Mending Wall

POEM TEXT

1 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
2 That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
3 And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
4 And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
5 The work of hunters is another thing:
6 I have come after them and made repair
7 Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
8 But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
9 To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
10 No one has seen them made or heard them made,
11 But at spring mending-time we find them there.
12 I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
13 And on a day we meet to walk the line
14 And set the wall between us once again.
15 We keep the wall between us as we go.
16 To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
17 And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
18 We have to use a spell to make them balance:
19 "Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
20 We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
21 Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
22 One on a side. It comes to little more:
23 There where it is we do not need the wall:
24 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
25 My apple trees will never get across
26 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
27 He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
28 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
29 If I could put a notion in his head:
30 *"Why* do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
31 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
32 Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
33 What I was walling in or walling out,
34 And to whom I was like to give offence.
35 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
36 That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
37 But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
38 He said it for himself. I see him there
39 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
40 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
41 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
42 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
43 He will not go behind his father's saying,
44 And he likes having thought of it so well
45 He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

SUMMARY

There is some force that doesn't like walls. It causes the frozen ground to swell underneath a wall, and the wall's upper stones then topple off in the warmth of the sun. This creates gaps in the wall so big that two people could walk through them side-by-side. And then there are the hunters who take apart the wall—that's something different. I often have to come and fix the spots where hunters haven't left a single stone in place, as they tried to flush out the rabbits that hide in the wall in order to make their barking dogs happy. No one has seen or heard these gaps in the wall being made. We just find them there in the spring, when it comes time to fix the wall. I reach out to my neighbor, who lives over a hill, and we find a day to get together and walk along the wall, fixing these gaps as we go. He walks on his side of the wall and I on mine, and we deal only with whatever rocks have fallen off the wall on our side of it. Some of them look like loaves of bread and some are round like balls, so we pray that they'll stay in place, balanced on top of the wall, saying: "Don't move until we're gone!" Our fingers get chafed from picking up the rocks. It's just another outside activity, each of us on our side of the wall, nothing more.

There's no need for a wall to be there. On my neighbor's side of the wall, there's nothing but pine trees; my side is an apple orchard. It's not like my apple trees are going to cross the wall and eat his pine cones, I say to him. But he just responds, "Good fences are necessary to have good neighbors." Since it's spring and I feel mischievous, I wonder if I could make my neighbor ask himself: "*Why* are they necessary? Isn't that only true if you're trying to keep your neighbor's cows out of your fields? There aren't any cows here. If I were to build a wall, I'd want to know what I was keeping in and what I was keeping out, and who was going to be offended by this. There is some force that doesn't love a wall, that wants to pull it down." I could propose that Elves are responsible for the gaps in the wall, but it's not exactly Elves, and, anyway, I want my neighbor to figure it out on his own. I see him, lifting up stones, grasping them firmly by the top, in each hand, like an ancient warrior. He moves in a deep darkness—not just the darkness of the woods or the trees above. He does not want to think beyond his set idea about the world, and he likes having articulated this idea so clearly. So he

says it again: "Good fences are necessary to have good neighbors."

THEMES

BORDERS

At its heart, "Mending Wall" is a poem about borders—the work it takes to maintain them and the way they shape human interactions. The speaker and the speaker's neighbor spend much of the poem rebuilding a wall that divides their properties. As they do so, they debate the function of the wall and how it affects their relationship.

The speaker suggests that the wall is unnecessary, both practically and politically: in the speaker's mind, walls exclude people, injuring otherwise harmonious relationships. But the neighbor argues that walls actually *improve* relationships, because they allow people to treat each other fairly and prevent conflict. The poem doesn't fall too heavily on either side of the debate, ultimately allowing readers to decide for themselves which vision of human community is most convincing.

The speaker believes the wall isn't necessary, given the crops that the speaker and the neighbor grow: while cattle might wander over to graze in someone else's pasture, the speaker's apples aren't going to eat the neighbor's pine trees. More importantly, the speaker believes that walls actively damage people's relationships. This is because walls are likely to "give offense"—that is, to offend people with their implication of mistrust and exclusion.

The speaker thus asks the neighbor why they need to continue repairing the wall at all. In response, the neighbor says simply and repeatedly: "Good fences make good neighbours." He believes that a good neighbor establishes clear boundaries, and in doing so prevents problems from arising between people who live near each other. The neighbor seems haunted by the possibility of future conflicts. In fact, he seems to regard such conflicts as an inevitable part of life—and as such that it's important to take steps to prevent them.

For the speaker, there's no reason to engage in such preventative measures because there are no conflicts between him and his neighbor—not even the seeds of future conflict. "Here there are no cows," the speaker says, literally referencing the fact that there aren't any cattle around that need to be penned in, lest they graze on someone else's property, and also figuratively suggesting that the speaker and the neighbor have no reason to be especially possessive of their lands. They aren't competing for resources, and should be able to live peacefully side by side. In this worldview, people are basically decent. It is *building the wall itself* that seems to the speaker most likely to cause conflict, by creating a sense of "us" vs. "them" and

implying that the neighbors don't trust each other.

The speaker and his neighbor thus disagree over an issue so fundamental to human society and political thinking: they debate whether conflicts between human beings are inevitable (if preventable) or whether those conflicts are the result of misguided cynicism about the possibility of peace between people.

Yet though the speaker gets the most air-time in the poem, it's not entirely clear that the reader is supposed to take the speaker's side. Instead, the poem itself remains decidedly ambiguous—for all the speaker's complaints about the wall, the *speaker* is the one who sets the mending in motion by reaching out to the neighbor, and the poem even gives the neighbor the final word.

The poem thus asks its reader to decide for themselves who is right and who is wrong, and to make up their minds about the utility of walls, borders, and other political and physical devices that divide people.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> - Lines 1-45

THE VALUE OF WORK

As the speaker describes it, the work of "Mending Wall" is ritualistic: each year, the speaker and the neighbor walk along the wall together and repair the sections that have been damaged by frost or by hunters over the previous year. It is hard, taxing work: by the end, their hands are chapped from it. The difficulty of the work, and the need to renew it every year, makes the speaker question why—and whether—it's necessary to keep rebuilding the wall. More broadly, the act of repairing the wall serves as an [allegory](link) for human labor. Though the speaker and the neighbor continue to rebuild the wall, the poem calls into question the value of labor for labor's sake—and asks whether a different relationship to work might be possible.

At the heart of the poem's meditation is a routine, even monotonous act: the speaker and the neighbor pick up rocks and put them back on the wall. The act is reminiscent of a famous myth, with which Frost—classically educated at Harvard—would likely have known intimately: the myth of Sisyphus. As a punishment for being crafty and deceitful, Sisyphus, the king of Corinth, was condemned to spend eternity pushing a boulder up a hill. When he reached the top of the hill, the boulder would roll back to the bottom and he would have to start over.

There is something Sisyphean about the work that the speaker and the neighbor do in "Mending Wall": each year rebuilding the same wall—a wall that serves no practical purpose. For Sisyphus, the boulder rolls down to the bottom of the hill each

time because the gods have decreed it. "Mending Wall" presents an equally futile but much less religious vision: instead of the gods, it is the frost that damages the wall over and over again, forcing the speaker and the neighbor to repair it over and over again. Nature itself, with its capacity to damage and destroy human artifacts, seems to defeat human ambitions, to force it to endless repeat the same futile projects without making progress.

Given that their task is repetitive and fruitless, the speaker suggests that they might be better off if they stopped repairing the wall altogether. But the neighbor insists that they keep doing so. And he may suggest that the work itself is good and valuable: it may not simply be the fence that makes "good neighbours," but the act of rebuilding it, of working together for a common goal.

For the speaker, work is justified only by its results, or in this case physical products: the material and permanent difference it makes in the world. For the neighbor, however, work is justified as an end in itself, and that work (in his mind, at least) is part of maintaining a fair and livable society.

This might also serve as an allegory for endeavors like poetry: implicit in this debate is a question about the value of creative work—work that is simply beautiful, and that does not materially change or improve society.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
>
> - Lines 1-23
> - Lines 24-27

CHANGE AND MODERNITY

As the speaker of "Mending Wall" and the neighbor debate the political and practical purpose of the wall they're repairing, the poem raises an implicit question about the possibility of change. The speaker argues that the neighbor's belief—that fences are necessary to keep people from getting out of control—is out of date: the speaker compares him to an "old-stone savage." But though his attitudes may be antiquated, the neighbor remains influential in the present—articulating a deeply held belief that it is necessary for society to restrain people in small ways to keep them from acting out in big ways.

The poem thus asks its readers to ponder whether the debate between the speaker and his neighbor will ever be resolved—and, more broadly, whether it is possible for society itself to change. The poem suggests that it is not: whatever the speaker's objections to the activity, the speaker still rebuilds the wall.

Despite often using every-day, simple language, the speaker is clearly an educated, loquacious figure. The speaker is likely fluent in philosophy, precisely countering the neighbor by

invoking the writings of Henry David Thoreau (in the reference to "cows"); the speaker engages in flights of fancy, musing that mythical "Elves" might be to blame for the wall's destruction; and the speaker uses a prestigious literary form—[blank verse](link)—in a rough but perceptible fashion to relate ideas to the reader.

