A: “Mending Wall”

1. The speaker in “Mending Wall” finds no … kindred spirit. Ironically, although he and his hidebound neighbor “work together” to repair the wall, the poem conveys a disquieting sense of incompatibility, of working “apart.”


2. The point usually missed, along with most other things importantly at work in this poem, is that it is not the neighbor, described as “an old-stone save armed,” a man who can only dully repeat, “Good fences make good neighbors”—that it is not he who initiates the fence-making. Rather it is the far more spirited, lively, and “mischievous” speaker of the poem. While admitting that they do not need the wall, it is he who each year “lets my neighbor know beyond the hill” that it is time to do the job anyway, and who will go out alone to fill gaps made in the wall by hunters: “I have come after them and made repairs/When they have left not one stone on a stone.” Though the speaker may or may not think that good neighbors are made by good fences, it is abundantly clear that he likes the yearly ritual, the yearly “outdoor game” by which fences are made. Because if fences do not “make good neighbors,” the “making” of fences can. More is “made” in this “outdoor game” than fences. The two men also “make talk, or at least that is what the speaker tries to do as against the reiterated assertions of his companion, which are as heavy and limited as the wall itself.


3. The poem leads one to ask, which is right, the speaker or his Yankee neighbor? Should man tear down the barriers which isolate individuals from one another, or should he recognize that distinctions and limits are necessary to human life? Frost does not really provide an answer, and the attempt to wrest one from his casual details and enigmatic comments would falsify his meaning. It is not Frost’s purpose to convey a message or give us a pat lesson in human relations. Though the poem presents the speaker’s attitude more sympathetically than the neighbor’s, it does not offer this as the total meaning. Frost’s intent is to portray a problem and explore the many different and paradoxical issues it involves. . . . The wall becomes the symbol for all kinds of man-made barriers. The two views of it represent general attitudes towards life—the one, a surrender to the natural forces which draw human beings together, the other, the conservatism which persists in keeping up the distinctions separating them.

4. What Frost intends to say in his poem, “Mending Wall, is quite clear. He protests meaningless walls; he protests people who build them: they “move in darkness.”

Truth, however, breaks in with another thesis which I am almost certain Frost did not intend—but which is nonetheless there. It is this: the villain of the piece is the narrator, not the neighboring farmer.

Consider: These two men come together every spring to rebuild a wall they know won’t last. To boulders which they place back on the wall they say only, “Stay where you are until our backs are turned!” The narrator regards the experience … merely as a joke … Yet despite this, it is he who at “spring mending time” takes the initiative in getting the job done…. Apparently he values the experience. (But perhaps he values it for the wrong reason, as we shall see.)

The neighboring farmer also values the experience. After all, he does do his share of the labor. Working stolidly and quietly, he twice insists on the truth of his father’s saying: “Good fences make good neighbors.” He finally is judged, cruelly. The narrator says of his neighbor and co-worker: “…like an old-stone save armed/He moves in darkness.” The judgment is generally accepted as justified. It is the indictment of a fine intelligence baffled by, and contemptuous of, stupidity. Or so, at any rate, it seems.

I believe it might be contended that the indictment only seems just. In fact, our neighboring farmer may not be what our narrator thinks. First, though evidence will not argue strongly for, neither will it argue against, the possibility that our neighboring farmer values not the wall, but mending the wall. Neighbors should get together once in a while. A coming-together such as this, he might say, justifies the comment, “Good fences make good neighbors.” It’s a paradox: by building this stone wall, the neighbors have a chance to eliminate other less substantial but more formidable walls—walls of misunderstanding, perhaps, or of exclusiveness, or of arrogant condescension.

Second, we might suggest that the neighboring farmer is with a wonderful irony rebuking the fine-witted narrator. That is, while the narrator is enjoying the experience of ridiculing this “dumb farmer” who insists on maintaining walls around pastures empty of cows, our neighboring farmer is, by his action, making a point about another kind of wall. Specifically, there is that kind of wall which the narrator has himself built; and it is this wall—his wall—of arrogance, of contempt, of un-neighborliness that ought really to be eliminated.


B: “Soldier’s Home”

1. “Soldier’s Home” is the story of a young man’s struggle to separate from home, and Hemingway packed it with a lifetime of revulsion and outrage. Nevertheless, the utterly unrelenting, utterly unqualified characterization of Mrs. Krebs as a monster revealed that the author was in fact still in thrall to her flesh-and-blood counterpart [his own mother, Grace].”

