, provides love and affection for Pip which he badly needs as a child. Joe's forge serves as a place of warmth and comfort for Pip. Man in his present state cannot live in fire, but, as with water, there is a fire of life and a fire of death. The fire of life burns without burning up: there is light and heat but no pain or destruction. This fire of life is found in the forge of Mr. Joe Gargery. Similarly, Miss Temple in *Jane Eyre* is the only soul who could understand Helen's genuine character. The fire in Miss Temple's room gives much warmth to Helen Burns and Jane.

A brilliant analysis of fire symbolism is undertaken by Gaston Bachelard in "Psycho-analysis of Fire". In the book, Bachelard makes his point about the unique life giving nature of fire. He says that, it is intimate and universal. It lives in our heart; it lives in the sky. It rises from

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

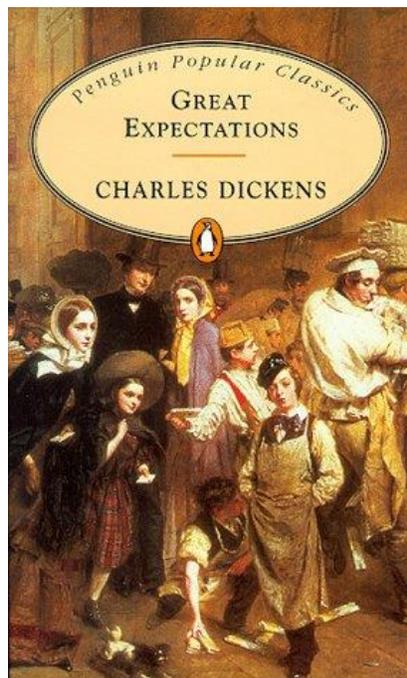
Dr. M. Manopriya

The Two Elements of Nature (Water and Fire) Used as a Symbol by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*

the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love. The forge fire nourishes Pip and gives him the much needed succor.

Similarly in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* Emily Bronte uses the fire and candle light imagery to show the warmth and revival of Catherine and Heathcliff's affection for one another, when Heathcliff reappears six months after Catherine's marriage. "Now, fully revealed by the fire and candle light, I was amazed, more than ever, to behold the transformation of Heathcliff". (81) But the revival of that old passion only leads to death and tragedy in that novel.

But, it is life sustaining in *Jane Eyre*. A relief for Jane comes with the visit of the apothecary who could offer a few words of solace to her. Before the arrival of the apothecary, a streak of light, a terrible red glare is noticed by Jane. It is the nursery fire - a symbol of warmth.



In contrast to the coldness referred to before, there is a welcoming fire which is associated with friendliness, warmth and security. This is also seen when Pip is ridiculed by Estella in Miss.Havisham's house. Estella treats Pip in a haughty manner. Estella feels a strong contempt for Pip and she despises him. Her behavior creates in Pip a strong feeling of inferiority. Pip is bowed down with a lot of confusion and shame; he feels consoled in the forge of Joe. Pip

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

Dr. M. Manopriya

The Two Elements of Nature (Water and Fire) Used as a Symbol by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*

says, “What with the birthday visitors, and what with the cards, and what with the fight, my stay had lasted so long, that when I neared home the light on the spit of sand off the point on the marshes was gleaming against a black night-sky, and Joe's furnace was flinging a path of fire across the road” (106).

Here the fire once again acts as a fire of life for Pip as he is getting warmth from Joe for his wounded heart. The fire from Joe's furnace serves as a beacon light to Pip. It shows him the path and it clears his way, as also his mind. Here the fire stands for the source of warmth, support, kindness, friendliness and security emanating from Joe towards Pip.

