

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue 3. 2025 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**Rooted in Love: Place, Membership and Belonging in Wendell Berry's
*Hannah Coulter***

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.3.92](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.3.92)



Article information

Article Received:20/07/2025
Article Accepted:16/08/2025
Published online:20/08/2025

Abstract

A person's identity is shaped by their surroundings, which weave their lives into something everlasting and cherished. Connection to a place is an experience of persistent attachment and responsibility, offering one a sense of purpose, comfort, and enduring belonging despite the joys and sorrows that life brings. The present study aims to explore the bonding of people to the place and their belonging to the Port William community in Wendell Berry's *Hannah Coulter*. The study examines how a profound relationship with a place may serve as a person's compass through happiness, loss and transformation.

Keywords: Attachment, Community, Loss, Love, and Membership.

The attachment to a place is more than just an affection for a particular region; it represents a deep rootedness of belonging that connects one's own experience to a larger communal and generational narrative. A person's identity is inextricably linked to the land they care for and the society they live in. Place attachment grows out of the way a particular place carries an individual's personal and family history, as well as generations of memories, hardships, and joys that are intertwined.

The novel *Hannah Coulter* by American novelist Wendell Berry is a portrayal of love for community, place and people. Port William is a fictional town created by Berry and it is the setting for the novel. The protagonist Hannah Coulter is attached to Port William by its land, people and remembered history. Aged Hannah narrates her life, love, loss, family and community in Port William. The term "community" in the novel refers to the group of people in a particular place, especially Port William.

Port William is more than just a place in the novel; it symbolizes a dynamic web of connections among individuals, generations, the community and the land. People who are born and residing in Port William have a great attachment to the place because of the people's membership, caring for each other and love for the land. Despite being an outsider from birth, Hannah gradually joins the Port William membership, who are connected by a common history, labour and responsibilities. Her sense of

belonging grows not just through marriage, but through shared experiences, hard work, and a commitment to the community values. Hannah's identity is shaped by her home, the land, and the daily routines of farming in Port William. Hannah's life in Port William, where she improved her house and farm, and raised her kids along with Nathan Coulter, is reflected in her narrative. She cherishes the way her life that has intertwined with both the community and the land.

Hannah's early life was a struggling one at Shagbark, a small village near Port William. She was the only daughter of Dalton and Callie Steadman and they lived in the old farmhouse that belonged to Arvinia Steadman, Hannah's grandmother in Shagbark. Hannah's mother died of flu and pneumonia when Hannah was twelve years old. Since then, Hannah learned about grief, absence, and emptiness in her life. Grandmam (Arvinia Steadman) took responsibility of the house and the bringing up of Hannah.

Hannah's father, Dalton married a woman called Ivy Crutchlow after a year of his wife's death. Ivy was a widow with two boys, Elvin and Allen. She was a bad stepmother to Hannah and she thought Hannah as a competition to her boys. Hannah's father was in trouble and he soon realized that his marriage to Ivy was a big mistake. Grandmam took charge of Hannah despite the ill-treatment of Ivy and her children. The kitchen was in the control of Grandmam and it was her hold of the house. From kitchen, Arvinia overlooked other works that happened in the smokehouse, the henhouse, the barn lots and the fields. She was a good cook and took care of garden and other things. She was the landlady and her word on everything was final and Ivy could not change it. Grandmam was capable of doing a man's work when needed but now she was thick and slow, after all her years of hard work and motherhood.

Still, by making her last stand in the kitchen, she kept herself in the center of things. In the kitchen she was in charge. Other people who worked in that kitchen worked for her. By moving her whole life there, she had, so to speak, faced away from the rest of the house, but from the kitchen she still oversaw the garden, the cellar, the smokehouse, the henhouse, the barn lots and the barns, and all the comings and goings between barns and fields. (Berry 9)

Grandmam became old and weak that she could not stand long by Hannah. Hannah wanted to leave home after her graduation, because of the ongoing resentment of Ivy and her boys. Grandmam sent Hannah to Hargrave to find a job for herself and earn on her own. Hannah stayed at Grandmam's friend, Ora Finley's house for rent and she got occasional job as a secretary to lawyer Wheeler Catlett.

Virgil Feltner, Wheeler's brother-in-law visited Ora Finley when he came on his business trips to Hargrave and Hannah came to know him through his visits. During winter, Hannah worked regularly for Wheeler and Virgil came down to Hargrave daily to his winter job at the Golden Leaf Warehouse. Virgil came to Wheeler's office to meet him and when Wheeler was busy, Virgil would talk with Hannah. He would ask Hannah about Shagbark, her grandmother and something else during their conversation.

