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Annie Dillard: At the Altar of Nature

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Annie Dillard: At the Altar of Nature

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ABSTRACT

This thesis intends to delve into Annie Dillard's time spent at Tinker Creek. Why Dillard chose to go into nature is critiqued, as well as what she found. One of the things it appears Annie Dillard sought and found was a connection to the Divine. She had been searching for this connection in various churches but had not found what she needed there. There is another, perhaps more pressing, issue of the mystical journey Dillard went on as well. This was an internal journey, not a physical journey. Both of these topics are vetted for the purposes of furthering the study of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as a primary nature text. Other texts by Annie Dillard were used in helping to give history in the writing of this thesis. These texts include: *Holy the Firm*, *An American Childhood*, and *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Further work should be done to understand more deeply Dillard's connection to nature.

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KEY TO ANNIE DILLARD'S BOOKS

AAC=*An American Childhood*

HTF=*Holy the Firm*

PTC=*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

TASTT=*Teaching a Stone to Talk*

Annie Dillard's Pulitzer Prize-winning work, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), suggests a figure--a believer or perhaps seeker--making a journey to a holy place. Nature is that holy place for Dillard, and she uses nature to show how she has been purified by her relationship with God. Nature, and more specifically, Tinker Creek, is the *destination*. Dillard states that the creek "holds me at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself and keeps me steadied in the current, as a sea anchor does" (PTC 5). But if it's all about the journey and not the destination, as people say, where is the *journey*? This thesis intends to show that Dillard's journey took place internally. It was spiritual, mental, emotional; the journey was *mystical*.

What does Dillard hope to find in nature? Why does she believe that Tinker Creek is "an active mystery, fresh every minute?" (PTC 4). Why does she wake "expectant, hoping to see a new thing?" (PTC 4). *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* helps us see and live these questions but does not dare try to give the reader the answers. However, the journey that Dillard goes on while in nature needs to be vetted. This thesis will add to the limited amount of academic writing that investigates Annie Dillard's reasons for going to Tinker Creek. Other authors have suggested her findings and critiqued her analysis of nature but have yet to delve into the basic question: *why*. Furthermore, this thesis

will follow Dillard's mystical journey to help her understand God's creation and her place within it.

But why is nature so important? Dillard's answer is that the subtleties of nature "are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there" (*PTC* 10). Dillard sees innumerable fascinating things happening in nature and wants to be there for as many of them as possible: "for nature does reveal as well as conceal" (*PTC* 18). There are things we see in nature, and things that we miss entirely. This is the way it is to be. We are able to observe some things, but others will be totally obstructed from our view. "As an artist," Dillard "reimagines a world that contains far more than we can see, a sacramental world. While theologians debate miracles and the supernatural, she renders the splendor of the ordinary" (Yancey 236). Though she cannot see everything, Dillard is going to try because she believes it is important. Tietjen goes so far as to say that "Dillard would have liked to see God in the face if she could do so without dying" (102). Dillard approaches this seeing "as a holy calling" (Yancey 228).

Dillard states, in her own words: "Come on I say to the creek, surprise me; and it does, with each new drop. Beauty is real. I would never deny it; the appalling thing is I forget it" (*PTC* 271). Furthermore, the creek "is the one simple mystery of creation from nothing, of matter itself, anything at all, the

given" (*PTC* 5). The creek given by the Creator, and the water within it helps Dillard feel grounded by keeping her "steadied in the current" of life (*PTC* 4). The Creator gave human beings a singular ability to see the good and bad of nature. Because of this ability to observe, we need to be there when the frog is eaten by the giant water bug like Dillard was (*PTC* 8). Dillard feels disgust seeing the giant water bug suck dry the innards of the live frog. Dockins believes Dillard is trying to show us that nature is not only "inherently cruel" but also "necessarily cruel" (638). If not for the water bug eating the frog, the giant water bug wouldn't be available for a larger animal to feed on. This is the circle of life. It is sometimes cruel, but it always goes on the way nature intended, despite our reactions to it.

Dillard's writing about her excursions into the wilderness of Virginia "is the weaving of a world--not so much a search for Truth as a matter of description, an account which answers to her (and our) needs" (Cheney 42). She creates questions for herself as well as us. However, she is not in search of the answers: she leaves that for us to find for ourselves. Part of this is seeing the frog being eaten by the giant water bug because it shows us the power of nature. We need to see what nature is capable of, because we often overlook it. Nature is not

all pretty flowers and flowing rivers. It is also cruel and horrific in its dealings.

Dillard attends to what goes on in nature because it is her form of prayer. Rather than follow prescribed prayers made by man, Dillard is making her own prayer, in a fashion that makes sense for her. This is what sets Dillard's works apart from others. She is not only the author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir, but also of her own experiences with nature. "Readers keep returning to her work because she describes what no one else has noticed with quite the same acuity" (Yancey 232). Dillard "helps us slow down, look closer, and breathe deeper as we stride through the natural world" while in fact, "[teaching] the rest of us to see" (Yancey 232). Dillard wants us to stop and smell the flowers, as the old adage goes.

Dillard possesses the "additional attributes that the writer must possess, among them solitude or even isolation, passion, and spiritual attentiveness" (Warren 123). "In 'An Expedition to the Pole' she confesses her 'taste for solitude,' relishing it for the concentration, silence, and single-mindedness it enables" (Warren 123). Being alone with and in nature is seemingly what Dillard does best. In fact, Warren believes that "for Dillard. . . spiritual attunement [and] a receptivity to the metaphysical" is required of an author like Dillard (125). Warren further states that "it is the task of the writer to

abandon herself to her materials so entirely that she disappears, and her subject emerges, clear and defined" (127).

"Nearly always in Dillard's descriptions [this] process is marked by struggle and suffering" (Warren 130). For Dillard, the struggle is sometimes that she becomes overwhelmed by what she is seeing. After seeing the giant water bug eat the frog, she states that she couldn't "catch my breath" (*PTC* 8). Warren concludes her thoughts with: "To Dillard, the writer's sacrifice is crucial in accomplishing the central purposes of language.

Dillard must lose her life in order to find it again in the resurrection power of the Word" (136). This losing of herself is crucial to the finding of the Divine within nature, it is her sacrifice. This is where mysticism plays a part for Dillard. By paying less attention to herself, she is able to pay more attention to the otherness of nature. However, Dillard realizes that she is as much a part of nature as it is a part of her. This is part of the journey that Dillard is going on while at Tinker Creek. She must traverse this path and come to her own questions and conclusions. Sometimes, she finds there are no answers, only questions.

Dillard finds purpose in the woods and discovers that "beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there" (*PTC* 10) because "the extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation" (*PTC*

11). Ireland calls this Dillard's "ecstatic phenomenology" (24) in that it is Dillard's way of being mindful in nature. Brown-Davidson relates that in Dillard's poetry and essays, she "wrestles with the essence of things with the strength of a grizzly wrapping us in its arms" (1). Dillard has the singular ability to grasp onto nature and not let go of it until it is critiqued and understood by her readers.

Dillard says that she walks out and sees something, "some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost; or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell" (*PTC* 14). To Dillard, discovering "at least where it is that we have been so startlingly set down" (*PTC* 14) is important if we cannot learn why, because "nature is very much a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't affair" (*PTC* 18). Who knows what one will see when they go into nature? You may see a muskrat in the river, or you may see a praying mantis mating and eating the head off of its mate. There are no guarantees that anything will occur. For Dillard, when natural wonders do appear, these "appearances catch at my throat; they are the free gifts" that nature gives us in bountiful supply (*PTC* 19). We only need to take the time to stop and see it clearly. We need to hunch down and allow the splendor of nature to give us a show. Part of this is being attentive to

what is happening around us. Dillard herself has no problem doing this. In fact, one "night I stayed too late I was hunched on the log staring spellbound at spreading, reflected stains of lilac on the water" (PTC 22). She "still sat transfixed" long after her muscles started to ache, she became stiff, and night began to fall around her (PTC 23).

