

# The Black Cottage

Robert Frost

We chanced in passing by that afternoon  
To catch it in a sort of special picture  
Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees,  
Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass,  
The little cottage we were speaking of,  
A front with just a door between two windows,  
Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black.  
We paused, the minister and I, to look.  
He made as if to hold it at arm's length  
Or put the leaves aside that framed it in.  
'Pretty,' he said. 'Come in. No one will care.'  
The path was a vague parting in the grass  
That led us to a weathered window-sill.  
We pressed our faces to the pane. 'You see,' he said,  
'Everything's as she left it when she died.  
Her sons won't sell the house or the things in it.  
They say they mean to come and summer here  
Where they were boys. They haven't come this year.  
They live so far away-one is out west-  
It will be hard for them to keep their word.  
Anyway they won't have the place disturbed.'  
A buttoned hair-cloth lounge spread scrolling arms  
Under a crayon portrait on the wall  
Done sadly from an old daguerreotype.  
'That was the father as he went to war.  
She always, when she talked about war,  
Sooner or later came and leaned, half knelt  
Against the lounge beside it, though I doubt  
If such unlikelike lines kept power to stir  
Anything in her after all the years.  
He fell at Gettysburg or Fredericksburg,  
I ought to know-it makes a difference which:  
Fredericksburg wasn't Gettysburg, of course.  
But what I'm getting to is how forsaken  
A little cottage this has always seemed;  
Since she went more than ever, but before-  
I don't mean altogether by the lives  
That had gone out of it, the father first,  
Then the two sons, till she was left alone.  
(Nothing could draw her after those two sons.

She valued the considerate neglect  
She had at some cost taught them after years.)  
I mean by the world's having passed it by-  
As we almost got by this afternoon.  
It always seems to me a sort of mark  
To measure how far fifty years have brought us.  
Why not sit down if you are in no haste?  
These doorsteps seldom have a visitor.  
The warping boards pull out their own old nails  
With none to tread and put them in their place.  
She had her own idea of things, the old lady.  
And she liked talk. She had seen Garrison  
And Whittier, and had her story of them.  
One wasn't long in learning that she thought  
Whatever else the Civil War was for  
It wasn't just to keep the States together,  
Nor just to free the slaves, though it did both.  
She wouldn't have believed those ends enough  
To have given outright for them all she gave.  
Her giving somehow touched the principle  
That all men are created free and equal.  
And to hear her quaint phrases-so removed  
From the world's view to-day of all those things.  
That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's.  
What did he mean? Of course the easy way  
Is to decide it simply isn't true.  
It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.  
But never mind, the Welshman got it planted  
Where it will trouble us a thousand years.  
Each age will have to reconsider it.  
You couldn't tell her what the West was saying,  
And what the South to her serene belief.  
She had some art of hearing and yet not  
Hearing the latter wisdom of the world.  
White was the only race she ever knew.  
Black she had scarcely seen, and yellow never.  
But how could they be made so very unlike  
By the same hand working in the same stuff?  
She had supposed the war decided that.  
What are you going to do with such a person?  
Strange how such innocence gets its own way.  
I shouldn't be surprised if in this world  
It were the force that would at last prevail.  
Do you know but for her there was a time  
When to please younger members of the church,

Or rather say non-members in the church,  
Whom we all have to think of nowadays,  
I would have changed the Creed a very little?  
Not that she ever had to ask me not to;  
It never got so far as that; but the bare thought  
Of her old tremulous bonnet in the pew,  
And of her half asleep was too much for me.  
Why, I might wake her up and startle her.  
It was the words 'descended into Hades'  
That seemed too pagan to our liberal youth.  
You know they suffered from a general onslaught.  
And well, if they weren't true why keep right on  
Saying them like the heathen? We could drop them.  
Only-there was the bonnet in the pew.  
Such a phrase couldn't have meant much to her.  
But suppose she had missed it from the Creed  
As a child misses the unsaid Good-night,  
And falls asleep with heartache-how should I feel?  
I'm just as glad she made me keep hands off,  
For, dear me, why abandon a belief  
Merely because it ceases to be true.  
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt  
It will turn true again, for so it goes.  
Most of the change we think we see in life  
Is due to truths being in and out of favour.  
As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish  
I could be monarch of a desert land  
I could devote and dedicate forever  
To the truths we keep coming back and back to.  
So desert it would have to be, so walled  
By mountain ranges half in summer snow,  
No one would covet it or think it worth  
The pains of conquering to force change on.  
Scattered oases where men dwelt, but mostly  
Sand dunes held loosely in tamarisk  
Blown over and over themselves in idleness.  
Sand grains should sugar in the natal dew  
The babe born to the desert, the sand storm  
Retard mid-waste my cowering caravans-

'There are bees in this wall.' He struck the clapboards,  
Fierce heads looked out; small bodies pivoted.  
We rose to go. Sunset blazed on the windows.

