

## The Black Cottage

This is a difficult poem, largely because of its length and the fact that it is hard to decide exactly what the attitude in the poem is to the story it tells. The poem seems to be about change, and asks the question as to what survives. The black cottage seems to embody the world of Nineteenth Century America and Victorian values as embodied in the old lady. Yet the cottage is decaying and there is much implicit questioning of the permanence of human values and truths over time. Here, again, in Frost is the debate between transcendence and transience that forms much of his work – a debate perhaps located in Twentieth Century scepticism, but also one that characterises his quest for meaning. The poem asks the questions, can fundamental values survive over time, or is nature in the end, symbolised perhaps by the bees, indifferent to human truths? Note a lot of the poem's views are conveyed through the thoughts of the church minister. He seems to assert the permanence of certain values and truths despite change and advance:

*'...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...  
Most of the change we think we see in life  
Is due to truths being in and out of favour.'*

He has a dream of a utopian kingdom where fundamental truths and beliefs can exist unthreatened by the world and change, yet his reverie or escapism is abruptly interrupted by the poem's return to the decaying cottage and the blazing sunset which seem to symbolise the funeral and burial of the old lady and her values. On the one hand, the poem asserts the reassuring idea that times may change but values do not, and then, on the other, it seems to express the idea of contingency – the idea that values, truths and ideas remain in part bound by their time. Hence, the great events of the American Civil War are already fading into vague memory. The old lady's simple faith and innocence seem to represent something very positive in the poem, yet she is seen as *'so removed / From the world's view today of those things'*. Even the great truths of the American constitution are seen as partly only relative to the time and people who produced them, hence Jefferson 'the Welshman'. The old lady perhaps represents nostalgia for a simpler age unchallenged by a modern world in which people can no longer quite believe science and religion to be compatible. Even the minister mocks her affectionately whilst admiring her stoicism, her pride and resilience and her unquestioning, simple faith in the rightness of things. She is at once a 'child' in her simplicity, and yet like a rock, the *'force that would at last prevail'*.

I don't think there is any simple conclusion to this poem, although, I think it presents a sense of the transience of human experience, memory and values set against the self-ordering world of nature which pursues its own logic. This would put it in line with those poems where Frost seems to question the existence of God, or at least of any clearly evident purpose in the way the universe unfolds. Whether or not Frost believes in God is an interesting question. Biographies suggest he did, but the poems perhaps contain a more open debate, especially as modern criticism and philosophy question language's ability to determine a world for us. Certainly, many of the poems present a rather modernist sense of man's aloneness in the universe, or at least deep uncertainty about final causes and purposes. The best way of approaching this poem is to see its tensions as a kind of dialogue about the past and present, faith and uncertainty, universal truths and human limitations, principles and nature, individual memory and time. The poem is above all a brilliant reflection on the past, written on the brink of the apocalyptic First World War which did so much to undermine the values of that past.