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### Walls

Much of what we believe, how we act, and indeed, much of who we are comes from our parents. This is simply human nature; parents are our first teachers, our first friends, and really our first insight into the world at all. We pass down traditions through generations, parents to children to grandchildren on down the line. These traditions eventually become unquestioned pieces of our identity – things we do that we don't have a reason for really, except that they're tradition. We blindly accept them, simply because "it's the way it's always been." Some of these traditions are good: family recipes, for example, or holiday traditions; they bring people together, not only with those who are right next to them, but also those generations before. Sometimes, though, what is passed down the line is not, in fact, tradition, but something else entirely – something that, instead of bringing together, separates. In their poems "Mending Wall" and "Hand-Me-Downs," Robert Frost and Sarah Kay discuss the latter type of blind acceptance of the past. Though these poems were written in different times in American history, they both seem to be arguing for the American idea that we need to consciously decide for ourselves to pursue what is good and what ultimately brings people together, even if that means going against what has been done by generations previous.

The poem "Mending Wall" was written by Robert Frost in 1914. The poem follows two men as they repair a wall which separates their properties on a spring day. He describes the task

as “just another kind of outdoor game” (ln. 21) – a game in which he and his neighbor “set the wall between [them] once again” (ln 20). They fill the gaps which have appeared over the winter months and the speaker muses as to what he supposes may have caused the wreckage; he considers ice and hunters as potential destroyers of the wall, or perhaps elves, “but it’s not elves exactly” (ln. 37). He wonders why the wall must be there at all, and he prods at his neighbor, who simply responds with “good fences make good neighbors” (ln. 27). The speaker isn’t satisfied with this answer, though, and continues to, somewhat playfully, respond to his neighbor: but *why* do good fences make good neighbors? The only answer that is provided comes in the last three lines of the poem: “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’” (ln. 43-45).

It seems as though Frost’s speaker is critiquing his neighbor’s “sort of mindless compliance with the least that life has to offer” (Poirier 116). The speaker is looking for an answer as to why the wall needs to be up at all anymore, considering there are no animals to separate, only trees; the only answer he gets is a cliché – which the neighbor picked up from his father, though he feels as if it is his own – that he recites several times, showing the reader that he is not questioning whether there is a better option for the two men now that circumstances have changed. There is a metaphorical wall between the men, too, then, in addition to the physical one. The wall symbolizes their lack of ability to communicate clearly with one another. The neighbor either simply cannot understand the speaker’s question, or refuses to think it through fully, and simply accepts what his father told him, which was probably the same as his father told him down the line for generations. Now, the speaker suggests, is the time to question

whether or not it makes sense to continue in these old ways or, perhaps, consider change, and the neighbor, at the very least, doesn't seem to understand that.

The wall also symbolizes the separation between the men's lives – physically and socially. The only time in which they come together is to build up the thing that divides them. And even then, the neighbors “keep the wall between [them] as [they] go” (ln. 15). It seems as though the speaker is objecting to there being a wall at all; even the first line alludes to this: “Something there is that doesn't love a wall,” and then later, “That wants it down” (ln 36), but that the neighbor either is opposed to the consideration, or simply has never thought of it before. Either way, it is clear that the neighbor is sticking to his thought that “good fences make good neighbors” and that the wall should continue to remain between the men's properties, for no reason other than simply that that's the way it's always been. Frost seems to be critiquing his speaker's neighbor, then, for following blindly the ideals laid out for him by his predecessors, or, as Mordecai Marcus states in speaking about this character, “stupidly delighting in repetitions of his father's unexplained wisdom,” without giving a thought for himself what it right for the situation (43). Frost also seems to be critiquing the separation between men that comes from generations past that goes unchecked because of simple “mindless compliance” (Poirier 116).

There is a reading of Frost's “Mending Wall” which somewhat problematizes this reading of the main point of the poem, though. In her article in *Critical Companion to Robert Frost*, Deirdre Fagan argues that Frost perhaps intended the neighbor to be the “something there is that doesn't love a wall” (Frost ln. 1). “It seems,” Fagan states “that the neighbor may take down the wall just so they can engage in the game of putting it back up again” (221). This is an interesting argument, because it seems to negate what I have posed as the speaker's main critique

of society in the poem. Indeed, if the neighbor takes down the wall simply so he can meet with the speaker to mend it and put it back up again, it would seem as though the wall, instead of separating the two men, really brings them together. Even in this reading of the poem, though, the wall cannot be seen so clearly as something bringing the men together. The purpose of a wall is to separate, and while they work, the men physically separate themselves from the other. It is clear, too, that this is basically the only time in the year in which the neighbors consciously reach out to each other. If mending the wall is the only way in which the two men connect and they only do that once a year, then for most of the year they are unnecessarily isolated from each other. Therefore, even if this reading were the most plausible one, the wall is still a symbol for a separation between people due to blindly following what has been done in the past, with no real regard for what is best now.

