

Obscure Biblical Allusions in Robert Frost's "Mending Wall"

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Abstract

Allusions are implied or indirect references that give writing aesthetic value. Robert Frost used allusions in his poems, but his Biblical allusions in the poem, "Mending Wall", have not yet been studied in detail. Perhaps the reason is that they are obscure rather than overtly present in the poem. The purpose of the study was to analyze this poem's obscure Biblical allusions through literary research. Numerous obscure Biblical allusions were discovered, including the poem's title "Mending Wall", which alluded to God's salvation as a mending process. "He is all pine" alludes to wood used to make the cross for the Crucifixion of Christ; "apple orchard" refers to the Garden of Eden; "good neighbor" to Jesus' command to love one's neighbor in the parable of the "Good Samaritan;" "loaves" to the miracle of loaves and fishes; and "Bringing a stone ... In each hand" denotes the tablets of the Ten Commandments carried by Moses. Thus, all these references used in Frost's poem have Biblical affiliations and represent the obscure Biblical allusions hidden in this poem.

Keywords: *Biblical allusion, Frost, poetic analysis, mending wall*

Introduction

Robert Lee Frost, or simply Robert Frost, began his poetry career as a teenager and began to teach at a school when he was seventeen years old. Frost had only a visual memory of his first small school and teaching experience in the hills near Salem, New Hampshire, early in the 1900s. While the kids did their work in their seats, he liked to sit at the window and draft his poems while gazing out into the pine trees (Newdick, 1936).

The opening poem of Frost's second collection of poetry, *North of Boston*, which was released in 1914, is named "Mending Wall." Like the majority of the poems in this book, "Mending Wall" is a tale set in a rural New England community. It talks about building a barrier between the properties of two New England farmers each spring. Every year, they pondered how the wall was breached (Sethi, 2018).

'Boston' is a representation of many things that have gone into the formation of the American consciousness both as a city and as a name, and its influence has extended far beyond its immediate surroundings. Boston has had a significant impact on America for about three centuries as the spiritual capital of the New England states, as the birthplace of the American Revolution and the nation, and as the first hub of American culture (Lewis, 2022).

This poem is built around the lives of two neighbors who met mainly in the spring of every year to mend their wall. For the speaker of the poem, Frost himself, this exercise of mending is more of a playful thing than a serious one. Nevertheless, they took this activity to not only mend their wall, but also to stitch together their relationship.

The poem uses three major allusions. The speaker of the poem explains the task of fixing the wall in the first few lines, picking up the broken stones and balancing them on the wall. It is almost a yearly tradition. Every year, the speaker and the neighbor must cope with the wall's damage from the previous year because no repair is ever truly permanent. As a result, the description of the labor closely matches a significant tale from Greek mythology: the Sisyphean Myth (Thomières, 2011). The other two allusions are the "elves," and 'Good fences make good neighbors'—an age old saying based on a quote by Henry David Thoreau (MacEnulty, 2017).

In other words, many researchers have pointed out the historical and mythological allusions in the poem, but not the Biblical allusions. Thus, there is a gap in the literature about "Mending Wall" that is related to its Biblical allusions. Therefore, this research paper attempts to identify the obscure Biblical allusions that are present in the poem.

The methodology employed in this study is literary research. It is the scientific, critical study of literature, usually for analytical purposes.

Literature Review

Grace (1939) considered each poem from the standpoint of the quantity and caliber of the syntheses it contained in order to analyze and assess it. Their synthesis is a phrase that is both potent and distinctive, in which the individual words are obscured by the whole of which they are a part. No word can be changed or removed without causing the synthesis to fail. In other words, the synthesis—the irrevocable union of one word, image, or sound with one or more other words, images, and sounds—is the place in any particular line where the poetry is most concentrated.

Allusion is a very important device in literature, and that makes it very difficult for poetry to survive without it. M. H. Abrams, as cited by William Irwin, defines allusion as “a brief reference, explicit or indirect, to a person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage (Irwin, 2001).” Irwin further pointed out that allusions are mainly overt, but sometimes they are covert; they may even be concealed. For instance, it is commonly known that Alexander Pope, one of the most well-known English poets of the early 18th century, attempted to hide many of his allusions; otherwise, his intended audience would have been somewhat smaller. However, allusions do not have to be subtle (Irwin, 2001). Irwin (2001) also asserts Michael Leddy’s belief that allusion can sometimes be so subtle that only the author is aware of it, even if others should be able to spot it in theory. It can be isolated and pointed on a micro level.

