‘Harvest Bow’ and ‘Mending Wall’/Relationships

The two poems ‘Harvest Bow’ by Seamus Heaney and ‘Mending Wall’ by Robert Frost both offer different views on relationships. Both poems focus on a ritual; in ‘Harvest Bow’ it is the father plaiting straw into a harvest bow each autumn, whereas in ‘Mending Wall’ it is the rebuilding of a wall between two neighbours. The father in ‘Harvest Bow’ repeats the craft each year out of an act of love, as he weaves part of himself into the bow for his son, Seamus Heaney. However, in ‘Mending Wall’, the two neighbours repeat the reconstruction of the wall in order to continue to be separated from each other. Both poems have first-person narrators.

Seamus Heaney’s ‘Harvest Bow’ is a conventional elegy written in memory of his father, Patrick. In a 1996 interview, Heaney told of his father’s “majesty” and how his father had “the country farmer’s silence and hauteur”. The poem has a reflective tone “You with a harvest bow in your lapel”, and one of admiration. There is no regular rhyme scheme, but stanza 4 has 3 rhyming couplets “homesick” and “sick”. However, ‘Mending Wall’ by Robert Frost contains no end rhymes, but the poem has sporadic half-rhymes “sun, stone, mean” throughout. The poem is also written in free verse, with constant enjambment to create a conversational tone, as if Frost was just reciting an anecdote. No stanza division is suitable for Frost’s discursive loquacity. Mending Wall regularly has ten beats per line, however, it is not perfect iambic pentameter as Frost varies where stress falls; this encapsulates a natural speech like quality. This gives the poem an idiosyncratic feel. Similarly, ‘Harvest Bow’ has no fixed rhythm and is not written in regular iambic pentameter. The effect of this imperfect rhythm, however, represents Heaney’s memory aid of his father, which emphasises their relationship.

In ‘Mending Wall’ the speaker begins by talking about “something there is that doesn’t love a wall”, we don’t know if it is a person, as he says “something”. This riddle is continued throughout the poem. This immediately gives the poem a mysterious tone. ‘Harvest Bow’ however begins with a direct address to his father “As you plaited the harvest bow” which sets the reflective tone immediately. The harvest bow is a symbol not just for the gathered harvest that autumn, but for the father’s hidden self. Heaney is remembering himself when he was young, watching his father plait the bow, and knowing the moment could not last. This makes the poem sorrowful, which contrasts harshly with Frost’s ‘Mending Wall’, which mentions “elves” and a “spell”. Unlike ‘Mending Wall’, ‘The Harvest Bow’ only contains enjambment in certain places, for example at the end of stanza two. This relates to the plaiting of the wheat, and how it was an ongoing task. It also shows how easy it was for Heaney to recall the fond memories of the relationship he had with his father.

Frost uses sibilance to create a mysterious feel around why the wall breaks every spring “sends the frozen-ground-swell”. The two neighbours keep rebuilding the wall, and the wall keeps

collapsing “spills the upper boulders in the sun”. This is similar to the Greek mythological creature, Sisyphus; Sisyphus had to roll a large boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down again when he got to the top. Frost was a classics student and was therefore aware of this link. This can be compared to the rebuilding of the wall, making it known to be Sisyphean, as it will never be fully completed if it keeps crumbling and breaking every year. Furthermore, in Ancient Rome, there was an annual festival at boundaries where neighbours would meet to celebrate their existence. Instead of celebrating each other’s existence every year, the neighbours are rebuilding a wall to keep them apart. This shows that the pair had a complicated relationship, which produces humour as they meet every year to divide again. This contrasts with the relationship in ‘The Harvest Bow’ as Heaney uses alliteration “But brightens as it tightens twist by twist” to emphasise that the making of the bow is something special that should be treasured. It also shows that there is a sense of longevity and life in their relationship. Also in stanza one of ‘The Harvest Bow’ Heaney gets an insight into the artistic side of his father “a knowable corona”. Heaney also uses a metaphor “throwaway love-knot of straw” which shows the father’s unspoken love for his son. The word “throwaway” shows that the bow is temporary, but we later discover in the poem that Heaney keeps them to remember his father. This further emphasises the strong relationship they had.

In ‘Mending Wall’, Frost uses repetition to emphasise mystery “seen them made or heard them made”. The speaker also uses simple and monosyllabic language “know beyond the hill”. This reveals that the speaker is, in fact, the one who alerts his neighbour to the broken wall each year. This shows that the speaker tries to enlighten his neighbour to get him out of the traditional mindset “If I could put the notion in his head”. The speaker also envisions his neighbour as a holdover from a justifiably outdated era, and a living example of a dark age mentality. The speaker of this poem believes that the wall should be elsewhere, as he says, “where are the cows”, and “we do not need the wall”. The neighbour also responds with “Good fences make good neighbours” which shows how he continuously wants maintenance of the status quo every year. This contrasts with ‘The Harvest Bow’ as Heaney is in awe of his father’s work, instead of questioning his relationship or trying to change it, like the speaker in ‘Mending Wall’. This is emphasised by the alliteration in Stanza two, “Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks” which highlights the skill of Heaney’s father in his rural work. Heaney’s father, Patrick was used to beating cattle and tying “spurs on a lifetime of game cocks” so this shows a contrast in his father’s farm life and the delicate making of the bow. Heaney also uses a simile “I tell and finger it like braille” which shows that he reads into his father’s actions and that the bow is a physical manifestation of his father’s thoughts and feelings towards his son. His father’s fingers also “moved somnambulant” which shows that he is so used to making the bow every year that it is like he is doing it in his sleep.