2. The girls are on Krebs’ mind and on the surface of the fiction, but the tension is more than sexual. There is something wrong with Krebs that we’re never told directly because of the skewed point of view (objective but much in the head of Krebs). He has come back from the war unfit to re-enter a family world. What is left unsaid becomes as important as the words we hear.


3. As in so many other ways regarding his return home, Krebs is trapped between distinctly unpleasant alternatives: nausea (lying) or anomie (separation to avoid lying). This dilemma, however, clarifies persistent misreadings of Krebs’s condition. Perhaps because of today’s widespread awareness of how post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects returning combat veterans, many critics assume that this syndrome explains Krebs’s behavior: his seeming lack of ambition and his reluctance to involve himself in a romantic relationship with the attractive young girls he watches from his porch. But ironically . . . Krebs’s combat experience was remarkably “positive”: it was something he was proud of; it gave him a sense of masculinity, which, combined with his uncomplicated sexual encounters in Germany, enabled him to grown beyond the cookie-cutter sameness of his prewar identity (as imaged by the first photo of Krebs in a fraternity). No one suffering from PTSD would look forward “eagerly” to reading about the battles he was in.

The problem, then, is not in Krebs, but in his hometown, not in the war experience in Europe, but in the peace back home. The town is built on lies, on game-playing rituals: the courtship game, the success game (becoming a “credit to the community”), the religion lie, the love lie, the patriotism and “heroes” lies. None of this is particularly new, but a changed Krebs sees it with new eyes. Thus, his dilemma: conform, lie, and assimilate, or stay aloof, try to maintain some shred of integrity, and suffer loneliness. When the latter alternative proves impossible (he must lie even to his mother), his only solution is the non-solution of leaving—as if he won’t encounter further lying and game-playing in Kansas City or anywhere else.

--This excerpt is from an article called “Vagueness and Ambiguity in Hemingway’s ‘Soldier’s Home’: Two Puzzling Passages.” Written by Milton A. Cohen, the article appeared in the journal The Hemingway Review, volume 30, issue 1, in Fall of 2010, on pages 158-164. The quote is from p. 163.

C: "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"

1. As the story indicates, Granny has become impatient and even angry at the delay of the bridegroom: “Again no bridegroom and the priest in the house.” This second time, however, the situation is different. During the sixty years which following the jilting, Granny has become stronger and more independent. As she approaches the moment of death, she remembers the jilting and then surprises the reader with an action contrary to the Biblical imagery.

For in the parable both the wise and the foolish virgins were waiting for the bridegroom. Due to the bridegroom’s delay, the foolish virgins ran out of oil for their lamps. While they went out to buy some more, the bridegroom came and was greeted by the wise virgins. Unlike the foolish virgins, when Granny becomes aware of the delay, she does not worry about the oil—she
has been ready for the past twenty years. More significantly, unlike the wise virgins, she decides not to wait any longer. She jilts the heavenly bridegroom by blowing out the lamp, an effective symbol of both the soul and patient vigilance.

Thus Granny, finally frustrated by the confused, empty waiting and the resurrected indignity of George’s jilting, rejects her life and God Himself. Even though she had worked hard to put aside her thoughts of George and had kept up her religious practices throughout her life, hurt pride overcomes her religious sensibilities when she does not receive a sign from God. In her pique the sixty years of “putting the whole place to rights” come to the fore, and she takes the situation into her hands. She will not wait. She will not be like “a shuffle of leaves in the everlasting hand of God…” This time she jilts. The grammatically ambiguous title attests that the dependent maiden, who was jilted, has become the defiant matriarch who jilts in return. Granny Weatherall is both the jilted and the jilter.

--This excerpt is from an essay by David R. Meyer called "Porter’s ‘The Jilting of Granny Weatherall’" from an issue of the journal *Explicator* published in the summer of 198, volume number 38, issue number 4. The article appeared on pp. 33-34. The quote is from the same pages.

2. “It was Hapsy she really wanted. She had to go a long way back through a great many rooms to find Hapsy standing with a baby on her arm. She seemed to herself to be Hapsy also, and the baby on Hapsy's arm was Hapsy and himself and herself, all at once, and there was no surprise in the meeting” (Porter 54).

