

Lesson Objectives

- Explore the concept of boundaries through a discussion of the saying “Good fences make good neighbors”
- Analyze the poem “Mending Wall” by Robert Frost
- Reflect on how students’ thoughts on “Good fences make good neighbors” have changed as a result of studying “Mending Wall”
- Write a dialogue expressing their views on boundaries

Suggested Grade Levels

8-12

Time Frame

Two or three 45-minute periods

Standards for the English Language Arts

Standards 2, 3, 5

(See Appendix)

Handouts

- “Mending Wall”
(1 copy per student)
- “Mending Wall” Analysis Worksheet
(1 copy per student)
- *Between Fences* classroom poster
(1 copy)

Good Fences Make Good Neighbors

Background for Teachers

This lesson helps students explore the duality of both literal and metaphorical fences by analyzing Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall.” Students express their own views of fences by writing a dialogue using the images on the *Between Fences* classroom poster as a writing prompt.

Setting the Stage

1. Show the *Between Fences* classroom poster. Tell students: *There is a saying about fences that goes “Good fences make good neighbors.” Ask students: What does this saying mean? Do you agree or disagree with the saying? Why?*

Lesson Procedure

1. Explain that Robert Frost uses the phrase “Good fences make good neighbors” in his poem “Mending Wall.” Distribute a copy of “Mending Wall” to each student. Read the poem as a class.
2. Help students understand the basic narrative of the poem. Younger students may require more assistance with this dense poem. Ask students: *What is the setting for this poem? Why does the wall in the poem need to be fixed? Who are the two men? What do they do in the poem? What remarks do they exchange?* Encourage students to ask clarifying questions.
3. Explain: A central question in “Mending Wall” seems to be about the purpose and value of walls. The poem contains two apparently conflicting statements about walls: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” and “Good fences make good neighbors.” The wall in the poem is a stone fence between two pieces of property. Ask students: *What other kinds of walls, literal and metaphorical, might this wall be a symbol for?* (Examples include boundaries between countries, barriers between people of different cultures, a picket fence around a home, prejudice, the door to your bedroom, the Berlin Wall, the Great Wall of China, etc.)
4. Tell students: *Many people have wondered about the tension between the statements “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” and “Good fences make good neighbors.” Does Robert Frost want us to take sides on this issue? Does he have a clear position himself? Could both statements be true? Let’s see what you think after analyzing the poem a bit more deeply.*
5. Divide students into groups of two or three. Distribute a copy of the *Mending Wall Analysis Worksheet* to each student. Review the questions on the sheet. Assign students to work together to answer the questions on the worksheet. Monitor the progress of the groups and provide assistance as needed. Younger students may need to do the analysis as a class.

6. When groups have completed their analysis, ask them to share their ideas with the class. Explain that many scholars think Robert Frost purposefully did not take a clear stand about fences in "Mending Wall." Ask students: *Why would a poet choose to be ambiguous? What purpose would it serve?*
7. Ask students to write a journal entry on the following question: "Have your thoughts about the saying 'Good fences make good neighbors' changed as a result of studying "Mending Wall"? If so, how? If not, why?"

Student Product

1. Show students the six images on the reverse of the *Between Fences* classroom poster. (Classroom poster lesson images may be downloaded from www.museumonmainstreet.org/educate.htm.) Briefly identify each of the images.
2. Assign students to select an image and write a narrative about a discussion between two people on either side of the fence in their image. The dialogue and detail in the students' narratives should help their audience understand their views on the phrase "Good fences make good neighbors." Students may wish to draw upon the thoughts in their journals as they prepare to write.

“MENDING WALL,” 1914

by Robert Frost (1874–1963)

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: 5
 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, 10
 But at spring mending-time we find them there.
 I let my neighbour 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. 15
 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. 20
 Oh, just another kind of out-door 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 25

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 30
 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, 35
 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. 40
 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.”

“MENDING WALL” ANALYSIS

“Mending Wall” contains two apparently conflicting statements about walls: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” and “Good fences make good neighbors.” Does Robert Frost want us to take sides on this issue? Does he have a clear position on the issue himself? Work with your team to answer the questions below. Look for evidence in the poem to support your answers.

1. Does the wall between the neighbors’ farms serve a practical purpose? What evidence in the poem supports your view?
 - 2a. Who initiates the annual fence repair project between the farms?
 - 2b. Do the speaker’s actions in the poem match his words? Why or why not?
3. Toward the end of the poem, the speaker seems irritated with his neighbor. Why do you think he feels this way? Use evidence from the poem to support your answer.
4. What does the poem’s title suggest to you? Notice it is not called “Mending the Wall.” Can a wall be “mending”?
5. Does the wall in the poem divide the two men or bring them together? Or both? Explain.
6. Which statement do you think “Mending Wall” best supports: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” or “Good neighbors make good fences”? Does it support both? Or neither?