

Building Pink See-Saws into the Curriculum

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“Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out.” – Robert Frost

In Robert Frost's opening line of *Mending Wall*, he describes a nebulous force that resists the presence of a barrier between neighbours. He says “[s]omething there [...] doesn't love a wall.” For Frost, a border is an unnatural boundary that divides a space that would otherwise have organic fluidity. The poem details how walls are an unfortunate hindrance: often getting in the way of every-day human activities, like hunting or walking distances with friends. More than this, there is also a physical cost in rebuilding the wall each year: “We wear our fingers rough” by maintaining the border. There is a toll in preserving the arbitrary structure that is felt on the tips of our fingers and deeper within ourselves. Not only is building a wall physically taxing for Frost, it, too, seems pointless. The neighbours are different men but there is no threat in their difference: “He is all pine and I am apple orchard.” There are also no cows to trespass and graze unencumbered, so he enquires to his neighbour, *why not merge their territories?*

However, his neighbour insists upon rebuilding the wall, claiming the old adage, “good walls make for good neighbours.” Another version of this is something that all introverts secretly know, and something that Jean-Paul Sartre verbalised well:

“Hell is people¹.”

What is commonly misunderstood about Sartre's sardonic declaration, however, is not that people are evil and one should shut oneself off from society, but rather that, through others' gaze, we see ourselves reflected, and are, therefore, often trapped in the claustrophobic judgement of our peers. “I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other².” For Sartre, judgement is hellishly confining. Interestingly, it is the walls that people put up to protect themselves because of their judgement of others that ultimately cause the most damage.

The only good thing about rebuilding the boundary wall with his neighbour each year, was that our speaker realised that he loved slotting in the smooth, loaf-like stones that had tumbled down *together*. There is beautiful irony here: the act of rebuilding the wall is a community exercise: one of dialogue, of debate, of repair. Frost is declaring that it is not the wall that makes for amenable relations, but rather the act of rebuilding with another person, despite their differences.

While the neighbour remains unconvinced and asserts his father's way of historical segregation, the speaker has had an epiphany. When he says that “something doesn't love a wall,” he is not referring to frost or wind or rain, but rather humans' innate empathy for one another, and a yearning to see and to be seen by a friend. For the speaker, there is no value in enclosing individuals within, and

¹ *Huis Clos (No Exit)* Sartre, Jean-Paul, 1944

² *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre, Jean-Paul, Éditions Gallimard, Philosophical Library, 1943

keeping difference out, even if it has been done by our forefathers. In future, he will do things differently: “[b]efore I built a wall I’d ask to know/ What I was walling in or walling out.”

As an English teacher, I love a good metaphor. The other day, I read an article about the subversive brilliance of art at the Mexico/USA border. What started as Trump’s divisive and racist separation of nations has been transformed by a series of bright pink see-saws, to the delight of American and Mexican children, alike.



(Photograph: Luis Torres/AFP/Getty Images)

In a project entitled, *The Teeter-Totter Wall*, children were united by the wall, despite the wall. It got me thinking about the way the English literary canon can also be restrictive and bounded, enclosing some writing within it and *walling* other writing out.

Italian literary historian, Franco Moretti, offers us a bewildering statistic: if we set today’s canon of nineteenth-century British novels at two hundred titles, they would still only be about 0.5 per cent of all published novels³. Moretti uses the metaphor of a tree to describe a novel’s popularity and ultimate position within the top-most branches of the canon, where 99.5% of other texts remain on “dead branches,” neglected and forgotten. In an article entitled, *The Way Children Are Taught to Read Hampers Their Path to Success*⁴, writers Glynis Lloyd and Soraya Abdulatief argue that the curriculum selections hold unwritten power. They believe the reality depicted in the narrow selection of novels becomes “naturalised, which means we come to see [the canon] as representative of the standard” (Lloyd and Abdulatief, 2019: 1). Similarly, Toni Morrison argues that

³ Moretti, Franco. *Distanced Reading*. United Kingdom: Verso Books, 2000

⁴ Lloyd, G & Abdulatief, S. *The Way Children Are Taught to Read Hampers Their Path to Success*, 2019

“cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation’s literature⁵.” To ask Frost’s question again, what are we losing by walling ourselves in too strictly by what we read and teach, and, more importantly, by what we don’t read and don’t teach? How often do we celebrate the pine trees as well as the apple orchards? How can we find pink seesaws in our literature selection at school?

Global citizenship (and the removal of literary walls) relies on the teaching and construction of a system (and, at the most basic level, a curriculum) in which individuals are taught to be sensitive and receptive to one another. This does not mean rejecting the existing literary canon or replacing it with another prescriptive list, but rather opening the learning system for opportunities for further intertextual exploration. This can only happen if we reject the ‘close reading’ dictum of our forefathers and allow the boulders of tradition to crumble. Moretti suggests the ‘distanced reading’ method which means reading widely beyond the confines of our canon. Reading and literary study can be a polyphonic journey where we find the pink seesaws across geographical bounds, time, race, politics, and language. If we allow students to identify poetry, short stories, and novels that they rejoice in, and ask them to find the parallels to our setworks, how much richer will they be? Perhaps we could encourage student agency by allowing them to choose from a range of novels in order to buy into their own education. As educators, we could construct the pink see-saws within our curricula and stretch the boundaries of human experience.

For example, Sindiwe Magona’s collection of short stories *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* could be explored in conjunction with Kathryn Stockett’s, *The Help*, as both interrogate the dual oppression of women, despite the difference of place and time. Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* could be paired with Anna Burns’, *The Milkman* in order to uncover the dawning agency of female adolescence in times of political strife. *Absolution* by Patrick Flanery could be read in relation to *David’s Story* by Zoë Wicomb as both novels centre on the fallibility of memory and truth. As a challenge, students could pair any poem by Carol Anne Duffy and link its message of isolation and alienation to the protagonist in *Fight Club*. The thing about taking down the walls of the canon, and building new borders of meaning elsewhere, is that beauty is derived through the conversation. Like the speaker and the neighbour in *Mending Wall*, the joy was found in making eye-contact over the boundary and sharing ideas. Without this fluidity of engagement, not only with the literature but with the process of learning itself, “individuals cannot be truly human” (Freire, 2005: 72).

⁵ Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.