

# Home burial



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

‘ Humankind erects and maintains real and symbolic barriers to protect and defend opposing stances, beliefs and territories. The resulting lack of communication reinforces those barriers, often to detrimental effects’.

Discuss in relation to at least two of Robert Frost’s poems. Much of Frost’s poetry includes the discussion of, and indeed reasoning behind varying types of barriers within diverse situations - many of which he himself experienced throughout his life.

Mending Wall, “ one of Frost’s most anthologised poems”, is a primary example of both physical and emotional barriers being used in his attempts to explore the diversity in the relationships between both humankind and nature, and human beings themselves; the question “ Are walls and fences instrumental in the retention and renewal of human relationships? ”, being the driving force behind this piece of work.

Although the narrator describes his neighbour as “ an old stone age savage...he moves in darkness as it seems to me”, it must be noted that it is in fact the narrator who initiates the mending of the wall, perplexing the reader as it appears that tradition and indeed the wall itself is of no importance to him. Harold Bloom states that “ Frost identifies a deep human resistance to formal principles, more generally, reluctance to erect obstacles to freedom, and a desire to see barriers break down. The neighbour who lives by the saying “ good fences make good neighbours”, “ resembles an obstructionist, a Luddite, who can only recite his father’s bromide to justify his yearly task of rebuilding the wall. ” The wording of the first lines of Mending Wall, also introduce something somewhat ‘ supernatural’ to its

meaning. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall", does not define what it actually is which destroys the wall.

Frost of course knows that it is the elements which are responsible, but as critic Frank Lentricchia comments "His fun lies in not naming it, and in not naming the scientific truth he is able to manipulate intransigent fact into the world of the mind where all things are pliable. The artful vagueness of the phrase 'Something there is' is enchanting and magical, suggesting even the bushed tones of reverence before mystery in nature.

And the speaker who is not at all reverent toward nature, consciously works at deepening that sense of mystery", therefore the "supernatural or Godly force that does not approve of the wall being up, and desires that there be no man-made barriers placed between human beings" is left paramount in the mind of the reader. "We have to use a spell to make them balance", reinforces the magical element of the poem, with the ambiguity, and significance of line 4 "And makes gaps even two can pass abreast", heightening its enigmatic and surreptitious elements.

Frost emphasises the fact that the gaps in the wall were made large enough for two humans to pass side by side through it, causing the reader and indeed himself to question if man is perhaps going against the wishes of nature itself in erecting these barriers, the destructive side of nature and the effect of the changing of the seasons being a recurring theme throughout the works of Frost. For him nature was not just a "background for poetry, but rather a central character in his works".

In *Mending Wall*, Frost also accentuates the human need to have different 'species' or types of people separated; his reference to the differing types of trees is a metaphorical, representing the way in which man feels the need to separate one type of person from another by way of both physical and unseen barriers; as much of Frost's life was spent during times of great class struggle and the oppression of African American citizens, the barriers he witnessed between these people and his own influenced and made greater his wish to destroy the lack of communication between all human beings, both those from differing backgrounds and, as can be seen between the husband and wife in *Home Burial*, those who share a strong bond. Here, Frost reinforces the difficulties which people face in achieving effective communication, where he presents it "as the only possible escape from isolation and despair".

His own experiences with the loss of children are explored within this emotionally charged and demonstrative piece of poetry; with prominence being given to how communication between two people can help overcome anything which life may hand them, and how a lack of communication causes the barriers between the two to become even greater. *Home Burial* describes not only the death of a child, but the aftermath which follows; the marital partnership dissolving both mentally and physically, as neither husband or wife feels able to confide in the other regarding the immense grief and sense of loss which they are feeling; this lack of communication is what ultimately destroys their marriage.

Both *Mending Wall* and *Home Burial* are prime examples of how Frost viewed and experienced barriers in his own personal life, although they are poles

apart; Home Burial being darker and more emotionally personal to Frost than Mending Wall, which seems lighter, with an almost playful and explorative element. Mending Wall is written as a lengthy one stanza poem in a narrative style, which seeks to reinforce the lighthearted nature of the piece. “ The poem is not broken into stanzas, which makes it look visually like a rock wall turned on its side...the ‘ gaps’ in the wall when we look at the way that the line endings form an imperfect line all the way down the page. ” The language and setting which Frost has employed for Mending Wall intends for the reader to focus on the wall and the men mending it.

The landscape is not described, the “ yelping dogs” of the hunters have long gone, and there remains only the pine and apple trees, and the wall dividing them. The poetic techniques of imagery, where the speaker tells his neighbour “ and irony, serve as symbolic representations of barriers, albeit through a cheerful tone; simultaneously highlighting the serious meaning within the poem. The wall is the most dominant piece of irony used throughout; it not only separates the speaker from his neighbour, but it also brings them together every year. Line 14 “ We set the wall between us once again. We keep the wall between us as we go”, suggests that they are content in working together to repair the wall on the condition that they both mend their own side.

The use of these techniques together with the repetitions of the lines “ Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” and “ Good fences make good neighbors,” emphasise the theme of a two sided argument, as does line 23 at the exact centre of the poem. “ There where it is we do not need the wall”, is the first intimation that the speaker does not feel a need for the

wall. This line divides the poem in two, with the first 22 lines being the factual events surrounding the mending of the wall, and the last 22 lines being the ‘argument’ for and against the presence of it. The style in which Home Burial is written in is opposing in every way, with the choice of language and delivery giving it greater importance and ‘weight’ within the works of Frost.

It is notable that only one word in Mending Wall is more than two syllables long. The language of Home Burial is direct and to the point; a dramatic narrative, written in informal blank verse which empowers and brings to life the characters within it. The position of the couple in the first stanza, and indeed throughout must be noted; the wife at the top of the stairs, and the husband at the foot of the stairs looking up at her; the sense of separation and yearning for solace which she feels being reiterated by Frosts choice of language in his description of her husband and indeed his movements. “Advancing towards her”, “Mounting until she cowered under him”, “You make me angry, I’ll come down to you!”