Sarah Kay wrote her poem “Hand-Me-Downs” in 2007 and, though the poems were written at much different times, Kay’s speaker seems to be saying much the same thing Frost’s speaker says in “Mending Wall.” Kay’s poem begins “You have taken to wearing your father’s / hand-me-down anger” (ln. 1-2), and from this line on, builds a metaphor comparing anger to an article of clothing which has been passed down for generations<sup>1</sup>. The boy whom the speaker is addressing begins to feel at home in his jacket. “You’ll find stories in there,” the speaker says, “which he left there for you to hand out” (ln. 13); eventually, she tells him, “some of those stories are your own” (ln. 21). She describes holes and snags in the jacket that were the boy’s own doing, and how his mother and sister will mend them, and tell him how proud they are of him for being just like his father and his grandfather, “and his father before him and his father

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<sup>1</sup> For my purposes, I’m going to assume that this article of clothing is a jacket, though this is not explicitly stated.

before him” (ln. 30). The speaker then begins to paint a picture of where all of this anger originated, saying that at some point in history, “someone / drew a line. Someone built a wall. Someone threw a stone” (ln. 31-32). Then someone threw a stone back, and the cycle continued until there were walls and stones all over the place and no one can remember where it began; they know only that now everyone is knitting these jackets of anger and these are being passed down through generations, never to forget that their “great-great-great-great-somebody” was angry for some reason, though the reason is unclear, exactly (ln. 37).

Our speaker ends the poem with a series of questions, pleading the boy, now man, to consider that everyone’s grandfather suffered in some way, implying the question: is worth it to continue this cycle of anger if it is no longer about you? And even if it is, what good is the anger doing, ultimately? She ends the poem by posing this question:

... And the first time  
 you come down to dinner, and your son is sitting at the  
 dining room table wearing your hatred on his shoulders,  
 who is going to be the first to tell him it is finally time to take it off? (ln. 44-47)

She is asking him, really imploring him, to consider ending the cycle of anger before it passes to another generation of blind, inherited anger at other people.

It is interesting to see how similar some of the imagery is in Kay’s poem to Frost’s “Mending Wall.” This similarity is especially evident in line 32 of Kay’s poem: “Someone built a wall. Someone threw a stone.” Kay and Frost are literally using the same metaphor here – this idea that someone, somewhere down the line of history, built a wall to separate two people or groups of people, and now here we are, years later, still with this wall here, still throwing stones

back and forth, even though we can't remember why the wall is up or even really why we started throwing stones in the first place. It is important to note that in Frost's poem, the neighbors are throwing stones – or, rather, placing stones – in order to *mend* a wall, while, Kay's poem, the men are throwing stones to *break* the other. This is an important distinction, because it makes Frost's poem far less of a violent event than the story Kay's poem depicts. However, the stones in both cases are used to separate the men and to symbolically break the relationship between them. Though the stones are used in much different ways physically in each poem, they really do almost identical things symbolically.

Kay's argument is, then, quite similar to Frost's. She is asking the boy in the poem to question the anger that has been passed down to him in much the same way Frost's speaker is asking his neighbor to question the wall that has been passed down to them. The boy's coat of anger is much like the wall is in "Mending Wall," because it is the thing which separates him from the fellowship of other people. This is evident early in the poem, with the lines "you'll find stories he left there for you to hand out / to the other boys like car bombs" (ln. 13-14). His anger isolates him from other children because it destroys the relationships he could have with the other boys, "like car bombs" (ln. 14). This anger which he has unquestioningly inherited keeps him from the love that comes in friendship, much as the wall keeps the neighbors at an arm's length from friendship with each other.

The neighbor and the boy both simply accept from their fathers the thing which isolates them. Each man, though, interestingly, wants the thing to be his own. The boy in "Hand-Me-Downs" seems to be proud that the jacket holds some of his own stories now. He is proud that it is his own. The neighbor, too, is proud of the saying "good fences make good

neighbors,” and “being as vain as any ill-read poet might be, the neighbor cannot recognize the ‘saying’ as having come from his father” (Poirier 106). Poirier, here, is referring to the last lines of Frost’s poem: “he likes having thought of it so well / He says again, ‘Good fences make good neighbors’” (Frost ln. 44-45). The neighbor thinks the saying is his own and *wants* it to be his own. There is some desire in each character to be original and to think for himself, even though his character is criticized for exactly *not* being original in thought. Even in these characters who are criticized for blindly following in their father’s footsteps, we see a desire for self-reliance and a kind of radicalism. Perhaps the poet’s do this to emphasize the American ideal that it is natural for a man to want to be independent and to seek his own personal flourishing, even if, in these particular cases, he is not truly actualizing it.

Probably the most powerful line of the entire poem “Hand-Me-Downs” comes at the end of the poem, when Kay’s speaker asks the boy what he’ll do when he sees that his son is carrying the same hatred that had been passed down to him. For some reason, this is even more powerful than hearing about the boy’s own struggles with the anger that has been given to him. Something innate within us, especially as Americans, is that we want better for our children than we have for ourselves. Nathaniel Willis stated in 1827 that American children should be “born to higher destinies than their fathers” (Fass 9). From our revolutionary beginning, we want better for the generation below us than we had for ourselves. It’s interesting, then, that in both Kay’s poem and Frost’s poem, we have characters who have been given ideals which hurt them and isolate them from the love of other people. This must mean that there are still these sort of painful traditions being passed down through generations, even in America, a place in which we characteristically want better for our children. This is perhaps part of the reason that both of these poems were

written. The speakers are obviously of the American opinion on the matter and are pained to think that there are those out there who simply follow blindly the road which they have been set upon.

