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LATENT SELF-REVELATION IN MARJORIE RAWLINGS' CROSS CREEK

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Alexandra Duckworth
1999
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Alexandra Duckworth

Approved, May 1999

Colleen Kennedy

John W. Conlee

Richard Lowry
DEDICATION

To my parents
Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings moved to Florida in 1928, to “a bend in a country road” where “her soul could be at ease” (Letters 5) and her writing would be inspired. Married and living in New York from 1920 to 1928, she sought fame as a writer, but her short stories did not sell and her career as a journalist did not provide the acclaim or the personal satisfaction she desired. Articles with headlines like “Do American Women Appreciate Good Points of Their Men?,” “Wives School First Aid for Peeved Hubbies,” and “No Place on Campus for Knickers or Cigarettes, Say Graduates” from the Rochester Evening Journal and the Sunday Rochester American did little to presage the independence, pioneer spirit, and love of nature she would demonstrate in her writing about north central Florida. Not until she moved to a 72-acre orange grove near “the flowing of Lochloosa Lake into Orange Lake” called Cross Creek and began using the native “Crackers” in her writing was she published in Scribner’s for the first time. “Mrs. Rawlings and ‘cracker’ Florida were made for each other,” writes Gordon Bigelow, “for until she came to live at Cross Creek … those literary talents which turned out to be so substantial simmered below the surface, giving no hint of greatness. … [From 1928 until] the middle 1940s virtually everything she wrote radiates with the excitement of her encounter with Florida” ("Lord Bill" 114). This encounter allowed Rawlings and her writing to thrive in a place that represented a sanctuary for her in both senses of the word, as a consecrated space and a rural refuge from an increasingly urban society.

In 1939, then divorced from her first husband, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings won the Pulitzer Prize for The Yearling, and enthusiasm for her writing made her a national
Three years later she published *Cross Creek*, a memoir about her 13 years in a rural Florida community of the same name. These years were marked on the national scene by Prohibition, the Great Depression, and America's entrance into World War II, and on the literary scene by the publication of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), a collection of essays advocating a return to agrarian values in the South; Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1937) and *In This Our Life* (1942) by Ellen Glasgow, both Pulitzer Prize winners. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' memoir thus appeared just as the South was enjoying a literary renaissance and the nation was enduring some of the most trying times of the twentieth century.

One of the first books printed in oblong paperback form in order to fit into the fatigue pockets of servicemen (Tobias "Elusive"), *Cross Creek* was published in six languages and enjoyed "spectacular success, both critical and popular" (*Letters* 217). Like her novels, it was a Book-of-the-Month selection, and it drew warm comments from most reviewers. *Time* called the book "a prose poem, praising Marjorie's reminiscent, unhurried, humorous account of how she discovered and took possession of a new U.S. literary landscape in Florida," while the *New York Times* characterized the book’s narrator as "a generous, impulsive woman who placed her chief value on integrity" (Silverthorne 207). In a letter to her editor and mentor, Max Perkins, Rawlings wrote, "It is gratifying to have such a generous reception for so queer a book" (*Letters* 217).

Not all readers, however, were as generous in their evaluation of the book. Soon after it was published, Zelma Cason, one of Rawlings' neighbors, sued the author for libel.
after reading a description of herself in Cross Creek. Rawlings had written that Zelma was “an ageless spinster resembling an angry and efficient canary” (56), words that would cost her five years in court and $32,000 in legal fees (Tobias “Elusive”). Although eventually ordered to pay her former friend damages of only one dollar, Rawlings never wrote about Cross Creek again. After her marriage to Norton Baskin, manager of the Castle Warden Hotel in St. Augustine, in 1941, she spent less and less time at the Creek, dividing her time instead between a summer home in Van Hornersville, New York, and a beach cottage near St. Augustine.

Marjorie Rawlings died, at age 57, on December 12, 1953, in her Crescent Beach cottage, succumbing to a fatal stroke precipitated by heavy drinking and five and a half packs of unfiltered Lucky Strikes a day. “She was a remarkable woman,” writes Idella Parker, Rawlings’ “perfect maid.” According to Parker, the author was full of contrasts. She was a strong woman, but she had many weaknesses. She was a very independent woman, but she loved to have things done for her. She was known for her wit, yet she seldom smiled. She cared deeply for others and very little about her own comfort, yet she could also be thoughtless. She loved to write and create books, but each one was difficult and took an enormous toll on her. (Parker 116)

According to other accounts, she was someone who expressed joy in the warmth of “cosmic vitality” but suffered from intense depression that led to alcoholism in the last decade of her life, someone who needed solitude to work but was often lonely. “Essentially, Mrs. Rawlings was ill at ease with people,” Samuel Bellman writes. “Despite a certain warmth and generosity, there was apparently something forbidding about her ... that accorded well with her deeply introverted temperament” (“Solitary” 80). “Did I ever
tell you," Norton Baskin wrote to one of his wife's aunts, "that Marjorie was the shyest person I have ever known? This was always strange to me as she could stand up to anybody in any department of endeavor but time after time when she was asked to go some place or to do something she would accept—'if I would go with her'" (quoted in Bellman Rawlings 26).

Jake Glisson, the son of Rawlings’ next door neighbors in Cross Creek, notes that, "In all the descriptions I've read of her, no two are alike and still most of them are accurate" (quoted in “Interview” 58). Parker agrees that “with all her lovely qualities, Marjorie Rawlings to me was a woman of more than one personality” (3), while Gordon Bigelow writes, “Like most people, [she] was not one person but many persons” (Eden 55). This multiplicity of personality created a dilemma for Norton Baskin after her death—to find not only an epitaph but also a name for his wife’s gravestone. For private relationships and correspondence she had insisted on being known as Mrs. Norton Baskin after their marriage but continued to use Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings for her public writing (Silverthorne 7-9). Compounding her husband’s somber dilemma was a long list of names that, although perhaps not suitable for posterity, testified to a rich and varied life, one that would be hard to encapsulate on a tombstone. She was called “Peaches” by her father; nicknamed “Felicity” in high school; labeled “Skinney” by her first husband, Charles Rawlings; used the pseudonym Lady Alicia Thwaite for a collegiate literary magazine; insisted on Marjorie Kin-NAN (the proper pronunciation) at the University of Wisconsin; was addressed in letters as “Dearest Diana” and “My Dear Hellion”; and sometimes signed the name of her mean-spirited Jersey cow, Dora Rolley. In considering names and
phrases, Baskin felt a profound sense of irony as he involved himself in the very struggle his dead wife had faced most of her life—"to put the right words in the right place" (Silverthorne 9). He finally settled on a name and an epitaph by which he felt Rawlings should be remembered:

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings
wife of
Norton Baskin
Through her writings she endeared herself to the people of the world

Although listed as one of the top fifty Floridians of the century (along with Burt Reynolds, Jimmy Buffet, and Bobby Bowden) by The Florida Ledger, Rawlings has retained almost none of the widespread affection implied on her tombstone. The most recent Rawlings biography⁴ bills her as "The Author of The Yearling," indicating the lack of recognition her name inspires in modern readers. None of her other books—South Moon Under, Golden Apples, When the Whippoorwill, and The Sojourner—is commonly recognized or available in bookstores today. In Frontier Eden, Bigelow asserts that Rawlings' "work has suffered an almost total neglect by critics"⁵ (xiv) and theorizes that "she was so surrounded by literary giants that her accomplishment has been obscured by theirs." He also notes that her writing "belonged to none of the literary schools or groupings of the period in which she wrote" (1). Even with the relatively specific focus of The Tradition of Women's Autobiography, Estelle Jelinek claims that the "forties and fifties ... were a dry period for autobiographies, especially by literary women" (148) and neglects to mention Cross Creek, even though she does name Zora Neale Hurston's Dust Tracks on a Road, published in the same year. Rawlings seems to hold little interest for
theorists or casual readers, making her second husband’s final remembrance of her all the more poignant.

With this inscription, Baskin established a unity of identity for a once-famous and now largely forgotten writer that she was not willing or able to do in her own writing, even—or perhaps especially—in Cross Creek. She has other epitaphs, slightly different, but no less true. Jake Glisson writes that Rawlings “exuded an aura of energy and controversy. She was charismatic and antisocial and unyielding, a force that could not be ignored. She smoked in public at a time when most women smoked in secret and publicized her taste for good liquor when most of the country buried their empty bottles. Her fast driving, reckless accusations, and occasional profanity all created an image not always admired but never ignored” (86). Idella Parker creates a similar image with these words: “[w]hen Mrs. Rawlings lit a cigarette and showed those catlike eyes, and almost every other word was a curse, well, everyone would listen. Whatever Mrs. Rawlings said or did was right, or you had better say it was right. What a woman she was!” (3).
I want to thank those that have helped me walk this road long traveled: Colleen Kennedy, for her friendship, patience, and guidance; John Conlee and Richard Lowry, for their time and insight; Jeff Jeske, for his encouragement, advice, and humanity; Barbara Duncan and Elaine Kessler, for their profound kinship; Tiki Murray, for more than words can say; her parents, Bess and Jim Murray, for obvious reasons; my brother, Dr. Edward Duckworth, for sending a computer and a printer, and for his support, technical and otherwise; Molly, for her single-minded pursuit of the important things in life; and Mike Fraughnaugh, for the gift of an open heart.
ABSTRACT

Cross Creek is both a product and a manifestation of a complex personality who often perplexed those who knew her best. Not surprisingly, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings remains enigmatic in her memoir, in which she focuses on a rural Florida community rather than on her own development. The description of her relationship to this community is, in itself, a paradox. She writes as an insider, an expert, but based on what other Creek residents have said and written about this time period, it is clear that Rawlings is inaccurate about much of what she reports, omitting facts, misinterpreting events, and shading the truth. She never reveals the vulnerability she must have felt in trying to assimilate into the “Cracker” culture after many years of urban living in New York, nor does she delve into her own emotional suffering. Instead, she co-opts the physical suffering of her neighbor’s hand-to-mouth lifestyle in order to create the written personas of benefactor, messiah, and backwoods pioneer. Ironically, the reader’s interpretation of the self behind these masks mirrors Rawlings’ attempt to find meaning in a world in which she remains an outsider, despite narrative attempts to prove otherwise. Hence, the autobiographer is known “less by what they did and what they narrate than by the peculiar quality of consciousness that informs the writing about the past action” (Olney 44). This quality of consciousness is, for Rawlings, frequently laced with an unacknowledged fear of alienation, not only from her adopted community but also from her own selfhood. This latent emotion causes her to seek a connectedness in nature and to create metaphors of self in the Florida hammocks—what James Olney calls “the myth of an earthly paradise that ... tells in all ways more about us than about a material universe” (18). Thus the absence of self-disclosure in Cross Creek is filled by a vision of tropical beauty, and the dance of interpretation connects Rawlings to her readers as they unravel the masks and metaphors of Cross Creek.
LATENT SELF-REVELATION IN MARJORIE RAWLINGS’ CROSS CREEK
Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings never forgave the Ocala Evening Star for its indignant editorial that accused her of misrepresenting north central Florida in one of her first published sketches about the region. “Of my accuracy I am so positive,” she wrote in a letter to the editor,

that I feel, in good time, as your knowledge increases, you will offer me the courtesy of an apology. My dear sir, my sketches are so true ... I have only begun my recreation of this section and these people. I am going leisurely, for I wish only to write of what I know. ... [T]here must be longer and further prowlings through the piney woods and the shadowy hammocks—where, alas, my dear sir, I am never likely to meet you. (Letters 39)

This sentiment, of wanting to write only of what she knew, stayed with her until a decade later, when she began her autobiographical account of “this section and these people.” She wrote four drafts of Cross Creek in two years, “trying to discover the proper key” (Eden 139), and told her mentor and friend, Max Perkins, who edited the manuscripts of some of the most famous writers of the 20th century—Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe—that “the book can only be done right, no matter how long it takes. If it is right, it will be good and if it is not right, it will not be worth publishing” (Letters 196). His advice to connect anecdotes like separate knots on a single string yielded a book with 23 chapters unified only loosely by broad themes. These themes include her romantic doctrine that happiness lies far from the heart of a city—a doctrine that echoes the agrarian values of “Fugitives” Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom—and her discovery of a pantheistic transcendentalism in the Florida backwoods that recalls Thoreau’s philosophy developed at Walden Pond.
Although these connecting threads, along with an element of comedy, act to unify Rawlings’ memoir, they also serve to camouflage a more complex design in her narrative tapestry, the design of her self. Like Ghandi, who asserted, “But it is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography,” and then wrote one of the greatest life stories of this century (Mandel 66), she disclaimed the intention to write about herself in Cross Creek in a letter to Perkins:

I did not want to tell a story of myself, particularly. I did not want anything like an autobiography of these past thirteen years. I wanted the thing objective, the only subjectivity consisting of my personal reaction to the Creek, its natural aspects and its people. (209)

Indeed, there is little in the way of self-analysis in her story. Like Lillian Hellman in her memoirs, An Unfinished Woman and Pentimento, Rawlings employs an external focus to deflect attention away from the self, creating a world of “others” who nevertheless, “as they come together in her memory, become significant in the articulation of her ‘self’” (Billson 163). Also significant in this “articulation” are the narrative strategies she uses to filter her subjectivity and to thus create anecdotes from which the self is ostensibly absent. These strategies include a reliance on religious vocabulary, a merging of an individual with a community, an emphasis on cooking and daily activities, a focus on the natural world, and the omission and minimizing of moments of fear and sadness. Paradoxically, each of these methods, meant to distance the reader from the author’s self, acts as a form of latent self-revelation, and each tells us, in some ways, more than deliberate self-disclosure. The appearance of religious references suggests a subtle manipulation of its imagery; the masks Rawlings constructs verify a fundamental alienation; the presence of daily activities implies the absence of self-reflection; the
descriptions of nature reveal metaphors of the self; and the scarcity of life details indicates an underlying motivation for omitting them.

Rawlings employs these narrative tactics as a way of avoiding painful self-examination and as a way of making herself more palatable to the reader. According to the introduction of Women’s Autobiography, such motivation is common among women autobiographers. Estelle Jelinek writes that “[i]n order to deal with their feelings, they use various means of detachment to protect and distance themselves from their imagined or real judgements of their unknown audiences” (13). Such judgement would have been easy for Rawlings to imagine since she herself had trouble understanding the complexity of her own feelings and actions.

