

M.A. 2nd Sem Paper eight

ROBERT FROST  
MENDING WALL

AMERICAN LIT

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14-4-20

67-21h

1200-12

A majority of Frost's poems are about social situations. "Mending wall" is a symbolic interpretation of the modern situation where national boundaries are fast disintegrating giving place to an international understanding, though at the same time, in certain quarters, militant nationalism is also showing up its head, thus cutting at the very roots of internationalism. We would like that there should be no barriers between peoples, between states; but, we also love to live within four walls, within self-limitations. We do not like to be taught that we must not be islands unto ourselves, though we prefer understanding and universal brotherhood to tension and misery. This seeming paradox is at the root of human existence, and it is the theme of the poem. Frost's analysis of the theme is realistic and based on sound judgement. He does not take sides, and recommend either militant nationalism (or individualism) or universal brotherhood; nor does he strike a compromise between the extremes. In either case he must have seemed unpractical. He only poses the problem, and leaves it to the reader to work out for himself whatever course he may prefer to choose.

Thus the strength of the poems is in the contradiction itself, one part of which is stated at the opening and the other at the close of it.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall.....and,  
"Good fences make good neighbours.

And, these two statements are the utterances of two characters obviously holding two different view-points. But, the poet also wants to have his say in the matter, not leave it to the speakers' debate, though he would not take the role of the judge who passes the verdict. He only generalizes on the problem, and in the course of the narrative makes the first person narrator slip in a few remarks which would throw light on the problem from a new angle. "There where it is we do not need the wall." By implication, this line should yield to the opposite notion that there where it is not, we need the wall. Elaborating on this idea, the speaker further says,

"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."

The need for the wall does not arise here as the trees do not move. There is no scope for encroachment. But this need not always be so. The speaker himself realizes this point. He further says,

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

That is, there are times when there should be a wall and there are times when there need not be a wall between neighbours. In the situation of "Mending Wall" the boundary-line does not serve any practical purpose, and so it is useless.

The central situation of the poem has given scope to a social or symbolic interpretation, where the greatest of the ethical or cultural problems of our time are said to have been analyzed. Some critics believe that in days of international tension born of national prides and prejudices, the poem has a social function to subserve : some others think that in "Mending Wall" Frost has counter-opposed the spirit to revolt with traditionalism. The second person repeats the saying, "Good fences make good neighbours" as he does not want to go "behind his father's saying" and "he likes having thought of it so well....." The speaker of the poem stands for the revolt against tradition that keeps a blind faith in the order, built up and rebuilt, as a matter of principle. He is for adjustments according to the needs of the hour, to the demands of the situation.

Frost, of course, denied having hidden any social or ethical intent behind the dramatic character study. The poem is a character study, the



effort of a dramatic character at self-analysis. The portrayal of the second person whose presence in the poem is only suggested and not drawn, is as keen as that of the speaker himself. The speaker argues and counterargues, and in the course of this reveals himself and his neighbour also.

Speaking about the symbolism of the poem Lynen has observed :  
"The poem seems merely descriptive and anecdotal in character, yet everyone who has read it will remember a certain feeling of puzzlement, a sense that Frost is driving at some point which one is not quite able to grasp. We are told how the speaker in the poem and his neighbour get together every spring to repair the stone wall between their properties. The neighbour, a crusty New England farmer, seems to have a deep-seated faith in the value of walls. He declines to explain his belief and will only reiterate his father's saying, "Good fences make good neighbours. The speaker is of the opposite opinion. As he points out :

There where it is we do not need the wall :  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.

To him the neighbour's adherence to his father's saying suggests the narrowness and blind habit of the primitive :

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

Yet the speaker's own attitude is also enigmatic and in some respects primitive. He seems to be in sympathy with some elemental spirit in nature which denies all boundaries :

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.....  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.....  
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.

The poem portrays a clash between these two points of view, and it may therefore seem that its meaning is the solution Frost offers to the disagreement. The poem leads one to ask, which is right, the speaker or his Yankee neighbour ? Should man tear down the barriers which isolate individuals from one another, or should he recognize that distinctions and limits are necessary to human life ? Frost does not really provide an answer, and the attempt to wrest one from his casual details and enigmatic comments would falsify his meaning. It is not Frost's purpose to convey a message or give us a pat lesson in human relations. Though the poem presents the speaker's attitude more sympathetically than the neighbour's, it does not offer this as the total meaning. Frost's intent is to portray a problem and explore the many different and paradoxical issues



it involves. He pictures it within an incident from rural life, and in order to reveal its complex nature he develops it through the conflict of two opposed points of view. The clash 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. But one cannot avoid looking at this problem in other contexts of experience. The wall becomes the symbol of all kinds of man-made barriers. The two views of it represent general attitudes towards life – the one, a surrender to the natural forces which draw human beings together, the other, the conservatism which persists in keeping up the distinctions separating them."

The real success of Frost the poet rests on the fact that he assimilates to his own New England idiom such varieties of classical conventions as relaxed modes of the Theocritan idylls, the terse epigrammatic brevity of Martial, and the contemplative serenity of Horace, the sharply satirical intensity of Juvenal, the homely didacticism of Aesop. In this poem he used the traditional blank verse for the purpose of poetic medium. The regular iambic pentameter of the first line is modified by the substitution of a trochee in the first foot, and the modification seems to carry the reader into the poem with an almost impulsive sense of ease.

## 8. HOME BURIAL

Text

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs  
 Before she saw him. She was starting down,  
 Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.  
 She took a doubtful step and then undid it  
 To raise herself and look again. He spoke  
 Advancing toward her : 'What is it you see  
 From up there always ? – for I want to know.'  
 She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,  
 And her face changed from terrified to dull.  
 He said to gain time : 'What is it you see ?  
 Mounting until she cowered under him.  
 'I will find out now – you must tell me, dear.'  
 She, in her place, refused him any help,  
 With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.  
 She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,  
 Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see.  
 But at last he murmured, 'Oh,' and again, 'Oh.'  
 'What is it – what ?' she said.

'Just that I see.'  
 'You don't,' she challenged, Tell me what it is.'  
 'The wonder is I didn't see at once.  
 I never noticed if from here before,