
Agriculture: A Way of Connection between Nature and Human in Wendell Berry's *Jayber Crow*

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Abstract:

Nature is always beautiful and human beings relish the beauty of nature in everyday life. Relationship between human beings and nature is intertwined as the existence of the people is more dependent on the nature. Their relationship is not always harmonious and sometimes tension arise between them as human activity disrupts the harmony of nature. Agriculture is a part of life and many people depend solely on farming for their living. Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow* portrays the rustic life of Port William town. Life story of the protagonist is narrated by himself in the novel and it is mainly connected to the rural town Port William and to the nature. People in Port William lead a rural life and their existence is mainly depended on the farmland and the natural environment. The present study aims to explore agriculture as a connection between humanity and natural environment with reference to Wendell Berry's *Jayber Crow*.

Keywords: Connection, farming, human, nature, sustainable living.

The novel, *Jayber Crow* by the American novelist Wendell Berry portrays the rural way of life and the deep connection of people with the land. *Jayber Crow* was first published in 2000. The novel is set in Port William, a fictional rural town in Kentucky. The novel presents the lives of people in and around Port William and their way of life which is more connected to the natural world. The traditional way of farming and the progress and effects of the technological advancement are also portrayed in the novel.

Jayber Crow narrates his life in the rural town of Port William, Kentucky, highlighting the relationship between the natural world and human existence. As a resident of Port William, Jayber has a profound connection to the land and its rhythms. He observes the changing of the seasons, the births and the deaths, plants and animals, and the ways in which the natural environment shapes the lives of people in Port William. It shows the interconnectedness of human society and the environment. The natural world is not a separate entity from human existence, but rather it is an integral part. He observes the changes happening in Port William over the decades. He also witnesses the transformations occurred in agriculture over the period of time.

Jayber's life was more connected to the nature from the very young age. He remembered the terrible winter of 1917 and 1918. In winter, heavy snow fell and the river froze. The frozen snow in the river melted when it rained and the water rose out of its banks. Big ice gorges were formed and it carried away everything on the bank and nothing was able to stand against it. Jayber's young parents fell ill during the winter in February of 1918 and they both died. Jayber went to live with Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy at Squires Landing after his parents died. Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy's house was up the hillside and their store stood below the house and above the road. He loved the river that was below the road and at the patch of bottom where the garden was. He would look at the river and he knew that though river was a barrier, it was a connection too. It connected people from different parts. Jayber's love for nature started from that very young age.

Jayber was very much affectionate with Aunt Cordie. Aunt Cordie was old and Jayber used to help her in all her activities. When he did not have work at the home he would go to the store to help Uncle Othy. When required he would do work in the farm as well along with Uncle Othy. Jayber loved to go for fishing with Uncle Othy and he also learnt to hunt from Uncle Othy. Jayber told about his fishing with Uncle Othy that "I loved to be out there in the early mornings and the late evenings, for then the river would seem spellbound, we and it caught in the same spell" (Berry 25). He also learnt certain things about gardening and farming from Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy. When Jayber was past ten years, both of them died one by one leaving Jayber alone.

Hence Jayber was sent to a church orphanage called The Good Shepherd. The institution was strict and had its own rules for the students. Jayber and other students lived a life with constraints and sufferings which were unheard. Though Jayber criticized the place, he had some fine memories from The Good Shepherd. He used to watch an old brick house with trees and brick outbuildings on the horizon while he stood in line to go into the dining hall or the school. He might be physically present in the classroom but he loved to look at a tree or a bird or a cloud or the blank sky through the window. Jayber felt lost in The Good Shepherd and sometimes he tried to escape from the place to relax. Jayber was tempted to

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outside like others boys not to the town in the night but to the countryside in the daytime to see the farmland and the nature.

Jayber found solace and meaning in the natural world surrounding him. When he was about thirteen he got out during Saturday mornings or Sunday afternoons between classes and supper in The Good Shepherd. Jayber mostly liked to go alone and when no one was there he would look into the barns and corncribs. During those visits he enjoyed the beauty of nature. Sometimes he was caught and punished but he felt that his excursions were worth it. Once he was caught by Brother Whitespade when he tried to go out for fishing in Dowd's fork stream. Jayber's love for natural environment urged him to go out and he got punishment for that which he never minded.