“Have you ever felt what I call the cosmic despair?” Rawlings asked Perkins in 1936. “It’s no joke” (Letters). “I go up and down, you know, like a barometer in the Caribbean,” she confided to Norman Berg. “A great deal of the time I am in contact with something quite indefinable, but possibly the cosmic warmth or cosmic vitality. As long as the strong current flows through me, I can work, I am aware. Then suddenly the lights go out. I am lost in despair” (Letters 283-284). She sympathized with Fitzgerald, whom she met at Grove Park, in Asheville, N.C., in 1936 and felt his black moods, with which she identified, creep “over one when one’s background is unstable or unsatisfying or empty” (Silverthorne 121). In one of her empathetic letters to Fitzgerald, she wrote, “If anyone knew how good my ‘32 revolver has looked to me sometimes...” (Letters 124). “I feel at the drop of a hat,” she wrote Ellen Glasgow in 1941 (Letters 207). “Beneath all her genial qualities... and love of life,” observes Gordon Bigelow, “lay a stratum of
melancholy which is apparent as early as the 1920s and which grew larger as she grew older” (Eden 65). “Real happiness,” Idella Parker tells us, “always seemed to be just out of her reach” (65). Jake Glisson reports that when his mother asked after Rawlings, Martha Mickens would respond, “She’s havin’ one of her black spells, bless her heart” (90). It was during these spells that she suffered “depressions and bouts of sickness, dark moods and terrible drinking sprees” (Parker 112), “sometimes to the point where she couldn’t get out of bed in the morning” (Parker 73). Norton Baskin, who was often away on hotel business, never knew “how serious the problem really was” (Parker 112). Near the end of her life, Carl Van Vechten photographed Rawlings and would later write, “I didn’t know about the tragedy until I saw the photographs. It’s a tragic face” (quoted in Eden 65).

Her black moods often resulted in irrational behavior. As early as 1918, for example, she threatened to dissolve her relationship with Charles Rawlings in an 18-page letter that damned him to “Palestine and back.” Before the letter could reach its destination, she sent her fiancé an urgent telegram: “UTTERLY DISREGARD DAMNABLE LETTER. I LIED. I CANT LIVE WITHOUT YOU” (Silverthorne 38). Early letters to Charles refer to her “female inconsistencies” that, she writes, must indicate that he has a “feeble-minded imbecile” on his hands (Letters 21). “I wish,” she told him, “I was normal and cow-like and grass chewingly contented, no matter what happened. But the trouble with me is, I act like a nut when nothing happens! … It’s bad enough to live with yourself when you’re a nut—but it must be awful for someone else!” (Silverthorne 38). Bigelow notes, “she often acted more on impulse than on reasoned
judgement” (Eden 64), especially after drinking too much when she would “fuss and cause a commotion.” When she knew her conduct was irrational or embarrassing, she would send written apologies to Norton Baskin, signing the name of her evil-tempered cow, Dora Rolley. She was often difficult to reason with, and Idella writes, “I had my hands full dealing with her every day” (52). “Here comes that woman again,” Tom Glisson used to laugh. “I still don’t know whether to get ready to fight or cry when I see her comin’” (102). When she gets her tail up above her head her brain don’t work” (Glisson 95). The speed with which her mood could change caused her friends to think of her as two different people, “kind and generous one moment, and before the day was over cursing and yelling” (Parker 87). Jake Glisson explains that, despite her kindness to him, she was “temperamental,” someone whose moods “shifted like the winds on the lakes” (90). In Cross Creek, Rawlings creates a foil for the rash side of her personality in the Widow Slater, “a violent person … [with] eccentric and unpredictable indignations” (77).

Rawlings must have worried about the mercurial nature of her personality and feared that her worst moments were departures from sanity. There is an underlying theme of insanity in Cross Creek that strengthens this assumption and betrays Rawlings’ preoccupation with madness. Of her Scottish terrier who could not adapt to Florida, for example, she writes, “He retired into his mental Highlands and stayed there” (40). As for her mule Joe (a product of “the unnatural mating of mare and donkey [which] gives the offspring a touch of the fey”), she guesses that his violent death through convulsions is the result of loneliness having “touched his queer mule’s brain” (349). Of the Slaters, she
notes that “There was something fey about most of the family” (81). In the chapter “Residue,” Rawlings focuses on three marginal characters—Mary, Mr. Swilley, and Marsh Turner—who suffer varying degrees of madness. Marsh Turner is a “picturesque” but violent drunk who has a proclivity for hurling other people’s furniture out of their windows when inebriated. Her farmhand Mr. Swilley lives “most of the time ... in a trance” (136), while her maid Mary has a long history as a manic-depressive and is “mad as a March hare” (143). Between Mary and Mr. Swilley, she writes, “I was in a fair way to become a psychopathic case myself” (146), attempting to imply that once she is rid of them, she will no longer be in danger of madness herself.

That she subconsciously feared this fate is suggested by the way Rawlings minimizes her brushes with insanity in Cross Creek, diminishing its power by implying its normality. She indicates that the outside world perceives everyone at Cross Creek as “more than a little queer” (9) or “in the precise sense, outlandish” (10), and she reports that Samson, one of her unsuccessful grove hands, uses these parting words: “Cross Creek is the queerest place and the queerest people I’ve ever knowed” (208). “At one time or another,” she writes, “most of us at the Creek have been suspected of a degree of madness. Madness is only a variety of mental nonconformity and we are all individualists here” (10). It is sometimes told, she writes, “as proved fact that those who live at the Creek are fey” (259). In these and similar examples, she accomplishes two things: she makes it appear that outsiders have overreacted to the nonconforming “individualists” at the Creek, and, while acknowledging her own “degree of madness,” she solidifies her place among a community of “fey” and “queer” individuals. Elsewhere
in the book, she uses words that denote insanity to connote something less threatening. For example, she writes, "When I am an old woman, so that too much queerness will seem a natural thing, I mean to build a tower … and I shall sit there on angry days and growl down at any one who disturbs me" (46), equating "queerness" with irritability. Similarly, she describes herself as "a trifle demented" (107) when Mr. Martin’s pig uproots her petunias, and Mr. Martin himself places her shooting of his pig “in the realm of madness” (110). Here, she dismisses the connotation of mental defect and lessens the power of these words by using “demented” to mean angry and “madness” to mean rash action.

Rawlings’ history of irrational behavior and her susceptibility to depression are aspects of her personality that are hinted at but not probed in *Cross Creek*. Unlike some confessional autobiographies that attempt a narrative catharsis and seek the reader’s absolution, Rawlings reveals little of her private pain and guilt. On September 1945, she wrote her husband that, “I have ‘read a book,’ and found out the KIND of nut I am. It isn’t as bad as it might be! And I am not completely nuts, and there is some excuse for me” (*Letters* 274). This revelation, on which she never elaborates, comes three years after the publication of *Cross Creek* and implies years of self-recrimination when there was no “excuse” for her volatile irrationality, her inconsolable sadness, or her excessive drinking. This self-recrimination is the motivation for the fictional self-representation in her memoir.

The most obvious method used by the author to fictionalize her life is outright omission of significant details. Like Edith Wharton in *A Backward Glance* (1934) and
Ellen Glasgow in *The Woman Within* (1954), Rawlings downplays her success as a writer in *Cross Creek*, indicating the importance of her self-presentation as a backwoods frontierswoman. Like the anecdotes in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's autobiography, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815-1897* (1898), those in *Cross Creek* inform the reader about the “external” Stanton but do not tell us about her inner feelings. Their humor distracts readers from the fact that while they are being entertained, they are not learning much that is intimate about the author. Not only does she exclude intimate information about her life, but she also excludes adult doubts, inhibitions, conflicts, problems, whether with her family, her friends, or her work. In order to protect herself and achieve her autobiographical intention, her primary tool is deliberate and calculated omission. (Jelinek 126-127)

Unlike Stanton, whose autobiographical intention was to protect her public cause (women’s suffrage), Rawlings’ external focus supports a more private cause—the preservation of a coherent and worthy sense of self. Like Stanton, she makes “calculated omissions” to protect herself from reliving painful doubts and problems. Intended to unify her narrative persona, these omissions and half-veiled truths suggest a more fragmented private self. As with Hemingway, what is not written speaks volumes, and, as is often the case in autobiography, “we find ourselves as alert to what is not said as to what is said” (Mandel 66).

In 1942, Rawlings wrote Ellen Glasgow, in whom she would find a “thrilling sense of friendship and sympathy” (Bond 3), that, with her divorce from Charles Rawlings in 1933, she felt a “great relief of being free of an oppressive and almost entirely hideous marriage.” In *Cross Creek*, this “hideous marriage” is never mentioned. When Rawlings describes the early years in Florida, she alludes to Charles’ brothers, who
initially accompanied the couple to Cross Creek, as “three bottomless capacities for food” for whom “the pattern proved within a year to be not the right one” (38). Charles lasted at the Creek longer than his brothers did, but neither he nor his 15-year “nightmare” union to the author is discussed in her autobiography. After her divorce, Rawlings tells Glasgow, there “came eight years of … stark and complete loneliness, … punctuated by emotional entanglements” (Letters 215). In her memoir, these “emotional entanglements”—presumably with Norton Baskin, who courted her for nine years—never come up at all. As for her loneliness, Rawlings discounts its “stark and complete” dimension by remarking off-handedly, “I am often lonely. Who is not? But I should be lonelier in the heart of a city” (13).

Similarly, she glosses over the anxiety she felt in moving from New York to Florida when she writes, “Even with my first fear, long since vanished, there was more of excitement” (41). She reveals later that, “I am only afraid of the intangibles” (177) without listing what these intangibles are. When she does speak openly of fear, she makes its origin external, as with a summer storm that send “the spirits” after her: “City folk are afraid of the country in a storm. And I, too, was afraid. … The spirits were after me, too. I returned to the veranda and paced up and down, up and down.” Her maid, Adrenna, moans, “Oh, you sick. I kin tell by your face, you sick. … I know. You sick at heart.” Despite her obvious distress, Rawlings gives her dog to her maid to take home “for her need was greater than mine” (288), thus minimizing her own needs just as she does when she makes her fears supernatural rather than innate.
Sadness, too, is omitted or minimized. Dark imagery hints at the depths of her despair. She describes a sunset as “a stain like old blood” and a pecan grove in winter as “row on row of gaunt gray skeletons” which suggest to her that there is “no escape in all the world from bleakness” (335). Rawlings passes briefly over explicit expressions of sorrow. For example, the story of her emotional attachment to Geechee, one of her maids before Idella, is dealt with only in the vaguest terms. “I had little comfort,” she writes, “and that little comfort stemmed from her” (94). Significantly, Geechee is an alcoholic and therefore a foil that foreshadows part of Rawlings’ future when she says, about drinking, “It’s the onliest way I can make out ... It’s the onliest thing that lifts my heart up, times I think I’m jus’ obliged to die” (100). Rawlings makes a poignant effort to keep Geechee in spite of her addiction, portioning out a small amount of liquor for her each day and storing the rest of her supply behind locked doors. Geechee, however, simply takes the doors off their hinges and eventually leaves Rawlings for an ex-convict named Leroy. The author is clearly devastated by the loss of this “small bright flame of loving devotion” but deals with it only in general terms: “All of us, no matter how self-reliant, long, I think, for tenderness” (102). Revealing the “strange emptiness [Geechee] left in a remote corner of [her] heart” is perhaps the closest Rawlings comes to displaying her vulnerability. In the next chapter, “A Pig is Paid For,” she banishes vulnerability and regains a more self-assured position when she shoots Mr. Martin’s pig.

Rawlings’ reluctance to dwell on her emotional suffering leads her to bury direct emotional statements in descriptive paragraphs:

... the hammock on the shore of Orange Lake ... has been from the beginning a true retreat. I went to it often in the early days but
have not gone much since life itself has had more to offer. This has been not for disloyalty or for any treachery, but because at all times we turn to what we need only when we need it. It is a matter of indifference to the lake-shore hammock whether I come or go, and so I went to it in my need ... (44)

As is often the case in her public writing, Rawlings' needs remain unexpressed here. She leaves the source for the need of a "true retreat" as a question mark in the reader's mind. Since they are omitted or minimized, the author's fear, sorrow, and emotional torment in the face of cosmic indifference remain camouflaged threads in the narrative tapestry, easy to overlook amidst the brighter designs of humor and beauty.

Rawlings' ubiquitous despair sometimes stemmed from her writing. ("Writing is my profession, my exaltation and my torture," she wrote in an article for Vogue in 1939). Unfortunately, none of her Cracker friends, many of whom could not read, is able to understand this kind of "torture," believing that her work is "all idleness and ease" (339). When she tries to explain the difficulty of artistic creation to Martha, the "dusky Fate" of the Creek replies compassionately, "Oh Sugar, I knows you're tired in the arms."

Although Rawlings concedes that "There is indeed much writing that sounds as though the only possible fatigue to the author were manual," she notes the "great mental anguish" involved in her own work. She shows Martha her books in an attempt to spark a greater understanding of this anguish, but the only response she gets is, "Sugar ... they ain't nobody at Cross Creek can do that" (35). Although Rawlings was able to share the mental anguish over her writing in a prodigious correspondence with other writers and Max Perkins, it must nevertheless have been an isolated feeling to be surrounded by a group of people who could not really understand her.
It is likely that this lack of understanding extended to include her moments of existential despair. Although Martha says matter-of-factly, “[T]hey’ll be a grove here right on, after you and me is forgotten” (29), she never senses the extent of Rawlings’ fear, expressed briefly here: “Because time frightens me, and I seek, like a lonely child, the maternal solace of timelessness, I plant only the evergreen shrubs and have no more than can be helped of the deciduous trees around me. . . . [T]he Turk’s cap and hibiscus bear red lanterns day in, day out, to light the timid before the dark face of time” (254).

This preoccupation with the passing of time—and the failure of her most immediate contacts to empathize with this preoccupation—sends Rawlings out into the Florida landscape to find a counterweight for her anxiety. About the road to the lake-shore hammock, she writes,

I have walked it in ecstasy, and in joy it is beloved. Every pine tree, every gallberry bush, every passion vine, every joree rustling in the underbrush, is vibrant. I have walked it in trouble, and the wind in the trees beside me is easing. I have walked it in despair, and the red of the sunset is my own blood dissolving into the night’s darkness. For all such things were on earth before us and will survive after us, and it is given to us to join ourselves with them and to be comforted. (14)

She discovers a similar sense of comfort after stumbling across a wild sow with her newborn piglets:

The jungle hammock breathed. Life went through the moss-hung forest, the swamp, the cypress, through the wild sow and her young, through me, in its continuous chain. We were all one with the silent pulsing. . . . This was the cosmic life, with suns and moons to make it lovely. It was important only to keep close enough to the pulse to feel its rhythm, to be comforted by its steadiness, to know that Life is vital, and one’s own minute living a torn fragment of the larger cloth. (46-47)
Although these passages impart a sense of cosmic unity, they also imply its opposite. In the first quotation, Rawlings writes that her long walks are “easing,” and in both she suggests she needs to be “comforted.” Moments like these recall one of Marjorie’s first intense encounters with nature as a child when, she writes: “I was standing under a tree. The sun shone through the leaves and a soft breeze caused the light and shadow around me to shift and change. There was a stillness … and with it came a feeling of ecstasy and regret—a lifting sensation but tinged with sadness” (Silverthorne 18). The author expresses this sadness poignantly when, one spring, she experiences “a wave of timelessness” when she sees nuts forming on her pecan trees. “The sight was unexpected,” she writes. “I thought for an instant that I was back in the May of a year ago. Then it seemed to me that I had skipped this present season and had been precipitated into the coming year. The pecan tree was bearing again, and where was I in time and space? And the old comfort came, in the recurrence, and on the heels of the comfort, despair, that there was no end to seasons, but an end to me” (255).

