

It Is Well With My Soil: Ecocriticism of Wendell  
Berry's *Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter* & Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Housekeeping*

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## Chapter One

## Introduction

## Wholeness of Being in Environmental Writing

“As the connections have been broken by the fragmentation and isolation of work, they can be restored by restoring the wholeness of work. There is work that is isolating, harsh, destructive, specialized or trivialized into meaninglessness. And there is work that is restorative, convivial, dignified and dignifying, and pleasing. Good work is not just the maintenance of connections— as one is now said to work “for a living” or “to support a family” –but the *enactment* of connections. It *is* living, and a way of living; it is not support for a family in the sense of an exterior brace or prop, but is one of the forms and acts of love.”

- Wendell Berry, “The Body and the Earth”

Since creation, nature has served as a thematic setting in literature. Specifically in American literature, man’s relationship with nature developed alongside the exploration of a new land with ripe opportunity for growth and production. From Native American literature to Henry James’ metaphoric correlation between the garden and man in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1883) to Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* in the twentieth century, writers use nature as a place for self-discovery.<sup>1</sup> As epitomized by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophies in *Nature* published in 1836, and Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* from 1854,<sup>2</sup> man’s relationship to the environment reflects a transcendental, yet singular, experience. Despite these authors’ origination of American nature writing,<sup>3</sup> it was not until 1978 that William Rueckert introduced the term “ecocriticism” (Glotfelty xx) into literary studies as a valuable type of criticism. Karla Armbruster in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* discusses the

<sup>1</sup> Self-discovery is defined as “the act or process of achieving self-knowledge” (*Webster’s Third World International Dictionary*). I use self-discovery as a means toward a holistic understanding of “selfhood”—a person’s total identity, which includes the soul.

<sup>2</sup> Joel Porte, in *Consciousness and Culture: Emerson and Thoreau Reviewed*, notes that Thoreau believed that God is discoverable in everything. Although Thoreau recognizes that “[i]deas are the realities that give meaning and value to the physical experience, substance is the reality that links us to the world and gives weight and veracity to our conceptions” (166-167), he fails to recognize the objective reality that God exists apart from Creation.

<sup>3</sup> Porte refers to Emerson as Thoreau’s “mentor” (169).

increasing awareness of ecocriticism as a viable literary study. However, even with a term that defined a new group of writing, Cheryl Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* published in 1996 adeptly narrowed the term in spite of a "postmodern age [that] exist[s] in a constant state of flux" as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Since its launch, popularity of ecocriticism has escalated because of the accessibility of information on global warming and other environmental issues.<sup>4</sup> While this interest and push for a conscientious respect for the earth is undoubtedly a considerable part of ecocriticism, the strongest argument for its substantiality as a literary theory is the focus on an underlying principle of life: that man must cultivate his relationship with the environment through work<sup>5</sup> in order to wholly live.

Critical to an understanding of ecocriticism is the distinction between environmental writing and ecocritical writing.<sup>6</sup> Glotfelty notes that environmental writing supports a dualism that asserts nature as totally separate from humanity, while ecocritical writing unifies the two, or at least analyzes the relationship between them (xx). An ecocritical approach views man's relationship with nature by his interaction with nature because it supports the idea that nature, as a literary subject, surrounds all parts of life. Because of this quality, much of environmental writing excludes the home as an environmental site and dismisses a family (or those living as a familial unit) that works on land to produce for self and one another. What has largely been explored in literary theory concerning the environment does not focus on human work in the

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<sup>4</sup> While this seems a sweeping statement, my argument does not focus on cultural trends concerning the environment. One can reference Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* for a primary source on global warming and its popularity as a potential threat to human and natural existence.

<sup>5</sup> Berry writes that "the care of the earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal is our only legitimate hope" ("The Unsettling of America" 46). My definition of work (within context of nature) extends beyond the tangible or physical implications toward a more holistic understanding that promotes mental and spiritual implications.

<sup>6</sup> When referencing my primary texts (Berry's and Robinson's), I use the term *ecocritical*.

environment as a positive endeavor; instead, many authors<sup>7</sup> employ environmental standards to push a political agenda that attempts to criticize or explain the importance of nature in a culture that continually destroys it. Therefore, ecocriticism is a necessary part of literary scholarship because literature cannot separate characters from nature that they domesticate either destructively or productively.

Foundational to this study of work in nature is Ralph Waldo Emerson's definition of nature and art and his argument about what it means to be whole through work in nature. In his definitive work, *Nature*, Emerson defines nature as "essences unchanged by man," and art as a "mixture of [man's] will with [what is unchanged by man]" (3). Thus, employing nature as a subject of literary study should address human will in nature. Emerson acknowledges that environmental problems arise because of man's "resumption of power" and that "[t]he problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty . . . is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye" (45). While Emerson rightly categorizes a need for restoration toward beauty, he does not believe that only through God can the soul be redeemed.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, Emerson argues that there is a "union of man and God in every act of the soul" (200), what he calls a "universal self" (200). Despite Emerson's ideas concerning the self actually becoming god, his relationship to nature requires a membership, or a partnership, between them. Emerson writes of nature, "We come to our own, and make friends with matter, which the ambitious chatter of the schools would persuade us to

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most significant works concerning scientific reasoning for environmentalism come from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It* (2006). Linda Lear writes in the Introduction of *Silent Spring* that although Carson argues for a cleaner and safer environment, she also "argue[s] that the human body [is] permeable and, as such, vulnerable to toxic substances in the environment" (xvi).

<sup>8</sup> Emerson discusses God in a different context than Berry or Robinson. Emerson places importance on man's will and intellect rather than focus on God as redeemer. While he does reference God as a spiritual being, he does not posit him as a perfect divine being (*Nature* 38). Words such as spirit and wisdom are applied to his usage of "God."

despise. We never can part with it; the mind loves its old home” (325). He also poignantly notes that “[c]ities give not the human senses room enough” (325), which suggests that a rural life allows man room to fully and wholly love, to form relationship with the land, and to be at home in it. Paul B. Thompson argues in *The Agrarian Vision: Sustainability and Environmental Ethics* that “[t]he transcendentalists held that the ways of life emerging through industrialization were not suited to the natural capacities and social forms that had evolved when human societies were primarily engaged in pursuits such as farming, hunting, and fishing” (56).<sup>9</sup> If farming is one of man’s “natural capacities,” then its work must accomplish something or work toward something greater than himself. According to Richard G. Geldard in *The Spiritual Teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, “Emerson defined heaven as that state in which the individual existed on earth doing the right work according to the universal law” (114). Emerson’s understanding of a universal divine was rooted in Eastern thought<sup>10</sup> and allowed him to “resolve the seeming contradictions arising from his own traditions by asserting that nature was a sign and a symbol of divinity, a lower order of appearance suggesting the reality at a higher level of perception” (Geldard 57). Emerson perceived heaven as only a state linked to doing “right work,” and the implications of this mindset connect working in nature to existing rightly and spiritually on earth.

Furthering what Emerson argued about nature are authors Wendell Berry and Marilynne Robinson who use work in the environment as a context for holistic living. In Berry’s novels *Jayber Crow* (2001) and *Hannah Coulter* (2005), and Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* (1980) and *Gilead* (2004) they advance a concept of work on land and with a community as a source of self and communal wholeness rooted in a person’s desire for the Divine—in their case,

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<sup>9</sup> Thompson also notes that for Emerson and Thoreau, the city eradicated any chance for “human fulfillment,” which they believed only came through “recreational experiences with nature” (56).

<sup>10</sup> Geldard’s chapter, “Emerson and Company” addresses “eastern influences” that influenced Emerson’s philosophy already based in Plato’s concept of the mind’s “aspiration” toward a “vision of Unity, the One” and a “proper home for the soul” (55).



God. When one accepts Berry's belief that working in nature produces wholeness, we can then identify this work as a type of art because the intentions underlying the will are constructive rather than destructive to nature—they are redemptive. P. Travis Kroeker's "Sexuality and the Sacramental Imagination" in Jason Peters' *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*<sup>11</sup> confirms Berry's belief that wholeness is bound up with a "human's longing for God, for the wholeness of all creation" (134). Kroeker explicitly labels this longing as "the darkness" that often appears in Berry's writing: "And in this darkness in which the human self is emptied of its own dominating intentions, [the main character] himself and by extension all creation may be reshaped, mysteriously and wondrously regained" (134). Similarly, Marilynne Robinson expresses a person's desire for God as the ultimate tie between land and a person. Her essay "Wilderness," in her collection *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, deals with man's relationship to land. Robinson also identifies her "bond with landscape" as her desire to "be at home in it, to be chastened and acceptable, to be present in it as if I were not present at all" (246). In the same vein, Robinson's Calvinist<sup>12</sup> understanding of man's fallenness leads her to view nature as a site of redemption, just as man is a site for God's redemptive nature. Therefore, Berry and Robinson allow their characters to experience in nature an emptying of self in order to experience God.

This spiritual experience comes by way of work in land and what people know about the environment comes from their interaction with it through physical work with either land or people. One type of interaction is how men and women build homes in and around nature, making their ownership of the environment like a communion cup passed between members of a church. Man's inability to recognize the importance of that communion is a constant problem of

<sup>11</sup> See Peters compilation for further biographical information and analysis.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson's book, *The Death of Adam*, discusses her understanding of and appreciation for theologian John Calvin. Her views of man and his sinful state come from a biblical study and undertaking of Calvin's philosophies.

humanity—that man’s inherent sinful character extends to his community and the earth. Thus, honoring one’s neighbor (and community) in order to cultivate a healing relationship with the earth<sup>13</sup> becomes a redemptive work. According to the Center for Ecoliteracy, this type of connection is a network, which is a “fundamental fact of life.” This system operates between all “living things in an ecosystem” in a connecting relationship in order for survival (“Ecological Principles” n. pag.). Therefore, one new function of ecocriticism is to seek out literature that portrays particular values and beliefs toward the unity between the environment and man. Another function is for ecocritical writers oftentimes to focus on nature for nature’s sake and excommunicate human action as a part of that nature. Finally, in the twenty-first century, a number of authors are creating works that attempt to resolve, or at best explore, the dichotomy between nature and man through conservation. A helpful term for this association is bioregionalism, which Paul Lindholdt defines as “the process of rediscovering human connections to the land” (244). It largely focuses on sustainability that “drive[s] toward the key goals of establishing a useful cultural criticism” (250). Lindholdt gives Berry credit for the term, suggesting that Berry “explored bioregionalism before the term came into being” (250). However varying the different focuses of ecocriticism are, the central idea that motivates a new realm of focus is Berry’s idea that one must *work* on earth in order to achieve wholeness. Like the principle of bioregionalism, one must rediscover his or her connection to nature. Therefore, Berry’s novels describe work and wholeness as inseparable.

American ecocritical literature in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries focuses upon fragmentation in people and on land, but Berry’s philosophy contributes to a new type of

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<sup>13</sup> For the purpose of my argument, I will utilize separate terms in similar ways. Nature refers to the physical world or what is from the earth. Other terms analogous to nature are environment, land, and garden. Because the physical world encompasses vast spaces, I will also use the term “place” to define a specific area that is a part of the environment.

ecocriticism that positively views work and diligence as constructive to both man and nature. Rather than rebuke a seemingly negative relationship with the environment, Berry acknowledges a positive interaction between human imagination and work, human wholeness, and the natural state of the earth. In his non-fiction writing, Berry suggests that a writer's imagination expresses, through language, his body *and* mind. In his essay, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," Berry calls modern dualism of the body and mind as a "cleavage, a radical discontinuity, between Creator and creature" (105). He even goes so far as to claim that this division is "the most destructive disease that afflicts us" (105). The modern church's deficiency in identifying holiness in the human body or in "the physical reality of the world" reveals Berry's mission in proposing ways to correct this "earthly villainy" (115). Significant to ending this problem is the focus on joining the physical and spiritual in order to display the importance of man's personhood *and* community.<sup>14</sup> The struggles man encounters with "the dust" (105) comment on a larger sense of community that is negative, leading to an individualism that Berry acknowledges and respects, but does not wholeheartedly encourage. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes of freeing oneself from struggles similar to the ones Berry addresses: "We have built for this world a family mansion, and for the next a family tomb. The best works of art are the expression of man's struggle to free himself from this condition" (28). But for Berry, a transition in writing about nature happens where home can also be a site for work. In the essay, "Money Versus Goods," he explains that work is not just a pursuit for economic growth, but also creates health for "family and community ties, connection to a home place, the questions of vocations and good work. If you have 'a job,' presumably, you won't mind being a stranger among strangers in a strange place, doing work that is demeaning or unethical or work for which you are unsuited by talent or

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<sup>14</sup> Thoreau acknowledges the importance work, but does not connect work with communal responsibility; for Thoreau, work is only a means to an end (survival and self illumination).

calling” (*What Matters* 22).

Because ecocriticism concerns itself with man and his development in context of both the community and land, cultural studies are an integral component of Berry’s agrarianism that revolves around the idea of husbandry,<sup>15</sup> which equates a sense of togetherness, a commitment to all that is a part of a culture—for Berry, the farming culture. A separation in this community, according to Berry, begins between men and women, and then reaches ecological divisions (“The Body and the Earth” 108). Ronald Jager, in *The Fate of Family Farming: Variations on an American Idea*, proposes that husbandry is concerned with “commitments and even objects themselves, flocks and fields and tools, had a scale that was comprehensible, humanly manageable, for they presented themselves as already integrated, organically related to each other and, when properly husbanded, mutually supportive” (27).<sup>16</sup> He also recognizes the harmony inherent in this type of community. Therefore, Berry views the natural world in harmony with humanity as one community working toward wholeness. This working represents the inclusion of culture in ecocritical studies. Glotfelty’s foundational definition of ecocriticism “takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specially the cultural attitude of language and literature” (xix). She defines this connection in ecocritical writing as a widening discussion of the “social sphere” to the “entire ecosphere” in which “ideas” interact as a part of a “global system” (xix). Thus, literature becomes an avenue for an expressiveness of nature that does not leave out culture. Nature is a place of existence where living organisms flourish, wither, and die; like nature, a person’s interaction with the environment also reveals his

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<sup>15</sup> Berry’s “The Body and Earth” provides extensive explanation of the terms *husbandry* and *housewifery*. The crux of the union between the two sexes is, to Berry, an endeavor to “nurture” and to decrease work (in favor of “thinking”) (108). In Chapters 2 and 3 of this project, I analyze the husbandry and housewifery with both Berry’s and Robinson’s novels.

<sup>16</sup> For further information regarding Wendell Berry’s definition of husbandry, see Berry’s essays in Norman Wirzba’s *The Art of the Commonplace*.

or her own development on earth. In the book, *Urban Place*, author Ed Barlett explains this connection between gardens and persons: “Gardens represent settings for the experience of growth and decay and active participation in such processes. Gardens are places where life occurs” (92). So for Berry, a garden or farm becomes representative of a community that grows, changes, and dies. In her Introduction, Armbruster recognizes the division between man and nature in popular ecocritical writing and the need to unite both ecocritical studies and cultural studies in ecocriticism: “A viable ecocriticism must continue to challenge dualistic thinking by exploring the role of nature in texts more concerned with human cultures, by looking at the role of culture in nature, by attending to the nature-focused text as also a cultural-literary text” (4). Berry’s fiction challenges this dualism by uniting man and the environment.

For Berry, the central theme in this union is interaction with one’s community and environment that enhances a person’s ability to love beyond self. Winifred Gallagher, in her book *House Thinking*, summarizes the simplistic concept of loving the land as a means to loving one another: “The love of nature also draws people together, supporting our increasingly endangered sense of community” (231). Oftentimes in contemporary fiction, the significance of work, community, and marriage are seemingly discredited, which directly corresponds to the reduction and loss of working the land and the making of households. Berry develops a philosophy of rootedness resembling that of French Christian and philosopher, Simone Weil. According to Weil in *The Need for Roots*, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul” (40). Weil’s focus here is that rootedness is a natural part of life and relationships to nature and the community are “given” and should be fostered in order for man to “draw wellnigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part” (40). Although Weil’s solutions to modern

community problems are more extreme<sup>17</sup> than Berry's, her idea of rootedness finds a home in Berry's novels, which accept her definition and agree that a soul's most earnest need is to find and live *with roots*.<sup>18</sup> In *Jayber Crow*, *Hannah Coulter*, *Housekeeping*, and *Gilead*, Berry and Robinson imply that a person's interaction with the environment in a particular place creates a sense of rootedness through a community.

## **Chapter Two: *Jayber Crow's* Economy of Redemption: Work as Recovery Toward**

### **Wholeness**

In this chapter I use an analytical approach to Berry's novels, *Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter* to argue that man's work allows him to be imaginative through a rootedness to a particular place. Berry asserts man's connection to the environment through local community, farming, and familial constructs that demonstrate his bond to nature in both novels. His term *husbandry* serves as a useful definition of a person's dedicated work accomplished in nature. First, I analyze *Jayber Crow* and show the correlation between Berry's philosophy of nature and God. The novel's central character, Jayber Crow, returns to his hometown<sup>19</sup> and interacts with the community and land, which mirrors his interaction and relationship to God. Jayber works in nature through gardening and through his relationship to other people. This chapter also examines *Hannah Coulter* as analogous to *Jayber Crow* in its examination of familial and farm work. The central theme of this novel is holistic living, which is conveyed through Hannah Coulter's memory of her life in Port William with her husband on their farm. Because both novels discuss farming or gardening as the primary source of work, they offer substantial commentary on contemporary ecocritical writing within a Christian context. Within the chapter, I

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<sup>17</sup> Weil's actualization of suffering led her to die of starvation. She also believed that political parties should be nonexistent in order for there to be absolute freedom of individual speech and belief (*The Need for Roots* 26).

<sup>18</sup> "Roots" refers to both a person's history in a specific place and with a certain community.

<sup>19</sup> Port William is the fictional town that Berry utilizes for all his novels.

contextualize the implications of the characters' work in Port William within an ecocritical framework and connect it to their development as whole persons in two of Berry's finest novels.

Wendell Berry is the grandfather of American agrarian writing, and his contribution to ecocritical scholarship covers a variety of topics and principles within ecocriticism. As a college educated farmer from rural Kentucky, Berry's agrarian philosophy stems from a personal devotion to both words and place.<sup>20</sup> Berry also constructs decidedly Christian<sup>21</sup> characters that interact in localized communities. This locality is central to all of Berry's literature. His characters understand life through their relationship to a specific place, and also to God. Consequently, Berry subscribes to an *ecotheology*<sup>22</sup> that allows his fictional characters to care for creation because of their belief in and understanding of God. Celia Deane-Drummond, in *Ecotheology*, defines "eco-theology" as a theology that references biblical literature in order to view caring for the earth as a Christian's responsibility (81). In the same vein, Berry recognizes the inherent relationship between a healthy<sup>23</sup> community and its land and identifies an

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<sup>20</sup> Berry defines Agrarianism as "a way of thinking and ordering life in community that is based on the health of the land and of living creature" (1).

<sup>21</sup> In the book, *The Art of Living Right: An Interview with Wendell Berry*, Gregory McNamee and James R. Hepworth quote Berry on his "Christian" identity: "I used the phrase 'forest Christian' to suggest what has been, for me, a necessary shift in perspective on the New Testament: from that of the church to that of the whole Creation. I don't want to sound too positive or knowing about this, because I hope to understand the problem better than I do, but I feel more and more strongly that when St. Paul said that "we are members of one another," he was using a far more inclusive "we" than Christian institutions have generally thought. For me, this is the meaning of ecology. Whether we know it or not, whether we want to be or not, we are members of one another: humans (ourselves and our enemies), earthworms, whales, snakes, squirrels, trees, topsoil, flowers, weeds, germs, hills, rivers, swifts, and stones—all of "us." The work of the imagination, I feel, is to understand this. I don't think it can be understood by any other faculty. And to live here very long or very well, humans now have to understand it. For us, it is not a question of whether or not we shall know that we are and act accordingly" (23).