The above explanation of the creative use of allusions by many writers is also applicable to Frost. Frost was a master artist who created classics with words that penetrated human souls regardless of distance, culture, and norms. Moreover, “Frost’s poems are so marvelously intricate that they reward attention to details of imagery, allusion, and tone (Pack, 2003).”

As a matter of fact, Frost’s poetry is rife with irony and complex undertones. When a poem—or all of his poetry—seems to have been understood by the reader, the poet/magician pulls the rug out from under him, and the reader starts to realize that he has been duped. Despite using very straightforward language, Frost’s poem “After Apple-Picking,” which was first published in his book *North of Boston* in 1914, is symbolic in meaning. Frost conceals the more obvious meanings of his poems using literary tactics like symbolism, imagery, dramatic setting, and—as Frost himself put it—“sound of sense.” The vague meanings and allusions to various subjects in Frost poems like “Mending Wall” and “Come In” are frequent (Tebbe, 1997).

His highly acclaimed dramatic narrative poem, “Mending Wall,” showcases his exceptional creativity. Frost wrote this poem in early 1913 (published in 1914) after he had been in England for about a year. According to John Evangelist Walsh and Douglas Wilson, as paraphrased by Sanders (2007), Frost’s excursion to Kingsbarns, Scotland, in August of that year was inspired by the stone walls he saw while out walking with the British academic J. C. Smith. Frost was drawn to Smith at once and opened up to him about the Derry farm, from which he had been gone for four years, as well as about his upcoming second book. After arriving back in Beaconsfield, Frost wrote to Sidney Cox about the stone walls, using the local term for them—“dry stone dykes”—and saying just, “I liked those,” a terse statement given their apparent significance.

Readers appreciate Frost’s “Mending Wall.” Though he was a modern poet, he used blank verse in this to win his readers’ admiration. The speaker in this poem is opposite the wall. The speaker’s older neighbor is separated from him by a wall. While the neighbor sees this wall as a symbol of progress, he views it as unnecessary. (Latif et al., 2022).

Frost juxtaposes two individuals who appear to be very different on either side of a crumbling stone wall, and then assigns them the responsibility of fixing the damage. One of these characters, who is the speaker of the poem, is not sure if he wants to fix the wall each year, or if he just does it to spend time and talk with his neighbor while also having a philosophical conversation with those listening to the poem. He seemed to have a tremendous desire to remove the obstacles standing in the way of the complete union of space and thoughts (Luce, 2000).

The 'wall' in the poem stands for the duality of life; it is the subject of both destruction and creation, which are interdependent. Here, destroying something does not always mean that it is a negative thing if it inhibits decent neighbors from getting along, just as creating something that alienates people from one another is not always a good thing. Thus, Frost's wall, which simultaneously divides and brings two individuals together, is a representation of ambiguity (Srinivasarao, 2013).

The neighbors get together annually, and they rebuild the wall. Hard and impenetrable boulders make up the wall. The speaker in Frost's poem imagines them as loaves and balls—bread to be shared—and toys—another type of outdoor game—to be played together. Frost contends that the wall, with all of its symbolic implications, serves as the framework for healing the relationship between these estranged men (Perlow & Furman, 2017).

It is quite clear that the entire poem is about walls in the metaphorical sense of dividing people. However, the wall that divides the speaker from his neighbor is also a wall that mends, indicating that it serves both a positive and a negative purpose. The speaker says: "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out" (Lathem, 1969, p. 34). The typical focus of criticism of "Mending Wall" is about what is being walled off in an absurd ritual, yet what is being walled in is just as significant to the poem (Arms & Henry, 1979).

In intellectual and political debate, lines from Frost's well-known poem "Mending Wall" are frequently used to frame discussions of boundaries. Some have used passages from the poem to defend the building of physical barriers, while others have challenged this notion (Madsen & Ruderman, 2016).

The poem is also rich with symbolism, especially that of the apple tree and the pine tree. The apple tree is a representation of both guilt and atonement in the Christian tradition. In an 18th-century hymn, the tree that Eve was not permitted to eat from in the Garden is now referred to as "Jesus Christ, the Apple Tree." The cedar, a member of the pine family, is connected to God's worship in the Bible; Solomon's temple was constructed from Lebanon cedars (NRSV, 1 Kings 5) (Phillips, 2020). "He is all pine and I am apple orchard." (Line 24)

"The verse above is symbols. In this line, He is all pine and I am apple orchard the symbol is represented by words all pine and apple orchard. The narrator uses these words to symbolize the dissimilarity between his neighbor and his selves. Based on both their characteristics, pine is inalterable but apple is useful. It means that the narrator is better than the neighbor" (Rinda, 2020).