This despair—in “the end to her”—must have seemed overwhelming at times, but she is nevertheless willing to express it in Cross Creek because it makes the cosmology she creates more powerful. In other words, her sadness in the face of her own mortality becomes a narrative device for highlighting the spiritual beauty of her surroundings. Other emotions, perhaps because they do not perform this function, are harder to find in her memoir, but we can examine how they are expressed metaphorically. James Olney describes this phenomenon as it applies to life stories generally: “The myth of an earthly paradise that each of us makes tells in all ways more about us than about a material
universe: it expresses us in our selfhood as it creates us” (18). That a writer cannot impart his or her essential self without the vehicle of metaphor is understandable because, Olney writes, “the self … is infinitely difficult to get at, to encompass, to know how to deal with: it bears no definition; it squirts like mercury away from observation, it is not known except privately and intuitively; it is, for each of us, only itself, unlike anything else experienced or experienceable” (23). These words echo Rawlings’ own belief, that “[t]he thing that sweeps across you, clamoring for expression, is probably always more powerful than the flabby words and phrases you begin to trot out against it. The profound reality, the essence, of an idea or a feeling, manages to slip away in the shuffle” (Letters 56). For the autobiographer, this is especially true as the “profound essence” is so intertwined with the self.

“The nearest one can come to definition,” Olney writes, “is to look not straight to the self, which is invisible anyway, but sideways to an experience of the self” (29), expressed through metaphor. Prenshaw notes that “the surface text [in Cross Creek] only obliquely reveals the author, and more often than not camouflages her” (“Resident” 13). Although Rawlings’ construction of identity does contain some elements of the duplicity implied by the word “hiding,” the oblique nature of the self’s revelation has a more important purpose, one that allows the reader to experience something of the irony Norton Baskin felt when he studied a blank slab of marble after his wife’s death. Rawlings says she goes to Cross Creek to find “content,” meaning contentment, but the double entendre of this word suggests that she, like Thoreau, also seeks to endow her life with content, or meaning, looking for significance in everyday experiences. Just as she
seeks the elusive self "sideways" through the experiences of Cracker living, so the reader
tries to understand this self through the sideways experience of reading her memoir.
Thus, Rawlings' identity is reflected in her words but also in the reading of these words.
The use of metaphor, then, which contributes to the "camouflage" of self in Cross Creek,
also has an important narrative function, engaging the reader in one of the essential
activities of the author's life.

"The self," Olney writes, "expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and
projects, and we know it by those metaphors" (33). Thus, when Rawlings begins the first
chapter of Cross Creek, "For This Is an Enchanted Land," with a description of the road
that leads to the heart of her orange grove, we recognize that she is sharing something
more personal:

The four miles to the Creek are stirring, like the bleak, portentous
beginning of a good tale. The road curves sharply, the vegetation
thickens, and around the bend masses into dense hammock. The
hammock breaks, is pushed back on either side of the road, and set
down in its brooding heart is the orange grove. Any grove or wood
is a fine thing to see. But the magic here, strangely, is not apparent
from the road. It is necessary to leave the impersonal highway, to
step inside the rusty gate and close it behind. By this an act of faith
is committed, through which one accepts blindly the communion
cup of beauty. One is now inside the grove, out of one world and
in the mysterious heart of another. ... And after long years of
spiritual homelessness, of nostalgia, here is that mystic loveliness
of childhood again. Here is home. An old thread, long tangled,
comes straight again. (15-16)

This metaphor works in more than one dimension. It represents both Rawlings' departure
from the "impersonal highway" of urban life in the Northeast and our opportunity to
glimpse the author's own "brooding heart" if we choose to "step inside the rusty gate" of
her sometimes "bleak, portentous" tale. This metaphor also draws a parallel between the
risks Rawlings takes in moving to Florida and the risks the reader will take in entering the "mysterious heart" of her memoir. The reward for these risks is "the communion cup of beauty," which for Rawlings is the spiritual oneness she finds in the rhythms of nature, and for the reader is her book about this experience.

The last phrase of this metaphor—"an old thread, long tangled, comes straight again"—strikes an odd chord. At first glance, the long-tangled thread seems to refer to the sense of "spiritual homelessness" the author has felt over the years, but that it "comes straight again" seems to imply that she has felt at "home," spiritually, before, an idea that contradicts the premise on which her memoir is based. The tangled thread should rather be read as a symbol of her complex emotions, which are straightened once when she writes Cross Creek, and straightened again when we read her book, an untangled narrative screen that provides a semblance of linearity over a muddled psychological landscape. This linearity parallels the wholeness of self that Janet Varner Gunn believes actually "forfeits deeper knowledge of a self which exists in time and therefore is ceaselessly evolving" (25). Thus, self-disclosure that is predicated on self-awareness is not the central force of Rawlings' life story. Barrett Mandel theorizes that the "false unity" of the kind we see in Cross Creek is a product of autobiographers who "fear the complexity of their own natures" (71) and is constructed to prevent self-discovery (51). The straightness of the thread, then, is a metaphor that implies the complex relationship between Rawlings and her readers. She has constructed a fictionalized self, calling less "on facts and true details" but projecting herself "painfully and slowly into years and scenes and feelings that [she has] actually forgotten and must recreate" (Letters 196). In
so doing, she reflects Mandel’s theory that “autobiography forges present meaning into the marrow of one’s remembered life” (60). The same is true for the readers who project their own present meanings into her remembered life. Thus, the autobiographer and the reader are engaged in parallel activities, for just as Rawlings struggles with her memories and perceptions of a time and place, the reader struggles to understand these perceptions within the text. This relationship has been termed the “autobiographical situation,” in which “the autobiographer [as the reader of his or her own life] inhabits the hermeneutic universe where all understanding takes place. The autobiographer serves, by this habitation, as the paradigmatic reader” (Gunn 22). The text of Rawlings memoir, then, works as a palimpsest as the author’s words, images, and metaphors are written over her own interpretation of Cross Creek. Thus, the reader sees not only printed pages, but traces of Rawlings’ own experience of “reading” the “text” of a place and time.

Such traces, as we have seen, are especially prevalent in the metaphors of Cross Creek. Rawlings’ story of the “catch-dog,” a working dog from a neighboring farm, acts as a useful metaphor for her subconscious fear of alienation from the Creek. She first meets the catch-dog on a warm June evening when she feels lonely and uneasy. She describes him as “self-contained” with “a simple integrity,” and notes the “black and alien smudge” that runs down his nose (305). She calls to him with some uncertainty but he bounds about her “with the joy of the alien who comes at last to his own” (306). A friendship develops and from then on the dog joins her on her evening walks. He looks back to be sure she is following him and stops to be reassured that they are “truly, together.” Sometimes they even romp together and, after facing a rattlesnake, are “joined
by the closeness of those who, together, have escaped a danger” (307). Her description of the catch-dog as an “alien” who nevertheless finds a sense of belonging—a sense reinforced by the repetition of the words “together,” “acceptance,” and “friendliness”—reveals the author’s preoccupation with the notion of her own “place.”

Occasionally the dog comes to her gate, but it does not otherwise intrude on her life, of which he recognizes he is not a part. When Rawlings finally gets a dog of her own, a pointer puppy, she finds that discipline is hopeless around the catch-dog and drives him away with a handful of gravel. He watches her with “bewildered eyes.” From then on, they pass as strangers, and Rawlings admits, “I am ashamed to face him, having used him in my loneliness, and then betrayed him” (308). Elements of this relationship can be seen in Rawlings’ connection to the Cross Creek community. She feels like the “alien who comes at last to his own” in her move to Florida and, once there, would like to feel that she is joined to the community by “the closeness of those who ... have escaped a danger.” Part of her, perhaps, fears that she may be “using” and “betraying” the Crackers she writes about. That she needed to create an outward symbol for this fear is suggested by her revelation in the Los Angeles Times that she had, in fact, invented the story of the catch-dog:

I got myself into very hot water [with that story]. My husband sulked for days after reading it, and finally blurted out, “You threw rocks at that poor dog.” Ellen Glasgow wrote me in anguish, about to take back her friendship. Readers swamped me with distressed or angry letters. To begin with, it wasn’t rocks, it was gravel, and I had not even actually thrown gravel nor anything else. What I had done was to let myself be carried away by making a good story from a minor incident, with the intent of having the heart break for the dog (whom in real life I had met only casually) and totally
oblivious to the fact that in fictionalizing the truth, I was making a
monster of myself. ("Creative" 1)

Perhaps what is "good" story is not its pathos but its correlation to Rawlings’ own
unexpressed feelings of alienation.

Like the catch-dog, the Scuppernong grapevine works as a complicated metaphor
for Rawlings’ unexpressed feelings about her place, both at the Creek and in her own
memoir. She writes:

The Scuppernong grape is not a Florida native, but cuttings from
old Carolina and Georgia vines have been brought in with many a
covered wagon and on many an ox-cart. The vine thrives here in
the dry sandy soil, and on many abandoned clearings, where even
the brick chimneys have fallen into dust, a huge Scuppernong will
stand, seeming to support the rotten lattice work rather than to be
sustained by it ... (233).

This passage can be interpreted both in terms of a woman’s relationship to a community
and an author’s relationship to her autobiography. On the one hand, the Scuppernong
represents the Crackers who have migrated to Florida in covered wagons and ox-carts.
They have survived, in some cases, in “abandoned clearings” and lived off the “dry sandy
soil.” In this case, the lattice work symbolizes Rawlings’ position as a generous woman
in a poor, rural community who is nevertheless sustained artistically by her Cracker
neighbors, again represented by the Scuppernong. In another reading of this analogy, the
Scuppernong, not the lattice work, can be analyzed as Rawlings self-constructed
autobiographical persona, someone who is not a “Florida native” but who “thrives,”
creatively, in this environment. In this interpretation, the lattice work represents the
author’s self, which is only supported in the text by her narrative mask. In both readings,
a simple image, of a lattice and a vine, has become an illusion of interdependence and a
mirror of two crucial sets of relationships, the complexity of which is never made manifest but is latent in the author’s metaphors.

Similarly unexpressed are Rawlings’ feelings about not having children. That she had any regrets about not becoming a mother is hard to tell from her narrative. Elizabeth Silverthorne writes that “From time to time throughout her life Marjorie referred to her childless state with a tinge of regret” (180); and from a letter to Norman Berg in 1951, we know that Rawlings “indeed wanted ... the normal destiny of a woman ... to bear children” (Letters 367). There are two metaphors in Cross Creek that reflect her ambivalence, if not regret, over the unfulfillment of this “normal destiny.” At the sight of new broods of ducklings, she writes, “The childless ducks make a great to-do, much upset that they themselves have nothing” (266), perhaps as a correlative to her own feelings. Eight pages later she counters this depiction of lack with a negative vision of what life could have been with children. She describes the “unhappy sight” of a lean sow being serviced by a boar while “the young of her previous litter seized the moment of her immobility to nurse.” When she mentions that the sow has “a thoughtful aspect,” Norton Baskin replies, “Of course she was thoughtful. ... She was thinking, ‘This is just a vicious circle’” (274). Something of her ambivalence is reinforced in the last paragraph of Cross Creek:

And after I am dead, who am childless, the human ownership of grove and field and hammock is hypothetical. ... It seems to me that the earth may be borrowed but not bought. It may be sued, but not owned. It gives itself in response to love and tending, offers its seasonal flowering and fruiting. But we are tenants and not possessors, lovers and not master. (380)
Partly because she is childless, she has had time to "love and tend" the land and then to write about those experiences eight to ten hours a day. But because she is childless, human ownership of the land will cease with her death, returning it more quickly to the redbirds. There is perhaps something melancholy in the last sentence of the book—"Cross Creek belongs to the wind and the rain, to the sun and the seasons, to the cosmic secrecy of seed, and beyond all, to time" (380). Rawlings would later write that "the actual ending" of Cross Creek was "nauseating." Given the author's preoccupation with human mortality in the face of nature's rhythmic constancy, this ending seems entirely fitting. But Rawlings told Perkins, "The cosmic love angle is revolting" (Letters 211). This reaction suggests that she needed to overcompensate for what she recognized subconsciously: that the "cosmic secrecy of seed" had failed to provide her with a human legacy for her grove.

Rawlings herself was the daughter of an ambivalent mother, an "elegant and strict" woman who enforced "fancy outfits and stilted manners" (Silverthorne 19). Although Norton Baskin remembers Ida Kinnan as a devoted mother, she was clearly never close to her only daughter. In one of Marjorie's early letters to Charles Rawlings, she writes, "She keeps me sick at heart all the time, although she worships me—or rather the part of me that can do creditable things—and if you could hear her, & feel her attitude, YOU WOULDN'T WANT ME TO SEE YOU DAY AFTER DAY THROUGH HER EYES—you wouldn't dare ask it" (Letters 19). The conditional love suggested here was accompanied by a certain severity, as Rawlings describes in the only passage in Cross Creek that directly refers to either of her parents:
My mother was as great a cook [as my grandmother was], but there was a taint to her art, for she did not consider it a notable accomplishment and she refused to teach me. Also, she worked so hard at it, with so little joy, no matter how capable a maid stood at her side, that she was exhausted, with a migraine headache, when a special feast was ready, and could not touch any of the magnificent dishes. (219)

Arthur Kinnan, unlike his wife, was a warm and loving father whom his daughter adored. When he died in 1913 from a kidney infection, the loss “was the first deep tragedy and the greatest betrayal of Marjorie’s young life. She remembered always the ‘great and terrible stillness’ that seemed to cover the earth on the day he died” (Silverthorne 25). In describing her orange grove on a freezing night, Rawlings provides a metaphor for this loss:

There is never at any moment complete darkness. The stars take over the sun’s work, but with a dispassionate aloof coldness, like a frigid and beautiful stepmother taking over a nursery where once walked warm and true maternity. The earth itself stands like a child, awaiting the injustice and the blow. We have bared our bosoms to the sun, and trusted it, and it has gone and left us to the treachery of the stars. (345)

Although Rawlings gives little indication that she is referring to her own emotions, it seems clear that the sun, “warm and true,” represents her father, the stars, with their “aloof coldness,” her mother, and the earth which “stands like a child,” herself. The bared bosoms then become the openness and child’s trust with which she loved her father, and “the treachery of the stars” is the joyless competence and “dispassionate aloof coldness” with which her mother raised her after his death.