Symbolism of Misty Marsh

The misty marsh in the village is used several times in the novel to symbolize the danger and uncertainties in Pip's life. This is revealed when Pip takes food for Magwitch and runs towards the misty marsh. Here the obscuring mist symbolizes the confusion in his mind regarding his theft of brandy and file for Magwitch, the convict:

The mist was heavier yet when I got out of the marshes so that instead of my running at everything, everything seemed to run at me. This was very disagreeable to a guilty mind. The gates and dykes and banks came bursting at me through the mist, as if they cried as plainly as could be, “A boy with Somebody-else's pork pie! Stop him!” The cattle came upon me with like suddenness, staring out of their eyes, and steaming out of their nostrils, “Halloa, young thief!” One black box, with a white cravat on - who even had to my awakened conscience something of a clerical air-fixed me so obstinately with his eyes, and moved his blunt head round in such an accusatory manner as I moved round, that I blubbered out to him, “I couldn't help it, sir! It wasn't for myself I it!” Upon which he put down his head, blew a cloud of smoke out of his nose, and vanished with a kick-up of his hind-legs and a flourish of his tail. (17-18)

The mist symbolizes the mental state of Pip, besides dwelling upon his external circumstances. He finds the damp mist lying on the bare hedges, spare grass, on every rail, gates, dykes, and banks. The phantom finger post and the cattle in the mist seem to accuse him of his theft. The disorientating effect of the mist thus creates a state of solipsism where the world seems to be a mere extension of the inner self. Mist, another form of water, is the objective correlative of the encircling fluidal existence of the unconscious. When Pip is in the graveyard and also while taking food to Magwitch, the whole scene is shrouded in mist. Here the mist stands for the collective unconscious which comes to help Magwitch in the form of Pip, when he provides the food and the file to Magwitch. This point of his life is extremely important, since the grateful Magwitch brings about a great transformation in Pip's life by helping him lead the life of a gentleman in the future.

Healing and Consoling - Water

Water has the power of healing and consoling. Pip has become quite friendly with Biddy in whom he places full confidence, telling her everything about himself. Biddy is quite responsive to Pip's friendly feelings. This is shown when Pip is thwarted and unrecognized by Estella, because of his low social status as a blacksmith. Pip feels consoled and confident when talking with Biddy on the banks of the river. He says,

It was summer-time and lovely weather. When we had passed the village and the church and the churchyard, and were out on the marshes, and began to see the sails of the ships as they sailed on, I began to combine Miss Havisham and Estella with the prospect, in my usual way. When we came to the river side and sat down on the bank, with the water rippling at our feet, making it all more quiet than it would have been without that sound, I resolved that it was a good time and place for the admission of Biddy into my inner confidence. (148)

The River

The river gives him more inner confidence than the church, churchyard and the marshes, which they pass. The touch of the rippling water at his feet has an anchoring effect over his

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

Dr. M. Manopriya

The Two Elements of Nature (Water and Fire) Used as a Symbol by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*

floating thoughts about Estella and Havisham. Like Pip, Shadrack in Toni Morrison's *Sula* gets consolation from the water when he is struggling as a war-torn victim. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), the Mississippi river promotes Huck's maturity. The reader sees how Huck grows up having the river as a place for solitude and thought. Biddy here can be identified with the form of water, which consoles Pip in his mood of destruction. Biddy makes him understand that the simple and the honest life he leads offers him sufficient means of self respect and happiness and that he need not be ashamed of it. In another case, when Pip is totally shaken by the life threat from Orlick, and by the brain fever after Magwitch's death he gets healed psychologically when he is on the river side with Joe. Pip says, "We had been sitting in the bright warm sunlight, looking at the river, and I chanced to say as we got up: 'See, Joe! I can walk quite strongly. Now, you shall see me walk back by myself'".(550) Pip like Abhijit in *Mukta-dhara* and Melville's Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, feels a mystical vibration in the presence of water. The ungraspable phantom of one's life is one's own inner self.