<sup>22</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond's *Eco-Theology* places Christian theological perspectives in context with environmental concerns. She defines eco-theology as "that reflection on different facets of theology in as much as they take their bearings from cultural concerns about the environment and humanity's relationship with the natural world. It is, in other words, broadly speaking a particular expression of contextual theology that emerges in particular contemporary context of environmental awareness that has characterized the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries" (x).

<sup>23</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, my definition of health also includes holiness. In his Introduction to *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, Joel James Shuman writes that holiness "shares a common linguistic heritage with the words *heal*, *health*, and *whole*. In this broader sense, a holy person is one attentive to his or her existence as a member of creation, which is constituted by an intricate constellation of dependences. Both

individual's wholeness as a part of that relationship. Therefore, to achieve wholeness, one must have a relationship with others and with land—they are inseparable. Lawrence Buell suggests in his definitive work *The Environmental Imagination*, that “[e]nvironmental literature launches itself from the presumption that we do not think about our surroundings, and our relation to them, as much as we ought to” (261). Despite this lack of correlation to nature in ecocritical writing,<sup>24</sup> Berry proposes that an environmental relationship is the surest proponent of man's interaction with other people<sup>25</sup> and with God. Although God curses man's work on land<sup>26</sup> at the beginning of Genesis, Berry recognizes this work in creation as a means of gaining back or attaining wholeness.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Berry posits ecocritical *and* Christian themes in his writing, making nature a site for holistic living that does not eradicate a person's spirituality in his conservation of nature.

Wendell Berry's deep connection to land originates from his personal and lifelong work with land. He was born and educated in rural Kentucky where he continues to write and farms.

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health and holiness, then, have to do with living well in relationship—to other persons, other creatures, and God” (7).

<sup>24</sup> In *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* by Max Oelschlaeger, he furthers this problem by suggesting that civilization separates man from nature: “The problem is that we are through and through civilized human beings who have drawn rigid distinctions between ourselves and the wilderness” (5).

<sup>25</sup> The author of *Faith in Nature* defines a view of the garden that complements my argument for work and spirituality as a joining of the physical and mental: “As a symbol, the garden was one of the oldest and richest in Western culture, and, as physical space, it offered active engagement with nature through our bodies, the kind of connection industrial society had broken. Working in his garden and reflecting on the relation between the ideal in his mind and the messy reality on the ground, Pollan came to see gardening as a way to integrate nature and culture—a fresh approach, accessible to all, between the extremes of pristine wilderness and conquered nature” (135). The reference is to Michael Pollan, author of three popular and definitive works of simplistic, environmental living.

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 3:17 states, “cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (ESV).

<sup>27</sup> Joel James Shuman addresses this issue in Christian stewardship of the earth in his Introduction of *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*. He emphasizes Berry's belief that “God beckons creation” and that man's correct response to Him is “engage[ment] in good work” (4). Shuman notes Christ on the cross as the ultimate “sign of God's care for creation, signaling the ultimate triumph of creative love over destructive hate” (4). I analyze love as an important part of this good work.



As a result of this committed work, Berry uses knowledge of the land to develop his understanding of self. While other ecocritical authors discuss the importance of place in literature, Berry critiques cultural responsibility by bringing together a person's mind and body through memory and knowledge of a place. As an author and a farmer, Berry connects the mind and body to creation in his literature, which creates a sense of wholeness from a particular place that allows him to fully live within a certain community. Despite modern structures, Berry continually creates metaphors of wholeness in his literature that open the crumbled and forgotten pages of agrarianism in modern literary communities. His new wave of environmental literature focuses on a decentering of self. Personal connection to real life hometown Port Royal, Kentucky informs Berry's proposing of a new and organic view of land and personhood in his poetry, essays, and fiction. Therefore, his literature reflects responsibility with one's self, family, and land in order for a person to engage holistically with land.

Berry's concept that wholeness of being comes by way of hard work that often includes struggle in one's specific environment, and the Christian connotations within this concept of wholeness align with ecocritical connotations. John Gatta, in his work *On Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and the Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* notes that "[a]mong the major traditions of world religion, Christianity, not surprisingly, has most deeply affected the ecological outlook of English-speaking North Americans" (7). Christianity reveals a need for valuing nature because it leads to a wholeness of being *through* work in nature. Christianity maintains the concept of stewardship as the dutiful attitude toward creation, which comes from Genesis 2:15: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it" (ESV). Even more clearly in Genesis chapter three, man works land because he was taken *from* it, suggesting an inherent connection between man and

land: “Therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken” (ESV 23). Thus, man not only desires to have relationship with land, but also to work and *keep* the land. My thesis outlines Berry’s literary proposal for this type of work. Fred Bahnson in “The Salvation of the City” describes a message from Jeremiah in the Bible that promotes peaceful use of land: “Jeremiah made clear that planting gardens and seeking peace were symbiotic practices—like sowing beans with your corn or marigolds with your tomatoes—and exactly the kind of companion planting the church should be doing” (105). Using the garden as a Christian metaphor is not a new literary device, but Berry extends working with land in his novels as the necessary and continued metaphor of wholeness that permits him to assume affection as the factor that stimulates man’s growth in community and nature. He connects this affection to pleasure stating, “For pleasure is, so to speak, affection in action” (“Economy and Pleasure” 96). Accordingly, in *Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter*, Berry writes of this affection in work as a leading toward pleasure in oneself and for God.

Work also becomes an avenue for a person to experience affection for a local community, which is a critical part of Berry’s agrarian way of life manifested in both novels. While the term “community” includes a group of people in a particular location, Berry’s knowledge of and concern for farming directs his view of culture as a whole. Allan Carlson ascribes part of this focus to Berry’s “direct witness to the failure of the early-twentieth-century New Agrarian dream” (292). He writes that within a failed agrarian culture, or “farm population,” there also is a “vanishing rural life” (293). Berry asserts this claim in his novel *Jayber Crow* and calls attention to a person’s action toward sustaining self and the community in order to gain a local way of life. Carlson labels Berry’s attention to individualism as a “portrait of the human person” that “can be understood through nine qualities,” which are not devoid of others:

To be human is to be tied to a specific place, a spot on the earth, . . . to be part of a web of memory . . . to be a member of a local community, . . . to resist the dominion of science and the machines, . . . to fit one's work into the rhythms of nature, . . . to enter into the mysteries, wonders, and agonies of marriage, . . . to be a generalist in the skills of life, . . . to maintain a true home economy," and "to be in communion with the God of Nature. (294-312)

These qualities depend upon discipline from a person—discipline to work with other people and nature, to resist machinery, and to labor in order to “be in communion with the God of Nature” (312). Yet, the most significant quality that defines a person is his or her unity<sup>28</sup> with God, and that relationship instigates a person's concept of work and dedication to land; man's relationship with God illuminates how he interacts with the environment.

This perspective is strongly ecocritical as man finds relationship with land as a reflection of his understanding of self and God— a struggle that is best understood by farming.<sup>29</sup> Gatta suggests that Berry's writing alludes to Thoreau's appreciation of nature by including this work as a part of man's relationship with the environment: “No contemporary figure embodies more visibly, in both personal and literary terms, a Thoreauvian dedication to ‘living deliberately’ amid the complexities of global economics. Again and again, Berry's essays remind us that ‘nature’ is a place of human labor and livelihood, not merely of recreation and observation” (201). Thus, Berry emulates Thoreau's concept that nature is a place for labor. However, Herman Nibbelink furthers Thoreau's belief, arguing that “[c]ommitment, even to husbandry, offers dissipation rather than fulfillment; and such indulgence, by weakening the body, enslaves and ultimately extinguishes the spirit” (139). Thoreau's lack of commitment does not instigate

<sup>28</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I employ communion, harmony, and unity as synonymous.

<sup>29</sup> Although Berry uses farming as the most useful metaphor for man's work toward recovery, I later use pastoring as an equally helpful work that also preserves land and community.

wholeness, while Berry's commitment instigates it. While Berry and Thoreau have much in common in regards to viewing the environment, the difference in their response toward work reveals Berry's firm commitment to the cultivation of land and man. Gatta explores Berry's religious beliefs about land. He calls it an "endowment," not a "possession" (202), noting that land as an endowment reveals a larger picture—that the environment signifies God's act of creation: "A religious sense of the world lies at the heart of Berry's ecological conviction that land must be treated as a divine gift and sacrament. To approach the earth as sacrament is to embrace its materiality while reverencing its worth beyond the horizon of visible use" (202). Learning to see beyond the physical allows Berry's characters to experience Christian themes such as redemption and wholeness of being. Gatta writes that "[p]erceiving restored fertility to be the outward and visible sign of inward and invisible grace, [Berry] literally works out his salvation—in the root sense of finding *salvus*, healing—in a marginal site that becomes spiritual central" (203). According to Berry in his foundational essay, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," a person's work directly parallels his or her understanding of self and God.<sup>30</sup> Viewing the earth and humans as a part of God's creation means accepting the "significance" of man's work—that it should be valued and understood as something useful and needed, and for Berry "[t]he significance—and ultimately the quality—of the work we do is determined by our understanding of the story in which we are taking part" (109, 110). Therefore, the farming life signifies a correlation to a story of redemption through usefulness in nature.

Ecocritics use their perspectives on land to provoke political change, but Berry addresses man's need to *engage* and *work* within the garden to better understand himself and his relation to God and others by committing oneself to the imaginative productivity on the land and in the

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<sup>30</sup> While Berry equates this working out as salvation, I do not concur with his assertion. However, I examine and use Berry's terms in order to posit his Christian themes.

community. His literature, then, argues that a person cannot creatively work unless he properly understands his environment. Berry separates himself from the Romanticism of Thoreau that views nature as something to marvel and adore, or as a spiritual entity, which extends Emerson's concept of work. Berry identifies this Romantic perception of man's desire to inhabit nature, but it neglects the missing link between nature and man—God.<sup>31</sup> That God created the earth and then man, and then told man to cultivate the earth, demonstrates an undeniable knitting together of land and man. Therefore, man's cultivation, or work, in nature demonstrates his response to his place as a member of God's creation. Berry's firm belief in eliminating technology from his lifestyle (and even his writing—he writes everything by hand) allocates his potential for creativity to his literature. Wendell Berry's significance as an ecocritical writer deserves great attention in the academic community for his Christian ecocritical literature. Berry opens the door for other authors to be both distinctly Christian and ecocritical. This chapter examines the theme of work as holistic living by depicting characters' husbandry that produces right relationship between man and nature, and man and God.

### **Chapter Three: A Vagabond in Nature: Marilynne Robinson's Ecocritical and Religious Impermanency in *Housekeeping***

Like Wendell Berry, Marilynne Robinson postulates Christianity, which shapes her concept of nature in her first novel, *Housekeeping*. Ruth, the novel's protagonist and narrator, portrays an environmental and religious worldview of wilderness that shows the effects of a person's temporary and permanent absence in nature through the work of memory. As such, topics addressed in this chapter are memory, sovereignty of God, domesticity and wilderness,

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<sup>31</sup> I define God in terms of Christianity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* includes earlier definitions of the word; however, I employ the third definition: "In the specific Christian and monotheistic sense. The One object of supreme adoration; the Creator and Ruler of the Universe" ("God," def. 3).

and family. Robinson discusses these topics through use of extended metaphors.<sup>32</sup> Also critical to this chapter are the novel's metaphor of wilderness and the symbolism of the town's lake as it pertains to Ruth's memory. Ruth comprehends her transitory existence by converging memory of her mother's death and her own present existence in Lake Fingerbone.<sup>33</sup> Rather than focus on wilderness as a place for wholeness, Ruth values landscape as an unruly place representative of life and death. Like Berry, Robinson values the earth for its immediacy as a site for self-discovery.

Robinson's novel locates the pulse of an environmentalism shaped in part by theologian John Calvin and American writer and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>34</sup> Their philosophies merge together under the umbrella of Robinson's Christian priorities. The final production is a story settled in strong Christian and agrarian principles. In this way, Robinson's fiction correlates to Berry's, and it is worth noting that *Housekeeping*<sup>35</sup> extends deeper theological implications that associate a person's soul with his or her interaction in nature by stressing its paradoxes. Robinson's religious view of the earth and man's place in it connects to Berry's in that the temporariness of life has everything to do with eternity and that man (or woman) must participate in a husbandry with nature in order to become whole. Yet, Robinson's focus is also on the physical world and its seeming transience. In her second novel and Pulitzer Prize winning *Gilead*,<sup>36</sup> Robinson writes that the earth is "all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that" (57). Robinson utilizes this description of nature as an image of what is

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<sup>32</sup> An extended metaphor is, essentially, a "mapping" of one metaphor to another (Gentner and Bowdle 113)

<sup>33</sup> Like Port William, Lake Fingerbone (and later Gilead too) is a fictional rural town in America.

<sup>34</sup> Hannes Bergthaller's essay, "Like a Ship to be Tossed: Emersonian Environmentalism and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*," will serve as a central source for this claim.

<sup>35</sup> *Gilead* also makes this association.

<sup>36</sup> I explore *Gilead* in the next section of this chapter, and it is the novel addressed in my fourth chapter.

to come,<sup>37</sup> infusing both *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* with descriptions of nature as a revelation of Heaven. This religious perspective toward nature dictates Robinson's ecocritical construction in her fiction. *Housekeeping*'s central characters, Ruth and her Aunt Sylvie, enact strong ecocritical views of wilderness that show the effects of a person's temporary and permanent absence in a place. Robinson employs her Christian lens to understand man's relationship to nature. Through work or lack of work in a particular place, these characters subscribe to a Christian ecocritical philosophy.

*Housekeeping* is a memory narrative;<sup>38</sup> thereby, Robinson reinforces the connection between life and death with nature. Ruth, the protagonist and narrative voice, recalls her grandmother's life as a widow in the town Fingerbone. Similar to Berry, Robinson demonstrates the redeeming power of one's work in a specific place in the story. Despite losing her husband to a tragic accident in Fingerbone, Ruth's grandmother, Sylvia Foster, remains in town because she commits herself to the place just as her "religious" commitments (9). The association between nature and Sylvia's own life shows the interconnectedness between the work of one's life and place:

[Sylvia] conceived of life as a road down which one traveled, an easy enough road through a broad country, and that one's destination was there from the very beginning, a measured distance away, standing in the ordinary light like some plain house where one went in and was greeted by respectable people and was

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<sup>37</sup> My reference to a future place or eternity will mention the kingdom of God.

<sup>38</sup> According to Lewis P. Hinchman in *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*, a person's memory implicitly argues for his or her "temporariness," also revealing that a person has "a history" (1). Hinchman's argument centers on the postmodern question that asks, "[I]s memory a reliable guide?" My argument shows that Berry and Robinson claim ecocritical principles while maintaining a usefulness for memory. In other words, a memory narrative interprets the central elements of a human soul: God created the earth, God created man to work in the earth, and God created woman so man would not be alone. Because Berry and Robinson ascribe to these Christian truths in their literature, they express an ecocritical view of memory to relate a person to a specific environment.

shown to a room where everything one had ever lost or put aside was gathered together, waiting. (9-10)

Sylvia's<sup>39</sup> final work shifts from her domestic duties, to her family and home, and then to the work of memory. In spite of Sylvia's legacy, rootedness to place does not exist for her daughter Sylvie and granddaughter Ruth's interaction with nature, which exists through their memories of what happened in the town's lake. This response to nature acknowledges Robinson's Christian beliefs concerning earth and Heaven.

Oftentimes, Christian writers suggest the earth as only temporary and Heaven as an eternal home, but Robinson avoids this division in her novels. She revokes the inconsequential attitude toward earth and establishes a domesticity that regards earth as a substantial and creative place that cultivates man's desire to live. Most importantly, Robinson observes the presence or loss of a family member as a person's reason for work. Steve J. Van Der Weele in a *Christianity and Literature* issue devoted to Robinson describes her third novel *Home* in these similar themes rooted in faith and the locality of home:

For what gives the novel its depth and significance is what so much of contemporary naturalistic fiction lacks—an acknowledgement of transcendence, of faith, an awareness of the deep realities of guilt, accountability, mortality, compassion—and forgiveness. Yes, forgiveness—a complex act, both to offer and to receive. It is not a one-time act; it must be lived out in the daily experiences of hearth and home and the quotidian of daily life. (547)

*Housekeeping* advances this awareness through the complexity of memory and does not avoid the powerful presence of nature in that awareness. Robinson believes that man has great

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<sup>39</sup> Ruth's Grandmother, not her Aunt.



responsibility to protect God's creation, and so she intends this creation to refer to both the environment and also to fellow man. While *Housekeeping* provides explicit interaction with wilderness and the domestic, Robinson poses a larger polarity realized by memory—recovery (or redemption) cannot occur without accepting the sovereignty of God in the past, present, and future.

#### **Chapter Four: Graves and the Ground: *Gilead* and the Work of Grace**

This chapter outlines *Gilead*'s ecocritical and religious themes through a different type of work. *Gilead* uses the two main male characters' relationship and work in a particular place as an ongoing effort toward knowing God and self. The protagonist, John Ames, completes work in creation as a pastor and father through unconditionally loving other people. Again, Robinson employs memory as the tool for understanding self in relation to others and to death. Because Ames is at the end of his life, his letter (his novel) promotes a finality that Robinson connects to Christianity's perspective of Heaven. Unlike *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* establishes a character's rootedness and work on earth, promoting wholeness and a holistic account of Christian work. The family is the center for the novel's development, and more specifically, Ames deals with the loss or death of a family member as an avenue for insight into self and God. According to Laura E. Tanner in her essay on Robinson and *Gilead*, the protagonist and elderly Ames grapples with the end of his life, making it impossible for him to live "in a world he cannot totally inhabit" (227). However, this perspective allows Ames to value nature, and also his own life. Describing a graveyard, Ames writes, "If I were to say it was going back to nature, you might get the idea that there was some sort of vitality about the place . . . My father always said when someone dies the body is just a suit of old clothes the spirit doesn't want anymore" (13). Here, the distinction between the body and spirit in death marks Robinson's focus on physical life as a valuable

source for discovering God's grace on earth.

Significant to this chapter is the metaphor of water as baptism. As a pastor, Ames chronicles certain stories that mainly recount incidents with rain and other water as an embodiment of God's cleansing. Therefore, part of Ames' work in the town focuses on redemption of man. The ecocritical theme becomes an extension of Robinson's religious beliefs, promoting Berry's similar concept that the preservation of people is the underpinning of all environmental work.

Robinson also asserts her characters' relationship to nature through familial and neighborly constructs that promote love as the common denominator in a healthy relationship with one another and place. Robinson looks again to French theologian John Calvin for a view of neighborly love. Her essay "Puritan and Prigs" quotes Calvin's perspective of "love thy neighbor," calling it a biblical response that firstly shows love for God, then love for one's neighbor. Calvin emphasizes the "evil" in one who "lives and strives for himself alone, and thinks about and seeks only his own advantage" (171-72). Although Robinson writes of a "singular self" (235), she encourages solitude (Ames' sermon writing) and family as chances for work. She writes of the modern crisis of family in terms likened to the environmental crisis: "We have reasoned our way to uniformly conditional relationships. This is at the very center of the crisis of the family" (89). Reminiscent of Berry, Robinson sees these human relationships as fragmented, implicating the unconditional relationship between Ames and his son, and with his neighbor's son. The paternal theme enlightens Robinson's environmental conservation of nature by working toward right human relationships as the cause for right relationship with nature. Her identification of the communal division reinforces her position on man's relationship between nature as fragmented between mind and body.