Although Rawlings does hint at moments of despair in Cross Creek, the fear she had that this despair would overtake her life seems best expressed symbolically in her
depiction of a summer fog she encounters on her way home from a bear hunt. She is so
tired from her day of hunting that she falls asleep at the wheel and crashes her car, still 40
miles from home. She is unhurt, but her car is damaged and cannot be driven over ten
miles an hour. She imagines that the shock of the crash will keep her from falling asleep
again, but she writes that, on the last stretch of road,

[the deadly fatigue overtook me and it was all I could manage,
talking to myself, singing, to keep my eyes open. Then I met the
fog. It was a soporific enemy. It lay over the hollows like a
ghostly trap. I drowsed. I stirred. The fog lay no higher than the
car, but it was a morass. Again and again I dropped into
exhaustion, and roused out of it with a fearful rushing feeling. The
fog was about me and I was plunging blindly into it, and imaginary
trees closed in on me, and the road ended, and I was doomed, and I
got a grip on myself and there was still open road, smothered with
the fog. I minded especially the rushing feeling—a drowning man
would feel so. And all that night, and for weeks after, a road swam
ahead of me and suddenly ended, and the trees poured in on me,
and I was damned in the fog. I still dream sometimes of rushing to
destruction through the mist .... (304)

Here, the fog represents the despair that repeatedly comes over her “like a ghostly trap,”
while the “fearful rushing feeling” symbolizes the fear of madness that causes her to feel
“doomed.” The cycle of feeling fatigue, succumbing to sleep, being startled awake,
sensing the trees “pouring in,” and seeing the road “smothered in fog” parallels through
metaphor the very real struggle she faced most of her life.

Rawlings’ fear of death, as a symbol of her own extinction, is expressed
throughout Cross Creek in the author’s references to human mortality. A related fear, of
the physical circumstances of dying, is revealed in the following metaphor that describes
part of her experience as a census-taker for Alachua County:
We entered the River Styx gently. Surely, death itself must come as quietly. The open fields, bright in the reality of sunlight, gave way easily to pine lands. The pines grew thicker, the sweet scent of their needles rising. The sunlight was spotty, the shadows of the tall trees wider. Here and there a live oak told of changing soil. Then, imperceptibly, we were in deep hammock. Coolness came in on us. The leaves of magnolia and bay trees shut out the sun, as all dark everlasting foliage must shut it out from the silent places of the dead. The hammock merged into cypress swamp. A trumpet vine dropped flamboyant flowers from a lone palm. The blossoms seemed gaudy and funereal. There were no birds singing from the cypresses. No squirrels swung in and out of the sepulchral arches of the trees. Out of the dimly defined road a great white bird rose, flapping noiseless wings. It was huge, snow-white as an angel of death, with a wide black mourning band around the edge of the wings. I became aware that the soft dampness of the road had turned into a soft rippling. The whole floor of the forest was carpeted with amber-colored water, alive, moving with a slow, insidious current. We had entered the River Styx. (58)

The tomb-like imagery here suggests the grim reality of death, where “changing soil,” “coolness,” and “everlasting” darkness become features of “the silent places of the dead.” The “funereal” blossoms and “sepulchral arches” suggest a burial ceremony where the great white bird is “an angel of death” with a “wide black mourning band” on its wings. As with the fog, the catch-dog, the ducks and the sow, the stars and the sun, and the road to the lake-shore hammock, the River Styx becomes a public metaphor for a private emotion. Such metaphors cast doubt on those interpretations of Cross Creek that note the “spirited optimism” of the book (Schmidt 55).

Rawlings uses metaphor in her memoir to take herself a step away from the intensity and the awareness of her own emotions. She accomplished this same kind of distancing in her life through such daily activities as cooking. In Cross Creek Cookery, a cookbook inspired by the tremendous response to her recipes in Cross Creek (eight out of
ten letters asked for a recipe), Rawlings weaves her philosophy of food into a practical compilation of recipes. In her introduction, she insists that “Food imaginatively and lovingly prepared, and eaten in good company, warms the being with something more than the mere intake of calories” (2). Rawlings clearly has something of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay in her, then, as “cooking for her … [is] practically a sacramental act, the preparation of a secular love-feast” (Bellman “Solitary” 82). In the chapter “Our Daily Bread,” she writes, “I hold the theory that the serving of good food is the one way of pleasing everybody … short of dyspepsia or stomach ulcers, any man or woman may be pleased with well-cooked and imaginative dishes” (215). Peggy Prenshaw speculates that Rawlings and her narrating self are “threatened by an overpowering daily routine” and that the author’s major challenge lies in “subordinating the daily life and daily bread sufficiently” (“Otherness” 21). Carolyn Jones, however, writes that the preparation of food becomes a ritual that makes “the transience of existence meaningful.” Food and shared meals “help Rawlings to negotiate the sense of sadness she feels facing her own mortality” (252).

Cooking and hospitality, then, take on a spiritual dimension in Jones’ view as Rawlings realizes that “death is inevitable” and thus “we must not seek reduction and separation … [but] must seek connection with and love one another in order to live well and to be whole” (248). Through homemaking, she continues, Rawlings is able to establish nurturing and intimate relationships with others and, through these relationships, gain a measure of self-understanding. Cross Creek, for Jones, is “the acceptance of loss and the definition of the self in relation and over time to the ‘other’—to nature, to
community, and to the holy—expressed in concrete activity in the home” (253). This
definition of self becomes, more specifically for Prenshaw, an “acceptance of her
womanhood” (“Resident” 5).

These views, however, do not take into account that the intimate relationships in
Cross Creek are fictionalized and that therefore the self-understanding or self-acceptance
that seems to come from maintaining these relationships must, in fact, be suspect.
Cooking may have a spiritual dimension but it also has a creative one. The concentration
required for “this daily routine” works as a kind of emotional anesthesia that
“overpowers” self-reflection. Thus, both preparing recipes at Cross Creek and then
imparting them to her readers becomes a metaphor for the way she represents selfhood in
her memoir, as a persona created and served up by the narrator. In writing about these
activities—the measuring of a recipe, the preparing of a certain dish, and the serving of her
guests—the author removes herself even a step further from the self-awareness that she is
able to avoid through immersing herself in the daily details of living.

In negotiating the pain of her divorce, Rawlings first discovers the comfort of
such activities. Despite its position as the penultimate chapter, “Hyacinth Drift” is
actually the story of one of her first adventures in Florida. Referring to her recent divorce
from her first husband, she begins, “Once I lost touch with the Creek. I had hardships
that seemed more than one could bear alone” (354). To escape these “hardships,”
Rawlings takes a boat trip down the St. John’s River with her friend Dessie Smith who
cannot understand the author’s torment because, unlike Rawlings, she is “simple and
direct and completely adjusted to all living” (354). At first, the river seems to mirror her
anguish: “It sprawled to the four points of the compass; flat; interminable; meaningless.”

The water hyacinths pass their boat “with a faint anxiety in their lifted leaves” (355).

Initially, she gives herself over to “a torment of weariness,” but eventually finds comfort in the river’s harmony, and strength in her ability to prepare meals by campfire and navigate the boat “by the sternest use of chart and compass” (362). She meets three foils to her persona on this trip: a woman running a catfish line with a “quick, desperate accuracy” and “terrifying absorption” who shames “all soft, clean women” (362); the wife of a yacht owner who “simmers” in a “pink spectator sports costume” and refers to their journey as “nonsense” (365); and a sullen-faced woman, a squatter in a fishing hut, who displays such a fear and hate of strangers that Rawlings wonders what life has done to her (368). These women can be said to represent the past, present, and future manifestations of Rawlings’ personality. The yacht owner’s wife, who is depicted with less sympathy but is no less unpleasant than the sullen squatter, represents Rawlings’ urban, New York self. The woman in the shack, fearful and hateful, is perhaps a correlative for the author’s present feelings sparked by her divorce. Finally, the catfisherwoman becomes a symbol of Rawlings’ key to survival in the future—to find concrete activities into which she can absorb herself. The author has seen the power of such activities (fishing, cooking, and navigating) on the river trip, but on her return to Cross Creek she is “afraid once more of all the painful circumstances of living” (369). She concludes the chapter with this thought: “I knew, for a moment, that the only nightmare is the masochistic human mind” (370). On her river trip, Rawlings has discovered one way to escape her internal
“masochism,” and she learns to apply this strategy at home, engaging in absorbing, tactile activities that defeat the introspection that leads to her cosmic despair.

To achieve a similar goal, Rawlings creates an exaggerated sense of belonging in her adopted community. On March 24, 1931, three years after Rawlings moved to Cross Creek, the Ocala Morning Banner ran an article entitled “Mrs. Rawlings Likes Crackers, Writes About Crackers, Is Becoming a Cracker.” She must have been pleased with this headline, for she loved to convince her readers that she was an integral part of the community about which she wrote, and she bristled at any suggestion that her participation in the Cracker way of life was anything but genuine. Much of Cross Creek is constructed to authenticate this self-image, but there is also much evidence to suggest that this alliance is largely fictionalized. As idyllic as Cross Creek is to her, most of its residents live in poverty, often facing what she calls “Old Starvation” and “Old Death.” As Thomas Dukes writes, “If Cross Creek is an enchanted land, it is not enchanted for everyone” (95). Rawlings’ participation in life at the Creek, Bigelow writes, “has the air of a little girl playing at a fascinating game. This was a game she could play seriously, but as much as she admired the Crackers and their ways, she didn’t have to play the game for keeps, and they did” (“Wilderness” 301-302). As much as she intimates acceptance, Rawlings remains an outsider and an observer, occasionally partaking in rural hardships but always having the choice to leave them behind. One of the central ironies of Cross Creek is the sense of belonging Rawlings cultivates in a community for which she is so ill-suited. Like a square peg trying to slip into a round hole by pretending it does not have any corners, she disregards the disparity between her situation and that of her neighbors.
Ignoring the fundamentally limited options available to them, she writes, “It is more important to live the life one wishes to live, and to go down with it if necessary, quite contentedly, than to live more profitably but less happily” (27). There is an implied choice here that simply was not available to everyone around her.

Jake Glisson, whose childhood and adolescence spanned Rawlings’ years at Cross Creek, provides a revealing account of her position in his family’s community in his book, The Creek, writing that “Cross Creek will always be known as the home of Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, and it should be.” But, he insists, “with the exception of the four families that lived east of the Bridge, Mrs. Rawlings had little contact with most of the Crackers, having set herself apart from them by displaying an air of intellectual and social superiority.” Incredibly, if one has read Cross Creek, “she was perceived as wanting to keep herself distant from the local inhabitants.” In fact, when she conducted research for South Moon Under, “she chose the Leonard Fiddia family, who lived east of the Oklawaha River twenty miles east from the Creek” (85). Glisson notes that “the Crackers were not humbled by or envious of social or academic status. They viewed Mrs. Rawlings’ stature as a burden that isolated her from the camaraderie and excitement of their world. … She was of little or no real consequence in the daily lives of most of the Crackers at the Creek” (86). The picture of Rawlings’ that emerges here is quite different from the self-portrait she constructs in Cross Creek of someone who is an integral and active member in the community.

Glisson explains that, “with the exception of our resident writer, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, the entire community derived some or all of its living from fishing (illegally, in
the opinion of outsiders) and hunting frogs and alligators. We made our own rules and settled our differences within the community” (2). It is unclear if Rawlings was aware of the illegality that lay behind the Cracker way of life, or if she understood the scope of the ongoing feuds between the fishermen and the game wardens, because she never mentions them in her book. Glisson asserts that she was unaware, writing that “everyone at Cross Creek (with the possible exception of Mrs. Rawlings, who didn’t know what was going on) felt it was their civic duty to sound the alarm … if they discovered the wardens anywhere in the area” (190). Yet Rawlings insists that

We know one another. Our knowledge is a strange kind, totally without intimacy, for we go our separate ways and meet only when new fences are strung, or some one’s stock intrudes on another or when one of us is ill or in trouble, or when woods fires come too close, or when a shooting occurs and we must agree who is right and who must go to jail, or when the weather is so preposterous, either as to heat or cold, or rain or drought, that we seek out excuses to be together, to talk together about the common menace (12).

Although she does admit that their relationship is “totally without intimacy,” she still manages to give the impression that she is *au courant* with how the community operates, and that she is part of communal activities like stringing fences or facing the “common menace.” Glisson’s book indicates that this commonality of experience was in fact not the case, and that this menace is far less common for her than for others. His work highlights some of the significant omissions in *Cross Creek*, including a description of the village’s “single landmark,” its bridge. Glisson explains that “The Bridge was an integral part of our lives, … a common meeting place, … really the capitol of Cross Creek, … a point of beginning, … a sort of Greenwich in our world. … When
disagreements arose and could not be settled, the offended party told his adversary, "I will meet you on the Bridge" (12-13). Despite its obvious importance to the community, this bridge is never referred to in Cross Creek, causing the reader to wonder if Rawlings was even aware of its significance.

That Rawlings is not as much a part of the community as she would like the reader to believe is only one facet of her estrangement from it. Her ignorance of community events is coupled with her numerous connections to the external world. Inevitably, her privileged upbringing, her education, her connections to major literary and political figures, and her relative wealth alienate her from her neighbors. Glisson writes of "the prestigious universities that had awarded her honorary doctorates" and describes how she had "refused invitations to speak from cities all across the country. … Even before Cross Creek was published … she had spent the weekend at the White House as a guest of Mrs. Roosevelt" (111). He also remembers being introduced to Wendall Wilkie, candidate for president, by Mrs. Rawlings (228). Idella Parker reports that, "Over the years there were many visitors at Cross Creek, many of them rich and famous" (67).

From Samuel Bellman we know that Rawlings transferred her cultivated, reflective sensibility to the north Florida woods where she could … make the best of two worlds. Far above the other inhabitants of the Creek area in education and refinement, she was a kind of reporterial visitor from another planet. A great deal of the time she wrote … enjoying the status of one of Scribner's important authors. Celebrities visited her at the Creek.

About Cross Creek, he writes, "There is a dimension of privilege that gives the book its particular character" (Rawlings 114). Her correspondence, too, provides evidence for this "dimension of privilege" and includes letters to Max Perkins, F. Scott Fitzgerald,
Ellen Glasgow, and other prominent literary figures. In a letter to Edith Pope, she reveals her influence outside the literary world when she describes having her husband, Norton Baskin—terribly ill after a stint as a volunteer ambulance driver in World War II—moved to a civilian hospital in New York on the orders of her good friend General Somerville. When Baskin's wardmates express disbelief at his good fortune, he simply explains, "My wife called up" (Letters 256).

