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MENDING WALL (1914)

By ROBERT FROST

About the Author: Robert Frost

- ▶ the most popular American poet of the twentieth century.
- ▶ highly regarded for his realistic depictions of rural village in New England.
- ▶ awarded 4 Pulitzer Prizes for his poetry in his lifetime.
- ▶ nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature for 31 times.
- ▶ His other masterful works: “The Road not Taken”, “Home Burial”, “Directive”, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, “The Lovely Shall be Choosers”, “Spring Pools” etc.

Mending relationship/ wall ?

- ▶ **The title** of the poem *Mending Wall* is ambiguous as the word “mending” implies a distinguished relationship that the speaker and his neighbour share which they are trying to mend.

About the poem

- ▶ It is Frost's first work in the second book of poetry, "North of Boston," which was published upon his return from England in 1915.
- ▶ The narrator, a New England farmer, contacts his neighbour in the spring to rebuild the stone wall between their two farms. The narrator questions the purpose of a wall. He notes twice in the poem that "something there is that doesn't love a wall" (1, 35), but his neighbour replies twice with the proverb,

"Good fences make good neighbours."

His love towards the farm

- ▶ exceptionally homesick for the farm in New Hampshire where he had lived with his wife from 1900 to 1909.
- ▶ associated his time in New Hampshire with a ***peaceful, rural sensibility*** that he instilled in the poem.

Frost's neighbour – the source for the poem

- ▶ Frost and a French–Canadian named **Napoleon Guay**, Frost's neighbour in New Hampshire had often walked along their property line and repaired the wall that separated their land.

The popular proverb

- ▶ Ironically, the most famous line of the poem (“*Good fences make good neighbours*”) was not invented by Frost himself, but was rather a phrase that Guay frequently declared to Frost during their walks.

The Other related proverbs

- ▶ 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 neighbours**”),
- ▶ In Germany (“*Between neighbour’s gardens a fence is good*”),
- ▶ In Japan (“**Build a fence even between intimate friends**”),
- ▶ And even in India (“*Love your neighbour, but do not throw down the dividing wall*”).

Structure of the poem

- ▶ simple forty-five lines of first-person narrative
- ▶ maintaining **iambic stresses**, but flexible with the form in order to keep up the **conversational feel**
- ▶ away from any obvious rhyme patterns, instead relies upon the occasional internal rhyme & the use of assonance in certain ending terms (such as “*wall*,” “*hill*,” “*balls*,” “*well*”).

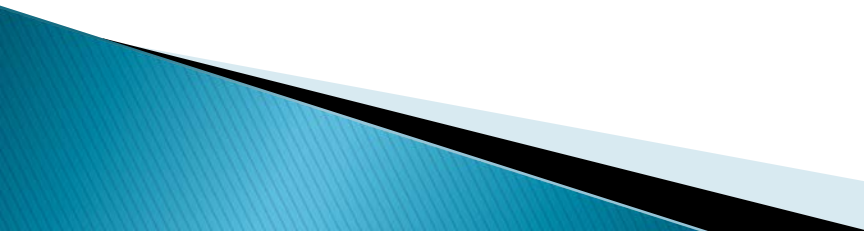
Are borders necessary ?

- ▶ In the poem itself, Frost creates two distinct characters who have different ideas about what exactly makes a person a good neighbour.
- ▶ The narrator deplures his neighbour'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 neighbour's pinecones.*

The old-fashioned mentality

- ▶ Despite the narrator's skeptical view of the wall, the neighbour 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 neighbours."