A tender love began in Hannah for Virgil but she feared it. Virgil began bringing gifts to Hannah and it would be a rose or a small box of candy. Subsequently Virgil invited her for outings but Hannah feared of Miss Ora. However, Virgil persuaded Hannah and he treated her well while taking her out. On Christmas Day, he presented her a silver bracelet as a symbol of his love. Their relationship looked like friendship for others especially for Miss Ora. Hannah accepted Virgil's love when he expressed it though she feared and worried about Virgil's family. Virgil shortly informed his parents, Mat Feltner and Margaret Feltner that he was going to marry Hannah and they did not object it. Hannah was happy that everyone including Miss Ora had accepted their marriage.

. . . we would drive in his car through the long evenings, looking at the waking-up country, and often we would stop at some high open place along one of the rivers and look at the country

under the moonlight or starlight. And Virgil started talking to me in a different way. He began telling me the things I needed to know in order to know him. (Berry 28)

Hannah's life in Port William began with her marriage to Virgil. Since then, Port William shaped her life with love, responsibility, belongingness, membership, joys and sorrows. In the fall of 1941, they were married and promised to stay with Mat and Margaret Feltner until they constructed a home of their own. During the Christmas time, Virgil and Hannah set the Christmas tree with lights and ornaments and they invited all the relatives. Hannah was satisfied with those Christmas doings and happy to be a part of Feltner's family and Port William. The guests came one by one on Christmas morning to Feltner's place. There were sixteen of them around the table and the table was filled with best dishes of long preparations which expressed Hannah's love for the members of Port William. The guests complimented the food and other preparations. They talked and enjoyed for some time and finally all the guests departed after collecting their presents.

Hannah became one of the Feltners and gradually she became the member of Port William. In 1942, Virgil was called to the army and everyone anxious about it. Hannah stayed back with Mr. and Mrs. Feltner after Virgil left to fight in World War II. A great sorrow and fear occupied Hannah and all others in Port William after Virgil and other young men left for war. Hannah was grown up in the rural place like Shagbark, worked in Hargrave, and now she was in Port William. Port William turned to be her world after her marriage and it was Virgil's world as well. The old world of peace was lost with the new world of war. Virgil and Hannah's possible life together had gone away and their lives were contrasted with each other. Hannah lived a regular life at Port William though she was afraid of war but Virgil lived among the battle and bloodshed.

Hannah created a strong bond with Port William by learning more about the place and the people around there. She got to know the Coulter brothers, Jarrat and Burley, as they started growing crops on the Feltner place during the war. She got to know Wheeler's parents, Dorie and Marce Catlett; Jayber Crow, the barber; Athey and Della Keith, and their daughter Mattie. Tom and Nathan Coulter, Jarrat's boys and Arthur Rowanberry were also in the army. In the dark way of the world, Hannah was making herself at home without knowing what her life would be. She wrote about Port William in her letters to Virgil. She told "Writing about Port William to Virgil in his absence and distance, I realized that the story of even so small a place can never be completely told and can never be finished. It is eternal, always here and now, and going on forever" (Berry 43).

The events of the fighting in the World War II came to the people of Port William as news. As they feared, the grief came to them when somebody's son would be wounded or killed or lost in the war. Everyone in Port William experienced some grief; some were sad for the deceased, while others felt fortunate to have been spared. During the battle, people were helpless but shared their sorrows and strongly supported each other. One day, members of Port William came to know that Tom Coulter was dead somewhere in Italy. They mourned for Tom's death but there was no funeral and no place to grieve and to send flowers. A great suffering came to Jarrat and Burley Coulter but they went on carrying it. Jarrat lost one of his sons and was with unbearable grief but he moved on expecting his another son Nathan Coulter to return safe from the war.

In the August of 1944, Virgil came back home for two weeks. Till then Virgil fought on various bases in the states but when he went back, he was sent to fight overseas as they feared. "Virgil was the easiest one of us. He tried hard to make his presence among us seem ordinary, and he succeeded well enough" (Berry 47). Virgil normalized his return by talking freely and laughing with his family members. He visited people and places with Hannah and they conversed about their future. Two of them took a picnic before Virgil left for the battle. Virgil told that he would build a house for Hannah. He drew a dream house on the mud and brought Hannah inside it. The house was the kindest of

everything Virgil had done for her. They lived the dearest minutes of their marriage in the dream house and then Virgil went away to war once and for all.

