

## **Mending Wall by Robert Frost**

The poem opens with the statement, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” and Frost’s readers are left to speculate for the remainder of the poem precisely what that something is. Winter does not love a wall, we learn in the second line; it creates gaps in the wall. The ground swells and the less securely placed boulders tumble off. The speaker explains that hunters are also sometimes responsible for the gaps. When they are chasing a rabbit to “please the yelping dogs,” but mostly themselves, they too have been known to send boulders tumbling. The gaps are mysterious, however. The winter and the hunter are suggestions: No one ever actually hears them or sees the gaps made. It is not until spring, when the speaker and his neighbor ritualistically meet at the wall for mending, that they discover the gaps and set about filling them. The two walk together, the wall between them, replacing the boulders that have been left behind during the winter when there has been no cause to venture out to the wall. Mending a wall takes work, but there is also a sort of sorcery to it. Sometimes one even needs to cast a spell to make the boulders balance just so: “Stay where you are until our backs are turned!” The speaker remarks that mending the wall essentially “comes to little more” than a game, since the wall itself is unnecessary. Neither neighbor has on his property anything that would disturb the other’s. One has pine trees and one has apple, but neither has livestock. As the speaker teasingly tells his neighbor: “My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines.” The wall mending is not about keeping things out, the speaker explains, raising the question whether it is about keeping things in. The other neighbor is cryptic when the speaker, the forthright one, questions him about the purpose of the wall. He simply responds with his father’s old saying: “Good fences make good neighbors.” This becomes his mantra, the only words we hear from him. The speaker acts as though his own questions are about making mischief more than anything else, which suggests he already knows the answers to them. They are questions anyone might be expected to ask about such a wall, and not just in

the mischief of spring; there is something more to it than that. The speaker wants to know why good fences make good neighbors. He is curious, inquiring, and reflective. The neighbor is cast as his opposite: someone who does not ask questions and is content to accept what has always been. He is unreflective, simply parroting back the phrase he learned from his father, carrying out his generation's duty without question.

The speaker continues to question, despite his neighbor's lack of interest. Frost teases as the speaker wonders, "to whom I was like to give offense." He puns on the word offense, another part of the game in and of the poem. The speaker continues to want to know what the "Something there is" is, and he is not content to let it be. The most telling and coy lines are "I could say 'Elves' to him, / But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather he said it himself." A visual is presented for the reader: "I see him there / Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top," and the speaker remarks, "He moves in darkness it seems to me, / Not of woods only and the shade of trees." The sort of darkness his neighbor moves in is metaphorical. He may remove boulders in the dark, but he also moves in another kind of darkness. The neighbor moves not only in nature's darkness but in the darkness that keeps him from more meaningful human connections. It is his lack of reflection, his lonely isolation of the sort encouraged by his father's saying. Yet each spring he needs to meet with his neighbour once again to enact this ritual of building up together the wall that separates them. Walls are not nature's things; they are human things, created to keep neighbors apart, but in this case the wall also brings them together. There is a division here between what is civilized and what is natural. The neighbor personifies this division. The two types of people are highlighted throughout but even more so in the irony of the second-to-last line: "he likes having thought of it so well." It seems that those who move in darkness believe that their thoughts are original when they really are not. The individual is simply following what came before, seeing neither "out far or in deep," being narrowed by custom, embracing it without question. The speaker is presented, in contrast, as the reflective

and questioning freethinker. The wall is being mended throughout the poem, but it is also a mending wall, doing its own mending. It is providing both characters with human contact as they wear their fingers rough by handling the stones. It takes a lot of effort to keep the wall there, but it seems to fulfill its complex function.

(Edited for students, Source originally from *Critical Companion to Robert Frost: A Literary Reference to His Life and Works* by Deirdre Fagan)