Symbolism of Washing

Washing denotes washing away of the sin. Jaggers washes his hands often with the scented soap after attending to criminals. He is not a wicked man, but Dickens gives him a terrifying air, portraying the stinking life of London with its guilt and crime. "He had a closet in his room, fitted up for the purpose, which smelt of the scented soap like a perfumer's shop. It had an unusually large jack-towel on a roller inside the door, and he would wash his hands, and wipe them and dry them all over this towel, whenever he came in from a police-court or dismissed a client from his room". (244) In *Henry IV-part-I* in Act 3, Scene 3, when Prince Hal, in the Boar's-Head Tavern tells Falstaff that he has paid the money stolen at Gad Shill, Falstaff is thinking that Prince Hal has become King and says, "Rob me the exchequer the first thing doest, and do it with the unwashed hands, too." In *Macbeth*, Act 2, Scene 2, after the murder of King Duncan, Macbeth says, "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red".

Water here symbolizes the purification of Macbeth's guilty conscience that even all the water of many oceans cannot accomplish. In the Bible we see the scene when Jesus is brought

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

Dr. M. Manopriya

The Two Elements of Nature (Water and Fire) Used as a Symbol by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*

before Pontius Pilate for judgment, Pilate washes his hands to show he is not responsible for shedding the blood of an innocent person: “When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude saying I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it”(Matt27:24). (Fulghum 169) So, in the case of Jagers the archetypal pattern of purification by water removes his crime related to his profession, in his mind.

Gazing at the Fire

After hearing the news - a great blow - from Magwitch, Pip and Herbert hear the story of Magwitch’s past. Magwitch narrates his past while sitting before the fire. His fixed attention to the fire light is an image of misery and dejection. In the case of Magwitch his gazing at the fire symbolically represents the painful incidents of his past life. He says how he was put in irons, brought to trial again and again and how finally he is sent for life by the dreadful act of Compeyson. Here the fire acts as a revelation of truth; fire is also seen in another aspect. When Magwitch narrates his past by sitting before the fire something more emerges from his account of life. Molly, the wife of Magwitch gives birth to a little girl, Estella. Thus Pip and Herbert understand the secret of Estella’s parentage.

Similarly in *Silas Manner*, Silas, after losing his gold, finds an infant, Eppie, before the hearth of his cottage on New Year’s Eve. The child appears like his lost gold on the floor in the fire light. He leans forward to touch the gold but finds the object under his finger to be soft - the blonde hair of the sleeping child. After following the track of the child along the road he finds Molly, the child’s mother lying in the straw. Thus the fire of the hearth helps in revealing the parentage of Eppie. Bachelard in his “Psychoanalysis of the Fire” says that the fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all life to its conclusion, to its hereafter.

Fire of Hatred, Depression and Frustration

The fire which burns outside indicates the fire of hatred, depression and frustration in his heart. Thus the fire in the case of Magwtich acts as a fire of death, giving him great pain. To

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

Dr. M. Manopriya

The Two Elements of Nature (Water and Fire) Used as a Symbol by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*

Gaston Bachelard, fire holds the central place in the experience of mankind. In *Psycho Analysis of Fire* he writes that fire has been an element for unforgettable memories. In Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* Lizzie and her brother Charley Hexam sit before the fire and talk about their childhood days.

The guilty conscience of Miss Havisham in corrupting Estella reaches its peak when Pip comes to meet her when she sets fire to herself. This self destructing tendency of Miss Havisham is symbolized through the element fire. Pip sees Miss Havisham running towards the door shouting and with fire blazing all about her. The fire consuming Miss Havisham, thus puts an end to the heap of rotten and ugly things that are stored in the room.

Foreshadow or Parallel Chaos or Disorder

Dickens, like Shakespeare employs natural disaster either to foreshadow or parallel chaos or disorder, in the life of Pip. Pip's attempt to save Miss Havisham from the blazing heat of the fire foreshadows the unfortunate catastrophe of Pip's plan in taking Magwitch abroad being totally aborted; he has to come face to face with the death of Magwitch, his second father.

