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Wood: Forests' Fires

I Burning to survive

Fires convert the chemical energy stored in plants into terrifically useful thermal energy. With the heat from wood, we can cook meat and plants that would otherwise be tough, rancid, or toxic; we can survive cold climates and extend habitable seasons; and we can clear land. With its by-product, light, we can cut through darkness to extend useful time and fend off beasts that would like to eat us. With smoke, we can communicate over distance and difficult terrain, and we can preserve food. Controlling fire is perhaps the most important coordinating element for many features of human evolution: larger brains, smaller jaws, greater omnivory, cooperative hunting, expanded habitat, tool manufacture, and—crucially for a weakling bipedal ape—protection against predators. The tribal fire was the first water cooler, a meeting place that encouraged confabulation, cohesion, laughter, negotiation, memory, and projection. It signified food, safety, light, and warmth. The sayings “home and hearth” and “keep the home fires burning” indicate an ancient intrinsic link between domestic felicity and the fireplace.

In this age of glowing LED screens and phone-based fireplace apps, the affinity between humans and fire is abstracted, perhaps, but this very abstraction underscores humanity's enduring desire for fire. “National Firewood Night,” a television program that aired in Norway in 2013, attracted a million viewers—one fifth of the country's population—to watch a live eight-hour broadcast of a burning wood fire. Debates ensued about the right techniques for splitting and stacking wood (bark up or down?), arranging logs in the fire, and cooking wieners and marshmallows. One viewer described the spectacle as “very calming and very exciting at the same time” (Lyall). In Norway, wood fires are necessary for survival, and are symbols of everything they literally provide: safety, warmth, light, company, food, conversation, silence. Once you reach a certain latitude

Figure 3.1 George Inness, *The Lackawanna Valley*, c. 1856. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art. Public domain.

away from the equator, certainly at Oslo's sixty degrees North latitude, wood and fire are intimately entwined with life. Take away the need for the actual fire, the emotional desire remains in the nostalgic form of slow-TV viewers clustered around an electronic glow.

In the twenty-first century, people in developed nations spend less time than ever by the hearth, but our fires have only moved and morphed, not extinguished. They burn in our home furnaces, they combust internally in our car engines, they drive turbines in our regional power stations (Wrangham 9). From prehistorical fuel—mostly grass, kindling, and branch wood—humans innovated burning peat, split cord wood, charcoal, coal, whale oil, kerosene, natural gas, and petroleum. In Europe, the source of fuel came to indicate social status: the impoverished burned brushwood gathered in rural areas, and coal in urban ones. The wealthy enjoyed fragrant, bright wood fires fueled by large timber. Oscar Wilde captures the morally barren Sir Henry Wotton, Dorian Gray's chauffeur into degeneracy, by describing his relationship with fuel: "He paid some attention to the management of his collieries in the Midland counties, excusing himself for this taint of industry on the ground that the one advantage of having coal was that it enabled a gentleman to afford the decency of burning wood on his own hearth" (39). Though Wotton's mode of generating wealth is of the new school, by all appearances he lives like an old-realm landed aristocrat,

burning fragrant timber even in his London house. The wealthiest landed gentry often had wood brought from their home estates to brighten their seasons in London; burning coal, like for most Londoners of the nineteenth century, was *déclassé*.

The abundance of wood in America was one of the recruiting points for immigrants: wood was abundant to the point of being a nuisance to farming and expansion. Even the poor family off the boat would be sure to enjoy blazing wood fires in the colonies. When the Pilgrims stepped off the *Mayflower*, they escaped the confinement of coal furnaces below decks to find a land “wooded to the brink of the sea.” Failing to find the Chesapeake shores veined in gold, the Jamestown colonists sent home cedar logs instead (Freese 259). By the eighteenth century, the American colonies had an endemic population of blacksmiths and colliers whose expertise helped convert the depthless forests into good profits: from forests, to wood, to charcoal, which fired blast furnaces to produce iron. By the time of independence in the 1770s, the United States was producing as much iron as the industrial centers of the world, England and Wales. That stockpile of raw infrastructure came at the price about forty square miles of forest per ton of pig iron (Nye 21). The iron industry, forged from charcoal, enabled westward migration through the vast eastern forests toward the Great Plains, leaving clear-cuts that initiated agriculture.

After millennia of outdoor fires fueled by brush, grass, and fallen logs, humans moved fires into their domestic spaces—caves to castles to condominiums. Architecture from the ancient through modern periods reveals the many ways that indoor fires were burnt. The shapes of rooms, roofs, and hearths changed according to the era’s design and the source of fuel. The medieval great room had a fire at its nucleus, and a hole in the roof to allow some modicum of relief from the smoke. These fires could burn anything even remotely combustible, and their nearly continuous ignition required a renewable stack of brushwood.

In the sixteenth century, fireplaces with chimneys began to appear in the walls of buildings, allowing greatly improved ventilation of smoke and the amenities of the hearth. But fireplaces did not burn as well with brushwood fuel from coppiced trees; they demanded larger logs, which raised the demand for good timber (Williamson 231). When coal began to replace scarce timber later in sixteenth-century England, open fireplaces became closed stoves, with narrower chimneys. Coal stoves became ubiquitous in early modern cities in England, which were densely populated, forested with chimneys, and ready for manufacturing industries. Coal stoves had at least three negative effects: more toxic low-level air pollution, the loss of the bright cheery open fire, and a

chimney sweep industry that exploited children, who fit in the flues too narrow for adults (Freese 34).