Even if we did not have such information from her biographies, her acquaintances, and her letters, there would be ample textual evidence to indicate her membership in a more worldly and fortunate class than the Crackers she admired. She casually dots Cross Creek with upper-class references like these: "I would not trade one tree for a conservatory of orchids" (37); "I have wept over the Brahms waltz in A flat on a master's violin" (154); "the litany of Macbeth's witches has its counterpart here" (154); "Fred is Puck incarnate" (155); "I felt as though I had just had a hearty meal on Kirsten Flagstad and Nino Martini" (157); a grove of brown sticks "is a Dali-esque nightmare" (160); the pomegranate holds a "magical connotation" because of the "story of Prosperine" (235); and "the woman ... spoke in the manner of a Greek chorus" (320). She refers to Charles Lamb's essay, "Roast Pig"; Dorothy Parker's verse that ends, "But say my verses do not scan, and I get me another man"; Georges Sand's "La Mare au Diable"; Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath; and works by William Bartram, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and James Whitcomb Riley. She hints at her connections: "A friend of mine once entertained Einstein on her fishing yacht off Miami" (371) and "I had made good friends; a state senator, the president of a university" (95). On her boat trip down
the St. John's River, she stops at a marina to buy the New York Sunday papers (366). Sometimes even her imagery contains highbrow language, her descriptive words taken from a storehouse of privileged life experience. For example, she uses the name of the most expensive spice in the world when she writes, “The sky turned orange, then saffron” (182). Although she uses locally relevant adjectives like lemon, rose, and guava in describing another sunset, she still subtly betrays her worldly connections with the words gold, saffron, opal, copper, salmon, and brass (289). Sometimes, Rawlings indicates these connections more overtly. For example, when she shoots Mr. Martin’s pig, she sends for friends—her real friends—from Ocala, with a telegram to Norton Baskin: “Bring ten or twelve Saturday night for whole roast pig barbecue” (107).

In reading Cross Creek, we notice these connections and realize, through her anecdotes, that Rawlings’ lifestyle was not as similar to the Cracker one as she would like us to believe. Her most common difficulties involve avoiding embarrassment or maintaining a level of comfort unknown to most Creek residents. These difficulties combine in the problem of her outhouse, one of the shortcomings of her farmhouse that she perceives as a “hardship” because it is uncomfortable, both physically and socially. It has, “amazingly, no door.” Furthermore, it stands “in a direct line with the dining room windows” so that “one fortunate diner might sit with his back to it. The others could not lift their eyes from their plates without meeting the wooden stare of the unhappy and misplaced edifice. They were fortunate if they did not meet as well the eye of a belated occupant, assuring himself stonily that he could not be seen” (66). Presumably, these diners are again her friends from Ocala, and Rawlings is clearly embarrassed by being
unable to accommodate them with indoor plumbing, although this feature must be
impossible to find anywhere else at the Creek.

Perhaps the most pervasive “struggle” Rawlings faces in Cross Creek is the
impossibility of finding and keeping household servants who can meet her demanding
expectations. She cites the times with unsatisfactory help or no help at all as some of her
most trying moments at the Creek—when, for example, “the life and the work ... were
new, and ... there was no domestic help [and] the hours by the west window [in front of
the kitchen sink] were endless” (38). Later, she writes—rather hypocritically, for an
alcoholic⁹—“I shall always associate my conception of hell with hot Sunday summer
mornings at the Creek. And why Sunday morning? Because that is when the drinking
portion of the Negro help fails to arrive” (119). On one such Sunday,

A new sack had to be opened and I bruised my fingers working at
the chain-stitch binding. ... A chicken snake and two rats ran
across my feet as I lifted a forkful [of hay]. ... The next to the last
rung [of the ladder] broke under me and I slid to the ground and
walked limping to the feed trough. ... I had never milked in my
life. I had never expected to milk in my life. (120)¹⁰

Here is the voice of a city woman, uninitiated and ill-suited to even light farm work. Her
search for adequate help sees “a long line of Negroes [come] and [go] like a string of
exploding firecrackers, each one arriving on the smoking heels of another and departing
as violently” (191).¹¹ Specifically, Rawlings devotes four chapters to describe this “long
line of Negroes,” which includes Adrenna, Georgia, Patsy, Geechee, Kate, Raymond,
Mary, and Samson. She even manages to make the presence of household help seem
difficult:
There were plenty of field-hands, like Kate, delighted at the thought of being elevated to housework, who could be trained into good servants. But the job takes from six months to a year. I had sweated and toiled with Kate, doing most of the work myself as I taught her. (193).

Not until she finally finds “the perfect maid” (Idella Parker) does Rawlings concede that she has been granted “a reward for her sufferings” (212).

Rawlings’ dilemmas, like her problems with hired help, often seem ridiculous compared to those of her neighbors, as when she endures a day of poison ivy, sandspurs, heat, incontinent puppies, and mosquitoes (18-19)—elements of “sheer indulgent frustration” (20) but not genuine hardship. Or when she “misplaces” some gold coins that she buries under a fence post to avoid spending them on anything other than a trip to New York. Unable to remember the correct fence post, she digs five different holes in the sweltering Florida heat, finds her cache with no time to spare for changing her clothes, and barely catches the train, paying for her ticket with “money that for all appearances had been buried in the Civil War.” She writes, “I was wet, dirty and disheveled, and neat passengers stared at me. I longed to say haughtily, ‘My good people, you have no conception of the difficulties I have encountered in being here at all’” (293). The element of comedy in these two instances contains a degree of self-deprecation that distracts the reader from noticing the disparity between the author’s way of life and the Cracker way of life.

A distinguishing feature of the Cracker lifestyle, Gordon Bigelow observes, was “poverty; they were poor when they came into the state and on the whole they remained poor” (Eden 99). Just as they are for the Baxter family in The Yearling, hunger and
poverty are constant predators in Rawlings' adopted community. She gives shocking
descriptions of the penurious conditions endured by many, some who have no shelter at
all, but make their home "under a great spreading live oak" where a "decrepit iron stove
and a clothes line [with] a bit of tattered cloth" are the only household appliances, "boxes
and a rough table" the only furniture. When Rawlings first encounters such a place, she
thinks it is a play area for children, but, she writes, "tin cans and a rusty pot, I think, made
me inquire about it, for children were not likely to carry a game so far. I was told that a
man and a woman, very young, had lived there for a part of one summer, coming from
none knew where ..." (72). A few pages later, Rawlings describes the camp of one of her
field hands as a "a palmetto shack, no larger than six feet by eight. ... [with] a half-door,
the lower half made from a crate and the upper of burlap sacking". When she lifts the
sacking to peek inside, she finds "a sapling bunk ... [a] pallet ... filled with moss ... a
ragged quilt ... [and] a small rusty stove, ... its pipe lifting crookedly and precariously
above the dry palmetto thatching." Possibly thinking of the space under the live oak, she
writes, "I have seen only one other human habitation more primitive and desolate than
this" (82). Or perhaps she is referring to Mr. Swilley's "tin box," which is "almost as tall
as a short man, and about six feet by six" and made of "sheets of corrugated tin roofing."
When Rawlings inspects it, she finds

One sheet of tin had been nailed to the adjacent sheet with hinges
made of old harness leather. Opposite the hinges was a new lock.
This, then, was a door. I walked around the corner and a square of
about twelve inches had been cut in the side. This was a window.
... A bunk of rough saplings filled one wall. It was covered with
pine boughs. The bedding consisted of a ragged patchwork quilt
... The near side of the box was filled with a stove that Robinson
Crusoe would have considered beyond the pale. ... There was one
battered pot on the stove. It held a few spoonfuls of lumpy grits. There may have been supplies under the stovepipe but there were none in sight. There were no clothes hanging on the wall, for the only clothes Mr. Swilley owned were on his stooped back wherever it might be. (138)

These descriptions are some examples of what Bellman calls “the impoverished and often desperate backwoods families” (“Solitary” 83) of north central Florida. There are others. When Rawlings visited the Long family in the Ocala scrub to do research for The Yearling, she asked if she could bring anything. Mrs. Long answered, “Something to eat” (Silverthorne 94). In the chapter “Antses in Tim’s Breakfast,” Rawlings asks Tim’s wife how they are getting along and she replies, “Nothin’ extry” (74). While taking the census of Alachua County with Zelma Cason, Rawlings encounters a family that is “half-starved most of the time” for whom “a meal of fish and cornpone was a festival” (62). She writes of her friend Moe as having endured “years of improper food and overwork” (128). She puts Mr. Swilley to work as a hoe hand because it is “hinted that the man was starving” (137) and mentions that “a day without food was a trifle to the adult Basses” (147). For her crews of orange pickers, “a lunch stealing dog is a catastrophe” (336). Idella tells Rawlings that, “When we were growing up ... all we had most of the time was cornpone and bacon, and we had to eat it or go hungry” (223).

In contrast to these examples of hunger and deprivation, Rawlings rarely seems to be without an abundance of food. She discusses her one brush with hunger in an autobiographical article for the Los Angeles Times:

There were bad years for the grove, years of freezes and low prices. The money from the few short stories did not quite cover expenses. I was down on day to a box of crackers and a can of tomato soup.
I hung my washing on the clothesline and stamped my foot and said aloud: “Things will have to get tougher than this to run me away from the Creek!” (“Struggle” 6)

Although perhaps intended to merge her struggle against hunger with that of her neighbors, this passage in fact points out how distant she is from that struggle. Although her supplies were obviously very low, she did have something to eat. Furthermore, she had the choice to “run away,” an option not available to other Creek residents.

Rawlings loved to cook and we know that she had plenty of food on hand most of the time because she lists meals she can make quickly in her cookbook, Cross Creek Cookery: creamed chicken salad, jellied tongue, or salmon loaf. In her pantry, she keeps “a good medium strong cheese always on hand,” and Idella can always make a cheese soufflé, with hot muffins and a salad for “as pleasant a supper as one can ask.” “There are,” Rawlings tells her cookbook readers, “always plenty of eggs in the ice box, canned fruits in the pantry, citrus on the trees, and rum in the liquor cupboard … and pecans for pecan patties” (42). “The ingredients are at hand,” she continues, “Dora’s cream and butter fill the ice box, ducks and frying chickens range over the grove, the pantry is filled with canned mushrooms, artichokes, crab and lobster meat, and so forth” (216). These are visions of abundance, not deprivation. In Cross Creek, Rawlings reveals,

I have often thought that if I should be quite destitute, provided I had a modicum of health, I should enjoy making my living as a cook, but it would have to be in an establishment where the cream and butter and cooking sherry were not stinted, for life at the Creek with Jersey cows has unfitted me for skimmed milk and margarine. And I should buy cooking sherry with my last dollar. (217)

This voice belongs to someone who has never been truly hungry. Thus, when she writes, “A country kitchen has no excuse for existence without pans of yellow milk, inch deep in
cream, pounds of fresh-churned butter and foaming buttermilk” (272), it is clear that she means “country” in a *Southern Living* kind of way, not in the way that is reality for many in Florida backwoods country.

The disparity between Rawlings’ relationship to food and the Cracker one is well summed up by an anecdote of her first Christmas at the Creek when two of her neighbors stop by to visit. They linger on her porch, so she invites them to stay for dinner as a polite way of getting rid of them. They accept although they have already eaten and “[apply] themselves with lowered heads and high-lifted elbows to their plates” without so much as a single compliment. In fact, when she serves the plum pudding “that had taken so long to make and decorate,” the men look briefly at “the blanched almonds and sugared fruits on the top and [scrape] them to one side.” Rawlings’ pride is wounded and she writes:

> The dinner had been one of my best, and it seemed to me from the rough worn clothes and the backwoods speech that it must surely have been a little out of the ordinary for these men. My vanity about my cooking is known and pandered to, and it seemed incredible to me that uninvited guests like these should not only pay me compliments, but should have put down the choice dishes like so much hay.
> I said, “You men have just eaten a typical Yankee Christmas dinner. Now tell me, what is the usual Cracker Christmas dinner?”
> Moe lifted his big head and looked at me gravely.
> “Whatever we can git, Ma’am,” he said. “Whatever we can git.” (117)

Despite this insight into the desperate circumstances of the Cracker lifestyle, Rawlings is still able to combine pragmatic recipes (in the chapter “Our Daily Bread” and later in *Cross Creek Cookery*) with snobbish, abstract, or metaphorical musings about food and
nourishment. She delights in Cracker cooking only when it fans her own culinary vanity and is willing to discuss ingredients only if they are of the highest quality. For example, in preparing mango ice cream, she writes, “If you do not own a Jersey cow, ... eat your mango plain and forget the Olympus beyond your reach. But if you can lay hold of cream as yellow as June butter, ... then crush your mangoes, ... and be prepared to have life afterward, without mango ice cream, a trifle dull” (229). Most the Creek residents would not have had the luxury of preparing this recipe; however, they probably did not therefore consider their lives, consumed with the daily struggle for subsistence, “a trifle dull.”

The world, Rawlings writes, is “hungry for food and drink—not so much for the mouth as for the mind; not for the stomach, but for the spirit” (Cookery 2). Clearly, hunger, for Rawlings, is something akin to loneliness or unfulfillment, not the physical pangs of deprivation endured by her neighbors. She writes, “For myself, the Creek satisfies a thing that had gone hungry and unfed since childhood days” (13). That she can use hunger as a metaphor while her neighbors struggle to feed their children indicates a certain distance from the community she called her own. What is satisfied, for her, is a metaphysical rather than a physical hunger, a need for beauty rather than “the mere intake of calories.” Thus her orange grove becomes a work of art rather than a source of income, as whole crops are sacrificed to a winter freeze so that Rawlings can admire, and be fulfilled, by a vision of oranges that “hang like lighted lanterns through the winter.” She proffers “the excuse of waiting for a better market,” but admits, “I delay in fact only because I cannot bear to see them cut and the globes of light extinguished” (335). Her intangible needs are also met by walking from her farmhouse “along the road that
nourished” to the lake-shore hammock (44). Similarly, Rawlings notes that “The tree that nourished me in a lean time is still here.” This sustaining tree is a magnolia, a tree that bears no fruit at all but has “a unique perfection” (38). Nature, then, becomes a source of emotional sustenance, an idea that is reinforced metaphorically by Rawlings’ description of a sunset that is a “flame” in which the colors of the sun—copper and brass—blaze, “blood-red,” into an “orgy” of lemon, saffron, rose, guava, and salmon that eventually dims “as though a bonfire charred and died.” This description works as an analogy for the preparation and consumption of a meal, and Rawlings is so nourished by it that she goes home to a “cool, sound sleep” (289). The beauty of the landscape has sustained her, even as the land itself has often failed to sustain her neighbors.