Like many other great poets, Frost's poems also exhibit simple layers but at the same time are multilayered and complex. Even this poem, "Mending Wall" is quite heavy and complex. "The first surface meaning, the anecdote, the parable, the surface meaning has got to be good and to be sufficient in itself. If you don't want any more, you can leave it at that" (Cook, 1976).

Frost used simple words with a multipurpose effect. "Frost's name for the phenomenon was *synecdoche*—the name for the part signifying the whole, as in "hands" for "sailors" or "wave" for "sea" (Quinn, 1999). Many of Frost's poems ask a question and offer two opposing viewpoints. In some, Frost uses an allusion to skew the argument in favor of one point of view. However, the allusion may be so subtle that the reader does not notice it, giving the impression that the poem is conflicted because the poet has not made up his mind about the issue (Selvi & Malar, 2021).

The Bible and Robert Frost's poems

In his well-researched book, Robert Faggen (2008) says, "Robert Frost knew the Bible well, an unsurprising fact given that he was raised by a Swedenborgian¹ mother in the late nineteenth century when Biblical literacy would still have been the rule, not the exception" (p. 151). Other excerpts from Faggen's book also support the Biblical background of Frost.

"Frost played deeply with Biblical stories.... Be that as it may, the Bible is in Frost's work, and his way of Biblical interpretation needs to be gone into, if not explained...." *Wild Grapes*, "...*After Apple-Picking*," ...*"Mending Wall*,"... are just some of the poems haunted by Biblical stories and proverbs" (p. 151).

Frost's attitude toward work and the environment is connected to and occasionally expressed through the story of the Fall, which is evidently referenced in more poems than just those that do so explicitly (Parfitt, 1996). As researchers, our deep interest in the Bible and its influence in literature encouraged us to look at Frost's "Mending Wall" in a different way. Moreover, learning this poem as students and teaching it in the classroom helped us to unravel the hidden Biblical allusions. In order to identify the allusions, we made a list of all the terms that evoked a Biblical connection. After that, we recorded the specific Bible events associated with them, and then analyzed how the obscure allusions pointed to Biblical events.

Findings/Results

Many great writers of English literature including Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Tennyson, and Browning used Biblical allusions. Without them, much of the charm and the worth of their poetry would be gone. So did American authors including Robert Frost. A detailed analytical study of Frost's "Mending Wall" clearly illuminated several significant, though obscure, Biblical allusions. All the suggested allusions are positioned creatively in different lines by the poet.

1. "Mending Wall"

The poem's title has "Wall," a common motif found in the Bible. The Bible has some important and fascinating stories related to walls. Joshua's effort to destroy the walls of Jericho and Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem are prominent examples that are metaphoric and symbolic. With reference to Biblical stories, walls are a symbol of protection, safety, salvation, and strength. For example, Samuel recounts that David's men "were a wall to us both by night and day, all the time we were with them keeping the sheep" (1 Samuel 25:16, 2010).

As quoted by Daniel L. Dreisbach (2007) from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "walls become a symbol of salvation itself" (p. 924). Besides their metaphoric and symbolic significance, Frost uses walls as an obscure allusion to God's salvation. This can be further established when the reader delves into "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down. "I could say "Elves" to him" (Lathem, 1969, 34). "Elves" are considered as spirits that can bring diseases and destruction. In the poem, they are the ones who don't like walls and thus the "mending" goes on. Thus, "Mending Wall" alludes to the salvation of God as a work in progress to save and protect God's people despite "Elves" working against it.

Even though one perspective establishes "mending wall" as a Biblical allusion of God's protection, there are other interpretations that treat the "wall" as a metaphor or symbol of entirely different things.

¹ Several related Christian denominations with a congregational system of ministries and churches connected by a central leadership council; they have been influenced by the scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg.

2. "Pine" and "Apple Orchard"

Trees have prominent symbolic significance in the Christian theology. Buckley (2017), quoting Mircea Eliade, stated that

Christians view Jesus Christ, a historical figure who is frequently represented by the wooden cross on which he died, as their sacred center rather than a specific location. However, in Christian theology, the tree also represents both Adam's fall in the Garden of Eden and salvation via Christ's crucifixion. The tree is considered a profane emblem of spring and renewal. The tree has come to represent human redemption and an extension of the cross in Christian literature.

As a New England farmer, Frost's daily life included both apples and pines. However, Frost, a scholar of classical and biblical literature, also considered his poems as dialogues with the entire canon of religious and secular literature. He emphasized the qualities of the two farmers in the "Mending Wall" by using the symbolism of the apple and the pine. He also employs it to mimic and refute a key passage, the conversation between Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Phillips, 2020).