Coal belongs to the fossil-fuel cluster of the next section. This chapter looks into the literature of wood, especially wood fires and their ecological, social, and aesthetic valences. Wood and brush fires still cause deforestation in underdeveloped parts of the world, so this fuel source is an ongoing factor in Anthropocene theory. Though its most obvious resonance is nostalgic in developed countries, wood is also a futuristic fuel: wood pellets are part of sustainable and climate-neutral fuel regimens, especially in northern Europe's timberlands.

Accounts of the age of exploration are replete with images of deep forests in terrains unknown, combining the intrigue of wealth with the exhilaration of danger and mystery. To the colonial explorer, these forests were treasure chests of fuel and raw materials, but they sheltered the uncontrollable elements of nature, hostile natives, predatory animals, poisonous plants, and ruinous diseases. Literature of this early modern period often lingered in foreign forests in order to refresh the wilderness for English readers. In *The Tempest*, Caliban, Shakespeare's cursed island native, bristles against the tyranny of his colonial lord Prospero, but is forced by fear of his torturing Western magic to haul in wood fuel for his fires. Caliban "does make our fire, / Fetch in our wood and serves in offices / That profit us," so he must be tolerated (1.2.456–8). To Prospero, having a fire well supplied and tended is more important than ridding the island of Caliban, a native, angry male attracted to his daughter Miranda. In response to his summons, Caliban's first line is both servile and defiant, a form of anti-colonial back-talk: "There's wood enough within" (1.2.460).

Caliban's intrigue lies not in his ability to make fire, but rather his intimate knowledge of the ecology of the island, a grounded naturalism that rivals Ariel's supernaturalism. Unfortunately for him, the too-trusting Caliban revealed to Prospero the secrets passed from his dead mother Sycorax. Caliban "show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle, / The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile: / Cursed be I that did so! All the charms / Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!" (1.2.488–91). Stripped of exclusive knowledge, Caliban is left in the primitive role of fire maker, and his mind is confined to fantasies of overthrowing his master without the agency to make it happen. He fears too much the "cramps" and "side-stitches" of Prospero's punitive magic (1.2.475–6). Caliban is a sad study of the oppressed colonized man whose technology, the wood fire, is essential for survival but requires hard labor to maintain. As fire

maker, Caliban is both abject and necessary. Vin Nardizzi has commented on Caliban's work as fuel-maker: "Caliban keys us into the indispensability of wood as the primary energy source underpinning subsistence and manufacture in the preindustrial era. Moreover, the response encodes a fantasy of plenty articulated during a time of shortage in England" (313).

Robinson Crusoe's domain is another fantasy colonial forest, arrived at by shipwreck. The famed survivalist follows his instinct from the first: "Having now fixed my habitation, I found it absolutely necessary to provide a place to make a fire in, and fuel to burn" (50–1). Crusoe finds shelter, food, security, and the companionship of goats, but the visible aspects of the wood fire become a danger for the anxious castaway. After spotting a footprint in the sand, he is obsessed with the fear that the smoke will attract cannibals to his "castle," and he eventually retreats to his inland cave "grotto" to burn raw wood: "I could not live there without baking my bread, cooking my meat, &c.; so I contrived to burn some wood here, as I had seen done in England, under turf, till it became chark or dry coal: and then putting the fire out, I preserved the coal to carry home, and perform the other services for which fire was wanting, without danger of smoke" (138). For a character dwelling in a land of infinite fuel, Crusoe kindles surprisingly few wood fires. His use of charcoal and gunpowder will receive attention later in this chapter.

Jack London's "To Build a Fire" develops the elemental necessity of fuel in an age of realism on a new frontier: Alaska. This story is about bare-bones survival, the danger of exposure, and the narrow margins in the physics of burning. A desperate man is far from camp on a subzero day with wet feet, so he must stop to warm up and dry out. But incubating a fire in such terrain is a ticklish process:

On top, tangled in the underbrush about the trunks of several small spruce trees, was a high-water deposit of dry fire-wood—sticks and twigs, principally, but also larger portions of seasoned branches and fine, dry, last-year's grasses. He threw down several large pieces on top of the snow. This served for a foundation and prevented the young flame from drowning itself in the snow it otherwise would melt. The flame he got by touching a match to a small shred of birch-bark that he took from his pocket. This burned even more readily than paper. Placing it on the foundation, he fed the young flame with wisps of dry grass and with the tiniest dry twigs. (15)

Though the scene is primordial, the traveler's expertise in combustion is advanced. It exhibits the delicate dance among various forms of carbon matter,

air, water, and extremes in temperature—from the ambient seventy-five below zero to the incendiary Fahrenheit 451:

He worked slowly and carefully, keenly aware of his danger. . . . When it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire—that is, if his feet are wet. If his feet are dry, and he fails, he can run along the trail for half a mile and restore his circulation. But the circulation of wet and freezing feet cannot be restored by running when it is seventy-five below. No matter how fast he runs, the wet feet will freeze the harder. (15)

