

The Meaning and Origin of ‘Good Fences Make Good Neighbours’

In this week’s Dispatches from The Secret Library, Dr Oliver Tearle explores the meaning of a well-known expression.

Here’s a question for you: who first wrote the line, ‘good fences make good neighbours’? Although it was the American poet Robert Frost (1874-1963) who first used that particular wording, the sentiment, expressed in slightly different (though only *very* slightly different) words, is considerably older. So where did ‘good fences make good neighbours’ *originally* come from, and what does it mean in the Robert Frost poem in which it appears?

‘Good fences make good neighbours’ is most recognisable as a (repeated) phrase in Frost’s 1914 poem ‘Mending Wall’. But the *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* provides some earlier instances of the same sentiment in earlier works of literature. In 1640, an E. Rogers wrote a letter containing the following piece of wisdom: ‘A good fence helpeth to keepe peace between neighbours; but let vs take heed that we make not a high stone wall, to keepe vs from meeting.’ This letter, written almost three centuries before Frost’s poem, is worth bearing in mind when we turn to ‘Mending Wall’ in a moment.

Then, in 1815, almost a century before Frost, H. H. Brackenridge wrote in *Modern Chivalry*: ‘I was always with him [i.e., Thomas Jefferson] in his apprehensions of John Bull. [...] Good fences restrain fencebreaking beasts, and [...] preserve good neighbourhoods.’

In both of these earlier examples, as in Frost’s ‘good fences make good neighbours’, the meaning of the expression seems clear enough: having a clear boundary between your house and your neighbour’s, and respecting that boundary, helps to keep the peace between neighbours, and thus good relations between neighbours are partly dependent on fences as a marker of said boundaries. How many neighbours have fallen out over some *Leylandii* that has become overgrown, intruding on another person’s garden? How many neighbours have fallen out over an extension that has been built, blocking out some of the sunlight into the next-door neighbour’s house? And so on. ‘Good fences make good neighbours’ pithily expresses the need to have clear boundaries between properties, as well as the need for neighbours to respect these boundaries, if relations between neighbours are to remain amicable and ‘good’.

But the meaning of Frost’s ‘good fences make good neighbours’ is not quite so clear-cut when we examine and analyse his use of this phrase in the broader context of his poem. Frost is regarded as one of the greatest American poets of the twentieth century. And yet he didn’t belong to any particular movement: unlike his contemporaries William Carlos Williams or Wallace Stevens he was not a modernist, preferring more traditional modes and utilising a more direct and less obscure poetic language. He famously observed of free verse, which was favoured by many modernist poets, that it was ‘like playing tennis with the net down’. His work may appear conversational and direct, but it is often misinterpreted by people determined to take it at face value, thus missing the subtleties and ironies of his work, or taking certain lines out of context.

'Mending Wall' is a poem about two neighbours coming together each spring to mend the wall that separates their two properties. The speaker of the poem reveals to us in his chatty and familiar manner that, while he and his neighbour fix the wall, it becomes clear that the speaker isn't convinced by the need for a fence dividing their two properties. When he asks his neighbour what the purposes of the dividing wall is, all his neighbour can do is parrot an old piece of wisdom his father used to say: 'Good fences make good neighbours.'

The neighbour clearly shares the view expressed by Rogers and Brackenridge in those much earlier wordings of the sentiment. In other words, having clear boundaries between ourselves and others leads to healthy relationships between neighbours because they won't fall out over petty territorial disputes. But 'Mending Wall' is frequently misinterpreted, as Frost himself observed in 1962, shortly before his death. (However, he also refused to tell anyone what the 'secret' meaning of the poem really was.)

It's worth noting that it is Frost's neighbour, rather than Frost himself (or Frost's speaker), who insists: 'Good fences make good neighbours.' But as the first line of the poem has it, spoken by Frost (or his speaker) rather than his fence-loving neighbour: 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall'.

For the neighbour, the hand-me-down proverb from his father is enough wisdom for him to live by: it's always been said, as far as he's concerned, that 'good fences make good neighbours', so who is he to question such a notion? By contrast, Frost's speaker can't resist questioning or probing the matter.

Nevertheless, it's a nice piece of irony that it is only really through 'mending wall' – mending it in order to retain it – that the speaker and his neighbour come together: the wall may keep their properties apart, but it also brings them together as they 'meet' in order to mend it.

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