This entire passage and the one that refers to the last child as being the one Ellen really wanted point to something much broader and deeper than what Laman sees. One such deeper reading is by Charles Allen, who symbolically identifies Hapsy with George (226). Marriage with George would have created Hapsy for Ellen. But Allen's reading is still too limited. Hapsy is that which Ellen has been striving for, with limited success, all of her life. As the name implies, Hapsy is "happiness," a deep and abiding spiritual happiness of soul, a wholeness of self, a holiness of soul. Granny may have achieved this happiness, this Hapsy, briefly with John before he died, but only after dutifully giving birth to Cornelia, Jimmy, and Lydia. Whether Hapsy was an actual child born of a union between Ellen and John is not necessarily relevant to the story's theme. She may have been born, she may have been still-born, she may have died shortly after birth, or she may be entirely the figment of Granny's imagination, the result of Ellen's passionate and holy desire to have a child born out of love--a love child. For it was a love child that she truly wanted, a child born out of her deep and true love for a man. Instead, she had Cornelia and the others, all children born out of a sense of her duty to herself, out of a sense of her God-given duty as a woman to have children. Cornelia, especially, was a "duty-child," not a "love-child." And for Ellen, Cornelia's birth did not bring her the joy that it should have. Even on her deathbed Granny still feels some resentment over this. Moreover, she sees that Cornelia has grown up to be just like her, a person who lives life according to the requirements of duty. At some deep level, at the level of her soul, Granny is aware that the good life is not achieved in this way: "Cornelia was dutiful; that was the trouble with her. Dutiful and good: So 'good and dutiful,' said Granny, 'that I'd like to spank her.' She saw herself spanking Cornelia and making a fine job of it" (Porter 51).
As one of Katherine Anne Porter's most brilliant technical accomplishments, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" has evoked a number of critical responses in recent years. Most commentators admit to a certain ambiguity in the story… none, so far as we have been able to discover, has adequately treated the matter of Granny's "sin" and its importance to an understanding of the story. Indeed, most are inclined to dismiss it as at best a venial violation, a natural occasion for concern on one's deathbed, but of little moral relevance otherwise.

There is in the story, however, evidence to show that Granny's concern for the state of her soul is genuine and closely connected with her memories of George, the man who had jilted her so many years before: “For sixty years she had prayed against remembering him and against losing her soul in the deep pit of hell, and now the two things were mingled in one and the thought of him was a smoky cloud from hell that moved and crept in her head when she had just got rid of Doctor Harry and was trying to rest a minute.”

While most critics have either assumed or implied that Granny's sin is little more than the "wounded vanity" she herself speaks of, her injured pride in being left waiting at the altar, "the fear that she has not withstood the shame gracefully," yet a more careful reading will, we think, reveal the true source of Granny’s fear of "losing her soul": there is more than one indication that her jilting was attended by one further complication—pregnancy—and that Granny’s sense of guilt for her premarital transgression has continued to plague her all those years.

If we accept Hapsy as Granny's child by George, saved from illegitimacy by Granny's acceptance of John's marriage proposal, we may better understand some of the puzzling references elsewhere in the story. For one thing, her reminiscence of that fateful day when George failed to appear takes on a more pointed significance: "She tried to remember. No, I swear he never harmed me but in that. He never harmed me but in that ... and what if he did?" What, indeed, if he had harmed her more than simply by jilting her? What if he had left her alone and expecting his child? John had saved her from the shame, after all.

From the shame, but not from the guilt. For despite her understandable pride in how well she has succeeded in raising the children, in maintaining the farm all these years, in "weathering all" (as her name clearly suggests), Granny continues to be haunted by the memory, not simply of George, but of her own transgression with him. Her conscious confidence in heaven is, then, so much bravado and rationalization; it is only in her moments of semi-consciousness that the reader is able to perceive Granny's agonizing guilt, guilt which she has carried with her for sixty years, unable to expunge it wholly from her mind. To be sure, it is this same guilt which finally humanizes her for the reader and makes of her something more than a quaint caricature. It is this guilt which has led her to penance—by ministering to the nuns, making altar-cloths for the
church, and the like. But perhaps most important of all, it is this which validates her grief, justifies her horror at not seeing any sign of her salvation at the moment of death.

--Written by Barnes, D. R., and M. T. Barnes. The article is called "The Secret Sin of Granny Weatherall" and it appeared in the journal Renascence, in 1969, in volume 21, on pages 162-65. The first excerpt is from p. 162, the second from p. 165.