

**Why We Need Port William:
Marriage, the Economy of Membership, and Ordered
Diversity in the Fiction of Wendell Berry**

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FOR AS LONG AS MEN HAVE TOLD STORIES, they have been primarily concerned with stories of a certain kind—those of love, of fidelity, of loyalty to kith and kin and country. The purposes of these stories have been as varied as the stories themselves. Some were meant to instruct; others, merely to provide amusement for a few idle hours. But the narrative form has long been recognized as more than cheap entertainment, and philosophers have grasped its utility. Something about narrative seems to capture our interest and burn its images in our memories better than mere statements of fact or opinion ever could. And perhaps no one better puts the agrarian philosophy into narrative form than Wendell Berry.

Berry is a man beyond tidy classification, who sees the good and ill in all movements that claim his influence. Jason Peters notes:

Berry's politics, closely tied to his economic critique and his distrust of organizations, are complicated by the fact that America's two major political parties increasingly resemble each other. He calls himself a Jeffersonian and a Democrat. He is a Jeffersonian inasmuch as he supports decentralization and the proliferation of as many small landholders as are possible, and he is a Democrat inasmuch as

he was born into, and comes out of, the New Deal.¹

The motivation for all Berry's interests is the overarching question of the well-being of the land and its people. For any technology or program, Berry asks the question, "What are the limits? What is this for?"²

His primary concern is the land. He is a conservationist, but unlike the modern conservation movement, he believes that the land is best used, not left in wilderness.³ And the best use of land, by far, is agriculture. We depend on the land, Berry notes, so much so that it is in fact a part of us: ". . . we and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally a part of one another." Our culture "must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, and so neither can be better than the other."⁴

The question, for Berry, is whether we will be a nation of "nurturers" or "exploiters." The exploiter takes from the land, usually for the benefit of an organization or corporation, and his motive is always profit. The nurturer, on the other hand, takes only what he needs, replenishes what he takes, and is motivated by the object of health—that of his land, his family, and himself. A Jeffersonian in his views on land-ownership as it pertains to liberty, he necessarily supports the small landowner and small-business owner.

Here, in a nutshell, is Berry's overarching philosophy—nurture rather than exploitation, and thus a care for the land and a culture reflective of place. In an interview with Berry for the Catholic Education Resource Center, Anne Husted Burleigh writes, "Berry's themes are marriage, community, land, and the fidelity that binds us to all three."⁵

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1. Jason Peters, "Introduction," *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 8-9.
 2. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 23.
 3. *Ibid.*, 30.
 4. *Ibid.*, 22.
 5. Anne Husted Burleigh, "Wendell Berry's Community," Catholic Education Resource Center, February 7, 2009), Web, available at <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/arts/al0051.html>. Originally published in *Crisis* 18.1 (January 2000): 28-33.

And perhaps the best place to look for these themes is in his fiction. By carefully examining these themes as they play out in Port William, we might gain a better understanding of what a truly agrarian economy looks like.

Marriage

Marriage, for Berry, is much more than the relationship between one man and one woman. In the same interview with Burleigh, Berry elaborates,

Marriage for me has great power as a metaphor or analog of other relationships. In an intact community, the marriage vows are given before the membership. The couple doesn't just exchange them with one another. The vows are given before witnesses, who are there partly because they are party to the contract. This young couple is pledging from now on to be to a certain extent predictable in their behavior. It's a terrible thing to say those vows. Something like that ought to be witnessed by people who will acknowledge that it happened and that these awe-full things were said. And in my own experience the sense of having loved ones' expectations directed toward me has been very influential, and it still is.⁶

The community bears both the responsibility for these unions and the burden when they fail: "If you have family failures in an intact community, the community takes up the slack. If there are enough failures, then that becomes a community failure."⁷

The modern industrial economy has of course made this community-supported marriage much more difficult to achieve. A point Berry emphasizes strongly is the sexual division of labor, "when nurture is made the exclusive concern of women. This cannot happen until a society becomes industrial; in hunting and gathering and in agricultural societies, men are of necessity also involved in nurture."⁸ While Berry notes that women have always born the greater portion of household duties, there is a difference between "sexual difference and sexual division."⁹

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *The Unsettling of America*, 113.