The combative elements of fire and water are closely linked to the ever-present motif of death. As a result of contrast references to these elements, the novel projects the qualities of creativity and destructiveness that continually transform the image of nature. Miss Havisham confesses that she has intentionally stolen Estella's heart away and put ice in its place. Again and again, Miss Havisham cries despairingly, "What have I done? What have I done?"(469) In the case of Miss Havisham, the fire symbolizes purification. In Dante's *Divine Comedy* fire symbolizes purification in Canto xxvi. Purification by fire is a familiar image in the Bible. Fulghum, Walter B. in *A Dictionary of Biblical allusions in English Literature* quotes from Bible: "It is like a refiner's fire". (Malachi.iii.2) "the trail of your faith, being much more precious than that of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire" (I Peter 7). The refining by fire being the obvious cure of corruption is clarified by such passages.

River Crossing

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

Dr. M. Manopriya

The Two Elements of Nature (Water and Fire) Used as a Symbol by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*

River crossing is an important turning point in a hero's journey. Pip decides to take Magwitch abroad. He reaches the sea by crossing the river Thames. Crossing the river symbolizes the process of baptism where all the sins are washed away by the water. Pip commits a sin by not recognizing the true love of Magwitch. His sins are washed away by crossing the clearer river and by accepting Magwitch as his second father.

In *The Bible* water is used in baptism, which stands for cleansing the soul of original sin and offering a new life in the light of God. In Frye's view, water comes in from the realm beyond human life, which means that after death there will be chaos and dissolution, unlike the Christian belief which is the beginning of a beautiful life with God after death. This is why the departed souls have to cross a river in many mythologies. Similarly in the *Silmarillion* by J.R.R. Tolkien, Elves have to cross the sea in order to reach earthly paradise. Thus in the case of Pip, crossing the river ultimately takes him to salvation.

Sea Water as Punishing Agent

Magwitch sees Compeyson with the sergeants in the galley. Immediately he pounces upon Compeyson. After a great struggle Magwitch kills Compeyson. The sea water acts as a punishing agent in the case of Compeyson. The sea water stands as a symbol for the good punishing the evil. The Red sea is significant in Jewish history as Moses at the beginning of Exodus enables the Israelites to escape from the Egyptian army that is chasing them. Here water acts as an instrument of God for protecting His people, as well as punishing; we see the Egyptian army gets drowned as the sea comes together again, after the Israelites have crossed the sea. Compeyson like the Egyptians gets drowned in the sea for his devilish nature, while Magwitch reaches the shore like the Israelites. Death by drowning is a horrible end which Dickens reserves for some of his villains, like Braddy Headstone and Roger Riderhood in *Our Mutual Friend*. Both villains meet their death by drowning for their sin of conspiracy against Eugene and Gaffer Hexam respectively. Similarly Compeyson gets his punishment at the hands of the avenging sea for betraying Miss Havisham and Magwitch.

Symbol of Rebirth

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

Dr. M. Manopriya

The Two Elements of Nature (Water and Fire) Used as a Symbol by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*

Water is the commonest symbol of re-birth. Pip's sinking into the water symbolizes his rebirth. Water is considered to be purifying in the spiritual context. Pip realizes the sincerity and gratitude of Magwitch who is his second father after he almost drowns. In *A Farewell to Arms* when Henry tries to escape from the Italian army, he jumps into the Tagliamento river. This jumping into the water symbolizes a sort of re-birth, and he decides to lead a new life. Similarly, in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs tries to wash and bathe Sethe's body which is molested by the school teacher's nephew. This bath makes her feel refreshed and it gives her a new life. Thus Pip's sinking into the water is a metaphorical re-birth in understanding the real love around him.

Umbilical Water of the Womb

Water is also seen in another perspective in the case of Pip. Water in this context is associated with the umbilical water of the womb, where individual life comes from the water of the oceans, where human life evolves. Pip in the sea water symbolizes the umbilical water of the womb and his struggle in the water indicates his struggling with the quest of the real love of his father figures Joe and Magwitch. Similarly in *Mama's Day*, George the protagonist, dreams that he is struggling in the sea, while Mama Day standing on an elevated place asks him to get out of the sea. Here the water of the sea symbolizes the umbilical water of the womb where George is struggling with the quest to know about his abandoned mother, who had abandoned him soon after his birth.

