‘Mending Wall’ by Robert Frost

‘Mending Wall’ is perhaps one of the most widely quoted poems by Frost. It was included in his collection of poems, ‘North of Boston’ which was published in 1914. The poem can be regarded as a dramatic lyric or dramatic monologue. Every spring, the speaker in the poem, presumably the poet himself and his neighbour, an old New England farmer walk along the stone wall between their respective properties to assess and repair the damage done to the wall every year, seemingly by harsh weather and hunters.

Each farmer picks up the boulders that have fallen to his side and places them back on the wall but being of uneven shapes and sizes, they do not remain in their place and fall off repeatedly. So much so, that the whole exercise of trying to make the boulders balance seems meaningless and “just another kind of outdoor game,/One on a side.”

The speaker is of the view that the reason the wall has “gaps even two can pass abreast” is that there is a mysterious force at work that simply “doesn’t love a wall.” In contrast to the speaker who is young, lively, energetic and with a flexible mould of mind who feels that a boundary line between the two neighbours is unneeded and unnecessary, his neighbour seems to have a deep-seated, blind faith in the value of walls and fences. He does not care to explain his belief and instead, stonily asserts his father’s words, “Good fences make good neighbours.” The younger man, who feels that boundary walls serve no other purpose besides creating differences and divisions between human beings, avers, “There where it is, we do not need the wall:/He is all pine and I am apple orchard…” He assures the older man rather playfully that he would confine himself to his own apple orchard and would not allow his apple trees to reach beyond to the pine trees that come under his friend’s territory. The older man responds with confidence that comes through experience and conviction. He asserts that it is necessary for boundary lines to exist. They paradoxically ensure a healthy relationship between neighbours.

The speaker questions this view and attempts to plant a different idea in his neighbour’s mind. He wants to know why they need a wall when neither of them has any cows. While he is not averse to the idea of a wall between them, he wants to be convinced about the absolute necessity of one and what he “was walling in or walling out”. He want to know exactly what harm would be caused if no wall was constructed.

The older farmer, however, is a traditionalist and is not at all prepared to change his views and opinions. He goes on repeating his inherited opinion, “Good fences make good neighbours”.

To the speaker’s inquiring and receptive mind, his neighbour’s unthinking adherence to his father’s saying is a blinkered, ignorant and primitive view. The speaker says of his neighbour, “He moves in darkness as it seems to me,/Not of woods only and the shade of trees.....” However, the speaker’s views are also primitive in some respect because he seems to be in
sympathy with some elemental spirit in nature that denies all walls, divisions and boundaries. It is implied that there is some supernatural power at work in Nature – “......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.....”

The difference of opinion between the speaker and his neighbour lays bare the issue, which within their world is the simple matter of whether or not it is worthwhile to maintain the unnecessary wall in defiance of nature’s persistent attempt to tear it down. On a deeper and more profound level, one can hear a clash of two forces: the spirit of revolt, which challenges tradition, and the spirit of restraint, which insists that conventions must be upheld, built up and continually rebuilt as a matter of principle.

The wall symbolises all man-made barriers suggesting the divisions between nations, classes, economic, racial and religious groups. While the poet may seem to be sympathetic towards the progressive thinker who seeks to spread the spirit of brotherhood and tolerance, the poem leads its readers to make a choice between the views of the speaker and those of his Yankee (an inhabitant of New England) neighbour. It poses the question to the reader as to which of the two is the more desirable: the need to tear down the barriers which discriminate and isolate individuals from each other, or, the need to be practical and admit that distinctions and limitations are necessary for human beings if they are to maintain mutual goodwill. Frost does not really provide an answer and the attempt to wrest one from his poem would falsify his meaning. It is not his purpose to convey a message or give his readers a lesson in human relations. He has simply presented a problem and has explored the paradoxical issues involved in it.

*Dramatic lyric or monologue*: A literary, usually verse composition in which a single character or speaker addresses a silent listener and often delivers a speech or expresses his views in relation to a significant situation or event.

*New England*: a region in the northeastern corner of the United States largely inhabited by farmers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Frost’s family was also from New England. Apart from being a poet, Frost bought and developed several farms and so understood the rigid mindset of the New England farmer.