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Reading Analysis of At Home in Nature (pages 1-65)

1. The book At Home in Nature by Rebecca Kneale Gould is a work of cultural and intellectual history that examines spiritual and practical aspects of homesteading, which she defines as "...staying at home but in the richest possible sense" (2). The author discusses homesteading as a complex concept that varies in its meaning, its practices, and its outcomes. She is also careful to consider homesteading as an integral part of American history and culture, simultaneously tracing its connections to religion and spirituality.

In the first chapter, called "Conversion", the author seeks to expand the definition of homesteading proposed in the introduction. Generally, homesteading may be considered to be a way of living that reconnects people with nature and in the process helps them to reconnect with their inner selves. Adding to the definition, the author describes homesteading as "commitment to food production at all levels" that becomes "less dependent on outside means" (12-13). Further into the text, the author mentions some of the social and cultural notions of homesteading, where it is viewed as a possible tool to redesign the society and to respond "to the dangers of industrial, technological culture without throwing out science altogether" (17).

In order to reveal to the reader just how differently homesteading may be viewed by different people, the author provides three examples of homesteaders: Robin and Dale, who "find [that] the best way to nurture their values is to seek remove from the dominant society...Bill Coperthwaite [who] is interested in reforming society through rearticulating the value of homemaking...[and] Arnold Greenberg [who] takes the vision a further step

outward,...joining with locals and designing schools themselves to reinvestigate... the values of home, community, and living lightly on the land” (19).

In the section called *Cultural Sin*, the author tries to take a closer look at the spiritual change sought after or experienced by homesteaders. She argues that homesteading may be viewed as a healing process of loss and recovery: “...being “lost” in the world of consumerism, industrialism, rampant individualism, and more recently, environmental degradation, until “found” again in a life lived close to nature” (28). Gould states that the spiritual effect of homesteading may be compared to the religious concept of rebirth or – as she puts it – “a sin and redemption model” (26). Like religious experiences, “homesteading becomes the conversion process through which the sick soul remakes itself while the body is building a garden and house” (29). However, despite the fact that religious healing and homesteading evoke similar awareness of mortality and vanity of material things, Gould stresses that concepts of sin and cure differ greatly between the two.

In the next part, entitled *Remaking the Sacred and the Profane*, Gould continues to look at homesteading as a process intended – among other things – to fulfill a certain spiritual task for the soul of an individual as well as for the community. The author explains that many homesteaders, faced with some of the shortcomings of institutional religion, seek to redefine the concepts of sacred and profane. At it appears, some of the mainstream priorities of American culture, such as self-interest and financial gain, are often viewed by the homesteaders as negative. Nature, in contrast, is viewed as pure, as a source of life, death, and nourishment. Thus, “living close to nature is seen as the way out

of this fallen world, a means of nourishing community, spiritual life, and a way of living in which human interests are not always at the center” (31).

Gould observes that some of the daily activities and rituals of homesteaders may often fulfill spiritual functions similar to those of religious practices such as prayers. These daily rituals of homesteaders help them find equilibrium between the self, nature, and existence. Gould provides examples of several homesteaders who come from different personal circumstances and have diverse religious backgrounds. What unites them in their approach to homesteading is their search for personal enlightenment and meaning of existence, as well as their experience of ‘rebirth’, or, “being lost until finally found through the daily work in nature”. So whereas religious backgrounds of homesteaders vary from Christianity to Judaism to Eastern religions, viewing nature as sacred, as a place of rebirth seems to be a common theme in their personal stories.

Gould begins her second chapter by talking about thinkers who frequently inspire or influence homesteaders. She finds that Thoreau’s “...blend of personal optimism and social cynicism...” (39) remains quite influential in both practical and intellectual ways. Thoreau’s nineteenth-century text has inspired a number of literary works on the subject – Nearings’ *Living the Good Life* being one of them – and remains popular among contemporary homesteaders. The reason for that, argues Gould, is that Thoreau and his texts exhibit a “...fascinating complexity that allows him to be possessed by everyone and no one” (39). According to the author, Thoreau’s texts provide the necessary emotional support and practical guidance often needed by the beginning homesteaders and long-time homesteaders alike. By telling personal stories of two new homesteaders – Simon and Joshua – the author shows that Thoreau can become a mentor, at the same

time helping people retain their commitment to the new style of life in nature. Indeed, the author argues, “it is important to read *Walden* as a text primarily about the experience of gaining spiritual knowledge and knowledge of the self” (42).