All the complexity of human life crystalizes in this life-and-death moment. The traveler's noisy brain brings into further relief the stark clarity of his bifurcated path into the future: fire and life, or ice and death. Seen from a materialist perspective, the reluctant fire possesses more agency than its unnamed builder: he is at the mercy of uncooperative matter. On the brink of failure, the traveler desperately makes one last effort to kindle the fuel:

He cherished the flame carefully and awkwardly. It meant life, and it must not perish. The withdrawal of blood from the surface of his body now made him begin to shiver, and he grew more awkward. A large piece of green moss fell squarely on the little fire. He tried to poke it out with his fingers, but his shivering frame made him poke too far, and he disrupted the nucleus of the little fire, the burning grasses and tiny twigs separating and scattering. He tried to poke them together again, but in spite of the tenseness of the effort, his shivering got away with him, and the twigs were hopelessly scattered. Each twig gushed a puff of smoke and went out. The fire-provider had failed. (19)

The fire fizzles out, leading to an infinite cold night for the condemned traveler. His dog survives, though, linking this micro-drama with the larger world. The dog is in effect the focalizer who bears witness to the failed fire provider, becoming the realist writer's alternative archetype to the fortunate frontiersman. London's story exhibits how often elements and chance win out over human planning, experience, and effort. The cosmos is indifferent, and any romantic notions about the wilderness are extinguished by London in his tale of failed fuel, or cold wood. Though the story depicts a single man's failure, his travail exemplifies the common struggle for survival over tens of thousands of years, as humans gradually gained footing in hostile climates. As we learned to manipulate the tool of fire, we radiated south and (especially) north to the brow of the globe, lengthened habitable seasons, extended useful light past sunset, and expanded the variety of foods we could eat. The reader, perhaps snuggled in a furnace-warmed home with a warm beverage, is by imagination stripped down

and back to biomass fuel, an essential ingredient of evolution. Kindling evokes the thin margins of our ancestors, easily scattered and snuffed out.

II The hospitable blaze

The *ubi sunt* motif usually laments the passing of a beloved person. But an ecological version of the trope appears in the literature of wood during the long age of deforestation. England was covered with forests in 4000 BC, but after the arrival of Neolithic man, these forests were steadily converted to agricultural land. By 500 BC only half of England was forested (Freese 259). Humans usually value a resource only when it is scarce, so the literature of wood in England is particularly rich in its period of rising endangerment: the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Wood fires and the comfort of the open hearth appear often in scenes of hospitality, since they measure the wherewithal and generosity of the host. In his great house poem *To Penshurst*, dating from 1616, Ben Jonson celebrates the fires at the heart of hospitality:

Thy tables hoard not up for the next day;
 Nor, when I take my lodging, need I pray
 For fire, or lights, or livery; all is there,
 As if thou then wert mine, or I reigned here:
 There's nothing I can wish, for which I stay.
 That found King James when, hunting late this way
 With his brave son, the prince, they saw thy fires
 Shine bright on every hearth, as the desires
 Of thy Penates had been set on flame
 To entertain them; or the country came
 With all their zeal to warm their welcome here.

(ll. 71–81)

Embracing the aristocratic bounty, Penshurst's fire and lights provide the bodily comforts of warmth and perspective, and the livery means clean clothes for the travelling guest or, by synecdoche, servants dressed in livery who wait upon his demands. The estate is not only the building, but also its private ecological amenities: strolling grounds and game-sheltering, fuel-filled forests. The hospitality is so complete that the guest himself feels as a sovereign over Penshurst. The estate served as a refuge to James I and his doomed son, Charles I, who brought their kill to its hearths and enjoyed the service of the staff, figured as

Penates, Roman mythical gods of the household, whose Latin root, *penus*, means provisions. The literal wood fire that warms Jonson doubles as a metaphor for English hospitality, tradition, and patriotism. Since the ode is addressed to the estate, the actual bodies at work to keep the fires lit and the provisions stocked are obscured and subsumed into the aura of Penshurst. Penury haunts the dark margins of existence, but Penshurst expansively glows with health and safety. Fueled by its ample timber resources, it is a refuge in the struggle for survival, for king and poet minstrel alike.

Fire is too evocative to stay in the fireplace for long; it spreads figuratively into memory, desire, and rage. Derek Walcott comments on the legacy of English great houses and the colonial spoils that financed them in his 1962 poem “Ruins of a Great House.” He bitterly speculates on the imperial slave economy that supported the grandeur of the house: “The world’s green age then was a rotting lime / Whose stench became the charnel galleon’s text” (ll. 35–6). Indignation carries his thoughts from corrupt wood to the coffin of the slave ship to the fire of reflective rage:

As dead ash is lifted in a wind,
That fans the blackening ember of the mind,
My eyes burned from the ashen prose of Donne.

Ablaze with rage, I thought
Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake,
And still the coal of my compassion fought
That Albion too, was once
A colony like ours.

(ll. 38–45)

His meditation shifts to Donne’s Meditation XVII, “No man is an island entirely of itself; every man / is a piece of the continent,” and he seems to forgive the ruined Great House for its legacy because it, too, was a victim of colonization and “bitter faction” in English history (l. 41). From wood fuel to burning anger to the quelling balm of Donne’s words of unity, Walcott’s terse, rough lyric concludes with the fragment quote: “as well as if a manor of thy friend’s ...” (l. 44). Donne’s meditation ends: as / well as if a Manor of thy friends or of thine / owne were; any mans death diminishes me, / because I am involved in Mankinde; / And therefore never send to know for whom / the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.” Though the sight of the Great House fuels the fire of resentment in the colonized man, what remains in the end are the ashes of empathy and compassion.

