

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Mending Wall

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In declaring that “I, Too, Sing America,” Langston Hughes raises the question of how we as Americans should relate to one another. (In the poem, Hughes likens America to a kind of family, where he is the “darker brother,” at the moment outcast but eventually included: “Besides, They’ll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed.”) In this selection, Robert Frost also raises questions about neighborliness and inclusion, but in quite a different way than Hughes.

*Frost (1874–1963) was born in San Francisco in 1874 and moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts as a child. He attended Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, but left without graduating to help support his family by working odd jobs. Frost returned to poetry in 1894 when he sold his first poem, “My Butterfly.” He married a year later and moved to a farm in Derry, New Hampshire. Inspired by his surroundings, Frost began using the imagery and themes of life in rural New England to explore philosophical questions in his poems. Frost and his family relocated to England in 1912 where he published his first two books. Frost returned to New Hampshire at the outbreak of World War I and embarked on a nearly 40-year collegiate teaching career. In 1924, Frost won his first Pulitzer Prize for his volume of poems, *New Hampshire*, and he would go on to win the award three more times over the next two decades. Frost served as the Poet Laureate for the United States from 1958 to 1959.*

*First published in 1915 as part of Frost’s second collection of poetry, *North of Boston*, the poem, written in blank verse, describes how two neighbors come together each spring to fix a stone wall that divides their property. The speaker in the poem wonders if the wall is actually necessary—“He is all pine and I am apple orchard. / My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines”—but his neighbor only responds “Good fences make good neighbors.” And so Frost paints a portrait of the two men, one who questions the yearly repair of the wall (but who continues to participate in the activity), and the other who is driven by tradition to build up the wall.*

As you read “Mending Wall,” consider these questions: Why do the two men repair the wall each year? Do they have different reasons for doing so? What are ways that fences do make good neighbors? What are ways they do not? What responsibilities do we

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*have toward our neighbors? And what does Frost's poem tell us about neighborliness?
Do good fences make good neighbors?*

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.
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,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
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.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
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 neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? 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 offense.

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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. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

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