By contrast, the neighbor is stern and old-fashioned. He says only one thing in the poem—and he then he says it again! His speech is direct and unpretentious. The speaker emphasizes this side of the neighbor's character: his unwillingness to think broadly or deeply, or to interrogate his own ideas. Instead of thinking things through for himself, the neighbor depends on "his father's saying[s]"—that is, he relies on received wisdom. As a result, the neighbor seems to the speaker to be "like an old-stone savage armed." His work in rebuilding the wall resembles primitive forms of violence. He has not advanced beyond that primitive state, but rather preserves its violence in his insistence on constructing barriers between people.

By implicit contrast, then, the speaker is a more modern figure. The speaker fancies himself as someone who has been released from the "darkness" in which the neighbor moves—and found a more enlightened, peaceful way of life. Yet the *speaker* is the one who lets the neighbor know when it's time to fix the wall. The *speaker* sets the repair in motion, even as the speaker insists it's not necessary.

Thus the speaker, unconsciously or not, has internalized the need for the wall—or, at least, has internalized the futility of pushing back too strongly against the neighbor and his deeply held beliefs. (And the speaker likely wouldn't have a problem with a wall if there were cows around!).

The poem thus suggests that as long as people hold ideas like the neighbor's, society itself will be captivated by them, unable to refuse the projects they inspire. It's hard to shake off the beliefs of the past and to implement change for the future.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
>
> - Line 26
> - Lines 26-38
> - Lines 38-45

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

> *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 first four lines of "Mending Wall" establish the poem's broad concern as well as its form. The poem opens with a

mysterious assertion: there is some force that dislikes walls. It spends the next three lines describing the attempts of that force to topple a wall down: it sends frost underneath the wall, causing the ground to swell; when the summer sun later melts that frost, some of the wall's stones become dislodged, opening gaps wide enough for two people to pass through side by side. The force, the thing that "doesn't love a wall" remains unnamed. The opening lines thus establish a question: the reader is invited to speculate about what the force is, and why it might oppose the very existence of a wall.

This mystery makes the lines feel weighty, as though the deepest mysteries of life are being explored here. But the language of the lines is simple and conversational: except for the compound word "frozen-ground-swell," the lines contain no words longer than two syllables. These are common, everyday words that anyone might use, perhaps suggesting the universality of the themes that the poem will go on to explore.

There are literary devices at work in the lines, but their presence is pretty subtle. For example, these lines are in blank verse—a literary form with a distinguished pedigree in English poetry. (Both Shakespeare and Milton used it, for example). Although blank verse is an iambic meter, the poem's first line opens with a trochee:

Something

A reader expects a first line to establish the poem's meter, and for variations to that meter to come later. But Frost waits to establish his poem's dominant meter until mid-way through the poem's first line. As a result, the reader may be slow to identify the meter and to associate it with its prestigious history. Similarly, the first four lines of the poem contain assonance on an /i/ sound ("something," "is," "it," "spills," "in"), but this repeated sound is relatively distributed through the lines: though it binds them together sonically, it does so unobtrusively.

The relaxed, everyday diction gives the poem a casual feel: even as it enters into deep and complex questions, it does so in unpretentious language. It sounds like someone thinking out loud.

This extends to the poem's use of enjambment and end-stop. "Mending Wall" uses enjambment and end-stop whenever it's convenient, simply following the flow of the speaker's thought. Despite their use of punctuation, the first three lines of the poem are arguably enjambed and express the continuation of a single idea; only in line 4 does the reader encounter the poem's first hard end-stop. The opening lines of the poem thus spill down the page, working at the pace of the speaker's thought.

In this sense, the poem subtly suggests an affiliation with previous poets, like Wordsworth and Milton, who often let long sentences cascade across multiple lines of blank verse. However conversational the language here, the speaker is thus

clearly cognizant of deep traditions in the history of poetry and offers subtle signals to readers that the speaker is extending and complicating those traditions.

LINES 5-9

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.

In lines 1-4, the speaker introduces a mystery: there is some unknown power that despises walls and knocks them over. In lines 5-9, the speaker qualifies the mystery. There are, the speaker admits, hunters who will knock over parts of the wall to flush out the rabbits that take cover in it, so that the hunters' dogs can chase them. The speaker encounters the damage they do periodically and repairs it. But this, the speaker notes, is "another thing": it is not the source, or even a manifestation, of the mysterious power identified in lines 1-4. The power the speaker has in mind seems somehow inhuman—and incompatible with human artifacts, which it seeks to destroy or damage. Its damage, then, is different from what the hunters do. The speaker repairs *their* damage in a piecemeal fashion, whenever the speaker discovers it. The damage done by the mysterious force, however, requires a different kind of repair—which the speaker begins to describe in the following set of lines.

In these lines, the speaker continues the formal pattern begun in lines 1-4. The poem remains in blank verse, though the iambic meter is peppered with metrical substitutions. After the austere mystery of the opening lines, these lines feel more relaxed and conversation—and the loose meter contributes to that sense. The substitutions keep the poem from feeling too *poetic*, too metered: instead, it imitates the rhythms of everyday language.

The lines alternate enjambment and end-stop at easy, loping pace, the sentence gradually unfurling down the page, until it reaches a period in the middle of line 9. This is a striking moment: it's the first place in the poem where a phrase or sentence has ended mid-line. Though the speaker has been using enjambment and end-stop in a seemingly casual way, the ends of sentences and phrases have all corresponded to the end of lines of the poem—until this moment. This is instructive: it is almost as though the speaker is encouraging the reader to pay particular attention to *this* caesura, to think through what it might mean for the poem. Its significance, however, only becomes clear once one reads across the caesura to see what happens after it—as we'll explore in the next entry.

LINES 9-10

The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,

The poem's first caesura appears in the middle of line 9. It's a surprising and heightened moment: until now, each sentence or phrase came to its conclusion at the end of a line. The caesura sticks out, almost begging for interpretation, particularly when one reads across its two halves.

The speaker begins line 9 by talking about the damage that hunters do to the wall, and he concludes it by returning to his initial subject: the mysterious, seemingly inhuman force that sends frost under the wall and knocks its boulders down. In the space between these two sentences, there is thus a gap, a break: between the human and the inhuman, the explicable and the inexplicable. Describing the gaps in the wall, the speaker notes: "No one has seen them made or heard them made…" Unlike the damage the hunters cause—which the speaker is able to imagine in detail—"the gaps" are the product of some force that exceeds the capacities of human understanding.

The caesura (and the enjambment that closes line 9, forming a kind of parallel gap alongside the caesura) reflects the strangeness, the unknowability, of this hostile force: it can be represented only by silence, by a gap in the line. The caesura might even be taken as a spatial representation of "the gaps" the speaker discovers in the wall: though one could not pass "two abreast" through this caesura, it is nonetheless a significant opening in a set of lines which had been, until this moment, solid and impenetrable.

The way the caesura looks is thus potentially meaningful. It suggests that the poem itself is like a wall, and that it too is susceptible to being damaged—and, as such, that it may need to be repaired. The visual appearance of the poem as a whole substantiates this sense: without any stanza breaks, the single, long column of text looks like a stone wall.

This is a surprising suggestion: later in the poem, the speaker announces his opposition to walls. Yet his own poem strongly resembles one! This is an ambiguous and potentially rich resemblance. It might suggest, for instance, that the speaker cannot help producing walls—no matter what he believes. Or it might suggest that his opposition to his neighbor's position is not as strong as he insists: he retains a sort of unconscious sympathy for the belief in the necessity of walls.

LINES 11-16

> *But at spring mending-time we find them there.*
> *I let my neighbour 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.*

In the poem's first 10 lines, the speaker focuses on describing the damage done to the wall every winter—emphasizing the mysteriousness of the force that causes that damage. In the next set of lines, the speaker switches focus. Without telling the reader what the mysterious "something" named in line 1 is, the speaker describes the work of repairing the wall.

There is a specific time of year, "spring mending-time," when the speaker and the neighbor, who lives on the far side of a hill, meet at the wall and walk alongside it, each on their own side of the wall. As they do so, they put the stones that have fallen off back on; each person is responsible only for the stones on their own side of the wall. Thus even though they both repair the wall, they don't help each other: their work is separate. The speaker emphasizes this with the repetition of the phrase "To each" in line 16. The epanalepsis emphasizes the distance between the speaker and the neighbor, the division between them as they work. Though the speaker doesn't say so explicitly, this seems to be something they do each spring, as a kind of ritual. The rules of the ritual are set, down to who is responsible for which stones.

In describing the act of repairing the wall as a ritual, with its own rules and customs, the speaker opens an interesting possibility: that repairing the wall is about something else, something more important than the wall itself. For example, it might be important to maintaining the bonds between the speaker and the neighbor. Indeed, it's notably the *speaker* who sets this wall-mending in motion, as the speaker is the one who reaches out to the neighbor in line 12. This would seem to contradict the speaker's later assertion that walls are unnecessary; either the speaker doesn't actually believe that very strongly, or believes that there's no use in fighting for that belief. In either case, these lines are somewhat ironically filled with language that implies togetherness—note the repetition of "we" and "us" throughout—even as, again, this communal work is in service of repairing physical barrier that separates people.

