

Cottage on Fire, Joseph Wright of Derby, 1786-87, English, 84.53

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Questions:

1. What is going on in this painting? Who - or what - is the **main character**? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. This painting is a study in **contrasts**. Let's name the contrasts we can see.
3. There are **people** in this painting. What are they doing? What do you think the artist is suggesting about their lives and their **plight** in the way he has portrayed them? What **emotion** does this painting evoke in you? How does the artist create a sense of drama and emotion? What is our role - as viewers - in this painting?
4. The artist has pictured two types of dwellings. What are those dwellings? Do you think that a Roman ruin would exist side-by-side in the English forest with a simple cottage? What might the artist be trying to say by picturing them in this way?

KEY POINTS:

1. Joseph Wright of Derby was one of the most inventive, complex and accomplished artists of his day. He was one of the founders of the 18th century English landscape school, powerfully influencing the work of Turner and Constable in the next century. He was born in 1734 and showed early artistic talent. He trained as portraitist under Thomas Hudson in London. But he became impassioned about landscape painting after his Grand Tour of Italy in **1774**, where he was mesmerized by the landscapes of **Claude Lorrain**. He may also have been influenced by Netherlandish painters working in the Caravaggio style. Wright's work straddled the Romantic era (with his picturesque settings and the industry that was steadily encroaching on it) and the Rococo (with his curvy, sensuous trees, flickering highlights and decorative coloring).
2. Wright's passion for the English country side is seen in its lush forests and racing rivers. In "**composed**" pictures, he often included the clear,

luminous light of Italy's skies and deposited Greek or Roman antiquities in improbable settings where they never existed in reality.

3. Wright was famous for his dramatic *chiaroscuro* effects of extreme lights and dark. He was the first painter to depict the Industrial Revolution, with its flaring furnaces and candle-lit cotton factories that sometimes burned to the ground with child and female laborers inside. Even before Wright went to Italy, he was known for his "**candlelight compositions**." Two seminal events in Italy shaped his landscapes: He witnessed the violent eruption of **Mt. Vesuvius** outside of Naples and a massive **fireworks** display in Rome. He used dramatics of flame and shadow to produce **sublime** feelings of awe mixed with terror. The resulting drama and emotion draw viewers into Wright's work, almost as if we are eavesdropping. Although Wright seems to suggest that humans are the victims of progress, he was not known as a social critic. He often painted pairs of subjects, showing the same scene by moonlight and sunlight. "A Cottage on Fire" is one of a pair with "Moonlight with a Lake and Castellated Tower." The first is hot and fiery; the other, cool and serene. Such contrasts were integral to Wright's artistic vocabulary.

4. Wright was a member of England's most **progressive intellectual** circles in the 18th century. He painted portraits of the Midlands' wealthy merchants, pioneering industrialists and scientists, many of them were members of the Lunar Society, which attempted to popularize science. His paintings about **scientific experimentation** were unique in Britain. He was meticulous in portraying complex human situations, accurate depictions of scientific apparatus and skillful use of a single light source. He shocked viewers with his, "An Experiment on a Bird in the Air-Pump," showing a horrified audience as a bird was nearly suffocated to demonstrate a vacuum pump. Moonlight – a reference to the Lunar Society – often shows up in his paintings.

5. Wright's paintings on the rapid development of scientific knowledge have **metaphorical** meanings: The difficult transition from a world ruled by faith and the church to one ruled by scientific enlightenment and rationality. The light science brings to a world of darkness – but at a human cost.