AUGUST AND EMMA KAETTERHENRY: A FARM MARRIAGE EXAMINED

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In her first novel *Country People*, Ruth Suckow introduces readers to the Kaetterhenry family. When Emma Stille marries August Kaetterhenry, she transforms from a giggling young girl to a farm wife, mother of six, and caretaker for her aging parents. While her responsibilities significantly increase, the decisions she is allowed to make are narrowly tailored to the domestic sphere; August manages the farm and the family's finances with little input from Emma. Interestingly, Emma Kaetterhenry grows more powerful and fulfilled as she ages, while her husband August experiences the opposite trajectory. To understand why the fate of the Kaetterhenry spouses diverge, we must understand their respective roles and responsibilities within the household and how these roles transform as they age together.

The Kaetterhenry Farm

The Kaetterhenry farm is a laudatory establishment, the pride of Richland Township. The first chapter of the novel is dedicated to "August Kaetterhenry's Place" and the novel's opening pages begin with a description of the 250-acre farm being admired by people as they drive past. From an early age, August desired to farm for himself, and this belief sustained him through difficult times when he worked and saved as a hired man (31). One of the first comments he makes about Emma's appearance is: "*She was not very large, but she looked like a good worker*" (35). It is a matter of key importance to August that the woman he marries can support his ambitious plans and the attendant workload.

From the onset of her marriage to August Kaetterhenry, Emma's time and energy are dedicated entirely to familial responsibilities. Ruth Suckow denotes this drastic change in Emma's life through the physical structure of her first novel. We are introduced to Emma and August's courtship in the chapter "Emma Stille"; the following chapter "The Farm and the Children" denotes the start of Part II of the novel. In this way the physical structure of the novel mirrors how a part of Emma's own life, that of a giggly young girl, has ended while a new part of Emma's life, that of a wife and mother, has begun. The new Mrs. Emma Kaetterhenry quickly finds herself juggling many responsibilities as the wife of an ambitious young farmer. Their family grows rapidly, and Emma must care for six children in addition to her ailing parents. Grandma Stille suffers a debilitating stroke and is bedridden for a five-year period before her death, requiring much care and assistance as a result. Suckow describes this confluence of responsibilities with the terse phrase *"It all came on Emma"* (77).

Their respective responsibilities on the farm impact August and Emma differently, and this difference is reflected in their physical appearance. How Emma and August age once they start raising a family together provides the reader with a stark contrast. Consider this description of Emma from the chapter "The Farm and the Children": "*She 'lost her giggles,' as the family said, and got an air of timidity that was an accentuation of her old shyness. She was thin, with skin burned dark, and tired, hollow eyes"* (57). And here is a description of August from the chapter "Grandma and Grandpa": *"Sturdy, square-set, heavy, but not fat, in his old blue shirt and overalls, with his ruddy face and blue eyes and the harsh outcropping of golden beard upon his sun-burned skin, and the golden hairs on his thick brown arms"* (74). Working on the farm gives August energy and strength, while it depletes Emma and wears her down.

August is depicted as a strong, sun-tanned young farmer, while Emma is an exhausted housewife with hollowed out eyes.

Care & Emotional Labor

One reason for Emma's haggard appearance may be the emotional labor she performs for her family. Of the two, Emma is frequently the parent who expends emotional energy worrying about the children and her parents. At this point it is helpful to introduce the source of Emma's responsibilities. The six Kaetterhenry children are as follows: Frankie, the oldest son and frequent farmhand to August; Mary, the bookish oldest daughter; Elva, the more outgoing middle sister; middle sons Carl and Johnnie who both enjoy playing basketball in town and are later drafted into WWI; and Marguerite, the baby of the family. Emma frequently worries about her family's well-being. To list just a few examples: Emma worries that she and August can't always get the children to Sunday school (64); worries about leaving her mother home alone in her old age (78); worries over her two sons who were drafted in WWI (115); worries over August's declining health (174); worries over Johnnie spending all his time at the garage and not church (192). August worries occasionally, but it is usually about the affairs of the farm, such as when he worries about how Carl is managing the farm while he and Emma are in Rochester for her operation (130). All this worry is surely contributing to Emma's hollowed eyes.