Dillard believes that "the literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise" (PTC 35). Not only can you find the expected within nature, the wholly unsuspected will happen, too, and you must be ready for anything. This includes the "collapsed body of the frog eaten by a giant water bug" (Tietjen 106). Not only is *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* about seeing nature and perhaps all of God's creation, it is also for being ourselves fully. Dillard believes that part of being human is being mindful of what is happening in nature. Conklin states that Dillard's work is an "example of metaphysical self-exploration" (226). The metaphysical, mystical, journey Dillard is on involved a great deal of looking into oneself to find or formulate the questions about life itself. Slovic believes that Dillard must also "be attentive to her 'controls,' to pen and yellow paper, and to how her 'line of words' will appear to her audience on the ground" (74-75). Again, losing the emotional and spiritual self is a part of

finding herself in nature. Sometimes you must abandon ship in order to save yourself.

In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard writes that "every day is a god, each day is a god and holiness holds forth in time" (11). Holiness is everywhere, and what Annie Dillard does alone in the woods is her form of worshipping that which is holy. Dillard does not need a set, specific time and place to wonder at the marvels of God. She can go out her door and walk to the creek whenever the feeling strikes her. Frequently, she sets "out for the railroad tracks, for the hills the flocks fly over, for the woods where the white mare lives," but sometimes she ends up at "the water" (PTC 5). No matter what Dillard intends, God will find a way to make her see what needs to be seen. She may intend to do one thing but may end up doing another. Dillard is as much an instrument of God as a seeker of knowledge about God. She is in some ways a receptive vesicle. In others, she is the wine that is poured into it.

To understand how Dillard, at a mere twenty-eight years old, came to be such an acclaimed nature writer, one must start with her childhood experiences. The best place to start is with Dillard's 1987 book, *An American Childhood*. In the prologue to this work, Dillard writes that "when everything else has gone from my brain--the President's name. . . and then my own name

and what it was on earth I sought. . . what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that" (3). Memory is the most important thing to her because remembering topology involves the graphic details of a place or region and shows us its natural form.

The natural form of the world around her and its features are important to Dillard. This attentiveness began with her childhood reading habits. This started in Homewood Library in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Books, for Dillard, proved to be an excellent medium for her to begin her serious contemplation of the natural world. As she began learning how to draw, she stated that Kimon Nicolaide's book *The Natural Way to Draw* "would ignite my fervor for conscious drawing, and bind my attention to both the vigor and the detail of the actual world" (AAC 78). Dillard learned to see by way of this book, which said that "learning to draw is really a matter of learning to see" (AAC 79). Books helped Dillard see the world and basically swept Dillard away "one after the other, this way and that" (AAC 85). "'When you open a book,' the sentimental library posters said, 'anything can happen.'" This was so" Dillard believed (AAC 83). Printed pages led Dillard to the outside, physical world.

However, it could be that Dillard's quest for knowledge about the physical world really started when she got a rock collection from her grandparents' paperboy (AAC 136). She found

that from "the Homewood Library's children's books" she could only learn the most basic information about these rocks (AAC 137). However, when given access to the adult books, she "got the true dope, and it was a long story," which helped her identify her rocks (AAC 137). She then discovered an old dime under a Lombardy poplar while she was digging with a popsicle stick in the dirt. Dillard found that there were secrets lodged within the earth's crust itself. She wanted to find out what these clandestine happenings below ground were. Of this, Dillard writes that her father told her that beneath her 1919 dime might be older dimes further down. She started to dig for them, hoping to find "coins from ancient times, from forgotten people and times, gold coins, even" (AAC 40). She states that when you "pry open the landscape, you find wonders" (AAC 143). This is the topology that she will remember when all else is gone from her memory. This is experiencing the world around her as an active participant rather than a passive observer. "That [she] never found another coin in that particular alley didn't matter at all" (AAC 41). She had the experience of digging and finding the coin. This experience, for Dillard, left more of an impression on her than just reading about someone else unearthing something. Reading about someone finding something in the earth would be less important to her now. She had her own experience.

Then Dillard "began a life of reading books, and drawing, and playing at the sciences. Here also I began to wake in earnest. . .and plan my days" (AAC 66). Being aware allowed Dillard to detect the smallest things around her, such as a book in the library that would change the course of her life. When Dillard began going to the public library, she found this book entitled *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams*. She checked out the book multiple times. The third chapter of the book:

explained how to make sweep nets, plankton nets, glass-bottomed buckets, and killing jars. It specified how to mount slides, how to label insects on their pins, and how to set up a freshwater aquarium. One was to go 'into the field' wearing hip boots and perhaps a head net for mosquitoes. (AAC 81)

She found that "anyone [who] had lived the fine life described in Chapter 3 astonished" her (AAC 82). She couldn't believe someone was so lucky as to experience the natural world in this way. People were allowed to go out unsupervised and collect specimens and document nature whenever they felt like it. This idea enthralled Dillard. She further notes that this book was "a shocker from beginning to end" (AAC 82) and that "every year, I read again *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams*" (AAC 83), because "the very hazards of field collecting tempted me" (AAC

142). What are the "hazards" she is speaking of? Perhaps she could get lost in nature. Perhaps she wanted to get lost. Perhaps the wildlife around her would not be so inviting to her forays. But how would she know until she did it? What would she find if she went out into nature? What, in effect, would find her? Dillard found that "just enough work had already been done on everything--moths, say, or meteorites--to get you started and interested, but not so much there was nothing left to do" (AAC 107). Dillard saw that further exploration was not only possible but necessary. What Dillard:

sought in books was imagination. It was depth, depth of thought and feeling; some sort of extreme of subject matter; some nearness to death; some call to courage. . . . What I sought in books was a world whose surfaces, whose people and events and days lived, actually matched the exaltation of the interior life. There you could live.

(AAC 183)

She further believed that "the sky was the limit" (AAC 149). Dillard knew, at a very young age, that there was so much more to explore about the natural world, and she felt an inner pull to do the exploring.

Dillard writes that at this time, "I was just waking up then, just barely" (AAC 10). "We teach our children one thing only, as we were taught: to wake up" (TASTT 22). However, Dillard woke slowly to the external world (TASTT 23). We are encouraged as children to start paying attention to the world around us. Parents are always admonishing their children to "pay attention." There comes a time when parents begin to back away from protecting their child from everything around them and allow their child to figure it out on their own. Instead of stepping in before something happens, parents then ask their child to look at the situation and determine if they could have done something different to create a different outcome. In *An American Childhood*, Dillard "brings a focus on 'awakening' from the blur of childhood into a literate adolescence and engagement with the world" (Harris 62). Although Dillard woke slowly, she did wake to the world around her.

Her father, Dillard states was "a lapsed Presbyterian and a believing Republican" (AAC 8). But her mother, she states, "questioned everything" and:

hers was a relentless mental vigor that just about ignited the dumb household objects with its force. Torpid conformity was a kind of sin; it was stupidity itself, the mighty stream against which Mother would never

cease to struggle. If you held no minority opinions, or if you failed to risk total ostracism for them daily, the world would be a better place without you. (AAC 116)

Her mother tried to keep Dillard keenly aware of everything around her at all times (AAC 117). This led to Dillard being able to live at Tinker Creek and to go into nature to document the happenings around her. Luckily, she learned this lesson well. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard states that even if she "can't see the minutiae, [she] still tries to keep her eyes open" (19). She may not see everything around her because that is not possible. However, she is going to be attentive as she can and for that moment see what is to be seen.

As "the great outer world hove into view and began to fill with things that had apparently been there all along: mineralogy, detective work, lepidopterology, ponds and streams, flying, society" (AAC 11), she found that "children ten years old wake up and find themselves here, discover themselves to have been here all along; is this sad? They wake like sleepwalkers, in full stride" (AAC 11). Dillard confesses that she "woke in bits, like all children, piecemeal over the years. I discovered myself and the world, and forgot them, and discovered them again" (AAC 11). Furthermore, Dillard believes that "consciousness converges with the child as a landing tern touches the outspread feet of

its shadow on the sand: precisely, toe hits toe" (AAC 11). "Like any child, I slid into myself perfectly fitted, as a diver meets her reflection in a pool" (AAC 11). Dillard was "experimenting as a scientist would, testing both the thing itself and the limits of my own courage in [finding] it miserably self-conscious in full view of the whole world" (AAC 108). Dillard was watching nature just as other people were watching her. She wrote an entire book about her travels into nature, and it was read by thousands of people. Some of these people were receptive to her book, but some were critical. She had speak to groups of people and be interviewed about her book. This took courage on Dillard's part.