9. *Ibid.*

Sexual difference implies that although the sexes have different roles, they have a common purpose and a very shared life. The farm couple had sexual difference to be sure; their duties were often split. But duties were also often shared, and the goal (of the wellbeing of the farm and the raising of children) was a common one. Sexual division happens when men leave the home to pursue money, which Berry believes is an abstraction.

In a sexually divided economy, women's work is demeaning to them, and men's is unfulfilling. "Home became," says Berry, "a place for the husband to go when he was not working or amusing himself. It was the place where the wife was held in servitude."¹⁰ And as this division of the sexes increased, the household splintered. The home was once not just a "unifying ideal," but a "practical circumstance of mutual dependence and obligation, requiring skill, moral discipline, and work. . . . Without much in particular that [couples] can do for each other, they have a scarcity of practical reasons to stay together."¹¹ The only real remaining ties are "love" or "friendship" or "the raising of children"—all good reasons, of course, but not as self-interested as economic goals.

Some of the most vivid examples of marriage in Berry's fiction appear in *Hannah Coulter*, one of his most recent works. Before Hannah marries Nathan, she marries a man named Virgil (who later dies in World War II), and the newlyweds move to Vergil's hometown of Port William and take up residence with his parents until they can afford to build a house of their own. Soon after her marriage, Hannah comments,

I had thought of marriage as promises to be kept until death, as having a house, living together, working together, sleeping together, raising a family. But Vergil's and my marriage was going to have to be more than that. It was going to have to be part of a place already decided for it, and part of a story begun long ago and going on.¹²

Hannah's marriage to Vergil was more than "falling in love," more than

10. *Ibid.*, 115.

11. *Ibid.*, 116-17.

12. Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004), 33.

two people beginning their lives together—though it was that. Their marriage was a part of the fabric of a larger community. Notably, after Vergil goes missing, Hannah remains at her in-laws' to raise their baby daughter. Returning to her father's home or branching out on her own is unfathomable, for her marriage has made her and her daughter a part of Port William.

Similarly, when she meets Nathan, Hannah becomes part of another story, and Nathan becomes a part of hers. Nathan adopts Hannah's in-laws as his own, helping them around the farm as they age, asking their permission to marry their daughter-in-law, and even buying the farm backing their property for himself and his new bride.¹³ Nathan wanted, Hannah says, "more than me. He wanted a life for us to live and a place for us to live it in."¹⁴ Their marriage was firmly rooted to the place they lived and farmed.

Hannah's marriage is a perfect image of Berry's concept of what a marriage economy should look like. When she and Nathan first move into the decrepit farmhouse on the piece of land Nathan has bought, they work long hours together to make the shell a suitable home. Later, when the neighbors go from farm to farm during harvest-time, Hannah is right there with them. Hannah and Nathan depend on each other in a way that the modern "division of the sexes" will not allow. This division does appear in the novel, however, in the marriages of Hannah's three children. All leave home and take up a more modern way of life. Two divorce. Hannah's daughter, Margaret, and her husband, Marcus, "were working in different places, going off every morning in opposite directions. They worked apart, worked with different people, made friends with different people."¹⁵ Their marriage falls apart, because they have become two individuals joined only by a child, who in the end is not enough to hold them together. The family disintegration continues: Margaret's son, Mattie, becomes the CEO of a company on the West coast and has "four different children by two wives, and between those

13. *Ibid.*, 79.

14. *Ibid.*, 67.

