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An Environmentalist view of Kentucky and its Natural “Suitors” by Literary Analysis

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Cover Page Footnote

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Literary Analysis

In the book “Divine Right’s Trip”, by Gurney Norman, the author provides a more modern, psychedelic-age epic, where the traditional theme of homecoming, often witnessed in Greek epics like the Odyssey, makes a connection with environmentalism. One reason for the unique combination of these themes is the effect created by a specific appeal for environmental support accompanied with the return of the main character, Divine Right (D.R.), to his small hometown in Eastern Kentucky where coal mining remains the prevalent employer. Upon his homecoming to Kentucky, D.R constructs a greater bond with the environment around him. Yet, rather than a return with conquest and victory- such as when Odysseus slew his wife’s suitors and reclaimed his kingdom –D.R. finds polluted rivers and strip-mined mountains resulting from the mining companies; which by their relationship with the people and the land, may be considered to be the suitors of Kentucky’s environment. Unlike Odysseus, D.R. cannot purge these suitors from his homeland, because they are also responsible for the economic sustenance of the people. In spite of a suffering environment, there often still exists a deep-rooted connection between these communities, their people, and nature, as exhibited by Divine Right. The urge for conservation, which may result from such a connection, is a sentiment felt among many of Kentucky’s residents who have lived with and experienced the ecological prowess of our state, and now continue to witness its deterioration alongside the economic destruction of their hometowns. Despite these sentiments, which are similar to those expressed by Gurney Norman in “Divine Rights Trip”, the force that continues to decimate these regions of the state remains persistent because of its relationship with the people as a “suitor” of Kentucky’s natural environment.

In order to unearth the details of the relationship between Kentucky's land and its suitors, or to begin seeking solutions for it, we must first understand the relationship between the coal mining companies and Kentucky's people. We may begin to accomplish this by examining the history and economy of rural Kentucky itself. From a naturalist perspective, there are few who can characterize this dynamic as well as Kentucky writer and author Wendell Berry. When describing the conditions present in coal mining towns across the state, Berry writes, "In my country, for example, as recently as the middle of the last century, every town was a thriving economic and social center. Now all of them are either dying or dead. If there is any concern about this in the state's institutions, I have yet to hear about it. The people in these towns and their tributary landscapes once were supported by their usefulness to one another. Now that mutual usefulness has been removed, and the people relate to one another increasingly as random particles" (Berry 53-54). This removal of this "usefulness" is the result of economic complications and failure of the coal companies, or failure caused from the coal companies' negative effect on these regions. Berry further describes this economic situation when he cites a letter written by Anne Caudill, the widow of Harry Caudill, who was an Eastern Kentucky advocate that studied the conditions of the region. The letter states, "The Lexington Herald Leader... published a major piece on the effects of the current downturn in the coal industry...Perhaps the most telling statement quoted came from Karin Slone of Knott County whose husband lost his job in the mines...found a job in Alabama and the family had to leave their home. Karin said, "There should have been greater efforts to diversify the economy earlier". My heart goes out to those families who yet again are being battered by a major slump in available jobs...they are not being exploited but discarded"(Berry 54). He then describes the reason for this "tragedy" as the industrialization of the region, whose "economy is dependent on

creating jobs” (Berry,55) which are not geographically specific, not dependent on who is working the job, or what the job is. He describes this as “a movement of people off the land and into jobs and consumption...in all the regions of rural Kentucky, just as it has happened or is happening in rural places all over the world”(Berry,59). This “movement” is evident in “Divine Rights Trip”, when D.R’s family moved to Cincinnati to find employment, and it is the same reason why many small farm and business owners have now been replaced throughout the region. To this, Berry poses the question, “How can it be that people of rural Kentucky can first become dependent upon officially favored industries, the “job-creating industries” that their politicians are always talking about “bringing in,” and then by those industries be discarded?”(Berry, 56). He provides himself with one answer to this question when he states, “Our many attempts to confront the political machine that authorizes the industrial machinery have not been answered at all. If money is speech, as our dominant politicians believe, then we may say that all our little speeches have been effectively answered with big money, which speaks powerfully though in whispers”(Berry,58). It is because of this historical foundation and continued political support of the industrialization of coal that the people of Eastern Kentucky are subjected to its employment; where they are then, as Berry stated, “ ‘exploited’ by an employer or ‘discarded’ by an employer when the economy falters” (Berry, 56). When D.R. becomes lost in Kentucky, he encounters a coal miner who expresses a similar attitude towards the industry. He speaks of man’s ability to live and profit from the land being stolen by the coal companies when he states, “Got cows, good garden and a spring, man can live good there if he’s willing to work. But they’s this outfit owns the coal rights underneath, and they’re on their way to get it. Eighty miles long, that bench is...big old eighty miles long snake killing everything in its path. It’s that way everywhere around here. Some folks call it the end of time but me, I just