Dillard realized at some point that

I never woke, at first, without recalling, chilled, all those other waking times, those similar stark views from similarly lighted precipices: dizzying precipices from which the distant, glittering world revealed itself as a brooding and separated scene--and so let slip a queer implication, that I myself was both observer and observable, and so a possible object of my own humming awareness. (AAC 12)

For Dillard, "what a marvel it was that so many times a day the world, like a church bell, reminded me to recall and contemplate the durable fact that I was here, and had awakened once more to find myself set down in a going world" (AAC 17). However, "one turns at last even from glory itself with a sigh of relief" (TASTT 28). Like a bell finally struck, or a world spinning like a top, Dillard finally begins to understand her own existence in this wild and wonderful place. She was aware of her meager existence yet seemed dispirited by this fact. She understood, finally, that there was so much she didn't understand.

Who could ever tire of this heart-stopping transition, of the breakthrough shift between seeing and knowing you see, between being and knowing you be? It drives you to a life of concentration, it does, a life in which effort draws you down so very deep that when you surface you twist up exhilarated with a yelp and a gasp. (AAC 17)

In *Teaching a Stone to Talk* Dillard likens seeing a total eclipse to "a diver in the rapture of the deep who plays on the bottom while his air runs out" (11). The diver is enthralled with what is happening in the deep but is not aware of the fact that they are close to death. Nature can be like that. While we focus on one thing, something more dangerous may be happening

just behind us. The diver is aware of what is happening within them but is unaware of their surroundings. This is a warning that Dillard makes for all of us.

Dillard's attentiveness to what is going on around her must be interspersed with what is going on within her. Rosenthal states that "the contemporary West's major spiritual problem is distractedness" (383). Furthermore, Rosenthal believes, like Dillard seems to, that "to shock us into paying attention is what truly matters--God's presence in our midst" is what we need to heed (383). Dillard says that she "saw us as if from above, even then, even as [she] stood in place living out [her] childhood and knowing it, aware of myself as if from above and behind" (AAC 123). Awareness of self is important in awareness of nature. Without knowing who and what we are, we cannot know or understand why bugs do the things they do. By understanding human nature, it gives us a small bit of understanding the natural world. Who we are and what we think influences how well we see and what is seen. Without self-awareness there is no other-awareness. Dillard is cultivating this ability within herself. Evoking "a genuine terror at the sacred power that catches us off-guard, yet within their terror is comic vision, because what catches us off-guard is ultimately God's love" (Rosenthal 389). Dillard needed to set this as her sight while trying to fight through the terrors of nature, such as the mating ritual of

praying mantises. Although this vision for Dillard was frightening, she understood it as the way it needed to be: as a necessary evil. In addition, Dillard sees that "the marvelous is always catching us off guard. . . because that's the only way it will catch us at all" (Rosenthal 391). If the marvelous is happening right outside our doors, we somehow need to have it "hit" us in order for us to pay attention to it. If it throws us off balance, then we will notice it.

Ross-Bryant believes that Dillard "explores in her works alternative models for perceiving and understanding the world, including the dimension of the sacred" (79). She further believes that in Dillard's work *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, "God is hidden throughout God's universe," and it is up to Dillard to find Him for her readers (81). It's as if Dillard sees God in creation and wants us to see Him too. She sees nature as more than what we see with the naked eye. Smith states that Dillard is not only "concerned with the God of creation" but also "the phenomena of nature, and the human place" within it (342). Even though "Dillard's whole enterprise as a writer is to make us marvel," Dillard realizes "that the sacred is too stupendous for us to stare at directly; we can handle only a glimpse, and even these usually come in disguise" (Rosenthal 391). Nature is so wonderful that sometimes it is too much for us to see at one time. We are only human, of course. Because of this, we can see

only what we are looking at. What we need to do is be open to seeing that which we are *not* looking at. A flower or a furry animal are easy to look at. The female praying mantis eating the head of her mate is not so easy to look at. Yet, we must see it.

Dillard writes:

The interior life is often stupid. Its egoism blinds it and deafens it; its imagination spins out ignorant tales, fascinated . . . The trick of reason is to get the imagination to seize the actual world--if only from time to time. (AAC 20)

Dillard believes that we are often too much in our heads. We over-think things to the point where we lose the meaning of what is happening right in front of us. "Wherever we go, there seems to be only one business at hand--that of finding workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideas and the absurdity of the fact of us" (*TASTT* 42). Dillard wants to point out the ridiculousness of this egoism. Dillard learned that "you have to fling yourself at what you're doing, you have to point yourself, forget yourself, aim, dive" (AAC 47). We have to get out of our heads and experience life. By doing this herself, Dillard learned that

I had been chipping at the world idly, and had by accident uncovered vast and labyrinthine further worlds within it. I peered in one day, stepped in the next, and soon wandered in deep over my head. Month after month, year after year, the true and brilliant light, and the complex and multifaceted coloration, of this actual, historical, waking world invigorated me. Its vastness extended everywhere I looked, and precisely where I looked, just as forms grew under my gaze as I drew.

Dillard recognizes the immensity of what she is dealing with. It grabbed her and pulled her in but she went willingly.

Dillard goes on to say:

This was the enthusiasm of a child, like that of a field-working scientist, and like that of the artist making a pencil study. One took note; one took notes. The subject of the study was the world's things: things to sort into physical categories, and things to break down into physical structures. (AAC 157-8)

Dillard goes on to say that "usually it was a bit of a trick to keep your knowledge from blinding you" (*TASTT* 15) and "only an extraordinary act of will could recall to us our former, living selves and our contexts in matter and time" (*TASTT* 18). Dillard is saying that once nature has put its grasp on you, you will never be the same. You cannot un-ring the bell once it has been rung. You cannot go back to your former self. Something within you has been changed, or affected, by your time in nature. It changes you internally.

"In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us" (*TASTT* 19). The deeps are our subconscious mind. They are the places we do not go willingly. One of the terrors was her experience watching the praying mantises. Dillard "was ambling across this hill that day when [she] noticed a speck of pure white" that she found were a couple of praying mantises mating. Dillard understands that the "mating rites of mantises are well known," but that did not stop her from watching the gruesome spectacle play out before her. She states, that "I have seen it done with my own eyes and have not yet recovered from my astonishment" (*PTC* 59). She goes on to say that "insects, it seems, gotta do one horrible thing after another. I never ask why of a vulture or shark, but I ask why of almost every insect I see" (*PTC* 64). We expect certain behaviors from a shark or vulture, but we do not expect such behavior from

insects. The interesting question is why not? Even Dillard appears unsure of the answer. She states:

remarkable thing about the world of insects, however, is precisely that there is no veil cast over these horrors. These are mysteries performed in broad daylight before our very eyes; we can see every detail, and yet they are still mysteries. If, as Heraclitus suggests, god, like an oracle, neither 'declares nor hides, but sets forth signs,' then clearly I had better be scrying the signs. (*PTC* 65)

Dillard's "unusual obsession with the horrors of the alien lives of insects could be, in part, an effort to accommodate the dark side of her own psyche" (Tietjen 108). Perhaps her daily brushes with death have ushered in the grim and grotesque reality of her own impending mortality. This is one part of fully being ourselves and that like the insects Dillard encounters; it could be violent or go totally unnoticed. By the end of the book, Dillard realizes this when she writes: "You see the creatures die, and you know you will die. And one day it occurs to you that you must not need life. Obviously. And then you're

gone. You have finally understood that you're dealing with a maniac" (PTC 275). The "maniac" that allows the frog to be eaten by the giant water bug is the same "maniac" that allows human beings to die when their time is up. Dillard's impending death hits her like a punch to the gut. She watches bugs dying all the time, but then finally she realizes that one day that will be her. She will be the one being "watched" while she is dying. This catches her off guard.