Among the most moving passages in the novel occurs in the chapter "Operation". Emma is described as being "right down sick" and ailing to a degree that prompts August to intervene and take her to a clinic in Rochester (116). It is revealed at the clinic that Emma has gallstones and must undergo an operation to remove the stones (124). Gallstones are among

the most painful ailments humans can undergo, yet despite the severe pain she must have been in, Emma stoically endures the pain until she cannot any longer. In the clinic, Emma can relax for the first time in her life as a farm wife and allow others to take care of her. Her demeanor at the clinic is described as follows: *"She took with shy gratitude the first attention and petting that she had had since she was a girl, with a kind of feeling that she, a married woman and mother, shouldn't like it, but a feminine pleasure in it"* (128). Even in the clinic recovering from a gallstone operation, Emma feels a sense of guilt for enjoying her reprieve. This scene illustrates how deprived Emma is of care and affection. She spends her days on the farm caring for everyone around her, washing and cooking and cleaning for her large family, often afraid to leave the farm lest something go wrong in her absence. However, the family rarely cares for Emma in return; the care relationship only seems to flow in one direction: *from* Emma and *to* her family. In the hospital, Emma feels respected and cared for, a novel experience for her, and this is likely why she enjoys her stay despite the circumstances which brought her to the clinic.

Throughout the years they spent running the Kaetterhenry farm, Emma endured a great deal of stress and hard work and looked back on these years as the most difficult of her life. Meanwhile, August seemed to be at his peak form during these years, particularly as the farm grew more prosperous and he was able to make considerable improvements to the property.

The Family Finances

In their marriage, August tightly controls the family's finances and does not share financial information with Emma. Let us consider the following interactions from 3 different stages of their marriage. Early in their union: *"Emma soon found out that he was not the kind*

who would take her with him. His mother had never gone to town. He did all of the buying" (57); When the children are growing up: "*Emma had no idea of what the family resources were; she would never have dared to ask"* (92); Regarding their retirement: "*Emma didn't know just what August intended to do, whether he meant to buy or to build a house of his own. He still kept all such things to himself. He managed all the money.*" (136). From these three scenes, we can see that August frequently excludes Emma from decision-making regarding the family's finances. The result is that Emma is denied input into how the family's finances are allocated and must ask August for permission regarding purchases she would like to make. When Emma asks timidly for a small purchase like some calico fabric, August's response is: *"He would get it if he thought she needed it, but he decided that"* (57). By not keeping her informed about the state of the family's finances, August removes Emma from the decision-making process entirely. He makes several large decisions and purchases without her, including the electric plant he has installed on the farm (93), the five-passenger car he purchased (94), and the lot for the house he built in town (138). Despite all these upgrades, August does not do much to renovate the inside of the house (84), nor does he ask Emma what kind of improvements she would like to see done to the house. August is allowed to make significant and expensive purchases on behalf of the family without Emma's input, meanwhile Emma cannot purchase a swatch of calico fabric without running her purchase by August for his approval.

Other women in Emma's orbit have more of a say-so in their marriages, including her sister Mollie and her daughter Elva, who complains about how her father does not tell Emma about the location of the lot he purchased for their new home (138). Emma's lack of financial autonomy creates in her a timidity toward money. As a result, when August dies Emma is

completely unprepared for how to handle the estate and finances: "*She had no idea how to make out a cheque, and was afraid of her cheque-book"* (186). Despite how hard Emma worked to care for her husband, children, and parents as a farm wife, she is given little control, autonomy, or decision-making power in the marriage. She is expected to be self-sacrificing and to put the needs of others ahead of her own. This way of existing is so ingrained in Emma that even after she inherits the full Kaetterhenry estate, she is loath to subscribe to a household magazine for herself due to the thought of spending so much money on a luxury for herself (186).

