

Boundaries, limitations, relationships and isolation in mending wall, the road no...

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Communication and Isolation. Relationships and Barriers. Limitations

‘The twentieth century was to witness an explosion of poetry in America. The traditionalist search for a past and precedent was to be maintained. The reader is confronted with work that negotiates between the solidity and the subversion of the moral self and poetic structure, the pursuit of form, discipline, and the impulse towards fragmentation, doubt’. (Gray 373-374)

This is the way in which Richard Gray describes the 20th century cultural atmosphere characterized by doubt, by innovation but also a return to past and traditions, a return to the simplicity of the rural life. And so does Robert Frost in his poems.

Robert Lee Frost, 20th century American poet and a four time Pulitzer Prize winner, was born in San Francisco in March of 1874. Although born on the West Coast, he is usually associated with New England in his poetry. To have a career as a modern poet he felt obliged to go abroad, taking the voice of a simple England farmer and using simple comprehensible words and scenes to depict high moral issues that a 20th century man confronted with.

Themes like isolation, final limitations of a man and human relationships marked Frost’s poetry and are heavily explored in poems like Mending Wall, The Road Not taken and The Gift Outright. The isolation of the individual is widely described in Mending Wall in which Frost’s illustrates man’s necessity for barriers to isolate themselves from their ‘neighbors’. In The Road Not Taken the author presents the final limitations of man, as a simple human being with one chance, with one life only. The purpose of my essay is to

analyze Frost's poems Mending Wall, The Road Not taken, and The Gift Outright to highlight the contrast between communication and self isolation and between human relationships and boundaries/barriers of the individual and twentieth society seen through Robert Frost's eyes.

Mending Wall is the first poem 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 missed the farm in New Hampshire where he had lived with his wife from 1900 to 1909. He associated his time in New Hampshire with a peaceful, rural sensibility that we can find in his poems.

The poem can be seen as an autobiographical poem: it is said that Frost had a neighbor in New Hampshire, named Napoleon Guay, with whom he often walked along their lands and repaired the wall that separated them. We can reach at the conclusion that Frost uses a simple, rural context, the annual mending of the wall to highlight a more general theme, the metaphor of the wall as the totality of self-limitations and boundaries that a living human can't live without.

Mending Wall describes two neighboring farmers who live in isolation from one another. Frost uses the word 'gaps' to describe the holes in the wall. This word could also stand for the 'gaps' that the neighbors are placing between each other. 'No one has seen them made or heard them made'(l. 10) but somehow the gaps naturally exist and are always found when the two get together.

The spirited discussion of the poem bears witness to its moving evocation not only of the two characters, but also of the paradoxically linked themes that their conflict dramatizes: neighborliness and isolation, open-mindedness and prejudice, dependence and independence. (Kemp 14)

Some other sub themes that are found in Mending Wall are the nature of a society, human relationships and physical and emotional barriers. Frost shows the way in which people interact, how they function as body. For Frost, the world is often one of isolation.

Its title is revealingly ambiguous. Mending can be seen either as a verb or an adjective. The verb refers to the activity that the speaker and his neighbor perform in repairing the wall between their two farms. As an adjective the word refers to the wall and serves a more subtle function: as a mending wall, it keeps the relationship between the two neighbors in good condition, justifying the author's affirmation in his essay: "Education by Poetry" (1931), Robert Frost says: "Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another". Starting from here we can always presume that Mending Wall may lead us to more than one path: one familiar, one more subtle. (<http://www.enotes.com/topics/mending-wall/in-depth#in-depth-the-poem>)

In the poem there are two distinct characters having different ideas about what good neighbor really means. While attacking his neighbor's lack of open-minded amiability, the speaker is the one who exhibits antisocial tendencies. He is quick to think the worst, presuming that the farmer's

concern with the wall is motivated by base selfishness, despite the latter's expressed interest in being. (Kemp 21) Despite his skeptical attitude, the speaker is even more tied to the annual tradition of wall-mending than his neighbor. His skepticism may be an attempt to justify his behavior to himself. Presenting himself as a modern man, far beyond old-fashioned traditions, the speaker is really no different from his neighbor: he also agrees with the concept of property and division, of ownership and individuality.

But truly, the speaker has mended the walls of his personality, and rather than combating an opponent, attempting moral or philosophical sallies, and worrying about victory or defeat, he has again taken an observer's approach to his neighbor. (Kemp 24) Although the speaker considers himself a modern man, above his simple neighbor, he does not try to help him with understanding the real significance of the wall. He does not fight him also, even though he does not agree with him. He keeps everything for himself, he internalizes and so he only manages to 'mend' the holes of his personality rather than fixing his problems and evolving.

The location of the neighbor is described as 'beyond the hill' and even when he tries to get closer he remains far away, another phrase suggesting isolation. The neighbor seems to 'move in darkness /not of woods only and the shade of trees (l. 41 - 42). Darkness represents his inability to communicate and relate with others.

He says again, ' Good fences make good neighbors` (l. 45), highlighting the idea that the wall is crucial to maintaining their relationship. The poem has a circular form, it begins and it ends with the same line.

The first line of the poem is notable because it functions as a counterpoint to the farmer`s apothegm, which appears once in the middle of the poem < l. 27> and then again in the final line. His reiteration is an appropriate ending of the poem because it completes a cyclical pattern to which the speaker has no rejoinder and from which he cannot escape. (Kemp 18)

The presence of the wall between the properties creates a solid relationship between the two neighbors. The division maintains their individuality and personal identity as farmers.. The act of mending the wall happens every year and represents the perfect opportunity for the two neighbors, members of a stray, rural community to interact and communicate with each other, an event that might not occur in an isolated environment. This action allows the two men to develop their relationship.

