

LESSONS ON SUSTAINABILITY IN THE POEMS OF WENDELL BERRY

Aasha N.P. R & D, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, India.
Dr. Associate Prof (Rtd) Reena J. Andrews

Abstract : Wendell Berry pursues the theme of sustainable agriculture and human development through ecological conservation in his poems. Tracing his heritage to writers like Emerson and Thoreau who speak to us of a simple way of life grounded in concern for each other and our planet, his essays, poems, and novels offer hope for the earth and its people. Berry's message in almost all of his work is that we must eschew linear notions of progress in favour of cyclical ones rooted in the ideal of 'sustainability' and that we should not separate our being from Nature. In other words, his poems remind us that we must identify with our place of origin, and that we must love and care for it.

Keywords: Agriculture, Mad Farmer, Nature, Sustainability

Wendell Berry is an American poet, essayist, cultural critic and environmental activist who thinks of himself as a farmer-poet whose work, rooted in the Thoreauesque tradition, communicates through his literary works the knowledge of the history of agriculture and man's connectedness to his environment. He has written several novels including *Nathan Coulter* (1960) and *A Place on Earth* (1967), many books of essays, beginning with *The Long-Legged House* (1969), and several books of poetry including *The Broken Ground* (1964), *Findings* (1969), *Openings* (1968), and *Farming: A Handbook* (1970). His work deals with the things closest to his heart—the Kentucky landscape, its inhabitants, and his grandfather's farm there.

Berry is a staunch advocate of sustainable agriculture, employing small farmers whose connection to their land is hereditary as well as economic. Berry's argument is that the corporations and machines have no sense of attachment to the land as they are embodiments of a mechanical approach to life wherein efficiency and productivity replace care and love. The deals that Berry espouses in his poetry are also directly connected to the notion of sustainability. The central theme of his poems is the return to simplicity and living in tune with the earth. Berry's ideas echo those of Emerson and Thoreau, but his message is more personal and urges us to engage with the issue more urgently. In the essay "The Loss of the Future", Berry says:

We have reached a point at which we must either consciously desire and choose and determine the future of the earth or submit to such an involvement in our destructiveness that the earth, and ourselves with it, must certainly be destroyed. And we have come to this at a time when it is hard, if not impossible, to foresee a future that is not terrifying. (46)

Berry's anthology of essays *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* is a critique of the progressive alienation of the American from his land. Berry reminds his business-minded fellow beings that they do not have to sacrifice quality for abundance or rely on chemicals that create new problems. He envisions a new future which can be obtained without abusing the earth and what inhabits it. He adds that man is obsessed with the linear notion of progress. But nature works in a cyclical pattern. Man aspires to reach greater levels of growth by bringing Nature under control, but he forgets that he is paving the way for his own annihilation. Berry reminds us that when we fail to view things in long terms, we tend to sacrifice health of the world for our fugacious pleasures. He writes: "Everything in the Creation is related to everything else and dependent on everything else" (46).

Berry argues that many of the American attitudes about life and the earth are based on the vision of the frontier forefathers who saw the natural world as an enemy to be conquered and tamed. Many of Berry's poems raise rallying cries against the way our earth has been abused. In *Vision*, from his collection titled *Clearing*, he remembers the farmland of his youth. He recollects how attached his grandfather was to his

property and how the love of the old man for all beings big and small instilled in him fresh hopes for a world where man could be reunited with mother earth. He states that though the majority of the people approach the land with what he calls the “conquistador” mentality; there are still people who worship the earth.

In “The Silence” in *Farming: A Handbook* (1970), he asks perhaps the most important question that his oeuvre sets out to tackle: “What must a man do to be at home in the world?”(67). He answers introspectively that one finds out personal solutions for the three questions that anyone has to face: the question of character, agriculture and culture. Berry claims that we are living in the midst of an exploitative revolution bankrolled by wealthy corporations whose sole aim is to prey on our habitats by donning the veneer of civilization. Agriculture, which is our first culture, has become mere business. He argues that our being and culture are inextricably entwined and that any response on our part that does not address the needs of the place we are rooted in destroys us in the long run. Culture is at the same time the source and product of agriculture. Berry tells us that a culture is not a collection of relics and ornaments, but a practical necessity and warns us that its corruption brings about calamity.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, states that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has created and culture is these webs” (34). Edmund Hall defines culture as “a series of situational models for behaviour and thought” (56). However Berry shies away from the academic confusions over the definition of ‘culture’ and appropriates the term to mean a state of mind marked by general well-being. It is evident that Berry’s ideal is the Greek model of *sophrosyne* or the excellence of character that forms the basis for qualities such as such as temperance, moderation, prudence, purity, and self-control.

