

“Something there is that Doesn't Love a Wall”: The Wall as Catalyst for Resistance in Frost's
“Mending Wall”

In this essay, my concern is with the politics of reading Robert Frost's “Mending Wall” in light of the environmental and societal concerns of the new millennium, rather than with the specific origins of the poem. Our own twenty-first century moment encourages us to reconsider and re-read “Mending Wall” in a different light. Although “Mending Wall” has been the focus of a body of scholarship, no critic, to my knowledge, has focused directly on the implications of the wall as the catalyst for resistance by, and among all the characters in the poem. The gap they in the wall deeply informs the competing attitudes toward tradition, community, land usage, and, above all, resistance at play in the poem. I will examine the pivotal role of the wall in galvanizing events in “Mending Wall” through the drastically different meanings it holds for the Speaker, his stoic Neighbor, and the Hunters. Moreover, this essay will show how through their various attitudes towards the Wall, the characters use their treatment of the Wall as a means to attempt to restore what they see as the optimum balance between nature and modern civilization.

The fact Frost chose to construct “Mending Wall” as a poem, and not as an essay carries significance for its content and for the reader. Frost strove to resist convention not in form, but in content. Blank verse forms the “architecture” of the poem. An absence of stanza breaks lends “Mending Wall” an even greater air of strength and stability. Still, the loose iambic pentameter at play in “Mending Wall” creates figurative “gaps” which defy a singular interpretation. The structure of the poem means every word carries more weight than would its equivalent in prose. These features create a boundary not unlike the literal wall, enclosing certain ideas and interpretations, while excluding others. “Mending Wall” gave Frost the opportunity to build, tear down, and build again, a landmark achievement.

Many recent critics have dismissed the Wall as little more than decoration and the hunters as little more than shadowy mischief makers. For instance, Frank Boyer observes “the narrator asserts that the wall is damaged by hunters, who will presumably hunt with or without permission.”¹ This makes the reader wonder of whom the Wall’s original builders sought permission, and what their true motives were? Most critics, though, have chosen to treat the speaker and his neighbor as if they were the only meaningful entities in the poem. Ebrahim Sheikhzadeh, Masoumeh Ouladian, and Ida Rochani Adi praise how “still, the neighbors persist”² in spite of obstacles thrown at them. Yet, the hunters face similar challenges without fanfare, as the Wall remains an unrelenting source of tension. For Kristina Hansen, “the poem is an allegory of tolerance.”³ Still, any supposed “tolerance” only exists between the speaker and his neighbor, as the hunters receive no mention whatever, and the Wall is a veritable afterthought. Such almost total critical neglect has left valuable aspects of “Mending Wall” virtually unexamined, and scholarship of “Mending Wall” worse off for it. The widely known actions, and motivations, of the speaker and his neighbor would be meaningless without the Wall.

The Wall in “Mending Wall” has no agenda. Rather, it provides the basis for an agenda of resistance for all the characters. For instance, the Hunters operate according to a different rhythm. Unlike the wall builders they do not see themselves as subject to the conventions and constraints of traditional ideas about land usage. From the speaker’s point of view:

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,⁴

Apart from moving through the gaps in the wall, we receive no indications that the hunters conduct themselves poorly, or mistreat the land over which they pass. Still, that proves too much

for Charles N. Watson, Jr., who asserts “while the processes of Nature gently spill the upper boulders in the sun, the hunters and dogs crash through the wall with a careless brutality. It is a crude violation, almost a rape.”⁵ I would like to offer a different view. As I understand “Mending Wall,” the hunters do not assault the wall, or the land, any more than nature itself does. As for the fact the speaker has to mend the wall, it is his idea. If he is so set against it, why should he initiate the idea to begin with? We receive no indication that the hunters, or even their dogs, while chasing a rabbit, vandalize anything, or even litter excessively. If there is any “aggravated assault” committed in “Mending Wall” it is perpetrated by the speaker and his neighbor for building, or, at least maintaining, a wall where none belongs. In doing so, they cut themselves off from the very kind of community that the speaker craves.

Something that has always struck me as strange in “Mending Wall” is the singular notion of “the work” of the hunters. Having grown up in a rural environment myself, I know, as does Frost, that the work of country life is multifaceted to an even greater extent than is its urban counterpart. When the speaker brings up that there are good neighbors where there are cows, but that “here there are no cows”⁶ he overlooks the idea that some of the hunters probably raise cattle and other livestock that would wander far and wide over the landscape of the poem if the wall were not in place. The hunters do not display “careless brutality” in their treatment of the land. By taking down portions of the wall, they want everyone to have free access, not just, they, themselves, but the speaker and his neighbor as well. Although the speaker tells us that the section of the wall he sets out to repair has been taken apart stone by stone, he does not bemoan any ripped up or trampled grass, or fuss about having to clean up any garbage or horse manure.