Even Dracula, literature's denizen of the cold and dark, knows the emotional importance of fire to mortal humans. His guest Jonathan Harker is frigid with fear as he arrives at the vampire's castle. The coachman who bore him to safety through dark Transylvania has evanesced, and in his place appears Harker's uncannily similar host. Like the coachman, his handshake is "cold as ice—more like the hand of a dead than a living man" (22). No other person appears to greet him. However, when the count leads Harker to his chambers, he "rejoiced to see within a well-lit room in which a table was spread for supper, and on whose mighty hearth a great fire of logs, freshly replenished, flamed and flared" (23). Later, when he is given a castle tour, Harker similarly finds "a great bedroom well lighted and warmed with another log fire—also added to but lately, for the top logs were fresh—which sent a hollow roar up the wide chimney" (23). Surely these well-attended fires, and his well-roasted chicken suppers, imply the presence of a mortal servant?

Yet there is none. For a skittish Englishman spooked by the gothic darkness of the castle and harrowed by the cold, wolf-infested woods on all sides surrounding it, these hearth fires signify a great deal more than chemical combustion. They represent safety, wealth, nourishment, and company. Remarkably, the simple gesture of the roaring wood fire allows Harker to perceive the chilly Count Dracula as a host who provides a "courteous welcome," filled with "light and warmth" (23). The Transylvanian (literally "cross-forest") wood transforms from a wolfish menace to a natural resource of a quality long gone in England. Rather than making the castle hollow and gothic, it makes it convivial and romantic. Harker is able at first to brush aside the spookier aspects of firelight—its flickering shadows that distort facial features and spatial dimensions. Wood fires forestall terror for precisely one night, this first one of Harker's residence. After that no more fires are mentioned, and the only blaze comes in the form of a "demonic fury" in the count's eyes when Harker cuts himself shaving (33).

This juxtaposition of warmth with chill, the domestic versus the wild, is a leitmotif in all kinds of spooky stories. Literary works built upon suspense, terror, and horror must ameliorate these stressors with relaxants, and a crackling wood fire and clear daylight are the two best anodynes. In Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," the fluttery hero Ichabod Crane is a schoolmaster who moonlights as a biomass handyman. He "assisted the farmers occasionally in the lighter labors of their farms, helped to make hay, mended the fences, took the horses to water, drove the cows from pasture, and cut wood for the winter fire" (297). These small services secure his spot by the fire with tale-spinning Dutch wives, a band of friendly witches who inhale the aromas of roasting

apples and exhale local ghost stories. Ichabod would exchange his “anecdotes of witchcraft . . . direful omens and portentous sights” for their “marvelous tales of ghosts and goblins, and haunted fields, and haunted brooks, and haunted bridges, and haunted houses, and particularly of the headless horseman, or Galloping Hessian of the Hollow” (299). These fireside chats capture an early American gothic where even the globe’s inherent spin takes on a supernatural weirdness that blends physics with folklore.

The fire sitters work each other into a frenzy of apprehension, diffused at the moment by the company and the companionable fire, but stored for later haunting in the imagination of the superstitious Ichabod. In early nineteenth-century New York State, nighttime travel was a lonely road, and the hero’s pleasurable sojourn becomes a harrowing travail of his imagination’s weaving: “But if there was a pleasure in all this, while snugly cuddling in the chimney corner of a chamber that was all of a ruddy glow from the crackling wood fire, and where, of course, no spectre dared to show its face, it was dearly purchased by the terrors of his subsequent walk homeward. What fearful shapes and shadows beset his path, amidst the dim and ghastly glare of a snowy night!” (299). Ichabod prevails over the mind spirits and reaches home this time, but the episode sets up the story’s famous climax in which he is bested by a pumpkin. Irving’s amusing satire of horror adopts the conventions of the gothic from eighteenth-century British literature, but he tailors them for an American landscape in which the wood fire is the nucleus of comfort and survival. The woods are spooky, dark, and deep. The settler’s essential work is to harvest from a woodsy wilderness a neat split stack at the cabin door. The woodpile holds the promise that civilization can carve enough energy out of the indifferent, cold, dark, material universe.

Because it required so much strenuous work and symbolized settlement, Robert Frost’s poem “The Wood-Pile” is spooky because its very presence indicates an absence. A traveler crosses that archetypal wilderness, the swamp, in a frozen winter wasteland. His footing on thin ice is unsure and the trees are “Too much alike to mark or name a place by / So as to say for certain I was here / Or somewhere else: I was just far from home” (ll. 7–9). Still, this traveler is looking for an experience; his imagination peoples the wild. He makes a companion of a skittish bird who alights on an incongruous “pile of wood”:

It was a cord of maple, cut and split
 And piled—and measured, four by four by eight.
 And not another like it could I see.
 No runner tracks in this year’s snow looped near it.
 And it was older sure than this year’s cutting,

Or even last year's or the year's before.
 The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
 And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis
 Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.

