Mending Wall Study Guide

Mending Wall by Robert Frost

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Introduction

"Mending Wall" (1915) is Robert Frost's tribute to one man's notion of being a good neighbor, even as that notion is the opposite of his own. It is the opening poem in Robert Frost's second collection of poetry, *North of Boston* (1915). Homesick for America, Frost wrote "Mending Wall" while living in England with his wife and four children before World War I. Napoleon Guay had been Frost's neighbor in New Hampshire a few years earlier and inspired the poem, "Mending Wall." Apparently, French-Canadian Guay made an impression on Frost by often repeating the phrase, "Good fences make good neighbors," during the routine repairs on the wall between their farms.

The idea of "good fences" is one of personal boundaries, evoking the American pioneer mentality of staking a claim and taking ownership. With this poem, Frost questions that version of the American dream and hints at another version. After becoming a well-known poet, Frost was eager to reclaim his own space in New Hampshire; "Mending Wall" illustrates the personal and natural freedoms, as well as limitations, of a rural existence. The poem questions the necessity of a wall, like questioning the wisdom of perpetuating an old habit. In America, a land of vast frontier, do we need walls to maintain relationships with others? This question becomes even more interesting in light of Frost's later position as American "goodwill ambassador" to South America, and later to the Soviet Union during President Kennedy's administration. In light of his interest in the dilemma of borders in "Mending Wall," it is fitting that he would reach across them to foster positive relations with other people and cultures.

Some scholars consider Frost as a nature poet in the manner of Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Wordsworth or an Imagist in the school of Ezra Pound; however, Frost did not classify himself that way. His poems deal with nature in an everyday, human fashion and are written in the language of ordinary speech. This colloquial tone is relevant for looking at Frost's poems in the context of the American dream: His poetry speaks to the common man with simple, yet evocative images. Frost is easy to approach, not esoteric or verbose, using words that allow the reader to connect with tangible objects and authentic emotion. He uses no pretense, as shown by this straightforward line from "Mending Wall": "We keep the wall between us as we go." His popularity and resonance with common Americans earned him the nickname America's Poet. He writes of home, of "yelping dogs," apple trees, and rough fingers. His poems recall a simpler, idealized time of prosperity and fertility.

As America's Poet, Frost received a multitude of awards and distinctions, including four Pulitzer Prizes. Though popular with the public, Frost did not participate in the modernistic, free-verse experiments of his fellow poets. He preferred to convey his thematic messages through meter, rhyme, and form. The U.S. Senate passed a resolution dedicated to Frost on his seventy-fifth birthday, declaring that "His poems have helped to guide American thought and humor and wisdom, setting forth to our minds a reliable representation of ourselves and of all men."

Author Biography

Robert Frost

Born Robert Lee Frost in San Francisco on March 26, 1874, Frost began writing poetry in high school. He married his co-valedictorian, Elinor White, in 1895, after dropping out of Dartmouth College. While trying to establish a career as a poet, Frost worked as a newspaper editor, cobbler, and farmer, and even attended Harvard for a time. Those years were lean for Frost and his family, but in 1906, he took a job as a teacher, which supported him as he composed most of the poems in his first book, *A Boy's Will*. After a stint living in England and a second book of poetry, *North of Boston* (1915), which contained "Mending Wall," Frost returned to America where he received critical acclaim for his poetry and four Pulitzer Prizes between 1922 and 1942.

During his career, Frost published over thirty-three volumes of poetry and acquired more than forty honorary degrees from universities and colleges, including the University of Michigan, Oxford, and Cambridge. Among his best-known works are "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "The Road Not Taken," "Dedication" (which he composed for President Kennedy's inauguration), and "The Gift Outright" (which he recited at Kennedy's inauguration). Frost died in Boston on January 29, 1963.

Since "Mending Wall" is not broken into sections, the meaning of the poem can be best seen through groupings of lines that comprise sentences or complete ideas. Lines 1-4 open the poem and establish the core image: a wall being up-ended by a "frozen-ground-swell." Nature, it seems, does not "love a wall" and "spills the upper boulders in the sun." This upheaval creates "gaps" in the wall large enough for two people to walk through side by side. With this last image comes the possibility of men aligning themselves against nature, an idea that will be up-ended by the end of the poem, much like the stones themselves. Transcendentalism also comes into play with these first few lines, as nature takes on a mysterious divine role with the introductory word, "Something." Frost does not explicitly identify nature as the culprit causing the upheaval, but instead uses a word evoking a powerful unknown, rather like a deity. The "Something" also has judgment, as well as emotion to act on that judgment: It "doesn't love a wall," and in feeling that way, "sends the frozen-ground-swell" to break the wall. Frost makes the reader question: Why does this "Something" not want the wall?