## VOCABULARY

**Daguerreotype** - a type of old photograph from the 1800s

**Gettysburg** - 1863, significant battle, American Civil War, Pennsylvania (northern east coast)

**Fredericksburg** - 1862, significant battle, American Civil War, Virginia (northern east coast)

**Garrison** - William Lloyd, abolitionist, journalist

**Whittier** - John Greenleaf, American Quaker poet, abolitionist

**Jefferson** - Thomas Jefferson, 'all men are created equal', American constitution

**Tamarisk** - a shrub with pink flowers that grows in hot/dry countries

## STORY/SUMMARY

The speaker and a priest pass by a small black cottage, offset from the main road where they are walking, it's surrounded by 'ancient cherry trees'. They go to the window and peer in, seeing that the cottage has been left intact despite its inhabitant - an aged woman - having passed away. The priest tells the history of the woman and her family, which is tethered to the history of the setting and to American history in general - her husband was killed in war - he can't remember whether it was Gettysburg or Fredericksburg. Her sons refuse to sell the house, but they long ago left and 'moved west', intending to return to it as a summer home (although they never have). The priest remembers the woman's presence in church with her 'old bonnet', and feeling self-conscious about speaking around her because he didn't want to offend. He says that there was something about her that stopped him from experimenting with the way he delivered sermons, 'but for her ... I would have changed the very Creed a little' - if it wasn't for her, he would have adapted the way he delivered the teachings of Christianity. Though she was very out of touch with the modern times, something about her commanded respect and she had a quiet kind of dignity. The priest finishes on thinking about the idea of 'truths', believing that some truths go in and out of favour rather than dying off completely - he would like his own isolated space in the desert where he could fully explore and remember all the great truths of the world without the influence of politics or society.

## SPEAKER/VOICE

The **narrator** of the tale begins and ends the poem, but the vast majority of the tale comes in speech from the priest himself - this takes up the bulk of the narration. This creates a **frame narrative structure**, where the speaker who starts the poem is not the main voice of the story. The result is a **broken sense of voice**, the voice of the speaker

is much weaker than the priest himself, who provides the most important perspective on the woman and her cottage, and what this represents.

## ATTITUDES

- **The narrator is an outsider** - we are placed in a similar position to him, as an outsider looking into the story. Our opinions and judgements of the situation are all impersonal and objective, we can try to view the story with less of a personal interest than someone in the community (such as the pastor himself)
- **Spirituality and community are connected** - the pastor explains he would have changed the way he spoke 'to please the younger members of the church', if it weren't for the old woman. This demonstrates the interconnected nature of spirituality and the community, the way in which they relate to and influence each other. Over time, the pastor's sermons have increasingly been for 'non members in the church', demonstrating that atheism or agnosticism is more common than it was in the past, and it is not expected of everyone to be religious. Yet, the church still holds a social and communal function for the local people, and many atheists still go there - so the pastor realises that his duty is quite similar - to help people with personal and spiritual problems.
- **Social attitudes change over time** - the old lady lived in a rural part of New England in the 1800s and died in the early 1900s, so we realise she was a product of her time and environment - some modern readers may interpret her (and perhaps even Frost himself) as racist, due to the phrase 'Black she had scarcely seen, and yellow never.', as 'yellow' is an outdated and now offensive term used to describe people of Asian ethnicity, and even the term 'black' is currently scrutinised, with many preferring the term 'African American'. However, we can see that for her time and place, the woman was in fact very progressive and accepting of other cultures, despite having little direct contact with anyone who was not from a similar background. The phrase that follows 'But how could they be made so very unlike / By the same hand working in the same stuff?' demonstrates her general kindness and openness, suggesting that she felt all humans were made equally by God and must therefore be similar. The pastor also observes towards the end of the poem that 'truths' are fashionable - across time and cultures people always cling to certain important truths or beliefs, and forget others that are equally important. He'd like to isolate himself from humanity and 'dedicate' his life to learning more about eternal truths that should never be forgotten.

## FORM/STRUCTURE

**Dramatic monologue** - the story is presented from the point of view of a narrator, who has the tale explained to him by a priest.

**Narrative poem** - this is one of Frost's poems in which he tells a tell and depicts characters that he encountered on his travels through pastoral landscapes.

**Frame narrative**- the poem is effectively a story within a story - the narrator tells us about the priest, who then takes over to tell the real story. The final tercet, the three line stanza at the end, brings us sharply out of the poem and the history of the woman/place and back into reality.