Of course, the speaker seems reticent to say too much about this ritual at all. With the exception of line 13, each line in this passage is end-stopped; the speaker refrains from offering more than the faintest explanation of the various steps of this ritual. The mysterious, almost lofty tone of the opening lines has faded: here the language is almost painfully simple and unliterary in its repetitive, straightforward nature. There is arguably consonance in these lines, in the repeated /n/ sound, which almost sounds like the clicking of the stones as they are put back in place. But this play of sound is so light, so judiciously applied that one might entirely ignore it—or miss it. The speaker has been working throughout the poem to capture the rhythm of everyday speech, and comes close to capturing it exactly here.

LINES 17-22

> *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:*

In lines 11-16, the speaker describes the ritual of repairing the wall: telling the reader when the speaker and the neighbor repair it and how they divide up the work. In lines 17-22, the speaker goes on to describe the work itself.

The speaker focuses on the difficulties that the work presents, beginning with the simple act of balancing the fallen stones on the wall. The stones are uneven and misshapen; some resemble loaves of bread and others are round. The speaker and the neighbor thus have trouble balancing the stones and sometimes resort to "a spell"—really, a sort of casual prayer that the stones will stay in place until after they've turned their backs and moved on.

The passage is suggestive and fanciful. Until now, the poem has been resolutely concrete and specific; the speaker has avoided literary devices like metaphor. In comparing the stones to "loaves" and "balls" the speaker admits metaphor into the poem for the first time, betraying a literary skill and sophistication that the speaker has otherwise suppressed. (The speaker also alliterates on a /b/ sound, though the use of alliteration remains judicious and restrained; many readers will ignore or not notice it. This is not a blatantly showy poem!).

Further, the speaker's prayer is revealing: the speaker and the neighbor do not pray for the wall to stay intact until next spring. Instead, they simply pray that the wall retains its integrity long enough for them to move on to the next fallen stone. It seems the work of *repairing* the wall is somehow more important than the wall itself, though, as the speaker acknowledges in line 20, it is hard work and wears their "fingers rough." The speaker thus refers to the act of repairing the wall as an "out-door game": for better or worse, it is an end in itself. This raises some questions about whether it's really worth it to rebuild the wall every spring.

The force of this question is amplified by an implicit allusion to Greek mythology that runs through lines 10-22. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus, King of Ephyra, is punished by the Gods for his deceitfulness: for all of eternity, he has to roll a boulder up a hill. When he reaches the top of the hill, the boulder rolls back to the bottom and he starts over.

The work of repairing the wall—each spring returning to it, restoring its tumbled stones, only to do so again the next spring—strongly resembles Sisyphus's punishment. The allusion to the myth raises questions about the value of repairing the wall: indeed, it comes to seem like some kind of bizarre punishment. And it also raises the stakes of the poem: the act of repairing the wall seems like a metaphor for human labor itself. The speaker asks us to interrogate the value of work, given that its products will inevitably decay and require repair.

LINES 23-27

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 neighbours."

Lines 17-22 raise doubts about the value of repairing the wall every spring. Lines 23-27 strengthen those doubts: indeed, the speaker notes, there is no need for a wall between the speaker's property and the neighbor's. The speaker's land is an apple orchard, while the neighbor has pine trees growing on his side of the wall. As the speaker points out, jokingly, it's not like his apple trees are going to cross the wall and eat the pine cones on the neighbor's land. The wall serves no practical purpose, meaning that repairing it every spring is a futile and painful exercise. The strong alliteration and consonance of these lines further imply a sort of unity between the speaker and the neighbor. Not the particularly strong presence of /a/, /p/, and /l/ sounds in line 24:

He is **all p**ine **a**nd I **a**m **appl**e orchard

Despite their different uses for their lands, the sonic similarities between "all pine" and "apple" suggest that the speaker and the neighbor are actually quite similar. They have the same concerns, and thus the wall truly doesn't seem all that necessary.

When the speaker points this out to the neighbor, though, he responds, "Good fences make good neighbors." The neighbor's response is arguably the core of the poem. (He repeats it at the end of the poem, forming a kind of refrain). In simple language, he presents a rich and complicated idea: that borders are necessary to keep the peace between people. The full richness of the neighbor's response—and its resonance with important strains of American philosophy—only becomes evident over the following lines.

Already in the neighbor's brief, enigmatic response, however, the reader sees hints of this complexity. The neighbor doesn't argue with the speaker about the need for the wall: he more or less admits that it doesn't serve a practical purpose. Instead, he believes that the simple fact of having a wall changes people's behavior for the better. The diacope of the line—the repetition of "good"—suggests that the opposite is also true: that **bad** fences (or the lack of fences) make **bad** neighbors.

The neighbor thus seems to have a rather dim view of human nature. Repairing the wall every spring is thus a kind of ritual designed to regulate the relationship between the neighbor and the speaker. The neighbor's response is not just a defense of the wall: it's a claim about the nature of human beings and an argument for a certain kind of society to restrain its worst impulses.

LINES 28-31

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:

"Why
do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

In line 27, the neighbor makes his case for the utility of the wall. It might not serve a practical purpose, but it does restrain people's worst impulses: it makes them into "good neighbours." The speaker spends much of the rest of the poem disputing the speaker's argument, presenting an alternate vision for human society.

The speaker pitches this as a kind of "mischief." Though the debate is serious and deals with monumental issues, the speaker pretends as though these arguments are simply messing about, playing devil's advocate, trying to "put a notion in his head." However, as the poem proceeds, the seriousness with which the speaker takes the issue gradually becomes evident, culminating in a grand and derogatory [simile](#)—the poem's only simile—in lines 40-41.

The speaker begins by interrogating the neighbor's position directly, asking, "*Why* do they make good neighbours?" The speaker then answers this question: "Isn't it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows." The neighbor has not mentioned any cows, so this might seem at first like a non-sequitur. But the speaker is making an [allusion](#) to a passage from the American Transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau once wrote: "Who are bad neighbors? They who suffer their neighbors' cattle to go at large because they don't want their ill will,—are afraid to anger them. They are abettors of the ill-doers." Thoreau states explicitly what remained implicit in the neighbor's brief comment: walls and fences are necessary because they restrain people's worst impulses. In the absence of such boundaries, small infractions will lead to larger injuries—a slippery slope.

The speaker presumes that the neighbor is thinking of this passage from Thoreau (and that the poem's readers will know it too): another signal of the speaker's underlying literary sophistication and education. But the speaker disagrees with Thoreau's premise: "here there are no cows," the speaker insists. The speaker is being literal: neither the speaker nor the neighbor owns cows. But the speaker is also using the cows as a symbol to suggest that the speaker's relationship with the neighbor is peaceful: there are no minor infractions that might lead to larger injuries. The speaker imagines, in other words, that it is possible for people to live in peace, without restraints or boundaries to guarantee that peace. The speaker maintains an optimistic, even utopian, view of human society.

LINES 32-38

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.

In lines 30-31, the speaker lays out an optimistic vision of human society: walls between people, the speaker argues, are not *always* necessary. Sometimes people can do without them. In lines 32-36, the speaker expands the argument: not only can people live without walls, but walls actually cause injury. As the speaker notes in line 34, walls "give offence."

For the speaker, this is not an incidental or accidental consequence of building a wall: walls separate people, allowing some people inside and keeping some people out. It creates insiders and outsiders, an "us" and a "them." The speaker repeats the word *wall*, and a verb based on it, *walling*, throughout the passage, using [polyptoton](#) to emphasize this point. Instead of finding a different, more eloquent word to describe the way that walls divide people, the speaker uses the word and its derivatives over and over again to hammer home the point. It is not an accident that walls divide people: instead, that is precisely their job.

To close the passage, the speaker repeats the opening line of the poem, forming a kind of counter-[refrain](#) to the neighbor's repeated line. However, the tone of this speaker's line has changed since it first appeared. In the opening of the poem, the speaker's refrain was ominous and mysterious: it named some hostile power that worked to damage and destroy human artifacts. In this line, it seems more joyful, even liberating. If the wall is oppressive and divisive, then it's a good thing that there's a force that will destroy it, "that wants it down."

In the opening of the poem, the force that destroys walls seemed to belong to nature; here it seems more an expression of the human spirit, a resistance to oppressive restraints. In the opening of the poem, the speaker seemed disturbed by the force; here, the speaker seems heartened by it.

As the passage closes, the speaker returns to the mystery that opens the poem: trying to identify the source of the mysterious "something" "that doesn't love a wall." Following the transformation of the speaker's feelings about this "something" in the previous lines, the speaker offers a fanciful possibility: Elves are responsible for it. This is another [allusion](#), this time to folk traditions in which Elves are mischievous and sometimes spiteful spirits who often interfere with human plans and projects. The allusion is fanciful and out-of-keeping with the poem's tone, its unpretentious, rural world—so much so that even the speaker admits, "it's not elves exactly." (The [caesura](#) in the middle of line 36 emphasizes the non-sequitur).

Even so, the speaker wants the neighbor to entertain the possibility: indeed, to be the kind of person who comes up with it on his own. The speaker, however, remains resolutely within the real and the concrete. The speaker has no space for

elves—and seemingly has no interest in the forces that knock down walls, human or otherwise.