Lines 5-9 frame the next sentence, though the sentence actually ends in the middle of line 9. Men have also upset these stone walls, in their pursuit of the hunt. In their overzealous charge, "they have not left one stone on a stone." The hunters come with the season, as does the eruption of the earth and rock. But the narrator acknowledges that even the hunters do not make as much damage as the earth. Again, Frost gives nature an all-powerful role in this situation, suggesting that man must be aware of what nature can accomplish.

The next few lines announce that the crumbling rock wall is a regular occurrence; the gaps form when the narrator is not present: "No one has seen them made or heard

them made, / But at spring-mending time we find them there." The "we" suggests another person is sharing the narrator's experience; it is the entrance of the narrator's neighbor, who plays a key role in the poem's central conflict. The "we find" also establishes a connection between the narrator and the neighbor; while the poem chronicles their aloof relationship, this small phrase unites them in this experience, showing that they could be on the same side of the wall, so to speak, if they desired.

Lines 12-14 offer further details about the seasonal routine the narrator and his neighbor perform. The narrator tells his neighbor about the gaps in the wall and eventually they "meet to walk the line" and repair the damage. They will not allow the wall between them to disintegrate, as if a boundary must be maintained, both physically and personally. However, Frost does give the sense, particularly with the repetition in lines 14 and 15, that the narrator might regret the wall, saying: "[We] set the wall between us once again. / We keep the wall between us as we go." The emphasis on the wall "between us" shows the narrator's awareness of the wall, which helps foreshadow his uncertainty about the structure later in the poem.

Lines 15-19 begin to describe the action shared by the narrator and his neighbor. Both stay on their side of the wall and replace "the boulders that have fallen." Because of their varying size and shape as indicated by the line, "some are loaves and some so nearly balls," the narrator jokes that he and his neighbor "use a spell to make them balance: / 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'"

In line 20, the narrator mentions the difficulty in the hard work by describing how they "wear [their] fingers rough" replacing the stones. Yet in the next two lines, he refers to the annual process as an "out-door game," each man "on a side." The tone is playful, and although the narrator knows it is futile, he performs the ritual of rebuilding the wall every year. For the first time, the narrator indicates that the neighbor wants the wall more than the narrator does. In line 23, the narrator questions the barrier's purpose, as it only separates the narrator's apple orchard and the neighbor's pines, neither of which poses any threat of trespassing. But as shown in line 25, a natural boundary is not enough for the neighbor. But with the narrator's reference to himself and his neighbor in metaphors of nature, Frost suggests the narrator's awareness of their connection to nature, hinting at the question: Why do two natural entities need a wall between them?

The narrator's rumination over his neighbor's obsession with the stone wall continues in the next lines. "Good fences make good neighbours," his neighbor always says when the narrator tries to point out that his apples will never "eat the cones under his pines." However, the narrator still does not completely understand his neighbor's philosophy and wonders what would happen if he asked his neighbor why fences "make good neighbours." Line 28 also points to the narrator's connection to nature: "Spring is the mischief in me," he says. Spring does not make mischief in him or inspire him to mischief, but is mischief. As with the line "I am apple orchard," Frost shows that man is nature.

The narrator could understand if they both owned cows, because cows would obviously stray into each other's pastures. But, as the narrator says in line 31, "here there are no cows." Next, he wonders if the wall is appropriate at all:

> Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
> What I was walling in or walling out,
> And to whom I was like to give offence.
> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That wants it down.

In line 36, the narrator is tempted to joke with the neighbor and say that "Elves" were creating the gaps in the wall. But instead of joking, he would really like to know why his neighbor feels so strongly that the wall is necessary, even when nature clearly feels that it is not.

