

AGRARIANISM

“Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”

Thomas Jefferson
Notes on the State of Virginia (1784)

“Agrarians: Literally people living in an agricultural society, or espousing the merits of such a society, as the Physiocrats did. In this sense most espousers of pastoral traditions are *agrarians*. Thomas Jefferson was a noted early American *agrarian*. In literary history and criticism, however, the term is usually applied to a group of Southern American writers who published in Nashville, Tennessee, between 1922 and 1925, *The Fugitive*, a little magazine of poetry and some criticism championing agrarian regionalism but attacking ‘the old high-caste Brahmins of the Old South.’ Most of its contributors were associated with Vanderbilt University; among them were John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren and Merrill Moore. In the 1930s, championing an agrarian economy as opposed to that of industrial capitalism, they issued a collective manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand* [1930]. They were active in the publication between 1933 and 1937 of *The American Review*, a socioeconomic magazine that also analyzed contemporary literature. They found an effective literary organ in *The Southern Review* (1935-1942) under the editorship of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. In addition to their poetry and novels, the *Agrarians* were among the founders of the New Criticism.”

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon
A Handbook to Literature, sixth edition
(Macmillan 1936-92)

Until 1800 about 95% of all Americans lived on farms and it was not until 1919 that 51% lived in urban areas. Overall, most Americans have been Christian farmers. Hence, a synthesis of *agrarian pastoralism* and *Christian pastoralism* is by far the most important expression of pastoral values in American history. In *agrarian pastoralism* the “good place” is the farm, or the land, and the good shepherd is the farmer. What Leo Marx calls the ‘counterforces’ of the City on the one hand and the Wilderness on the other are particularly clear (*The Machine in the Garden*). Of all the *pastoralisms* the agrarian is wed to the strongest *puritanism*, because of the hard work required of farmers and their wives.

In America, though pastoralism is expressed earlier, as by Anne Bradstreet in the 17th century, the first pastoral classic of some length is *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), by Crèvecoeur, whose vision is comparable to that of the most influential American *agrarian*, Thomas Jefferson. Subsequent *agrarian pastoralists* in American literature include James Fenimore Cooper, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, Sidney Lanier, Edwin Markham, Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, Louis Bromfield, Robert Frost, Willa Cather, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Andrew Lytle, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Robert Penn Warren, Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate and Flannery O’Connor. Since the 20th century the agrarian tradition has been opposed by urban liberals, who favor atheist Postmodernist fantasies set in cities.

Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* (1782) idealize Nature and the pastoral agrarian life of the farmer. That is because it was ideal in his own experience. He believed his life on an American farm was as close to living in Eden as was possible on earth. Hawthorne joined the socialist Brook Farm experiment in utopian agrarianism, then satirized the urban liberals there (briefly—farming is hard work and smelly) who presumed to reform the world without reforming themselves, in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Like Crèvecoeur, in his classic *Walden* (1854) Thoreau idealizes Nature and agrarianism, though he was not much of a farmer, and not for long. *The Octopus* (1901) by Frank Norris is a panoramic epic of the war between California ranchers and the railroads—the machine in the Garden. The novel has obvious aesthetic faults but is based on history, memorably evokes the atmosphere of central California in the late 19th century, and is full of iconic pastoral themes, symbols and motifs. The most popular poet of the 20th century Robert Frost is an iconic agrarian pastoral poet, whose most agrarian poem is “Mowing” (1913). Willa Cather is the supreme agrarian fiction writer in her great prairie novels about heroic farm women, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918). John Steinbeck’s novels *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *Of Mice and Men* (1937) were both adapted into

popular films and became iconic expressions of agrarian pastoralism. The most complex agrarian fictions dramatize how human faults in a fallen world prevent attaining Edenic agrarian ideals. Three of the best are short stories about problems with hired farm hands and intruders: *Noon Wine* (1939) by Porter and “The Displaced Person” (1954) and “Greenleaf” (1956) by O’Connor.

Michael Hollister (2017)

AGRARIAN PRINCIPLES

“The importance of agrarian thought in the development of American culture cannot be overestimated. In fact, one distinguished contemporary historian, Henry Bamford Parkes, maintains that no genuine appreciation of the distinctive qualities of American civilization is possible without taking full account of the force and influence of the agrarian tradition, and his perceptive study *The American Experience* (1947) focuses upon the drive toward an ideal society of independent property owners and husbandmen, in the political and economic history of our nation.... Some of the basic ideas voiced by the agrarians...include the following:

1. The cultivation of the soil, the mother of all arts, has within it a positive spiritual good and instills in the cultivator such virtues as honor, manliness, self-reliance, courage, moral integrity, and hospitality. These follow from his direct contact with physical nature, the medium through which God is directly revealed and which serves to remind man of his finite nature and dependence on God. It is an occupation singularly blessed by God, since He was the first husbandman, having wrought order and creation out of confusion and chaos, and it was the first employment ordained by Him of Adam, the first man.
2. Only farming offers complete independence and self-sufficiency, because regardless of the state of the national economy (provided the farmer and not the bank owns his land), his basic needs of food and shelter are provided through his cooperative relationship with Nature. The standard by which an economic system is judged is not how much prosperity or wealth it produces, but how effectively it encourages freedom, individuality, and morality.
3. The farmer has a sense of identity, a sense of historical and religious tradition, a feeling of belonging to a concrete family, place, and region, which are psychologically and culturally beneficial. His life is harmonious, orderly, and whole, and counteracts tendencies in modern society toward abstraction, fragmentation, and alienation.
4. Industry, capitalism, and technology, and the thriving metropolises they have created, are often destructive of independence and dignity, and encourage corruption, vice, and weakness.
5. Agricultural communities, where the brotherhoods of labor and cooperation bring about increased understanding, provide a potential model for an ideal social order.”

M. Thomas Inge, ed.
Introduction
Agrarianism in American Literature
(Odyssey Press 1969)