(ll. 23–31)

With the woodpile serving as a text, the traveler reads the ghostly verbs of the vanished settler, who has cut, split, and stacked. The traveler perceives the craftsman settler's experience in creating the clean geometry of the woodpile, four by four by eight, which is reinforced by Frost's steady pentameter. Nature has, in turn, shown a paradoxical care for neglect in the intervening years. The pile is clean of tracks and tied in a neat bundle of clematis, a biomass embrace. Unlike human care, which tends to preserve form, Nature's care is a conversion process, and the decay toward a new form shows in its vanishing geometry and warped bark.

Slowly, the pile of civilization is digested by natural entropy. The energy expended to cut, split, and pile has not served its laborer, but it has assisted nature in the process of turning deadwood into recyclable nutrients by increasing surface area. The fire is starved, but the termites and mushrooms feast. The traveler attempts to know the vanished settler through this strange vision of neglected work; he must be a man "who lived in turning to fresh tasks / Could so forget his handiwork on which / He spent himself, the labor of his ax" (ll. 35–7). Like the traveler in an antique land observing the ruins of Ozymandias, Frost pities the woodpile for its irrelevance, and finds irony in a crumbling ruin that displays consummate skill. Instead of serving its primary purpose in a fireplace helping its maker survive, the pile works at the simmering pace of compost "To warm the frozen swamp as best it could / With the slow smokeless burning of decay" (ll. 39–40). The settler's neglect shifts to nature's loving attention. Like Wallace Stevens's jar in Tennessee, the woodpile defines the wilderness surrounding it; unlike the inorganic glass, the woodpile is itself becoming wild. Within years, thanks to the tireless work of termites and twining vines, there will be no trace of its maker's hard labor.

III In depth: Jane Austen

Considering the crucial role that the wood fire has played in human social evolution, it is not surprising that eagle-eyed Jane Austen would see the fireplace as an ideal location to test character and indicate wealth, that is, access to

resources. That wood was rapidly being replaced by coal in domestic uses during her lifetime only enriches the piquancy of her observations. Her novels elaborate on how this seeming background element in a regency room is actually an important leitmotif that Austen deploys with characteristic wit and ruthlessness.

In Europe, since medieval times, and especially during the Industrial Revolution, the source of domestic fuel came to indicate social status. Rural peasants usually burned brushwood gathered in the commons, and the poor burned cheap coal in cities. The wealthy enjoyed fragrant, bright wood fires fueled by large timber at their country estates and imported wood to their London townhouses for use in the kitchen, since coal left a nasty taint on the taste of food. Due to chronic deforestation and the great increases in mineral mining in the Midlands, coal began to replace wood in English fireplaces surprisingly early. In London, by the mid-seventeenth century, coal was commonly the domestic fuel across the classes. One hundred years later, coal burning was common in city and country alike, though its use was influenced by access to the sea or load-bearing canals. In the English interior, wood and brush continued to be valuable resources for domestic heating well into the nineteenth century, and the poor would scavenge the countryside for free fuel with increasing desperation as common lands were enclosed. Children were often assigned the task of gathering brushwood from public lands: F. M. Eden in his 1797 book *The State of the Poor* laments the “young marauders” who ravaged hedgerows and copses to supply their families with fuel for warmth and cooking (Adkins and Adkins 95). Literary urchins Samuel Coleridge and Dorothy Wordsworth gathered brush for their fireplace on the Quantock hills near Nether Stowey in 1798, which Wordsworth notes in her journal as a quotidian domestic chore for the country resident (Adkins and Adkins 96).

For Jane Austen, writing in this time of timber scarcity and accelerating coal consumption, the wood fire is a kind of pigment that helps her illustrate and color different human types and the resources available to her socially stratified characters. Since most of Austen’s scenes take place in the country among the upper classes, it is not unreasonable to assume that the fuel is wood. Notably she only specifies the fuel source, coal, when it is a class-based observation of Fanny Price’s impoverished family in *Mansfield Park*. Lacking her clear designation, we must assume from location and consumer that most of Austen’s domestic hearths were wood-fired.

Austen’s characters are variably described as domestic, generous, gregarious, silly, naïve, rich, selfish, stingy, lazy, hypochondriacal, scheming, or sleepy according to their relationship to the wood fire. *Pride and Prejudice*’s Mr. Bingley, for example,

demonstrates his generosity, attentiveness, and growing love for Jane Bennet in the way he tends the Netherfield fireplace: "He was full of joy and attention. The first half-hour was spent in piling up the fire, lest she should suffer from the change of room; and she removed at his desire to the other side of the fireplace, that she might be further from the door. He then sat down by her, and talked scarcely to anyone else" (40). Through Bingley's cavalier use of Netherfield's resources, we detect that his natural exuberance can tend toward the silly, so smitten is he by his invalid guest. But Austen's teasing account of his behavior is laudatory rather than mocking. Bingley's fires burn clean and true to his good heart.