The turn in the poem comes with the second half of line 38, as well as lines 39 and 40: "I see him there / Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed." Every year, when the narrator encounters his neighbor, he sees him as a throwback to another age. Suddenly, he sees the stone wall as a manifestation of a generations-old tradition: The neighbor is no longer simply his neighbor, but a man doing what men have always done in protecting their property. His neighbor "will not go behind his father's saying," as stated in line 43; in other words, he will never let his father, or generations of men in his family, down. The narrator also sees his neighbor as fighting nature, despite being part of nature, "old-stone," himself.

The poem ends with the narrator's impression of his neighbor:

> He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
> Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
> He will not go behind his father's saying,
> And he likes having thought of it so well
> He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

The narrator feels that the neighbor's insistence on maintaining this barrier, clinging to whatever urge or habit that motivates it, is unenlightened.

Plot Summary

Before analyzing the narrative of "Mending Wall," it is important to look at the structure and language. The poem is not divided into stanzas and its forty-five lines make one solid verse narrated in first-person voice. The speech is colloquial, filled with the natural stops and pauses found in everyday conversation. In addition, Frost uses contractions to emphasize the vernacular rhythms, such as in the first line, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," and in line 32, "Before I'd built a wall I'd ask to know." By this same token, Frost keeps his syllables short and simple for easy comprehension, as in line 31, "Where there are cows? But here there are no cows."

Themes

Property

The American dream of property ownership undergirds many other aspects of the American dream, including control, privacy, and wealth. In a country where people may own their own land (rather than living at the pleasure of the sovereign or state), property-owning citizens are more secure. To own property means that the owner controls the use of the property, may benefit from the property, may sell the property, and may exclude others from the property. The last of these basic property rights is the one being exercised by the neighbor in "Mending Wall." Knowing that they have a place to call home frees landowners from the basic human worry of having a place to sleep, allowing them to focus on progress, or wealth, or whatever other pursuit they think may bring them happiness. Property also represents a legacy, one that future generations may inherit and use as the foundation of their future American dream.

The seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke believed that it was the natural order of the world that men should own land:

As a man had a right to all he could employ his labour upon, so he had no temptation to labour for more than he could make use of. This left no room for controversy about the title, nor for incroachment on the right of others; what portion a man carved to himself, was easily seen; and it was useless, as well as dishonest, to carve himself too much, or take more than he needed. (Section 51 of *Two Treatises of Government*, 1689)

Man being born, as has been proved, with a title to perfect freedom, and an uncontrolled enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the law of nature, equally with any other man, or number of men in the world, hath by nature a power, not only to preserve his property, that is, his life, liberty and estate, against the injuries and attempts of other men. (Section 87 of *Two Treatises of Government*, 1689)

Locke's ideas of men's right to "life, liberty, and estate" appear in the *American Declaration of Independence* as the "inalienable Rights,… Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Adam Smith, the eighteenth-century economist and philosopher, lays the groundwork for modern capitalism in *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). He builds on Locke's philosophy and explains that the ownership of capital resources, and the motivation to best apply those resources to make a profit, is the engine that drives capitalism.

Privacy

The American right to privacy is among the most basic and precious of freedoms, and is prescribed and protected by the Fourth Amendment:

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

To possess that privacy and use it however one desires is another tenet of the American dream. People argue about whether privacy fosters trust or suspicion and whether it helps or hinders intimacy, but no one seems to question the desire for privacy as an innate human impulse. Though the narrator of "Mending Wall" questions the need for a physical wall to separate him from his neighbor, he also recognizes that his neighbor puts up personal, figurative walls between them. He and his neighbor are not on the same side: "He is all pine and I am apple orchard." The narrator represents bounty, harvest, fruit, things to share. He wonders "to whom [he] was like to give offence." Obviously, he does not feel the same way as his neighbor with "a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed." His neighbor feels the need to maintain not only the actual wall of rock, but also the wall preventing intimacy. "He moves in darkness," the narrator says, acknowledging that his neighbor does not reveal or expose much about himself. The form of this poem reflects its ironic message: It is not broken into stanzas but rather is one solid block, reflecting the neighbor's walls.