Despite this disparity between her lifestyle and that of her neighbors, Rawlings still believes that she can belong—or at least make it appear as if she belongs—to the community at Cross Creek. She writes that her house has a “weather-worn shabbiness” (which recalls her description of the “weather-beaten frame” of a typical Cracker house in an unpublished manuscript entitled “Cracker Florida”) that “is a constant reminder that wind and rain and harsh sun and the encroaching jungle are ready at any moment to take over” (17). Although she renovates freely inside the house, she never makes any improvements to the exterior, preferring instead to use its shabbiness as a badge of inclusion into the hardscrabble Cracker lifestyle. Rawlings admits that “a millionaire, perhaps even just a New Englander, might stand off the elements and maintain a trim tidiness—and a picket fence,” but she worries that “a white picket fence would interfere with the feeling one has inside the house of being a part of the grove” and that “the rest of
the Creek would not know what to make of it, and would be made most unhappy" (17-18). It is hard to imagine people who are living hand-to-mouth having the time or the inclination to be “made most unhappy” by a white picket fence, but for Rawlings it would become a correlative for her marginality, a physical reminder of her social alienation—that she is part of neither the grove nor the community.

To openly acknowledge this division would be to negate her self-image as one of them, so she tries to avoid the appearance of wealth. She uses, for example, the old-fashioned fatwood fires to protect her groves from freezing weather rather than the “smudge pots of the California type” used by “some affluent grove owners” (344). In reflecting on the new Governor’s Palace in Williamsburg, she implies that there is something distasteful about the restoration, which, in her view, becomes “something only to be stared at” because of its “superimposed wealth.” Old Williamsburg, she believes, lived in “genteel poverty” that stemmed from “long years of gracious living” (16). Thus, she recognizes that poverty, or even the appearance of poverty, can sometimes be more prudent than the appearance of wealth. She is scornful of young British immigrants (“subsidized to stay away [from England] ... given funds to establish orange groves, funds they often squandered” (59)) who could not succeed in the Florida scrub partly because of their injudicious use of wealth.

Rawlings wrote to her Aunt Ida in 1939, saying that

much of the pleasure I would otherwise get from the city is upset for me by running into obviously poor and unhappy people, and when I pass them in my fur coat, with my stomach full of expensive food and drink, and my purse full of money, it seems to me that it is wrong for anyone to have either an under-share or an over-share of comfort and security. An old, old woman selling 5c
bunches of lavender outside the theatre last night—not right.

(Letters 176)

Here, she feels this discrepancy because, in New York, she is so obviously removed from people like "the old, old woman." She avoids this feeling of alienation in Cross Creek—not because she is any less rich there—but because she can integrate herself with her neighbors through place (an old farmhouse in the Florida backwoods), appearance (anything but a fur coat!), and activity (cooking, planting, and tending stock). While she cannot ignore the discrepancy between her New York self and the destitute, lavender-selling woman, she ignores similar discrepancies at Cross Creek very effectively. She writes, for example, that "We at the Creek need and have found only very simple things" (11). For poor Florida Crackers, these "simple things"—flowering and fruiting trees, a blandness of season, the song of the birds, the sound of the rain, and the wind in the pines—do not fulfill their more basic needs for food and shelter. Furthermore, they have not "found" these things, as Rawlings has; they are the reality of a life in which more complicated things are not possible.

As Rawlings overlooks this discrepancy and others, she uses anecdotal and semantic reinforcement to perpetuate her fictionalized membership in the Cross Creek community. In the first ten paragraphs of her memoir, the author only refers to herself with the word "I" 15 times, whereas there are 56 appearances of the third person plural (we, us, or ours). She is part of a community that has chosen a deliberate isolation, and are enamored of it, so that to the sociable we give the feeling that St. Simeon Stylites on top of his desert pillar must have given the folk who begged him to come down and live among them. ... And something about Cross Creek suits us—or something about us makes us cling to it contentedly,
lovingly and often in exasperation, through the vicissitudes that have driven others away. (10)

And she makes it seem as if everyone in the community shares her needs:

We need above all ... a certain remoteness, from urban confusion, and while this can be found in other places, Cross Creek offers it with such beauty and grace that once entangled with it, no other place seems possible to us, just as when truly in love none other offers the comfort of the beloved. We are not even offended when others do not share our delight. Tom Glisson and I often laugh together at the people who consider the Creek dull, or, in the precise sense, outlandish. (11)

Rawlings constructs an opposition between the community, of which she is a member, and a world of others—the “sociable,” those “driven away” by “vicissitudes,” and those that prefer “urban confusion” over a “certain remoteness”—a group to which she clearly does not belong.

She uses a similar technique in the infamous chapter entitled “The Census” (in which she wonders if Zelma Cason should have been “a man or a mother”):

We circled back from Orange Lake and across Lochloosa Prairie. We use the word ‘prairie’ in a special sense. We have no open plains, but around most of the larger lakes are wet flat areas thick with water grasses, and these we call our prairies. They are more nearly marshes, yet we save the word ‘marsh’ for the deep mucky edges of lake and river, dense with coontail and lily pads, and for the true salt marshes of the tidal rivers. We found no living soul across this tract (59).

In this passage, she merges the “we” of her and Zelma in the first and last sentences with the larger “we” of the community of Alachua County. She is obviously a part of the former, a duo; she is less obviously so a member of the latter, a community. From here, it is easy to include herself in the rhythms of the seasons at Cross Creek: “The orange season is the cash-money season for most of us. The entire village works in season at the
orange-packing plant ... We pay up our accumulated summer bills and make down payments on cars and radios and set aside money for spring seeds and fertilizer” (338). In this instance, the one part of the process that Rawlings most definitely is not a part of—working at the orange-packing plant—is imparted without a pronoun, thus glossing over her exclusion from it. As she often does, the author has stretched her similarities to her neighbors (that she makes money from her oranges and pays off her bills as they do) over her differences from them (that she makes much more money writing for an urban public than they do packing oranges).

In discussing the threat of the Mediterranean fruit fly that menaced Florida one summer, she writes, “The conflict was grave for us ... “ (293) and “If the fly reached us, we faced ruin, with the actual menace for the poorest of starvation” (295), implying that “ruin” is equally “grave” for her and for her neighbors. Likewise, she suggests that she, too, worries when “the great enemies of Old Starvation and Old Death come skulking down on us” (12). More subtly, she blends her identity with the misfortunes of those for whom

[t]he battle has not gone too well ... at the Creek. One or two have gone ahead, some hold precariously to the narrow ledge of existence, and other have slipped back, and back, until each day’s subsistence has become a triumph. Their houses reflect their fortunes. Mine lies the farthest east in the small settlement. (18)

The one specific piece of information here (the location of Rawlings’ house) is oddly juxtaposed to the rest of the paragraph, for she never goes on to describe the manner in which her house “reflects her fortune.” This omission makes it easier for the reader to assume that she, too, may cling “precariously to the narrow ledge of existence.” She
adopts the community’s superstitions as a way of suggesting she is one of them. “At the Creek,” she writes,

We all watch for signs of change. When the dog fennel blooms, we count that it will be forty days until frost. When the curlews wheel, high in the sky, we are despondent, for they are called the dry-weather birds, and the circling flocks indicate that the rains are a long time away. The golden rod is no help to us, for it is not a fall flower here, but blooms in August or even in July. We listen hopefully for the big bull alligator in Orange Lake, prophesying change, and watch for the poor-Joe flying, for the bird is the best of weather prophets. We eye the Spanish moss for the direction of the wind, for as long as the wind is from the east there will be no rain. We are careful to throw onion peelings into the wood range, and not to throw peanut hulls out of the door, to prevent the quarreling that could so easily arise in the tenseness. We do not sweep anything out the door after sunset, to avoid catastrophe.

Here again, Rawlings uses the grammatical collusion of “we” to mean “myself and others” when in truth “they” would be more accurate.

In a 1988 article, Peggy Prenshaw theorizes that this strategy suggests a “self in hiding.” In order to evade the reader, Rawlings “merges her identity with that of the Creek residents” (13). Prenshaw reads Cross Creek’s first paragraph, in which Rawlings uses the third person plural exclusively, as support for this interpretation:

Cross Creek is a bend in a country road, by land, and the flowing of Lochloosa Lake into Orange Lake, by water. We are four miles west of the small village of Island Grove, nine miles east of a turpentine still and on the other sides we do not count distance at all, for the two lakes and the broad marshes create an infinite space between us and the horizon. We are five white families; “Old Boss” Brice, the Glissons, the Mackays and the Bernie Basses; and two colored families, Henry Woodward and the Mickenses. (9)

Prenshaw notes that the narrator is “strangely absent” from these first few lines, and that in the opening paragraph “there is no ‘I’. Rawlings is part of the ‘we’, but, in fact, she
omits her name from the roll call of Creek families.” Nevertheless, Prenshaw continues, it is a “sense of self, hard won in a lonely battle at Cross Creek, that account[s] for the life force in her work” (3). In a later article (1992), Prenshaw extends the above reading to include Simone de Beauvoir’s discussion of the relationship between the dominant Subject (a position traditionally occupied by men, “chiefly because of economic power”) and the dependent Other (usually women who “are forced to forego self identity and assume the identities … construct[ed] for them”). In this analysis, Prenshaw sees Rawlings as “a shaping Subject that could encompass the Otherness of the world in her story” (18). In this reading, Rawlings’ position as the “seeing, gazing Subject” suggests that her alienation from the Creek (“the malleable Other”) is deliberate; in fact, writes Prenshaw, her “distancing was necessary and … came only with mastery, a mastery that made it possible for Rawlings to impose her interpretation, her shaping imagination upon the unmediated experience of daily life at Cross Creek” (21). In both readings, Prenshaw credits Rawlings with a certain self-consciousness, believing that she is aware, at least on some level, “that as a storyteller she subverts the Creek, even destroys many truths of its people and earth, in order to give her version of it and thereby master her art” (23).

This belief parallels James Olney’s view of autobiography as part of “the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create and that, in the end, determines the nature and form of what he creates” (3) and Rawlings’ own thoughts from a lecture she delivered to the National Council of Teachers of English in 1939:

For the producer of literature is not a reporter but a creator. His concern is not with presenting the superficial and external aspects, however engaging, of an actual people. It is with the inner revelation of mankind, thinking and moving against the backdrop
of life itself with as much of dramatic or pointed effect as the artistry of the writer can command. The creative writer filters men and women, real and fancied, through his imagination as through a catalytic agent, to resolve the confusion of life into the ordered pattern, the co-ordinated, meaningful design, colored with the creator's own personality, keyed to his own philosophy, that we call art. (17)

Rawlings might have agreed, then, with Prenshaw, that the book's central topic is the growth and construction of knowledge ("Resident" 19). She wrote to Max Perkins that in Cross Creek, "I came as close as possible to a thread, in more or less dealing with the growth of my knowledge of place and people" (Letters 209). Here, the emphasis on "place" and "people" and the absence of any reference to self-knowledge indicates that what is overlooked in Prenshaw's view of the book is the unconscious impetus for this "construction," how the public sharing of a certain kind of knowledge (of nature, of the community) is predicated on the private denial of another type of knowledge (of the self). Because of this self-repression, Rawlings has a complicated relationship with her own autobiography. She is both the writer and the Written. Her self is the Other to the narrating Subject; her self's representation is at the mercy of the narrator's agenda, which is primarily to prevent Rawlings' own marginalization. The persona it creates is one that insures the self's continued security as part of the community, and therefore the narrative constructions of the community and the self are manipulated by a fear of alienation. Thus, it is not a "sense of self hard won" that gives her writing its life force, but a persona supporting its constructed masks that motivates her narrative.

Rawlings' desire to play a certain role at the Creek, according to Gordon Bigelow, "combined several rural myths: that of a sturdy frontierswoman facing the perils of the
wilderness, that of a simple farm wife tending her house and garden and barnyard, and
that of a female squire ... galloping about on a blooded horse supervising her acres and in
the evening acting as the gracious hostess in a long gown.” Each of these myths,” he
writes, “she played out in real life” (Eden 56-57). That the combination of these myths
does not reflect Rawlings selfhood makes her identity the central interpretative problem
of Cross Creek. The narrator—an authorial voice “that is of as much concern [to the
reader] as the ... characters that it records” (Dukes 91)—shapes a persona that veils her
ture self. Rawlings indicates an awareness of this dynamic in writing to Max Perkins that

[n]o actual autobiography, even, is ever truly the individual. In
writing of ourselves, we shade ourselves almost as much as we do
an imaginary character—often quite unconsciously. For instance, I
gave a false picture of myself in ‘Cross Creek’. Readers think of
me so much as The One Friend, and my flesh crawls when they
approach me, which would never happen to The Friend” (Letters
290).

This “false picture” of “The One Friend” is one of many masks constructed by the
narrative consciousness in Cross Creek to camouflage the author’s negative attributes,
whether her impulsive decision-making, her violent temper, or her poor driving.

Parker tells us, for example, that Rawlings acquired her services as a maid with
characteristic impulsiveness and equal degrees of forcefulness and perfidy. Expecting
Mrs. Camp to contact her about a job as a cook, Idella first meets Rawlings on her front
porch:

[A] rich lady came up there with a cigarette in her hand and a big
dog in the back of this new shiny Oldsmobile. I knew that was
Mrs. Camp from Ocala ... When [I] saw this new car, [I] knew it
was a rich person. She said “I’m looking for Idella,” and I said,
“I’m Idella.” And you can cook, you sure you can cook?” I said,
“Lord, yes.” She didn’t tell me her name, but she ... wrote a
check for two dollars, my salary. ... And when she left, she said, “I’ll see ya.” But the check said Rawlings on it. “Rawlings,” I said, “No, I’m looking for Mrs. Camp.” She said, “You don’t want to work for that woman. She’s hard to get along with.” (quoted in “Interview” 57)

This story reveals a certain audacity about the “rich person” in the “shiny Oldsmobile” who could presume to know that someone she had never met would want to work for her rather than “that woman,” who was actually a friend of Marjorie’s. In Cross Creek, nothing of this presumptive attitude is revealed by the narrator, who says merely, “There came to me, in answer to a prayer, a reward for my sufferings, the perfect maid ... The Lord taketh away but the Lord also definitely giveth” (212). From Idella’s rendering of what happened, it is clear that Rawlings played a significant and somewhat dubious role in acquiring the “perfect maid.” She had at least as much to do with the situation as the Lord, but by giving him credit she manages to keep an unflattering part of her identity concealed from her readers and, perhaps, from herself.