Collective Unconsciousness

Water stands for the collective unconscious. In *Great Expectations* the unconscious comes to the help of Magwitch in his understanding of the truth about his daughter, which is shown by his giving strong pressure on Pip's hand after knowing the secret, while the pressure is gentler in other cases. The above incident resembles the incident in the novel *Our Mutual Friend*. An attempt is made to murder John Harmon and he is thrown in to the river Thames by Rodger Rider Hood. When he drowns in the water the collective unconscious comes to the help of John Harmon in this critical situation in the form of the water and makes him reach the other shore. Thus the collective unconscious comes to give support when there is a lack of support in

the conscious world. This sort of help is rendered by the collective unconscious to the creative writers. In “Psychology and Literature” Jung says:

The creative process of an artist has feminine quality and the creative work arises from unconscious depths - from the realm of the mothers. Whenever the creative force predominates human life is ruled and molded by the unconscious as against the active will, and the conscious ego being a helpless observer of events is swept along a subterranean current. It is not Goethe who creates Faust, but Faust which creates Goethe. The archetypal image of the wise man, the savior or redeemer, lies buried and dormant in man’s unconscious since the dawn of culture; it is awakened whenever the times are out of joint and a human society is committed to a serious error. (186-187)

After the death of Magwitch, Pip falls ill. He suffers from high fever. He even loses his consciousness and has fits of delirium. Learning about Pip’s illness, Joe comes to London to nurse Pip. The fire in the form of fever unites Joe and Pip once again. Joe nurses him not only physically, but also mentally with the same old confidence and simplicity, and in his old unassertive protecting manner. Similarly in Evelyn Waugh’s *A Hand full of Dust*, the hero Troy Last, after suffering a tropical fever in South America, which renders him “fitfully oblivious to the passage of time and bedevils his mind with a constant company of phantoms”(95) is nursed back to health by Mr. Trod.

In *Little Dorrit* when Arthur submits to imprisonment in the Marshalsea, Little Dorrit comes to nurse him back to health when he suffers from fever. Thus the fever helps Arthur to go back to his past, which brings back to his mind the memories of his childhood pleasures. After his recovery Joe takes Pip to the open lane in the carriage. Joe wraps up Pip and takes him in his arms, carries Pip down and puts him in the carriage as if Pip is still the small helpless little boy. Joe’s service to Pip closely mirrors the scene in *Jane Eyre* where Jane brings Rochester out from Ferdean into the open air of the English country side, beginning his recuperation and new life.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

Dr. M. Manopriya

The Two Elements of Nature (Water and Fire) Used as a Symbol by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*

Thus the fire (fever) acts as a positive element in the case of Pip which makes Pip really understand the true depths of Joe's love.

To Conclude

Thus the two contrasting elements (water and fire) play their respective roles in projecting the mental condition of the characters, as well as symbolizing the different stages in their lives, like renewal, new beginnings, farewells and reunions.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. New York: Dale, 1978. Print.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Bronte, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. 1907. Ed. Philip Handerson. Newyork: Everyman's Library Dulton, 1966. Print.

Fulghum, Walter B. *A Dictionary of Biblical allusions in English Literature*. New York: Holt, 1965. Print.

Lodge, David, ed. "Psychology and Literature". *20th Century Literary Criticism*. London: Longman, 1972. Print.

Shakespheare, William. *Complete Works*. ed. W.J. Craig. Delhi: Oxford UP, Print.

Waugh, Evelyn. *A Handful of Dust*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1964. Print.

Dr. M. Manopriya
Assistant Professor
Department of English (SF)
Vellalar College for Women
Erode - 638012
Tamilnadu
India
manopriyao@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

Dr. M. Manopriya

The Two Elements of Nature (Water and Fire) Used as a Symbol by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*