Community

Although "Mending Wall" begins with a brotherly image of two men walking "abreast" through a gap in the stone fence, the poem ultimately encapsulates the story of two neighbors who "set the wall between [them] once again" and "keep the wall between [them] as [they] go." The narrator calls the rebuilding a "kind of out-door game," but more aptly, the mending of fences symbolizes a tenuous keeping of the peace. The image of the men "meet[ing] to walk the line" evokes an allusion to war, of eyeing the enemy from opposite sides of the fence. The image also refers to "toeing the line," or following the rules, not straying from what is right and wrong. If the two men allow the fence between them to fall into disrepair, would they turn into "old-stone savage[s] armed"? The third to the last line, "He will not go behind his father's saying," shows that this rebuilding has probably been continuing for generations, and by keeping the peace, the apple orchards and pines have thrived; one has not overtaken the other. Good fences have made, and will continue to make, good neighbors.

Though the walls in Frost's poem function as a distinct and questionable barrier between the speaker of the poem and his neighbor, they also offer an opportunity for the men to evaluate, or even "mend," their relationship. These walls in need of "mending" indicate an existing, yet fractured, relationship, and each season, when the crumbling walls require attention and care, the narrator wonders whether replacing the stones will leave his relationship with his neighbor in ruins or if leaving the fallen stones will actually repair their strained and impersonal connection. This inner conflict is shown when the narrator says, "Before I'd built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out." In other words, the narrator questions the purpose of the wall: In rebuilding, was he walling out a true, intimate relationship with another human, and at the same

time, making sure his personal property and identity was protected? S. L. Dragland, in his January 1967 review of Frost's poem published in the *Explicator*, suggests "the walls defin[e] the difference between individual and collective modes of thought and existence." If the walls were not re-established, would the narrator and his neighbor begin to form a closer community of sorts as they learned to understand and accept one another? Or would they grow more antagonistic toward each other as their individual space became invaded? In any case, the recurring situation of "mending" these walls presents an open door for the narrator and his neighbor as each year they are faced with the chance to patch their friendship and not their fences.

Nature

In his 1836 essay *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote this:

Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result.

With this, Emerson established American Transcendental philosophy, and the idea that humans are a part of nature, not above it. "Mending Wall" illustrates the idea that in drawing boundaries between each other, our property, and our lives, we gain a false sense of wellbeing. Nature is unpredictable, as alluded to in the first two lines, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it," yet humans want to believe they can control, claim, and tame nature. The narrator of the poem realizes that no matter how many times he and his neighbor rebuild the wall year after year, the gaps return at "spring mending-time"; the men are forever losing nature's battle. They "wear [their] fingers rough with handling" the stones and rely on a magic "spell" in hopes that the stones will stay in place. But each spring, after nature has run her course once again, the men must repair the "gaps where even two can pass abreast."

Tradition

"Mending Wall" provides a snapshot of rural life "North of Boston" at the turn of the twentieth century. The second line of the poem immediately describes a thaw after the hard winter "frozen-ground-swell" and inspires an image of a cold countryside lined with crumbling stone walls. In addition to the narrator and his neighbor, this rural landscape belongs to "hunters" and their "yelping dogs," but while the narrator and his neighbor live their lives on separate sides of the boundary, hunters have the freedom to knock down stones to encourage "the rabbit out of hiding." The hunters seem a natural part of this rural landscape, arriving on the scene according to season like the apple trees and pine. The narrator expects them, but obviously cannot control their actions. This poem provokes questions about the nature of change: Despite the crumbling stones that must

be annually repaired, rural life remains the same. The narrator knows the cause of the "fallen boulders" and accepts his yearly task. Ultimately, he wonders why he and his neighbor need a wall to separate them and whether the wall is holding things in or out, but he does not move to change the situation. When "spring-mending time" rolls around, he follows through with habit; routine seems comforting, rather like the closing two lines of the poem that refer to his neighbor's tradition: "And he likes having thought of [his father's saying] so well / He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbours.'"

Historical Context

The History of the "good Fences" Proverb

Robert Frost did not invent the proverb, "Good fences make good neighbours" with his poem "Mending Wall." The saying began long before the poem was published, in communities all around the world. According to Wolfgang Meider in an article in *Folklore*, translations include "There must be a fence between good neighbours" in Norwegian; "Between neighbours' gardens a fence is good" in German; "Build a fence even between intimate friends" in Japanese; "Love your neighbour, but do not throw down the dividing wall" in Hindi; and "Love your neighbour, but put up a fence" in Russian. The phrase even relates back to a late medieval Latin proverb, "Bonum est erigere dumos cum vicinis," or "It is good to erect hedges with the neighbours."