## Conclusion

Marilynne Robinson, in her essay “Wilderness,” writes that “[e]very environmental problem is a human problem” (253). Therefore, the incorrect care for, or views of, the environment is man’s problem to correct. Robinson also claims that “[u]nless we can re-establish peace and order as values, and learn to see our own well-being in our neighbor’s prosperity, we can do nothing at all for the rain forests and the koala bears” (253). In order to preserve and care for the earth, man must work on the land and in his community. He or she must be, as Simone Weil considered, rooted. This rootedness moves a person to cultivate a relationship with other people and God. So it is that authors Wendell Berry and Marilynne Robinson explore and emulate an ecocritical Christian framework that unifies a man’s work in a land to a man’s soul, whether it be through hard labor, provision and care for family, or the devotion to a history of a place. Wendell Berry’s fiction beautifully constructs stories of people living in a community who learn to love one another through decentering<sup>40</sup> and respecting the land on which they so firmly stand, work, and live. Examining Berry’s and Robinson’s characters and principles that are metaphorically represented and literally portrayed as people who are committed to a husbandry with land, a reader is able to encounter and understand Christian principles in a literature that is clearly environmental. Because the academic realm lacks a voice that is both strongly Christian and strongly ecocritical, this project attempts to reveal the interconnectedness between environmental principles and Christian values in Berry’s and Robinson’s novels that shape a Christian ecocriticism within American environmental studies.

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<sup>40</sup> Simone Weil deems that in order to decenter self, a person must “give up [his] imaginary position as the center . . . A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions” (qtd. in Scarry 111). Decentering in literature suggests a belonging to a culture in a certain time and place that uses a specific language. I argue that decentering illuminates the importance of land through placing one’s self within the crux of a community and work within the environment.

## Chapter Two:

*Jayber Crow's Economy*<sup>41</sup> of Redemption

## Work as Recovery Toward Wholeness

“The earth is the genius of our life”

–Wendell Berry, *A Place on Earth*

*Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter* are two of Wendell Berry's finest novels because of their agrarian and Christian principles. Both novels are set in Berry's fictional rural setting, Port William, and concentrate on the narrators' relationships with community and land. Published first in 2001, *Jayber Crow* addresses Berry's environmental concerns through narrative of place. The narrator, Jayber Crow, returns to Port William as an adult and settles into his position as the town's barber. Through his work in both the barbershop and his backyard garden, Jayber experiences a closer relationship with other people and with God. Yet, Jayber's experience with a woman he secretly and loyally loves also mirrors his devotion to Port William and the cultivation of its life. His recollection of daily, ordinary events and his response to them shape the narrative and correspond to God's work in humanity. In this way Berry creates an ecocritical text that carefully imparts metaphors of God's redemption in human life through one man's work in a particular place.

Likewise, *Hannah Coulter*, published four years after *Jayber Crow*, also supports Berry's concept of work as instigation of God's grace. The novel's namesake, Hannah Coulter, although a woman, parallels Jayber's narration in her singular voice and situation. Hannah begins the novel with her journey to Port William and marriage. After becoming a mother and then a war

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<sup>41</sup> Berry writes in his essay, “The Idea of a Local Economy,” that “[t]he ‘environmental crisis’ has happened because the human household or economy is in conflict at almost every point with the household of nature” (249).

widow, Hannah marries Nathan Coulter who promises to work and provide for Hannah. Their marital and farm work reveal the interconnectedness between marriage and farming and the power of husbandry and housewifery. Hannah remembers her relationship with Nathan as parallel to her relationship to their land, showing a deep sense of belonging as the root of Berry's ecocritical themes. Although *Hannah Coulter* addresses similar environmental (and thus, political)<sup>42</sup> problems initiated by war, disrespect for land, and greed, Berry offers an inverted picture of these realities in *Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter*. He suggests a new way of living developed by a commitment to work in nature and place that restores a man's sense of God's love.<sup>43</sup>

I examine both novels employing Michael Branch and Scott Slovic's definition of *Ecocriticism* in the introduction to *The ISLE Reader* as "scholarship that is concerned with the environmental implications of literary texts" (xiv). They show the religious concepts of working in the environment, which Berry terms, "husbandry." This husbandry is a Christian agrarian resolution for the problem of humanity in nature—that man is broken and in need of redemption. Berry believes that man should work with land primarily through farming or gardening, which attributes work as the foundation for solving patterns of fragmentation and destruction within the environment and, ultimately, Berry argues, within man as a part of creation. In "The Idea of a Local Economy," Berry labels the "environmental crisis" as solvable if "people, individually and in their communities, recover responsibility for their thoughtlessly given proxies" (250-51). Conclusively, Berry argues, "it is a crisis of our lives as individuals, as family members, as community members, and as citizens. We have an 'environmental crisis' because we have

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<sup>42</sup> Berry believes that every environmental issue directly relates to an individual or community's understanding and practice of economy.

<sup>43</sup> This wholeness is not synonymous with salvation; rather, it instigates a person's awareness of self in light of God's redemptive act in creation.

consented to an economy in which by eating, drinking, working, resting, traveling, and enjoying ourselves we are destroying the natural, the god-given world” (251). However economic these problems are, Berry focuses on work as a healthy part of nature’s destruction allows an argument of his characters’ responses to this crisis as evidence of both religious and ecocritical work for wholeness.

Berry writes an in-depth representation of ecocritical and religious passions that unite the body and mind in *Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter*. He references this union in *On Farming and Food* as an “atonement between ourselves and our world, between economy and ecology, between the domestic and the wild” (7) that comes by means of comprehending the implications of the “health of all the creatures belonging to a given place” (7). According to Berry, the environmental dilemmas exist because of man’s misuse of his own body, and perhaps his displaced religion. His essay, “The Body and the Earth,” places man in “Creation” as a small member who should ask “religious” questions such as, “What connections or responsibilities do we maintain between our bodies and the earth?” (97-98). Consequently, *Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter* answer these types of questions, providing reason to both analyze and discuss the novels’ attempt to define, through relationship with land and community, man’s need for a holistic life through his relationship to nature.

Both novels adhere to a maintenance between humanity and land, which exists within three categories that Berry identifies as “Character,” “Agriculture,” and “Culture” (*The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*) in order to achieve this wholeness through relationship with land and community. By separating and focusing on these three human dilemmas, Berry illuminates subsequent environmental dilemmas. Through a person’s character, Berry expresses the divide between “what we think and what we do” (18)—man’s moral makeup

must be realized in his actions. Agriculture seems another obvious category for Berry because he is a farmer who works the land, but his concern is largely with wilderness, or areas separated and conserved from humanity, because man's "roots" are in nature (28). Therefore, in order to return to or realize a holistic life, a person must conserve wilderness. Protecting wilderness means that if man must live, he must "use" wilderness carefully (30). The emphasis on using land as a mutual member of creation perpetuates a conservationist mindset. Thirdly, Berry defines culture as "a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the human limits" (43).<sup>44</sup> This chapter examines work for holistic living by narrowing the focus to characters' work in land (husbandry) that produces right relationship between man and land, which reflects man's relationship to God.

The view of creation as belonging to God significantly structures these two novels as the protagonist narrators remember their work in a specific place because holistic living is a religious pursuit. *Jayber Crow* outlines a single man's journey toward whole living through his belonging to a specific place, while *Hannah Coulter*'s protagonist's remembrance of her interaction with nature also determines the protagonist's health and happiness. In *A Place on Earth: An Anthology of Nature Writing from North America and Australia*, Mark Tredinnick describes Berry's perspective of this interaction that belonging to a place leads to a right relationship between man and nature:

I sense that human beings live best when they remember that they live inside a natural order, that the land includes us and all our schemes and creations, and that when we begin to imagine our lines of kinship and our bonds of responsibility extending out, beyond ourselves and our human families and our nations to the

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<sup>44</sup> While Berry includes memory and work as separate parts of culture, I argue that memory is a type of actual communal work.

many forms of life and intelligence that comprise our home place, then it is that we will learn how to behave well, not only at home, not only in human society, but as inhabitants of the earth. (27)

Working in nature not only benefits a person's whole self, but also creates a community that extends to the individual person and his or her family. Therefore, the novels, and all of Berry's writing, present a view of nature directly related to a person's "healthy" choices attained through work in land.

Of Berry's novels, *Jayber Crow* provides the closest representation of man's connection to the divine, or God, through his work in land. Man's *work* with land, a husbandry, makes him able to recognize the divine. In other words, working in nature cultivates both the physical and spiritual health of a person, which affects his or her relationship with other people. Jack Hicks, in his essay "Wendell Berry's Husband's to the World: A Place on Earth," identifies Berry's writing as a movement back toward wholeness and away from the "distinctly flawed being fallen from natural wholeness" (240).<sup>45</sup> The environment serves as a site for both rootedness and wholeness,<sup>46</sup> yet a person cannot become whole without recognizing his need for wholeness. Therefore, in this novel, work in nature provides Jayber with an opportunity to discern either implicitly or explicitly God's offer of wholeness.<sup>47</sup> James Shuman's Introduction to *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life* describes wholeness as "holy living" that "ha[s] to do with living well in relationship—to other persons, other creatures, and God" (7). Berry asserts

<sup>45</sup> Hicks also addresses Berry's religion that is not "stress[ed]," but evident in his "settlers...as near to the garden [Eden] as mortal man can ever return" (240). While critics of Berry label his depiction of a fallen world as "fragmented," they fail to place this view as decidedly Christian. In fact, it is Berry's understanding of the Bible that brings him to desire a forgotten or displaced harmony between man and nature.

<sup>46</sup> The term "wholeness" differs from the term "rootedness." Rootedness means belonging to a specific community or place, while wholeness concentrates on the physical and spiritual—the entire self.

<sup>47</sup> Wholeness does not equate to salvation. Normal Wirzba describes Berry's concept of wholeness as a central part of his agrarianism. In his book, *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, he comments on the connection between "wholeness and the Holiness of the creation" (184). In essence, Berry believes that a person's understanding of his soul and what it means to be whole leads to wholeness of being.



man's connection to the environment through local community,<sup>48</sup> farming, and familial constructs in his fictional town, Port William.<sup>49</sup> The novel's protagonist, Jayber Crow, remembers his work in a specific place that brings him to an understanding of the union between the spiritual and natural. Berry furthers Thoreau's idea of "a broad margin" in life where man sits in "solitude and stillness [that were] far better than any work of the hands would have been" (83)<sup>50</sup> by including Jayber's desire to work as a pastor. His intelligent work leads to a developed and holistic understanding of relationships to other people and to Port William. But we cannot exclude Jayber's relationship to the environment from this sort of work. On the back of another of Berry's novels, *A Place on Earth*, the editor summarizes the story's protagonist as the actual town, Port William, and concludes, "[T]he rhythms of the novel are the rhythms of the land." Indeed, each of Berry's novels, and especially in *Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter*, emulates this relationship and intertwines metaphors of place and person. Therefore, firstly viewing *Jayber Crow* through the lens of ecocriticism exposes connections between the environment and God, because for Berry, even religion cannot be separated from place.

In the first chapters of *Jayber Crow*, Jayber describes his background through relating his relationship with rural land. Port William, a small town in 1937 Kentucky, presents Jayber Crow with the opportunity to begin a new life as the town's barber. The novel recounts a progression from Jayber's childhood to his departure from Port William, which suggests that both the beginning and the end of a life constitute personhood because he believes that working land

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<sup>48</sup> Wendell Berry defines community as "a locally understood interdependence of local people, local culture, local economy, and local nature" (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 120).

<sup>49</sup> Port William resembles Berry's experience living in a rural Kentucky town. Berry writes in his essay, "A Native Hill," that "what [he] had in [his] mind that made the greatest difference was the knowledge of the few square miles in Kentucky that were mine by inheritance and by birth and by the intimacy the mind makes with the place it awakens in" (7). He also notes that, there in Kentucky, he "had grown more alive and more conscious than [he] had ever been" (7). Through Berry's interaction with his particular place on land, he discovers the transformation of his mind as the "root of [his] life rather than its sublimation" (7). According to Berry, his land provided the strongest opportunity for growth and – ultimately – wholeness of being.

<sup>50</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

equates to whole living; a complete life is fragmented without work. Berry's *Citizenship Papers* discusses this principle and expands his agrarian vision to include work embedded in a real commitment to place: "To live, we must go to work. To work, we must work in a place. Work affects everything in the place where it is done: the nature of the place itself and what is naturally there, the local ecosystem and watershed, the local landscape and its productivity, the local human neighborhood, the local memory" (33). Ultimately, Jayber's character exposes Berry's idea that a person must understand where he is and where he came from to work effectively. Because this work happens firstly in a place and consequentially affects a community and the worker himself, Berry utilizes the term *husbandry* to encapsulate the connotations of a relationship. Therefore, work cannot be separated from place, and (in Berry's writing) work in a rural place encompasses Jayber's entire life.

Essential to this Christian ecocritical view is the emphasis on time itself in that both the past and the future reflect the Christian belief that the temporal *and* eternal hold importance in an earthly life. This allows for a focus on memory as an outlet for gained respect and wisdom, but memory also eminently contains the timeline of existence for a person or place. Although George B. Handley's essay, "The Metaphysics of Ecology in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*," addresses Marilynne Robinson's novel,<sup>51</sup> his explanation for memory as a literary device is analogous to the views of time in both Robinson's and Berry's novels:

Memory, reflection, and imagination, then, are no more insubstantial than the physical world itself and its law of decay and transformation; culture and nature are conflated. When this conflation occurs, the metaphysical and the physical can no longer be assumed to remain in separate spheres or at some kind of

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<sup>51</sup> See my third and fourth chapters for analyses of Robinson's *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*.

essentialized opposition. The thingness of things becomes paradoxical evidence of their place in a kind of whole cloth of existence. (512)

Physicality, or what is only transient, bonds with the undying promise of eternity to create a Christian ecocritical outlook. In other words, Berry employs this perspective in order to show the unending value of physical life. Memory allows Berry to portray the human life as “carr[ying] in [it] the presence of eternity” (249). As Jayber remembers his beginning, he recalls, “[Port William’s] history was its living memory of itself, which passed over the years like a moving beam of light. It had a beginning that it had forgotten, and would have an end that it did not yet know” (3). Jayber’s relationship to Port William uncovers its “forgotten” past and describes the beginnings of the “end.” Like Port William, Jayber Crow’s history lives through his own memory. Jayber remembers the people and places of Port William, but most importantly, he remembers the land: “The river moved me strangely, and I loved it from the day I first laid eyes on it” (18). Jayber’s love for Port William deepens as his usefulness in it extends to “gardening” and “milking and the care of the animals;” both “responsibilities” that made Jayber feel “useful” (27). This usefulness is the foundation for Jayber’s connection to the land; therefore, his work as a barber and his very personhood cannot be separated from Port William.

While Jayber is a young boy, the orphanage he spends time in is also where he yearns for Port William’s land; he is a part of the land and people even when he is absent from them. Berry explains this idea that one’s history is joined with land in his essay “A Native Hill.” He writes, “It is impossible to escape the sense that I am involved in history” (8). When Jayber “hear[s] or read[s] the word *home*, that patch of country was what [he] thought of” (36). This recollection of the land proves Jayber’s awareness of its presence and importance in his life. In high school, Jayber reads Thoreau’s *Walden* and unearths a longing for wilderness that “made [him] want to

live in a cabin in the woods . . . [a]lso I kept a list of words I especially liked *independent*, I remember, was one, and then *tintinnabulation* and *self-reliant* and *free* and *outside*” (35). This Thoreauvian connection deepens as Jayber remembers what life was like in Port William, yet Jayber’s self-reliance comes through partly in *reliance* on the land and what it offers—a chance to belong to something greater than self. After Jayber settles in Port William as an adult, he uses descriptions of the land to show his desire to be in the wilderness and rely upon its uninhibited space:

[T]emptation was not to go into the town at night but to escape into the countryside in the daytime. It was a fine, lovely part of the world—excellent, rolling farmland, with old ashes and oaks in the pastures, divided by streams with trees along the banks and patches of woods along the steeper slopes of the valley sides. (41)

But Jayber’s appreciation for Port William also includes buildings and the people at work inside them. He includes depictions of small, privately owned stores and restaurants because they represent the work of others in Port William. In essence, Jayber’s absence from Port William increases his desire to become self-reliant as a working member of its community.

Not surprisingly, Berry gives Jayber “Jonah” as a first name, showing the correlation between the biblical character’s entrance by way of sea into a new place, and Jayber’s return to Port William through a fierce storm. When Jayber sets out to return to Port William, he trudges through a flood, and then meets a fisherman, Burley Coulter, who directs him toward town with hopes of acquiring the vacant barber position. Burley takes Jayber in his boat – away from a flood – to Port William, and Jayber “would have recognized [Port William] by the look of the sky” (93). Jayber is met by Burley’s mother with hospitality and continues to introduce himself

as Jonah. Yet, later in the novel he shifts his name because he becomes a member of Port William rather than a foreigner like Jonah from the Bible. When Jayber is shown the barbershop and is left alone with it, he goes outside, “walking up and down and looking and stopping to think” (103). His conclusion to “have a garden” (103) reflects his ownership of the place and, perhaps, a reaction to the waters that he walked through to arrive at solid land. In a way, Berry uses this biblical allusion to showcase the suffering implicit in work required in belonging to a place.

Jayber’s memory of Port William grows from the history of the community and his own interactions, which directs the rest of the novel as he establishes relationships with people through his work within a localized community. John Leax, in *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, proposes that to Berry, memory is “a creative force functioning not only in the present but as a source of hope” (66). Therefore, Jayber’s memory narrative comments on what is and what is to come. Reflecting on the change within Port William from when he was a younger child, Jayber, as a grown man, notices and attributes the people’s work with the land as a means of defining a community:

And so there would always be more to remember that could no longer be seen.

This is one of the things I can tell you that I have learned: our life here is in some way marginal to our own doings, and our doings are marginal to the greater forces that are always at work. Our history is always returning to a little patch of weeds and saplings with an old chimney sticking up by itself. And I can tell you a further thing that I have learned, and here I look ahead to the resting of my case: I love the house that belonged to the chimney, holding it bright in memory, and I love the saplings and the weeds. (37-38)

His memory of this community is bound up with the environment. Thus, the Port William citizen cannot disengage from the land—it is bound up in his memory and daily living.

Jayber believes that physicality is imperative in order to better value, and perhaps comprehend, the soul because of his Christianity. Jayber's early decision to become a preacher (a brief declaration) and his decision not to pursue the ministry as a vocation affect the rest of his life in Port William.<sup>52</sup> In the midst of his recollection about his schooling to become a preacher, Jayber acknowledges the “old division of body and soul” (49). He calls this division a “rift” (49) that separates the value of a person's body from any religious devotion, but he chooses to view the body as an integral part of the soul. Throughout the story, Jayber weaves this concept of the soul and its function as a part of a physical body: “And what about our bodies that always seemed to come off so badly in every contest with our soul? Did Jesus put on our flesh so that we might despise it?” (50). He concludes that he “wasn't just a student or a going-to-be-preacher anymore. [He] was a lost traveler wandering in the woods, needing to be on my way somewhere but not knowing where” (52). Peters discusses this idea of home, calling attention to Berry, who “is reluctant to speak of heaven in his nonfiction, but he is able to give these words to Jayber because the fictive Port William is a ‘bible-based culture’ in which people remember Bible stories” (67). Perhaps Jayber's theological searching foreshadows his search for a new life in Port William—like a “lost traveler,” Jayber finds Port William and finds God.

As a result of this spirituality, Jayber's work on land promotes wholeness through the harmony of his body and mind;<sup>53</sup> Jayber understands that a person serves what is not self, and

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<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, Marilynne Robinson makes her protagonist in *Gilead* a pastor. She uses this role to extend man's work in nature and community.