call it a bunch of goddamn criminals out tearing up the world” (Norman, 193). Because of this situation, the only choice for many citizens to find employment and remain in Eastern Kentucky is to work for the very industrialized companies that are destroying the environment, which was once a local resource. As Kentucky’s natural “suitor”, the mining industry presents itself as the most appealing and practical option for the local economy, providing the most significant stable employment; yet it not only mines the minerals of the land for profit but also undermines the people it employs.

The suitor relationship is ironically parasitic. This state of industrialism clearly poses an economic threat to developing a supportive connection between Kentucky’s people and her environment, and it is a threat that Berry directly addresses. He states, "All of us who are living owe our lives directly to our connection to the land. I am not talking about the connection that is implied by such a term as “environmentalism”. I am talking about the connection that we make economically, by work, by living, by making a living. This connection, as we see every day, is going to be either familiar, affectionate, and saving, or distant, uncaring and destructive. The loss of a saving connection between the land and the people begins and continues with the destruction of locally based household economies.”(Berry, 58-59). By causing a disassociation between the people and their land, industrialism has converted a producing environment into a consuming one. This diminishes people’s economic abilities for practical utilization of their own natural resources and overarches the economic will of the coal company over the economic power of the people. In this way, the “suitor” gains full control of both the environment and economy, while local towns slowly continue to decay.

I can personally relate to an example of this local decay by the faltering of industry. Both of my parents grew up in Greensburg, Kentucky, during which time the primary income of the

city (apart from agriculture in the county) was manufacturing. When the factories in the surrounding area shut down, businesses started to decline as a result, which led many in Green County to move elsewhere. This has created further decline among local businesses who still cannot generate significant inter-commerce to become reliant on each other. This is evident if you are to walk into Ron's Hardware (of course on a day when the doors are open). It was once a bustling business supplying a healthy consumer base with whatever supplies required, but now it's foreclosed and little more than a popular meeting place for the same old men to "shoot the breeze". Those old men can't afford to buy the store, and no one else wants to. The same slow-business situation as Ron's Hardware declined could be imagined from Ms. Geodesy's store in "Divine Right's Trip" where, "Most days the store was half full of people waiting on their mail, five, six, sometimes seven of them, sitting in chairs or leaning against soft drink cooler waiting and talking"(Norman,213). Now, most Greensburg locals even drive to nearby Campbellsville to shop for goods at Wal-Mart, while years ago this would have been considered a ridiculous notion. In some cases, though, places such as Norman's "Finley County" could be at a slight local economic advantage over towns like Greensburg because of their isolation. While hundreds of cars on Old Greensburg Road travel between Greensburg and Campbellsville daily, when D.R. turned onto highway 666 he, "went almost twenty miles without seeing another car and he began to wonder if he had got on the wrong road somehow." Both situations have negative connotation; Route 666 isolates profit in Finely County which is then directed and controlled by coal company without any other competition, while Old Greensburg Road seems to direct all profits towards economic opportunities away from Greensburg. Even my family, which previously occupied Green County since the early 1800's, is the first generation to live in Campbellsville. My father still enjoys recounting tales of the local grocery that was once run by