Early in “Mending Wall” our annoyed speaker concedes that “But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,/To please the yelping dogs.”⁷ Yet, does not his wall impede the natural

movement of rabbits in search of food and suitable ground for burrows? It is no coincidence the hunters only play a small part in the poem. Darrel Abel observes that “There are not just two, but three, terms in any relationship: the two beings with their opposed positions and purposes and the object or event that is the ground of a possible common interest, although the opponents differ in what they “invest” and perhaps in their intentions”⁸ Such an idea is sound. Still, in the case of “Mending Wall” it does not go far enough. It only accounts for the points of view of the speaker and of his neighbor. The point of view of the hunters, and, importantly, their precise motivations for doing what they do, especially in direct relation to the wall, receives no mention. The speaker dismisses even the potential that the hunters could add something valuable to the conversation by saying their work is “another thing.” In so doing, he makes them strangers in their own land.

The Hunters’ understanding of how the landscape functioned before the wall went up has no meaning for the speaker. To him, their only concern is bagging their prey. The fact that they, in so doing, likely, see themselves as preserving an ecological balance that makes the land better able to support not only rabbits, but also cattle and other animals and plants is as lost on him as is the reason why his neighbor will not say anything other than his cherished Maxim (“Good fences make good neighbors”). The speaker fails to grasp Aldo Leopold’s notion that “conservation is a state of harmony between men and land.”⁹ The hunters, continually motivated by the Wall’s presence, represent conservation personified. While they take down certain sections of the wall, they do not damage the land over which they ride. They do not mangle the trees they pass. The speaker admits “No one has seen them made or heard them made, /But at spring mending-time we find them there.”¹⁰ The hunters do not seek to deny access to the land to the speaker or his neighbor. They simply go about their work, as nature herself does, silently and systematically.

Their hunting expeditions do no more damage to the land than do the natural processes of wind and weather. Leopold's ideas of a land ethics speak directly to such a situation. He asserts that:

In short, a land ethic of course changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land- community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.¹¹

This is where the hunters, as throwbacks to an earlier, unsettled time, could be most beneficial not only to the land, but also to the speaker and his neighbor. They know how nature intends the land to be accessed. They are as natural to the land as the wall is unnatural to it. The gap they open in the wall fosters a broader sense of public community that the narrow private interests of the landowners walls out.

The "rabbit" that the hunters seek to "flush out" certainly could be the literal animal. It is such for Watson. He makes this analogy, "As the hunters unthinkingly tear down the wall to get the rabbit out of hiding, so the speaker wants to tear down the wall to ferret out the neighbor."¹² It is the "unthinkingly" part of the statement with which I take issue. The very act of coordinating a successful hunt requires much forethought, as does setting up a successful livestock ranch. The hunters are not Neanderthals. They simply live by a code where the land belonged, at least in large part, to everyone, and everything, equally. When the speaker mentions about neighbors being better where there are cows, I think of the idea of the Roundup where all the herds from a particular area would come together and all of the ranch hands, and their families, would interact and exchange news and ideas. I agree that the speaker is after his neighbor just like the hunters are after the rabbit. The trouble is he does not understand his neighbor as well as the hunters understand the rabbit. He cannot because his connection to his neighbor has been rendered unnatural by the wall.

The Wall is the paramount reason the speaker sees himself as fundamentally different from the hunters, as well as his stoic neighbor. The hunters seek to open up the land so that everyone in the poem can have the access they desire. They do not seek to drive the speaker and his neighbor away, but to pull them in to a closer communion with nature and themselves. By comparison, the speaker is the interloper as he seeks to navigate between two separate traditions, and to innovate beyond them. The speaker only knows what he “invests” in the scene. He knows what he wants to get out of the conversation, and he thinks he knows what his neighbor wants out of the conversation. The third voice in the poem, that of the hunters, he considers of no consequence. This is evidenced by his exclusion of the hunters from his proposed solution. It is only about his neighbor that we learn:

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.¹³

The pine and apple trees serve as a much less “offensive” boundary one that the hunters’ gap preserves. The fact that the hunters and their dogs only disassemble parts of the wall while leaving others intact preserves a balance between isolation and community. Under such a scenario, the wall becomes a sort of “turnstile” through which can pass people, animals, information, and natural processes. The landowners do not lose their claim in such a situation, but no one else need feel unnecessarily excluded.