<sup>53</sup> In the foreword to *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, Berry writes on the importance of identifying nature as more than a place of survival: “We are, howbeit only in part, earthly creatures. We have been give the earth to live, not on but with and from, and only on the condition that we care properly for it. We did not make it, and we know little about it. In fact, we don't, and will never, know enough about

therefore views the land as a site for learning what it means to be whole.<sup>54</sup> Jayber Crow acknowledges the church community as religious, but also as one that dichotomizes the body from the mind.<sup>55</sup> The church is one “that scorned the beauty and goodness of this world” (161), yet found value in “good crops, good gardens, good livestock and work animals and dogs; they loved flowers and the shade of trees, and laughter and music; some of them could make you a fair speech on the pleasures of a good drink of water or a patch of wild raspberries” (161). This contradiction “puzzles” Jayber, and he becomes “a man outside” (161), or one who recognizes the beauty of the world and works in it. Also, because Jayber places value on land, he is able to value work as a satisfying part of life; for Jayber, a dichotomy is not possible. Jayber views Port William as a constant source of life:

What I had come to know (by feeling only) was that the place’s true being, its presence you might say, was a sort of current, like an underground flow of water, except that they flowing was in all directions and yet did not flow away . . . To come into the presence of the place was to know life and death, and to be near in all your thoughts to laughter and to tears. (205-206)

Caring for land goes beyond mere habitual management, but extends to a moral sensibility that represents Berry’s dedication to holistic living. Between haircuts, Jayber grows a garden, “[bringing] to life the useful things Aunt Cordie had taught [him]” (129). He refers to himself as

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it to make our survival sure or our lives carefree. Our relation to our land will always remain, to a significant extent, mysterious. Therefore, our use of it must be determined more by reverence and humility, by local memory and affection, than by the knowledge that we now call ‘objective’ or ‘scientific.’ Above all, we must not damage it permanently or compromise its natural means of sustaining itself” (ix).

<sup>54</sup> Handley argues in his essay that “nature is this site of our metaphysical possibility [that] might not be exactly a modern idea. However, to suggest also that it is simultaneously the grounds of our metaphysical doubt and uncertainty means that the metaphysical probing into the nature of physical life lies at the very core of our moral challenges and possibilities” (505). Berry pursues these challenges by encompassing land as a central character in his stories.

<sup>55</sup> This claim differs from Robinson who acknowledges the church as a type of community involved in environmental and spiritual work.

a “garden fanatic” who is “not over it yet” (129). Immediately after reflecting on his gardening, Jayber connects loss as an integral part of holistic living: “I began to live in my losses” (130). Jayber’s lifelong attention to gardening epitomizes his dealing with growth, loss, and personal usefulness in a community.

Being whole cannot occur without a type of salvation, and for Jayber, this salvation comes from God and exhibits itself in his work in Port William, which requires types of suffering that Jayber discerns as necessary in wholly loving a person and a place. Concerning this suffering in discipline, Christian and writer Madeline L’Engle, in her book *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, writes that “[t]he discipline of creation, be it to paint, compose, write, is an effort toward wholeness” (70). She goes on to address the suffering tied to an artist’s wholeness and concludes that God’s grace enables the artist to move through the suffering and become whole (72). Just as Berry writes the novel, an act of creation, so Jayber’s creation is working in Port William. The novel deepens this concept according to Christian concepts from biblical principles such as loving others and living temporarily *and* eternally; therefore, Jayber’s work points toward not only God’s grace, but also Jayber’s act of creation. Interestingly, David A. Brondos, in *Redeeming the Gospel: The Christian Faith Reconsidered*, defines salvation using “synonym terms such as wholeness, well-being, shalom, and justice” (180). Although salvation comes only from God, Jayber realizes his need for salvation through his love for land and other people. Brondos also defines the means of gaining wholeness as a “behavior necessary for salvation to become a reality is above all *love*, understood as *a commitment to seeking wholeness for all*” (180). Conceivably then, Jayber’s work and community in Port William actually reflects his work for and community with God. In describing his deepening understanding of God’s love, Jayber recognizes the suffering associated



with that love:

Just as a good man would not coerce the love of his wife, God does not coerce the love of His human creatures . . . To allow that love to exist fully and freely, He must allow it not to exist at all. His love is suffering. It is our freedom and His sorrow. To love the world as much even as I could love it would be suffering also, for I would fail. And yet all the good I know is this, that a man might so love this world that it would break his heart. (254)

Just as God continues to love his children in spite of their failure to love him back, so too does Jayber love another person without her returned love. This absence of love – a suffering – only strengthens Jayber’s ability to see God’s love as the most holistic relationship.

In this way, Jayber experiences an ongoing sanctification by suffering in love for a woman named Mattie. Jayber’s relationship to Mattie shows a decentering that allows Jayber to see himself as a faultless man in need of redemption. Mattie Chatham immediately captures Jayber’s attention when he first sees her as a young schoolgirl, and after she ages and marries, Jayber’s love for her continues to grow despite her marriage to another man. Despite Mattie’s marriage, Jayber actually marries himself to Mattie, which he claims is a type of recognition that only a soul sees. Jayber believes this marriage is a “sacrifice” where he “love[d] her all her life—from the time before I ever saw her, it seems, and until she died” (247-48). This “secret” marriage, as Jayber calls it, almost mirrors his first feeling upon seeing Mattie—one of being “visible in the dark” (10). Mattie is seemingly unaware of Jayber’s loyalty and devotion to her because his love extends beyond physical affection or outward signs of loyalty. Jayber begins to love Mattie without a promise of returned love, and by doing so, undergoes a love that decenters and reflects “eternity” (249). Jayber also expresses decentering through love, saying, “If you love

somebody enough, and long enough, finally you must see yourself” (197). He also understands this love to be painful because it uncovers his “self-begotten desire” (198); therefore, he decenters himself by loving another person despite her unreturned love. Because sanctification leads to righteousness, the work Jayber completes in land corresponds to the process of setting himself apart to love Mattie.

One element central to the novel is Jayber’s attitude toward Mattie’s marriage to Troy Chatham, whom Jayber does not admire. Troy’s disrespect toward the land he belongs to emphasizes Jayber’s counteractive conception that the need for roots, community, and love are the crux of human happiness. He notes that Troy is “lonely” and connects this separation from other people and his wife to his disconnection from land: “He was lonely because he could imagine himself as anything but himself and as anywhere but where he was. His competitiveness and self-centeredness cut him off from any thought of shared life” (194). Jayber describes him as “aloof” with “zeal for newfangledness” (278). Troy’s loneliness encompasses the isolation associated with a person’s inability to love his land and community.

Of course, Berry’s idea of farming steps away from industrialization that removes roots, leading a farmer to value the slow work of his and others’ hands as the means toward production. As time passes in Port William, Jayber addresses the incorporation of machinery in farming that eliminates the work of a community: “You couldn’t see, back then, that this process would build up and go ever faster, until finally it would ravel out the entire old fabric of family work and exchanges of work among neighbors. The new way of farming was a way of dependence, not on land and creatures and neighbors but on machines and fuel and chemicals” (183). But it is through Troy’s character that Berry creates a contrast to Jayber,<sup>56</sup> who places significance on the

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<sup>56</sup> This is, perhaps, not a complete contrast because Jayber does not own a farm, but only gardens.

process of gardening and community rather than on machines. Toward the end of the novel, Jayber discusses the new interstate, which, like Troy Chatham's idea of farming, leads to a division between Port William and the land:

By that time the interstate highway was boring its way into our valley and across it and out again on the other side. Everything it came to looked smaller than it had looked before. Whatever it came to that was in its way, it destroyed. It was a great stroke of pure geometry cut through the country maybe five miles down the river from Port William—close enough, that, now when the town is quiet, it can hear the sound of more traffic in a few minutes than ever went through it in a month.  
(281)

Like Troy, his son Jimmy also struggles to love Port William. His poor relationship with his father prompts his drunkenness and rebellion, and shapes Jimmy into a man only interested in leaving (or escaping) Port William. Both Troy and Jimmy need roots, but their resistance to Port William and the value of working on its land eliminates any chance for real connection to other people. To Troy, Port William “serve[ed] and enlarge[d] him” (182), while Jayber views a farmer as a “creature and belonging” to the farm itself (182). So it is that a person's work in the land reflects his or her ability to be in community with others, and, as Jayber suggests, to love one's neighbor and enemy (287). Jayber views one's work in land as a participant rather than as an overseer, which also reflects a person's ability to love his or her family and neighbor. Jayber's grudge against Troy seems personal if only because it relies upon Jayber's love for his “wife,” but in reality, the grudge also symbolizes Jayber's attitude toward obstructions of peaceful and loving work in land, community, and family.

Berry believes that the opposite of this work is war because it destroys the physical health

of land and the spiritual health of a community, leading to an adverse effect on man's work in nature.<sup>57</sup> So Jayber's aversion to technology stems from Berry's anti-war mindset;<sup>58</sup> therefore, his concept of life before the war motivates his anti-industrialist mindset after the war.<sup>59</sup> For Berry, war destroys human lives and agriculture—the life of the land. Because war creates industrialism (in this case the creation of weapons), Jayber comments on the loss of healthy productivity in farming:

It is littered with wastelands, landfills, and, most shameful and fearful of all, dumps, industrial sites, and whole landscapes made dangerous virtually forever by radioactive waste. An immense part of this damage has been done in the years after World War II, when the machinery and chemicals of industrial warfare were turned upon the land—to make production “efficient” by the most doubtful standards and to replace the people of the land economies. (189)

He continues this thought by calling attention to the “dualism” also relevant to the outcome of war. Berry notes that the “division” between “heaven and earth, too prominent among the religious, [has] been damaging both to people and to the world,” yet the scientists who arguably “value highly the material world, have instead held it in contempt and damaged it more than anybody” (189). Residents of Port William who go to war also perceive it as dualistic—a split between land and people, and, therefore, also fractured wholeness. In *Jayber Crow*, Berry uses Jayber's developing sense of God's love to show the damaging causes and effects of war. Upon

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<sup>57</sup> Berry connects war with industrialism and destruction of human and natural life. “The Whole Horse” offers a distinction between the two: “whereas industrialism is a way of thought based on monetary capital and technology, agrarianism is a way of thought based on land” (239).

<sup>58</sup> Bill Kauffman, in Peters' work, addresses Berry's use of both World Wars I and II in his chapter, “Wendell Berry on War and Peace.” He writes, “In Berry's fiction, the Second World War is a watershed in so many ways: it rends, it depopulates, it mechanizes, it destroys” (20). In this chapter, Kauffman references Berry's speech against the war in Vietnam where he labels himself a pacifist because no war promotes unity and peace in place (24).

<sup>59</sup> The “war” refers to World War II—the war that Berry lived through and uses in his Port William novels.

reflection, Jayber realizes that, ultimately, the war would ravish Port William, leaving it stripped of a community's ability "to love one another" (142). He believes that "[t]he thought of loving your enemies is opposite to war. You don't have to *do* it; you don't *have* to love one another. All you have to do is keep the thought in mind and Port William becomes visible, and you see its faces and know what it has to lose" (142). Hence, the closeness Jayber feels to Port William and its health determines his own wholeness.

Even Jayber's admittance of God's sacrifice and suffering for mankind connects to his understanding of Port William and his necessary suffering in it. Jayber views God as "compassionate" because he "put on mortal flesh" and "suffer[ed]" people's "thoughts" and "death" (252). For this reason he associates Port William's life as a community under (perhaps surrendered to) God's act of love:

And I could imagine a Father who is yet like a mother hen spreading her wings before the storm or in the dusk before the dark night for the little ones of Port William to come in under . . . I could imagine God looking down upon it, its lives living by His spirit, breathing by His breath, knowing by His light, but each life living also (inescapably) by its own will—His own body given to be broken.  
(252)

Like Christ, Jayber experiences a degree of brokenness and then loneliness because loving another person (or a community) requires a self-decentering. This experience of brokenness is not only spiritual, but also physical. Jayber prays as if "lying awake at night, afraid, with your head under the cover, hearing only the beating of your own heart. It is like a bird that has blundered down the flue and is caught indoors and flutters at the windowpanes" (253). His prayer utilizes the image of a bird to communicate the interrelatedness between man and nature

in a state of brokenness.

That man's work in relationships such as marriage and community epitomizes Jayber's relationship to nature *and* God situates Berry's writing as ecocritical and religious. Identifying the novel as merely pastoral<sup>60</sup> withholds the constructive work that man can and should do in nature as a redemptive act toward wholeness—Berry grants (or proposes) solutions to problems involving land and self. While *Jayber Crow* does present a traditional view of family and land, the modern time period creates a new sense of landscape that not only contrasts urban living, but also establishes that a person's relationship with and in nature comments on (and at times reflects) his or her relationship with God.

### *Hannah Coulter*

Berry's novel *Hannah Coulter* also concentrates on a person's work in nature as holistic. Hannah's perspective of the war, farming, and marriage is separate from Jayber's in that Hannah marries and raises children, experiences firsthand the grief of war as her first husband, Virgil, dies in the war and her second husband Nathan carries its deep effects. Therefore, in *Hannah Coulter*, Berry examines Port William through a distinctly female perspective and uses Hannah Coulter's first widowhood, second marriage, and then second widowhood to uncover issues or themes such as grief and suffering. These themes are interrelated to the essential work of a farming life—farming represents holistic work that presents avenues for redemption and satisfaction that, as Terry Eagleton terms it, “embodi[es] a creative wholeness which ha[s] been historically lost”; therefore, by reading Berry, one can “regain vital touch with the roots of one's own being” (32). Hannah's memory of her second husband, Nathan, and their work in Port William as farmers and marriage partners also confirms Berry's religious ecocriticism that

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<sup>60</sup> Pastoral in the sense that Jayber's views are strongly romantic: his love for Mattie, dedication to Port William, and extensive description of the landscapes.

appeals to a traditional way of life steeped in theology. Again, Hicks' essay points us toward Berry's most significant traditional agrarian perspective that stems from Thomas Jefferson's agrarian thought: land and literature (248). *The Fate of Family Farming: Variations on an American Idea* by Ronald Jager acknowledges Jefferson as "the founder of agrarian tradition in America," as one who perpetuated the idea that "[f]or all agrarians, farming is *the* foundational and inspirational discipline, *the* sustaining activity for life and for democratic society" (83). Berry's *Hannah Coulter* follows this Jeffersonian agrarianism by putting down words instead of seeds, and by disciplining the imagination like a farmer who places "poems and paragraphs [as] cultivated fields" (83). Therefore, Hannah Coulter cultivates whole living in Port William through her work in marriage and in land.

In order to wholly live, Hannah recognizes that work and "hope" have everything to do with one another (5), but it is her marriage that imbues the positive presence of commonplace work in life because, according to Berry, "To try to heal the body alone is to collaborate in the destruction of the body" (*Unsettling* 103). Although she was raised in Port William, Hannah's tie to the land happens when she marries Nathan Coulter, a hard worker dedicated to maintaining a farm. In this way, Berry writes about marriage and land, using both as metaphors for the struggles and love discovered in both relationships. Even Hannah's love for Nathan seems as strong as her love for Port William because "their love for each other would be a way of loving their place" (67-68). Nathan's human desire for Hannah is likened to nature as a "warm rain" that, like actual rain, nourishes and foreshadows the growth of love and crops through difficult work.

Hannah's work in making a home reveals the difficulty of loving another person; it corresponds to the difficulty in healing from loss. Before she marries Nathan Coulter, Hannah

marries Virgil Feltner, and they dream of building a home on a piece of land. Before Virgil leaves for active duty, Hannah talks of marriage and work almost synonymously, calling attention to its unifying and holistic presence in a person's life. She remarks that "[t]here is no "better place" than this, not in *this* world. And it is by the place we've got, and our love for it and our keeping of it, that this world is joined to Heaven" (83). However, World War II eliminates the possibility of a place and marriage for Virgil and Hannah, bringing suffering to Hannah through grief. Just as war is destructive in *Jayber Crow*, it strips life in *Hannah Coulter*. Nonetheless, Hannah's marriage to Nathan constitutes a remaking of what was destroyed. Their nurturing of land and one another furthers Berry's argument for work as the means toward a holistic living. Hannah describes their marriage as a "meeting prepared in the long day, in the work of years, in the keeping of faith, in kindness" (110). The work in marriage, like work in land, requires hope and heals wounds.

Rather than employ aspects of feminism in a novel centered on a woman's life, Berry continues his Christian agrarian framework, placing emphasis on a wife's role as a member of a home in order to illuminate the necessary yet challenging work to be done by humanity in nature. Berry writes in *The Unsettling of America* that "[i]n modern marriage, then, what was once a difference of work became a division of work. And in this division the household was destroyed as a practical bond between husband and wife" (115). He also concludes that a "disintegration of marriage . . . completes the disintegration of community" (118). Hannah Coulter's cultivation of housewifery comes by hard work mainly accomplished through traditional (feminine) domestic duty—raising children, supporting her husband, and aiding in the work of the land. She writes about her desire to make a clean home, which is work that develops the culture of their life in a particular place: "I'll never forget the feeling it gave me just to make this house clean, to fill it



with fresh air and the good smell of soapy water, to wash the dingy windows and see the rooms fill with light, to get here one morning and find that Nathan had mowed the yard, sparing the day lilies and the rambler rose” (77). This appreciation for simplistic living in the home also correlates to a post World-War II domesticity that integrated new technology to increase efficiency and lessen a workload. However, according to Ronald R. Kline, author of “Ideology and Social Surveys: Reinterpreting the Effects of ‘Laborsaving’ Technology on American Farm Women,” the rise of machines in the home, such as “coal stoves, water pumps, and [the] vacuum” actually “shifted [the purpose of work] from production to consumption” (356). Despite this shift, Hannah remains faithful to the agrarian mindset where productivity serves as most valuable. Berry, in his essay “Conservationist and Agrarian,” describes agrarianism (specifically farming life) as a life suitable for a person who chooses to work in land because he or she belongs to it, or one where a person “love[s] to watch and nurture the growth of plants. They love to live in the presence of animals. They love to work outdoors. They love the weather, maybe even when it is making them miserable. They love to live where they work and to work where they live” (75). Thus, land cultivates a woman’s life in the same ways that it cultivates a man’s life; it presents opportunities for loyalty and the fostering of life.

Hannah Coulter loves her work because she loves Port William and her husband; she characterizes a femininity that dually works with masculinity. Berry, in his famous essay “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” discusses modern marriage by calling attention to the consumptive attitude that fractures marriage rather than a holistic attitude that recognizes marriage as productive. He writes that “it is equally regrettable that all of the feminist attacks on [his] essay implicitly deny the validity of two decent and probably necessary possibilities: marriage as a state of mutual help, and the household as an economy” (67). Viewing marriage as

“mutual” and as an “economy” supports the housekeeping Hannah routinely completes through its placement of her work in support of Nathan’s farming and the love of nurturing land (in this case, Hannah and Nathan’s farm). While Hannah works almost completely indoors, it is her love of the outdoors and for Nathan that compels her to work. So it is that Hannah decenters herself in order to value land and others as mutually valuable. Therefore, Hannah’s wholeness evidences itself in her very role as wife, mother, and worker—she works because she loves her land and husband.

In the same vein, fertility plays a dominant role in the novel as a metaphor of nature’s offering to mankind, making Hannah’s work in nature a stewardship of her family. Hannah speaks of the home that she and Nathan created as her life, and hopes that the legacy of her love continues with her children: “We lived here by our work. Our life and our work were not the same thing maybe, but they were close. The children would grow up knowing how to work, and would have the satisfaction of knowing they were useful” (89). Not only does work make one useful, but for Hannah, work positively changes her family’s life. Their work “improved” the farm and “gave [them] back [their] life” (89). Because “God rested” on Sunday, the family experiences a “free[dom] of work” (89). But life requires work, and so Hannah and Nathan continue to love their children and work on their land in order to know their place.