It is interesting that “Mending Wall” and “Hand-Me-Downs” have such similar messages, considering the fact that they were written little less than a hundred years apart from each other. Though some of the specific content differs because of the time period difference, the point is still almost exactly the same, and even many of the specifics are the same, as we noticed already. This is perhaps because it is an American idea that has been part of our culture from our country’s birth. In her article “How Americans Raise Their Children: Generational Relations Over Two Hundred Years,” Paula Fass discusses the trends and tendencies of American parents historically when it comes to raising their children.

She discusses in particular at the beginning of the article the influence that the revolutionary mindset had on parents’ views of child-rearing. Because we were radicals, we opposed most anything that had to do with holding sovereign power over another human being. Children were, then, raised much differently in America than they would have been in England. Children were given more freedom, Fass says, in part because, as a country, we “lacked the kind of aristocratic class system in which family was an expression of lineage and children were beholden to inherited descent,” and therefore, because there was an “absence of laws that specifically regulated generational relations and obligations, relationships between Americans parents and their children cast and lowered the degree of control that parents exercised over their young” (Fass 9). This is important, because children are no longer in fear of losing their inheritance, so they have less obligation to follow in the footsteps of their parents. Children can,



in America, consciously make decisions despite their parents wishes without worrying about losing their inheritance. Because of this, then, we get the viewpoint which Frost and Kay both seem to be coming from: that a man should question for himself what is right, and not simply blindly follow whatever it is his father or his grandfather would have him do.

This doesn't mean, however, that Americans have lost all respect for the past and the lives and opinions of the generations before. We look to our elders for guidance and to understand why we do what we do, but, at least from the point of view that both Kay and Frost are coming from, we shouldn't simply take and do what they did for no reason except that it's what has been done before. Kay does a really beautiful job of hitting this subject in her poem; her speaker asks the reader "Who is going to be the first to remember that / their grandfather suffered just as many broken windows, / broken hearts, broken bones?" (ln. 42-44). She acknowledges the suffering of the past, and validates that it was, indeed, painful. She does not wish to pretend that this hurt was not real, and that we should simply pretend it didn't happen. The argument she is making, though, is that part of what it means to be an American is to respect and honor the past for what it was, but not simply to settle for it. Fass quotes the Mother of Mary Lundie Duncan in 1852 as saying of American children, "The little citizen seems to feel at a surprisingly early age, that he has a part on the stage of the world, and is willing enough to act a little before his time" (8). We feel, as Americans, apparently from a very young age, that we have a voice in things – that we have a say in what the world is for us. It is an American ideal, then, which Kay and Frost are tapping into: that we can and, indeed, *should* decide what is best for us, not necessarily following those who came before us, but using their experience as a

guidelight for us, in combination, of course, with our own experiences and our own understandings of the world around us.

In lines 42-44 of her poem, Kay does something else that is extremely relevant for Americans and simply people in general: she looks at the conflict from the other side. She makes the point that all of our grandfathers were hurt in some way by the anger that they were given. Every person struggles, and there have been deep wounds incurred in the past. That is an inescapable part of not only American existence, but human existence. It's important for us to remember, though, that we have the option not to this alone. We have the option not to suffer in silence, but to break down the walls that divide us. We can recognize that, in a lot of ways, we are as Frost said of himself in relation to the characters in "Mending Wall," "on both sides of [the] wall" (Marcus 42). In the end, what Kay seems to be arguing about these walls between neighbors is that we should not harbor anger for no reason at our neighbor on the other side of the wall, because his family has suffered just as much as ours. Frost seems to take this argument even further, though. He argues that men should not only forgive those on the other side of the wall, but, furthermore, truly become friends with them. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down" (Frost 35-36); it's not enough, then, to simply accept the others on the other side of the wall, but to tear the wall down altogether – because it is no longer necessary – and become connected to each other.

Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" and Sarah Kay's "Hand-Me-Downs" both delve deeply into Americans' views on our relationship to the past, especially to the generations which came before us. They both describe the struggle which comes from wishing to honor those who have come before us, while still moving forward in the world, and loving the other as well as we are

called to love each other. Both Kay and Frost seem to hold the opinion that blindly accepting what has been passed down from our ancestors, and even just from our parents, is not what is ultimately good for the person or for our country as a whole. They argue that sometimes what is passed down separates us from each other in ways that have nothing to do with us personally. This separation, this wall, can only be taken down, though, if Americans take the initiative to consider thoughtfully the ideas which have been given them by their families and make sure they all consider the innate dignity of the other people in the world. If we don't, according to Frost and Kay, these walls will grow so big that we cannot even see each other anymore.

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