In April 1754, Benjamin Franklin told the readers of his *Poor Richard's Almanack* to "Love thy Neighbour; yet don't pull down your Hedge," marking the proverb's influence in the United States. However, Reverend Ezekiel Rogers of Rowley, Massachusetts, might be the first to note the saying in the New World, with his advice to Governor John Winthrop on June 30, 1640: "Touching the buisinesse of the Bounds, which we [have] now in agitation; I [have] thought, that a good fence helpeth to keepe peace betweene neighbours; but let [us] take heede that we make not a high stone wall, to keepe [us] from meeting." Rogers agrees that having boundaries "keepe[s] peace betweene neighbours," but believes the wall should not completely close off one man to another.

The Stone Walls of New England

The central image in "Mending Wall" is a typical stone wall criss-crossing farmland in New England. According to the Stone Wall Initiative, a group dedicated to preserving the walls in New England much like "classical ruins," early American farmers constructed most of the walls with stones that erupted from the ground after thousands of years. When the colonists began farming America, the soil began to change. The loss of the organic mulch and topsoil, not to mention colder winters, acted as a catalyst in forcing the stones out of the soil. As stones churned up into fields and pastures, farmers desperately needed them removed. As in "Mending Wall," farmers usually hauled them away by hand, and because the weight of the stones did not allow easy transportation, the stones were dumped along the nearest fence line. Now, stone walls represent the early rural American dream and recall a time when stones marked a man's property, a man's worth, and a man's future.

A New America

The stone wall of Frost's poem acts as a nostalgic marker, one that suggests the days of claiming one's territory and living off the land are coming to an end. With the dawn of the twentieth century, new frontiers were characterized by industry, machines, and new

technology. Urban centers and lifestyles beckoned, and farmers soon found it difficult to maintain their pioneering way of life. A man could not build a solid future for himself behind stone walls. The "frozen-ground-swell" was pushing up the stones just as it was pushing up the farmer. Traditions of father and country were eschewed for urban dreams. Darkness was settling upon the "old-stone savage" as he desperately tried to rebuild the walls around his heritage and identity.

Imagist Poetry

Robert Frost is called one of the "pioneers" of the Imagist Poetry movement, though Frost himself has denied that credit, as well as his contribution to that particular genre of poetry. However, Amy Lowell, in her article, "On Imagism," in *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, claims otherwise. She defines Imagist poetry with six key "rules," which include "us[ing] the language of common speech, [and] employ[ing] always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word"; "present[ing] an image … [that] render[s] particulars exactly"; and "produc[ing] poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite." Frost's "Mending Wall" adheres to those rules, as well as to Lowell's others. His colloquial speech, strong imagery, and precise, straight-forward style make this poem Imagist without a doubt, as illustrated in this group of lines: "I see him there / Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed." Imagists, Lowell says, present images, rather than represent images. Essentially, instead of using metaphors or other overblown language to convey an image, Imagists describe the image clearly and purposefully, as shown through this no-nonsense image of stacking the stones in "Mending Wall": "We wear our fingers rough with handling them." The rules of Imagist poetry, Lowell notes, "boil down into … [s]implicity and directness of speech; subtlety and beauty of rhythms; individualistic freedom of idea; clearness and vividness of presentation; and concentration." Other famous Imagist poets include Lowell herself, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and Ezra Pound, who began the movement in London around 1912.

Nature Poetry

In 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote *Nature*, an essay establishing the Transcendental belief in nature as the divine, a divine accessible, understandable, and knowable to humans, if they remain aware. Because of Frost's keen poetic relationship to the natural world, particularly with regard to the way humans connect to nature, he is often classified with Emerson, William Wordsworth, and Henry Thoreau as a nature, or Transcendental, poet. "Mending Wall" certainly deals with man's connection to nature as both narrator and neighbor struggle to battle the "frozen-ground-swell" that "spills the upper boulders in the sun." However, as the men face nature's intervention, Frost reminds the reader that the narrator and his neighbor not only fight with nature but also are a part of nature with the line: "He is all pine and I am apple orchard." By that token, if man is aware of his surroundings, if he becomes one with those surroundings, without constantly rebuilding walls between himself and his neighbor, perhaps he might grow closer to the divine. With "Mending Wall," Frost might be suggesting that nature is telling

the men something important with its continuous destruction of the walls: that perhaps good fences do not make good neighbors, but instead block our sight from the natural world, or what is truly important.