By valuing her home as a site of love and growth, Hannah continues teaching the practice of housewifery and husbandry to her children, hoping for another generation of workers dedicated to becoming whole through their understanding of their relationship with land. Yet, her children choose to make their living completing other tasks; in their failing to return to the land, to Port William, they forgo the connection between work and wholeness—they do not view the consciousness of the environment as Hannah and Nathan hoped. Discussing her son Caleb’s

decision to become a professor of agriculture rather than a farmer, Hannah writes, “But as I know, and as he knows in his own heart and thoughts, Caleb is incomplete. He didn’t love farming enough to be a farmer, much as he loved it, but he loved it too much to be entirely happy doing anything else. He is disappointed with himself” (131). The loss of relationship with nature causes Caleb’s inability to be whole. Her recognition of Caleb’s unhappiness testifies to the power of place in a person’s life; he cannot truly be whole without working in land. Hannah’s inclusion of her children’s approach to farming illustrates Berry’s approach to the environment

Throughout *Hannah Coulter*, Hannah associates Port William with her marriage, motherhood, and the entire Port William community. When the land suffers from war and destruction, so too do the people living on it. Hannah defines this relationship with land by first defining her relationship with her husband Nathan: “Our story is the story of our place: how we married and came here, moved into this old house and made it livable again while we lived in it” (5). Just as Jayber Crow experiences wholeness as he lives life in Port William, so Hannah Coulter lives holistically, concentrating on her relationship to land and other people. This emphasis on her earthly life also illuminates her desire for an eternal one. And like Jayber, Hannah knows the suffering in love and the membership required of her in a place such as Port William.

A person’s relationship with land signifies his or her relationship with others and with God. *Jayber Crow* and *Hannah Coulter* comment on Berry’s ecocritical mindset because they choose work in land as a means of understanding life. Although other relationships parallel a character’s struggle or decision to love another person, the work done in nature proves the most encompassing. Berry’s Christian and agrarian concepts, in these novels, attempt to prove the interrelatedness between work in nature and the work of self—both experience the process of life

that ends either in wholeness or in fragmentation, or as Berry might suggest, in life or death.

## Chapter Three

## A Vagabond in Nature

Marilynne Robinson's Ecocritical and Religious Impermanency in *Housekeeping*

“So I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes. I think the concept of transcendence is based on a misreading of creation. With all respect to heaven, the scene of miracle is here, among us.”

- Marilynne Robinson, “Wilderness”

At the beginning of Marilynne Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*, we are introduced to the narrator Ruth Stone who describes her past leading to the present in a Mid-West town called Fingerbone. The novel depicts a female perspective of a town using only female characters.<sup>61</sup> Ruth's grandfather died in a train accident where the train left its tracks and fell into the town's lake, leaving Ruth's grandmother alone to raise her two granddaughters (8). After her death, a sequence of women in the family cares for the sisters. The novel's lack of maleness promotes Ruth as a strong female protagonist who is intent on discovering something outside or beyond Fingerbone. Ruth and her sister Lucille's father is absent from their lives, and their mother committed suicide by driving her car off a cliff into the same lake where her father rests, leaving Ruth and Lucille intentionally motherless. Unsurprisingly, Ruth's first recollection of Fingerbone depicts the fatal train accident over the lake that permanently possesses both the train and travelers in its dark icy waters and occupies the memory of her mother. Thus, the lake becomes a central part of Fingerbone's events, centering the novel's focus on nature as an unruly, life-giving, and life-taking force.<sup>62</sup> Ruth, describing the lake's powerful and almost

<sup>61</sup> The sheriff of the town is the only male to have dialogue in the novel.

<sup>62</sup> In her article, “The Novel As Extended Metaphor,” Ellen Y. Siegelman discusses the importance of voice in Robinson's novel and her use of metaphor through psychological analysis. Most importantly, Siegelman quotes Gaston Bachelard in *Water and Dreams*, providing a helpful foundation for examination of the lake as the source for action in the novel: “Water is truly the transitory element. It is the essential, ontological metamorphosis

furtive presence, observes, “what exhales from the furrows but that same, sharp, watery smell. The wind is watery, and all the pumps and creeks and ditches smell of water unalloyed by any other element. At the foundation is the old lake, which is smothered and nameless and altogether black” (9). Despite the lake’s threatening presence as a type of sanctuary because of the lifeless bodies at rest in it, Ruth’s grandmother continues to live in Fingerbone until she dies. However, Ruth eventually leaves her house with her new guardian, Aunt Sylvie, and forsakes Fingerbone *because* of the work of her memory represented by the lake as the physical embodiment of Ruth’s imagination.

An applicable ecocritical reading of the novel develops Ruth’s self-discovery parallel to the lake’s presence as the representational absence of her mother, but more importantly, it is the intermediary space between the past and present that Ruth cannot reconcile. When describing the town and its surroundings, Ruth first mentions the family house; however, she reminds the reader that “[t]he terrain . . . once belonged to the lake. It seems there was a time when the dimensions of things modified themselves, leaving a number of puzzling margins, as between the mountains as they must have been and the mountains as they are now, or between the lake as it once was and the lake as it is now” (4-5). Thus, we can read nature as a source for memory, and specially the lake as a metaphor for Ruth’s memory.

The story as memory narrative connects Robinson’s novel to Berry’s *Hannah Coulter* through its singular female voice, recalling a specific place and remembrance of deceased family through the narrator’s past and present relationship to that place; however, *Housekeeping* analyzes nature as a subject parallel to God’s redemption of man rather than as a setting for

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between fire and earth. A being dedicated to water is a being in flux. He dies every minute; something of his substance is constantly falling away . . . Water always flows, always falls, always ends in horizontal death . . . [F]or the materializing imagination, death associated with water is more dream-like than death associated with earth: the pain of water is infinite” (39).

personal and communal work.<sup>63</sup> The lake's existence mirrors both points in time, and Robinson articulates a work of memory that Ruth cannot escape:

One cannot cup one's hand and drink from the rim of any lake without remembering that mothers have drowned in it . . . [w]ell, all that was purged away, and nothing is left of it after so many years but a certain pungency and savor in the water, and in the breath of creeks and lakes, which, however sad and wild, are clearly human. I cannot taste a cup of water but I recall that the eye of the lake is my grandfather's, and that the lake's heavy, blind, encumbering waters composed my mother's limbs . . . Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it. God Himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made when we fell, or so the story goes. And while He was on earth He mended families. (193-94)

While this passage appears at the end of the novel, it articulates the power of memory over Ruth and connects her relationship to nature (Fingerbone's lake) with her view of God, making valid the novel's ecocritical and religious framework.

This concept of memory and perception of nature connects to Robinson's religious thought and interaction with theologian, John Calvin; therefore, considering Calvin's view of creation and God seems relevant to this analysis. Charles Partee examines Calvin's philosophies in *The Theology of John Calvin* and notes that "[a]ccording to Calvin, we cannot know God's essential reality; we can only know God's revelation to us" (51). His historical context is also important to Calvin's view of the relationship between creation and man: "The scientific

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<sup>63</sup> Here, Robinson's Calvinist understanding defines sovereignty. Charles Partee's authoritative work, *The Theology of John Calvin*, asserts, "If divine sovereignty is overemphasized, the result is complete resignation. If human freedom is overemphasized, the result is brazen confidence or abject fear" (131). According to John Piper in *Suffering and Sovereignty of God*, God's sovereignty means "everything else that has any value has it by connection to God" (17). God inhabits man's suffering only through grace, restoring fragmented life and making it whole. Thus, nature, for Robinson, represents a potential danger for man. Later in this chapter I will discuss the implications of this view within the novel.

exploitation of nature was just beginning in Calvin's time, and in common with most theologians, Calvin assumed that nature existed chiefly for the benefit of mankind. Men and women were an exceptional part of the natural world, and the emphasis was on the word 'exceptional' rather than on 'part'" (78). However, Robinson's account of a girl learning to define self through perceiving life through nature widens her sense of God and situates her as participant in the natural world.<sup>64</sup> This distinction uncovers Ruth's ability to recognize something greater than self that is essentially real.

Robinson also uses the lake as a metaphor for loss, embodying Ruth's struggle to discover self. According to Henry David Thoreau's transcendental perspective in *Walden*, "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is the earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature" (139). This transcendental attitude toward nature influences Robinson's Christianized context by furthering human action in nature as a means of discovering personhood.<sup>65</sup> Essentially, Ruth's confrontation with memory is merely an in-depth analysis of self. In an interview with Thomas Gardner from his work *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson*,<sup>66</sup> Robinson connects Ruth's memory to her shaping of reality:

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<sup>64</sup> Thomas Gardner's essay on Robinson that appears in *Christianity Today* (February 2010) supports this point. I later use Gardner's book for a deeper analysis of Robinson's metaphors. Much more could be addressed on Robinson's relationship with Calvin's theology; however, this chapter stresses the primary points of Calvin's belief in God's sovereignty and man's place within that reality as a basis for interpreting Robinson's narrative.

<sup>65</sup> Robinson, in her interview, remarks on her view of the Bible's relationship to creation: "The Old Testament is an entire, complex literature which developed over a thousand years—a conservative estimate. It is dedicated to the proposition that human life and human history have very high meaning—that they are the center and object of creation—and to the proposition that the cataclysmic world and obstreperous humankind are essentially holy and good. So it is a very this-worldly text in which metaphysically fascinated attention is brought to bear on sunlight and childbearing and warfare and greed and love and despair. There is really nothing else like it. All its great beauty is earned by the directness with which it confronts, and laments, and celebrates the world as it is. For me, it has the religious authority it claims, and at the same time I consider it quintessentially human. For me this involves no contradiction" (183).

<sup>66</sup> See Gardner's book for a comprehensive analysis of Dickinson's influence on Robinson's *Housekeeping*.



Well, Ruth, as I understand her, has lost many things and she in effect creates a complete reality out of the things she's lost. Either on the one hand by memory or on the other by imagination. She knows that in a sense what she's saying is true because she knows her grandmother, but at the same time she knows it's not true. She's making reality. (59-60)

Ruth experiences a meeting with nature, or what is other, and constructs her own reality—a perception not only of herself, but also of God. Robinson further comments that a necessary suffering exists in this meeting between self and other, which is a divine experience because man is made in the image of God:<sup>67</sup>

[B]eing thrown back on some essential being of her soul toward which she is in fact reverent . . . [t]he difference between what you perceive as utterly other and yourself is a sense of proportion, among other things. This is something again that runs all through mysticism and also Calvinism—the sense that the smallness of the self is a celebration of the utter vastness of the other . . . [i]t's a feeling of discomfort, because what you're doing when you have that feeling is apprehending a certain grandeur. (57)<sup>68</sup>

However, this revelatory transaction with nature only instigates an awareness of God. In order for Ruth to perceive correctly, she must experience the vastness in nature.

Robinson's depiction of the West and its wilderness comes from her own experience living in Idaho, showing a personal love for nature that seeps through her narrative. In an issue of *Contemporary Literature*, Robinson notes that her experience growing up in Idaho, an American

<sup>67</sup> I address Wendell Berry's philosophy of humanity as God's image later in the chapter.

<sup>68</sup> Gardner's essay and interview provide foundational support for my defining Ruth as the self and nature as the other. While Gardner's study proves the links between Robinson's novel and Emily Dickinson's poetry, his attention toward her novel's theistic qualities and "[s]tripping down to the essence of perception" (55) proves helpful.

and Western experience, influenced her depiction of the home and family in *Housekeeping*; she calls her childhood “matriarchal,” which suggests that motherhood shapes the entirety of the novel, a theme Martha Ravits explores through her investigation of Ruth and Sylvie’s relationship in her essay, “Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*.” Ravits posits that Ruth’s attitude toward the home is also her attitude toward a “social convention” (653). This perspective shapes her analysis of the woods as a site for self-identification because of a loss of the mother. For Ravits, absence of motherhood affects landscape, relationships, and Robinson’s American fiction revision (654). While this theme uncovers meaning, my focus on nature does not revolve around or arise only because of motherhood; rather, the lack of *working* in nature, or the natural landscape, is a pervasion of undergoing a complete work of wholeness<sup>69</sup> for the sake of experience. Ravits expounds on the idea that nature does provide an avenue of “solace”; however, she attributes Ruth’s “solitude with nature” as an “empowering attribute of self-reliance [that] can be claimed by female as well as male protagonists” (654). While self-reliance could be associated with wholeness through work, Ravits focuses on the woods as a site for “regeneration” that “sooth[es] her mother-craving” (659). Again, the reason for Ruth’s going into the woods is for wholeness attained by “the subjectivity in the face of isolation” (659). Unlike Lucille’s negative responsiveness to nature, Ruth “went into the woods for the woods’ own sake, while, increasingly, Lucille seemed to be enduring a banishment there” (99). Therefore, Ruth’s singular self gains some sense of momentary healing from the abandonment of her mother only in nature where she is forced outside the bounds of this memory. Ruth’s imagination roams from reality through the grandness

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<sup>69</sup> Berry’s “Imagination in Place” defines *wholeness* in terms of work: “But works of imagination come of an impulse to transcend the limits of experience or provable knowledge in order to make a thing that is whole. No human work can become whole by including everything, but it can become whole in another way: by accepting its formal limits and then answering within those limits all the questions it raises” (3).

of nature, and by this means she also abandons prospects of physical and communal work.<sup>70</sup>

Rather than remain in the struggle of domesticity, or the embodiment of the pain in reinforcing accurate memory, Ruth binds herself to her Aunt, craving not only a mother figure, but also a community that accepts an identical suffering of loss.

Her treatment of nature transposes Berry's belief that domesticity thrives in a working relationship with nature because Ruth's commitment to place does not recognize a membership with Fingerbone; rather, she returns to her fragmented memories as a source of incomplete wholeness. In the same vein, she lives by their fragmentary frame rather than the crooked foundation of the house; the domestic becomes inadequate because of her memories. Berry, in "Writer and Region," acknowledges the centering presence of person in a domestic place that forms all other relationships – even with the environment – in literature: "To assume that the context of literature is 'the literary world' is, I believe, simply wrong. That its real habitat is the household and the community—that it can and does affect, even in practical ways, the life of place—may not be recognized by most theorists and critics for a while yet" (84). Robinson's novel agrees with Berry's acknowledgment of literature's development of place in her division of house and woods. At the beginning of the novel, Ruth remembers what her grandmother advises her regarding the sisters' inheritance of the home: "'Sell the orchards,' she would say, looking grave and wise, 'but keep the house. So long as you look after your health, and own the roof above your head, you're as safe as anyone can be'" (27). This devotion to Fingerbone and the family's house represents the loyalty present in domesticity:

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<sup>70</sup> Although I define *work* in my first chapter and discuss its presence in Berry's fiction, it is necessary to provide a definition for this chapter and context. From his essay, "Writer and Region," Berry notes that "[t]he test of imagination, ultimately, is not the territory of art or the territory of the mind, but the territory underfoot as well. Memory, for instance, must be a pattern upon the actual country, not a cluster of relics in a museum or a written history" (84). Continuing this concept of work, Berry also recognizes that the solitary interaction with landscape is – almost- invalid: "Alone, the invisible landscape becomes false, sentimental, and useless, just as the visible landscape, alone, becomes a strange land, threatening to humans and vulnerable to human abuse" (84).

She had lived her whole life in Fingerbone. And though she never spoke of it, and no doubt seldom thought of it, she was a religious woman. That is to say that she conceived of life as a road down which one traveled, an easy enough road through a broad country, and that one's destination was there from the very beginning, a measured distance away, standing in the ordinary light like some plain house where one went in and was greeted by respectable people and was shown to a room where everything one had ever lost or put aside was gathered together, waiting. (10)

Living only by memory (an extension of the past) by waiting for something, as opposed to actively working in the present, characterizes the entire novel. We can identify this division as the difference between living in the wild versus the domestic without any connection.<sup>71</sup> Because of Ruth's mother's suicide, Ruth's feelings of abandonment merge with her new relationship with Sylvie who reinterprets a mother's role as nurturer and provider.<sup>72</sup> Ruth recalls, "Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it" (53). The prevailing theme of domesticity illustrates a seemingly picturesque view of nature's relationship to civilization as familial, yet Robinson actually collapses Ruth's existence in the house for finding truth in nature's wildness, mirroring Ruth's displacement in nature's unrestrictive custody.<sup>73</sup> By unraveling actual and active domesticity, Ruth, along with her Aunt Sylvie, disregards any commitment to Fingerbone, and also commitment to her sister Lucille. Therefore, it is Ruth's familiarity with death, through memory, that transforms her present as she absorbs the animating

<sup>71</sup> Berry, Wendell, *Standing by Words* (Berkeley, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003) 193-209.

<sup>72</sup> Ravits explores, in detail, the connection between motherhood and abandonment as a central part of Robinson's extension of the American hero. She also explores the biblical analogy of Ruth and Naomi, suggesting that Sylvie represents Ruth's "mother-substitute" (652). I address her essay and this connection later.

<sup>73</sup> Despite her apparent decisiveness to follow Sylvie, Ruth's resistance to domesticity and family is an unconscious desire to name what is absent from that site of familiarity.

and displacing presence of her Aunt.<sup>74</sup>

The novel enhances Berry's idea that commitment to land leads one to wholeness, but it alters Berry's model by fixating on the absence of person in place, thereby showing the supremacy of nature, not God, as a controller of human movement and emotion. In spite of this removal (or reversal), Robinson's perspective of God's sovereignty only develops Ruth's attempt to discover herself. Robinson discusses the correlation between God and self in her interview with Gardener: "For [Jesus] the insufficiency of people is the great gift of God's grace. A wonderful thing goes on despite us, really. But you don't overcome yourself in order to attain a vision of God; you actually become incredibly aware of yourself" (Gardner 58). In making Ruth absent from work, Robinson posits a negative communal relationship between place and self that cannot cause wholeness—it only transmits confusion and displacement, suggesting that rootedness and work in land benefits humanity only by removing all other community.

Ruth and Sylvie's absent love for Fingerbone stems from a desire to live unhindered by memory and access absolute freedom through memory in an ephemeral reality. Their misplaced love toward memory motivates them to resist an allegedly controlled community and take refuge from humanity in the woods, which is in contrast to Berry's characters that work in land and community by appreciating the limitlessness in nature.<sup>75</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain in *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* writes of Robinson's understanding that "pure thought is not greater than love" (234), and "[i]t follows that God's love and mortal love are not so separate" (236). Thus, for Robinson, love cannot separate what thought undoes, and so her characters interact with one another through thought and act upon love in nature. Though Robinson wrote *Housekeeping* with no clear preconceived plot, her ideas stem from a passion for eighteenth century American

<sup>74</sup> Ruth also characterizes their Aunt as "unstable" (83).

<sup>75</sup> Robinson addresses substantiality in her interview with Gardener.

writers, creating the novel's holistic vision of humanity's struggle in modern America. Elshtain notes the power of suffering as type of redemptive work: "What should continually amaze us is that many lives we imagine as wretched are, in fact, not: people find purpose and even joy in the midst of extraordinary difficulty and suffering. That is not all they find, of course, but we can see redemptive moments when we would least expect them" (237). *Housekeeping* characterizes an undoing of suffering and the past; it becomes a story that views human suffering through memories and places them in context of God's redemption available only through discovery in nature.