In addition, Dillard's experience with the Polyphemus moth shaped her future self. Dillard reports "

at school I saw a searing sight. It turned me to books; it turned me to jelly; it turned me much later, I suppose, into an early version of a runaway, a scapegrace. It was only a freshly hatched Polyphemus moth crippled because its mason jar was too small" (AAC 160). Dillard's experience is that "the teacher fades, the classmates fade; I don't remember anything but that thing's struggle to be a moth or die trying.

(PTC 62)

Even though "I hated insects; that was the fact. I never caught my stamp collection trying to crawl away. . . I hated insects; that I knew" (AAC 164). However, Dillard believed "you have to

study something. I never considered turning away from them just because I was afraid of them" (AAC 164). To Dillard, fear is not quite a big enough deterrent. She will not stop studying something just because it frightens her.

Part of Dillard's childhood education was her parents' insistence on religious instruction. Dillard begins her book *An American Childhood* with an epigraph from Psalm 26: "I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of thy house and the place where dwelleth thy glory." This is important because it is within the pages of this book that Dillard gives us the genesis of her ideas about nature and God, and the relationship between the two. The epigraph shows that she believes that nature is God's "house," and it is within that "house" that Dillard has found beauty. Even within the most gruesome acts she observes, she can appreciate God's hand. She understands that God is within everything she sees. Although she may not agree with God's plans or actions, she understands it is beyond her control.

Dillard states in *An American Childhood* that "the Catholic schoolchildren carried brown-and-tan workbooks, which they filled, I knew, with gibberish they not only had to memorize, they had to believe" (33). In addition, "whatever the Pope said, I thought, it was no prize; it didn't work; our Protestant lives were much sunnier, without our half trying" (AAC 33). Yancey re-

lates that "Dillard felt drawn to religious ideas. . . Memorizing long passages from the King James Version, she wrote poems in deliberate imitation of its rhythms" (230). In the church she attended as a child, "she occasionally felt 'despite myself, some faint, thin stream of spirit braiding forward from the pews'" (Yancey 230). Dillard admitted to "one short fling of rebellion against God. . . After four consecutive summers at the church camp, she got fed up with the hypocrisy of people coming to church to show off their clothes and, wanting to make a major statement, she decided to confront the ministers head-on" (Yancey 230). Because she was intimidated by the senior minister:

she marched into the assistant minister's office and delivered her spiel about hypocrisy. A wise man, in one fell swoop he accomplished for her what took me many years: he separated the church from God, and did so in a way that dignified, rather than demeaned, his teenage critic. (Yancey 230)

Dillard was impressed by the "calm man in a three-piece suit. . . I was this little high school kid who thought I was the only person in the world with complaints against the church. He heard me out and then said, 'You're right, honey, there is a lot of

hypocrisy' " in the church (Yancey 230). "Then the minister proceeded to load her down with books by C.S. Lewis, which, he suggested, she might find useful for a senior class paper" (Yancey 230). The minister said to Dillard in parting, "'I suppose you'll be back soon' and he was right" (Yancey 230). "After plowing through four straight volumes by C.S. Lewis, she fell back in the arms of Christianity. Her rebellion had lasted one month" (Yancey 230). It took only one month for Dillard to read C.S. Lewis' works and come to the conclusion that was where she needed to be. Her parents probably helped Dillard "decide" to rejoin the church, as her rebellion was not looked upon favorably.

Of her time in a summer camp, Dillard remembers that each "July for four years, Amy and I trotted off to a Presbyterian church camp. It was cheap, wholesome, and nearby," or so her parents thought (AAC 132). "If our parents had known how pious and low church this camp was, they would have yanked us," Dillard mused (AAC 132). The campers "memorized Bible chapters, sang rollicking hymns around the clock, held nightly devotions including extemporaneous prayers, and filed out of the woods to a chapel twice on Sundays dressed in white shorts" (AAC 132). Dillard believes that "the faith-filled theology there was only half a step out of a tent; you could still smell the sawdust" (AAC 132-133).

Each summer Dillard "memorized these things at camp" (AAC 133). Then, "every Sunday in Pittsburgh we heard these things in Sunday school" plus "every Thursday we studied these things, and memorized them, too (strictly as literature, they said), at school" (AAC 133). Dillard reports having:

miles of Bible in memory: some perforce, buy most by hap, like the words to songs. There was no corner of my brain where you couldn't find, among the files of clothing labels and heaps of rocks, among the swarms of protozoans and shelves of novels, whole tapes and snarls and reels of Bible. (AAC 133)

Dillard believes that "by dipping us children in the Bible so often, they hoped, I think, to give our lives a serious tint, and to provide us with quaintly magnificent snatches of prayer to produce as charms" (AAC 134). Dillard thought that somehow, knowing all these *Bible* verses would help her in the future. Perhaps it would ward off some evil. Perhaps it would lead her to salvation. Who knew what knowing these verses could do?

Annie Dillard has always been attracted to theology. At her Presbyterian camp, she realized that: "I had a head for religious ideas. They were the first ideas I ever encountered. They made other ideas seem mean'" (AAC 133). If the other ideas Dillard had were not religious, did this make her un-pious in

some way? Did they infiltrate her mind and bury sacrilegious ideas there? Who knew what thinking thoughts that were not religious could do to a person? "*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Holy the Firm, and Teaching a Stone to Talk* are saturated with religious thought, longing, and experience" (McClintock 90). "The meandering exploration of nature is the context for a religious quest in which Dillard displays not only a profound knowledge of Christian theology but also interests in medieval alchemy, Jewish Kabbalism, Hasidism, Eskimo traditions, and Sufism" (Webb 429). According to McClintock, "Dillard is after the 'pearl of great price,' religious vision, which will reconcile the self, pulled between faith and doubt, with a nature that is often cruel and ugly, and with a God who seems as irrational as loving" (90). How rational is it to bite the head of your mate in the middle of copulation as the praying mantis does? How loving is it to watch a muskrat floating on the river?

Dillard "prepares for mystical reconciliation by mingling Judeo-Christian rituals and tradition with the conventional ways of encountering nature recorded in nature writing" (McClintock 90). Dillard has the ability to see Tinker Creek and the nature around her in religious as well as secular ways. She can see God's work within nature. However, she can also just see nature as it is. She does not have to bring God into everything she sees. If she chooses to, then that is her decision.

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek recounts the acute perceptions and expansive reflections generated by an isolated year spent in the Virginia wilderness [which posits] creation as an exuberant gift, overwhelming the understanding and yet demanding responses adequate to an aboriginal excess. Nature is profusive, extravagant, fecund, bearing traces of a prodigious God, who splurges and wastes rather than creates and orders. (Webb 429).

Furthermore, "for Dillard, creation is more than that which makes it possible for us to benefit from God's gifts of grace. Creation is a gift of its own, but it is a peculiar gift, not easily received" (Webb 430). Peterson states that "*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a contemplative journal" in which she is "breathless in awe. She cries and laughs. In turn, she is puzzled and dismayed" (179). Furthermore, Dillard is "after meaning, after glory, after God" (Peterson 180). At times, Dillard must look for God and the good in nature. Sometimes she finds God, and sometimes she does not. It is the search that is important to Dillard. "Creation for Dillard is not a deliberate work, deadly and dull, that must be balanced by a day of rest and relaxation. Instead, creation is, in her words, 'God's

spendthrift and neverending jubilee'" (Webb 433). Dillard gets that God is good, but that sometimes the good must be balanced with the bad.

Dillard quotes Psalm 24.1: "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they dwell therein" and Psalm 9.1 "the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (quoted in AAC 133). Dillard firmly believes this. For Dillard it is the earth, and therefore nature, that shows the glory of God. Other people find God in a church or in reading their Bible. Sometimes it is a priest or pastor in which someone sees the glory of God.