On March 5, 1945 Feltner's family received a notice that Virgil was missing in action. Missing meant that nobody knew where he was or where his body was. Hannah was with fear and hopelessness as Virgil was missing but she longed that he would be alive somewhere. Later she understood that missing meant he was dead. Hannah was a young wife married for four years but she had not yet lived a full year with her husband. She was in love with Virgil, his parents, and his unborn baby. In the daytime, they all stood upright but during the night someone would be lying awake on the bed fearing about war and death. Day by day they slowly understood and accepted that Virgil was dead. Hannah was then a widow with Virgil's unborn child.

Virgil was missing, and nobody ever found him or learned what happened to him. And the girl I was when I fell in love with him and married him began to be missing too, becoming a memory along with him. I was changing, and the world was changing. I was going on into time, where Virgil no longer was. (Berry 58)

Love was the hope which carried everyone in a place like Port William during the critical time of World War II. On May 16, 1945, Hannah delivered her and Virgil's daughter. Mat and Margaret Feltner were with Hannah during her delivery and Hannah named her Margaret after Mrs. Feltner. From the first day they called her Little Margaret. She was the happiness to all but she made everyone cry. They cried thinking that the little girl had lost her father before she was born.

After we lost Virgil, I grieved for our unknowing love, and for the life we might have lived if we had been allowed to live it. I so much wanted what was lost. It had turned out to be only a hopeless hope, a dream, but I wanted it . . . Virgil loved his life. He loved me. He loved his family. He did not want to die. He wanted to come home and live with me and raise a family, and farm with his dad. He knew we were going to have a baby. He never knew he had a daughter. He never knew her name. (Berry 56-57)

Hannah knew nothing of Port William during her initial years there except for a few acquaintances. Her sense of belonging to Port William gradually developed with her stay in the place. Hannah came to know that Nathan Coulter had been in war and had lost his brother, Tom in the war. He came back home after a great fight and was a quiet man. Hannah began to know him. When Virgil went to war Mr. Feltner shared his farming with Jarrat and Burley Coulter as he was getting old. They would often be at work on the Feltner place and mostly Nathan would be with them to help. All the men worked together on the farm and Hannah carried water and sometimes dinner to them. The idea of membership was shared by all of the neighbours in Port William, who were willing to lend their support when necessary.

In Port William, everybody knew something of others. Likewise, Hannah noticed the presence of Nathan. A friendship grew between them and their losses in the war made them close. Hannah was two years older than Nathan. He was a fine hand at work and he had a love for farming. Mat Feltner respected Nathan for his dedication towards farming. Nathan was a beautiful man and in looks he resembled his uncle Burley. His best beauty was in his eyes and Hannah noticed it from the first she was aware of Nathan.

Nathan started loving Hannah and he looked at her with some purpose. Hannah noticed a change in herself and she was afraid to look back at Nathan. She was then a mother and a widow. She did not want to be carried away from her old love for Virgil and she wanted to remain loyal to Virgil. Nathan began to talk to her and he invited her on dates to Hargrave. It was difficult for Hannah to go out for dates from the house, where she lived with Virgil. Still she was living in that house with Virgil's parents, who had made herself at home in their place. Then Nathan continued to talk to her. They

started having a strange courtship. Hannah felt the love for Nathan inside. Her love for Virgil began with a kind of innocence but her love for Nathan began with knowledge.

Hannah and Nathan, both had suffered because of the war. She had lost her husband Virgil and Nathan had lost his brother Tom in the war. They both had faced fear, loss and grief in their life and were trying to come out of it. Nathan wanted a life for them to live. He had come back from war to the place where he was born and ever since lived. All through his battle and struggle in the war, he wanted to come back to Port William.

He had gone to the war and lived through it, and he had come home changed. He saw Port William as he never would have seen it if he had never left and had never fought. He came home to these ridges and hillsides and bottomlands and woods and streams that he had known ever since he was born. And this place, more than all the places he had seen in his absence, was what he wanted. (Berry 67)

Nathan was emotionally connected to the place and when he fought in the war, he deeply longed to return to Port William. Nathan went to the war and came back home and he understood that there was no better place than his native Port William. Art Rowanberry was another person who fought in war and came back home. He too never left the place after that. Port William gave solace to its residents.