Critical Overview

In the early years of Frost's career, critics positioned Frost as a speaker for America, a connection between nature, art, individual, and nation. His imagery provided every reader with access to the American dream: a life of homespun, real texture and neighborly conversation. In the January 1917 issue of *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe comments on the natural style of Frost in the context of American history by evoking the country's birth: "His New England is the same old New England of the pilgrim fathers—a harsh, austere, velvet-coated-granite earth." Critics shared Monroe's opinion for the next several decades and echoed the patriotic tone, much like G. R. Elliott in the July 1925 issue of *The Virginia Quarterly Review*: "The Frostian humour is peculiarly important for America. No other of our poets has shown a mood at once so individual and so neighborly…. His poetic humour is on the highway toward the richer American poetry of the future, if that is to be." Others, like Malcolm Cowley in the September 18, 1944, issue of the *New Republic*, focus on Frost's mastery of the everyday power and beauty of nature:

Let us say that he is a poet neither of the mountains nor of the woods, although he lives among both, but rather of the hill pastures, the intervals [*sic*], the dooryard in autumn with the leaves swirling, the closed house shaking in the winter storms (and who else has described these scenes more accurately, in more lasting colors?). In the same way, he is not the poet of New England in its great days, or in its late-nineteenth-century decline (except in some of his earlier poems); he is rather a poet who celebrates the diminished but prosperous and self-respecting New England of the tourist home and the antique shop in the abandoned gristmill. And the praise heaped on Frost in recent years is somehow connected in one's mind with the search for ancestors and authentic old furniture.

With the advent of modernism, Frost's reviewers focused on the dark realism of Frost's ordinary imagery. Lionel Trilling, in the Summer 1959 *Partisan Review*, calls Frost both a "terrifying poet" and a "tragic poet" while the "universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe." In his 1961 examination of American poetry, Roy Harvey Pearce argues that "Frost's protagonists refuse to live fully in the modern world," while John Ciardi of the *Saturday Review*, March 24, 1962, suggests "the darkness in his poems is as profound as the light in them is long. They are terrible because they are from life at a depth into which we cannot look unshaken." Yet critics were still affected by Frost's style, as shown by a rhetorical question from Denis Donoghue in the Winter 1963 edition of the *Yale Review*: "what are the possibilities for a poetry based upon nothing more than a shared sense of human fact?… Frost has spent a lifetime seeing how much he could say on those terms. He is the poet most devoted to bare human gesture."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

In the following excerpt, Trachtenberg discusses how Frost thematically reveals the complexities of humanity through the relationship between nature and man, as well as communal and personal space. He asks the reader to contemplate the meaning of the words neighbor and boundary.

"Mending Wall" has two characters: its narrator and his neighbor, owners of adjacent farms, who meet each Spring to repair the stone wall that stands between their properties. The narrator, at first glance, seems to take a somewhat skeptical attitude toward property. (We shall see that his attitude is in fact more complicated.) The poem opens with his words "Something there is that doesn't love a wall"—a phrase he repeats later, making it a kind of slogan for the position on property he personifies. That position seems to reject human attempts to inscribe the arbitrary divisions of property holdings on the land. The narrator sees in natural processes an attempt to cast off this artificial imposition: that which doesn't love a wall "sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, / And spills the upper boulders in the sun." He recognizes that asserting a separation between the two parcels of property by erecting a wall is futile. For, he recognizes, the two parcels are one, connected underneath the wall by natural forces that work unconsciously but actively against human efforts to divide them.

In 1956, Robert Frost recorded himself reading "Mending Wall" and other poems at his home. The recording is available online at town.hall.org/radio/HarperAudio/012294_harp_ITH.html.

Robert Frost recorded readings of many of his poems between 1935 and 1962. Many, including "Mending Wall," were released as *Robert Frost: Voice of the Poet* by R. H. Audio Voices in 2003. It is available on compact disc.

