

Robert Frost: "Mending Wall"

Analysis

This poem is the first work in Frost's second book of poetry, "North of Boston," which was published upon his return from England in 1915. While living in England with his family, Frost was exceptionally homesick for the farm in New Hampshire where he had lived with his wife from 1900 to 1909. Despite the eventual failure of the farm, Frost associated his time in New Hampshire with a peaceful, rural sensibility that he instilled in the majority of his subsequent poems. "Mending Wall" is autobiographical on an even more specific level: a French-Canadian named Napoleon Guay had been Frost's neighbor in New Hampshire, and the two had often walked along their property line and repaired the wall that separated their land. Ironically, the most famous line of the poem ("Good fences make good neighbors") was not invented by Frost himself, but was rather a phrase that Guay frequently declared to Frost during their walks. This particular adage was a popular colonial proverb in the middle of the 17th century, but variations of it also appeared in Norway ("There must be a fence between good neighbors"), Germany ("Between neighbor's gardens a fence is good"), Japan ("Build a fence even between intimate friends"), and even India ("Love your neighbor, but do not throw down the dividing wall").

In terms of form, "Mending Wall" is not structured with stanzas; it is a simple forty-five lines of first-person narrative. Frost does maintain iambic stresses, but he is flexible with the form in order to maintain the conversational feel of the poem. He also shies away from any obvious rhyme patterns and instead relies upon the occasional internal rhyme and the use of assonance in certain ending terms (such as "wall," "hill," "balls," "well").

In the poem itself, Frost creates two distinct characters who have different ideas about what exactly makes a person a good neighbor. The narrator deplores his neighbor's preoccupation with repairing the wall; he views it as old-fashioned and even archaic. After all, he quips, his apples are not going to invade the property of his neighbor's pinecones. Moreover, within a land of such of such freedom and discovery, the narrator asks, are such borders necessary to maintain relationships between people? Despite the narrator's skeptical view of the wall, the neighbor maintains his seemingly "old-fashioned" mentality, responding to each of the narrator's disgruntled questions and rationalizations with nothing more than the adage: "Good fences make good neighbors."

As the narrator points out, the very act of mending the wall seems to be in opposition to nature. Every year, stones are dislodged and gaps suddenly appear, all without explanation. Every year, the two neighbors fill the gaps and replace the fallen boulders, only to have parts of the wall fall over again in the coming months. It seems as if nature is attempting to destroy the barriers that man has created on the land, even as man continues to repair the barriers, simply out of habit and tradition.

Ironically, while the narrator seems to begrudge the annual repairing of the wall, Frost subtly points out that the narrator is actually more active than the neighbor. It is the narrator who selects the day for mending and informs his neighbor across the property. Moreover, the narrator himself walks along the wall at other points during the year in order to repair the damage that has been done by local hunters. Despite his skeptical attitude, it seems that the narrator is even more tied to the tradition of wall-mending than his neighbor. Perhaps his skeptical questions and quips can then be read as an attempt to justify his own behavior to himself. While he chooses to present himself as a modern man, far beyond old-fashioned traditions, the narrator is really no

different from his neighbor: he too clings to the concept of property and division, of ownership and individuality.

Ultimately, the presence of the wall between the properties does ensure a quality relationship between the two neighbors. By maintaining the division between the properties, the narrator and his neighbor are able to maintain their individuality and personal identity as farmers: one of apple trees, and one of pine trees. Moreover, the annual act of mending the wall also provides an opportunity for the two men to interact and communicate with each other, an event that might not otherwise occur in an isolated rural environment. The act of meeting to repair the wall allows the two men to develop their relationship and the overall community far more than if each maintained their isolation on separate properties.

NOTE BY Katherine Kearns

It is arguable that the self-righteous speaker of "Mending Wall" is himself obsessively committed to wall building, far more intractably and instinctively committed than his cliché-bound neighbor. While the speaker of "Mending Wall" justifiably castigates his unthinking neighbor and is himself far more aware of the powers of language for good and for ill, he is nonetheless caught up, ironically perhaps, in the same actual task, wall building, which will have the same results and look no different from his neighbor's contribution despite the narrative he brings to it. There are several possibilities for irony here, depending on the level of Frost's self-awareness. Wall imagery pervades his poetry, as a conscious poetic image and as a psychological marker of control and limitation.

That the speaker is the one who calls the neighbor to mend the wall is vitally important, then, but it is not clear that Frost meant for the speaker to be ironically perceived as a hypocrite. The simple explanation, that the speaker acts out of a sense of inevitability, knowing his neighbor's habits, seems hardly enough given the contextual symbolism of the wall in Frost's poetry; the psychological explanation attendant upon this version might suggest that Frost's conscious intent was subverted by his own unconscious need for walls. So while Frost might not mean the speaker to be self-parodic, the reader might judge that there is an ironic discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, both by the speaker and by the poet. On a deeper level even than this is the possibility that Frost was aware of, had taken account of and justified, his own need for barriers. One does, after all, need something against which to push. In this case, the poem might be completely ironic, for while both men are engaged in the same task, each brings a different narrative to it, the one limited to a thoughtless cliché, the other enriched philosophically. It could be that Frost is illustrating what it means to move from delight to wisdom: the road less traveled may not look any different, but it is made different by the inner progress of the traveler. The one wall becomes, in this reading, two walls, the speaker's wall a philosophically differentiated structure, the neighbor's wall a mere landmark of past clichés.

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Monarch Notes:

By the end of the poem [the wall] has become a symbol, and the two farmers have turned into allegorical figures representing opposing views of freedom and confinement, reason and rigidity of mind, tolerance and violence, civilization and

savagery.... There is no mistaking the poet's meaning, or his attitude toward what the wall represents ... it stands for... the barrier between human contact and understanding. It is erected by all that is primitive, fearful, irrational and hostile [in the neighbor]. It is opposed by a higher "something" that Frost recognizes as in himself ... the desire not to be alone, walled in, but to be one with the rest of the world.