However, over time Emma grows more comfortable spending money. Although Emma greatly misses her husband when he passes, she enjoys being able to purchase items for herself for the first time in her life. Now when she sees goods in a store window, it satisfies her to think she could purchase the item if she wanted to without needing to ask anyone for permission (203). Emma exercises her newfound financial freedom by purchasing little gifts for her grandchildren, sending dollar bills in the mail to Marguerite, and giving generously at the church and to various salesmen (203). Having purchasing power and financial freedom bring Emma a sense of power and contentment in her twilight years. Thus, Emma gained more autonomy as she aged, while August experienced a decrease in his sense of worth once he turned the family farm over to his son Carl.

Retirement in Town

Once the Kaetterhenry's retire and move to town, their fortunes reverse, and Emma is the one who is thriving while August begins aging rapidly. As discussed previously, Emma rarely centers her own needs because she is often caring for and worrying about her family. A faint

blossoming of personality occurs only in her widowed years, after her children are raised, her mother and husband have passed away, and her father is in her sister's care. This freedom from caregiving responsibilities frees Emma and allows her to develop into her own woman because she finally has the time and freedom to pursue her own interests and develop female friendships. The apex in Emma's emotional life occurs while August experiences a sharp decline. Having retired and left the farm to his son Carl, he feels adrift and lost. Running the Kaetterhenry farm imbued August with a sense of worth and purpose. The farm sustained August, until he couldn't work any longer, and then the loss of his farm destroys him.

The deep sense of identity that connects August to his farm is the result of the many years he spent saving for and building the farm. August was hired out to neighboring farmers beginning at age eleven (21). Work on the farm was a central and defining aspect of his life for some fifty years by the time he approaches retirement. Because he always invested his time and energy solely into his farm, without the farm, August loses his will to live. In a sense, August Kaetterhenry *is* the Kaetterhenry farm. He simply does not have fulfilling ways to spend his time now that he is no longer running a farm. He is unable to develop new hobbies or interests once they move to town, and instead continues to read the farm journal into his retirement, and to talk with retired farmers at Dawson's store or the post office about farms changing hands and how the crops are doing (160). The novel explains his listlessness in retirement as follows: *"Everything that he had done had been for the farm. The farm had always come first. He had always talked about retiring some day, quite this slaving; but he had never really looked forward to it*" (162). In contrast to August, Emma finds fulfillment in a variety of ways and largely seems to enjoy her life in retirement.

When August and Emma move to town, Emma benefits emotionally from the proximity to other women her age. This is the first time in the novel that Emma is depicted as having friends. The only other character who fulfilled the role of friend to Emma was her sister Mollie in their youth, though after they marry, the two farmwives have little time to spend together. Newly retired Emma engages in many activities for pleasure, something she never had time for before. She joins the Social Circle Club and the Aid Society (156 – 157), two clubs which provide older women in town an opportunity to socialize and engage in a craft like fancy work or quilting. Emma also enjoys watching her grandchildren. She bakes cookies for her grandson Junior and, unlike when she was raising six children herself, can see him off with his mother at day's end and enjoy some time for herself (209). Emma also gains "sentimental and emotional satisfaction" out of the prayers, sermons, and hymns she hears at church (156). Retired Emma can go to church freely now that she does not have to feel guilty about leaving her parents or children unattended. August accompanies Emma to church services, but he doesn't seem to gain the same spiritual fulfillment from attending that Emma does. Rather, August is moved to attend church by a sense of duty, and often falls asleep during the service (156). Lastly, Emma loves to garden, and she raises plants, geraniums, colored foliage, and a sword-fern (158). Emma can devote her time to her hobbies like sewing and growing beautiful ornamental plants, a hobby unthinkable in the time when she "lived between bedroom and kitchen", although even then she planted geraniums in tin cans to decorate the windowsill (81).