Jayber became a pre-ministerial student at Pigeonville college with scholarship from The Good Shepherd after his eight years stay at The Good Shepherd. He got more freedom at Pigeonville college and he got good grades in his studies. Several teachers at Pigeonville college were ordained preachers and the place had a pious atmosphere. Jayber was not comfortable in it and he asked himself how it would suit him if he was called Brother Crow in future. Jayber Crow was doubtful about himself as a preacher and went out of Pigeonville college hoping for some other profession. He went to Lexington and worked in the trotting track, cleaned the stalls, and ran errands to people there. Later he worked as a barber in the shop of old Skinner Hawes. After a stay of one year and ten months at Lexington, Jayber felt that he had no direction in his life at that place and he decided move to some other place in January 1937. He started his journey by walk and after many struggles in the heavy rain and flood, he felt that he wanted to go home. Finally, he went to Port William as he was familiar with the place from his young age.

Jayber's life in Port William started as a barber. He bought a shop using his savings and with the help of Burley Coulter and Mat Feltner. His profession as a barber made him acquainted with most of the men in Port William. He made friends and enjoyed the rural life of Port William community. In March, 1937 Burley ploughed the garden of Jayber. Jayber brought to life what Aunt Cordie taught him about gardening. He planted potatoes, onions, peas, cabbage plant, and other things. The garden was the space between the shop and the privy out by the back fence. When the days were warm, Jayber would be working or looking in the garden. When he was called by the customer for a haircut or a shave, he would attend them and then resume his work at the garden. He enjoyed gardening and loved to plant according to the seasons. His work on the soil showed his love for the nature and farming.

I became a sort of garden fanatic, and I am not over it yet. You can take a few seed peas, dry and dead, and sow them in a little furrow, and they will sprout into a row of pea vines and bear more peas . . . I would be back in my garden all the time, working or just looking. (Berry 129,130)

After some years, Jayber also worked as the grave-digger and church janitor in Port William. Jayber loved Mattie Keith but she married Troy Chatham, whom she loved. His love for Mattie was permanent but his love was unknown to anyone. He believed that he was secretly married to Mattie at heart and his later life was more concerned about the well-being of Mattie and her family. After Jayber stayed and worked in Port William for thirty-two years, he decided to leave the place and settle near the river as his shop did not meet the modern standards of the government. He left Port William town at the age of fifty-four and went to stay in the small camp house near the river that belonged to Burley Coulter. His decision to leave was deeply rooted in his disillusionment with the societal norms and the simplistic life he needed.

In his new solitude, Jayber felt a deeper connection with nature and with himself. After settling near the river, Jayber explored the woods nearby and found solace in it. Jayber's cherished memories of his childhood in the countryside, where he learned to hunt and fish, were rejuvenated after he settled near the river and it acted as a self-discovery in his later part of the life. He said "I didn't see much of the young men and the boys. (The young don't come to the river anymore, even to swim or fish. You don't often run into them hunting in the woods. Mainly, they don't go where they can't drive.)" (Berry 305). Jayber's observations with the natural world showed the importance of sustainable living with environment and he worried that young people of his age were moving away from the pleasures of nature. He understood the importance of respecting and preserving the natural world, living in harmony with it rather than seeking to dominate or exploit it. His love for nature was intertwined with his love for the Port William community and his commitment to live a simple, meaningful life rooted in the land.

Jayber realizes the nature's delicate balance between calm and turbulent power. He says "The river was a barrier and yet a connection . . . It brought things and carried them away" (Berry 18). Jayber acknowledges the ever-present vulnerability of the human against the nature. He believes that river and nature have the ability to destroy anything against it. Jayber Crow's rich relationship with the river and its surroundings illustrates the close-knit, life-changing relationship encompassing human existence and nature. Jayber's narrative celebrates the beauty and diversity of the natural world, and people's relationship with the land. From the novel it is evident that a more sustainable way of life is possible, that prioritizes local communities, traditional practices, and environmental governance.

Mattie Chatham is another character in the novel who loves nature. She was the daughter of Athey Keith and wife of Troy Chatham, and she embodies strength, resilience, and loyalty. Mattie was a source of comfort to those around her, offering guidance and support through life's joys and sorrows. She appreciated the beauty and stability of her rural life and her complete life turns to be depended on farming and her husband. She lived a life

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accordance with her husband's beliefs in farming. Mattie found joy in simple pleasures, prominently with the natural world. Her marriage life was not a happy one as Troy kept on running after his modern beliefs and hardly paid attention to the family. She took good care of her children in spite of her joyless marriage life. Mattie was struck in between her husband and her father. She suffered silently and tried to balance between both of the men. She loved nature and she wandered in the woods called the Nest Egg to get a temporary relief from her sufferings. She found solace in looking at the nature in her later stage of life.