This struggle is ecocritical in its attempt to be in relationship with nature by abiding in it. A house and the art of maintaining it take the place of Berry's concept of husbandry, which results in creating an extremist who abandons all connection to community and work for the unpredictability of undisciplined living. Ruth and Sylvie are not committed to work in the home; instead, Robinson places them in a particular place with only a work of memory, showing the repercussions of modern art in what Joan Kirkby's article, "Is There Life After Art? The Metaphysics of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*," identifies as a total surrender to wilderness.<sup>76</sup> Kirkby comments, "in Robinson's novel, nature is a living presence which humans find menacing" (93). Connecting this presence with spirituality, John Gatta addresses the "ecospirituality" within the novel, and calls attention to the paradox of nature: "[The ecospirituality] centers, then, on a vision of "nature" as holy and terrifying abyss" (224). Ruth experiences nature as an abyss or gulf between the ability to know life and death for a transitory wholeness activated by her dependency on something outside of herself. However, Ruth and Sylvie do not despise nature, but fear it—an extremism that situates man (and in this case,

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<sup>76</sup> In her article, Kirkby uses Emerson's definition of art as "a mixture of man's will with nature" (91). Kirkby also references Thoreau's belief that one should leave the confines of a house for the expansiveness of nature (93).

woman) as nature's equal in the wildness of life. For Robinson, "extending the domestic to the environment as a whole and abandoning the traditional sphere of domesticity, erasing the exclusions" (Kirkby 84) eradicates the possibility for work in a community. Hence, at the end of the novel her characters disappear from society and enter into wilderness. This abandonment of possible community becomes religious because Ruth is unwilling to confront the past by suffering its effects in daily living. In other words, becoming whole means undergoing a total healing that incorporates suffering.

A specific extended metaphor in *Housekeeping* is the house as a defined place in nature as permanent art that contrasts with the unyielding and transitory wilderness. This is a binary between healing and escapism. The eventual break from the house uncovers Ruth's desire to escape totally from any limitations only by going into nature. Rather than remain in the house, Ruth desires to isolate herself in a transitory place, avoiding all chance for tangible improvement. After visiting a drugstore, Lucille tells Ruth not to return home because it is "Sylvie's house now . . . [w]e have to *improve* ourselves" (123). Ruth's response to Lucille's "nudging, pushing, coaxing" is to "pull [herself] into some seemly shape and slip across the wide frontiers into that other world, where it seemed to me then I could never wish to go. For it seemed to me that nothing I had lost, or might lose, could be found there, or, to put it another way, it seemed that something I had lost might be found in Sylvie's house" (124). This break from the actual frontier of the West also relates to Ruth's disassociation from the Fingerbone community.

The lake as a subject that mirrors nature affects this severing from community by saturating the house with reminders of the past. After a massive flood that devastates the entire town excepting her house, Ruth writes, "The restoration of the town was an exemplary community effort in which we had no part . . . [t]hat we were self-sufficient, our house reminded

us always” (74). The house’s unique design and independence from physical damage from the flood signifies Ruth and Sylvie’s separation from the community, allowing them to construct their relationship as a means of coping with past tragedy. Even though Ruth believes the house may be sufficient, it does not provide real sustenance and hope for wholeness. Ruth and Sylvie leave the confining walls that lock in suffering for the openness of nature; the house limits while nature unbinds limitations. Using nature in this way prescribes a radical decentering that leaves a person with the opportunity for wholeness in a new place, yet Ruth and Sylvie venture too far and find otherness to be nothingness. This paradoxical relationship between land and the characters perpetuates the metaphysical theme in the novel.

This transcendental understanding coupled with Robinson’s view of wilderness bares her novel of its layers of deep religious and environmental metaphors.<sup>77</sup> In an interview with Sarah Anne Johnson, Robinson terms these as extended metaphors, and attributes them to Emerson:

I share the Emersonian view that language is metaphorical in its origins and its fundamental character. The fossil poetry of single words is generally lost to familiarity, and we forget the potency of syntax, its amazing ability to capture meaning. Extended metaphors have syntax at a larger scale, and they exploit the fact that the mind moves through the likenesses of things. (183)

According to this definition, *Housekeeping*’s ecocritical metaphors also describe Ruth’s problems with memory. This “likeness” appears in Ruth’s interaction with nature. Ruth hides in nature, pursuing what is imaginative in memory without seeking wholeness through working in nature. But her willingness, evident in her remembering, actually divorces her capacity to holistically engage her personhood. In *The Death of Adam*, Robinson defines wilderness as “a

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<sup>77</sup> I use the term, *religious*, to summarize, or complete, a holistic understanding of Robinson’s Christianity. By no means is this essay an attempt to uncover each seeming religious metaphor or theme. Rather, my analysis focuses on the ecocritical metaphors that translate into a critique of her view in *Housekeeping* of work in nature.



condition of being in the natural world” (247) in order to claim that environmental problems are human ones, specifically calling attention to England and their plutonium waste.<sup>78</sup> She concludes that “[h]umankind has no enemy but itself, and it is broken and starved and poisoned and harried very nearly to death” (249). Humanity is, ultimately, within a biblical conclusion sinful and corrupts what surrounds it: “The whole human disaster resides in the fact that, as individuals, families, cities, nations, as a tribe of ingratiating, brilliant, momentarily numerous animals, we are perverse, divided against ourselves, deceiving and defeating ourselves” (250). Berry also values humanity, but does not place it as construer of harmony. His essay, “Against the Nihil of the Age,” in his newest book *Imagination in Place*, articulates a similar response to man’s destructiveness of creation. Moving from the idea that man’s image has been “reduc[ed],” it follows then that man has “implied permission to be more bewildered, violent,” allowing for the “desecration of the world and all its places and creatures inexorably follows . . . having once repudiated our primordial likening to the maker and preserver of the world, we don’t become merely higher animals . . . but are ruled instead by an antithetical likeness to whatever unmakes and fragments the world” (117). If humans are corruptors, then something other must provide a way to wholeness for self. Although Robinson does not utilize Berry’s exact relationship to nature that involves physical work such as farming,<sup>79</sup> *Housekeeping* integrates the imagination and memory as avenues for work that reflect God’s loving creation.

Robinson discusses the loss of love, or what she labels “loyalty” (89),<sup>80</sup> that encourages a “creative work, requiring discipline and imagination” (89) as a solution to the modern

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<sup>78</sup> See her non-fiction book, *Mother Country* for an in-depth analysis and research of England’s environmental concerns.

<sup>79</sup> In “The Body and the Earth,” from *The Unsettling of America*, Berry describes the “wholeness of work” as a “maintenance of connection” that is “restorative” rather than “isolating” (139). The entirety of the passage appears at the beginning of my first chapter and sets the tone for the entire project.

<sup>80</sup> From her essay, “Family,” pages 87-107 in *The Death of Adam*.

deterioration of the family. Here, Robinson lays claim to a Christian humanism that recognizes the human capability of loving work for the sake of others. Firstly, though, a working definition of imagination would benefit the argument. Berry defines imagination as work that “completes the picture by transcending the actual memories and provable facts” (“Imagination in Place” 4). So then, Ruth’s endeavor to transcend her memory is the work of the imagination—not a physical undertaking. She believes that memory serves as a way of keeping community: “There is remembrance, and communion, altogether human and unhallowed. For families will not be broken” (194). In context of Christianity, Deane-Drummond affords similar views of a response to man’s brokenness (or sin), which leads to death. She writes that “the suffering of creation with humanity’s failure to act” instigates an “appropriate human behaviour [that] is required for creation’s flourishing” (88). Essentially, she places the responsibility of maintaining and keeping nature free of pain on humanity *because* of a previous, and perhaps current, lack of human action or responsiveness. Although not in direct response to this claim, Robinson also posits a suffering engrained in familial life that encounters and deals with grief and pain just as creation groans for redemption. As Ruth experiences the pain of a mother’s neglect, she values Sylvie’s uncultivated example as the only source of loyalty. In essence, Ruth leaves Fingerbone and any chance for community or establishment for the opposite of humanity, which suggests an all-encompassing behavior toward self and nature. Robinson nods to an industrialized society as a motive for vanishing from society by connecting a competitive economic state to a family, leaving no room for religion or flourishing.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, *Housekeeping*’s ecocritical themes are bound to its religious ones; nature exists as a source of freedom from destructive relationships because of Ruth’s inability to suffer and *work* through her memories of her mother’s death, which reveals

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<sup>81</sup> Robinson’s essay “Family” offers further insights into this connection. She discusses the devalued Sabbath and implications of the state controlling or at least being “intrusive” in families, communities, and religion (98).

the transitory redemption Ruth accepts in place of wholeness.

Rather than accepting suffering as a type of work, Ruth chooses to suffer the cruelty and unknown character of nature, which reveals Robinson's connection to Emersonian concepts of nature and work. Nature provides evidence of spirituality without work because it serves as a type of sanctuary. Hannes Bergthaller argues in his essay, "Like a Ship to be Tossed: Emersonian Environmentalism and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*," for the novel's alignment with Emerson's belief that "nature's permanence and consistency . . . allows [nature writers] to pursue the project of deriving 'spiritual facts' from 'natural facts,' making nature the normative ground on which to raise their critiques of modern society" (75). Moving from this premise, Bergthaller argues that *Housekeeping* is a story of aimed transcendentalism, making Robinson a contemporary nature writer. He also notes Robinson's "abandoning the *oikos*, the idea of nature as *our home*" (75).<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, Bergthaller implies that Ruth leaves the domestic in order to regain the first domestic experience in the wilderness.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, Robinson's novel connects to Emerson's belief in man's experience in nature as instigation toward the divine (or God), and references the Edenic theme of Eve as the nurturer of that experience. At the beginning of the novel, Ruth observes the importance of religious belief and earthly care through believing that Heaven is a restored earth:

If heaven was to be this world purged of disaster and nuisance, if immortality was to be this life held in poise and arrest, and if this world purged and this life unconsuming could be thought of as world and life restored to their proper natures, it is no wonder that five serene, eventless year lulled my grandmother into forgetting what she should never have forgotten. (13)

<sup>82</sup> *Oikos* is translated as "house" in classical Greek.

<sup>83</sup> Bergthaller's implications of defining *oikos* as earthly suggest a type of transcendence gained through an abandonment to nature.

This passage does not expose the empty promise of Heaven and its impact on human life, but rather serves to devastate Ruth with the effect of spending life without regard for the impact of earth in context with human connection. Thus, experience in nature supplies Robinson with a spiritual metaphor that, like Emerson, she values for its transience and immeasurability. Instead of placing her characters within a working relationship with nature, Robinson positions them to see beyond the “fragments” or the mere reflection in the lake and to discover a final “knit[ting] up” (92). In the end, she constructs her religious metaphor with careful design, and shows Ruth’s desire to be uprooted by what is lost.

In the same vein, Ruth acknowledges these fragments by watching her Aunt Sylvie displace herself from home and engage in the life of a drifter, signifying the intermediately existence between nature and domesticity. Bergthaller continues this idea by ascribing a communal relationship between Ruth and Sylvie that can only be maintained in nature. This relationship protects what he calls a “peculiar kind of domesticity-the fragile ‘household’ which they have established between each other- from being severed by the law, which is represented by the sheriff of the town” (84).<sup>84</sup> Although Robinson does not eliminate men from her novel, her intentionality in creating a feministic perspective connects and contrasts to Berry’s idea of husbandry. This female centeredness, within Wendell Berry’s philosophy of husbandry, reveals the connection between abandonment of the house and a lack of work. Berry offers a helpful meaning of the term in his book, *Bringing It to the Table*, showing the correlation and dependence occurring with husbandry between work and sustenance:

Husbandry pertains first to the household; it connects the farm to the household. It

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<sup>84</sup> Bergthaller makes note that the sheriff is a man, furthering his argument that *Housekeeping* is ecofeminist writing; however, this chapter focuses on the ecocriticism of the novel as it pertains to Berry’s writing. Therefore, rather than suggest the novel as ecofeminist, I argue that it is ecocritical in a way similar to Berry’s husbandry, but without the husband. In other words, the females leave the house because there is no husband and enter into the wilderness to find God who offers ultimate loyalty.

is an art wedded to the art of housewifery. To husband is to use with care, to keep, to save, to make last, to conserve . . . Husbandry is the name of all the practices that sustain life by connecting us conservingly to our places and our world; it is the art of keeping tied all the strands in the living network that sustains us. (93)

Employing Berry's definition of husbandry to the concepts of domesticity and its roles in *Housekeeping*, the lack of husbandry is a cause of Ruth and Sylvie's failing physical maintenance and their escape into nature.

Ruth's descriptors of nature reflect the reality of a final reconciliation (heaven), illuminating similar themes to those in Berry's novels. Toward the end of the novel, Ruth perceives that "[i]t is better to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall. It is better to have nothing" (159). Arguably, Ruth's consideration for finality matches a Christian belief in and waiting for redemption; whereas, Berry's characters recognize a final restoration, yet for both authors and their novels, this restoration cannot come about without pain. Robinson utilizes imagery of the first garden in Eden to illustrate the suffering of both man and nature that can only be redeemed at the end of all things:

The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory—there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine. (192)

A garden metaphor illustrates the power of memory in recognizing this truth. When Ruth conceals herself from Sylvie in an orchard amongst trees during the night, Ruth describes the distant house "beyond the orchard with every one of its windows lighted. It looked large, and

foreign, and contained, like a moored ship—a fantastic thing to find in a garden” (203). The orchard as the center of action and the house comparable to a ship<sup>85</sup> show the fixed devotion to wilderness, not the permanency of domesticity. Ruth’s attitude toward the house directly contrasts with her grandmother’s words at the beginning of the novel to “sell the orchard” rather than the house to be “safe” (27). But for the grandmother this safety only comes by way of an accumulation of “goods . . . maintained out of habit as eagerly as if she had come to reclaim them” (27). Like Berry, Robinson makes distinctions between the domestic and wild in order to reveal the timelessness of memory as the only work continuing in recovery.

Ruth’s introduction to her Aunt Sylvie is also an introduction to the possibility of living a “life of perished things” (124). Eventually, her relationship with Sylvie brings an unconscious growth from an emotionally confused girl to an evolving woman who is alone. Evolving only occurs outside of the already-crooked house with uneven floors covered with leaves. For that reason, Sylvie, and her involvement in Ruth’s evolution, replaces the house as the place for recovery:

It seemed to me that what perished need not also be lost. At Sylvie’s house, my grandmother’s house, so much of what I remembered I could hold in my hand—like a china cup, or a windfall apple, sour and cold from its affinity with deep earth, with only a trace of the perfume of its blossoming . . . And yet as I approached the house I was newly aware of the changes that had overtaken it . . . [the lawn] had risen to the height of the foundation. And it seemed that if the house were not to founder it, it must soon begin to float. (124)

Sylvie’s influence on Ruth constructs the rest of the novel as the house “float[s]” and Ruth

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<sup>85</sup> This reference to a ship correlates to the previous description of the house floating (24).

follows Sylvie around town and eventually to the morbid, awful, yet beautiful, lake. However counteractive this relationship might appear, Robinson's belief in the family as the core unit of life that remains at the center of all work, even if that work appears disastrous or unfruitful because of pain, gives this relationship a sense of what Berry defines as communal.

Perhaps the novel's first sentence, "My name is Ruth,"<sup>86</sup> and the final words of the novel, "always for me and Sylvie," show a shift from singularity to plurality (3, 219). This naming consists of Ruth's address, or place, as herself rather than an actual number representative of a house. In spite of this singularity, it is Ruth's voice that dominates and controls the novel's plot and it is her quest for self. According to Maureen Ryan's, *Housekeeping* is a "new narrative for a new American Eve" because Ruth, "[h]aving claimed her own voice, become namer instead of named, Ruthie recognizes and examines throughout her story the subjectivity of experience and the implications of existing in a world in which she refuses to be defined by others" (83). This dominant female voice is ecocritical and strongly feministic; using a feminist perspective also furthers the ecocritical veins in the novel by comparing the dominance of man over nature to the female characters' subjection to a male dominated society. Ravits argues that Robinson is "trying to reinvent the American myth to fit female consciousness, the woman writer faces a double task: her work must respond to both the mainstream of native patriarchal literature and to the swelling current of writing—British and American—by and about women" (644). Therefore, *Housekeeping*'s plot is American in its female "retell[ing] [of] the story of heroic selfhood" (Ravits 646). This selfhood contributes to Robinson's ecocritical metaphor of Eve, which intersects religious and ecocritical values of motherhood. Returning to Ravits' argument that

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<sup>86</sup> Critics of Robinson acknowledge the statement as a reference to Melville's Ishmael from *Moby Dick* (Ryan, Hartshorne). This connection reveals Robinson's attention to literary tradition and is considered the female counter to that tradition. See Ryan's article, "Marilynne Robinson's 'Housekeeping': The Subversive Narrative and the New American Eve," for further explanation.

“[Ruth’s] quest and choice is always for the missing mother” and that “[s]he can attain full selfhood only by squarely facing the sorrow of maternal abandonment that brings in its wake attendant fears about the wider world of indifferent nature” (648) accurately assesses nature’s place in the novel—nature offers Ruth the chance to explore her selfhood. According to Ravits, then, “Feelings of abandonment of the mother permeate all of nature” (651). But her exploration does not end in a community.

Ruth’s allowance of Sylvie’s role as mentor, or stand-in mother figure, reveals her support of familial community. Meeting Sylvie for the first time, Ruth notices the “similarity . . . that Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it” (53). In Robinson’s essay “The Way We Work, The Way We Live,” she establishes that “one’s family are those toward whom one feels loyalty and obligation, and/or from whom one derives identity, and/or to whom one gives identity, and/or with whom one shares habits, tastes, stories, customs, memories” (n. pag.). Despite Sylvie and Ruth’s shared memories, they remain a family because Sylvie encourages Ruth in her inattentiveness to the home. Robinson’s essay on work also includes the concept that a family develops by togetherness, not just biological relations: “Families of circumstance and affinity as well as kinship . . . allow[ing] also for the existence of people who are incapable of family, though they may have parents and siblings and spouses and children” (n. pag.). So, when Ruth decides to leave Fingerbone with Sylvie, it is because she establishes this type of kinship through circumstance, creating a family outside of an established home as an obligation to shared memory. Their need to remain together motivates their escape. Ryan comments that the literary patriarchal hero “abandon[s] home and civilization and embark[s] on an unknown journey; like their forefathers, they are forced to flee an oppressive civilization, but in a female urge to roam, the pair are threatened . . . but by the danger of



separation” (85). She terms this desire for togetherness as “an affirmation of female solidarity” (85). While in the woods searching for Sylvie, Ruth notices “abandoned homesteads” and relates their stories to her own solitariness, stating, “Because, once alone, it is impossible to believe that one could ever have been other. Loneliness is an absolute discovery” (157). The women flee from constraints of society—an ordering with the capacity of locking them into a pattern of domesticity. Ruth’s female and familial connection to Sylvie becomes evident as Ruth imagines being separated from her:

Just when the water in the orchard had begun to rush from us and toward us and to leap against the trunks of trees and splash against our ankles, an old man in a black robe would step from behind a tree and take me by the hand—Sylvie too stricken to weep and I too startled to resist. Such a separation, I imagined, could indeed lead to loneliness intense enough to make one conspicuous in bus stations.

(68)

Although separation from one another causes Ruth and Sylvie to leave Fingerbone, it is their need to separate from present reality that actually drives them into the woods and beyond the lake.

Aunt Sylvie’s presence accompanies Ruth’s mysterious attitude toward the memory of her mother and death, and she becomes completely absent from any work other than that of her imagination. Observing her own domestic practices, Ruth recognizes the house’s physicality as the last signifier of her memories: “[F]or the appearance of relative solidity in my grandmother’s house was deceptive. It was an impression created by the piano, and the scrolled couch, and the bookcases full of almanacs and Kipling and Defoe. For all the appearance these things gave of substance and solidity, they might better be considered a dangerous weight on a frail structure”

(158-9). Later, she reinvents herself through as a “rescuer” of children, placing herself as a mother figure through her imagination (158). Rather than confront the reality of her abandonment by living in her house, which holds a “relative solidity . . . [that] was deceptive” (158), Ruth chooses to remember her mother “lost to all sense, but not perished” (160). The creation of a domestic space (the house) only prolongs Ruth’s quest for a final perception of self that is whole.