Ronda believes that "beauty and cruelty, intimacy and horror, extravagance and waste, are reoccurring themes in Annie Dillard's prose" (483). This appears to be so. This could be because Dillard is able to experience "intense mystic moments, moments of new seeing, of profound oneness with the sources of life" (Ronda 483). Going into nature for Dillard is like going to a church service or Mass. Furthermore, "as a 20th century person, she envisions God as not 'out there,' but rather as perceived among us through the proper angle of vision. . . .In Dillard's writing, one feels the awful inner tension between wanting to control and wanting to let go" (Ronda 486). There is the rub for Dillard. On the one hand, she wants to be able to stop things like the giant water bug eating the frog, and on the

other she wants no part of controlling what goes on in nature. Annie Dillard walks and stalks so that she can "see" in more than one sense. She "sees" through her eyes, of course. She also "sees" with her mind and her heart. Ultimately, she "sees" spiritually. To see truly, she must prepare herself ritualistically. She must become both innocent and informed:

Moreover, her personal ritual of stalking is ultimately described in Christian terms: on the night her life changes dramatically as a result of witnessing the muskrat, she summarizes the nature of the stalking ritual as "Knock; seek; ask," obviously a variant of the the biblical "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. (McClintock 96, Matthew 7.7-8)

Due to Dillard's contradictory vision of nature, "to balance these unresolved contradictions within a single, unified vision, she creates rituals that are familiar to both religious practitioners and nature observers" (McClintock). Dillard sees what she does not wish to see and does not see enough of what she wants to see. Despite Dillard's vision originating "from the

standpoint of Christian orthodoxy, she can still be heterodox and unconventional. . . Dillard has always been uncomfortable within orthodoxy, even if paradoxically, she is also uncomfortable outside a Christian perspective" (McClintock 92). Dillard is trying to find her place in the world. She realizes that organized religion is not the place for her. However, she also recognizes that a life without knowing or at least seeking God is not going to work for her, either. She is looking for that tenuous balance between the two. This is shown by her early life of church-hopping. She was looking for something she never found within the walls of a church. Ultimately, she turned to nature to find the answers she was seeking. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* helps the reader go on this journey with Dillard. We get to see her questioning and attempting to answer those questions.

"And he said, Verily, verily, verily, verily; life is not a dream. Let this cup pass from me. If it be thy will, of course, only if it be thy will" (AAC 135). What was God's will for Dillard? Did she know? Or was she looking for it at Tinker Creek? "As an adolescent, she was already absorbed in the theological question that is at the center of both *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm*--"If the all-powerful Creator directs the world, then why all this suffering?" (McClintock 92). However, for Dillard the moments she spends watching the ways of nature are "always accompanied by suffering, loss, despair,

doubt, anxiety. God's absence and God's presence are felt simultaneously. . .Dillard's work proposes that suffering is a chief characteristic of the contemporary mystic way" in which she writes and sees the world around her (Ronda 483). Dillard understands that suffering is accompanied by the sublime but she doesn't understand *why*. We go on this ontological journey with Dillard.

Ronda believes Dillard's suffering is her own and that "the very vulnerability that allows her to experience the hidden currents beneath the apparent has also brought her to this profound crisis" (484). Ronda states that "ultimately, Dillard concludes, the only response to such brutal reminders of our creatureliness is worship" (485). The only way we are going to understand nature and ourselves is through worshipping the one who created us. We may not understand. We may be angry or confused. However, we need to accept that this is the world as it is. We cannot change it, so acceptance is our only response. To go one step further, we need to praise the one who created us as well as the natural world around us. Ronda states:

Dillard's struggle with this problem is real and moving. Her suffering comes from the experience of having the ground shaken, the order disestablished. Her despair at nature's moral indifference is the consequence

of her contemplative living. Nature does not need salvation, she concludes; she does.

(484)

How many of us have had experiences such as this? Dillard understands she is not alone. However, "agonizing over the Christian response to the sufferings of the innocent, Dillard, near despair, asks, 'Do we really need more victims to remind us that we're all victims?' she [then] reminds herself that we are "sojourners in a land we did not make, a land with no meaning of itself and no meaning we can make for it alone" (McClintock 97). Again, we must understand our place in the scheme of things. We are not the creators nor are we able to control what is created. The only thing we can control is our reactions to nature's cruelty.

In *Teaching a Stone to Talk* she notes that she has "overcome a fiercely anti-Catholic upbringing in order to attend Mass" (30), but she likens her attendance to having "run away from home and joined the circus as a dancing bear" (31). Perhaps Dillard changed to the Catholic Church because she "hated being" at the Presbyterian church she went to as a child (AAC 192). She states that she felt trapped and forced to be there by parents who themselves did not attend the service (AAC 192). Dillard further states that the members of the congregation "accumulate dignity by being seen at church every Sunday for the duration of

life," which she found ludicrous (AAC 194). Dillard knew that if Alaskan lumberjacks "showed up in Pittsburgh wearing a lumberjack shirt and actually tried to enter the church building," they might actually be denied admittance by ushers-turned-bouncers (AAC 195). Dillard found the belief system of the members of her congregation to be hypocritical. Obviously, the lumberjacks would be denied admittance: they weren't dressed for the occasion. Dillard found that what one wore should have no bearing on how they worshipped or what they believed. Clothing does not make the man in this case. Dillard understood that the most faithful people could be dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

In Dillard's short story, 'An Expedition to the Pole,' she writes that "there is a singing group in this Catholic church today," which makes her wonder: "Why am I here? Who gave these nice Catholics guitars? Why are they not mumbling in Latin and performing superstitious rituals? What is the Pope thinking of?" (TASTT 30). What is interesting is that she states:

nobody said things were going to be easy. A taste for the sublime is a greed like any other, after all; why begrudge the churches their secularism now, when from the general table is rising a general song? Besides, in a way I do not pretend to understand, these

people--all of the people in all of the ludicrous churches--have access to the land.

(*TASTT* 30)

Thus, these nice church-going people have access to nature. She goes on to write that "the extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation" (*PTC* 11). Not only is creation there for the taking, but it is intricate and detailed, much like us humans. Sentient beings are numberless, and so are the intricacies of nature. There is so much to know about nature that Dillard thinks that by telling us some of what is happening, it will create in us a desire to go experience it ourselves. And maybe, if for some reason we cannot go experience it first hand, she will help us by writing about her own experiences. However, her experiences are not numberless. She is only one person, and even if what she believes is important is important to her, it's not necessarily so to us. Someone else could see something different while she was watching the frog die. We are all individuals, and as such, we will experience everything differently.

Dillard did try her hand at other organized religions. Before attending Catholic Mass, Dillard states that

the handiest church was Congregational. Week after week I climbed the long steps to that little church, entered, and took a seat with some few of my neighbors. Week after week I

was moved by the pitiableness of the bare linoleum-floored sacristy which no flowers could cheer or soften, by the terrible singing I so loved, by the fatigued Bible readings, the lagging emptiness and dilution of the liturgy, the horrifying vacuity of the sermon, and by the fog of dreary senselessness pervading the whole, which existed alongside, and probably caused, the wonder of the fact that we came; we returned; we showed up; week after week, we went through with it. (*TASTT* 39)

Of her time in organized religion, Dillard believes that the significant thing she learned is this:

God does not demand that we give up our personal dignity, that we throw in our lot with random people, that we lose ourselves and turn from all that is not him. God needs nothing, asks nothing, and demands nothing, like the stars. It is a life with God which demands these things . . . God does not, I regret to report, give a hoot. You do not have to do these things--unless you want to know God. They work on you, not on him. You

do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it.

(*TASTT* 43)

Darkness is necessary to seeing the stars. However, Dillard says that God does not demand you to go to a church in order to find Him. If you choose to, that is fine. Some people, like Dillard, do not find God while sitting in a pew. Church does not work for Dillard. However, nature does. Dillard is able to see God within nature without having to wait for the darkness required to see the stars. God is there, morning, noon, and night.