Similarly, in the chapter “A Pig is Paid For,” Rawlings shoots Mr. Martin’s pig for eating her fluffy-ruffle petunias—“delicate plants [for which] the seed is as expensive as gold dust and as fine” (106). The pig, “Titian-haired and light of spirit and rounded into delicious curves by his long diet of biddy-mash, skimmed milk, and petunias,” had long been an enemy of Rawlings as he “raced joyously under [her] bedroom ... butt wobbling, tail curling, to the trays of feed and the petunia bed.” To make matters worse, the pig brought his brothers and sisters with him, who “only followed where he led.” Rawlings admits that “murder lay ready in her heart,” and describes her revenge without remorse: “I arose as one in a trance, picked up my gun, stepped to the petunia bed and
shot him dead where he fed. ... I pulled the trigger with joy and looked down at my fallen foe with delight and triumph” (107). She hides none of this delight from Mr. Martin when he confronts her about the shooting, saying happily, “I’m sorry. But that’s the way I am. I go along quietly for a while, and then out of a clear sky I just don’t know what I’m doing. I pick up a gun and I shoot whatever makes me angry. This time it was a pig. I’m so afraid some time it may be a person.” When Mr. Martin suggests that she should have captured the pig instead, Rawlings retorts, “Yes, Mr. Martin, ... but then I wouldn’t have had the pleasure of shooting it” (109). Rawlings portrays the incident as highly humorous, failing to mention several salient facts that Jake Glisson reveals in his book. For example, “She could not afford new fences,” he writes, “and tried to repair the old ones, which resulted in livestock coming and going at will on her property.” She often blamed the result of her inadequate fencing on her neighbors, even going so far as to “accuse a neighbor of tearing down her fences when they had fallen because of rotten posts.” Glisson tells us that “on several occasions she threatened to shoot invading livestock, and she did shoot Mr. Martin’s pig when it rooted in her petunia bed” (94).

When Rawlings writes that Mr. Martin forgives her because she talks “so honest” (110), she implies a justification to her crime when in reality she had none. According to Glisson, the destruction of her petunias was her own fault and her shooting of the pig unwarranted.

Like stories of her violent temper, accounts of Rawlings’ poor driving abound. Although the element of comedy in these stories varies, the degree of danger is always the same. She was not to be trusted behind the wheel of a car, a fact to which both Jake
Glisson and Idella Parker attest in an interview with Gordon Bigelow. When asked how many times Rawlings wrecked her big Oldsmobile, Idella initially declines to answer. But Glisson says, “Her driving was notorious. I remember every now and then somebody would say Mrs. Rawlings’ car got away from her with Idella again.” Once, her recklessness caused her to hit one of the Glissons’ mules, which then flew over the top of the car upside down, dented the trunk, and was dead when it hit the ground. The noted author leapt from her car and insisted the mule have a proper burial. Jake Glisson then noticed a “lady on the floor board.” Struck immobile by fear was Julia Scribner, the daughter of Rawlings’ distinguished publisher. After this story, Idella finally admits that “had it not been for the car, I would have been with her until her death ... She had lots of wrecks. One time I had two ribs broken” (“Interview” 59-60). In her book, Idella writes that she always felt more comfortable behind the wheel because Rawlings was such a bad driver. “The speed limit,” she relates, “on open highways in those days was 70, but she paid little attention to that” (39). Despite a fault that must have been obvious to her, Rawlings never mentions it in Cross Creek. She does, however, relate the story of Mr. Swilley following her in the farm truck on an errand. Once on the road, she realizes that he has never driven before. As the story continues, Rawlings implies that only her “sudden wisdom” prevents Mr. Swilley from killing himself. She starts the truck four times for him after it stalls and gives him “a belated and elemental lesson in gear-shifting.” The success of this lesson goes to Mr. Swilley’s head, and “in a great burst of speed ... he [swoops] and [swerves] ahead,” only “by a miracle” bringing the truck “to rest against the side of the barn” (140). The focus here is on Mr. Swilley’s incompetence
and the implied self-portrait of the author as a competent driver, which clearly could not be much further from the truth.

What are perhaps the author's most important masks in Cross Creek have their basis in the book's religious themes. Although descended from a family of Methodists, Rawlings never practiced formal religion, and the cosmic mysticism of her books far outweighs any other religious viewpoint. It seems slightly odd, then, to find so many religious references in Cross Creek. In the first chapter, Rawlings tells us that amiability at the Creek is as uncertain as "a sinner's hope of Heaven," and describes a physical discomfort created by mosquitoes, heat, and sandspurs that makes "Job's boils seem a luxury" (18). The chapter "Residue" begins with Rawlings' interpretation of the parable of the camel and the eye of the needle, while "The Ancient Enmity," a chapter about her fear of snakes, opens with a bible verse from Genesis about the serpent. The chapter "Our Daily Bread" in which the author admits that "I have studied Fanny Farmer as a novitiate to the prayer book" (217), takes its title from the Lord's Prayer and ends with a "shrill soprano voice" singing the opening strains of "I know Salvation's free" (252). In describing spring at the Creek, Rawlings writes, "Here in Florida the seasons move in and out like nuns in soft clothing, making no rustle in their passing" (254). In cold weather, before she installs indoor plumbing, her outside shower is "a fit device for masochistic monks. The icy spray that [attacks] the shoulders like splinters of fine glass [is] in the nature of a cross." The water that runs off the roof when it rains, however, is warm in cold weather and cool in warm weather; for this water, she writes, "I could strip and accept the benediction" (65). Cross Creek is laced with such references, references that
create an easel on which Rawlings props two of her most significant self-portraits, that of a woman redeemed and a savior received.

When The New York Herald Tribune defined her characters in South Moon Under as “members of the sub-species of the human race called Florida Crackers” (Silverthorne 86), Rawlings wrote Max Perkins that she felt “quite the Judas, at having delivered the Cracker into the hands of the Philistines” (Letters 61). However, when English and Scottish reviewers “found her Crackers ‘spirited and virile pioneers,’ ‘rugged settlers who struggle against great odds” (Silverthorne 86), Rawlings approved because this view more closely resembled her own, that through “superiority to life’s hazards” her characters affirmed “man’s hardiness and unconquerability” (“Solitary” 85). In Cross Creek, we see the author’s belief that these hazards allow the indomitable human spirit to shine, brightened by the daily struggle for survival. About the Widow Slater, for example, Rawlings writes, “I have never known a person who had less over which to rejoice, who found more in daily living to rejoice her.” The Slater family, which was “large for one of no means at all” (78) had “a luminous quality that somehow set them beyond the well and fit and made of them more desirable citizens and friends and neighbors than many a well-cared-for aristocrat” (79). Similarly, Moe’s mother is the “admirable Florida pioneer type, plump, immaculate, wise and kindly” (124). In the Fiddias, she finds an “utter lack of bleakness or despair” despite their living “on the very edge of starvation and danger.” She is astonished by their zestfulness in living, their humor, and their alertness to beauty (Letters 49). “The true Florida Crackers are almost gone,” Rawlings said in a 1935 talk, “and I regret it because they are … beautiful in their
repose, their dignity, and their self-respect. Life has never been easy for them, but it has a distinct graciousness" (Eden 99). This attitude, writes Bigelow, "reminds one of eighteenth-century theorists like Rousseau or Chateaubriand, who claimed that virtue would most abound in men who lived in a state of nature" (“Wilderness” 302).

Ironically, when asked to modify one of her characters in Golden Apples, Rawlings wrote Perkins, “Damned if I’ll make Camilla noble. I like pitiful people and loving people and people who have any elements of strength and put up a fight, but nobility turns my stomach” (Silverthorne 105). This strong reaction may have stemmed from her subconscious realization that an element of nobility did indeed lace her portrayal of the Crackers, an element that was self-serving as much as it was genuine.

In a lecture given in 1939, Rawlings told her audience that “If people really are just as quaint as all-get-out, write an essay about them for National Geographic, but don’t make a novel about them unless they have a larger meaning than just quaintness” (Bellman Rawlings 22). Four years earlier, in a talk entitled “The Invisible Florida,” she claimed that Florida’s beauty was invisible because it had to be seen with a spiritual eye. “You must have seen,” she continued, “some withered old woman in a gray and white percale dress, standing in the doorway of an unpainted pine shack under a live oak or a magnolia, and felt that she was a strong and lovely part of a sturdy, an admirable and difficult life” (Eden 99-100). This woman’s “difficult life,” her suffering, Rawlings seemed to be saying, is transcendent for those who see the “larger meaning” of this vision, not for the woman herself. In other words, to see with a “spiritual eye” requires a certain distance from the immediacy of starvation and penury. Rawlings has this distance
at the Creek and is able to superimpose a larger meaning on the Cracker lifestyle, portraying the adversity they face as a kind of redemption. In Cross Creek, she quotes Georges Sand, who believed:

The happiest of men would be he who, working intelligently and laboring with his hands, drawing comfort and liberty from the exercise of his intelligent strength, should have time to live through his heart and his brain, to comprehend his own work and that of God. Happiness would be wherever the mind, the heart and the arm should work together beneath the eye of Providence, so that a holy harmony should exist between the munificence of God and the rapture of the human soul. (376)

Like Sand, Rawlings elevates man’s physical struggles to an almost spiritual realm. As in religious communion, she embellishes the hardships of rural Florida life with a beauty and significance that glorifies suffering.

In Rawlings’ notes about Georges Sand, Bigelow reports, there is another passage copied from “La Mare au Diable”: “[T]he dream of a sweet, free, poetic, laborious and simple life is not so difficult to conceive that it be dismissed as a chimera. Virgil’s sad but sweet words, ‘O, happy the man of the fields, if he but knew his happiness!’ are a regret; but ... [a] day will come when the husbandman will be able to be an artist also.”

For Bigelow, there is no doubt that Rawlings “thought of herself at Cross Creek as a kind of Virgilian husbandman or shepherdess” who expresses her “desire to be identified with her neighbors who actually were committed to rural or agricultural pursuits” (Eden 124). Cross Creek, then, is for Rawlings what le petit hameau was for Marie Antoinette, and her desire to participate in this kind of rural fantasy can be traced back to 1918, when she wrote in a letter to Charles Rawlings,
Do you know what I want to do? Marry you & go to Russia or France or Italy, & bum around at something interesting. Don’t you honestly think, after the war is over, that the Red Cross would have use for a man & wife in reconstruction work? ... Doesn’t that appeal to you like everything? We could write a couple of books... Golly, wouldn’t that be slick? ... And we’d have goats’ milk, and peasants, and fur coats if we went to Russia—and oh jiminy, it would be great. ... And we’d run around in ox-carts ...

(Letters 23)

Here, Rawlings uses the verb “have” to indicate what life would be like in Russia with “goats’ milk, peasants, and fur coats.” What she obviously meant was that they could “have” the appearance of being peasants. Not until ten years after this letter, when Rawlings’ moved to what she once called a “firmly entrenched outpost of the vanishing frontier” (Letters 36), did she find a place to adopt this appearance and fulfill her desire to “bum around at something interesting” and “write a couple of books.” Her involvement in her grove rarely amounted to anything other than “either supervising or puttering” (Eden 124), yet she writes that one of the most important lessons she learned at Cross Creek is “a recognition that one is not unique in being obliged to toil and struggle and suffer” (27). When Martha tells the author that her newly-purchased grove hasn’t always turned a profit but has never let any of its previous owners starve, Rawlings writes, “Hunger at the moment was not immediate, but when it menaced later, I remembered the things the old black woman said, and I was comforted, sensing that one had only to hold tight to the earth itself and its abundance. And if others could fight adversity, so might I” (29), implying a kind of desperation that never really existed for her.

Carolyn Jones writes that in Cross Creek Rawlings “comes to terms with human suffering and loss through human action in the context of creation” (244-245). In fact, it
is her fictionalized participation in a rural Florida community “where everything they do is necessary to sustain life” (Letters 49) that allows her to infuse this suffering with meaning. “Because we have adapted ourselves, with affection,” Rawlings writes, “to a natural background that is congenial to us, we know that the struggle is better done in love than in hate ... when a wave of love takes over a human being, love of nature, love of all mankind, love of the universe, such an exaltation takes him that he knows he has put his finger on the pulse of the great secret and the great answer.” “We know,” she continues, “that in our relations with one another, the disagreements are unimportant and the union vital” (377). For Rawlings, the union is vital because it allows her to adopt a redemption for physical suffering that she cannot possibly deserve for her own inner turmoil.

“I like to see people bucking something solid instead of their own neuroses,” she writes. “Of course, neuroses are something to reckon with—I suppose it is too late for humans to turn back to the basic simplicities, the soil, the prehistoric struggle for food” (Letters). This “prehistoric struggle,” which she finds to some degree at Cross Creek, becomes a metaphor for her private anguish. Implying her membership in a community that is “bucking something solid,” she writes, “Life has not been easy for any of us” (372). The word “easy” is ambiguous here, as it is in this passage from The Yearling, when Penny, the hardy frontiersman, tells Jody, his son:

You’ve seed how things goes in the world o’ men. You’ve knowned men to be low-down and mean. You’ve seed ol’ Death at his tricks. You’ve messed around with ol’ Starvation. Ever’ man wants life to be a fine thing, and easy. ‘Tis fine, boy, powerful fine, but tain’t easy. Life knocks a man down and he gits up and it knocks him down agin. I’ve been uneasy all my life. (496)
In these lines, Rawlings juxtaposes a list of tangible hardships (low-down men, death, and starvation), evidence that life “tain’t easy,” with Penny’s odd admission, “I’ve been uneasy all my life.” In *Cross Creek*, the same kind of overlap occurs between what has not been easy for the author and the way “life knocks a man down” in the Cracker community. This same kind of ambiguity occurs when Rawlings describes the nights of “firing” the grove during a freeze: “My heart bursts with the loveliness of the grove and of the night. If only, I think, I could watch such beauty unencumbered by my fears” (347). Ostensibly, her fears, like those of her neighbors, are for the loss of the oranges, but this loss is less devastating for her than for others. She writes, “There is a healthy challenge in danger and a certain spiritual sustenance comes from fighting it. For all the losses they have cost me, I would not chosen to have lived without knowing the nights of firing on a freeze” (344). What she chooses to overlook in this statement is that although the battle against inclement weather may redeem her, her neighbors cannot benefit, as she does, from “spiritual sustenance” if it is lost.

Whatever the source of Rawlings’ “uneasiness”—which she feared might be seen as an indulgence of her privileged upbringing, a touch of madness, or merely unjustified brooding—Rawlings obviously feels that it is not as legitimate as the hard, but redemptive, Cracker lifestyle. If she can falsely attribute her black moods to a struggle for survival, she is then spared having to examine or reveal their true source. She identifies her situation with that of the Creek residents because she cannot write about her own genuine emotional adversity. Her readers, she must have feared, would not understand that kind of suffering. Although her “mental agony causes physical
symptoms” (Cross Creek 178), it is, for the most part, unacknowledged and unseen. Members of the community, struggling for survival, cannot perceive its effects—moodiness, evil temper, anxiety, and despair—as suffering. Furthermore, this kind of struggle has no tangible rewards. At least backbreaking labor puts crops in the ground, and poverty is visible—children have no shoes, families go hungry, a couple sets up housekeeping under the shelter of an oak tree.