my Grandparents, and was always busy during the week as one of the town's primary local suppliers for almost every need; essentially a locally resourced Wal-Mart. Now, its replacement is the Los-Agaves Mexican restaurant, which is likely the only restaurant on the town square not considered "fast-food" whose budget at least breaks-even. In short, Greensburg is now less profitable than other cities surrounding it like Campbellsville, so there is little to attract industries for settling there and is even more difficult to form a business. Local economic support was not always poor when it remained centered on local produce. In fact, long ago when our State Legislature was determining what city would suit its capital, Greensburg was nearly the choice, but came up second. Its geographically central location and position along the Green River and the old railroad provided a preferable environment for collaboration, along with a well-established economy based on supported agrarian practices with the land. The state, during this time, understood that Greensburg could develop further to support a larger community with an economic expansion of those practices. As Greensburg began to industrialize in the future and later suffer economically, the movement of people towards employment elsewhere separated the economy from its reliance on utilizing the land. As a result, the people of Greensburg have also lost their connection with their immediate environment and with nature -just as it has often happened in the coal mining regions of Eastern and Western Kentucky.

When groups of people lose their connection to the environment, so does the next generation. Throughout my childhood, the continued exposure to the Green River and my family's farm in Green County remains a very significant factor in inspiring a desire within me to conserve the environment; and it is because those natural resources have been made personal. This is a key topic of discussion in Richard Louv's book "The Last Child in the Woods". Louv provides details of a child's unique relationship with nature as one that inspires "creativity in a child by

demanding visualization and the full use of the senses.”(Louv,17). He continues in this analysis, stating, “Given a chance, a child will bring the confusion of the world to the woods, wash it in the creek, turn it over to see what lives on the unseen side of that confusion...In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace. These are some of the utilitarian values of nature, but at a deeper level, nature gives itself to children—for its own sake, not as a reflection of a culture...When considering children in nature, one hungers for a richer description...Snyder is drawn to poet John Milton’s phrase, “a wilderness of sweets.”...A ‘wilderness of sweets’ is like the billions of herring or mackerel babies in the ocean, the cubic miles of krill, wild prairie grass seed . . . all the incredible fecundity of small animals and plants, feeding the web,” he (John Milton) explains. When we think of children and the gifts of nature, this...more bountiful understanding is helpful...Though we often see ourselves as separate from nature, humans are also part of that wildness.”(Louve, 17-19). In today’s age, the connection made between children and nature is not only under threat by industrialization in areas such as Eastern Kentucky but now also by the advancement and invasiveness of technology. This is even more troubling by the fact that the divide between children and nature prevents what psychological research suggest is a “necessity” for development even through adulthood (Louve, 12). There is certainly not a war “against” coal, but if there is a war “for” the environment, then it’s being fought on at least these two fronts. In “Divine Right’s Trip”, D.R. certainly has exposure to nature through his wandering lifestyle as an adult, while having more limited, yet cherished exposure to nature as a child. Leaving Finely County for Cincinnati created a need for regular exposure to nature, but D.R. and his family “came home every weekend for the next year, and almost every weekend for two years after that” (Norman, 178). He recollects a personal connection to nature through those travels passing

over “Big Hill”, the “precise dividing line between the flat lands and Appalachian Mountains known as the Cumberland Plateau.”(Norman, 177). Norman describes the significance of Big Hill as being “ a special place on the ground, and...an important feature in the landscape of D.R.’s mind as well, because it reminded him so much of his father, Daniel Boone. The Boone legend in Kentucky...has it that it was from Big Hill that Boone got his first look at the lush Kentucky plain, the fabled garden spot that had been the object of his fantasy and quest. When D.R. would ride over the Big Hill with his father, his father never failed to refer to Boone and the Wilderness Road. D.R. had no idea how many times that might have been, but surely it was in the thousands” (Norman, 178). By continued exposure to nature, D.R. developed a greater personal, historical, and even a family-based connection with the land, which would have had a significant psychological effect in benefitting his development as a child and building a stronger connection with nature that could remain through adulthood. The psychological benefits a child gains for a sustained, stable development, are evidenced when D.R. was lost in the wilderness and driven nearly to suicide. The book states,” He was on his way back to set fire to Urge and commit suicide when a rear tire hit a chughole so hard it knocked something loose and caused the motor and headlights to quit, right there in the middle of dark nowhere. D.R. didn’t even get out to see what was wrong. He just sat there behind the wheel staring through the windshield at the black shapes of mountains all around” (Norman, 184). It may be entirely possible that D.R.’s history of being connected with nature created a long lasting psychological “schema” from his childhood development that triggered a positive reaction to the environment when he gazed upon the mountains (Passer, Smith, 321-322). If D.R. had not journeyed back to Kentucky so frequently with his family, his behavior, perhaps, could have actually progressed to a suicidal degree. This may be considered an extreme example; however, there is no question that a