15. *Ibid.*, 139.

two there was another woman he was at least traveling with.”¹⁶

Hannah Coulter also depicts the more sentimental side of marriage, however, in a way impossible in Berry’s essays. When, for example, Hannah consents to marry Nathan, they share a beautiful moment surveying the farm Nathan has yet to buy and pondering their life together:

We were looking at each other, though we could barely see. It was almost dark. But to know you love somebody, and to feel his desire falling over you like a warm rain, touching you everywhere, is to have a kind of light. When a woman and a man give themselves to each other, they have a light between them that nobody but them can see. . . . They see only each other and what is between them. If it’s only an old run-down, overgrown, disregarded farm they have between them, they see that and they see each other, though everything else is dark. . . . “I know you’re afraid,” he said. “And so am I. But can you see a life here?” . . . I went to him then, and he hugged me. . . . I wanted to hold and protect and save him forever.¹⁷

Berry’s essays emphasize the economic importance of marriage—the foundation of strong families, strong communities, and to protect a couple who protects each other and nurtures the land they own. In the fiction, however, we see most clearly the type of intimacy that a marriage founded upon a common economic pursuit can offer.

Such tender images also appear in Berry’s sweet short story, “A Jonquil for Mary Penn.” A young newlywed couple, Elton and Mary, poorer than poor, have just moved onto a small farm in a rural community. One day Mary falls ill but pretends otherwise so Elton will not worry while he works at a neighbor’s farm. Finally, the stresses of everyday farm life get to her, and she falls asleep cold and miserable, not caring if she lives or dies. She awakens to a warm room, a teakettle whistling on the stove, and a close friend and neighbor sitting with her. Her husband had noticed her illness in spite of her attempts to feign health and stopped by the neighbors’ to get some help while he worked. Mary falls asleep again, thinking to herself, “So he had known. He had thought

16. *Ibid.*, 124.

17. *Ibid.*, 72.

of her.”¹⁸ In the same way as Hannah, Mary expresses the simple but profound joys of the marriage economy, of being loved and protected.

The Economy of Membership

Marriage is perhaps most important for Berry because it serves an even greater function—as the basis for the community itself. For Berry, “community” is a much stronger word than it is in most modern usage. Community is land-based, a long-term, dedicated connection to a particular place. The mere fact of moving into a community does not automatically make one a part of that community—Hannah Coulter does not immediately become a “member” of Port William. She writes that Nathan “had come back home after the war because he wanted to. He was where he wanted to be. As I was too by then, he was a member of Port William.”¹⁹ Notice her phrase—“as I was too *by then*.” Her first marriage to Vergil, their cultivation of the land together, her loss, their child—all had combined to make Hannah a part of a new community. The simple acts of marrying a Port William boy and moving there had not done the trick by themselves.

Another crucial aspect of community is a “community memory,” which Berry discusses in another interview:

If you had a settled, a really settled, thriving, locally adapted community, which we don’t have anywhere, you wouldn’t just be remembering the dead. You’d remember what they did and whether it worked or not. And so you’d have a kind of lexicon of possibilities that would tell you what you could do, what you could get away with, and what penalty to expect from what you couldn’t get away with. . . . So the memory that a community has of its dead, and of the pasts of the living would be a precious sort of manual—a kind of handbook, a kind of operator’s manual for the use of the immediate place.²⁰

18. Wendell Berry, “A Jonquil for Mary Penn,” in *Fidelity: Five Stories* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 81.

19. *Hannah Coulter*, 67.

20. Wendell Berry, interview by Jordan Fisher-Smith, “Field Observations: An Interview with Wendell Berry,” originally published in *Orion* (August 1993), available at http://arts.envirolink.org/interviews_and_conversations/WendellBerry.html.

The most eloquent statement of what exactly Berry understands as a community, however, is in “Standing by Words,” an essay on the uses and abuses of language:

What can turn us from this deserted future, back into the sphere of our being, the great dance that joins us to our home, to each other and to other creatures, to the dead and the unborn? I think it is love. I am perforce aware how baldly and embarrassingly that word now lies on the page—for we have learned at once to overuse it, abuse it, and hold it in suspicion. But I do not mean any kind of abstract love, which is probably a contradiction in terms, but particular love for particular things, places, creatures, and people, requiring stands and acts, showing its successes or failures in practical or tangible effects. And it implies a responsibility just as particular, not grim or merely dutiful, but rising out of generosity.²¹

It is this particular love that leads us to a sense of responsibility to our community, a responsibility that is based on “generosity” instead of mere duty. This sense of responsibility is also frightening. Berry says that just as marriage is the basis of a community, it is also an image of the community. Marriage says “wait, stay, and find out. . . . The thing is too great to be belittled by any decision that you can make about it.”²² Community, like marriage, is an institution that we should fit ourselves to, not an arrangement based on our passing whims. And although there will be times when we want to leave, the community tells us to “wait, stay, and find out.”