Wendell Berry’s work is an analysis of man’s relationship to the land and his life constitutes a comprehensive attempt to reintegrate man into the fabric of communal harmony which comes from viewing progress qualitatively in terms of the health of the ecosystem and not quantitatively as complex organizational structures. The proponents of progress and development might rally against Berry for his manifest rejection of the modern way of life, but it should be remembered that Berry is not an armchair critic who preaches his commandments from a safe distance, but an environmental activist whose work is intertwined with his own life. Berry’s life—his vocation as a poet, his activism, the farm work that he does and his status as a family man are all strands of the interdependence that his poems speak of. He is eventually someone who is as much at one with himself as he is with the rest of the world and Nature. His writing is above all a brave and inspiring attempt to throw light on the inter-relationships and inter-dependencies of man and the natural world.

Berry questions the view that new ideas and technologies can enhance the quality of life. Although his criticism might sound as counter intuitive and obscurantist to neo-modern liberals who insist on the use of technology to overcome the limitations imposed on us by biology, Berry backs up his claims with ideas ranging from Romantic ideology to economic theory. In the first place, he finds fault with American modernism for coercing the youth to disencumber themselves of the baggage of the past and the specifics of geography so as to discover themselves. Berry argues that when the individual divests himself of place and past, he severs the strands that connect him to his environment. Thus unmoored from his background, the individual disintegrates into splinters of alienated identities. Berry stresses that we have not yet found ourselves in our homes or communities and he motivates us to rebuild our broken relationships to past and future generations. Criticizing the Romanticism of the nineteenth century that turns a blind eye to economic facts and relationships, Berry proposes a form of agrarian Romanticism that transforms the rustic Romantic ideology of Wordsworth into a practice of responsibility and fidelity.

Berry’s poetry is grounded in his memories as a boy in his homeland. He says he was overwhelmed by nostalgia when he chose to settle down in the metropolis away from his childhood home in Kentucky where his grandfather had a farm. His longing for a childhood lost in the drifts of time was so much that he used to fantasize going back to his homestead even when he knew that his past was irretrievably lost to him. That is one reason why Wendell Berry’s poetry teems with metaphors of recollection and symbols that posit

man in a two-way relationship to Nature and his fellow-beings. Berry argues that by developing a sincere physical relationship with a place and its accumulated history, we will be able to cultivate an identity that comes from accepting the holistic interdependence between the individual human body and the community of human and non-human life that surrounds it. The concept of finding oneself, also implies cultivating a sense of generational continuity. In other words, it involves a shunning of modern ideals in favour of Romantic conservatism marked by notions of indebtedness to community, place and imagination.

Berry argues that we have handed over our individual responsibilities to big corporations in the hope that they will save the planet, but these corporations have turned our earth topsy-turvy. In the poem “A Timbered Choir” taken from his *Selected Works*, he writes alluding to these corporations:

Their passing had obliterated the graves and the monuments
of those who had died in pursuit of the objective
and who had long ago forever been forgotten, according
to the inevitable rule that those who have forgotten forget
that they have forgotten. Men, women, and children now pursued the objective
as if nobody ever had pursued it before. (13)

It is our collective responsibility to care for our ailing planet. Berry says that the real work of change should begin at home with the help of our neighbours. Yet he is not against organizations; he only reminds us that there is no public crisis which is not also at the same time private.

In the poems in *The Country of Marriage*, Berry assumes the persona of the Mad Farmer, who is a reflection of the poet's own psyche. The Mad Farmer laments that “to be sane in a mad time / is bad for the brains, worse / for the heart” (67). He speaks with derision about technocracy and extols the humility of the man who returns to the pleasures of the land. The Mad Farmer can be compared with Old Beechum, who appears in Berry's novel, *The Memory of Old Jack*. Old Jack, who is an aggregate of the memories Berry has about his grandfather, is a retired farmer who has lived close to the earth for ninety two years. He tended his Kentucky farm with care and watched his land go into other greedy hands. Berry makes Old Jack's memories poignant by imbuing them with a sense of personal loss. When Old Jack dies, Berry writes of how he keeps up the cyclical patterns in Nature