LINES 38-42

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.

After the speaker's brief and fanciful aside about elves in lines 36-38, the speaker returns to the quarrel with the neighbor. In the previous lines, the speaker has offered two arguments against the wall. In lines 30-31, the speaker suggests that walls are not necessary to preserve good relations between neighbors, because people can treat each other fairly without them. Then, in lines 32-35, the speaker argues that walls cause harm: they damage relationships and cause offense. Finally, in lines 38-42, the speaker adopts a new argumentative strategy: the speaker stops disputing the neighbor's ideas and instead attacks his character.

As the speaker does so, the speaker largely drops the pretense—maintained through much of the poem—of being a humble figure who uses everyday language. The speaker switches into a high, eloquent poetic mode, employing a [simile](#) for the first time in the poem and using [alliteration](#) in a self-conscious and highly noticeable way. The speaker's writing becomes showy, extravagant, loud—as in the alliteration (and [consonance](#)) on the /s/ sound that jingles through the passage and becomes especially ostentatious in line 40, with its "old-stone savage." In this passage, the distance between the neighbor and the speaker becomes clear: although they live together, they come from different cultures, with different vocabularies, different relationships to literary history. The speaker is willing to weaponize that difference to prove a point.

Indeed, the speaker's grand, literary simile is distinctly insulting. Watching the neighbor pick up a stone to put on the wall, the speaker notes that he looks "like an old-stone savage armed." The speaker calls on the word here precisely for its derogatory senses: in this simile, the neighbor is backward, uncivilized, and violent. By comparison, the speaker is modern and civilized. Further, the neighbor is surrounded by "darkness" both physical and moral. Darkness is often used in western literature as a symbol for ignorance and error. By contrast, the speaker is enlightened, correct.

The speaker's attack on the neighbor's character is thus, implicitly, a way of validating the speaker's own position. As the neighbor seems increasingly ignorant and backward, the speaker of the poem is vindicated, shown, by comparison, to be right and just. However, for some readers the argumentative strategy may backfire: some may find the speaker to be patronizing and aggressive.

LINES 43-45

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 neighbours."

Though the speaker objects strongly and at length to his neighbor's argument, the speaker does not do so out-loud: lines 28-43 happen almost entirely in the speaker's mind, as the speaker imagines things to say to the neighbor. In line 43, the speaker returns firmly to the real world.

The speaker and the neighbor are still out in the woods, repairing the wall between their properties. The neighbor, as if responding to the speaker, repeats his initial statement: "Good fences make good neighbours," creating a kind of [refrain](#) that closes the poem. To the speaker, this repetition is a sign of the neighbor's stubbornness and lack of intellectual sophistication. He does not want to think beyond the common-sense wisdom that has been handed down, generation by generation; he simply wants to restate it as well as possible. For the speaker, these lines thus continue the project of the previous lines: they attack the neighbor's character by making him seem like an unsophisticated country bumpkin.

However, the placement of these lines may undercut the speaker's intention. These are the final lines in a long and complex poem: for many readers, they will be the things they remember best about the poem. They have a kind of prominence and clarity that the speaker's own position doesn't have. They betray, perhaps, a lingering insecurity in the speaker—a barely suppressed sympathy for the neighbor's position.

More importantly, perhaps, their placement suggests that the poem itself may not be designed to vindicate the speaker's position. Indeed, at the end of the poem, it's difficult to tell whether the poem sympathizes with the neighbor's position or the speaker's. The neighbor doesn't rely on complex [allusions](#) or [similes](#) to make his point: he does so in simple language that anyone might understand. He does not patronize or insult. His position may be bleak and pessimistic, but it is articulated with considerable force and precision.

By contrast, the speaker's position is utopian and beautiful, but it is caught up in complex rhetorical devices. And the speaker doesn't seem to practice the generosity the speaker preaches: far from avoiding offense, the speaker actively insults his neighbor. The poem thus leaves its readers to decide for themselves which position they favor.

�֎ SYMBOLS

FROST

The frost—or as the speaker calls it, "the frozen-ground-swell"—is a mysterious, unsettling force in

"Mending Wall." It acts in powerful and damaging ways, ultimately knocking over large sections of the wall each winter. But, despite its force, it's only doing the bidding of something else that remains undetectable; this "something" doesn't like walls, and as such "sends" the frost out to destroy them.

As the speaker notes, describing the gaps it makes in the wall, "No one has seen them made or heard them made." The frost and the strange force behind it thus occupy a complex position in the poem. Frost is a real force, a natural phenomenon. And yet it has a kind of supernatural quality in the poem, in having been sent by some powerful, absent entity. The reader might take both frost and this entity as a broader symbol for nature itself and for nature's effects on human artifacts. The things that people make, the poem suggests, are fragile and temporary, when compared and subject to the grand forces of nature.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "frozen-ground-swell"

SPRING

The spring is traditionally a [symbol](link) of rebirth, and it works, in part, as a symbol for renewal in this poem: it's the time of year when the speaker and the neighbor repair the wall between their properties.

It's also important to recognize that in Christianity, the spring is associated with Christ's resurrection. Frost plays with this tradition in "Mending Wall." The renewal that the speaker and the neighbor take part in by rebuilding the wall is quite different from the Christian resurrection: it is the result of *human* work, rather than divine grace; it is temporary, not permanent; and it must actively be renewed each year.

In other words, "Mending Wall" takes a symbol that often has a strong religious flavor and strips away that religious content. The symbol becomes more complex and ambivalent: if spring symbolizes a temporary renewal or rebirth, it also implies that death and decay will arrive again. This, in turn, reflects the poem's broader thematic consideration of the value or point of work itself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "spring"
- **Line 28:** "Spring"

FENCES

A fence is a physical structure that divides two areas—in the case of "Mending Wall," two people's property. It may be confusing that the neighbor uses the word "fence" here to describe what the speaker calls a "wall," but the speaker clearly uses the two words interchangeably. In any case, fences in the poem represent not simply the actual, physical border between the two subjects' land areas, but also the broader divisions between human beings. The poem debates the question of whether borders in general—be they fences between plots of land, or country boundaries on a map—encourage goodwill or mistrust between human beings.

Do borders separate people into an "us" and a "them," creating divisions where none need exist? Or is establishing clear boundaries essential to peaceful coexistence? It's ultimately up to the reader to decide.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 27:** "fences"
- **Line 45:** "fences"

COWS

Cows are important [symbols](link), in the American philosophical tradition, of the damage that one person might cause another. Henry David Thoreau writes: "Who are bad neighbors? They who suffer their neighbors' cattle to go at large because they don't want their ill will,—are afraid to anger them. They are abettors of the ill-doers." Thoreau imagines a slippery slope: a small initial infraction leads to larger and more serious problems.

Here Thoreau isn't concerned with literal cows, but symbolic cows: cows that symbolize the small injuries that, if left unchecked, might grow into more serious conflicts between people who live close to each other. Cows also suggest a certain selfishness and greed, as one may allow their own cattle to graze on another's pasture—taking another's resources for themselves.

The cows in "Mending Wall" function similarly. Though it's true that neither the speaker nor the neighbor seem to own cows, the speaker is concerned with something broader when announcing "here there are no cows." The lack of "cows" points to a lack of potential conflict—the speaker and the neighbor use their lands differently and don't compete for resources, meaning there's little danger of tension. They can live peacefully side by side, and thus perhaps don't need a wall between them.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 30-31:** "Why / do they make good neighbours? Isn't it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows."

DARKNESS

The "darkness" that the neighbor "moves in" is not only a literal shade or shadow. In line 42, the speaker specifies that it is not the darkness "of wood only and the shade of trees." The speaker does not tell the reader, however, what kind of darkness it is. Most likely, it is a kind of symbolic darkness.

In western thought, darkness is often treated as a symbol for ignorance or error. (By contrast, light is a symbol for enlightenment and truth). Darkness also serves a symbol for history or the past; the past is often described as lost in darkness, in obscurity. The speaker may mean both at once: the neighbor is not only wrong and ignorant, but he also remains tied to obsolete, antiquated ideas—such as his "father's saying" about good neighbors, which makes him "like an old-stone savage armed."

> **Where this symbol appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 41-42:** "He moves in darkness as it seems to me, / Not of woods only and the shade of trees."

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's enjambments and end-stops are irregular. They fall where the speaker's thought demands them, rather than following a pre-determined pattern. This irregular pattern contributes to the poem's conversational tone: for a reader, it feels as though the speaker is thinking out-loud, working things through, wrestling with the implications and questions that arise from the debate with the neighbor.

The enjambment in line 25 is particularly evocative, coming as it does after the word "across": as the thought spills over from one line to the next, the structure of the poem undermines the speaker's assertion that the apple trees won't cross over into the neighbor's "pines."

There are also fewer explicitly enjambed lines than there are end-stopped, perhaps reflecting the subject of the poem: each end-stop is like a little wall, while enjambments are the gaps being chipped out one by one. In a poem obsessed with boundaries, smooth, conversational enjambments are potentially thematically important: they provide the reader the experience at the level of overcoming such boundaries. They model, even if only momentarily, the experience of a world without walls.