"Not satisfied with apple tales, legends and symbols, many people in the Middle Ages began searching for the Garden of Eden and its infamous apple tree.... The apple began appearing in devotional pictures, often mythical depictions of the Garden of Eden, in Western art in the Middle Ages." (Janik, 2011).

In Lines 24–26 (Lathem, 1969, p. 33) of the "Mending Wall" Frost writes,

"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." If the apple tree is a temptation to life, the pine forest is a temptation to death," according to Philips (2020).

This establishes the researchers' assumption that a "pine" tree was used in making the cross. Similarly, presentation of two trees alludes to the two trees in the Garden of Eden. One tree was the Tree of Life, and the other was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 2:8-9, 2010).

3. "Good Neighbors"

Love is the foundational principle that keeps neighbors as "good neighbors." That's why in the Gospel of Matthew 22:37–39 (Matthew 22:37–39, 2010) Jesus says, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

A *good neighbor* is always and should be interested in the affairs of his/her neighbor. By taking care of the neighbor, the caretaker would become a "good neighbor." That's what Jesus Christ explained through the parable of the "Good Samaritan," and this term is well known in humanitarian and secular circles beyond the Christian religion.

Frost's poem is also a reflection of the universal need for limits, a reflection on how to sustain societal harmony, and a philosophical investigation into who our neighbors might be, both ethically and psychologically. The narrative of two neighbors is presented; they get together every spring to fix a deteriorating stone wall between them, and the poem distinguishes between two methods based on their characteristics. One focuses on the ceremonial act of mending this shared work, using a falling wall as an opportunity for creativity and play, and one feels compelled to keep using a father's tired cliché (Hinrichsen & Dempsey, 2011).

The opportunity to mend the wall can be considered as an opportunity to mend the neighborly relations. Frost's next-door neighbor had an intriguing viewpoint on this yearly tradition of wall-mending; "good fences make good neighbors." He might have noticed something in that yearly tradition that we have missed. Frost believed that his apple trees would never wander into his neighbor's pine forest without permission and consume its pinecones. He made fun of his neighbor by using this absurd image. His neighbor, though, had not argued; "good fences make good neighbors," he merely retorted. Frost continued to walk with his neighbor alongside the wall. To ensure that two herds of cattle are kept apart, you might require sturdy fences. On this land, however, there were no cows. He only says, "good fences make good neighbors" (Robeck, 1999).

According to Copland and Peat (2016), Frost attests that neighbors can be both wonderful and unpleasant. Comparing the concept of the neighbor to two other categories of human relationships—family and friendship—helps us to better comprehend its distinctive features. The concept of family conjures up permanent and legally binding blood ties or social contracts. Contrarily, friendship is a non-contractual relationship. Additionally, it is founded on the acceptance of diversity while imagining connections across that diversity. The neighbor paradigm allows for even more diversity than friendship because neighbors don't always look for kinship, but rather coexist in an uneasy, occasionally hostile, occasionally helpful nearness. Neighbors form a temporary, open, and non-binding community.

Thus, the use of “good neighbor” by Frost is a clear indication of its use as a Biblical allusion.

4. “Loaves”

The use of the first literary device in the poem is in Line 17 in the form of a metaphor. Stones are compared to the “loaves”, and this evokes the miracle of loaves and also the breaking of bread by Jesus in the Bible. Van Iersel, as quoted by van Aarde (1994), “regards the variation in the wording ‘He gave thanks and broke the loaves’ (Mk 6:41) and ‘When he had...given thanks, he broke them’ as of fundamental importance. If we accept, as most scholars do, that this ‘central formula’ is an allusion to the celebration of communion in the early church.”

Van Aarde (1994) further noted that the preceding result is undeniably true when Mark 6:41 and Mark 8:6 (the language of the twofold narrative, respectively), are compared with Mark 14:22 and 1 Corinthians 11:23–24 (the words of the Markan and Pauline narratives of the establishment of communion). The stories about the multiplicity of loaves were not connected to the custom of communion by Mark. Before Mark, it was present in the transmitted history. John's association of the miracle of the multiplicity of loaves (John 6:1–15), the link to the Old Testament story of the manna from heaven (John 6:22–40), and the custom of communion further supports this inference (John 6:41–59).

Therefore, “loaves” is another obscure Biblical allusion used by Frost. Furthermore, in Line 18, he mentions that “we have to use a spell to make them balance.” The use of “spell” is an allusion to the prayer of Jesus that multiplied the loaves to feed the listeners and satisfy their hunger. Thus “loaves” gets firmly established as an obscure allusion in the poem.