Due to Dillard's upbringing in Pittsburgh, Dillard believed that those in her community had some "peculiar social legacies," such as

their powerful Calvinistic mix of piety and acquisitiveness, which characterized the old and new Scotch-Irish families and the nation they helped found; the walled-up hush of what was, by my day, old money--amazing how fast it ages if you let it alone--and the clang and roar of making that money; the owners' Presbyterian churches, their anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, Republicanism,

and love of continuous work; their dogmatic practicality, their easy friendliness, their Pittsburgh-centered innocence, and paradoxically, their egalitarianism. (AAC 75)

Dillard realizes that focusing on work can keep one from seeking out nature. If you are busy working all the time, you are going to miss what is going on in nature.

Dillard's friend Judy was a Unitarian. "I visited her Unitarian Sunday school once. There we folded paper to make little geese; it shocked me to the core" (AAC 151). Such a different approach to religion was not a good fit for Dillard. Even of her Catholic church service, Dillard writes about her dismay with the lack of progress in the Catholic Church:

A high school stage play is more polished than this service we have been rehearsing since the year one. In two thousand years, we have not worked out the kinks. We positively glorify them. Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God is so mighty he can stifle his own laughter. Week after week, we witness the same miracle: that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens. Week after week Christ washes the disciples'

dirty feet, handles their very toes, and repeats, It is all right--believe it or not--to be people. Who can believe it? (*TASTT* 32)

On the one hand, it's not a good fit for Dillard. On the other, she comprehends that she is dealing with something profound. Dillard has a hard time reconciling these two issues. Furthermore, her mention of dancing bears reduced humans to something that can be trained. We are not necessarily unique human beings. We can be made to act in whatever way God wishes.

Dillard writes that: "polar explorers must adapt to conditions. They must adapt, on the one hand, to severe physical limitations; they must adapt, on the other hand--like the rest of us--to ordinary emotional limitations" (*TASTT* 41). Dillard must face emotional limitations while at Tinker Creek, even though she does not have the severe physical limitations. She must face God's horrific acts without letting them affect her severely. She must come to accept that the horrific happens alongside the beautiful. Even as a child, Dillard felt

an urgent responsibility to each change of light outside the sunporch windows. Who would remember any of it, any of this our time, and the wind thrashing the buckeye limbs outside? Somebody had to do it, somebody had to hang on to the days with teeth

and fists, or the whole show had been in vain. That it was impossible never entered my reckoning. For work, for a task, I had never heard the word. (AAC 173)

Dillard writes: "Nothing exhilarated me more than the idea of a life dedicated to a monumental worthwhile task" (AAC 169).

Dillard goes on to ask: "What if people said it could not be done? So much the better" (AAC 170). This was because Dillard "loved living at my own edge, as an explorer on a ship presses to the ocean's rim" (AAC 97). Dillard found herself "miserably self-conscious in full view of the whole world" (AAC 108). As a child Dillard "wanted to notice everything, as Holmes had, and remember it all, as no one had before" (AAC 130). Dillard maintains this determination throughout her adulthood. For all of these reasons, Dillard was set on a specific course in life. She was to see what was to be seen in nature. She was to be attentive, to love nature but also to learn about it. Furthermore, she was to impart her knowledge and appreciation of the natural world on her readers.

Even in watching a solitary insect, Dillard is seeing the cosmos of nature. Cochoy states that Dillard, "by confessing the limitations of her art . . . succeeds in drawing an analogy between the exposure of discourse and the vulnerability of nature" (34). Dillard realizes that nature loses something through her

interpretation of it. However, her interpretation is the only interpretation she can honestly give. Along with the physicists who believe that we "know now for sure that there is no knowing" Dillard realizes they are really saying that "they cannot study nature per se, but only their own investigations of nature" (PTC 205). Dillard states that she read that "the idea of a thing which a man framed for himself was always more real to him than the actual thing" (HTF 23). Dillard makes no attempt to prove that her interpretations are the "correct" or "right" interpretations. They are simply her interpretations.

There are several religious symbols invoked in Dillard's work. McClintock states that "*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, too, opens with Dillard awakening to a world seen through Christian experience, even if her doubt is constant. She is, after all, an anchorite and pilgrim" (91). Dillard's doubt is something that sticks with her throughout the book. She is searching for answers when she is not even sure of the questions. Dillard relates that:

some mornings I'd wake in daylight to find
my body covered with paw prints in blood; I
looked as though I'd been painted with
roses. It was hot, so hot the mirror felt
warm. I washed before the mirror in a daze,
my twisted summer sleep still hung about me

like sea kelp. What blood was this and what roses? It could have been the rose of union, the blood of murder, or the rose of beauty bare and the blood of some unspeakable sacrifice or birth. The sign on my body could have been an emblem or a stain, the keys to the kingdom or the mark of Cain. (PTC 3)

Warren believes that "without question, the bloody marks are emblems of Christ's blood" (131). This could actually be the case. According to McClintock: "this imagery is profoundly linked to the Judeo-Christian tradition through the Passover, on the one hand, and through Christ's redemptive blood and the rose symbolizing Mary, on the other" (92). Both of these authors hit upon the blood as a truly religious symbol. The idea that a cat would leave a symbol of God on girl or woman is difficult to believe. However, people have seen statues weep and have seen appearances of Mary in clouds and the like. Considering these occurrences, a cat leaving paw prints in blood that are supposed to have a deeper meaning is not without merit.

Another religious symbol used by Dillard is light. In particular, "the vision of 'the tree with the lights in it,' is a revelation of 'Christ's incarnation,' which Dillard accepts despite liberal theological objections to a belief that Christ's

incarnation took place at a particular time and a particular place" (McClintock 92). Dillard relates that

one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly on fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared.

(*PTC* 36)

Dillard's contention that "it was less like seeing than being for the first time" shows that seeing is not the end of the road. One must also just "be" in order for God to touch us. At some point we stop the "doing" and be what we are: "beings." Like the old dime found under the Lombardy poplar; it isn't about the dime found, it's about the experience of finding the dime.

Dillard uses the metaphor of being a bell: "I had been my whole life a bell and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck" (*PTC* 36). Olderr states that a bell is a symbol of several things, including purification, consecration, and a call to worship (29). Bells are often found in churches, which could be a hold-over from Dillard's time in organized religion. It is ultimately Dillard's careful communion with nature that rings her proverbial bell.

The very water of Tinker Creek is a religious symbol. Tietjen states that the creek is "pure energy, flux, the rush of the future and promise of rebirth" (106). The water affects Dillard in a way that anyone who has spent even a little slice of time in nature knows: it is amazing and brilliant, yet mysterious and full of needless suffering at the same time. Dillard "immediately interprets every one of her observations in spiritual terms, in relation to human life" (Tietjen 106). Dillard understands more about the Creator's plan for the world by watching nature. Furthermore, she understands more about the Creator's plan for herself by watching nature. Natural occurrences can be so fleeting that it "could be that God has not absconded but spread. . . to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can feel blindly of its hem" (*PTC* 9). Goldman believes that Dillard "presents her narrative

persona as a sacrificial, human offering on an altar of paradoxes and presents *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as a sacrificial, linguistic offering to catch the eye of a biblical God" (196). It is the very paradoxes and the "unresolved dualities" in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that create interest for the reader (Goldman 195). The biggest duality is good versus evil. The basic question of why God would allow evil in such a beautiful world is posed, but never answered. Dillard has no answer. She herself cannot reconcile an all-knowing, all-powerful God who chooses to allow such evil to exist.

Dillard writes that the creek:

holds me at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself and keeps me steadied in the current, as a sea anchor does, facing the stream of light pouring down. It's a good place to live; there's a lot to think about. . . . Theirs is the mystery of the continuous creation and all that providence implies: the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, the intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free, and the flawed nature of perfection. . . . Theirs is the one simple mystery of creation from

nothing, of matter itself, anything at all,
the given. (*PTC* 5)

Furthermore, Dillard is drawn to "the dry grass at the end of island by the slower side of the creek. . . I come to it as to an oracle; I return to it as a man years later will seek out the battlefield where he lost a leg or an arm" (*PTC* 7). Dillard is pulled in the direction of the water by some unseen force. She is kept there by her own need to be purified by God.