The fireplace is an orientation marker in Austen's rooms, just as important as the windows and doors. Her characters approach it, pace by it, gather around it, draw away from it, gaze into it, lean and pose on its mantel. It is the place to get warm after a damp journey, to share confidences, to draw information from a knowledgeable companion, to admire a collection of china baubles, to burn letters, to toast successes. Sometimes Austen's use of fire is not so much a delineation of character as it is a record of the physical strains of travel and exposure that were realities in the early nineteenth century. When the Dashwood sisters travel by carriage to London in *Sense and Sensibility*, we fully understand their physical relief when "they reached town by three o'clock the third day, glad to be released, after such a journey, from the confinement of a carriage, and ready to enjoy all the luxury of a good fire" (182). Three days of jostle and Mrs. Jennings's jabber merit the refreshment gained from a long bask by the "luxury" fire, presumably made of wood despite its urban setting.

More artfully, Austen plays out a dynamic between Emma's father Mr. Woodhouse and the love-struck Mr. Elton, by way of fire. Annoyed at having a social engagement on a cold Christmas evening, the feeble father strikes out against his hosts: "'A man,' said he, 'must have a very good opinion of himself when he asks people to leave their own fireside, and encounter such a day as this, for the sake of coming to see him. He must think himself a most agreeable fellow; I could not do such a thing. It is the greatest absurdity—actually snowing at this moment! The folly of not allowing people to be comfortable at home, and the folly of people's not staying comfortably at home when they can!'" (107). Division from the fire represents a threat to the neophobic old man, and he comically turns his own fears of exposure into an accusation of egotism in the modest Mr. Weston. In response, the smitten Mr. Elton reassures Emma's father by employing the apposite domestic image: "We are sure of excellent fires," continued he, "and every thing in the greatest comfort. Charming people, Mr. and Mrs. Weston" (110). His ardour rolls on, until it gets stuck in the snow with an unwilling Emma.

Outdoors, the aesthetic perception of smoke from chimneys indicates the mood and disposition of the perceiver and his or her subjective impression of the landscape. Emma begins to view Robert Martin with greater favor when she evaluates the utility and beauty of his Abbey Mill Farm: “The considerable slope, at nearly the foot of which the Abbey stood, gradually acquired a steeper form beyond its grounds, and at half a mile distant was a bank of considerable grandeur, well clothed with wood . . . It might be safely viewed with all its appendages of prosperity and beauty, its rich pastures, spreading flocks, orchard in blossom, and light column of smoke ascending” (338). This pastoral idyll is a working-class version of Elizabeth Bennet’s arrival at Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, which I will discuss below. Martin’s farm is not just a site of labor; it is filled out by time-honored buildings, picturesque land contours and, importantly, natural resources. The bank “well clothed with wood” implies ecological health and sustainability, and the management of this resource feeds directly into the “light column of smoke” rising from the farmhouse chimney.

This happy aesthetic medium between beauty and function is also a reassuring social medium between wealthy landowners (the stalwart Knightly owns all the land in sight) and the honest, worthy worker (Robert Martin) who keeps the land groomed and profitable. Wealth *and* work cooperate in this scene: the standing woods and Knightly; the column of smoke and Martin. The smoke itself has an aesthetic. It echoes a feature of a Grecian temple: a “light column,” naturalized. It is singular in the landscape, giving texture to the clear-aired day rather than polluting it. It is light in color (unlike coal smoke) and light in density (not urban industrial). Emma’s misperceptions are famous, but in this case we view through her an accurate ideal of the pastoral scene, sustained by the right stewards. These rare long scenes of landscape description in Austen usually indicate the swing of a character’s mind toward new perspectives. Here, the farm’s woods and its domestic fires help Emma’s imagination to settle her friend Harriet there as Robert’s wife.

Austen presents a counterpoint to Emma’s pleasant musings in *Persuasion*, where the tormented heroine Anne identifies her discontent with her place of forced habitation, Bath. Anne “persisted in a very determined, though very silent disinclination for Bath; caught the first dim view of the extensive buildings, smoking in rain, without any wish of seeing them better; felt their progress through the streets to be, however disagreeable, yet too rapid; for who would be glad to see her when she arrived? And looked back, with fond regret, to the bustles of Uppercross and the seclusion of Kellynch” (110). Anne suffers from the persistent melancholia of “fond regret,” or toxic nostalgia. Her mind is

continually trapped in the past rather than engaging the present, as evidenced by her disinclination to see Bath better. The dour scene is made dim with the “extensive buildings, smoking in rain,” which imply both a repellant density of habitation and an unhealthy battle between indoor fires and outside wet chill. The smog, smoke, and damp induce a feeling of miasma and claustrophobia, psychosomatic though it may be. The buildings themselves are smoking, not the chimneys, implying a ground-level pollution that sullies lungs. Anne is unhappy during the journey, and she anticipates further misery when she arrives. Where Emma enjoyed wide perspectives, landscape variation, fine weather, and a complete view of the workings of the system (both ecological and interpersonal), Anne endures all the opposite: obscure, jumbled views passing too rapidly, monotonous urban construction, British weather further dirtied by smoke, and a keenly felt ignorance of locale. Austen chooses the domestic wood fire as a distinguishing marker in these subjective portraits of her contrasting heroines.

