

ROBERT FROST

(1874 - 1963)



Mending Wall

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Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
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.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors'.
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows?
But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me~
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Analysis

Frost begins by saying that there is some force which does not love a wall. This force, he says, makes the ground underneath the wall swell up, causing the topmost stones to fall. Of course, the "frozen-ground-swell" is in fact caused by frost, a pun which would not have escaped the poet and which would, I am sure, have appealed greatly to his sense of mischief and fun.

The gaps in the wall are so large in places that two people could walk through, side by side. Hunters also cause damage when they go through the land with their dogs, but Frost says that this is "another thing" and not the same as the mysterious force that tumbles sections of the wall when nobody is there. Nobody sees or hears the wall fall, but each spring, when it is time to walk the boundaries of his land and check for damage, Frost finds these gaps. He lets his neighbour know, and they make a plan to meet one day and fix the wall together. This may seem neighbourly and friendly, but Frost's description of the work suggests otherwise. They both stay on their own side of the wall and each only picks up and replaces the stones that have fallen on his side. The stones are different sizes and shapes, and Frost says that the spherical ones are so difficult to balance that they have to use a spell and ask the stones to stay in place until they have left. This light-hearted approach contrasts with the stolid, unimaginative attitude of the neighbour, who refuses to be drawn a little later in the poem when Frost asks him if there is really any need to repair the wall.

Frost regards the mending of the wall as "just another kind of outdoor game" and seems to see little point in it when there are only trees on both sides. As he points out to his neighbour, "My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines". The neighbour is unmoved by this argument and responds with an old proverb, "Good fences make good neighbors." This attitude brings Frost's sense of mischief to the fore, and he is tempted to ask his neighbour what truth there is in the proverb. After all, he says, there are no cows here to wander onto the other farmer's land. Frost says that he'd like to have a better reason for building a wall than the one offered by his neighbour. He suggests that by building it they may be "giving offense" to someone or something – perhaps the spirits that knock the wall each winter. He is further tempted to suggest to his unimaginative, practical neighbour that perhaps it is elves knocking the wall, but he would rather the other man thought of that himself and at least acknowledged that there was some supernatural force at work here. The tone here is humorous, and yet the point Frost is making – that we build barriers between ourselves and our neighbours – is a serious one.

There is no practical reason to rebuild the wall, but the neighbour "will not go behind his father's saying" and clings to the old tradition. It seems that Frost delights in teasing this unimaginative farmer and revels in the fact that he, Frost, understands the man's motivation more than he does himself. The neighbour regards the act of rebuilding the wall as necessary work, and rejects Frost's more whimsical notions, yet the neighbour is moving "in darkness". This may be the darkness of ignorance or the darkness associated with deep magic and with pagan rituals. Frost, a classical scholar, would certainly have known that the ritual of rebuilding walls each year was a tradition predating the Romans, who nevertheless honoured Terminus, the god of boundaries, each year in a pagan feast involving sacrifices and feasting. When I read "Mending Wall" I can almost hear Frost's glee as he looks at his conservative neighbour becoming "like an old-stone savage armed." The man believes that he is being practical and sensible and merely taking his father's good advice, and would doubtless be horrified to think that he was actually following a pagan ritual.

Theme: This poem explores mankind's need to build boundaries and to respect the rules and regulations of society. The wall is built to separate the neighbours, yet they join together each year to rebuild it.