Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall”: Physical and Psychological Boundaries

“Good fences make good neighbors”. This proverb has been passed down repeatedly from generation to generation for as long as anyone can remember. However, few have questioned why people need fences in order to create good relationships with those around them. Robert Frost faces the issue of fences both literally and figuratively in his poem “Mending Wall”. Frost uses a paradoxical tone created through careful diction, syntax, and grammatical form to question why people create literal and figurative fences between each other.

The speaker in “Mending Wall” is a concerned citizen, possibly even Frost himself. Because Frost was a farmer in the Northeast, many of his poems reflect this experience. Although this poem is told in the voice of a farmer, Frost meant for the theme to be conveyed to all of society. “Mending Wall” portrays a farmer and his neighbor rebuilding a wall between their properties every spring. The wall represents both the physical detachment of people in society as well as their psychological need to remain private. Frost creates an ironic tone by presenting a paradoxical situation in which he suggests that he wants to break down the wall, even though his actions show a psychological need for the wall to remain. As the speaker struggles with the concept of physical and psychological barriers, the reader is left to decide whether they believe individuals in society should set up boundaries.

“Mending Wall” begins with the statement, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall”. Frost’s choice of the word, “something”, as well as his inverted syntax create a mysterious beginning to the poem. This word as well as its placement in the sentence make the reader question what this thing might be. According to Steven Frattali, “The
opening line hints at some enigma in its tone and syntax” (65). If Frost simply said “there is something that doesn’t love a wall” his directness would not only throw off the verse’s rhythm it would also remove all sense of ambiguity, which is center to the speaker’s inconstancies about the wall. “Although the original inverted syntax is not ‘literary’ in any negative sense, it give[s] us the impression of being introduced to something rather mysterious” (Frattali 66). Therefore, Frost begins the poem with a lingering unexplained question as to what could be destroying his wall each year.

Frost then gives the reader two plausible causes for the yearly destruction of the wall. First, he muses that it could be “the real or natural cause (frost heave)” (Squires 92). Frost’s diction is once again very important. He states that something “sends the frozen-ground-swell” under the wall. Another word for “frozen-ground-swell” is frost. The poet may be alluding to his own name to suggest that he is actually the something that is opposed to the wall between his property and his neighbor’s. Furthermore by using the word “sends” Frost has personified the something. This diction implies that Frost himself wants the wall to be destroyed.

The second reason given for the walls destruction is “the work of hunters”. According to Radcliffe Squires, “The tone slants toward an inappropriate shrillness with the early reference to hunters” (76). Although he seems to dislike the wall, the speaker reprimands the hunters for its destruction. He even goes as far as to “come after them and [make] repair[s]” on his own, without the neighbor’s influence. The speaker’s action of mending the wall on his own shows his need for psychological barriers that separate him from his neighbor. These two conflicting circumstances leave us with a paradoxical tone. It is not definite as to whether the speaker wants the wall to come down or remain
standing.

As the speaker goes on to describe working on the wall with his neighbor, his actions and thoughts remain inconsistent. The speaker states that he is always the one to “let [his] neighbor know” when it is time for them to mend the fence each spring. James Potter notes that, “It becomes clear that the speaker really favors mending the wall—he initiates the process every year” (49). Frost also uses the plural “we” and “us” to refer to the work on the fence. With this diction he emphasizes that the two men work together, meaning the narrator does not readily oppose mending the fence. However, his words contradict his actions when he literally states that, “we do not need the wall”. The speaker’s words and actions directly conflict in such a way that it is impossible to tell whether he is for or against mending the wall.