Like the wine-turned-blood during a Catholic Mass transubstantiation, the very water of Tinker Creek opens to Dillard a meaning that not many others are able to find in nature. Dillard's story begins with a blood rite: her old tom cat would leave "an emblem or stain" of blood on her chest after his nightly carousing (*PTC* 3). She states that she "never knew as I washed . . . whether I'd purified myself or ruined the blood sign of the Passover" (*PTC* 3-4). Dillard, in turn, is the "arrow shaft" through which the blood of an animal shot with an arrow will seep and fall onto the ground, and her book "is the straying trail of blood" (*PTC* 15). This is another reference to communion. Dillard is likening her book to the sacrificial lamb, and perhaps rightly so. She is the one going into nature to find out the secrets of God, and she is the one asking "what it all means" (Conlkin 226). She is giving of herself and her time willingly to learn whatever it is that God intends for her to

learn, and she "systematically explains what she sees or says" (Cochoy 34). This is much like Jesus' focus while on earth. He came to teach us the ways of God and to release us humans from sin, and therefore, death. He gave of himself freely, up to and including his very life. It is through the death of Jesus that Catholics can partake of the body and blood of Jesus during Mass. This is why the blood Dillard finds on herself in the morning is important. For Dillard, she is trying to understand why this is happening, and make some meaning of it.

According to McClintock: "The essential characteristics of Annie Dillard's nature writing [are] her writing about place, the language she uses to evoke her experiences, and her religious preoccupation and vocation" (88). Philip Yancey states that "she is a guiding light for writers who still care about words, sentences, paragraphs, and ideas, and a singular beacon for writers of faith" (228). "*Holy the Firm* [1977] and *Teaching a Stone to Talk* [1982], [are] the two other Dillard books that use nature as a touchstone for spiritual insight" (McClintock 89). Nature is the mode through which one becomes or is spiritual. Through nature one discerns their place in the cosmos of things. It is, as John 14.6 states, the way, the truth, and the light. McClintock states: "In fact, nature writing in America has always been religious, if unorthodox" (89). It's not only

what Dillard writes that is important, it is how she says it that must be considered.

One issue that Dillard has uncovered is that she "willingly asserts that words are necessary to the discovery of the real" (Cochoy 34). "Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it" (PTC 33). By doing so, "she lucidly exposes the dilemma of nature writing: when naming the wild in order to reveal its fragile value, one also runs the risk of taming it into the 'freeze-frames' of knowledge" (Cochoy 34). Not only does Dillard need to see what is being revealed to her, she needs to ensure that in her vocalization of what she sees, it does not lose its meaning as a beautiful, wondrous moment given by God. Dillard needs to be wary of reducing nature to its basest elements in the same way that life today can be reduced to bytes of information. The same elements of nature can be seen once and again and not get old. It doesn't matter which frog is eaten by a giant water bug, it's that a frog was eaten. Each time it happens is a new scene, a new occasion to witness the very stuff of creation. Dillard recognizes this. Furthermore, it's almost as if Dillard is asking herself "*If I did not write, would I even exist?*" (Yancey 242, emphasis: author). Dillard is asking: would nature be there to see if Dillard didn't exist? Or would Dillard not exist if nature wasn't there to see? These are the questions that confound Dillard.

Although Annie Dillard mentions over a hundred different people in her book, one author she mentions several times is Henry David Thoreau. Indeed, many authors have compared her to Thoreau, including Mendelson. She argues that

while Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* makes no explicit statement of her interest in Thoreau, she quotes and alludes to him frequently, and her book rings with the Thoreauvian echoes in imagery, figurative language, themes, motifs, extra-vagant diction, and the cognitive leaps it demands of its readers. (51)

"Dillard . . . alone has been able to compose, successfully, in Thoreau's extravagant and transcendental manner" (McClintock 88) because "like Thoreau, Dillard teeters creatively between careful and loving observation of the material world and reflections on her engagement with that world" (Ronda 483). Hartin believes that Dillard "in the footsteps of Thoreau. . . combines empirical gleanings with metaphysical musings" (45). In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard writes about the tree she sits under:

Under the world's conifers--under the creek-side cedar behind where I sit--a mantle of fungus wraps the soil in a weft, shooting

out blind thread after frail thread of palest dissolved white. From root tip to root tip, root hair to root hair, these filaments loop and wind. . . King David leaped and danced naked before the ark of the Lord in a barren desert. Here the very looped soil is an intricate throng of praise. Make connections; let rip; and dance where you can.

(PTC 97)

Dillard is comparing King David dancing before God to the way fungus grows around the base of a tree. She brings the physical world and the metaphysical world together for us to understand both on a deeper level. Looking at fungus growing may not make all of us think about King David, but once we are given the comparison, we no longer think the same about either the fungus or King David.

Mendelson believes both Dillard and Thoreau use "natural images and metaphors" in their work (55). Like Thoreau, Dillard "reads messages of hope in nature" (Warren 54). Mendelson states:

That Dillard so similarly to Thoreau imagines becoming a spectator of life and death on earth pulls her book toward his. Both Dillard and Thoreau perceive the bind, the

problem with cyclic, earthly time, and imagine breaking out of it. Both understand the mixed blessings of nature, life, and consciousness. (54)

Dillard writes: "The present of my consciousness is itself a mystery which is also always just rounding a bend like a floating branch borne by a flood" (*PTC* 95). Later, she realizes that while she is sitting under a sycamore, below her are other creatures "for whom also this moment, this tree is 'it'" (*PTC* 95). It's almost as if she has a kind of co-consciousness with the creatures around her.

Dillard's choosing to move to a cabin beside Tinker Creek to write about nature "mirrors Thoreau's leaving Concord to live by Walden" pond (Mendelson 53). *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is "in its structure a conventional 'nature' book, in some ways comparable to *Walden*" (Wilde 31). Webb, on the other hand, believes that Dillard "is more like Melville, with his sinister view of untamed nature, than . . . Thoreau with his conflation of nature and self-sufficiency" (433). Both authors demonstrate "the unknowability of nature" (Mendelson 56). Mendelson goes on to state that

Much of the tug of Thoreauvian current that the reader feels in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is an undercurrent: Dillard's vision of

darkness, disorder, and death along with the light, unity, and life in nature links her with Thoreau's similarly complicated vision, wide-angled and illuminated. . .by a mixture of light and dark. (51)

Dillard does follow in the footsteps of Thoreau who "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" (Thoreau 88). Like Thoreau, Dillard is afraid that she will awaken on her deathbed and ask: "What was that?" of her life and the world around her (AAC 155). Because of this fear, Dillard states, "I went out to see what I could see" (PTC 13) and that even if she cannot see everything, she will "still try to keep [her] eyes open" (PTC 19). Dillard hopes to capture "a vision of some single slice of the beauty and mystery of things, of their complexity, fascination, and unexpectedness" (AAC 159). Furthermore, Dillard has an "intense Thoreauvian desire to see what is really there," which is "accompanied by a growing awareness that human seeing is inevitably interpretive. But is it she who is interpreting, or she who is being interpreted?" (Ronda 483). This is the conundrum faced by Dillard in nature, and by the readers of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Who is observed and who is observing? Is Dillard observing nature, and

therefore the handiwork of God? Or is God observing Dillard? These are the ontological and theological questions facing Dillard at every turn.

Chénetier believes that:

Intersecting *Walden* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, by means of successive or simultaneous readings, provides a large harvest of surface similarities and a smaller number of lexical muses that, upon analysis, deliver interesting and truly intertextual effects.

(161)

Anna Stenning argues that what "[Dillard] produces is, after Thoreau, a 'meteorological journal of the mind'" (45). However, for Dillard, not only is she filled with the sights and sounds of nature, "there is another kind of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied" (PTC 33). Furthermore: "something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin . . . I was the lip of a fountain the creek filled forever" (PTC 34). Julia A. Ireland sees Dillard comparing herself to "a receptive vessel" (28) waiting for God to reveal to her whatever it is she is supposed to see. When Dillard sees nature in this way, she is able to "see truly"--to see as Thoreau also experienced it: "I return to my

senses" (PTC 34) because "experiencing the present purely is being emptied and hollow" (PTC 82). Dillard is emptied of her preconceived notions about how the world should be. She therefore, has the ability to be open to new ideas. Tietjen believes that Dillard realizes that "all of life was worth noticing. . . because any piece of it could lead to revelation" (103). That revelation could be about herself, nature, or even God Himself. It is Dillard's going "purposely in life, seeking and readying herself for such moments" (Tietjen 103) that makes *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* such a seminal work.