Paradoxically, given this attempt to cast herself as a poor Cracker redeemed by physical hardships, Rawlings also wants to play the part of savior in her memoir. In Cross Creek, she depicts herself as someone who is generous to a fault, accepting “her role as lady bountiful as part of her purpose in life at the Creek” (Dukes 100). Although by all accounts she was “great-hearted,” her self-portrayed munificence takes on almost messianic overtones. Whereas Christ is a fisher of men, she is a “hospitable and nurturing shore” for the “outright derelicts in the neighborhood, men cast adrift by life” (131). After feeding one such mendicant, Rawlings writes that “[t]he ragged creature blessed me as he went away with his full stomach and small gifts” (33). She pays for medical care for Creek residents that need it, and although she presses charges against Henry Fountain for shooting her farmhand, Samson, she nevertheless sends money to his family while he is in jail. At Christmas, she makes up boxes of sweaters, shirts, dresses, candy, fruitcake, and pecans for her workers and poor families with children (339). Despite this kind of charity, which she gave freely, Rawlings bristled at the suggestion that she should improve the economic conditions at Cross Creek. “They don’t need any improving. They are happy as they are,” she would reply, explaining more mildly that
"[a]ny change imposed by others ... might upset their present harmony and happiness" (Silverthorne 163). There is a measure of self-interest in this attitude, as any change in their economic status would also make her role as a benefactor obsolete.

Rawlings’ desire to be both the saved and the savior at Cross Creek manifests itself in the chapter entitled “The Pound Party,” when she encounters the Townsends, a typical Cracker family with “thin, grave boys” who have “the look of age that hunger puts on children” (52). Mr. Townsend is a “lean brown-eyed man” with “long bare feet” who looks like “John the Baptist” (49). In what Rawlings initially takes as the first friendly overture she receives at the Creek, the family invites her to bring a pound of something—“A cake’s fine”—to a party at their house. In retrospect, the author asks herself, “[H]ow was I to have known ... that the Townsends’ invitation to a pound party was not a social gesture?” (48). After she arrives, she slowly realizes that no other guests have been invited and that besides her chocolate cake and another small layer cake, “[t]he rest of the refreshments provided by the hostess consisted of a bucket of water, a ten-cent jar of peanut butter and a nickel box of soda crackers” (50). Eyes follow “hungrily” as Mrs. Townsend passes the crackers and the tiny jar of peanut butter, and the cakes disappear “as though a thundershower had melted them” (51). Rawlings surmises that her invitation has been merely an attempt to procure food for the family and so decides, “I should go any time I was invited, and should see to it that a larger jar of peanut butter was provided” (52).

This episode marks Rawlings’ initiation into the Cracker culture and can be read as both a baptism and a first communion for the author. By experiencing the poverty of a
man she calls “St. John” (55) and his family and accepting a dipper of water from the bucket, she is symbolically baptized into a community whose way of life will redeem her. The crackers provided by the hostess represent the communion wafer, a metaphor reinforced by the image of food disappearing as though it has “melted.” This incident marks the beginning of Rawlings’ attempts to minister to the Townsends. She provides work for the entire family when jobs are scarce, pays them generous wages, obtains tetrachlorethylene capsules from the state to prevent hookworms in the children, even sews clothes for the children to wear to school, and delivers her charity “with a missionary’s pride” (54). Ironically, the invitation that sparked this charity was one that she fundamentally misunderstood, according to Jake Glisson. He writes that “[o]n two occasions, well-meaning families attempted to draw her into their community of friends, only to have her misinterpret their overtures as attempts to obtain charity.” The Townsends’ invitation to the pound party was a genuine offer of friendship, he reports, and Rawlings’ implication that it was something less sincere stemmed from “the bias of her own misunderstanding” (86). This insight demonstrates how Rawlings interprets events in such a way as to lend strength to her self-representation, how her portrayal of the Townsends upholds her constructed self-image as benefactor of the Creek.

This example highlights what Bigelow describes as the central problem of Rawlings’ literary career: “how to strike the proper balance between truth to life and truth to literary art” (“Lord Bill” 114). This question became even more problematic for her in Cross Creek, a book in which “truth to life” meant deciding whether to reveal the truth of her self. That she did not attempt a truthful self-revelation in her memoir is perhaps
testimony to her belief that, no matter how "humorous or moving," truthful anecdotes would not be "enough" to convey her experience among the Crackers. "The sense of knowing a particular place and people," she wrote Perkins, "with a deep, almost Proustian deepness and intimacy and revelation, with my own feeling about things back of it, is what I want" (Letters 195). In trying to understand how a narrative persona—which has as its base the idea that the author's "own feeling about things" will be secondary to her "knowing a particular place"—defines its "self," we create a self as surely as the author has done in writing down her experiences. Thus, "the thread, long tangled, comes straight again." Rawlings' self-portrait, then, despite its masks, delusions, and repressed fears, becomes in some ways more truthful than manifest self-revelation. She believed that, "All life is a balance ... between the forces of creation and the forces of destruction, between love and hate, between life and death ... We know only that we are impelled to fight on the side of the creative forces." Since the creative force of her writing does not serve to create a "holy harmony" of self, her identity can therefore exist as part of the "dual nature of man and the dual nature of the universe" (CC 376-377). Thus, the reader is able to sense a self whose definition is in many ways beyond words. This sense may be an illusion, but with the awareness of illusion comes the realization that Rawlings must have glimpsed her own alienation. And with this realization comes the thought that in writing, as in life, "Her legacies were rich but somehow often sad."13
NOTES

1 "No one knows for sure," Gordon Bigelow reports, "where the word 'cracker' came from as a name for the white settlers of inland Florida. Some claim that it is based on the practice of these people of cracking dry corn to make the meal and grits so important to their diet; some claim that it refers to their skill in cracking the great whips they used to drive their oxen and cattle; still others claim that it comes from the Spanish word *cuacaros* meaning 'Quakers'" (Eden 98). Some have ascribed a negative connotation to the name, as in this quotation from a travel book (Florida for Tourists, Invalids, and Settlers, 1882) that describes Crackers as

> the clay-eating, gaunt, pale, tallowy, leather-skinned sort—stupid, stolid, staring eyes, dead and lusterless; unkempt hair, generally tow-colored; and such a shiftless, slouching manner! simply white savages—or living white mummies would, perhaps, better indicate their dead-alive looks and actions. ... Stupid and shiftless, yet shy and vindictive, they are a block in the pathway of civilization, settlement, and enterprise wherever they exist. (quoted in Eden 101)

For the purposes of this paper, "Crackers" refers to the rural natives of north central Florida. No pejorative connotation is intended.

2 Most critics recognize Cross Creek's importance to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. In fact, Bigelow writes, "Her mature life and literary career can be understood only in terms of her discovery of Florida" (2) and, in the introduction to her collected letters, explains the philosophy that this discovery inspired in her:

> She had a theory ... that human happiness is radically related to place. She felt that places quite as much as people have definite character, and that just as a person has natural affinity for some
people and not for others, in the same way he has affinity for some places and not for others. ... She had the conviction, immediately in the tiny hamlet of Cross Creek, Florida that she had found a place where her soul could be at ease. (Letters 4-5)

In an article for the Sewanee Review, he notes that “Throughout her writings the wilderness theme is closely associated with a developed doctrine concerning the relation of man to his environment. She believed, briefly, a man can be happy only in the degree to which he is able to adjust harmoniously to his surroundings” (33).

The introduction to Selected Letters of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings gives a fuller account of the public perception of the author and the relationship of this perception to her life:

... by the late thirties she had become something of a national celebrity and something of a legend. She began to be represented in magazine feature articles as an outdoorswoman extraordinary, a kind of great white huntress in boots, breeches, and slouch hat, whose passion when she was not hunting quail or gigging frogs was cooking up swamp cabbage or alligator tail or other forest delicacy in her kitchen.

This image and the legend behind it, while true in a way, were only part of the truth behind this remarkable woman. Underneath the slouch hat was a northern city woman ... who until she came to Florida ... had had little to do with the outdoors except for summers spent on a farm, little to do with sports of any kind— who had seldom held a fishing pole or hunted so much as a rabbit. (Letters 3)

Rawlings has three biographers: Gordon Bigelow, who wrote Frontier Eden in 1966; Samuel Bellman, who wrote Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings in 1974; and Elizabeth Silverthorne, who wrote Sojourner at Cross Creek in 1985. The first two biographies focus on her literary career, while the later is a more comprehensive account of her life.
There is more recent criticism of Rawlings, most of it published in the *The Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Journal of Florida Literature* (Kevin McCarthy, ed., University of Florida Press), which attempts to provide "a forum for literature written about Rawlings’ beloved Florida" but maintains a "primary commitment to Rawlings" (Editorial Statement).

This idea is one of many that recall Thoreau’s philosophy in *Walden*:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear ... I wanted to live deep and suck all the marrow of life ... (66)

According to Gordon Bigelow, Rawlings’ “call for a return to the basic simplicities of life emphasizes how much her own passion for nature was combined with a protest against the blight which industrial civilization casts on the human spirit, a protest virtually identical to that of the transcendentalists of the last century” (“Wilderness” 308).

In this example and others, *The Creek* has been interpreted as more authentic than *Cross Creek*. Indeed, Glisson’s account of a rural Florida community has been used to discredit Rawlings’ depiction of the way things were. One might well ask what makes Glisson’s recounting more credible than Rawlings’ own story. Certainly, he was a more legitimate citizen of that community than she was, and, as a little-known artist, had less of a public image to protect. But even more importantly, a sense of an examined life and an integrated self emerges from his narrative that, despite Rawlings’ skill as a writer, never comes together in her memoir. Thus, Glisson’s book is a foil to *Cross Creek* not only in its presentation of an alternate reality but in its disclosure of a self. Beginning
with his statement, “If one grows up next door to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, he should think hard before writing about Cross Creek” (1), Glisson’s narrative voice remains genuine throughout. He expresses his objective “to tell the truth” and to share his “unpolished view of the world” (3), and thereby proves his assertion that “there is the Cross Creek that Idella and I know about; then there is the Cross Creek of [Rawlings’] book” (“Interview” 62). However, just because Glisson presents facts more accurately than his famous literary neighbor does not mean that he has written a better book, only that his viewpoint is worth using as a tool for examining Cross Creek.

8 See Simone de Beauvoir thoughts in The Second Sex:

To regard the universe as one’s own, to consider oneself to blame for its faults and to glory in its progress, one must belong to the caste of the privileged; it is for those alone who are in command to justify the universe by changing it, by thinking about it, by revealing it; they alone can recognize themselves in it and endeavor to make their mark on it. (793)

9 Evidence that Rawlings was dependent on alcohol surfaces in her correspondence and even in her more public writing. When Charles Rawlings upset her, she wrote Max Perkins, she could only be soothed by “copious draughts of native rye” (Letters 57). In Cross Creek, she unabashedly describes where and for how long she ages her corn liquor. Under stress, she admits, “I would give my hope of salvation for a dram of whiskey” (180). When she returns from a vacation in North Carolina to find her farm neglected by her workers, she writes, “I told myself to go and make a highball and hold steady” (193). Near the end of Rawlings’ life, Idella Parker tells us, she often embarrassed herself at dinner parties by passing out in her bedroom before her guests had gone home, and whiskey became her “constant companion” (74).
“All this strenuous out-door stuff,” Rawlings wrote in 1933, “is new to me since coming to Florida. I’ve taken to it naturally, but my chief claim to capability in such matters lies only in being game for anything” (Letters 3).

Rawlings views on race were complicated. “There was always a hint of the grande dame, of the lady of the manor, in Marjorie’s stance towards” African Americans, according to Bigelow. “But this was no more than a small corner of her attitude. ... For the most part she looked toward [them] with an unusual candor which was both clear-eyed and charitable, and she wrote of them with a combination of frankness and sympathy” (Eden 141). She was clearly sympathetic to the hardships endured by African Americans in the South, believing that they were often treated unfairly. In fact, when she addressed the Woman’s Club of Gainesville in the late thirties, she “chose to speak in the most uncompromising fashion about the necessity of granting Negroes complete social and political equality” (Eden 64). When Idella Parker took that first fateful ride in Rawlings’ car to Cross Creek, she wondered how to get in the backseat where a large hound seemed to have dominion. Sensing her hesitation, Rawlings said, “Sit in the front, Idella. Always sit in the front with me.” Parker goes on to remind her readers that this was 1940, in the days when African Americans were known as “colored people,” “Negroes,” or just plain “niggers.” Wherever you went in those days you’d see signs: WHITES ONLY.

We weren’t allowed to register, so we couldn’t vote. We didn’t enter white people’s houses by the front door, and ... we sat in the back seats on public buses and separate cars on trains, and we sure didn’t sit up front in a white lady’s car. That’s just how it was. (Parker 19)
Parker writes that Rawlings would become infuriated with anyone who tried to keep the two of them apart, whether in a diner or at the movies. Yet, in many ways, Marjorie Rawlings was still a product of a segregated society. When Zora Neale Hurston visited her fellow Floridian author, she was required to spend the night in the tenant house with Idella rather than in the farmhouse with Marjorie. Years later, Parker reflects on this incident:

My mind keeps going back to the way Mrs. Rawlings made her sleep out in the tenant house. No matter how much she respected Zora’s writing ability and enjoyed her company, Zora was still colored, and would always be treated as such by white people. As liberal and understanding as Mrs. Rawlings was about the poor treatment of blacks by whites, she couldn’t bring herself to let a black woman sleep in her house.

She goes on to say that “In many ways [Rawlings] was ahead of her time, especially in her attitude towards race relations. Yet she could not bring herself to allow a person of color to sleep in her home, and she often called us ‘niggers’ when speaking or writing to other white people” (116). Unfortunately, Cross Creek proves this statement to be true. Rawlings often portrays the African Americans who worked for her unfairly, discussing them in condescending or arrogant tones and depicting them as unreliable, lazy, alcoholic, and a host of other racial stereotypes.

12 In Florida in the 1930s, property owners were responsible for keeping livestock out since, according to a policy of “free range,” farmers were not required to keep their animals fenced in. In Cross Creek, Rawlings acknowledges her awareness of this policy in writing, “In a no-fence county, stock is free to roam as it wills, and the landowner must fence against them if he does not wish to be over-run” (273).
13 From a poem by Samuel Bellman that opens his biography of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and is reprinted here:

Abhorring cities, she took her secret hurt
Into the flat-woods: another De Leon
In search of healing waters.
The marriage failed but Florida
Was balm, and out poured tales
Of Cracker ways, a whole
New language for the proud
Tormented soul. Her cooking
Graced her life, a fierce disjointed
Thing, compact of solitude and
Work at orange grove and desk.
Her legacies were rich but somehow often sad:
The way it used to be, in hammock land and scrub,
The code for tasty meals,
Some pictures of the boy she never had.
Her biggest foe was Time,
But when she’d learnt enough to
Go and make her peace
It turned and claimed her.
She never knew
The soft and slow release.


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VITA

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