Recall, however, that enjambment can be subjective; though we haven't highlighted these instances here for simplicity's sake, the first three lines of the poem are arguably better thought of as enjambed—as Frost draping long sentences across several

iambic lines so that the reader experiences a pleasurable tension between the finite, contained unit of the line and the seemingly endless unit of a sentence that spills down and down the page. In this sense, "Mending Wall" might seem like one extended thought: the speaker gradually working through the implications of the opening line: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall…"

Indeed, there are a number of locations in the poem where it is difficult to tell whether a line is enjambed or not. For instance, line 44 lacks punctuation at its end, though one would normally expect it there based on its syntax. Because the poem has used regular punctuation throughout, however, the lack of punctuation here seems unusually loud, like something the reader has to pay attention to. In this moment the poem closely mimics spoken English, which tends to extensively employ run-on sentences. And it again reflects the poem's broader pattern of using enjambment, a poetic device, to better mimic ordinary speech.

> **Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 6-7:** "repair / Where"
> - **Lines 13-14:** "line / And"
> - **Lines 25-26:** "across / And"
> - **Lines 28-29:** "wonder / If"
> - **Lines 30-31:** "it / Where"
> - **Lines 32-33:** "know / What"
> - **Lines 37-38:** "rather / He "
> - **Lines 39-40:** "top / In"
> - **Lines 44-45:** "well / He"

END-STOPPED LINE

Just as the poem uses enjambment in an irregular, casual fashion, so too it employs end-stop without a clear pattern or a pre-determined logic. Often the speaker's thoughts fall into single line units, each discrete from the next. They build on each other, but they often ask the reader to do the work of assembling the relationship between them.

For instance, lines 12-16 are almost all end-stopped. The exception is line 13, which is a fairly weak enjambment. It does not disrupt the basic feel of the passage: each line is its own thought, relaying that the ritual of mending the wall has clear, precise steps.

In a poem deeply concerned with walls, fences, and boundaries, the prevalence of end-stops is potentially thematically significant. Each end-stop is like a wall itself, a forced pause. In the poem's end-stops, then, the reader experiences both the force of a wall and the difficulty of overcoming, even if only momentarily, such boundaries.

> **Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "wall,"
- **Line 2:** "it,"
- **Line 3:** "sun;"
- **Line 4:** "abreast."
- **Line 5:** "thing:"
- **Line 7:** "stone,"
- **Line 8:** "hiding,"
- **Line 9:** "mean,"
- **Line 10:** "made,"
- **Line 11:** "there."
- **Line 12:** "hill;"
- **Line 14:** "again."
- **Line 15:** "go."
- **Line 16:** "each."
- **Line 18:** "balance:"
- **Line 19:** "turned!""
- **Line 20:** "them."
- **Line 21:** "game,"
- **Line 22:** "more:"
- **Line 23:** "wall:"
- **Line 24:** "orchard."
- **Line 26:** "I tell him."
- **Line 27:** "neighbours.""
- **Line 29:** "head:"
- **Line 31:** "cows."
- **Line 33:** "out,"
- **Line 34:** "offence."
- **Line 35:** "wall,"
- **Line 36:** "him,"
- **Line 40:** "armed."
- **Line 41:** "me,"
- **Line 42:** "trees."
- **Line 43:** "saying,"
- **Line 45:** "neighbours.""

CAESURA

"Mending Wall" is a poem about boundaries: the walls and fences that people use to protect their property and to separate themselves from other people. Devices like enjambment, end-stop, and caesura are thus thematically suggestive in the poem. They provide the reader the experience of encountering and (sometimes) overcoming boundaries—even if those boundaries are merely at the level of the sentence or the phrase.

Of these devices, caesura is perhaps the richest and most suggestive in its uses in "Mending Wall." One expects to encounter and overcome boundaries at the *end* of a line: such boundaries are intrinsic to poetry. But caesuras are more disruptive, less expected, and thus better positioned to evoke the experience of encountering a wall.

The speaker models this almost explicitly at the beginning of the poem. There is a caesura in the middle of line 9: "To please

the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean…" The caesura might be said to model "the gaps" the speaker discovers in the wall between the speaker's property and the neighbor's. The gap in the line between the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next looks like a break in a fence or a wall. In this sense, the caesura metaphorically makes the line itself into a wall.

Perhaps inadvertently, then, the speaker suggests that the poem itself is itself a wall or a boundary, something that keeps people apart. (And the way the poem looks on the page strengthens this suggestion: it is one continuous stanza). Something similar happens in line 22, where the caesura suggests the division between the speaker and the neighbor as they repair their respective sides of the wall. Here the caesura does not symbolize the damage to the wall, but the wall itself.

In these cases, the poem's use of caesura suggests that the speaker's confidence in declaring the wall unnecessary is somewhat overstated: the speaker might have a lingering sympathy with the neighbor's ideas, a sympathy which embodies itself in the very form the poem takes. Notably, given this implicit crisis of confidence, the number of caesuras increases in the section of the poem where the speaker contests his neighbor's ideas, lines 30-40.

More broadly, each caesura in the poem asks the reader to experience the boundaries and divisions that the poem itself wrestles with: the experience of reading the poem requires the reader to negotiate and overcome those boundaries.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** ". "
- **Line 22:** ". "
- **Line 27:** ", "
- **Line 28:** ", "
- **Line 30:** "?," " "
- **Line 31:** "?," " "
- **Line 36:** ""! "
- **Line 37:** ", "
- **Line 38:** ". "
- **Line 40:** ", "
- **Line 45:** ", "

REFRAIN

The speaker of "Mending Wall" is talkative and expansive: this is someone with a lot to say and who talks at length. In contrast, the neighbor is quiet, even taciturn. He says one thing: "Good fences make good neighbours." And then he says it again.

This supplies the poem with a kind of refrain. Unlike many poems with refrains, however, the poem's refrain does not appear at regular intervals throughout. Instead, the refrain seems to follow the neighbor's whims: it appears where and when he wants to speak. The refrain is thus a formal and stylistic counterpoint to the speaker's rather rambling ideas: a

point of constancy, even certainty, to which the poem returns—and with which it ends.

The repetition of the refrain and its prominent placement at the end of the poem suggests that the speaker may not be quite so sure of the position that the wall is unnecessary: the speaker is somehow captivated by the neighbor's saying and makes it the center of the poem.

However, the poem contains a second refrain as well: the speaker repeats the line "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" in lines 1 and 35. This forms a kind of counter-refrain to the neighbor's repeated line (and perhaps reinforces the speaker's position).

This refrain is arguably less effective than the neighbor's, though. In both cases, this refrain is not its own sentence: rather it forms part of a larger reflection. This diminishes the phrase's intensity and its separation from the rest of the poem. It tends to read less like a firm thesis statement and more like another part of the speaker's cascading train of thought.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Something there is that doesn't love a wall"
- **Line 27:** ""Good fences make good neighbours.""
- **Line 35:** "Something there is that doesn't love a wall"
- **Line 45:** ""Good fences make good neighbours.""

ALLUSION

"Mending Wall" contains three major allusions.

In the opening lines of the poem, the speaker describes the work of mending the wall: picking up fallen stones and balancing them on the wall. This is a sort of yearly ritual. No repair is permanent, and every year the speaker and the neighbor must deal with the damage the previous year has inflicted on the wall. The description of the work thus closely resembles an important story from Greek mythology: the myth of Sisyphus.

In the myth, Sisyphus, a Greek king, is punished by the gods for being deceitful and must spend eternity pushing a boulder up a hill. Every time the boulder reaches the top of the hill, it rolls back to the bottom and Sisyphus must begin again. (Hence, pointless and repetitive tasks are sometimes called "Sisyphean").

The speaker of "Mending Wall" does not explicitly mention Sisyphus, but the labor described here seems distinctly Sisyphean: indeed, the repetitive, unending task of repairing the wall, every spring, might seem pointless, or even like a form of punishment. The implicit comparison to Sisyphus thus calls into question the reason for the speaker and the neighbor's work. More broadly, it introduces an implicit question about the value of human labor.

The allusion to the myth of Sisyphus is quiet and implicit: it

marks the speaker as an educated person, even if the speaker closely mimics humble, everyday language in the poem. This allusion is the kind of thing a reader might reasonably ignore—or miss—without seriously comprising their understanding of the poem.

Later in the poem, however, more explicit allusions appear. In lines 30-31, the speaker alludes to the American Transcendentalist thinker, Henry David Thoreau. Interrogating the neighbor's insistence that "Good fences make good neighbours," the speaker asks:

> *Why* do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
> Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

The speaker is riffing on a passage from Thoreau's writings, where the philosopher interrogates the role of fences in ensuring peaceful relationships between people. Thoreau writes, "Who are bad neighbors? They who suffer their neighbors' cattle to go at large because they don't want their ill will,—are afraid to anger them. They are abettors of the ill-doers."

The allusion to Thoreau clarifies the stakes of the poem: the argument between the speaker and the neighbor is about some fundamental questions in human society. For Thoreau (and the neighbor), boundaries are necessary to ensure that small injuries do not escalate and become serious; for the speaker, no boundaries are necessary where there are no injuries.