In Port William, a community is also an economy. Hannah gives a vivid picture:

[T]here were times too, mainly during the tobacco harvest, when we would all be together. . . . This was our membership. Burley called it that. He loved to call it that. Andy Catlett, remembering Burley, still calls it that. And I do. This membership had an economic purpose

21. Wendell Berry, “Standing by Words,” in *Standing by Words: Essays* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1983), 60.

22. “Wendell Berry’s Community.”

and it had an economic result, but the purpose and the result were a lot more than economic.²³

And although this membership was indeed partly motivated by economic goals, nobody, Hannah remarks, kept any record. All worked under the understanding that the work was only done when every last farm's harvest had been brought in. Skimping out on your share of the duties would have been unacceptable, but none of the characters was even remotely interesting in leaving early. The result, Hannah says, is that the harvesting itself was enjoyable. It was hard work, to be sure, but with the women cooking, the men joking, and her brother-in-law Burley telling stories down one row and up the other, the burden was greatly lessened.

The community also brings with it the kind of help that goes far beyond the economic. In his short story "Pray Without Ceasing," Berry writes of the friendship between two of Port William's membership, Thad Coulter and Ben Feltner. Thad falls into economic disaster, gets very drunk one evening, and comes to Ben's house to rail. After listening to the drunken rant, Ben tells Thad to go home, get sober, and come back in the morning. Thad is furious. The next day, he kills Ben and flees town. Ben's son Mat happens upon his father's body and sets out for immediate revenge. In a powerful passage, Jack Beechum, another Port William member, literally catches Matt in mid-run:

Jack could hardly have known what he was doing. He had not time to think. He may have been moved by an impulse simply to stop things until he could think. Or perhaps he knew by the look on Mat's face that he had to be obstructed. At any rate, as soon as Jack had taken hold of Mat, he understood that he had to hold him. And he knew that he had never taken hold of any such thing before. He had caught Mat in a sideways hug that clamped his arms to his sides. . . . But Mat was little more than half Jack's age; he was in the prime of his strength. And now he twisted and strained with the concentration of fury, uttering cries that could have been either grunts or sobs, forcing Jack both to hold him and to hold him up. They strove there a long

23. *Hannah Coulter*, 93-4.

time, heaving and staggering, hardly moving from the tracks they had stood in when they came together, and the dust rose up around them. Jack felt that his arms would pull apart at the joints. He ached afterward. Something went out of him that day, and he was not the same again. . . . And what went out of Jack came into Mat. Or so it seemed, for in that desperate embrace he became a stronger man than he had been.²⁴

Eventually, Mat gains control of himself. Jack follows Mat home and stands by him while he tells his fellow townspeople not to seek Thad. It is a striking image, but also symbolic of what a true community does. A true community helps out at harvest; cares for each other while ill; and even keeps one man from killing, so saving him for a productive and whole life.

An Ordered Diversity

For Berry, land is really the central theme, the thing that binds everything and everyone. We are a part of the land, and our culture is only a reflection of the particular place that we nourish. But our problems as they relate to the land are endless. To begin with, Berry says, we are destroying our land in the name of progress. Many modern farm practices themselves are destructive. Traditional farm practices such as contour plowing and crop rotation are on the decline, and the results are disastrous. Berry's solution is a return to traditional farming techniques. Diversity is key:

Woodlands, orchards, and shade trees are part of the diversity of life that is another of the prime characteristics of a healthy farm. And this principle will extend to cropland and pasture. The aim of a healthy farm will be to produce as many kinds of plants and animals as it sensibly can. This will be an ordered diversity, the various species moving in rotation over the fields. The land will be

24. Wendell Berry, "Pray Without Ceasing," in *Fidelity: Five Stories* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 36-7.

fenced for livestock, and its aspect will change from field to field.²⁵

The underlying aim—the health of the land—requires both biological diversity and an understanding of how much the land can reasonably be expected to hold. Plant life serves not only to produce profit but also to protect the land itself.