And in the hush of it they are aware of something that passed from them and now returns: his stubborn biding with them to the end, his keeping of faith with them who would live after him, and what perhaps none of them has yet thought to call his gentleness, his long gentleness toward them and toward his place where they are at work. Old Jack dies but his influence lives on. He has become a part of the cycle of life. (167)

Berry echoes the same concern in his poem “The Man Born to Farming”:

The grower of trees, the gardener, the man born to farming,
whose hands reach into the ground and sprout,
to him the soil is a divine drug. He enters into death
yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen the light lie down
in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn. (76)

In “The Wheel”, Berry sings of the eternal process of “birth, growth, maturity, death and decay.” Nothing is ever lost “for it takes circles/of years, of birth and death/ for patterns, eternal form/visible in

mystery” (45). A person’s life passes into the flow of Life. And life always repeats itself through myriad varying forms. But modern man is obsessed with the idea of linearity and fails to see the cosmic connections that sustain the web of life. Berry argues that it is time we supplanted visions of annihilation with those of hope and sustainability.

Wendell Berry is a poet who might come across to most as old-fashioned, but the wisdom he imparts through his poetry is timeless. He gives us apocalyptic visions of a global environmental crisis, which he sees as originating from America’s cultural crisis. In his poetry, he reminds us to be beware of the justice of Nature, to understand that there can be no successful human economy apart from Nature or in defiance of Nature, to understand that no amount of education can overcome the innate limits of human intelligence and responsibility, to have a sense of community and to put the interest of the community first, to love your neighbours, to realize that this world is a gift to us, and to find work that does minimal damage to the environment. He tries to make us aware that by making things always bigger and more intricate, we make them both more vulnerable in themselves and dangerous to ourselves. Berry’s artistic and agricultural visions, which tie into each other, are then contrary to corporate values and the business ethics of capitalist organizations who focus on amassing gains. He is vociferous in his stance against those who have blighted the land and paved the way for deforestation, pollution, and the destruction of habitats worldwide.

As a poetic explanation of what agribusiness is and what the mechanization of farming is doing to destroy the American community, Berry’s works do stand out from the rest. Speaking of community in *The Long-Legged House*, Berry explains, “A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives” (61). He stresses that a traditional farmer will always adapt his practices to the needs of the land’s primal character (92). Successful and sustainable agriculture is possible only by maintaining a cyclic vision, one attuned with Nature, rather than a linear vision; one seeking conquest of Nature. The more a person is removed from the substance of his work, Berry argues, the greater is his tendency to neglect or to ignore it (Continuous Harmony 53). He says that while a traditional farmer will survey his fields out of interest and love, an agricultural company will do the same out of business interests. He adds that traditional care requires a comprehensive, intimate, often passionate knowledge of the Nature of one’s place (82).

Berry claims that in a state where man is bereft of his natural affiliations, he becomes a machine. He also identifies specialization and expertise as the offshoots of a misguided cultural policy and argues that education in its proper sense brings man closer to land and not otherwise (Hall 49). What happens when a community moves towards greater specialization and mechanization is that it becomes more and more complex, but less and less structured. Finally it disintegrates when the strands that sustain the subtle relations between body and spirit, the past and the future, man and soil, and life and death are severed (63). Thus it can be seen that Berry’s poems espouse sustainability as the Holy Grail of agriculture. He says that any form of production that does not take into consideration the needs of posterity poses a threat to the interconnectedness of life. He argues that the current natural resource crisis is a direct consequence of our character, and thus the only real hope lies in the change of attitudes. Such a change must begin at the local level. He says that man cannot separate himself from Nature. He can only live in relation to it: like a conqueror or like Thoreau or Emerson, who lived in tune with Nature. Berry asks us to consider what path we must choose for our own and our planet’s collective future.

Works Cited

- Berry, Wendell. *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural*. New York: Harcourt, 1972. Print.
- . *Farming: A Hand Book*. San Francisco: North Point, 1983. Print.
- . *A Country of Marriage: Poems*. New York: Counterpoint, 2013. Print.

---. *The Long-Legged House*. New York: Harcourt, 1969. Print.

---. *The Memory of Old Jack*. New York: Counterpoint, 1999. Print.

---. *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*. New York: Counterpoint, 1999. Print.

---. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. 1977. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1986. Print.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays*. New York. Basic, 1973. Print.

Hall, Edward. *Beyond Culture*: Garden City. Anchor, 2003. Print.

