

Western Kentucky University

From the Selected Works of Wes Berry

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Wendell Berry (Encyclopedia Entry)

Wes Berry, *Western Kentucky University*



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Berry, Wendell

(b. 1934) POET, NOVELIST, AND ESSAYIST.

Wendell Berry, author of more than 30 books of essays, novels, poems, and short stories, farms and writes in Henry County, Ky., his native ground. Berry was born on 5 August 1934 in New Castle, Ky. He earned B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Kentucky and attended Stanford University as a Wallace Stegner Writing Fellow in 1958-59. In 1960 his first novel, *Nathan Coulter*, was published. Berry taught at New York University for two years before returning to his home state, where he taught at the University of Kentucky from 1964 to 1977. In 1965 Berry and his wife, Tanya, moved to Lanes Landing Farm in Port Royal-a small farming community near the Kentucky River-where they continue to live. In their four decades of permanent dwelling, the Berrys thus model the life-style that Wendell preaches in his prolific literary work.

In his life and writing, Berry advocates sustainable agriculture and the importance of reestablishing healthy local cultures and economies. His cultural criticism, best expressed in his numerous essay collections, challenges the destructive habits of contemporary life-styles, citing as especially problematic the transience of human populations following World War II. The habit of transience fosters an attitude that human beings can avoid responsibility for their actions by moving on to new places and other relationships, therefore abetting a culture of abuse. As a rejoinder to the irresponsibility that can accompany transience, Berry advocates fidelity to places and people. Berry's belief in the value of particular places encompasses the nonhuman world as well as the human, as he expresses in the essay "Health Is Membership": "I believe that the community-in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures- is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms." We will best care for the world, Berry says, if we love the world; and people are most likely to love places they know intimately. Berry's alternative to the widespread destruction of land and human communities in modern life is, therefore, the regeneration of local cultures and economies. "The real work of planet-saving," he writes, "will be small, humble, and humbling, and (insofar as it involves love) rewarding. Its jobs will be too many to count, too many to report, too many to be publicly noticed or rewarded, too small to make anyone rich and famous."

While Christian values inform Berry's work, Berry's brand of Christianity is not doctrinaire but pragmatic. In an essay "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," Berry writes: "[O]ur destruction of nature is not just bad stewardship, or stupid economics, or a betrayal of family responsibility; it is the most horrid blasphemy. It is flinging God's gifts into His face." Berry criticizes the exploitative American economy, defined by global trade and absentee ownership, and encourages consumers to secede from this destructive economic system by buying good-quality locally made products that honor the materials of Creation. An artist, Berry claims, does "good work" when he uses the materials of the earth in a respectful, sustainable manner.

Berry has remained faithful to his place and to the central themes of community, land, stewardship, and marriage through his four decades of farming and writing. The title of Berry's essay collection, *Another Turn of the Crank* (1995), is a humorous acknowledgment by the writer that he, the "crank," is taking yet another "turn" on these important themes. Insisting that human communities require wholesome food, water, and air to be healthy, Berry continues to present a vision of "right livelihood" –a moral vision that requires responsibility and restraint in economic life.

WES BERRY

Martinsville, Indiana

Wendell Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank*
(1995), *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*
(1993), *The Unsettling of America:
Culture and Agriculture* (1977).