Since Ruth and Sylvie have to pass through the woods to get to the train<sup>87</sup> for their escape, Scott Hess’s recognition of this departure as one that is congruent with the modern movement toward nature seems applicable. His essay, “Imagining an Everyday Nature,” refers to modern nature writing that portrays nature as a “refuge” where one can live out “endangered forms of sensual, aesthetic, and spiritual life” that is “threatened by an increasingly destructive and all pervasive-world economic and social order” (85). Hess’ argument is that a person creates more harm to the environment by escaping rather than creating everyday incorporation of nature, which “reshap[es] also the senses of self, work, and society” (85). His definition of everyday nature mirrors Wendell Berry’s definition of husbandry, which converges in Robinson’s novel. Using the metaphor of art to depict the home, one notices the patterns of escapism in *Housekeeping* – not a commitment to solving personal and social dilemmas – that encompass Ruth’s life in Fingerbone. The train’s mechanics contrast the untouched home, but like modern art, Ruth’s existence within her home only forms her anxiousness to escape it. This anxiety does not vanish as Ruth’s Aunt Sylvie attempts to domesticate herself and parent both Ruth and Lucille in unusual ways. Sylvie’s vagabond life points only toward brokenness, not toward wholeness; therefore, Sylvie and Ruth cannot establish a true family unit (or community)

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<sup>87</sup> A train can also refer to a series of connected events. Just as a locomotive operates by a series of cars and motor, Robinson offers a paradox between the machinery and nature.

because they have, as Robinson claims, “forgotten solace” (“Work” n. pag.). Yet being whole can also be the work of memory. Ruth writes, “memories are by their nature fragmented, isolated, and arbitrary as glimpses one has at night through lighted windows” (53). Therefore, their looking beyond the window and stepping into nature is an *attempt* toward wholeness. In other words, a family that undergoes suffering or pain has the capability of becoming a “miracle of solace” (n. pag.).

Because of Robinson’s Christian theology, these images also expose earth and humanity’s restoration. Despite critiques that the novel is feminist because of dominant female characters, Robinson clearly situates Ruth within an encompassing female context in order to make clear a displaced nurturance that can only be holistically accepted through a right view of God. Ruth describes Sylvie’s rebirth in similar terms to Eve’s existence in the garden of Eden before sin: “Before, she had been fleshed in air and clothed in nakedness and mantled in cold, and her very bones were only slender things, like shafts of ice . . . [a]nd now, list to her kind, she would almost forget them, and she would feed coarse food to her coarse flesh, and be almost satisfied” (204). Her interpretation of a rebirth teaches her to “relax and accept [the cold],” but the sheriff abruptly ends her story of Sylvie and suggests that the women come stay with his family where food and warmth are readily available (205). This male-female binary leads to a final radicalism from Ruth and Sylvie. They return to their house only to burn it, furthering the idea of the house as a hindrance to maintaining a fragmented existence. But the burning only mirrors the suffering and memory that follows death. Ruth says, “For even things lost in a house abide, like forgotten sorrows and incipient dreams . . . and there was an end to housekeeping” (209). Ironically, the two women cross a field intersecting “the garden and the tracks” (210), connecting the boundaries between life and death that humans face. Robinson’s inclusion of a

garden captures the cycle of life, birth and decay, while the man-made train runs through the cycle, blurring the lines between home and homelessness.

Although they escape the confines of domesticity by burning the home, Ruth and Sylvie's flight toward a transporting train cannot be successful because the sounds of fire drive them into the woods as a temporary home. In this instance, nature offers a transitory source of life that protects man. Because nature can also represent the wild in man, Ruth's final crossing over the bridge in utter darkness proves her elimination of a life of cultivation in a particular place. Rather than live in Fingerbone, Ruth spends the rest of her life, or what she writes of it, "unlike other people," which happens "[e]ither when [she] followed Sylvie across the bridge, and the lake claimed us, or it was when my mother left me waiting for her, and established in me the habit of waiting and expectation which makes any present moment most significant for what it does not contain" (214). Ruth did not have a choice in this disassociation; just as her mother abandoned her in death, so Ruth crosses the lake to nothingness. This choice only stirs an uncultivated desire for a life of hope and waiting for joined fragments.

This ecocritical perspective of *Housekeeping* gives insight into Robinson's extended metaphors and maintains Wendell Berry's concept of husbandry and wholeness that cannot function without community with other people and God. At the close of the novel, Ruth contemplates the Genesis account of Cain. She writes how Cain was "made in the image of God" and who "gave the simple earth of the field a voice and a sorrow, and God Himself heard the voice, and grieved for the sorrow, so Cain was a creator, in the image of his Creator" (193). By focusing on memory and loss, *Housekeeping* furthers a Christian ecocritical framework that situates man beyond mere consideration for self. Through her narrative, Robinson supplies us with a firm concept of man's place in and response to nature because it advances a discovery of

self and God. By placing Robinson's perspectives on domesticity and the environment contiguous to Berry's novels, one can appreciate both the value and dangers of memory as a site for work in so far as it accomplishes a completion of personhood through emphasis on family as the final and essential community.

## Chapter Four

Graves and the Ground: *Gilead* and the Work of Grace

“I have lived my life on the prairie and a line of oak trees can still astonish me. I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again.”

- Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

Recognizing Marilynne Robinson’s first novel, *Housekeeping*, as ecocritical allows us to examine her second and Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Gilead*,<sup>88</sup> as a necessary place to continue discussion of work in nature as leading to wholeness and understanding of the human self. Titled for the name of a town where the Reverend John Ames preaches, gardens, and lives in community with his family and neighbors, *Gilead* seems a simplistic story; however, its complexity stems from Robinson’s theological views, which then form her environmental views. While Robinson’s first novel *Housekeeping* employs a female narrator as voice to the protagonist’s remembrance, *Gilead*’s protagonist is male, which permits my study of the environment in terms of a father’s work toward wholeness. Explicitly, Robinson revolves her story around Ames’ role as a father who is “trying to tell the truth” (201) and as a pastor whom people ask, “what death is like?” (4). Written as a letter<sup>89</sup> by an elderly and dying Ames to his seven-year-old son, the novel acknowledges the paradox between life and death from his perspective as a father remembering his experiences and preserving his son’s, and as a pastor committed to the reality of “the next life” (4). Because Robinson believes that “every environmental problem is a human problem” (“Wilderness” 253), I will argue that Ames’

<sup>88</sup> The name “Gilead” is biblical and appears as the name of a man and as a particular land in Old Testament books from Genesis to Zechariah. I Chronicles 5:9 calls Gilead a land full of livestock and Genesis 31 recognizes Gilead as a “hill country” (*ESV*).

<sup>89</sup> Christopher Leise’s article argues that the form of the letter reveals deep religious roots. I reference Leise, and religiousness, later in this chapter.

remembered and current work in Gilead is a metaphor of his work as a father and preacher. Of course, the problem of human sin cannot be comprehensively dealt with in one novel; however, Robinson does portray the problem and its negation by God's grace to man and man's extension of that grace to others through the intrinsic work of a father. But Ames is also a pastor, which reinforces the religiosity of the novel. Defining work in this context, Robinson, in *The Death of Adam*, consults Calvin's interpretation<sup>90</sup> of Genesis chapter one as a reference for this type of work: "This blessing of God may be regarded as the source from which the human race has flowed . . . here Moses would simply declare that Adam with his wife was formed for the production of offspring, in order that men might replenish the earth" (185). I focus on this work of replenishment as the solution (a restoration) to human problems *and* environmental ones; thus, Ames' memories of his preservation and interaction with nature inform us of the human soul and its ability to complete a work of grace.

Although Ames does not work directly with land in the novel, his role as a pastor requires a similar relationship fostered by work. Eugene Peterson, pastor and admirer of Wendell Berry, summarizes this pastoral work in *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*: "One thing I have learned under Berry's tutelage is that it is absurd to resent your place: your place is that without which you could not do your work. Parish work is every bit as physical as farm work. It is *these* people, at *this* time, under *these* conditions" (131).<sup>91</sup> The physical work done by a pastor "protect[s]" and "nourish[es]" a congregation—what Peterson names the *field* of work (134). Accepting this preservation also requires an understanding of life after death. A pastor concerns himself with the field in preparation for a harvest. Peterson

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<sup>90</sup> Calvin's view of predestination seems the prominent concern of his theology, and Robinson mentions it briefly in the novel. Jack Boughton asks Ames for his "views on predestination," and, like Robinson, Ames admits the topic is his "least favorite topic of conversation in the entire world" (149).

<sup>91</sup> Kyle Childress references Peterson's work in his essay, "Proper Work." His essay deals more explicitly with a pastor's response to Berry's concept of farming.

recognizes eschatology as “the tool [pastors] use to loosen the soil and weed the field” (140). In other words, the work of a pastor is expectant and caring for a final wholeness within a local community of people. Ames fulfills this role through his relationship with his neighbor’s son, Jack Boughton, and his biological son. This preservation is evident in his discussion of the “truth” with his son via this written letter, and in his attempt to “weed the field” exemplified in his relationship with his seemingly incorrigible friend’s son, Jack Boughton. Childress offers a definition that links the work of a farmer and pastor based on Berry’s philosophy:

Proper work is the practice of submitting our lives to this call and to these people in this place. It includes the pastoral practices of preaching and teaching and leading the liturgy but also the detailed, painstaking, mundane care of nurturing the people and paying attention to God working in them. Proper work is work that fits with the purpose of God in this particular place. (75)

The work Ames accomplishes with Jack reveals a proper work that can be applied to a community, and especially to land. Applying this concept of pastoral work to Ames’ life, we can view his relationships as avenues for understanding self and God that illuminate the profundity of life and death—just as a gardener nourishes plants in order to keep them alive and watch them produce fruit. Although a letter to a young boy, *Gilead*’s fluidity and concentration on God’s redemption as a central theme through Ames’ role, centrally as a father in Gilead, exemplifies Robinson’s ecocriticism grounded in a person’s *husbandry*<sup>92</sup> in nature.

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<sup>92</sup> According to Berry, loving other people is a part of husbandry: “What is wanting, apparently, is the tragic imagination that, through communal form or ceremony, permits great loss to be recognized, suffered, and borne, and that makes possible some sort of consolation and renewal. What is wanting is the return to the beloved community, or to the possibility of one. That would return us to a renewed and corrected awareness of our partiality and mortality, but also to healing and to joy in a renewed awareness of our love and hope for one another” (“Writer and Region” 78).



While literary critics do not usually focus on *Gilead* as ecocritical,<sup>93</sup> I propose to evaluate Ames' relationship and work with people in Gilead as an upholding of Wendell Berry's principles of work within a local community and nature.<sup>94</sup> The novel enlightens Berry's perception of holistic work on earth. Therefore, I will also mention my previous use of *wholeness* for determining Robinson's dedication in the novel of placing self in context of creation in order to better grasp the weight of the novel's ecocritical themes. These themes in the novel become evident when one applies Berry's idea of work to Ames' actions. Berry, in an essay defining and persuading his readers to engage in right and whole work, argues that "solving these [environmental] problems is not work merely for so-called environmental organizations and agencies but also for individuals, families, and local communities" (33). While this work takes place in nature, its purposes also extend to humanity, making a connection that Berry promotes as a "continuous harmony."<sup>95</sup> Robinson's novel proposes this work. Ames' job as pastor, role as husband and father, and commitment to his neighbors show an underlying principle similar to Berry's definition of "good work": "The name of our *proper* connection to the earth is 'good work,' for good work involves much giving of honor. It honors the source of its materials; it honors the place where it is done; it honors the art by which it is done; it honors the thing that it makes and the user of the made thing" (35). So work becomes not only about the end result, but also about the means and the people who complete the work.

Berry includes people as a part of the environment, calling the terms "ecology and

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<sup>93</sup> Three important sources for this chapter: Charles Partee's work on John Calvin, Christopher Leise's article on Puritanism and *Gilead*, and Laura E. Tanner's essay on absence in *Gilead* (which seems appropriate considering *Housekeeping*'s prominent theme of absence).

<sup>94</sup> Nature also includes place—Gilead as a site for preservation of nature and man is the basis of my definition.

<sup>95</sup> See Berry's essay collection, *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural*. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003. The phrase comes from Thomas F. Hornbein's *Everest: The West Ridge*: "It seemed to me that here man lived in continuous harmony with the land, as much as briefly a part of it as all its other occupants. He used the earth with gratitude, knowing that care was required for continued sustenance" (45).

ecosystems . . . sterile” because they do not include the inherent “connection” that all creation shares (35). Later in the novel, Ames tells of his work as a child, which emphasizes the importance of farming work—an obvious connection to land and its relationship to man: “Chores really mattered in those days, and if every farm in three or four countries lost a pint of milk and a few eggs every day or two for twenty years, it would have added up” (82). These simple chores mold Ames’ view of land. Work becomes the means of sustenance. While Robinson specifically discusses man’s responsibility in preserving the wild environment in her non-fiction books,<sup>96</sup> *Gilead* moderately addresses the issue of responsible land use and focuses primarily on a preservation of humanity that is essential to a healthy, or right, relationship with the environment.

Because Ames writes to his son, he speaks casually, including personal details about his relationship to his own father and to God, which makes the narrative poignantly paternal and religious. Concerning the act of writing as a religious pursuit, Ames writes, “For me writing has always felt like praying, even when I wasn’t writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone. I feel I am with you now, whatever that can mean” (19). Though he writes only for his son, Ames also offers the novel as a type of prayer, implying that God also is partaker of his words. Therefore, Robinson’s spirituality is not hidden; in fact, her story openly conveys Christian themes, characters, and metaphor through Ames’ relationship to Gilead and nature in conjunction with his relationship to his family.

Ames’ interaction with Jack Boughton also elaborates on Robinson’s definition of work. According to Robinson, family “eludes definition,” but includes “the existence of people who are incapable of family, though they may have parents and siblings and spouses and children”

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<sup>96</sup> See Robinson’s *The Death of Adam* and *Mother Country*.

(“Family” 87). Ames’ interaction with his friend’s wayward son, Jack, expresses this aspect of family. Even though Jack is not Ames’ son, Ames forgives Jack, which is a work that displaces self for other: “Imagine that someone failed and disgraced came back to his family, and they grieved with him, and took his sadness upon themselves, and sat down together to ponder the deep mysteries of human life” (90). So a father’s forgiveness becomes the primary type of work in *Gilead*.

The connection between forgiveness and work in nature are that they both exist in everyday life in order for Ames to better understand earth as a place for work. Simple descriptions of particular experiences in nature express his theological beliefs: “Sometimes I have loved the peacefulness of an ordinary Sunday. It is like standing in a newly planted garden after a warm rain. You can feel the silent and invisible life. All it needs from you is that you take care not to trample on it” (20). Here, Robinson creates an analogy between work that preserves and nurtures nature, and work that preserves human life. She allows Ames to acknowledge nature as God’s handiwork, which, together with humanity, reveals a necessity of human responsibility: “But the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it expect a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?” (245). Through these structured analogies of life and death, the novel locates and develops a soul’s spiritual existence. Christopher Leise calls this structure “epistolary,” using the “mode of a spiritual biography” that comes from the early American Puritans (352). He also promotes the idea that this Puritan style of writing attempts to show a “self-discovery and religious practice that served an obviously useful dialectic function” (352). Thus for Ames, the commonplace provides an avenue for understanding the complexities of life that pertain beyond the everyday

events and target the human soul as a participant in God's creation.

The commonplace also describes Ames' process in understanding the body and soul. While remembering parts of his childhood, Ames recalls a time with his own father, when, during a visit to his grandfather's grave, he views the graveyard as a place where one works and senses the importance of knowing the difference between a body and soul:

That graveyard was about the loneliest place you could imagine. If I were to say it was going back to nature, you might get the idea that there was some sort of vitality about the place. But it was parched and sun-stricken. It was hard to imagine the grass had ever been green . . . My father always said when someone dies the body is just a suit of old clothes the spirit doesn't want anymore. But there we were, half killing ourselves to find a grave, and as cautious as we could be about where we put our feet. (13)

But, the graveyard is not an everyday place. Leise addresses Ames' purpose in this seemingly odd coupling of simplicity and the extraordinary: "Ames exhibits in these digressions, as a vehicle to in the immediate and the immanent: an experience that stops short of knowing through reason and is content with simply living the experience of the miraculous in the everyday" (349). Leise articulates Robinson's purposefulness in this inclusion of the miraculous in everyday living through nature. For instance, when Ames meets his second wife, she "enlarged [his] understanding of hope" and "greatly sweetened his imagination of death" (203). The experience "felt to [him] as if my soul were being teased out of my body" (203). Robinson's metaphors allow for the narrative to remain direct and simple in language, still they also express weighty issues regarding eschatological validity in human life.

The significance of Heaven, or at least the idea of a final restoring of earth, becomes a

vital part of Ames' letter because his discussion of everyday life always shifts to contemplation of life and death in connection to man's relationship with God's creation. Because of this holistic perspective, which only happens in acknowledgment of God, Ames views beauty and truth in the present because they reflect what is to come:

I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try. (56-57)

In this passage, perhaps more than any other in the novel, Ames readily sees earth as a part of his theology. Eschatology, the theology of finality, permeates his prose, confirming Ames' impending death as mankind's metaphoric future in the hands of a new earth that is not quite different from the old. Ames agrees with his neighbor and fellow pastor Robert Boughton who proposes, "the imagination of heaven as the best pleasure of this world" (166). This longing concentrates on Ames' view of death, judgment, and Heaven.<sup>97</sup> Robinson values John Calvin's theology; consequently, his beliefs in eternity are relevant to the novel's themes. Charles Partee, in his work *The Theology of John Calvin*, argues that "[i]n a kind of eschatological verification of God's grace Calvin declares death to be the great distinction 'between the reprobate and the

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<sup>97</sup> Partee writes, "Calvin discusses the future life before the present life, presumably because he does not want to emphasize the historical progression from present to future, but rather the theological reality that hope in the future life provides for the present life" (220). Partee's research shapes my theological context of Calvin and religious terms applied to Robinson.

sons of God, whose condition in the present life is commonly one and the same, *except that the sons of God have by far the worst of it*” (220). While Partee quotes Calvin and his concept of Christians and suffering, he also shows Calvin’s focus on the “perfect restoration of this present life [that] will take place in the future life” (221). By concentrating on this restoration, Robinson’s novel illustrates nature’s significant relationship in context of her Christian theology where suffering has its place in work, but only for the sake of “the future life.”

Through accounts of his past and present, Ames recognizes human sin as a hindrance to wholeness and utilizes metaphors of nature to describe the human soul. He compares man to an “old” fire that “will make a dark husk for itself and settle in on its core, as in the case of this planet. I believe the same metaphor may describe the human individual, as well. Perhaps Gilead. Perhaps civilization” (72). This analogy references Boughton’s comment that “[m]an was born to trouble” (72), or more simply, that man is born with sin. Recording his memory becomes an act of preservation<sup>98</sup> of the human soul.<sup>99</sup> He writes, “I have thought sometimes that the Lord must hold the whole of our lives in memory, so to speak. Of course He does. And ‘memory’ is the wrong word, no doubt” (115). But Robinson does not leave memory without packed metaphors concerning the environment. However, Robinson does not offer a solution to environmental problems because they are, in actuality, human problems—she suggests that the solution rests in man’s momentary life. Speaking of mortality, Ames writes of life as transitory, yet accomplishing some permanence through memory: “Well, but again, this life has its own mortal loveliness. And memory is not strictly mortal in its nature, either. It is a strange thing, after all, to be able to return to a moment, when it can hardly be said to have any reality at all, even in its

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<sup>98</sup> Preservation can also be defined as conservation. Berry in his essay, “Conservation is Good Work,” defines environmental abuses as a human dilemma, which is very similar to Robinson’s description: “The problems we are worried about are caused not just by other people but by ourselves” (33).