The speaker asks his Stoic neighbor to examine not so much the what, but the why of what they are doing. Thus, the speaker, inspired by the Wall’s presence, resists the system while at the same time preventing chaos by nominating a more compatible successor.

“Mending Wall” makes no mention of any plants or animals, endangered or otherwise, beyond the orchards of the speaker and his neighbor, the enthusiastic dogs of the hunters, and the “rabbits” they seek. The dispute in the poem, then, prompted entirely by the wall, centers around

what Brown would call “colonization” of the land by an outside entity, namely the speaker and his neighbor, as embodied in the Wall. Interestingly, none of the opposing forces in the poem seek to “degrade” the land in the conventional sense of the term. Other than bringing down parts of the wall and riding around flushing out rabbits, the hunters leave the land more or less as it was. We receive no indication that the orchards of the speaker and his neighbor create any undue pollution which would deteriorate the landscape. Environmental impact, then, and, thus, moral right and wrong within “Mending Wall” moves from the strictly environmental to the strictly human. Each of the opposing human forces in “Mending Wall” seek to “improve” the land in some way they see as necessary. Moreover, each of the opposing forces seeks to prevent the others from “damaging” the environment in some way they find unnecessary or hard to understand. Under this scenario, the hunters are the easiest to understand, they would “improve” the land by removing the stone wall, and allowing themselves easier access to the rest of the landscape. Whether they realize that such access would work both ways, and allow the speaker and his neighbor also to reach them more readily, is unclear. However, the fact the speaker only mentions their damaging the stone wall, and not his, or his neighbor's property, is significant. The hunters, it turns out, have more respect for the land-use rights of others in the poem than do either the speaker or his neighbor. They are not trying to impede the apple trees or pine trees of their more sedentary neighbors. The core of the stalemate between the speaker, his neighbor, and the hunters comes, in large part, from the presence of the Wall and the resistance it causes all around. I do not wish to portray any of the characters in “Mending Wall” as villains since I do not believe, once we set aside the speaker's frustration at having to clean up after the hunters, that Frost means any of the characters to be villains. The kind of stalemate he is after does not require good and evil, as such, only disagreement.

The speaker and his neighbor certainly resist the hunters on account of their efforts to repair the wall. If it were not for having to counter the hunters, the speaker might not even get the idea to try to commune with his neighbor. He owes what limited contact he gets with his neighbor to the wall, and its implications. It speaks to the desire to resist isolation itself, for a greater, more open, and authentic sense of community, communion, and communication. As the speaker admits:

But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.¹⁴

By giving him a reason to do so, the wall facilitates the main, as well as all ancillary, action in the poem. Moreover, minus the presence of the wall, would lose all value as a depiction of practical resistance because there to bother about resisting.

Although the hunters and their dogs only function on the outskirts of "Mending Wall" the poem could not express its full meaning without them.

NOTES

¹ Frank Boyer, "An Inquiry into the Essential Conditions for Artistic Collaboration in a Post-Postmodern Age" in *Proceedings of School of Visual Arts 27th Annual National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists: Collaboration in the Arts*, October 16-18, 2013, 17.

² Ebrahim Sheikhzadeh, Masoumeh Ouladian, and Ida Rochani Adi, "American Humor in Promoting the Talk over the Wall with a Focus on Robert Frost's Poems" *International Journal of Social Sciences* 3:2 (2013): 65.

³ Kristina Hansen, "Robert Frost's 'Mending Wall' as an Allegory of Tolerance: Understanding, Acceptance, and Invitation," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy* 35.1 (2014): 3.

⁴ Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*, eds. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995), 39.

⁵ Charles N. Watson, Jr. "Frost's Wall: The View from the Other Side," *The New England Quarterly* 44.4 (1971) 655.

⁶ Frost, *CPPP*, 39.

⁷ Frost, *CPPP*, 39.

⁸ Darrel Abel, "'Against and With' in Robert Frost's Poetry," *Colby Library Quarterly* 24.4 (1988): 207.

⁹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, Illustrated Charles W Schwartz, London: Oxford University Press, 1968, 207.

¹⁰ Frost, *CPPP*, 39.

¹¹ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 204.

¹² Watson, "Frost's Wall," 655.

¹³ Frost, *CPPP*, 39.

¹⁴ Frost, *CPPP*, 39.