Frost uses a metaphor in ‘Mending Wall’ to show how the speaker feels impish “spring is the mischief in me”. This also correlates to the riddle he reveals in the opening phrase, suggesting that there is something mystical at work here; Frost reinforces this “I could say Elves”, which intrigues us. As Critic George Montiero states, “’Mending Wall’ is constructed around the idea of mischief”. All of this shows us that the speaker does not take this rebuilding seriously, unlike his

neighbour. This emphasises how their relationship is built purely on the fact that they must rebuild a wall. However, in ‘The Harvest Bow’ the making of the harvest bow is a serious task, as Heaney mentions that his father’s hands “worked with fine intent”. This shows the delicate movements of Patrick’s hands and how much effort he put in; he takes this as seriously as his farm work. It also shows how the speaker is expressing his admiration for his father’s labour, which further strengthens their relationship. Furthermore, Heaney is able to distinguish his father’s love for him through the bow “Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable”. The fact that there is no dialogue shows that Patrick can express himself through this act. In ‘Mending Wall’ the neighbour also expresses himself through the reconstruction the wall, as it’s all he has known to do every year “Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand”. Both the neighbour and the father in ‘The Harvest Bow’ are skilled at making something with their hands, yet they have different relationships with who they are making it with.

Heaney uses childish language in stanza 3 of ‘The Harvest Bow’ “And if I spy” which reinforces the fond childhood memories that he experienced with his father. This contrasts with the childish language Frost uses in ‘Mending Wall’, “another kind of outdoor game”. This emphasises the fact that the speaker believes that the situation is like a game between him and his neighbour. Frost also wrote ‘Mending Wall’ while in England as he was missing his old wall in New England that he hadn’t fixed. These differences further stress how ‘The Harvest Bow’ is a much more personal poem, and how it focuses on a warm, fond relationship of a father and son, rather than two neighbours trying to compete with each other. In ‘Mending Wall’ Frost uses a metaphor to display the neighbour’s preference to maintaining the wall “he moves in darkness as it seems to me”. This suggests the speaker’s gloom towards the situation, and also the darkness could be literal, or inside the darkness of the neighbour’s mind, which shows he is a slave to the ‘ritual’ of rebuilding. The repetition of the neighbour’s aphorism shows that he is set in his ways, and wishes to hide behind not only a physical wall but the wall he has created cutting himself off from civilisation. This juxtaposes with Heaney’s father who made the bow out of love each year. Heaney also detaches the father and son with the structural separation of pronouns “You with a harvest bow in your lapel” and “Me with the fishing rod”. This indicates how the father and son struggle to express their love for each other verbally; this is further accentuated by the caesura in stanza four “Nothing:”. Heaney and his father are separated by a metaphysical verbal barrier “tongue-tied”, in contrast to the physical wall that separates the two neighbours in ‘Mending Wall’. However, the enjambment in ‘The Harvest Bow’ backs up the fact that despite the difficulty in communicating vocally, they still have a close connection and relationship. Heaney also does not show his father’s inability to express himself, as he illustrates how Patrick puts his emotions into his bow, compared to Seamus Heaney himself, as he writes down his emotions into a poem.

Moreover, Heaney mixes beautiful images in stanza three with less pleasing ones “midges” and “Blue smoke straight up, old beds”. This gives his memories a sense of realism, and it shows that Heaney’s childhood was not perfect, yet his memories with his father are heartfelt and warm. The fact that Heaney was “already homesick” shows that he was upset that the times

with his father were coming to an end; in the autumn, Heaney would have been going back to boarding school. Heaney also describes the past in a present tense throughout the poem “whacking the tips off weeds” which emphasises how raw and vivid the memories are for him. Additionally, the alliteration here shows a different side to Heaney’s father, Patrick; he is a practical farmer, despite the delicate work he puts into the bow. This contrasts with ‘Mending Wall’ as the speaker discloses a negative image of his neighbour through a simile “like an old-stone savage” which not only shows he wishes that his neighbour would be as carefree as him, but that he rebuilds the wall coarsely. The juxtaposition between Patrick Heaney’s delicate hands and the neighbour’s hands reinforces their relationship with the person they are building it for. Patrick takes great care in his craft as it shows his son how much he cares for him, whereas the neighbour believes the wall should continue to divide him and the speaker. In ‘Mending Wall’, the speaker states that his neighbour “will not go behind his father's saying”. This shows that while the neighbour may not have a close relationship with the speaker, he obviously honours what his father believed, and had a sincere relationship with him. While writing ‘Mending Wall’, Frost stated that “Life is composed of cells. Life is cells breaking down and building up”. This shows that Frost believed that life’s fences and walls are always changing, but necessary for structure. This idea can also be linked to relationships, as relationships can constantly change, but are essential for a good life.

In stanza five of ‘The Harvest Bow’ Heaney states that “The end of art is peace” which is a line taken from Yeats.; this could be the motto of the harvest bow. Heaney also puts the harvest bow on his dresser “I have pinned up on our deal dresser” which shows that the bow is a part of Heaney’s everyday life as an adult. Heaney ends the poem with a simile “Like a drawn snare”. This shows that even though his father is gone, his love and spirit still linger in the bows he made. The fact that it is “still warm” shows that how even touching the bow brings back floods of memories of Patrick, and how it comforts him. This reinforces how strong their bond and relationship was. This contrasts with how Frost ends ‘Mending Wall’ as he ends it with a piece of dialogue from his neighbour “He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours”. This aphorism emphasises how the neighbour would not give in to the speaker and forget about the wall, despite the fact they only meet once a year and this would allow them to build a friendship.

Overall both of these poems deal with very different relationships, which is shown through both Frost’s and Heaney’s use of poetic methods. Both poems have an individual that is expressing himself through the art of building something, whether that be a wall or a harvest bow.