The neighbor, by contrast, speaks for an individualistic belief in the value of marking property holdings. "Good fences make good neighbors" are his only words in the poem, repeated in the last line like a counter-slogan to the narrator's. The neighbor first offers his slogan in response to the fact that the wall is not needed for the practical purpose of keeping his and the narrator's goods separate. Their goods do not need a wall to be kept apart: they have no cows to wander back and forth across the line, and the narrator's "apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under [the neighbor's] pines." For the neighbor, that is, the utility of the wall is not economic. Rather it serves to define the sort of relationship he wishes to have with those who surround him: his slogan expresses an ideology of human separation. In the neighbor's eyes, apparently, all that makes a neighbor is the mere fact of owning an adjacent farm, hence what makes a *good* neighbor is his separateness. For what else could characterize the goodness of neighbors who are made good by fences?

The neighbor thus personifies a position on property that disvalues community. Property is marked by walls, whose main function in his view is precisely to divide people—more importantly even than dividing their goods. Thus the neighbor appears to the narrator at

the end of the poem as "an old-stone savage," armed with the rocks to be used for rebuilding the wall, an image that associates walls with weapons. At the same time, this image presents the neighbor as an autarchic figure, an embodiment of human isolation. In both ways the poem shows the neighbor rejecting the human connectedness that constitutes membership in community, in favor of the personal security of his own property. The slogan "good fences make good neighbors" thus encapsulates the notion that property's primary function is to mark off separate domains within which individuals are independent of each other.

What, then, is the value of the wall to the narrator? He understands as well as the neighbor that the wall lacks a utilitarian purpose; it is he who reminds the neighbor of this fact. The neighbor, as we have seen, responds to this fact with the ideological justification that by separating them the wall makes them good neighbors. The narrator responds to it lightheartedly, by conceiving of the shared activity of mending the wall as "just another kind of outdoor game/One on a side." Because the wall has no practical function, that is, the only justification for the effort of maintaining it must be in the nature of the effort itself. What is important for the narrator is the playful sharing of an activity with his neighbor. Consider his description of their replacing the stones on the wall: "We have to use a spell to make them balance / 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'" Here he represents the chore both as a joint enterprise, and as one understood to be justified by the doing of it rather than by the result. Thus, as he says, mending the wall is like a game, in which the opponents are in a broader sense partners in a common undertaking.

In seeing the practice of affirming property divisions as a game, the narrator presents property as a human convention. And, as he witnesses every Spring, this convention sits uneasily on the land. We noted above that the narrator sees in the forces that cast down the wall nature's rejection of the division of land into property. But the narrator also sees in these natural forces the occasion for cooperation with his neighbor. The vulnerability of the wall to natural destruction explains why it constitutes an ongoing opportunity for engagement between his neighbor and himself. Nature tends to obliterate the marks of property; the narrator grasps the effort to reestablish what is their own as an opportunity for human connection. Hence, for him, it is this chance to affirm community in the face of nature that makes mending the wall worthwhile. Recall that he fixes the gaps made by other people himself. By contrast, responding to the forces associated with the land calls for communal activity, carried out and celebrated in the yearly ceremony of mending the wall.

It turns out, then, that the narrator sees a spark of truth in his neighbor's slogan that good fences make good neighbors. But, for him, it is not the simple existence of the fence that does the trick. Rather, to paraphrase Richard Poirier, the narrator sees that while the mere presence of good fences might not make good neighbors, the shared activity of mending fences can. Sharing the chore of mending the wall can transform owners of adjacent properties into neighbors indeed. In the poem that very activity brings the two men together, raising the possibility at least that the narrator can engage the neighbor in the kind of communal interaction the latter seems to disvalue. But we must follow the narrator's position a step further. For, to the extent that he is motivated

to "wear fingers rough with handling" stones simply by the chance to enjoy his neighbor's company, we can say that the effort of sustaining their human connection provides the opportunity for the men to reestablish what is their own. The wall stays mended because mending it is the expression of communal attachments. For the narrator, then, the truth of the neighbor's slogan is in its dialectical opposite: in reality, it is good neighbors who make good fences.