**Volta** - 'Everything's as she left it when she died' - the Priest starts to speak part way through the poem, and he opens by telling us about the deceased inhabitant of the cottage. This creates an abrupt shift in tone, disrupting our expectations of the quaint pastoral setting by bringing in more historical and tragic themes - war, death, isolation, spirituality. There is another volta at the end, signified by a line break, where the original speaker closes off the poem by shifting back to third person narration.

## LANGUAGE

**Symbolism** - 'black' connotations of evil, darkness, obscurity, mystery, sets an ominous tone, perhaps Gothic or reference to Southern Gothic genre/tradition, **juxtaposition** with 'cottage', which is typically a quaint and inviting type of setting. The cottage is 'fresh painted with a shower a velvet black', making it seem deep and mysterious, also perhaps warm and enticing, and at harmony with nature.

**Determinism** - 'We chanced in passing by' fate led the speaker and priest to the location.

**Pastoral Imagery** - 'Tar-banded ancient cherry trees' fruition, pastoral image, connotations of life and thriving nature, also a rural farming tradition - indication of how modern Americans modified the landscape/natural ecosystems. Tar-banding is a natural method of deterring caterpillars from living in and eating the trees.

- The 'Cottage' 'little cottage' as a setting has quaint, pastoral connotations of rural, peaceful life - living a simplistic and natural existence, separate from the influences of the big cities. It has a 'weathered windowsill', 'leaves that [frame] it', sitting 'well back from the road', visual imagery that reinforces its peaceful connection to nature and its reluctance to engage with the modern pace of life.

**Visual Imagery** - the father is remembered via 'a crayon portrait ...Done sadly from an old / daguerreotype' - the man died in war, so his absence upon the family creates a tragic impression, we feel that the woman struggled or isolated herself without him, and it is suggested elsewhere that she convinced herself that he died for a highly noble cause - 'all men are created equal' in order to honour his memory and justify her sacrifice. The crayon portrait seems crude and 'unlifelike', but it's also a sign of love - the woman must have sat and drawn his face in order to have a picture to remember him by, then hanging the picture in the living room where she would always be reminded of him. It also evokes the folk art tradition of northern US states, where arts and crafts are considered popular pastimes.

**Neologism** - 'unlifelike' made up/not grammatically correct word creates emphasis and parallels the doubt found in the Priest's dialogue concerning whether the woman's optimism and dedication to the reason behind her husband's death - war - prevailed to the end of her days.

**Personification** - 'warping boards pull out their own old nails' in spite of the death and neglect that surrounds it, the house is personified as alive, albeit in a lonely and sad way. It draws the speaker, and therefore the reader, in and invites them to sit there. The **paradoxical idea** of it being alive whilst it is equally lacking in that department, makes it seem as if it is an image frozen in time, much like the image of the elderly woman is. The **juxtaposition** of life and death is such close proximity enhances the idea of a place that has lived through so much history that it has become timeless, equating itself to the concept of the woman.

**Metaphor** - 'But suppose she had missed it from the Creed / As a child misses the unsaid Good-night' the priest likens the idea of the woman missing a section of the Creed to a child in absence of a 'Good-night' from a parent. Though children are often seen as weak and dependant, it is this dependence on her faith that **paradoxically** commands respect to her character and traditions. The idea of the absence of this results in potential 'heart-ache' further intensifying this need for the Priest to withhold from more modern ideas as he wants to avoid this.

## THEMES

**History** - Frost uses the poem to explore humans' relationship to history and progress - in many ways, the cottage is an anachronism - it's out of place in the modern world, which shows how much society has progressed since the woman first lived there. The pastor's respect for the woman's beliefs and the history she experienced and became part of - such as her husband's death when fighting in the civil war - suggests that we too should respect history and work to preserve it in the minds of future generations.

**Nature** - The humans in the poem live a peaceful, rural life surrounded by nature - the cottage turns 'velvet' in a shower of rain, and sits among 'ancient cherry trees' that have been 'tar banded' to prevent disease - showing how the manmade elements in this landscape interact harmoniously with the natural environment, there is no jarring technology or abuse of nature here. The ending of the poem, where the 'fierce heads' of the bees in the woodwork are briefly enraged, does however hint at the potential of nature to turn violent if it is disrupted or disrespected.

**American cultural identity** - so many images and references in the poem are iconically American and give us a flavour of the US American identity - particular the references to 'Civil War', 'States', 'the church' and the constitution: 'all men are created free and equal'. Throughout the poem we get a sense of the deeper beliefs of American citizens, and their general interests and concerns (religion, family, owning land and property, connecting to local and national communities, war/conflict etc) - some which change over time, and some which don't.