As a result of having time to cultivate her interests, Emma begins to look more vibrant, and the novel remarks upon her improved appearance: *"She had gained flesh again since her operation, and some of the lines had gone from her face"* (161). Retiring has the opposite effect

on August who now shuffles around town, listless and unfulfilled, without anything to keep him busy. This description of August from the same chapter describes the effect retirement has had on his person: "*August, when he decided to retire, had been a hearty, vigorous man seemingly in the prime of life. But now all at once his old colour was gone, his shoulders were slack, his vigorously bright curling hair was sparse and faded, and he walked like a man ten years older*" (161). Another reason for this decline is that August now suffers from the lack of control and a role reversal. Whereas before he was the head of the household and made all the decisions about the farm unilaterally, now when he visits his farm, he sees all the changes that Carl is making to the property without his input and which he is powerless to stop. The result is that *"August couldn't get used to the feeling that he couldn't tell Carl just what to do"* (164). Instead, he has to submit quietly as his son makes changes like using sweet clover for pasturage, while August had always considered sweet clover a weed (164). Now when August returns from visiting Carl's farm, he is filled with bitterness that everything has to go Carl's way (198). August is transitioning from being the head of the household to being in the more passive role of grandfather and retired farmer, and he is not embracing this change. He seems to care little for interacting with his grandchildren and is resentful of being pushed to the side by his son, even though it was his decision to leave the farm to Carl.

We can see that the move to town benefited Emma in several ways, which explains why she is in better spirits living in town than she had been as a farm wife. However, it's also worth noting that most of the retired farmers in town did not experience such a sharp decline as August had. We have looked at some reasons why August failed to adjust to life in town as well as Emma had, but why is he faring so much more poorly than the other farmers?

Herman Klaus: A Fellow Farmer

The main source of August's dejection in retirement is that he no longer has a project to channel his time and energy into. Always an industrious farmer, August has never spent his time on anything but the family farm, so he takes the loss of his farm in retirement particularly poorly compared to other retired farmers. In addition, it seems that August's death is as much a product of physical decline as one of spiritual decline, with his depressed mood exacerbating his physical ailments. What did other farmers do differently from August Kaetterhenry to bolster their spirits? One point of comparison is the husband of Emma's sister, Herman Klaus.

The Kaetterhenry work ethic is referenced throughout the novel, and August is often compared to other farmers who take a more relaxed approach to their farms. At August's funeral, the funeral goers lament that other farmers like Herman Klaus are still living "as well and happy as ever" while August has passed away (182). The mourners neglect to consider that Herman Klaus's relaxed nature is precisely the reason why he is still alive: he simply didn't work himself as hard as August had. This passage, describing Mollie and Herman's farm, is illustrative in that sense:

"Their farm had a dingy old-fashioned house set close to a scraggly, tangled willow grove where the ground seldom got a chance to dry and the blackbirds were noisy. They used a gasoline engine for some of their work, but they had no silo, no lights, and only the old red-painted barn. Farm implements stood about the worn, grassless yard" (135).

Compare the description of Klaus farm to that of the Kaetterhenry farm. As a farm couple, Emma and August clearly work much harder than the Klaus' and make more sacrifices of their personal time and relaxation for their farm; as a result, August Kaetterhenry builds a

more successful farm than Herman Klaus. August has a farm with a silo, electricity, and "one of the best barns in the country" (13). Because August channels all of his energy into his farm with a single-minded focus, he seems to regard other farmers who do not work on their farms rigorously with a sense of disdain. When August moves Grandpa Stille into the Klaus farm, we learn that he had "always despised Herman a little for being so easy-going and not getting anywhere" (135). Clearly, August does not consider Herman to be a successful farmer. However, it's worth noting that despite August's poor opinion of Herman Klaus, he seems more fulfilled with his life than August is. Herman is described as having "kindly, childlike eyes" and being "happy-go-lucky" with "a kind of innocence of speech" (134). He and Mollie seem quite happy together despite running a less successful farm than the Kaetterhenry's.

August considers material goods an important measure of a farmer's success, which is why he looks down upon how his brother-in-law Herman Klaus and his father-in-law Grandpa Stille managed their farms and financial security. August does not envy the conditions in which Grandpa Stille lives and seems to view the old man as something of a failure: *"August had always said that if her father had been more of a farmer and less of a preacher, he'd be better off today. He had despised him in a dispassionate way"* (197). However, while Grandpa Stille may not have been a success according to August's metrics, the old man does appear to be enjoying his retirement in a way August never could. At the time of August's passing, Grandpa Stille is still alive and well as he lives out his final years in a room at the Klaus' farm.