Finally, the speaker alludes to a tradition that descends from Germanic mythology: the existence of elves. In popular tradition, elves are semi-divine creatures, endowed with some supernatural powers and the capacity to cause serious mischief and harm to human life. The speaker offers—and then rejects—elves as the cause for the constant damage to the wall. It's a fanciful, playful allusion; it thus reveals that the speaker is given to such fancy and playfulness.

In sum, the poem's three major allusions suggest that the speaker is a person of considerable learning, comfortable with myth and philosophy and able to deploy them casually as part of a debate with a neighbor. The allusions thus strengthen the sense, implicit in the poem, that the speaker is somehow foreign to the poem's rural setting: an outsider, alien to its humble ways of life and thought.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-20:** "But at spring mending-time we find them there. / I let my neighbour 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."

- **Lines 27-31:** "He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours." / Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head: / "Why / do they make good neighbours? Isn't it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows."
- **Lines 36-38:** "I could say "Elves" to him, / But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather / He said it for himself."

METAPHOR

"Mending Wall" is a self-consciously unpretentious, unliterary poem. The speaker uses simple language to describe the hard, humble work of agricultural life at the opening of the 20th century. The speaker thus tends to avoid metaphor, preferring concrete things to fanciful comparisons. And when the speaker does indulge in metaphor, it comes as a break: a moment of self-conscious literary play.

In line 17 the speaker compares the stones that the speaker and the neighbor replace in the wall to "loaves" and "balls." The metaphor is not entirely out of place: it does describe the real objects that they work with. But it is also somewhat fanciful: the stones may look like loaves of bread, but surely they taste quite different.

This metaphor shows the reader something about the speaker: that the speaker is capable of momentary flights of fancy, of actions of the mind that feel quite distant from the otherwise concrete world of the poem.

> **Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 17:** "And some are loaves and some so nearly balls"

SIMILE

"Mending Wall" contains a single simile, toward the end of the poem: the speaker compares the neighbor to "an old-stone savage armed" who "moves in darkness." The poem is otherwise restrained in its use of metaphor and simile. In keeping with its emphasis on common, everyday speech, the poem prefers to deal with real things; the few times that the speaker indulges in metaphor and simile feel like ruptures, moments of illicit fantasy, in an otherwise unpretentious world.

The poem's single simile is thus notable, even loud: a self-conscious moment of literary ambition in an otherwise restrained poem. In other words, the speaker is showing off a little bit.

Further, the speaker chooses a suggestive and important moment in the poem to take on this higher, more literary tone. Until this point, the poem has simply described the neighbor as an individual, a person like any other. Here, however, the speaker attempts to connect the neighbor to a longer tradition.

The speaker compares the neighbor to a "savage" who is "armed" with a stone. This suggests that his ideas haven't evolved since the Stone Age. The neighbor is the embodiment of a "darkness" that haunts human thought: a kind of cynicism about the possibilities of peaceful relations between people.

The neighbor ceases to be an individual and becomes almost a symbol for something deep and dark in human thinking. In this sense, the simile does not provide the reader with much information about the neighbor himself. Instead, it helps the reader understand how the speaker sees the neighbor: as an old-fashioned, out of date figure, who works in an intellectual and moral "darkness."

> **Where Simile appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 38-42:** "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."

POLYPTOTON

"Mending Wall" is a poem concerned with boundaries—and the effect they have on people's relationships with each other. At its center is a physical wall, which the speaker and the neighbor repair: and the wall itself becomes a kind of obsession for the speaker. The poem is also resolutely unpretentious and unliterary.

Thus instead of coming up with elaborate comparisons to describe the wall and its effects, the speaker prefers to use the word itself with a kind of obsessive regularity: the word "wall" and its derivatives are used eight times in the poem. At its point of highest intensity, the speaker uses the word three times in two lines, creating an instance of polyptoton: "Before I built a **wall** I'd ask to know / What I was **walling** in or **walling** out."

The repetition of the word achieves, with considerable economy, something that might elude a more elaborate literary device. The speaker stresses that the physical fact of a wall has social consequences: it separates people, putting some on the inside and some out. This is not an accident but the purpose of a wall: a wall *walls*, it separates and divides. The speaker thus uses polyptoton to make sophisticated political arguments in ordinary, unpretentious speech.

> **Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 32-33:** "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out"

EPANALEPSIS

The speaker uses epanalepsis in line 16 to emphasize the division between the speaker and the neighbor: "**To each** the boulders that have fallen **to each**." Strictly speaking, the

repetition of the phrase "to each" is redundant: in context with the previous lines, the line would still make sense if it simply read "To each the boulders that have fallen."

The repetition serves to emphasize the distinction between the speaker's work and the neighbor's. They may work side by side, but they are not working *together*. Indeed, the poem has already emphasized the way that the wall keeps them apart: they "keep the wall between [them] as [they] go."

The spatial position of the repetitions in line 16 also imitates the division they describe: each person—neighbor and speaker—is on each end of the line, with the rest of the line acting as a barrier or wall between them.

> **Where Epanalepsis appears in the poem:**
> - **Line 16:** "To each the boulders that have fallen to each."

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses [alliteration](link) in ways both subtle and bold throughout the poem. For example, in lines 16-19, the speaker alliterates on a /b/ sound, using it once per line:

> To each the **b**oulders that have fallen to each.
> And some are loaves and some so nearly **b**alls
> We have to use a spell to make them **b**alance:
> "Stay where you are until our **b**acks are turned!"

The alliteration binds together the passage and suggests a subtle link between the boulders and the people who balance them. But the alliteration is restrained and unobtrusive: a reader might just as easily ignore it.

In the poem's more self-consciously literary moments, however, the use of alliteration (alongside [assonance](link) and [consonance](link)) becomes more sustained and marked. Take lines 13-15, with their clear repetition of the /w/ sound (which becomes stronger still when considering the consonance of "bet**w**een" in these lines):

> And on a day **w**e meet to **w**alk the line
> And set the **w**all between us **o**nce again.
> **W**e keep the **w**all between us as **w**e go.

(Note that "once," despite starting with the letter "o," still begins with a /w/ sound when spoken aloud.) The sound rings out clearly in line 23:

> There **w**here it is **w**e do not need the **w**all:

There's a bit of [irony](link) in the connection created by these /w/ sounds: this sound links "we"—the speaker and the neighbor—together as they mend the "wall," yet the wall is the structure keeping these people apart!

In line 24, note the repetition of /a/ sounds (as well as the consonance created by the /l/ and /p/ sounds):

> He is **a**ll pine **a**nd I **a**m **a**pple orchard.

The speaker in these lines is describing the different plots of land on either side of the wall, and using this to—on the surface—reveal a difference between these individuals. Yet the sonic similarities in these descriptions suggest that the speaker and the neighbor are quite similar—and, as such, that the wall dividing them is unnecessary, a means of creating difference where none need exist.

Throughout the poem, then, it seems the speaker turns to alliteration largely to draw connections between people—an attempt to unite even as the wall seeks to divide.

> **Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**
> - **Line 1:** "S"
> - **Line 2:** "s," "s"
> - **Line 3:** "s," "s"
> - **Line 7:** "s," "s"
> - **Line 8:** "h," "h"
> - **Line 9:** "m"
> - **Line 10:** "m," "m"
> - **Line 11:** "m," "th," "th"
> - **Line 12:** "n," "k," "n"
> - **Line 13:** "w," "w"
> - **Line 14:** "w," "o"
> - **Line 15:** "W," "w," "w"
> - **Line 16:** "b"
> - **Line 17:** "s," "s," "s," "b"
> - **Line 18:** "s," "b"
> - **Line 19:** "S," "b"
> - **Line 20:** "W," "w"
> - **Line 21:** "O," "ou"
> - **Line 22:** "O," "o"
> - **Line 23:** "w," "w," "w"
> - **Line 24:** "a," "a," "a," "a"
> - **Line 25:** "a," "a"
> - **Line 26:** "A"
> - **Line 27:** "G," "g"
> - **Line 28:** "m," "m"
> - **Line 32:** "w"
> - **Line 33:** "W," "w," "w"
> - **Line 34:** "w"
> - **Line 35:** "w"
> - **Line 36:** "w," "E"
> - **Line 37:** "e," "e"
> - **Line 38:** "H," "h," "h"
> - **Line 39:** "s"
> - **Line 40:** "s," "s"
> - **Line 41:** "m," "m"

- **Line 45:** "G," "g"

ASSONANCE

In keeping with the speaker's general—if not entirely successful—resistance to literary grandeur, the speaker is careful to make the use of assonance subtle and unobtrusive: it is rarely the loudest or most interesting thing happening in a line. For example, the poem's opening lines contain assonance on /o/, /e/, and /i/ sounds. But the patterns of assonance are diffuse enough that it fails to attract much attention:

> 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...

Despite the assonance that stretches through the passage, the reader is more likely to notice the moments in the line where sound *fails* to line-up: for example, the slant rhyme between "wall" and "swell." In its opening lines, the poem calls its attention to its failure to use sound smoothly—and, in the process, subtly obscures the ways that it *does* use smooth repetitions of sound with real literary skill. In other words, it's almost as if the speaker doesn't want the reader to notice the speaker's skill.