Inseparable from this attitude of nurturing is a sharp mistrust of technology—or a mistrust of man’s ability to use technology wisely. Technology means petroleum, which means a nation’s dependence on foreign oil, at least to some extent.²⁶ But more importantly, Berry stresses that because technology makes it possible to farm ever more land at greater speeds, farmers find it more difficult to adhere to the limits of what is good for the land: “The arguments that rise out of the machine metaphor—arguments for cheapness, efficiency, labor-saving, economic growth, etc.—all point to infinite industrial growth and infinite energy consumption.”²⁷ The very nature of the machine promotes the misuse of the land. (Berry himself farms with mules and believes that for some land, mules and draft horses are a better solution than tractors.²⁸)

All these themes of care for the land, biodiversity, and a mistrust of technology also appear in Berry’s fiction. In *Hannah Coulter*, Hannah describes the “three levels” of her farm:

At the top, on the best-lying or gentlest sloping land, we raised our crops and made our hay. . . . Where the slopes are steeper and more likely to wash, but not too steep to mow, we have permanent pastures, and we have tried to keep the cattle off those places after the ground gets soggy in the wintertime. . . . On the steepest ground we have let the woods grow.²⁹

The Coulters farm their land based not just on what kinds of crops the land will support, but what kinds of farming will best preserve it.

25. *The Unsettling of America*, 183.

26. *Ibid.*, 37.

27. *Ibid.*, 94.

28. *Ibid.*, 199.

29. *Hannah Coulter*, 84.

Such farming is based on Hannah's intimate understanding of the land, and her desire to save it for posterity. (She is terrified that her farm will one day become a subdivision.)³⁰

Another exemplary farmer is Athey Keith in *Jayber Crow*, a novel narrated by Port William's barber. Athey has a highly diversified farm on which he rotates tobacco, corn, wheat, barley, clover, and grass. He also keeps livestock.³¹ Moreover, says Jayber, "he used his land conservatively. In any year, by far the greater part of the land would be under grass. . . . He was always studying his fields, thinking of ways to protect them."³² The opposite of Athey is his son-in-law, Troy Chatham. Troy believes Athey is an old-fashioned farmer, slow and afraid to take the "necessary risks." Troy buys his first tractor and continues to plunge into debt so that he might plow ever more land. When Athey and his wife pass away and leave their farm to their daughter, Mattie, Troy has already established the farm's downfall: "Troy, who had been going all-out for twenty-six years, had nothing to show for it but a continuous debt that he claimed to be reconciled to, his status (mostly with himself) as a big operator, and the goad and burden of unquenched ambition."³³ No farm, Berry believes, can long withstand such management. As his wife lay dying in a hospital, Troy is madly plowing under the very portion of land she best loved in a desperate effort to save himself from his creditors.

In Hannah Coulter, Nathan is much more responsible with his own tractor, yet Hannah still seems wary of it. She says that although buying a tractor seemed the right thing to do at the time, "[t]ractors made farmers dependent on the big companies as they never had been before. And now, looking back, it seems clear that when the tractors came, the people began to go."³⁴ Although other families who had depended not on tractors but on mules and horses continued to farm their land, Hannah is the last of the Coulter line in Port William. Her children have all left. Somehow, though Hannah herself cannot put her finger on exactly why,

30. *Ibid.*, 83.

31. *Jayber Crow*, 178.

32. *Ibid.*, 179.

33. *Ibid.*, 334.

34. *Ibid.*, 92.

there seems to be a connection between the coming of tractors and the exodus of people.

In Berry's fiction, it is the land that holds the marriages and even the communities together. Plowing it, planting it, harvesting its bounty, seeking to best preserve it—the land gives purpose to these people's lives. It even quite literally gives them their lives, their livelihoods and food. And the land imposes certain limits—you can go this far, but no farther. Trespassing those limits, as Troy Chatham does, brings poverty, despair, and death.