Athey Keith was a well-known farmer in Port William. He practiced a kind of small-scale, diversified agriculture that respects the land and its rhythms. Athey's farming methods were not driven by profit maximization but by a sense of administration and a commitment to the balanced environment. He valued traditional knowledge and practices, working in harmony with nature rather than seeking to dominate it. His farm was not just a place of production but a place of beauty and spiritual significance, reflecting his deep love for the land and his understanding of its interconnectedness with human life.

Athey Keith was one of the best farmers in the Port William neighborhood in his time. He had five hundred acres, nearly all in the river bottom, nearly all arable except for the hollows and the timber patches. Athey raised tobacco and corn, followed by wheat or barley, and then by clover and grass. He had cattle and sheep and hogs. (Berry 178)

Athey Keith symbolizes the deep connection of farmers with the land and the traditional way of life. He is a farmer who practices small-scale, diversified agriculture, respecting the land's rhythms and prioritizing sustainability over profit. Athey's character is defined by his quiet wisdom, his deep understanding of nature, and his commitment to his community. He serves as a mentor and friend to Jayber, embodying the values of a life lived in harmony with nature and tradition. Athey Keith's way of farming is an example of self-sufficient economy.

Troy Chatham was a young man in conflict with the traditional practices of farming and was against the rhythms of nature. He was portrayed as an ambitious young farmer who sought to modernize and expand his agricultural operations. He married Mattie Keith, Athey Keith's daughter, which connected him to one of the town's prominent families in Port William. Troy Chatham's farming methods relied on chemicals and other industrial farming inputs. Troy implemented modern techniques in farming and believed in large-scale farming. He adopted industrial farming techniques, moving away from traditional methods which his father-in-law had been practising. He did not want to leave out any free land and he continuously expanded his landholdings and farming operations. He would say "“Never let a quarter's worth of equity stand idle. Use it or borrow against it”" (Berry 179). Troy was in conflict with Athey and his farming methods. He was a complex character driven by his own

vision of progress discarding the traditional methods of farming. He was obsessed by a desire for progress and profit, at the expense of the land as he pledged it to get loan. Later he was encircled in the web of loan and debt, and he was in need to continue farming to earn and pay the debts. His ambitious expansion led him to take on significant debt to finance new equipment and land purchases.

Troy Chatham embodied the transformative forces reshaping agriculture and rural life in the fictional town of Port William, Kentucky. His character served as a lens through which Berry examines the broader societal shifts occurring in mid-20th century rural America. The transformation was represented through the decline of small-scale farming and the rise of large-scale industrial agriculture. One of Troy's defining traits was his unbridled ambition. As a young farmer, he had grand aspirations to revolutionize agricultural practices in Port William. This ambition drove him to pursue modernization aggressively, setting him apart from the more traditional farmers in the community. Troy's eagerness to embrace change reflected a broader generational shift in attitudes towards farming and rural life.

Troy's marriage to Mattie Keith, the daughter of the respected Athey Keith, was significant as it served as a symbolic bridge between the old ways and the new. Troy's approach stood in contrast to the more traditional, small-scale farming practices that had long defined Port William's agricultural landscape. Troy's adoption of modern machinery, chemical fertilizers, and expansive farming represented a shift in farming philosophy. Troy never worried about loans and was pushed into endless debts. When Mary was in death-bed, Troy to meet his needs cut down the trees for timber that was long protected by Athey Keith and Mattie. Troy's struggle with debt tells the importance of financial prudence in farming.

The law of the farm was in the balance between crops (including hay and pasture) and livestock. The farm would have no more livestock than it could carry without strain. No more land would be plowed for grain crops than could be fertilized with manure from the animals . . . this was a conserving principle; it strictly limited both the amount of land that would be plowed and the amount of supplies that would have to be bought. (Berry 185)

Troy's methods and ambitions frequently brought him into conflict with the established values and practices of the Port William community. This conflict was not merely ideological but also practical, as Troy's industrial approach to farming often clashed with the natural rhythms of the land and the cooperative spirit that had long defined rural life in the area. These conflicts serve to highlight the cultural and ecological costs of rapid agricultural modernization. Troy's journey explores how the pursuit of efficiency and profit in agriculture can lead to unintended consequences, including environmental degradation, community fragmentation, and personal hardship.

People have begun to neglect their connection to the land as industrialization and urbanization increase. This disconnection not only affects the natural world but also the human experience with the nature. Jayber's connection with nature shows his concern for the environment and the people depending on it. Jayber's fellow people in Port William are interdependent and mutually supportive, with each person contributing to the well-being of the community. *Jayber Crow* portrays how agriculture and lives of the people are interconnected and it urges the preservation of farming practises. The novel also explores the intersections between human and environmental experiences insisting the readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world.

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