One crucial intellectual source used by Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is the philosopher Heraclitus. "Dillard quotes and associates the views close to those of quantum physics, that 'nature is wont to hide herself'" (McClintock 103). "Moreover, his perspective is akin to her dialectical vision. She opens *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* with the following epigraph from Heraclitus: It ever was, and is, and shall be, ever-living Fire, in measures being kindled in measures going out" (McClintock 103). But what is Heraclitus referring to? What is it? Perhaps "it" is human consciousness. Perhaps "it" is God. For an atheist, however, that is an interesting idea. Why would Heraclitus want to reference God in his works? There may be something we don't know about him. Perhaps, just perhaps, he had some of the same doubts Dillard has.

McClintock believes:

Heraclitus was the philosopher of opposites. But the opposites have underlying connections; for instance, good and evil define one another. The same is true for all natural events: while seen and described in terms of opposites, there is an underlying interrelatedness, a hidden connection, of which fire is the physical embodiment.

(McClintock 103)

"The flaming tree is a vision that, as Heraclitus would have predicted, comes and goes. It is a vision she lives for. In that moment her spirit's aspirations and her own reality are melded" (McClintock 103). What Dillard thinks and what she knows become one. It's almost as if the tree is trying to answer some of Dillard's questions regarding the nature of God. "Heraclitus's imagery of eternally waxing and waning fire is the perfect metaphor for her thematic dualities of evil and good, grotesque and beautiful, and repulsive and awesome, all of which co-exist in God's nature" (McClintock 103-104). It is this co-existence that Dillard has a hard time with. She understands dualities but does not see why God Himself should be forced to, or why He would choose to, be confined by dualities.

It is important to note what Heraclitus thought because Dillard uses him several times in the book. Why? 1.) He believed, as she does, that there is "unity in experience." She believes that two people watching the same thing happen in nature binds them together in some cosmic, primal way. 2.) Because she, too, believes that most of us are sleep-walking through life. If it's possible for her to change that, she will. And 3.) she is all about the experience, which we must do through our senses. She imparts to us through her work what she experiences through her senses.

What Dillard writes is this: "It ever was, and is, and shall be, ever-living Fire, in measures being kindled and in measures going out." What Heraclitus actually wrote is: "it ever was and is and will be: everliving fire, kindling in measures and being quenched in measures" (Graham, 2018). It is interesting that she changed the wording, but in doing so, does it really change the meaning? This sounds a lot like "The Glory Be," a prayer Catholics often say: "Glory Be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen." In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Dillard writes that she had "overcome a fiercely anti-Catholic upbringing" (18) and that now she regularly attends Mass. Perhaps she simply mixed her words, the Glory Be, and Heraclitus to arrive at the lines she used in her book? It seems

odd that she wouldn't use his exact words. It could be that she had a specific reason in mind for doing so.

Dillard shows the reader that she has an openness, as well as an attention, to what is happening outside of herself. It is a total commitment to seeing what is to be seen. It is being willing to stand and wait and notice whatever is happening around her that Dillard does so well. It is what she learned to do as a child in Pittsburgh and has brought this characteristic forward into her adult life. In this way, Dillard's communion with nature has allowed her to learn not only about nature and God, but about herself. She finds that

instead of going rigid, I go calm. I center
down wherever I am; I find a balance and re-
pose. I retreat--not inside myself, but out-
side myself, so that I am a tissue of
senses. Whatever I see is plenty, abundance.
I am the skin of water the wind plays over;
I am petal, feather, stone. (PTC 203)

Yancey states that "Dillard comes to nature not merely to observe but also to learn, to wrest meaning out of a text that mulishly resists all such attempts" (233). In fact, "Dillard likewise acknowledges the world as the Creator's work and then considers the consequences. What joke is this Creator playing on

us? she asks" (Yancey 233). "The problem, as always, is that nature gives off mixed signals. Like an unruly child, the natural world both reveals and obscures God; creation *groans*, to use the apostle Paul's term" (Yancey 233). It is this groaning, this ambiguity, that Dillard is trying to discern for herself, and for her reader. The problem is that

Dillard lacks the optimism of a Chesterton, who sees God's smile even among the shadows, or of a Donne, who longs for a new home in an afterlife. She says, 'I alternate between thinking of the planet as home--and as a hard land of exile in which we are all sojourners.' God must prefer working with one hand tied behind his back, she concludes.

(Yancey 233)

Dillard believes that if "we go to nature to construct theology; she will fail us every time. Rather, we go to nature once we have our theology and let her fill in the words--awe, glory, beauty, terror--with meaning" (Yancey 235). Dillard realizes that her time in organized religion gave her the structure to allow her understanding, but not the understanding itself. She has the ability to understand, just not the understanding. It goes back to her being a receptive vessel. She has been emptied and is awaiting her chance to be filled. Furthermore, Dillard

"[approaches] 'the whole chaos of nature as if it were God's book. For many of my readers, that's the only book of God they will read. I must start there'" (Yancey 235). Dillard understands that not everyone has the same structured vision of God that she does. Many have not read the *Bible*. In addition, those who have read religious texts (other than the *Bible*) may find that "writers of faith tiptoe around God's creation, dismissing it as mere matter, unworthy of attention granted the mind and spirit. Doing so, we forfeit one of God's main texts" (Yancey 235). To Dillard, creation is where one finds God. The fact that religious writers side-step nature in their writing is frustrating and misleads the reader. "As an artist, she reimagines a world that contains far more than we can see, a sacramental world. While theologians debate miracles and the supernatural, she renders the splendor of the ordinary" (Yancey 236). Dillard points out the basic elements of nature: insects, animals, fungus, plants, and trees. She is not in a pulpit making theological claims that she cannot back up with fact or proof. She simply shows the reader what she sees in nature. It is her form of worship, essentially. Rather than praising something unseen and unheard, she praises the very things God has created.

Clay Harrison wrote in his poem "*I Must Walk Again the Wooded Path*" that "I must do these things lest I forget how precious life can be." Life is precious--even the lives of birds,

bugs, and amphibians! We, as humans, have the ability to learn and understand about the world around us. Because of this, we should want to learn, we should want to know, we should want to understand as completely as possible. Dillard is inviting us through her writing, as well as beginning our education.

Instead of simply noticing or observing changes in nature, Dillard now notices changes within herself. God pointed out the path for Dillard, but she had to be brave enough to follow that path and to discover whatever there was to discover. Who knows what lay before her? Who knows what she would find? By being willing to approach the altar of nature, Dillard was opened and receptive to both the violent and the sublime side of insects and animals, but also human nature. It is in nature that Dillard finds God. Some people go to church to find God, but Annie Dillard goes to nature. Dillard is not out in nature just to explain things to us, her readers. She is looking for something very specific, yet difficult to define. She is, above all, hoping to have a response to the woman who said, "Seem[s] like we're just set down here . . .and don't nobody know why" (PTC 4). Annie Dillard is going in search of the why, the reason, and God himself. What she finds in the process is the reason for her own faith in God as well as a connection to the divine. Along the way she questions as well as begins to understand God's

place in the world, as well as her own. Through this understanding, she begins to discern why she was so startlingly "set down here" (PTC 4).

She goes on a mystical journey that takes her through questioning everything she was ever taught, and everything she could see. She began to understand that nature is not the "other," it is part of us. We are a part of it. God created both, not as separate beings, but of the same cloth. Annie Dillard begins to comprehend this, as well as answer some of her own questions along the way. She had to take the journey in order to reach the destination. She is not at the end of her journey, however. Dillard finally realizes that she is still questioning, still discerning. She is able to accept the questions as normal and knows where she can always go to seek the answers: nature.

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