With Catherine Morland, the young innocent who wanders wide-eyed down the halls of Northanger Abbey, the pleasure and sense of safety afforded by a live fireplace is a relief from her gothic imagination. The spooky ambience of the abbey haunts her every perception, and she is assailed by a “tempest” upon arrival, which “brought to her recollection a countless variety of dreadful situations and horrid scenes, which such buildings had witnessed, and such storms ushered in; and most heartily did she rejoice in the happier circumstances attending her entrance within walls so solemn!” (121–2). Morland’s internal monologue blends sensational fiction with her sights of the abbey, and she buttresses her will: “*She* had nothing to dread from midnight assassins or drunken gallants... . In a house so furnished, and so guarded, she could have nothing to explore or to suffer ... Thus wisely fortifying her mind, as she proceeded upstairs, she was enabled ... to enter her room with a tolerably stout heart; and her spirits were immediately assisted by the cheerful blaze of a wood fire” (122). The happy fire dissipates her worst fears derived from gothic novels: “How much better to find a fire ready lit, than to have to wait shivering in the cold till all the family are in bed, as so many poor girls have been obliged to do, and then to have a faithful old servant frightening one by coming in with a faggot!” (122). We might smirk at the terror of a girl who cannot make her own fire but needs a servant to frighten her first before she can be comforted. The preexisting fire burns away her superstitions about shadowy abbeys and shows that the Tilneys are gracious hosts who anticipate the desires of their guest. If Catherine has a fire in her room, she is respected; at least, she is worth the spent resources.

Fanny, the poor urchin of *Mansfield Park*, receives no such respect from her guardians. As much as the servant's dress she is given to distinguish her as inferior to her cousins, the distinction of rank is signified by fire, or the lack thereof: "Mrs. Norris, having stipulated for there never being a fire in it on Fanny's account, was tolerably resigned to her having the use of [the room] nobody else wanted, though the terms in which she sometimes spoke of the indulgence seemed to imply that it was the best room in the house" (120). Mrs. Norris, monster of this gothic house, controls the domestic economy by doling out unequal favors. Fanny takes advantage of Norris's intolerance by growing stoic and modest, a contrast to her spoiled female cousins. Her absentee uncle Lord Bertram discovers Mrs. Norris's petty tyranny when he returns from his slaveholding estate in the West Indies:

It was indeed Sir Thomas who opened the door and asked if she were there, and if he might come in. The terror of his former occasional visits to that room seemed all renewed, and she felt as if he were going to examine her again in French and English.

She was all attention, however, in placing a chair for him, and trying to appear honoured; and, in her agitation, had quite overlooked the deficiencies of her apartment, till he, stopping short as he entered, said, with much surprise, "Why have you no fire to-day?"

There was snow on the ground, and she was sitting in a shawl. She hesitated.

"I am not cold, sir: I never sit here long at this time of year."

"But you have a fire in general?"

"No, sir."

"How comes this about? Here must be some mistake. I understood that you had the use of this room by way of making you perfectly comfortable. In your bedchamber I know you *cannot* have a fire. Here is some great misapprehension which must be rectified. It is highly unfit for you to sit, be it only half an hour a day, without a fire. You are not strong. You are chilly. Your aunt cannot be aware of this." (248)

By way of the vacant fireplace, the injustice is revealed to Sir Thomas in a way that Fanny could never have told him, in keeping with her uncomplaining character. Fire fosters survival in basic subsistence, and even in these more velvety conditions it supports health and connotes welcome. By depriving Fanny a fire, Mrs. Norris symbolically effaces her existence in the house: her chimney vents no smoke. Sir Thomas rectifies the rudeness in the same chapter:

She was struck, quite struck, when, on returning from her walk and going into the East room again, the first thing which caught her eye was a fire lighted and

burning. A fire! it seemed too much; just at that time to be giving her such an indulgence was exciting even painful gratitude. She wondered that Sir Thomas could have leisure to think of such a trifle again; but she soon found, from the voluntary information of the housemaid, who came in to attend it, that so it was to be every day. Sir Thomas had given orders for it. (255)

Fanny's position is strengthened, and Mrs. Norris is chastened, by the luxury of the colonial family burning wood fires in the estate's many fireplaces. Even the attending housemaid seems to enjoy this turn of Fanny's fortunes, though it makes more work for her.

The fire is one element of the distinction of wealth and breeding that Fanny feels acutely when she returns home to her poor nuclear family in Portsmouth, where there is more fire drama:

"Dear me!" continued [Fanny's] anxious mother, "what a sad fire we have got, and I dare say you are both starved with cold. Draw your chair nearer, my dear. I cannot think what Rebecca has been about. I am sure I told her to bring some coals half an hour ago. Susan, you should have taken care of the fire."

"I was upstairs, mama, moving my things," said Susan, in a fearless, self-defending tone, which startled Fanny. "You know you had but just settled that my sister Fanny and I should have the other room; and I could not get Rebecca to give me any help." (301)

The housemaid, Rebecca, is inattentive; the sister, Susan, is saucy, and they all sit in the chilly misery of an inadequate fire. Worse, it is a coal fire: possibly an indication of their closeness to the ocean where sea coals were gathered, but certainly a sign of their impoverishment. The Price daughters feud over their chores in a display of impudence that shocks the aristocratically trained Fanny. This passage is unique among Austen's works in naming the fuel source, a piece of information that carries geography and class alongside the sadder aesthetics of smelly and polluting coal fires. Its very existence shows by contrast the luxuries taken for granted in the rest of Austen's canon, where Fanny has observed a norm of good fires made of rare, expensive wood that has been chopped, split, and prepared by servants.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the fireplace illuminates a contrasting variety of wooing young men: Bingley, Collins, and Darcy. During his doomed first proposal to Elizabeth, Darcy positions himself in a lord-of-the-manor pose, "leaning against the mantel-piece with his eyes fixed on her face" (146). Bingley, as seen above, reveals the size of his heart by the high pile of wood in his fireplace at Netherfield. He is eventually rewarded for his affability by a more intimate tête-à-tête than