The poem highlights both the dual and the complementary nature of human society. The rights of the individual are confirmed upon other individuals` rights; the act of the mending of the wall represents a good excuse for the speaker to interact with his neighbor.

Robert Frost`s The Road Not Taken describes a traveler in the woods when he arrives at a fork in the road and hesitates while deciding which path to take. This decision seems to be irreversibly, I doubted if I should ever come

back (3rd stanza, l. 5). He realizes that the two paths are essentially the same, resulting in an ironic “sigh” at the end.

The Road Not Taken is an allegory about life choices and their consequences. It describes the speaker contemplating upon past decisions. The symbolism of the poem shows an individual that chooses a path, a direction of his life that has irreparable consequences. Although it may seem an obvious poem, The Road Not Taken is opened to multiple interpretations. The Road Not Taken is an ambiguous poem that allows the reader to think about choices in life, whether to go on the crowded path or go it alone, on a “less traveled path” (4th stanza, l. 4). If life is a journey, this poem highlights those times in life when a decision has to be made.

According to Robert Frost himself, the poem ‘is tricky, quite tricky’. In a letter, Frost claimed, “My poems... are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless.” The poem does not trip readers simply to tease them — it aims to launch them into the boundless, to launch them past spurious distinctions and into a vision of unbounded simultaneity.

Frost played with the differences between the human capacity to connect with one another and to experience feelings of profound isolation. For the author solitary individuals wander through a natural setting and encounter another individual, an object, or an animal, a forked path. Moments of revelation are discovered in these times in which the speaker realizes her or his connection to others or the ways that she or he feels isolated from the community. Themes like the figure of the wanderer and the changing social

landscape of New England in the twentieth century appear in Frost's poems. The poet, like a solitary traveler, was separated from the community, which allowed him to view social interactions, as well as the natural world, with a sense of wonder, fear, and admiration. ([https://www. sparknotes. com/poetry/frost/themes/](https://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/frost/themes/))

In the early twentieth century, the development of transportation and industry created the "tramp," the person who lived a simple lifestyle on the outskirts of the community, looking for work in a rapidly developing industrial society, highlighting the idea of isolation from society and boundaries and creating the historical and regional background of Frost's poetry. ([https://www. sparknotes. com/poetry/frost/themes/](https://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/frost/themes/))

In the Road not Taken, Frost analyzes life's different possibilities and observes human limitations regarding the decision between the two paths. The speaker can only pick one road, at the end selecting the one not taken because the individual has only one life, this being the final limitation of a human being. That person influences his future, becoming responsible for his choices and, at the same time he can never return to the past and change it. Life may turn out successful or not but there is always a regret when one wonders how would have been if he had taken another path, living other experiences.

The last poem, The Gift Outright received special attention when Frost recited it at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy on January 20, 1961. It shows the idea of crossing lines and overstepping boundaries as the

best way to create the identity of a nation and gain culture. Americans 'outright' gave their abilities to a country that was expanding its border towards the west: '[The poem] alluded to American history, especially in relation to England, and it explores the American Dream in terms of the promise of ownership of the land. [...] The earliest promises of America were based on the idea of fresh opportunity - to escape from the oppression of history to a virgin land where one could make oneself anew. had come to mean prosperity and possession of the land'. (Bloom 59)

The poem opens by describing the American the possessed the land-before they also belonged to the land-partly because the people were controlled by their English masters. Ownership of the land was denied to them by England and because they did not give themselves to the land in the spiritual and physical union how love demands. These limitations were overcome when Americans realized they had to give themselves in an act of passionate surrender, for to give oneself 'outright' means to do so immediately and totally, as lovers do. (Mordecai, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/gift.html/)

(l. 13th line) suggests the condition of rootlessness and culturelessness of newcomers adrift on a continent, derived from and secondary to a land they were still possessed by. They were capable neither of witnessing nor adjusting to the new place, to the new condition since those had not yet, and perhaps never did, came together for them (Bloom 64). The colonists in America initially struggled to connect with the land because of their ties to England. English colonists were not Americans when they first lived on the

land. The colonists were still under the barriers and limitations of the English law, art, culture, tradition, and beliefs. Over time, they managed to make a commitment to the land and establish their identities as Americans because of their efforts to build a culture that was not based on European traditions. Frost ignores the original “ owners” of the land: the Native Americans and the conflict between them and the colonists, focusing on the confrontation between the Old World of European tradition and the New World of American freedom and dreams. This fact may highlight the limitations of Frost`s perception towards society and the period that he lived in.

To conclude with, in Robert Frost`s poems the question of boundaries, limitations, relationships and isolation can be approached in many ways. In one context the barriers are accepted just the way they, in other contexts those limitations seem to represent the motivation that encourage the people to overpass them to gain freedom and to create their own identity.

Frost`s formulations is frequently used to address the universal difficulty of moving beyond the borders of our daily lives, whether imposed at the edges of the nation-state, inscribed in our social relations, or inferred within the formal dimensions of a poem but also the need to overcome our limits to evolve and experience the consequences of our choices. Frost`s deep ambivalence about fences and borders is a useful step in any political and aesthetic movement forward.

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