<sup>99</sup> This idea is similar to William Wordsworth’s poetic theme of memory as a gateway for self-identification.

passing. A moment is such a slight thing, I mean, that its abiding is a most gracious reprieve” (162). Recognizing one’s past and present allows for a deeper understanding of the future without neglecting the “reprieve[s]” found in each period. Each story tells of Ames’ action in a particular environment; whether it is in the wilderness with his father, watching his wife in the garden, or expecting a whole restoration of earth, Ames rightly situates the environment as a subject in need of the work of redemption in order to realize his own approaching restoration.

Necessary to this claim is Emerson’s influence<sup>100</sup> on Robinson’s portrayal of Ames and his specific beliefs regarding human existence and its connection with the environment. In the following passage, Ames connects Emerson’s view of nature to his concept of existence:

The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of morning. Light within light. It seems like a metaphor for something. So much does. Ralph Waldo Emerson is excellent on this point. It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within the great general light of existence. Or it seems like poetry within language. (119)

Directly summarizing Emerson, Robinson shifts attention away from just Ames and to the universal soul that exists as an act of creative meaning in a created world. However, Ames carefully suggests that man’s sin gets in the way of this preservation:

Existence is the essential thing and the holy thing. If the Lord chooses to make nothing of our transgressions, then they *are* nothing. Or whatever reality they have is trivial and conditional beside the exquisite primary fact of existence. Of course the Lord would wipe them away, just as I wipe dirt from your face, or

<sup>100</sup> Please reference Chapter One and Three for further analysis of Emerson.

tears. After all, why should the Lord bother much over these smirches that are no part of His Creation? Well, there are a good many reasons why he should. We human beings do real harm. History could make a stone weep. (189-90)

As in *Housekeeping*, Robinson shows God's sovereignty through observation and reflection of life. Because man corrupts when he should preserve and nurture, only God acts as the ultimate redeemer of man and earth. Still, Robinson's reference to Emerson and his philosophy grounds her novel in his definition of work in a place and one's interaction in a community.

Ames' experiences in nature become a means of explaining and transmitting his memories to his son; therefore, remembering acts as a type of preservation in a particular community. Ames, directly speaking to his son, writes, "For Preservation is a Creation, and more, it is a continued Creation, and a Creation every moment.' That is George Herbert, whom I hope you have read . . . if Herbert is right, this old body is as new a creation as you are yourself. I mean as you are now, playing under my window" (111). Accordingly, to love a child is a type of creation and preservation because it daily preserves the life of another, but for Ames, he cannot disconnect from the thought of his approaching death even in the midst of watching his young son. Using this concept to understand Robinson's belief of environmental preservation, Leise argues that Robinson makes Ames' letter reflect "the earthly as the site God made manifest" (352), which agrees with Robinson's Calvinist mindset. Robinson parallels Calvin's focus on Christ made flesh as the crux of a Christian's daily life that is mainly obvious in her continued metaphors in Ames' stories of the past. Calvin writes of a Christian's conscience that observes and becomes aware of Christ rather than totally grasping it: "I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery . . . Reason itself teaches us whatever is supernatural is clearly beyond the grasps of our minds. Let us therefore labor more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of



that communion” (qtd. in Partee 194). Since Ames is a pastor who reads Calvin<sup>101</sup> (and other equally recognized theologians), everything has meaning in light of Christ, but this understanding is a work (what he calls a “labor”). In his writing, Ames discovers that he “is just an old man struggling with the difficulty of understanding what it is he’s struggling with” (202). He applies and summarizes Calvin’s belief in God’s redemption despite man’s sin:

Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense . . . It would be a way into understanding essential things, since presumably the world exists for God’s enjoyment, not in any simple sense, of course, but as you enjoy the *being* of a child even when he is in every way a thorn in your heart. (124-25)

Again, Robinson’s Calvinism affects her metaphors, allowing the grace of God to become a significant theme in Ames’ letter because of his desire to teach and convey grace to his son—what is both a creation and preservation of humanity. The metaphor begins with God’s relationship to man, and then from man to his child, which clarifies the motive for Ames’ memory narrative; Ames becomes deeply aware of death and life through valuing the present, physicality of life.

While we have focused on Ames’ past, it is also important to acknowledge his present perceptions as a dying man because they illuminate a sharp perceptivity into life in Gilead and the nearing reality of Heaven. Concerning Ames’ sense perception, Laura E. Tanner proposes a

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<sup>101</sup> Ames references Calvin and Augustine in the novel. Both philosophers are Christians who regard human sin as the hindrance to a relationship with Christ and recognize grace as Christ’s gift to man. Robinson notes the different view of women between Augustine and Calvin, noting that Calvin’s view is more holistic and regards the woman as the key to the “both the birth and the bringing up of children...that bind[s] us mutually together” (*Death of Adam* 186).

more psychological analysis of his letter: “[Ames’] struggle with his own death in acts of perceptual processing which it both depicts and thematizes; the novel pushes existential concerns back into the realm of lived experience to explore the way that Ames's experience of dying traps him in the collapsing space between perception and representation” (228). Tanner presents an interesting analysis; however, she focuses too heavily on Ames’ nearing a loss of perception (death) as the reason for his focus on memory and Heaven. Rather than dwell on loss, Ames assimilates his everyday living as an integral point of reflection. At the beginning of his letter, Ames writes that “[e]ach morning I’m like Adam waking up in Eden, amazed at the cleverness of my hands and at the brilliance pouring into my mind through my eyes—old hands, old eyes, old mind, a very diminished Adam altogether, and still it is just remarkable” (66-7). Memory serves as a foundation for wisdom; old age and death offer only deeper understanding for Ames’ perception. Rather than concede this perception as a trap, Ames posits John Calvin’s importance on man’s everyday interaction with other people and with God’s creation as a holy living in anticipation of Heaven.

Wholeness comes by way of daily exchanges with other people. Ames’ relationship with Jack Boughton presents grace as a major theme in the novel. Although Jack’s characterization in the novel appears toward the end, it enhances Ames’ concentration on ordinary work in nature. Earlier in the novel Ames recalls his brother Edward and his leaving their parents’ home, which caused “rage and weeping in [his] mother’s kitchen and [his] father was in the attic or the woodshed, in some hidden, quiet place, down on his knees, wondering to the Lord what it was that was being asked of him” (26-7). Though Ames writes of many different experiences, this specific account foreshadows his relationship with Jack Boughton, who Robert Boughton named for his friend, John Ames. Therefore, Ames completes a work that has eternal consequence by

communicating God's grace to Jack, who, although not his biological son, acts as a prodigal son in the narrative:

And I spent the time thinking how it would be if Jack Boughton were indeed my son, and had come home weary from whatever life he had, and was sitting there still and at seeming peace in that peaceful night. There was a considerable satisfaction in that thought. The idea of grace had been so much on my mind, grace as a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials. There in the dark and the quiet I felt I could forget all the tedious particulars and just feel the presence of his mortal and immortal being. (197)

The silence enlightens Ames' perception of the weight of earthly work. Rather than comment on nature's relationship with man, Robinson parallels grace to interaction in nature. In other words, the ordinary tasks that take place in nature help explain, or unpack, the mysteries of human nature. Ames, speaking of his relationship with Jack, writes to his young son, "I believe I am beginning to see where grace is for me in this" (201). Forgiving Jack grants Ames the opportunity to experience God's grace. This forgiveness occurs as Ames learns of Jack's rebellious act in leaving Gilead, living with a colored woman, and having a child with her (230).<sup>102</sup> After relating Jack's background to his son, Ames steps out of transmitting the story to address Jack's wrongdoings as inconsequential to his soul: "On the other hand, he is a man about whom you may never hear one good word, and I just don't know another way to let you see the beauty there is in him" (232). This premise encapsulates the entire novel's thesis—God's grace is evident in all of creation. The grace Ames experiences in his interaction with Jack upholds his

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<sup>102</sup> Ames forgives after battling his own prejudice against Jack. Rebecca M. Painter addresses Ames' power to forgive in her essay, "Virtue in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*": "But in Robinson's novel, the pathway to the most difficult-to-achieve forgiveness is painstakingly explored in terms of self-questioning and rigorous honesty" (109-10).

view of the world at the end of his life. He writes, “Though I must say all this has given me a new glimpse of the ongoingness of the world. We fly forgotten as a dream, certainly, leaving the forgetful world behind us to trample and mar and misplace everything we have ever cared for” (191). Directly after writing this, Ames describes the exchange of crops between his wife and Jack, deeming their relations as noteworthy if only to suggest a type of redemption. His wife plants a flower garden with Jack’s gifts, representative of Ames’ forgiveness and integration of Jack as family, and also symbolic of the cycle of life.

Although wilderness is not a central subject, it is a place where Ames can understand himself and work for the sake of grace that is both temporary and eternal.<sup>103</sup> Ames defines grace as “the great gift. So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that *we* also can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves” (161). This restoration creates wholeness and is only through the grace of God; Berry anticipates this restoring as man preserving both natural and human relationship. Ames conceives wholeness as biblical, comparing his trust in God to Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac: “because any father, particularly an old father, must finally give his child up to the wilderness and trust to the providence of God” (129). Here, wilderness as a powerful site for interaction with God resonates with *Housekeeping*’s same theme of God’s sovereignty controls and guides man’s work and relationship in nature. Personifying nature, Ames recounts a baseball game he attended with his grandfather where nature, the center of action, instructs a human audience: “I also more or less assumed that the thunder and lightning that day were Creation tipping its hat to him, as maybe it said, Why Reverend, what in this grieving world are *you* doing here at a sporting event?” (46-7). In this instance, Creation assumes

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<sup>103</sup> It does not play a role in the novel as it did in *Housekeeping*, but it does symbolize the vitality and power of God.

a role as controller of human action, but Robinson also includes nature's grievances, just as Ames recognizes Jack's. Once more, this emphasis on mercy requires a decentering that accepts the mysteries of life and lives wholly in transitory moments for an eternal reality:

There is no justice in love, no proportion in it, and there need not be, because in any specific instance it is only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality. It makes no sense at all because it is the eternal breaking in on the temporal. So how could it subordinate itself to cause or consequence? It is worth living long enough to outlast whatever sense of grievance you may acquire. Another reason why you must be careful of your health. (238)

This "breaking" encapsulates the novel's argument about the environment and man's relationship with it. Living correctly applies to people because love nurtures preservation. Being in nature affords Ames the reality that all of life exists as a whole creation waiting for the eternal, and that by cultivating creation, which includes both land and people, man sees glimpses of its reality.

Since nature provides clarity for Ames, rain signifies a baptism that purifies and blesses man's work in an economy or community.<sup>104</sup> In the novel, each incident with rain or a storm washes away human work, but it also leaves opportunities for Ames to understand grace. Thus, even rain acts as a natural baptism that represents an absolving within the human soul. On a particular occasion, Ames remembers his mother's farm work and a storm that displaces a set of hens: "But one afternoon a storm came up and a gust of wind hit the henhouse and lifted the roof right off, and hens came flying out, sucked after it, I suppose, and also just acting like hens. My

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<sup>104</sup> Painter references the "healing balm of Gilead" in order to show Jack's continued "injustice and sorrow, pointing to the kind of iniquities a society must seek to eradicate" (110-11). Therefore, the novel's emphasis on communal hope points to a "people perilously lacking in hope" (111).

mother and I saw it happen, because when she smelled the rain coming she called me to help her get the wash off the line” (35). After settling inside and realizing the work still left to do, his mother says, “I know there is a blessing in this somewhere” (35). Despite the ruin of the henhouse, she acknowledges grace, but only in context of her husband who finds the prospect of nourishment in every event. He believed that “being blessed meant being bloodied, and that is true etymologically, in English—but not in Greek or Hebrew. So whatever understanding might be based on that derivation has no scriptural authority behind it . . . He did it in order to make an account of himself, I suppose, as most of us do” (36). In Gilead, nature affects mankind through storms, embodying the potential restoration over grief and loss that God’s grace enables. In another instance, Ames helps his father tear down a lightning-stricken church in a “warm rain” (94). He compares the sound of falling rain on a “wagon bed” to its falling “in an attic eave” (94). Rain gives Ames perspective of nature as imperative for recognition of God’s grace.

Although the story seems insignificant or random, Ames actually learns from nature’s supremacy that man’s life is uncertain like nature. Recording this incident manifests Ames’ “communion” where he eats an ash soaked biscuit his father offers (95). This experience remains with him and in the next sentences, Ames writes of his own reaction to nature’s uncertainty:

When I’m up here in my study with the radio on and some old book in my hands and it’s nighttime and the wind blows and the house creaks, I forget where I am, and it’s as though I’m back in hard times for a minute or two, and there’s a sweetness in the experience which I don’t understand. But that only enhances the value of it. My point here is that you never do know the actual nature even of your own experience. Or perhaps it has no fixed and certain nature. (95)

Reflecting again on the past, Ames notices the adults’ response to the loss of life and church

building as “joyful and sad” (96), which he “mentions . . . because it seems [that] much of [his] life was comprehended in that moment. Grief itself has often returned [him] to that morning, when [he] took communion from [his] father’s hand” (96). The rain, although merely a physical presence, represents that feeling of comprehension, and that understanding of affliction and loss. The work completed in the rain becomes representative of a blessing that expounds upon man’s ability to work in the midst of affliction.

However, the rain also represents sanctification or the process of becoming whole in the midst of suffering. Still writing of the same experience, Ames mentions how the community members “buried those ruined Bibles under the tree in the rain, and it is somehow sanctified by that memory” (96). In spite of the natural disaster, nature offers healing for the community, and soon prairies, orchards, and sunflowers arose where ruin once lay (96-7). He connects this story of loss with sanctification amidst affliction. Ames repetitively references this personal baptismal narrative and recounts that “no one minded the rain” because “everyone was poor” and because of the draught in Gilead (102). Again, what he retains of the day clearly mirrors the rain’s bestowment of a new start. Even the women sing old hymns that seemed to “just rise up with the sound of the rain” (103). Ames directs this communion with his father to his son, recalling how his son also took communion: “[You] broke the bread and fed a bit of it to you from my hand, just the way my father would not have done except in my memory” (103). Ames utilizes this memory in order to better comprehend “present reality” that “bear[s] to an ultimate reality” (103). Returning to the baseball game with his grandfather, Ames discusses the storm’s existence as “an end to [the game], as if it were a fire to be put out, an eruption into this world of an alarming kind of nullity” (47). Therefore, the presence of rain provokes a memory, but more importantly, it evokes a near and final sanctification.

Although *Gilead* does not explicitly incite its reader to environmental action, or persuade an obvious agenda with instructional solutions, Robinson does provide a riveting religious narrative of one man's dedication to and work in place as metaphor for God's grace—the instigator of all effort and healer of all disaster. Speaking of Gilead at the end of his letter, Ames writes:

To me it seems rather Christlike to be as unadorned as this place is, as little regarded . . . This whole town does look like whatever hope becomes after it begins to weary a little, then weary a little a more. But hope deferred is still hope. I love this town. I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wile gesture of love—I too will smolder away the time until the great and general incandescence. (247)

One man's grappling with the major metaphysical and concerns of human life through his experiences in a particular place provides excellent commentary on the human soul.<sup>105</sup> To hope in God and his grace requires man's active choice to forgive other people of grievances, remember and know love and pain, and preserve life by raising a child, and engaging in the communal work as a pastor. Each of these acts is part of Berry and Robinson's definition of work as a means of becoming whole. Encountering nature and working in a specific place as a father and pastor begins with man's right relationship to God. Ames values his life on earth before his departure from it by recognizing all of creation as a work of preservation for a final restoration, which makes the novel eschatological; therefore, *Gilead's* ecocritical theme can be derived from this premise because nature cannot be separated from man's work. Ames' relationship to Gilead and his work in that community provide us with helpful ways to work in

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<sup>105</sup> Because Robinson uses Ames' self *experiences* as the foundation for wisdom, Painter considers the novel phenomenological. Her article offers essential passages from the novel to support her assertion.



nature, because, as Robinson argues, “every environmental problem is a human problem.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> See Robinson essay “Wilderness” for the complete quote and helpful context (253).

## Chapter Five

## Conclusion

## Beyond Berry

“Their lives spun off the tilting world like thread off a spindle”

- Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Ecocriticism continues to become a legitimate part of literary scholarship because of recent concern for the environment. Wendell Berry and Marilynne Robinson integrate principles of environmental recovery with Christian principles of redemption, and thereby offer new possibilities for ecocritical writing rooted in a religious connection with man’s work on earth. My thesis contributes a new approach of this criticism in the academic community by stretching the established boundaries of ecocriticism to include Christian environmental perspectives in literature. Significant to man’s relationship to the earth is the work accomplished in nature; however, this work is firstly religious and then ecocritical because man furthers a relationship with nature by furthering his relationship with (or at least awareness of) God. Therefore, working in nature, in a specific place, and with other people are all aspects of ecocritical writing. Simply put, a study of these two authors in an ecocritical *and* religious context offers a unique and integrated study of different aspects of ecocriticism.

Since environmental problems are actually human problems, an important aspect of ecocritical writing should include analysis of human relationships. So Berry and Robinson explore and emulate environmental *and* human relationships in their novels *Jayber Crow*, *Hannah Coulter*, *Housekeeping*, and *Gilead* through familial themes and nature metaphors that preserve and advance an appreciation of nature and people. Thus, this thesis fosters consideration

of Berry's and Robinson's literature as ecocritical because they promote preservation and care for the earth. Their novels are also religious because of their application of spiritual themes such as grace and forgiveness as a part of work that seeps into and affects environmental themes of response and interaction. Using Berry's philosophy of environmental care, a new type of ecocriticism emerges that argues for one's work with land and community as a means of understanding the human soul.

Therefore, my study of these particular novels addresses the need for a comprehensive ecocriticism that appreciates Christian connotations and themes. In particular, this study addresses the texts as religious in part because of both authors' Christian beliefs and their direct (and at times indirect) biblical references, allowing them to articulate a view of nature and the human soul as members of creation working toward knowledge of self and God. Specific interaction with nature and people leads characters to an awareness of self and God. These novels offer plentiful examples, primarily through metaphor, of nature as a subject that distinctively addresses environmental concerns without excommunicating human responsibility and relationships.

While these novels effectively outline the potential for ecocriticism to include Christian ideas, further exploration of other religious ecocritical literature will comment on and enhance understanding of the human soul as a mind and body actively engaged in a particular place with particular people that expounds upon man's place as a member of God's creation. Also, because I employ Berry's philosophy as the basis for my analysis, an interesting extension of this thesis might utilize another environmental thinker for differing principles and focus. But Berry's structures reveal strong Christian elements in *Jayber Crow*, *Hannah Coulter*, *Housekeeping*, and *Gilead*, which illuminate a holistic and ecocritical mindset that is applicable to society in the

twenty-first century. An extremely beneficial study of this niche in ecocriticism could build on Christian theology that responds to biblical references to nature as indicative of a modern, environmental awareness. Though this project aims to analyze Wendell Berry and Marilynne Robinson as ecocritical and religious, the study of their texts is not complete. However, because our relationship to nature provides ways to understand our relationship to people and to God, my analysis of these two different authors imparts distinct and useful commentary on environmental preservation.

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