Berry's Solution

One of the charges frequently leveled against the agrarians is that they are nostalgic, unrealistic, yearning for times past. Berry, however, believes that “There is no time in history, since white occupation began in America, that any sane and thoughtful person would want to go back to, because that history so far has been unsatisfactory. It has been unsatisfactory for the simple reason that we haven't produced stable communities well adapted to their places.”³⁵

The characters in his fiction also clear Berry of the charge of nostalgia. There are many good folks, but also quite a few we would not want as neighbors. In *Nathan Coulter*, the first novel in the Port William series, Burley Coulter is a good man but a bit of a drunkard and ne'er-do-well who ends up impregnating a woman whom he never marries. His grandfather hangs his grandmother's cat after it has proved particularly bothersome. In *Hannah Coulter*, Hannah hints gently that her own daughter, Margaret, does not visit the farm as often as she should. Her children grow up to have very modern tendencies, which hint at family shortcomings. And of course, there is the short story, “Pray Without Ceasing,” in which Thad Coulter loses his farm because he trusts his useless son more than he should and then murders his best friend before killing himself. These are not all fine, upstanding citizens, and yet the community takes them in.

Hannah describes her community best:

35. “Field Observations: An Interview with Wendell Berry.”

The old Port William that I came to in 1941 I think of now as a sort of picture puzzle. It was not an altogether satisfactory picture. It always required some forgiveness, for things that of course could be forgiven. But the picture was more or less complete and more or less put together, and the pieces were more or less replaceable. After the war ended in 1945, slowly at first but ever faster, the lost pieces were not replaced.³⁶

The not “altogether satisfactory picture” makes room within itself for those aspects that are less than satisfactory. But Port William’s ultimate failure is that it is dying. The elderly are slowly disappearing, and the young have left—oftentimes with the encouragement of their parents, who have been fooled by the notion that one should “get out” to make it in the world. Even though Berry’s fictional Port William is in many ways the model for what an independent local community with a local economy looks like, it is also a model of the suffering that many such communities are now undergoing. Port William is realistic because it, too, is faulty, and in decline.

So what is the solution? Berry names many: better management and care of the land, stronger marriages, sexual fidelity, taking care of the other members of the community. But part of the solution is something greater. In an interview, Berry says that “What we’re really talking about is faith, the faith being that if you make a commitment, and hang on until death, there are rewards. The rewards come. Nobody has ever said that this was easy to do but I think that everybody who has done it has done it out of this faith that there are rewards.”³⁷ We remain committed to a particular location, and we farm and live with more care and thought, because we trust that these practices will eventually bring about rewards. The community will in turn be a blessing to us. The farms will flourish.

The strongest image of this hope is in *Hannah Coulter*, with the return of Hannah’s grandson. Margaret’s son, Vergil, was the only grandchild who loved to farm, and in fact the only grandchild whom Nathan and Hannah really had the chance to know. But with his parents’ divorce,

36. *Hannah Coulter*, 179.

37. “Field Observations.”

“Vergie” fell apart, became addicted to drugs, and finally vanished altogether. For years, his family had no idea where he was or what had become of him. One night after Nathan’s death, Hannah hears a car pull into her long driveway. She walks outside, over to the car, and raps on the window: “It was Vergie. He looked like death warmed over, and his face was wet with tears. He looked like a man who had been lost at sea and had made it to shore at last, but had barely made it. . . . But he was weeping, with relief, I think, and sorrow and regret.” Vergie has come home at last. He confesses that he would like to try and farm: “I want to be here. I want to live here and farm. It’s the only thing I really want to do. I found that out.”³⁸

We are Vergies, Berry suggests, and when we wear ourselves out with trying to make money, or “find ourselves,” or whatever foolish endeavor we are busying ourselves with, the land offers the only healing power we can have in this world. Vergie is the clearest symbol in Berry’s work—a symbol of redemption by return, of “finding ourselves” by restoring the oldest connections.

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38. *Hannah Coulter*, 182-3.