Grandpa Stille in Retirement

Why is Grandpa Stille able to enjoy his life as a retired farmer while the same life stage causes August to diminish as a person? August passes away in 1922 at the age of 63 from a stroke, while Grandpa Stille is still alive at the end of the novel and is reported to be over ninety years old (194). At first glance, one would think that August would enjoy a much more pleasant retirement than Grandpa Stille. August has a lovely new home in town, filled with a shining floor and white plumbing and new furniture (145). In contrast, when Grandpa Stille moves into a small room in the Kaetterhenry farm for his retirement, it is described as a *"small, dark, stuffy, room with an uneven floor, and one dingy, small-paned window"* (69). One would imagine that Grandpa Stille might be depressed at his meager living conditions, but the old man is surprisingly content with his retirement.

How does Grandpa Stille experience the transition to retirement and how does he feel about being a retired farmer? When Grandpa Stille first moves into the Kaetterhenry farm, he is described as follows: "*But, although he stayed somewhat feeble and tremulous, when his troubles and farm worries were off his shoulders at least, he seemed to get better and sink into a kind of irresponsible sweet content, dreaming, reading his old books, playing with Marguerite"* (76). One major difference between the two farmers is how Grandpa Stille finds happiness in family life. Grandpa Stille experiences his retirement as freedom now that he is no longer responsible for a farming operation and enjoys spending time with his young granddaughter, frequently singing German hymns to Marguerite and showing her the calves on the farm (75). August is rarely shown interacting with his grandchildren, even when his children come through town and bring the babies with them for dinner at their house (145).

As Emma is reflecting on the differences between her father and husband in retirement, both of whom were farmers, she has an insight into why Grandpa Stille did not suffer in retirement the same way August did: "'*He's got something to think about,' she thought. It was that something, she could not name it, which she had missed all her married life"* (197). Although Grandpa Stille does not have much in the way of physical items, he is content in his mind. Grandpa Stille is able to generate a sense of internal contentment for himself, and his interest in religion helps sustain him as he ages. He can often be found smoking a pipe and reading old German religious books in his free time (71). When Emma visits him at the Klaus' after August's death, he is in his room praying in German. The tiny income he still receives from his land is enough for him to purchase tobacco and the German monthly *Die Flammende Fackel* (134). Together, Grandpa Stille's pipe, the German monthly, and his religious texts keep him fulfilled in his spirit, and he does not succumb to the same bitter malaise which weakens August. He is described as content and happy in retirement (196), while August is discontent and purposeless.

Emma's visit with her father after August's passing allows her to discover something about herself: *"She was a Stille, not a Kaetterhenry. That showed now. She could be happy pottering about on her own devices. The children said ma got along better alone than they'd been afraid she would*" (202). August Kaetterhenry is unable to find satisfaction and happiness outside of the farm; Emma recognizes this trait in her husband and how it contributed to his untimely death. She sees how her father, though living in a single room at her sister's farm and without much compared to the grand house August built in town, is more spiritually fulfilled

than August. August's primary concern is not to end up destitute in his old age; he works hard throughout this life, always with an eye toward having enough for the future. Yet August is scarcely able to enjoy his retirement and the house in town. In fact, that period of his life finds him at his most despondent and miserable. The tragedy of August's life is that all his life he had worked hard and refused to take it easy like other farmers including Grandpa Stille or Herman Klaus, both of whom outlived him and seemed happier with their life circumstances than August had been in his retirement.

Over the course of their lives, August and Emma Kaetterhenry navigate many challenges together. While Emma feels overwhelmed and stressed as a young farm wife, August is filled with vigor at the thought of fulfilling his longtime dream of owning his own farm. However, August's single-minded focus on developing a successful farm finds him despondent in his retirement when his son Carl takes over the family farm. August Kaetterhenry identified so completely with his farm that he was unable to exist independent of it, even as other farmers and his own wife found joy and contentment in their retirement. The divergent fates of the Kaetterhenry spouses invites us to consider what makes life worth living and how to cultivate a sense of purpose as we age.

Work Cited

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