In the early spring of 1948, Nathan bought the old Cuthbert place in Port William as his father Jarra's farm was small and he needed a farm on his own. The place was owned jointly by three generations of Cuthbert heirs. All of them never farmed on the place for decades and finally they sold the place. Nathan used his savings to buy the old place and he had a lot of work to repair. Port William discussed and wondered what Nathan was going to do with such a place.

Mat and Margaret Feltner worried for Hannah, a young woman who was living a life of an old woman. They believed Hannah had a life apart from theirs and she needed to go. One evening, Hannah walked from the farm of Feltner's place to the Cuthbert place to meet Nathan. The sun was down by then and Nathan was standing among the cedar trees for Hannah to come. Hannah had never returned Nathan's look but that day it happened. They felt their love overflowed on them and both saw a life at Cuthbert place. Then Nathan and Hannah got approval of Mr. and Mrs. Feltner for their marriage.

Nathan and Hannah began their life in the old house at Cuthbert place. They went to the old house through the abandoned path and looked into all the rooms. The house was left unused for a long time and it badly needed repair. Nathan told Hannah that everything was fixable. They swept and mopped the house again and again to make it clean. They bought a new cooking stove and a refrigerator from Hargrave. They replaced the broken glasses and washed the windows. They got the remaining household things from the attics or storerooms of Burley, Jarra and the Feltners.

The neighbours supported each other across generations offering help in times of need and receiving it in turn. From the first day of their life, Nathan and Hannah got enough help to fix the house. The Coulter brothers and the Feltners came out to help them whenever they got time to spare. Nathan mended the stalls in the feed barn. He and Burley mended the garden fence. Nathan brought a team of mules and a mowing machine. They bought a Jersey cow. Nathan brought a dozen hens from Burley's and they ate eggs from it. People in Port William were ever ready to help their neighbours and they practised interchange of work among themselves.

Hannah and Nathan's love for each other became evident with their existence in Port William, where many of their life's tales had been both remembered and forgotten. They raised up their children on that place. Little Margaret started her life there with them when she was three years old. Hannah and Nathan's son Mathew Burley called Mattie was born in 1950 and their last son Caleb was born in 1952. They lived on the place with their work. They grew up their children teaching how to work. From

the time they were able to help, children helped them at work. Sometimes children thought that they were playing but they did real work with the elders. As a family they worked and improved their place.

We lived here by our work. Our life and our work were not the same thing maybe, but they were close. The children would grow up knowing how to work, and would have the satisfaction of knowing they were useful . . . We were at work, sometimes hard at work, the year round. By our work we kept and improved our place, and in return for our work the place gave us back our life. (Berry 89)

Hannah's children, who were born into the Port William membership, chose to relocate to cities as they grew up for various reasons. Hannah thought that children were hers when they were young but now they were gone. They often visited her in varying times and Hannah had the same love for them but old ties were broken which she never expected. But Hannah had a great attachment to her place. She and Nathan made their living from the place in Port William and it was the hold of their life.

People of different generations had different thoughts and opinions. Grandmam wished Hannah to go to high school as she had never been to a high school. Hannah who never went to a college wanted her children to go to college. Nathan also agreed with her in sending their children to college. The way of education led the children away from home. Hannah expected their children to return after their studies but it did not happen. They had never foreseen their children parting away from them and Port William. The idea of learning was that one had to be in a better place. The better place was not where they were but they had to move on to find one.

And I, who never went to college, was desperate for my children to go to college. Nathan, who also had never been to college, was less ambitious for the children than I was, but he agreed with me. We both wanted to send them to college, because we felt we owed it to them. (Berry 112)

Hannah wished her daughter Margaret to get higher education but when she was gone she felt sad. Hannah missed something when she entered the house which sounded empty after her children were gone. Margaret went to the university in Lexington. She wrote letters to her parents and grandparents, and came home during her holidays. She was living in a different world than her parents. But when she came home she worked with her parents. She brought her friends to show her family and place.

Margaret fell in love Marcus Settlemyer, a young man from Louisville who was a year ahead in her school. During the Easter weekend, Margaret told Hannah that she and Marcus were going to be together. Marcus went to teach history at a school in Louisville after he got graduated. Margaret stayed at school in Lexington until she completed her studies.

