

Thesis Proposal:

Fred Chappell's Agrarian Roots as Displayed in The Kirkman Tetralogy

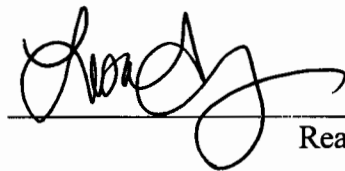
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Area of Emphasis: Literature

Estimated Date of Completion: October 2004

Approved by:


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 4/30/04
Reader

 5/1/04
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Although Fred Chappell once considered himself foremost to be a poet, in recent interviews he has claimed the distinction, coined by Allen Tate, of “man of letters” (Redd 7). Chappell’s skill at writing fiction is evident in his Kirkman Tetralogy, a series of novels loosely based on his own experiences growing up in the mountains of North Carolina. While admitting to his Southern heritage, Chappell also strongly embraces the Appalachian tradition, a distinct Southern subculture characterized, in part, by its folk life (Stewart 28). The books describe a Southern, rural community especially focusing on the Kirkman family’s connections to the community and within their own extended family.

I Am One of You Forever (1985) begins the series, with Jess Kirkman as a young boy; he narrates *I Am One of You Forever* as well as all the other novels from the distance of adulthood. This first novel introduces Jess’s family and describes its strength as they mourn the death of an adopted member. Also in this novel, the reader is introduced to some of the Kirkmans’ eccentric relations. *Brighten The Corner Where You Are* (1989) describes one hectic day in the life of Jess’s father, Joe Robert, as he decides to give up his job as a schoolteacher. *Farewell, I’m Bound To Leave You* (1996), the third book, offers a close look at the women of Jess’s family and their communities. In this novel, Jess, as an adolescent, shows his first interest in the opposite sex and realizes his passion for writing. In the last book, *Look Back All the Green Valley* (1999), the adult Jess narrates in the present as he goes back home to clean out his deceased father’s workshop. This last novel is filled with allusions to the first three, yet is missing some of the childlike innocence that makes the earlier novels so appealing.

The Kirkman Tetralogy is often magical and has been described by some critics as an example of magic realism, a distinction that Chappell resists (Broughton 116). The

fantastic situations in the novels are reminiscent of a child's flight of imagination and add much to the appeal of the books; these fantastic situations can also be seen as a function of the region's storytelling—a topic often discussed by the characters. Indeed, the Kirkmans and their extensive extended family are at times seemingly preoccupied with storytelling: what makes a good story, how to tell a story, who should tell a story. This concern with oral narrative links the tetralogy to the region and to Agrarianism.

The stories within these novels are all related to the reader by Jess, but he is remembering their telling by his family members. The stories were first told to him usually for entertainment purposes, but always with the idea that they were instructional. He relates the traditions, morals, and ideology of his family and community, and as all the stories are filtered through Jess's adult mind, they ultimately reveal the things that he deems important. These particular items of significance include a respect for nature, a disdain for industry, and a sincere commitment to family and community ties. Through the tetralogy, and his Jess character, Chappell reveals his own Agrarian leanings.

The original Southern Agrarians began with the Twelve Southerners who wrote *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). This collection of essays describes the Agrarians' ideology; their underlying fear is that the South, and the world, will lose "the amenities of life," the characteristics of rural life that they believe are threatened by progress, technology, and industrialism (xliv). The Twelve Southerners idealize subsistence farming and man's relationship to nature. They believe that industrialization ruined family and community ties and that as humans lose contact with nature and other humans, they lose quality of life. Six years after the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, many of the same men published essays in *Who Owns America?* (1936), a collection which instead of dwelling

on the importance of the land goes one step further and describes how important it is to control that land.

Thesis Outline:

In **Chapter One** of my thesis, I intend to give an overview of the work of the original Southern Agrarians—what their beliefs were, the sources of their beliefs, and how those beliefs influenced their fiction writing. I will also track which of the Agrarian ideals carried over into the writing of the second generation Southern Agrarians, such as Wendell Berry. I will also include a brief discussion on writers who were influenced by the Agrarians, but who are not considered Agrarian themselves, such as Peter Taylor and Randall Jarrell. I will focus this discussion on the writers who influenced Chappell as a way of leading into the argument of Chappell's own Agrarian leanings.

In **Chapter Two**, I will discuss the role of storytelling in the tetralogy. I will assert that storytelling is essential to the Agrarian ideal, as oral narrative is essential to the passing of Agrarian ideals from generation to generation. I will include an examination of the educational function of the stories told to Jess by his family members, especially the stories from his mother and grandmother. This examination will lead into the argument that his stories form the folk or oral history of his family and the part of Appalachia in which he was reared. I will discuss the function of magic in Chappell's stories as well as how the idea of magic is tied to the oral narrative tradition of Appalachia.

In **Chapter Three**, I will discuss the role of nature in the novels. I will assert that the books describe the characters' close ties to the land, which are in keeping with the Agrarian tradition, but that the glorification of the farming lifestyle is less evident. I will also consider how the Appalachian setting of the novels affects the characters'

relationship with the land. This chapter will include an examination of the significance of the four elements of Chappell tetralogy, water, fire, wind, and earth.

In **Chapter Four**, I will discuss the role of industry and technology in the novels. I will include a close discussion of Robert Kirkman's ongoing (and relatively one-sided) feud with the Challenger Corporation. Also I will discuss Robert's perception of the community's reticence to scientific education, specifically Robert's fight with the school board over the teaching of Darwin.

In the **Conclusion**, I will assert that Chappell's Southern Agrarian leanings are evident in his tetralogy. He has been influenced by Agrarian scholars as well as traditions learned from childhood. His upbringing in Appalachia keeps him from embracing the Agrarian value of farming in the same way as the original Agrarians, but his love of community and nature is very much in keeping with the Agrarian ideals.

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