In the places where the poem becomes more obviously literary (and less like regular conversation), the intensity of its assonance increases. For example, line 17—which contains some of the poem's only metaphors—includes a strong assonance on an /o/ sound: "And some are loaves and some so nearly balls."

Unlike the poem's opening lines, which hide their musical quality, the assonance here is front and center, so that the reader notices, suddenly, how skilled the speaker is at organizing the poem—how much literary skill underlies this unpretentious speech. Frost's poem only seems simple and casual on the surface, while containing an expert manipulation of language throughout.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 2:** "e," "e," "ou," "e," "u"
- **Line 3:** "u," "ou," "u"
- **Line 4:** "A," "a," "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 5:** "o," "o," "a"
- **Line 6:** "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "o," "o," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 8:** "a," "a," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 9:** "ea," "ea"
- **Line 10:** "ee"
- **Line 11:** "i," "e," "i," "i," "e"

- **Line 13:** "A," "a," "ee"
- **Line 14:** "A," "a," "ee"
- **Line 15:** "ee," "a," "ee," "a"
- **Line 16:** "ea," "a"
- **Line 17:** "o," "a," "oa," "a," "o," "o," "a"
- **Line 18:** "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Lines 19-19:** "a / y"
- **Line 19:** "a"
- **Line 20:** "i," "i"
- **Line 21:** "o," "oo"
- **Line 22:** "O," "o," "i," "o," "i," "o"
- **Line 23:** "e," "ee," "a"
- **Line 24:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 25:** "a," "a"
- **Line 26:** "i," "i," "I," "i"
- **Line 27:** "oo," "oo"
- **Line 28:** "i," "i," "i," "I"
- **Line 29:** "i," "i"
- **Line 30:** "I," "i"
- **Line 32:** "I," "i," "a," "I"
- **Line 33:** "a," "I," "a," "a," "i," "a"
- **Line 34:** "I," "i," "i"
- **Line 35:** "i," "i," "o," "o," "a"
- **Line 36:** "a"
- **Line 37:** "a," "a"
- **Line 38:** "i," "i," "I," "i"
- **Line 39:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 40:** "o," "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 41:** "ee," "e"
- **Line 42:** "ot," "o," "oo," "o," "o"
- **Line 43:** "i," "i," "i," "a," "i"
- **Line 44:** "i," "a," "i"
- **Line 45:** "a," "a," "oo," "oo"

CONSONANCE

As with the use of alliteration, consonance in the poem often serves to draw attention to the connections between the speaker, the neighbor, and the wall itself.

Note the marked consonance of lines 12-15:

> I let my neighbour 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.

As mentioned in our discussion of alliteration, the irony here is that the /w/ sound draws a link between the shared labor of the speaker and the neighbor—even though that labor is in service of fixing the wall that divides them. The /w/ that unites the speaker and neighbor in "we" cannot be disentangled from the "wall."

In lines 24-26, note how the intense repetition of /a/, /l/, and /p/

---

sounds draw a connection between the speaker and neighbor even more explicitly:

> 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.

Again, even as the speaker allegedly seeks to differentiate their identities, the sonic similarities here bring the speaker and the neighbor together; the apple orchard may not encroach on the pine tree forest, but the two already overlap heavily in their sonic territory. A wall thus isn't just unnecessary, but useless.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "th," "th," "th," "l," "ll"
- **Line 2:** "Th," "s," "th," "s," "ll"
- **Line 3:** "s," "p," "ll," "pp," "r," "l," "r," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "th," "th"
- **Line 6:** "m," "m," "m"
- **Line 7:** "t," "n," "s," "t," "n," "s," "t," "n"
- **Line 8:** "h," "h"
- **Line 9:** "s," "s," "s," "m"
- **Line 10:** "h," "s," "s," "th," "m," "m," "d," "h," "th," "m," "m," "d"
- **Line 11:** "s," "m," "n," "d," "m," "nd," "th," "m," "th"
- **Line 12:** "n," "b," "kn," "n," "d," "ll"
- **Line 13:** "nd," "n," "d," "w," "w," "l"
- **Line 14:** "t," "w," "ll," "b," "t," "w," "n," "s," "o," "nc," "n"
- **Line 15:** "W," "w," "ll," "b," "n," "w"
- **Line 16:** "ch," "b," "ch"
- **Line 17:** "s," "l," "s," "s," "l," "b," "ll"
- **Line 18:** "s," "ll," "m," "m," "b," "l"
- **Line 19:** "l," "b"
- **Line 20:** "W," "w," "f," "gh," "w"
- **Line 23:** "r," "r," "w," "d," "n," "n," "d," "w," "ll"
- **Line 24:** "a," "ll," "p," "a," "a," "appl"
- **Line 25:** "appl," "ll," "n," "a"
- **Line 26:** "A," "n," "n," "p," "n," "ll"
- **Line 27:** "n," "G," "g"
- **Line 28:** "m," "m"
- **Line 31:** "r," "r," "r," "ws," "r," "r," "r," "ws"
- **Line 32:** "B," "b," "l," "ll," "w"
- **Line 33:** "W," "w," "w," "ll," "ng," "w," "ll," "ng"
- **Line 34:** "w," "l"
- **Line 35:** "th," "th," "l," "ll"
- **Line 36:** "T," "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 38:** "H," "h," "m," "s," "s," "h," "m"
- **Line 39:** "B," "s," "s," "b"
- **Line 40:** "s," "s," "m"
- **Line 41:** "m," "s," "ss," "s," "s," "m," "s," "m"
- **Line 43:** "s," "'s s"
- **Line 44:** "h," "s," "h," "s"
- **Line 45:** "s," "s," "g," "G," "g"

▤ VOCABULARY

Frozen-ground-swell (Line 2) - This compound word is Frost's invention, but it describes a recognizable and even commonplace natural phenomenon. In the winter, the water in the ground freezes and, as it does, it expands. This forces the ground itself up: a "ground-swell." The result of this "ground-swell" is often disruptive: it can buckle the asphalt paving of a road. Or, it might knock down parts of a stone wall.

Abreast (Line 4) - The word almost always refers to people walking: it describes people who walk side-by-side, rather than single file. In this case, it gives the reader a rough estimate of the size of the gaps in the wall: they are as big as two people standing next to each other. It thus also gives the reader a sense of the scale of the work required to repair the wall. To repair such large gaps would require significant, sustained labor.

Mending-time (Line 11) - This compound word is Frost's invention. It means, simply, "the time when the wall is repaired." The use of the word suggests that there is something regular, even ritualistic about repairing the wall. It happens every year, in the spring. It's a specific time, a moment marked on the calendar. And it's a ritual that both the speaker and his neighbor recognize and respond to. The word thus helps the reader understand the nature of the work described in "Mending Wall": this is not simply a one-off project, but a part of life in the rural world the speaker describes.

Offence (Line 34) - In its most common, everyday uses, the word means something like "harm, injury, damage." It also can refer to an action that causes someone to feel offended: in other words, outraged or insulted. Using it, the speaker keeps both of these senses in play: a reader may have difficulty deciding how serious the "offence" actually is. It may simply be an insult, which causes hurt feelings and mistrust, but nothing more serious. Or it may be an injury, a serious breach in the relationships between people—that may have more serious consequences.

Elves (Line 36, Line 37) - A species of supernatural beings. In Germanic mythology, they were supposed to have magical powers which they might use either for the benefit or the harm of human beings. In subsequent literature, they are often treated as mischievous spirits who play tricks on people. Invoking these creatures from folk tradition, the speaker may be patronizing the neighbor: as if to say, "This is the kind of nonsense you probably believe in." Based on his taciturn pronouncements, though, the neighbor seems unlikely to believe in elves: he seems practical and free of illusions. The speaker seems to be projecting beliefs and ideas onto the neighbor without much evidence to support them.

Old-stone (Line 40) - Like the other compound words in the poem, "old-stone" is something that Frost invented. Its meaning

---

is more ambiguous than the other compounds, though. It may be a way of suggesting that the neighbor belongs to the stone-age, dating him and his ideas to a specific—and very ancient—moment in history. Or it may be more general, simply saying that the neighbor is old as stone itself. Or it may suggest that the stone that the neighbor holds in his hands looks like a weapon, as the speaker implies at the end of the line, calling the neighbor "armed." Most likely, some combination of all of these senses is present. Using the compound word, the speaker avoids specificity, sliding into suggestion and implication, which readers must interpret on their own.

Savage (Line 40) - An antiquated (and now offensive) word that here suggests a person or a culture is undeveloped, antiquated, and out-of-touch. In most of its uses, it was a word that European colonists applied to indigenous peoples, to describe what they considered a backward or primitive lifestyle. In this case, Frost draws on the pejorative senses of the word without specific reference to indigenous cultures. He seems to have in mind less the native peoples who lived in New England before Europeans arrived and more a general backwardness, a stone-age way of life that survives in the present.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mending Wall" does not follow a particular poetic form. It isn't a sonnet, for example, or a villanelle. Instead, it is simply a single stanza of 46 lines, written in blank verse.