The marriage took place in 1967 and had two bridal showers. The first one was at the outskirts of Louisville by Marcus' side. The Louisville shower was only for the Settlemyer family and other invited guests. The Port William shower did not distinguish the people and they came from all the classes. The shower took place at the dining room of Lyda Branch's house. The women in Port William who were interested in attending the shower did so. The wedding in a rural town like Port William was an event open to the general public. The wedding took place in the church of Port William. It was a big wedding and there was an interesting mix of people without any class division. There were Mrs. Feltner, Catletts, Branches, Gibbises and other friends.

Hannah and Nathan felt a distance between them and their children after they went away. When Margaret wanted to be a teacher, Hannah thought that she would teach in Port William but the school there was closed in 1964. Then the children were sent to the school at Hargrave and Hannah hoped that Margaret would not go too far from home. But things did not happen as she hoped and Margaret went to stay in Louisville. "That was expectable, and when it happened we weren't surprised.

Having no choice but to let her go, we let her go, glad that she went no farther than Louisville" (Berry 120).

Mattie studied electrical engineering and later he was interested in communications technology and information technology. Then he went to a high paying job in the West Coast leaving behind his parents. Now he was the CEO of an information-processing company. He was earning a lot of money, flying here and there and had a little time to think of his parents and place. He called his parents once or twice in a month and not visited them often. Sometimes he would send a letter written by a secretary to his parents. He was far away from home and farming and no longer interested in the things happening on their place in Port William as he was busy with his profession in the city.

Caleb, Hannah and Nathan's last child was eager to work in the farm with his father when he was a boy. He was somehow smart but not brilliant and he did not like to go to school. In the school, he did only the required things and not more than that except for the agricultural courses. Caleb as a young boy wished to become a farmer which gave a hope to Nathan and Hannah that he would become the true inheritor of their place. He went to the university for education, when his time came. He planned to study agriculture and come back home to farm.

Hannah was worried when her youngest child Caleb went away to city for education. Caleb became a good student in the university and his grades got better. He got a scholarship in the college of agriculture. As he was helping in a research project, he visited the home very less. Caleb did not have the need to farm and his education distanced the need. Caleb came home after he got graduated. Nathan asked Caleb what they had to do for him in that place but Caleb told Nathan that he was not going to come home and he had accepted a scholarship from a graduate school. Finally, all the three of their children were gone. Caleb became Dr. Coulter, teaching agriculture to the students who were not actually going to farm. He became an expert in laboratory and experiments but Hannah felt that he was incomplete as he was teaching agriculture theoretically but not practising it.

Hannah, being old now, thought of her and Nathan's life on the place. The history of that place was in her memory and she worried that it would be gone after she died. Hannah hoped that after she was gone some young couple would start their life in that old place like she and Nathan who started their life fifty-two years ago there. People had started moving to cities from Port William. There was no Feltner in Port William. The Rowanberrys were gone. There would be no Coulter in Port William after Hannah was gone. Now Hannah was an old woman sitting by the fire and recollecting her memories of the dead. She felt that they were not gone but they were present to her in her thoughts. Hannah longed to retain the customs and practices of Port William and yearned to pass the values to next generations.

Hannah and Nathan, who were the residents of Port William did not want to leave their place. The rhythms of farm life, the landscape and their family's history were all bound up in Port William. They wanted to retain their place at any cost and expected their children to stay back in the rural town. But they were of different generation and they had dissimilar thoughts from their children. The younger generation love to move towards the city rather than staying back in the rural town like Port William.

Hannah's life is guided by the membership of Port William, the way neighbours aid one another through the ages, giving and receiving support when needed. This relationship is based on love, respect, and gratitude rather than only being an economic deal. According to Hannah, it was work freely given in exchange for work freely given and there was no accounting, no bookkeeping, and no settling up. Membership is open to all living people, the deceased, and future generations in Port William. Hannah's sense of belonging and bond with Port William are inextricably linked. Together, they embody a way of living that is grounded in the place, reciprocal support, and thankfulness that turns even adversity into a sense of belonging.

Thus, in *Hannah Coulter*, the land represents reliability, continuity, and the enduring force of place. Hannah's love for Port William is everlasting and it grounds her idea of membership and belonging, that consecrates her joys and sorrows within the treasured landscape. Hannah finds that caring for the land and staying with Port William are gestures of dedication that help her get through difficult times and grief. Hannah's affection for the location extends because it reflects all her values, including gratitude, relationships, memories, and community resilience. People want a better place to live and they are moving from one place to other to find one. There was no better place in the world unless one adapts and accustoms to the place, where they are living.

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