Frost uses grammatical parallelism to further emphasize his main theme of people psychologically wanting space. He uses three obvious parallels to display the growing detachment of the narrator from his neighbor. First, the narrator states that “to each the boulders that have fallen to each”. By repeating the word “each” rather than saying it once, the narrator sets even more room between him and his neighbor. In describing these boulders he says, “some are loaves and some so nearly balls”. Once again, by repeating a word (in this case “some”) the narrator creates space. Furthermore in this passage he displays clear separation between two different things, loaves and balls. Finally, the narrator creates even more separation by speaking of his neighbor that “He is all pine and I am apple orchard”. This can be seen as a metaphor for the narrator to completely differentiate between himself and his neighbor. Although he uses their differences as a reason to eliminate the wall, the narrator actually creates a psychological barrier between
his neighbor and himself by pointing out their differences. This psychological barrier represents all of society’s barriers put up against people who differ from themselves. “In “Mending Wall” grammatical parallelism...shapes many of the speaker’s statements and symbolizes the central image of the poem” (Hoffman 76). Through Frost’s use of parallelism, the narrator grows further and further apart from his neighbor as the poem proceeds.

At this point in “Mending Wall”, the reader cannot be sure as to the narrator’s true feelings about the fence, so we must examine his view towards his neighbor. According to Tyler Hoffman, “the skeptical and teasing attitude of the narrator comes into focus” with the question: “why do they make good neighbors?” (99) As the speaker questions his neighbor, the tone appears to be “deeply quizzical as opposed to highly ironic” (Hoffman 99), suggesting the speaker’s own puzzlement once again. The punctuation that Frost uses creates a metrical stress which leads us to the conclusion that the tone is quizzical rather than harsh and ironic. However, we still have to question “How are we to take the speaker’s criticism of his neighbor if he himself is in some way behind the expression? How light hearted is his criticism or how heavy-handed” (Hoffman 109)? At this juncture we must come to the conclusion that, “The tone of voice is not fully resolved, but not wholly open either” (Hoffman 99). In this case, we must first determine the narrator’s stance regarding the fence before we can uncover his feelings toward his neighbor.

Nearing the end of the poem, Frost then brings us back to his original question; what is the “something” that doesn’t love a wall? He suggests a “fantastic cause (elves) offered whimsically” (Squires 92). What the speaker is really trying to convey through
this nonsensical answer is that he wishes his neighbor would question the necessity of the wall in the same way he does. As the speaker says, “I’d rather / He said it for himself”. However, the neighbor just continues building the wall, “bringing [to it] a stone grasped firmly by the top”. Unlike the narrator, the neighbor’s words and actions complement each other. In contrasting the two characters we see the neighbor as society’s tradition and the speaker as questioning those traditions. Directly before he wills his neighbor to speak up, the narrator asks: “to whom [he] was like to give offence” if he does not create a wall. Once again Frost has used diction to great effect. “The pun on “a fence” directly concerns the validity of stone walls—the word play may be outrageous but it keeps the focus on the main issue of the poem” (Potter 58). In other words, that society and tradition expect people to maintain certain distance both physically and psychologically.

Although the speaker struggles between his thoughts and actions, he eventually “accepts the paradox and works within it” (Potter 49). The neighbor represents tradition and ritual as expressed by both his repetition of the saying, “good fences make good neighbors” and the observation that “he [the neighbor] will not go behind his father’s saying”. Tradition is based on repetition, so Frost’s use of it in the poem emphasizes the traditional boundaries people set up. Furthermore, by stating that the saying was the neighbor’s father’s, Frost concludes that tradition is based on patriarchal society. In the end, “The speaker accepts the activity as ritual, restoring a symbol of manmade barriers” (Potter 49). The speaker is conflicted throughout “Mending Wall”, but Frost ends by showing us that the tradition of creating barriers will continue.

In reflection on “Mending Wall”, Frost stated that, “Maybe I was both fellows in the poem” (Hoffman 108). This would make logical sense, as the speaker’s actions do
coincide with his neighbor’s thoughts. Frost intentionally creates his paradoxical tone through carefully chosen diction, syntax, and grammatical structure in order to force readers to come to their own conclusions about barriers in society. When analyzing whether Frost meant for us to break down barriers or keep them up, it is important to realize that Frost also said: “I make it a rule not to take any ‘character’s’ side in anything I write” (Hoffman 108). This is much the way that we as readers need to look at “Mending Wall”. “The wall is both good and bad. The barrier serves both to separate the men and to bring them together and each of these functions is ambivalent” (Potter 49). The only definite conclusion that we can come to is that Frost wanted people to examine their society and question, why do good fences make good neighbors?