

Katherine Kearns: On "Mending Wall"

It is arguable that the self-righteous speaker of "Mending Wall" is himself obsessively committed to wall building, far more intractably and instinctively committed than his cliché-bound neighbor. While the speaker of "Mending Wall" justifiably castigates his unthinking neighbor and is himself far more aware of the powers of language for good and for ill, he is nonetheless caught up, ironically perhaps, in the same actual task, wall building, which will have the same results and look no different from his neighbor's contribution despite the narrative he brings to it. There are several possibilities for irony here, depending on the level of Frost's self-awareness. Wall imagery pervades his poetry, as a conscious poetic image and as a psychosexual marker of control and limitation. That the speaker is the one who calls the neighbor to mend the wall is vitally important, then, but it is not clear that Frost meant for the speaker to be ironically perceived as a hypocrite. The simple explanation, that the speaker acts out of a sense of inevitability, knowing his neighbor's habits, seems hardly enough given the contextual symbolism of the wall in Frost's poetry; the psychological explanation attendant upon this version might suggest that Frost's conscious intent was subverted by his own unconscious need for walls. So while Frost might not mean the speaker to be self-parodic, the reader might judge that there is an ironic discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, both by the speaker and by the poet. On a deeper level even than this is the possibility that Frost was aware of, had taken account of and justified, his own need for barriers. One does, after all, need something against which to push. In this case, the poem might be completely unironic, for while both men are engaged in the same task, each brings a different narrative to it, the one limited to a thoughtless cliché, the other enriched philosophically. It could be that Frost is illustrating what it means to move from delight to wisdom: the road less traveled may not look any different, but it is made different by the inner progress of the traveler. The one wall becomes, in this reading, two walls, the speaker's wall a philosophically differentiated structure, the neighbor's wall a mere landmark of past clichés.

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