In the section titled *A Tale of Two Gardens (1994)* Gould concentrates her attention on the actual physical results of homesteading by examining two gardens, each created by a family of homesteaders according to their own vision and understanding. As the author observes, the resulting garden spaces vary tremendously in a number of details: such as soil management, the use of compost, random or spaced seed planting, and the way they look from the street. Interestingly, these differences indicate more than their gardeners’ taste differences. In fact, the way each garden is constructed provides insight into homesteaders’ philosophy: their understanding of nature and their place within nature, their possible spiritual attitudes towards their work, as well as their effort to reinvent cultural conventions. Despite their differences, the author concludes that both of the homesteaders’ “approaches to gardening express a sense of nature as sacred, worthy of reverence and respect...at the same time, these self-conscious and attentive gardening practices express some underlying ambivalences with respect to the human relationship with the natural world...” (50).

Gould uses the next section – *Doing Things Yourself is a Spiritual Process*: *Henry (1995)* – to make a careful observation of the challenges and rewards that may be faced by a homesteader. By reading Henry’s reflections about his life, one uncovers that homesteading is not to be viewed as a simplified recipe of rebirth and self-discovery. Instead, making a conscious choice and choosing a distinct style of life, homesteaders may be faced with regrets for careers or lives left behind. At the same time, Henry’s

homesteading is a mix of hard physical work, valuable life lessons, and spirituality that, as he puts it, “comes in building things myself” (52). The author concludes that “what we hear in Henry’s story...is that the journey from self-sufficiency to a positive, healthy lifestyle is a journey in which doing things yourself and remaking the self are simultaneous and intertwined” (53).

The author then goes on to clarify that experiences gained from lifestyles like Henry’s are not simply end results of homesteading. Instead, she argues, they may be used like yet another stepping stone, or education, for “experiencing nature and the self anew” and to adjust the strictness of homesteading activities to a level that is beneficial for both nature and homesteader.

In this manner, Gould uses the next section, called *Making Bread and Making Meaning* (1995), to “...illustrate how a meaning-making process at work in homesteading – the process of cultivating the self – can actually lead a person out of homesteading and into another practice” (56). The author talks about Sal, who used to be an avid homesteader and later – for a number of personal reasons – decided to switch from gardening to bread making in a city bakery. However, the author does not define this change as a random shift of lifestyles. Instead, she reasons that his homesteading days were just a segment of his greater inner transformation which, in turn, led him to his new evolved approach to life, nature, and people. “The external practice of living close to nature became subordinate to the internal practice of honing perception and nurturing a sense of connection to other people and things, practices that Sal interprets in the language of spiritual growth and psychological maturity” (57). The author explains that the process of remaking the self is possible not exclusively within the realms of nature

and pure homesteading. Rather, having been started there, it then is able to – and sometime has to – be continued elsewhere.

2. In the complex but insightful narrative of her book the author Rebecca Kneale Gould discusses homesteading as not simply a set of activities, but as an approach to life. Her analysis of various types of homesteading practices helps the reader to understand how they may be united under the broad definition of homesteading. Indeed, “going “back to nature” is pursued by many in order to find in nature an experience of the sacred that is perceived to be unavailable either in the disenchanting culture of capitalism or in the doctrinally bound culture of organized religion. But going back to nature also involves discovery of what the self can do in and in spite of, with and against, the natural world” (59).

3. Undoubtedly, the type of life people lead influences greatly the meaning they derive from it, as well as the perception of self people construct from it. Gould’s book examines homesteading as an active approach to life, where ‘going back to nature’ does not mean leaving scientific progress behind; instead it means leading a type of life that promotes “a sane and sustainable way of life” in most surroundings and rediscovering one’s place within nature (21). The author also introduces the concept of “food sufficiency”, (producing one’s food) which is largely considered to be more easily attainable than “self-sufficiency” (producing everything), taking into account current social and economic conditions.