Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall”

While the majority of American poets turned away from classical poetic tradition, Robert Frost continued to write poems that were out of style. At a time when free verse became widespread, Frost resisted this new style and one of the poems that most represents his refusal to change is “Mending Wall.” Delving deeper into “Mending Wall,” it is a poem that can be interpreted from a psychological, a creative, and a social perspective, but in the end the same message surfaces: creativity is at the boundary between modernity and historical tradition.

In the poem, two men meet to repair the wall that separates their property. This is an activity they do once every year during the spring. One of these men, the narrator, is convinced that something is unfriendly to the wall. Given that the wall falls down every year, the narrator tries to persuade his neighbor to abandon the project of mending it. The wall would be worth having if any of the neighbors had cattle or anything other requiring protection, but this is not the case. There is also something that makes sure to inflict damage on the walls during the winter. The neighbor, on two separate occasions, just responds: “Good fences make good neighbors” (Frost 27). These words terminate the argument, and the neighbor continues with the ceremonial ritual of mending the wall.

The poem presents two neighbors who sporadically meet to mend the wall separating their property and go about the task as if it were a ceremonial ritual. Modernist sensibility prioritizes the dissolution of boundaries. This implies that the idea that attention on boundaries is indispensable for cultivating satisfying relationships is conservative, particularly when focusing on existing boundaries between social classes or the boundaries keeping people from each other: “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” (Frost 32). However, reading between the lines, the notion of mending a wall or rebuilding a boundary is a means for reestablishing the integrity that is inherent to human relations and human individuality itself.

Second, “Mending Wall” is a poem that may be interpreted as a metaphor for the process of poetic creation. Under this interpretation, the narrator could be seen as a poet, and the act of mending a wall could be viewed as the process that a poet goes through when revising and editing a poem. The creative process confronts two antagonistic minds that nonetheless collaborate: “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” (Frost 12). One of these minds decants in favor of removing stylistic structures, whereas the other insists on reaffirming tradition, just like Frost refused to embrace free verse.

There is yet another interpretation for this poem: the dialogue or confrontation between the poet and the reader. This interpretation requires considering the wall as that which leaves the reader outside, what prevents him from fully understanding the poem’s sense and true meaning. The narrator in this interpretation is the reader that once again entices the poem just like the narrator tries to get in the head of the neighbor: “If I could put a notion in his head: Why do they make good neighbors?” (Frost 29). In this case, the reader may wish to destroy the wall, but as he reads the poem he may be inadvertently reconstruct that boundary that separates the artist from his audience.

In the end, “Mending Walls” is a poem that demonstrates that giving in to the ritual reparation of walls may also inspire man to think about tearing those walls down. Analyzing this poem makes it possible to interpret it in three different ways. In this way, Robert Frost manages to demonstrate that creativity is at the boundary between modernity and historical tradition.
Works Cited