

An explication of mending wall by robert frost



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The poem “ Mending Wall” by the prominent American poet Robert Frost has often been viewed as one of his favorite pieces of verse. The basic context of this poem concerns the construction of a stone wall between two neighbors and their individual houses, yet with closer examination into the meaning behind “ Mending Wall,” several scenarios can be found which center around “ a special paradigm regarding the boundaries between reality and the subjective viewpoint” (Montiero 134) which may reflect the poet’s personal history, due to his love of nature and his desire to share his inner poetical beauty with the world. Out of all the poems written by Frost, “ Mending Wall” best illustrates his poetic manner and his intentions as a storyteller. “

Mending Wall,” among other things, appears to be built around the tone of mischief which creates an oral barrier between the neighbors. Yet this mischief is defensively countered by the weaker neighbor, for “ he reaches into the past for support and comes up with his father’s proverb–“ Good fences make good neighbors” (Kearns 176). The two neighbors in “ Mending Wall” seem to be concerned with nothing more than territory, but in reality the argument is much more philosophical in nature, i. e. the wall serves as a boundary between divergent outlooks on life, such as clashes based on conservatism vs. liberalism, urbanism vs. agrarianism and religious dogma set against secular humanism. The context of “ Mending Wall” suggest that one neighbor is dominant over the other as shown in the line “ I let my neighbor know beyond a hill,” which illustrates that “ the passive neighbor has been informed that he is like a serf in some Medieval society” (Van Egmond 56). Another symbol that suggest a form of non-dominance on the part of the neighbor is the way “ beyond a hill” is applied, “ a mark of distance which foretells a lack of communication” (Montiero 174). However,

as is the case with many poems by Frost, “ Mending Wall” can also be viewed as the antithesis of political allegory, being that the narrator is not some broad-minded liberal and that the neighbor is not a submissive secondary. As Frank Lentricchia points out, “ Mending Wall” “ has nothing to do with one-world political ideals. . . good or bad neighbor policies” (251). Thus, this poem distinguishes between two very different types of persons—one who sees mending as an escape from the rituals of everyday life and a source for imaginative explorations, and another who is trapped by the traditions of his forebearers and old New England societal structures. Several key lines in “ Mending Wall” help to illuminate the true character of the narrator as to his views on his neighbor. “ I see him there/Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top/In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed,” an indication that “ the dominant neighbor wishes to be permanently separated from his secondary self” (Kearns 217), yet it also presents the idea of primitivism as in the separation of Cro Magnon man from his “ neighbor” the Neanderthal, the thick-browed savage from ancient Europe who preferred the wilds of the forest over the domesticity of a sheltered society. In addition, the narrator says that his neighbor “ moves in darkness as it seems to me/Not of woods only and the shade of trees” which suggests that the poet no longer sees any plausible reason for repairing the “ Mending Wall” year after year and has now retrograded into the psychology of human darkness. As Van Egmond so eloquently puts it, this is evidence that “ even on New England farms in the twentieth century, the ways of the savage (the “ old-stone savage armed”) continues no matter how transformed the society of Robert Frost” (148). Within the text of “ Mending Wall,” there are several references to the cycle of the seasons as symbols of change and

repetition, such as “ spring mending-time,” “ frozen ground-swell” and “ spring is the mischief in me.” According to George Montiero, this theme of seasonality refers to “ an ancient ritual predating the Romans. . . an annual reaffirming of boundaries” (169) which can be understood as a metaphor for the rebuilding of the wall, due to the ever-changing environment brought about by wind, rain and snow. Yet throughout “ Mending Wall,” several underlying themes aside from that associated with the seasons can be found within the narrative, namely sarcasm, superstition and mystery. The narrator/farmer puts forth several sarcastic references about his “ conservative” neighbor, such as “ My apple tree will never get across/And eat the cones under his pines” which indicates that the wall itself is redundant and stands as a symbol of something far more complicated than a mere boundary marker. This sarcasm is replicated when the narrator/farmer states that walls are only necessary as a barrier to keep the farm animals from straying, yet neither neighbor apparently owns farm animals. The theme of superstition is best represented by the narrator/farmer, for he states that “ We have to use a spell to make them (the stones) balance” which conjures up images of witchcraft, especially since Frost spent his early years not too distant from Salem, Massachusetts, the site of the famous Salem witch trials in the seventeenth century. As to the mysterious elements of “ Mending Wall,” the “ conservative” neighbor/farmer speaks few words and constantly reiterates his belief that “ Good fences make good neighbors.” It seems as if he is letting the narrator/farmer know that isolation and distance is what he desires. Thus, the wall “ keeps the neighbors on friendly terms by limiting their interactions that makes it possible for the conservative farmer to keep to himself” (Lentricchia 247). In conclusion, four

specific lines from “ Mending Wall” announces the true symbolic meaning of the stone wall-“ I let my neighbor know beyond the hill/And on a day we meet to walk the line/And set the wall between us once again/We keep the wall between us as we go.” After all, why does Frost use the term “ mending” to describe this structure? What exactly does it “ mend”? Obviously, the wall serves as a physical boundary between the two properties of the neighbors, but in reality the wall is a metaphorical paradigm that defines the societal differences between the narrator/farmer and his neighbor “ beyond the hill”-one is primitive/pastoral, the other modern/urban. Yet the wall also serves to “ mend” the natural landscape, for when viewed from a high elevation, it would appear as a “ scar” zigzagging across the terrain as if the land itself had being “ mended.”

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