How might we classify the narrator's position on property? To underscore the contrast with the neighbor's liberal view, it seems natural to suggest that the narrator frames a "communitarian" conception of property. But we should distinguish between two ways the connection between property and community can be drawn. On the one hand, as Alan Ryan observes, the view of property that stresses its role in the formation and support of personality "is at home with the concerns of so-called 'communitarian' moral and political theories, since personality needs the right communal support if it is to flourish." Note that the focus of this kind of view is on the individual, hence property is conceived as "prior" to community: it contributes to community by helping form the individuals by whom a community is constituted. An example of this sort of connection is the Jeffersonian ideal, in which property enables the individual to participate in the life of the community, which in turn cultivates the civic virtue of its individual members through its property regime.

But on the other hand there is a sense in which community is "prior" to property. For the narrator, as we have seen, the maintenance of a property regime itself relies on communal ties. Few formal theorists of property have developed this sort of connection between property and community. A possible conceptual link can be found in an argument offered by Carol Rose, who has persuasively identified a role for the human connections I associate with community in the creation of a property regime. She treats the institution of a property regime as the collective action problem of providing a public good. To get a property regime going, people must be willing to cooperate reliably with each other, not breaking their mutual agreements even if they are certain they can get away with it. The willingness to enter into cooperative arrangements where it is open to others to cheat can be explained by the existence of some prior human attachments between the erstwhile cooperators. Being part of a community, that is, can inspire the trust needed to initiate and sustain collective action. On this view, community feelings motivate people to respect each other's property holdings, so that good neighbors will make good fences in more than a literal sense.

Although the narrator sees the possibility that property can support community, he also sees that that possibility can go unrecognized. Indeed, by the end of the poem it seems that the neighbor has failed to appreciate the shared activity of mending the wall in the way the narrator would like. The narrator sees the chore as play, and hopes that his banter about his apple trees not eating the neighbor's pine cones will bring his co-worker to acknowledge their connectedness. The neighbor responds with his slogan, endorsing separation. Still, the narrator has hopes that their interaction will make the neighbor question his belief. "Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head / '*Why* do they make good neighbors?'" The narrator wishes, that is, that the neighbor would examine his own understanding of neighborliness. The

neighbor should consider that blithely putting up a wall might give offense—building walls requires examination first, of what one is "walling in or walling out." That is, the narrator wants the neighbor to acknowledge that a wall might not make someone a good neighbor, but might sever all connection with him. At this point the narrator repeats his slogan, imagining that the neighbor might see in it a critique of his (the neighbor's) limited conception of human association. The narrator wants the neighbor to grasp that a wall can be like an insult, and that whatever it is that doesn't love a wall might want it down because, like an insult, it disrupts community.

But the neighbor does not entertain these thoughts. He does not even enter into the narrator's play, by, say, joking that the damage the two men repair was caused by elves. Rather, as we noted, the narrator's final image presents the neighbor not as a companion in community, but as "an old-stone savage" who "moves in darkness as it seems to me / Not of woods only and the shade of trees." Far from learning the narrator's lesson, the neighbor, because he "likes having thought of it so well," reaffirms his own slogan. This slogan is the poem's closing line, indicating that the narrator grasps that their interaction has failed to make the neighbor "go behind his father's saying." The neighbor appears in darkness to the narrator precisely because of this failure: he seems to stand in a shadow cast by his ideology of isolation, blind to the fact that the walls he values are the product of the community he disvalues.

The richness of "Mending Wall" is that it offers a hopeful vision of the role property can play in sustaining community, while fully acknowledging that vision's ambiguous prospect. Though he might convince the reader, the eloquent spokesman for a communitarian conception of property cannot convince his own neighbor. The poem's confrontation between the narrator and the neighbor, and the positions on property they represent, reflect what is perhaps a paradox inherent in the effort to bring the notions of property and community together. A clue is in the poem's title, which yokes a word that evokes reconnection with a word that evokes separation. This paradoxical juxtaposition generates the poem's dialectical power. It is, in effect, reiterated when the narrator tells how he and his neighbor meet to "set the wall between us once again." Together they share an activity that divides them; maintaining the division requires their shared activity. 'Mending Wall' thus displays the dialectic into which we must enter if we are to explore the relation between property and community because it helps us frame a conception of property in which walls are acknowledged as dividers, but are also imagined as seams.

Source: Zev Trachtenberg, "Good Neighbors Make Good Fences: Frost's "*Mending Wall*"," in *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1997, pp. 114-22.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
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- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
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NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

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A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

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