Though the form of "Mending Wall" is therefore relatively simple, it is also interesting in the way that the form intersects with the poem's content. The long, uninterrupted stanza of the poem visually evokes the subject at hand: the block of text itself is a sort of wall of its own. In fact, if you were to tip the poem on its side and look at it horizontally, with the beginning of each line at the bottom and the ends of lines sticking up into the air, the differing line lengths look like the wall's uneven, gap-filled top. And the speaker's declaration that the wall isn't necessary comes in line 23—the exact center of the poem.

METER

"Mending Wall" is written in blank verse, a form with a prestigious pedigree in English literature. It is, for example, the meter of many of Shakespeare's plays; John Milton uses it in *Paradise Lost*, as does Wordsworth in the *Prelude*. It thus may not seem like a particularly promising literary form for a poem about life at the turn of the 20th century in New England. But for poets like Shakespeare, Milton, and Frost, the appeal of blank verse lies in its proximity to spoken English. It is the meter that most closely approximates the language's natural rhythm and intonation. In the hands of a skilled poet, blank verse thus fades into the background: a reader may not even

realize that a poem or a monologue is in meter.

Frost works in this tradition: though "Mending Wall" is a metrical poem, its meter is often imperceptible, and is certainly unobtrusive. It can most broadly be thought of as iambic pentameter, with most (though certainly not all) lines have ten syllables. Line 9 is an example of perfect iambic pentameter:

> To **please** the **yel**ping **dogs**. The **gaps** I **mean,**

But Frost tolerates an unusually high number of metrical substitutions, some of them quite startling—if a reader is paying attention to the meter. However, few readers will be paying close attention: Frost uses these substitutions to keep the poem from feeling stilted and literary. Instead, the poem's many metrical substitutions help it capture the liveliness and variability of actual speech.

For instance, the poem's first line begins with a trochee before settling into an iambic rhythm:

> **Some**thing there **is** that **does**n't **love** a **wall,**

In starting the poem with a trochee and then sliding gradually into iambs, the poem disguises its underlying rhythm—at a moment when the reader's ear is trying to find that rhythm.

Though the poem is broadly in pentameter, many lines also do not have ten syllables; this creates lines of varying visual lengths. The entire poem is one long block of text, which looks kind of like a wall; if you were to turn the poem on its side, these differing line lengths resemble the wall's gap-filled top—full of holes were stones (syllables) have toppled off.

RHYME SCHEME

"Mending Wall" is in blank verse. Though the poem does not have a regular rhyme scheme, it does contain occasional slant and perfect rhymes, which often serve to emphasize moments of particular literary intensity.

The speaker of the poem is clearly educated and fluent in literary tradition: when it suits the speaker's ends, the speaker is willing to forgo the poem's unpretentious plainness in favor of a more elegant style. This happens, for instance, in lines 41 and 42, when the speaker rhymes "me" and "trees" in a couplet:

> He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
> Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

Rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter are also called heroic couplets—a form typically reserved for and associated with poems about heroic subjects, usually written by elite, educated poets. Frost switches briefly into the form precisely when his poem takes on an elevated, grand tone: connecting the speaker's neighbor to a powerful and persistent force in human life.

However, most of the poem's rhymes are slant rhymes: like "line" and "again" in lines 13 and 14. These slant rhymes tend to emphasize the way that the poem falls short of an expected and traditional literary grandeur.

👤 SPEAKER

The speaker of "Mending Wall" is a person, likely a man (though, to be clear, this is not ever stated in the poem), who lives in rural New England on a farm with an "apple orchard." The speaker's farm seems to be relatively remote: the speaker mentions having only one neighbor, and their properties are separated by a stone wall that must be repaired every spring.

Since the poet, Robert Frost, was living on a farm in rural New Hampshire at the time the poem was written, some people have taken the speaker to be Frost himself, or a version of Frost. Certainly, the speaker seems—like Frost—to have a strong education in classical mythology and an awareness of the history of English poetry.

Although the speaker uses plain, everyday language throughout, the speaker is clearly capable of making allusions to classical myth (like the myth of Sisyphus) and using blank verse—one of the most distinguished literary forms in the history of English poetry. This suggests—though the poem does not confirm this suggestion—that the speaker is an interloper, a newcomer to the rural community where the poem takes place. By contrast, the neighbor seems to have lived there for generations.

The poem is thus infused with implicit tension—between urban and rural, the educated elite and the plain-spoken farmer. In this tense exchange, the speaker is not altogether a sympathetic character: some readers may find the speaker verbose and condescending. His arguments, too, border on the naively utopian.

By contrast, the neighbor speaks from a position of cynicism and practicality about human society. Readers are left to decide for themselves which of the two they trust and agree with.

🏞 SETTING

"Mending Wall" is set in rural New England (it was even first published in a book called *North of Boston*). Its two characters, the speaker and the neighbor, likely live in an agricultural community—though whether either is a farmer remains unclear. The reader *does* know for certain that neither raises cattle: "Here there are no cows," the speaker announces.

The poem takes place in early spring, after the winter frosts have damaged the wall between their properties. The speaker describes the frosts in detail—"the frozen-ground-swell"—as a mysterious force that damages and defeats human labor. For

instance, the frost works in secret: "No one has seen them made or heard them made." The natural world that the poem describes seems hostile and powerful: a force that human beings have to counteract through diligent and difficult work.

The setting of the poem is reflected in its unpretentious language: the poet has worked hard to capture the sounds of a rural place, where flowery, ornate rhetorical habits are unnecessary and unwelcome. And it is reflected in the neighbor's insistent, plain-spoken wisdom: "Good fences make good neighbours."

As the speaker suggests, this idea of the neighbor's has actually been handed down from generation to generation without the intervention of sophisticated urban elites and their, perhaps more modern, ideas: the phrase is "his father's saying."

ℹ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Frost wrote "Mending Wall" in 1914, at the height of literary modernism. Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" were published that year—both of which are major modernist texts. Modernism is a broad and complicated literary movement. It responds to the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the late 19th and early 20th centuries by emphasizing the isolation that many people felt in a newly modern world. And it does so by breaking from traditional literary forms: modernist writers often write without meter, rhyme, or set form. Instead, they invent new forms; they bring together fragments and quotations; and above all, they seek to cultivate the same innovation and excitement in literature that they see in the world around them.

Frost's relationship with modernism has been a subject of vigorous debate among scholars for many years. Frost's early critics dismissed him as out of touch, even anti-modernist. "Mending Wall," for instance, is set far from the bustling cities of early 20th century America. It uses a traditional form, blank verse—indeed, one of the *most* prestigious traditional forms.

But more recent critics have defended Frost and argued for counting him among the modernists. Though he is far from the most radical of the modernist poets, he nonetheless makes significant and subtle innovations in the forms he uses. These innovations are evident in "Mending Wall" in his pervasive metrical substitutions, which test the limits of blank verse, and in the irony that suffuses the poem. The poem does not resolve its debate for its readers, nor does it present a particularly trustworthy or admirable speaker. The old certainties have fallen away. Thus while "Mending Wall" may be distant from the pulsing heart of modernity, all the uncertainty and disorientation modernism involves are clearly evident in the poem.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Mending Wall" was written in the early 1910s, in a transitional period in American life. Following a century of mass immigration and industrialization, the United States had become a substantially more diverse and populous place than it had been at its founding—and a substantially more urban place as well. The gentlemen farmers who founded American democracy had been supplanted by fractious urban political parties—alongside populist rural political movements. Further, the country had expanded from the Atlantic coastline all the way to the Pacific in recent memory: the frontier had been officially declared closed in 1890.

As these rapid changes took place, a set of tensions developed in the country: between urban and rural populations; between the educated elite and wide swaths of un- or under-educated people; between New England Protestants, who could trace their ancestors to the earliest Pilgrims, and more recent Catholic and Jewish arrivals.

Though "Mending Wall" does not specifically acknowledge this context, it is implicit throughout the poem. For instance, one might read the debate between the speaker and his neighbor as an expression of conflict between an urban and rural populations—and perhaps between an old New England stock and a newer crop of immigrants, laying claim to the country, trying to shape it line with their ideals.

📖 MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Sadie Stein on "Mending Wall" — The critic Sadie Stein discusses "Mending Wall" for the Paris Review. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/09/23/mending-wall/)

- Frost Poetics — A group of scholars and poets debate Frost's "Mending Wall" at the Kelly Writers' House at the University of Pennsylvania. (https://jacket2.org/commentary/frosts-poetics-and-mending-wall)

- Was Robert Frost a Modernist? — Poet and critic Robert Pinsky considers whether Frost was a modernist. (http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/poem/2010/04/old_made_new.html?via=gdpr-consent)

- Robert Frost Reads "Mending Wall" — The poet himself reads "Mending Wall" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uB_iD1ZCVG0)

- Essays on "Mending Wall" — A series of essays on "Mending Wall" from the University of Illinois. (http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/wall.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- Acquainted with the Night
- After Apple-Picking
- Fire and Ice
- Nothing Gold Can Stay
- Out, Out—
- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
- The Road Not Taken

💬 HOW TO CITE

MLA

Altman, Toby. "*Mending Wall.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jan 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Altman, Toby. "*Mending Wall.*" LitCharts LLC, January 23, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/robert-frost/mending-wall.