Darcy could at first achieve: Elizabeth “perceived her sister and Bingley standing together over the hearth, as if engaged in earnest conversation; and had this led to no suspicion, the faces of both, as they hastily turned round and moved away from each other, would have told it all” (264). In her various strategies to marry off her too many daughters, Mrs. Bennet quite literally stokes the fire in order to manipulate the passion of Mr. Collins, who “had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth—and it was soon done—done while Mrs. Bennet was stirring the fire. Elizabeth, equally next to Jane in birth and beauty, succeeded her of course” (53). Austen subtly inserts the fire metaphor to brilliant effect: Bingley’s claim upon Jane’s affection must not snuff out Collins’s interest in the Bennet daughters; the mother stirs away those ashes and brings fresh oxygen to the ample fuel in the hearth. Mrs. Bennet has five logs to burn, and they are piled in all at once, choking each other off. The anxious mother sets Elizabeth squarely in Collins’s flame, but alas it is too feeble to ignite our weighty heroine.

An inferno on Pemberley’s scale is needed to set her ablaze. Elizabeth observes that “to be mistress at Pemberley might be something!” only after she views the estate from the Gardiners’ slow-rolling carriage (185). The extended description begins, “The park was very large, and contained a great variety of ground. They entered it in one of its lowest points, and drove for some time through a beautiful wood, stretching over a wide extent” (185). The sylvan state of Pemberley not only emphasizes Darcy’s good taste in landscape, but perhaps more importantly also the security of his wealth. Darcy’s standing reserve of timber is harvested sustainably to keep his fireplaces well-fueled, and the forest remains intact because of his prudent management. Elizabeth’s playful avarice in regarding Pemberley as “something” finds a central symbol in fuel wood, which plays a role both outdoors in the park and indoors in the impressive fireplaces—timber exhibits Pemberley as an exceptional property.

Mr. Collins is less interested in the fire itself than in the wealth demonstrated by its framing. Always close to offending everyone, Collins tells Elizabeth’s Aunt Phillips that her main drawing room resembles the “small summer breakfast parlour at Rosings; a comparison that did not at first convey much gratification,” and goes on to enumerate why the likeness is complimentary: “When she had listened to the description of only one of Lady Catherine’s drawing-rooms, and found that the chimney-piece alone had cost eight hundred pounds, she felt all the force of the compliment, and would hardly have resented a comparison with the housekeeper’s room” (57). Collins’s cupidity is infectious among the trivial-minded characters, and Rosings’s chimneypiece illustrates Lady Catherine’s force of character and her riches, which dazzle the clownish crowd: Collins, Mary,

Aunt Phillips, and Sir Lucas. Like Darcy's, Lady Catherine's blazes are built of the finest dried hardwood harvested from her private wooded estate in Kent. It is surprising that the lady fanfaron never proclaims this advantage to her guests. Since the wood represents indigenous resources rather than specific monetary value (like her glazed windows and chimneypiece), the luxury of its abundance may escape her notice.

In each of these cases, except the poor Prices who burned coal in Portsmouth, the very fact that Austen's gentry families burn wood is an indication of their wealth. By the eighteenth century, the English groves that sheltered Robin Hood had been significantly diminished by centuries of deforestation. The forests of England had long supplied the navy with ships (Nelson's HMS Victory required six thousand oaks) and the iron furnaces with wood for charcoal, had fed domestic hearths, and provided the raw materials for the construction of buildings, bridges, farm equipment, and vehicles. To a certain extent, coppice groves were managed sustainably, supplying brushwood for fuel, but that was not the kind of large split lumber desired for the aristocrat's stately blaze. Peering through this specific lens of fireside hospitality, we find a sociohistorical trope that Austen uses as a rasp to chisel her character's features.

Now most often superfluous because of the furnace, the fireplace continues to represent wealth in today's homes. We use electricity or natural gas to heat our houses, so the fireplace now occupies the aesthetic seasonal role of coziness. As discussed earlier, the satisfaction of a fire has evolutionary roots. We still go retro with fireplaces because society has evolved away from open fires faster than biological evolution can adjust our innate preference for their light and warmth. Burning wood for pleasure is not exactly villainous in the Anthropocene, but it does have environmental costs. It drains out the carbon sink of the timber itself and contributes local air pollution in the form of soot, which increases the ratio of heat-absorbing dark material in a cold land of white, reflective snow and ice. Still, it is a less dramatic energy indulgence than turning the key in an ignition. Any guilt we may feel burning wood is no longer associated with a limited supply that implies deforestation, as it would have a few centuries ago. Now, the guilt is caused by the larger process of climate change in the Anthropocene, where every emission contributes to a global process within our collective agency but beyond our individual control. The pure fireside pleasure of Austen's era has become an ambivalent negotiation between coziness and climate burden. The inscrutable line of causation between individual actions and global climate patterns captures the essence of the climate hyperobject, and the psycho-emotional condition of living in this century of ripe consequences.