5. “In Each Hand, Like an Old-stone Savage Armed”

This line from the poem can evoke several thoughts in readers. Readers subconsciously suppress the unpleasant and out-of-place imagery of the “stone-armed savage” and the “yelping dogs” because they seem out of place in the pastoral setting of the poem. These pictures do not go with the typical notion of a first reading of the poem or the typical perception of the poet. Maybe erecting walls is both a savage invention and a pitiful first step away from savagery (Dubinsky, 1995).

Ahmed and Al-Gobaei (2013) reflected on Frost's lines from “Mending Wall” that talk about ‘The neighbor resembling a Stone Age savage when he is carrying stones and is walking along the wall. In this dramatic monologue, the narrator poses inquiries and then he responds to them.’

This dramatic monologue, as part of visualization, can also allude to Moses, the Bible hero carrying the two stone tablets with Ten Commandments and reaching the people of Israel. Moses got a savage look especially after seeing the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. Exodus 32:19 (2010) reads, “So it was, as soon as he came near the camp, that he saw the calf *and* the dancing. So Moses' anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.”

Discussion

For English poetry analysts, Frost's poems are an interesting mix of challenge and adventure. This paper shows that a treasure trove awaits anyone willing to take up the challenge. Thus, the present study researched and analyzed the obscure Biblical allusions in Frost's “Mending Wall.”

Works of poetry are not just a simple literary emancipation, but a storehouse of literary creativity that opens new chapters every day. In that context, Frost's "Mending Wall" still holds valuable treasures. The use of Biblically connected words, phrases, or events like "Mending Wall," "loaves," "pine," "apple orchard," "good neighbors," and "in each hand, like an old-stone savage armed" are all seen to be Biblical allusions used by Frost. This was possible because of previous studies on the meaning of allusion; the Biblical allusions found in Frost's poems are similar to the literary works of other writers. Because Frost's poems are 'marvelously intricate and they reward attention to details of allusion' (Pack, 2003), "Mending Wall" also has 'allusions to various subjects' (Tebbe, 1997).

Therefore, this poetic analysis may establish that the title "Mending Wall" is an obscure reference to Joshua's effort to destroy the walls of Jericho, Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and also "wall" as an allusion to God's protection as established by Dreisbach (2007). "Loaves" used as a metaphor in the poem is a clear allusion to the feeding of the five thousand, and also an allusion to the 'celebration of communion in the church' (van Aarde, 1994). This "communion" Frost undeniably desired to establish with his neighbor. The next obscure Biblical allusions are "Pine" and "Apple Orchard;" these two allusions are connected to the two trees in the Garden of Eden. One was the Tree of Life and the other was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil found in the book of Genesis. Another major Biblical allusion is the "Good Neighbors." Even though "Good fences make good neighbors" was not original with Frost, it was popularized through his poem. As an allusion, "Good Neighbor" clearly alludes to the parable of the "Good Samaritan" told by Lord Jesus Christ. The final allusion is in Line 40 of "Mending Wall" that says, "In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed (Lathem, 1969, p. 34)." This dramatic monologue helps readers to visualize the Biblical character Moses carrying the two stone tablets with Ten Commandments and reaching the people of Israel. Especially, Moses had a savage look on his face after seeing the Israelites worshipping the golden calf (Ex. 32:19, 2010).

These findings may add to previous studies done regarding various overt and covert Biblical allusions in many items of English literature. Nevertheless, the researchers also think that some words, phrases, and ideas as Biblical allusions from the poem "Mending Wall" may need further study to fully establish them.

Conclusion

Robert Frost has authored a vast body of poems, some of which concentrate more on the concepts of nature and death, while others have a more overtly religious bent. Particularly, Frost's early upbringing in the Christian faith by his mother influenced his poetry to a certain extent; this is evident in the use of Biblical imagery, motifs, and symbols in several of his poems. For example, a poem entitled "Astrometaphysical (Lathem, 1969, p. 388–389)" delves deeply into concepts of the sublime with its rich descriptions of nature and the power of nature. In terms of religious interpretation, this brief poem has a lot going on. It begins with the speaker openly addressing God and expressing love for the sky.

Similarly, "Mending Wall"—true to its name—is still "mending" relations in politics, between countries, and even between ordinary people, and it also reveals its metaphysical qualities. Moreover, this great work of poetry encouraged the researchers to study and understand how Frost artistically placed obscure Biblical allusions. Thus, the identification of "Mending Wall," "Pine" and "Apple Orchard," "Good Neighbors," "Loaves," and "In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed" as Biblical allusions in the poem will enrich English literature. Moreover, the findings of this study help us to understand the metaphysical elements of Frost's poetry, and the beauty of Bible as a masterpiece that has been inspiring writers of all generations to freely allude to its characters, events, and ideas.

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