**Generations**- there is a noticeable difference across generations - the old woman belongs to an older time, whereas the speaker and pastor seem to be around Frost's age (he was 41 at the time the poem was published), the woman's sons are possibly a similar age or younger, and the pastor also speaks of the 'liberal youth' in his church, who are shocked by his reference to 'Hades' ( a Greek myth) as it seems unchristian - an irony as the word 'liberal' implies open mindedness. We realise the similarities and differences between humans as we consider the layering of these generations and their shifting values and beliefs over time.

**Erosion of Time** - the priest observes that the cottage is like a time capsule, it feels out of place and anachronistic, it was old fashioned when the woman was alive but now she has died and it has remained untouched, it further becomes something like a museum or historical monument. He says it is 'a sort of mark / to measure how far fifty years has brought us' - this also relates to the theme of **Change vs Fixity** - an exploration of what changes over time in a culture or place, and what always stays the same.

**Spirituality** - there is an exploration of different types of spirituality in the poem, though the pastor is Christian, he does not specifically speak of Christ or the Christian God, he seems more open to different types of religion and personal beliefs, observing that even 'non-members' of the church should be allowed to explore their spirituality. He wishes to be isolated in order to have more time to reflect further on his own beliefs, we get the impression that he's a highly intelligent and sensitive man who hasn't quite fully formed his own opinions of the world yet (and perhaps may never fully form them, as he's always open to new ideas and the ways in which attitudes change over time). For the old woman and the community, religion is sometimes more about forming social connections or repeating the teachings of the



Bible as a comforting routine, and the pastor seems to feel that this misses out on some of the deeper benefits of philosophical and spiritual exploration.

**War** - the husband, a soldier who died in war, had a huge impact on the woman - we realise she never moved on or remarried after his death, which suggests that she possibly never fully recovered from the grief and loss. Yet there's a sense of pride too - the pastor observes the idea of 'her giving' and 'all she gave', suggesting that she felt she sacrificed a happy life with her husband in order to contribute to the larger importance of winning the Civil War, abolishing slavery and fixing the division between the North and South of the US. War is dealt with on a national and political level, as well as the personal impact it had on individuals and the lasting influence on their lives.

**Death vs Life** - there's an exploration of how death can impact life, the war and soldiers lost left a lot of empty spaces in people's families, and the old woman seems to have responded to the grief of losing her husband in a quiet and respectful manner, though we always get the feeling that she thought often of him - as she had painted a picture herself of him from a photo and hung it in her living room. She has a quiet grace and dignity, but her life certainly was tinged with sadness at the loss and this must have impacted her children too, who have moved away now and have their own lives and always intend to return to the cottage, but never do - perhaps because the memory is too painful, or perhaps just because they are busy.

**Equality** - both the woman and the pastor seem to be open, liberal and sympathetic figures who embrace the ideas of cultural and racial equality. The wider context of the war, too, seems to have been a fight for equality in the pastor's mind.

## CONTEXT

- **American Civil War (1861-1865)** - This war took place between the Northern and Southern states of the US - it was primarily waged for economic and social reasons - the Southern states relied heavily on slave labour but were economically prosperous so they didn't want to abolish slavery, whereas the Northern states felt it was fundamentally wrong and against the constitution to enslave people (the document created to govern Americans that stated 'all men are created free and equal'). Frost was born 9 years after the end of the war, but the 'old lady' in the poem would have been an adult during it, her husband was a soldier who fought and died in the war (for the side of the Northern states, against slavery), giving his life to contribute to the cause. There is a sense of pride and honour, but also tragic loss surrounding his untimely death.
- **Pastoral Literature** - the cottage relates to pastoral tradition, being in an idyllic setting of 'ancient cherry trees' and 'lodged grass', we realise that the lady lived a quiet, peaceful life in the rural countryside but that this life was also disrupted

or tinged with sadness at the loss of her husband, it must have been difficult for her to raise the sons without his help. Traditionally, pastoral is a genre that explores the perfection of living a simple life in the country, so Frost is drawing from but also disrupting this tradition. The imagery of the 'black cottage' implies a darkness around the house, and perhaps suggests that Frost is blending Pastoral with **Gothic** influences.

- **Abolition / Slavery** - we learn that the 'old lady' was pro-abolition, she didn't want slavery to continue and she even saw famous abolitionists (Garrison and Whittier) give speeches on the reasons to end slavery. Slavery was finally abolished in 1865 when the North won the Civil War, so the woman is proud that her family contributed to that outcome, and that her husband gave his life in war for this cause.