dissolve of the connection between children and their natural environment can have adverse, lasting personal effects. When families must flee the rural areas like Eastern Kentucky, and seek economic sustenance in more sprawling, urban environments, without a continued interaction with nature, we cannot expect the children of these families to experience such a critical natural exposure. When combined with the intrusiveness of technology among young persons (which often takes the place of spending time in nature), the likelihood for young people to retain a true sense of and respect for nature, or develop an attitude of environmental conservation, ultimately declines. This is why continued human integration with the very land which the coal companies destroy, and the values and practices in the management of this land, must play a role in implementing a solution to restore the people and their economy.

With the relationship between the “suitor” and the people now characterized, we are left with the question of how to solve the economic and natural disconnect problems created by that relationship? Multiple solutions, proposed by both state and federal legislature, have attempted to solve these environmental problems politically, though many argue that in order for actual positive economic and environmental change to occur, it takes the leadership of the people themselves. Indeed, a grassroots type of movement, of which Wendell Berry has certainly been a part. In urging the necessity to save the land by saving its people, Berry offers multiple solutions to restore this connection, which include accepting only specific help only from the centers of power, showing local loyalty, gaining more skilled and careful people in land-using economies for the sake of our home places, and confronting the issue of prejudice (Berry,64-66). For the political environment of today, Berry’s last solution is one of particular interest. He details how many rural Kentuckians remain “prejudiced against themselves”, and believe they are not worthy to stand up to the progressing coal companies due to their own ignorance or supposed

shortcomings; often suggested by the term “hillbilly”. Berry concludes that if we “keep faithful to our land and our people, both together, never apart, then we will always find the right work to do, and our long, necessary, difficult, happy effort will continue”(Berry,67). D.R. provides us with an example of faith in the land when he decides to take part in his uncle’s “scheme to save the world with rabbit shit.”(Norman, 255). This is described as Emmit’s “scheme to reclaim the soil of the homeplace that had been killed by the mining on the slopes above the farm”. Emmit and D.R.’s will to restore the land “for the sake of our home places” is evidenced as Norman writes, “it cost him, but the project was important to Emmit...and in a year’s time, he had redeemed a patch twenty feet by ten, and it was now growing...as the garden expanded and the rabbit population increased...Emmit wanted still more worms...D.R. intended to finish that pit and perhaps build another one...If Estelle would come...They could have five hundred hutches full and 10 million worms at work in their manure...a thousand hutches...one standing on every 5 square yards of that old ruined mountain” (Norman,279-281). In order to restore the local economy, this ambitious behavior by D.R. to restore nature must be replicated. It is quite ironic that the very nature destroyed by coal companies can provide a greater source of economic sustenance and opportunity.

It is certain that the solution to purge Kentucky’s natural suitors lies in turning back to nature for sustainable utilization, and thus, forming a reconnection with the people. The complex relationship between the people of Kentucky’s “coal country” and the industrial economy is deep-rooted, yet manageable through shifting our focus back to supporting land-reliant economies and internalizing local communities. This will only occur if the people are willing to rise up and take a stand to work for the environment, just as D.R. has in fiction and Wendell Berry in reality. The destructive suitor relationship between the coal companies and the people

must end, and be replaced with one of faith in the land and the community. By doing this, we will find a sustenance in a true homecoming... a return to nature itself.

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