About mending the wall

- ▶ 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 neighbours fill the gaps and replace the fallen boulders, only to have parts of the wall fall over again in the coming months.
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Nature's Opposition on barriers

- ▶ 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.*

The Irony

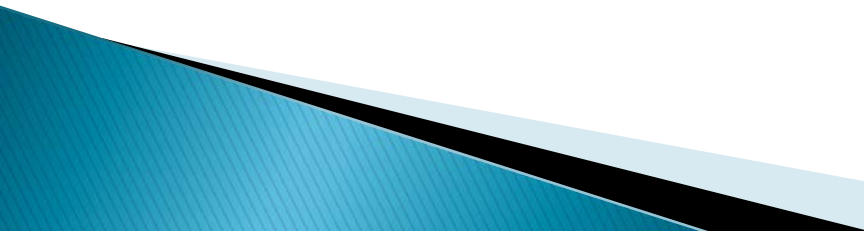
- ▶ Ironically, while the narrator seems to begrudge the annual repairing of the wall, Frost subtly points out that the narrator is actually more active than the neighbour.
- ▶ It is the narrator who selects the day for mending and informs his neighbour across the property.
- ▶ Moreover, the narrator himself walks along the wall at other points during the year in order to repair the damage that has been done by local hunters.

The narrator's ties with tradition

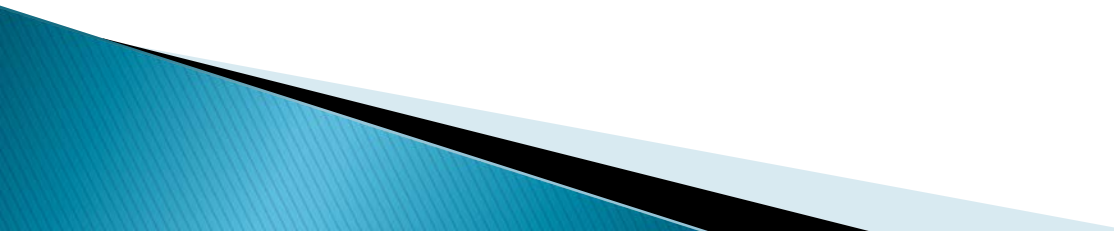
- ▶ Despite his skeptical attitude, it seems that the narrator is even more tied to the tradition of wall-mending than his neighbour.
- ▶ Perhaps his skeptical questions and quips can then be read as an attempt to justify his own behaviour to himself.
- ▶ While he chooses to present himself as a modern man, far beyond old-fashioned traditions, the narrator is really no different from his neighbour: *he too clings to the concept of property and division, of ownership and individuality.*

The quality relationship

- ▶ By maintaining the division between the properties, the narrator and his neighbour 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.

- ▶ Despite all his efforts and hopes and dreams of turning the neighbour around, the speaker sees that the neighbour is bringing stones grasped firmly by the top in each of his hands. He looked like an armed old-stone savage, totally unaffected by the speaker's intentions and desires.
 - ▶ The speaker now firmly believes that the neighbour is living in darkness. Not just the darkness due to woods and tree-shades. The speaker feels that the neighbour is under the tight-grip of darkness of ignorance.
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Not to be stony-faced

- ▶ Please carry away the stones that you have built in your relationship.
 - ▶ Feel the burden of stones your beloved one carrying.
 - ▶ Don't be like your neighbour who is bringing stones like an armed old-stone savage, totally unaffected by your affection, intention and desire.
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“... a neighbour nearby can help you more than a brother who is far away.”

–Proverbs 27:10

*Love your neighbour, build your relationship & realize what **The Bible** says.*

Begins in delight and ends in wisdom

- ▶ The poem actually talks about ideas and thoughts that are deep, not ordinary.
- ▶ Frost talks about truth; it teaches us wisdom.
- ▶ He himself has said, that for him, a poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom”.
- ▶ The Bible reference about wisdom:

“ I am Wisdom, and I have knowledge and sound judgement”.

– Proverbs 8:12

Judgement/ conclusion

- ▶ The act of meeting to repair the wall allows the two men to develop their relationship if each maintained their isolation on separate properties/ places.
 - ▶ Through this poem, Frost has tried to explore the way people isolate themselves physically and emotionally by building barriers like fences to derive a sense of safety.
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