
Enlightenment Over Truth - Annie Dillard's Mission at Pilgrim Creek

Dillard's mission at Pilgrim Creek was twofold: primarily, she desired to be immersed in nature and the environment that surrounds humanity, but she also wished to achieve her own personal and creative way of expressing her innate connection to the experience she had. For this reason, Dillard's writing becomes something of an exhaustive "wringing out" of the mind, leaving no memory, thought, or inkling unwritten. The idea that Dillard's writing was so extensive in this pursuit of the complete captivation of experience is one that makes itself known in many scenes where the content becomes sensitive, disturbing, or plain encyclopedic. Dillard's account, for example, of the frog being drained of its meat by a giant water bug appeared as a topic of disgust among the class. People wondered what was the deal with her fascination with an otherwise perverse and putrid natural event. Here is a paragraph from the topic in question, quoted in fullness to elucidate the point of this exhaustive pseudo-stream-of-consciousness style of writing:

"I had read about the giant water bug, but never seen one. 'Giant water bug' is really the name of the creature, which is an enormous, heavy-bodied brown bug. It eats insects, tadpoles, fish, and frogs. Its grasping forelegs are mighty and hooked inward. It seizes a victim with these legs, hugs it tight, and paralyzes it with enzymes injected during a vicious bite. That one bite is the only bite it ever takes. Through the puncture shoot the poisons that dissolve the victim's muscles and bones and organs—all but the skin—and through it the giant water bug sucks out the victim's body, reduced to a juice. This event is quite common in warm fresh water. The frog I saw was being sucked by a giant water bug. I had been kneeling on the island grass; when the unrecognizable flap of frog skin settled on the creek bottom, swaying, I stood up and brushed the knees of my pants. I couldn't catch my breath," (Dillard 8). In this segment of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Dillard incorporates several aspects of her mind and observatory skills to craft this text. The obvious factor here is observation, as Dillard is astute in observing what is happening directly in front of her. Inherently, the observation is explained and expanded upon with the advent of information, where Dillard accounts for what she knows from prior experiences of reading about the giant water bug. Further, she uses these ideas that she had learned from a book (likely one that, if interested, a reader could find somewhere with a bit of research) to connect the experience that she is having to what is known. Just as well, there are aspects of emotion that shine through the mire of logic and fact, as her breathlessness indicates both a disbelief that this was occurring as well as a disbelief that this was occurring right before her eyes. This emotional appeal proves that Dillard's experience has become more personal than logical, and the captivation of this moment in time is one that was important to reflect on in media res as well as in the pages of her journal afterwards.

While Dillard's style proves to be effective in accounting for her experiences in nature, scholars like Vera L. Norwood and Scott Slovic reflect on the ideas of nature writing itself, pointing out that Annie Dillard emphasizes the subjective experience without making much regard for the facts and logic of the given scenario. Slovic is especially on board with this idea of poeticism over straight facts, as he accounts for all the assumptions and assertions that Dillard has made throughout her piece. For example, he cites the old myth that a female praying mantis will bite the head off of a male during its reproduction cycle, a phenomenon of old myth that is

perpetuated through Dillard's "observation" of the event. Indeed, facts are important in a piece where nature, which is widely accepted as an omnipotent and logically dissectable, is at the forefront of the text. However, Dillard's assertions about nature prove that the text is about one's place in nature, the subjectivity of the topic, and the attempt to record even a brief percentage of this experience to the fullest of one's ability often means that thoughts in the moment can prove to be counterfactual. To cite examples from "Spring," the seventh chapter of the book, we may see where critics would be disheartened to see logic take a backseat to inference and assumption, but the fact that Dillard does not know these things for a fact is more about aiding herself in this quest to capture the conscious state like a firefly in a jar.

The "Spring" chapter of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is full of ideas based in poeticism rather than standing logic, as her thoughts about the nature of plants highlight the ideas of stymied obviousness. She cites, for example, the simple nature of planting a seed into the ground, asking the reader in a way that seems rhetorical and delves no deeper than it needs to, "If I swallowed a seed and some soil, could I grow grapes in my mouth?" (Dillard 114). There is hardly any need for a swooping expert to answer this question: having heard the term "stomach acid" even once or remembering the mythic nature of an adult's warning about the consequences that follow eating watermelon seeds and the resulting fear of harboring such a massive fruit in one's gut provide sufficient elaboration to the question. While Dillard leaves the sentiment hanging as she continues on to the next flash of brilliance, the question is posed in earnest after witnessing how easy it is to plant something and allow nature to resolutely take its course. It is a view into her subconscious, a thought that may appear silly but is indeed vital to the understanding of the equality of prominence each sentiment has in Dillard's transcription of thought. As Vera L. Norwood explains, this natural inclination of wonderment stems from Dillard's presence as nature writer with, "an artist's eye, a scientist's curiosity, a metaphysician's mind," (Norwood 339). Questions that may be quickly explained away remain in the text to display just how curious Dillard was.

In a similar fashion, the more arguable inferences about the eskimos and their lives in the unfavorable arctic have quite a bit of text devoted to them, despite lacking in research. Dillard plods through the lives of eskimos, as the spring season reminds her of what she has read from Asen Balikci about the walrus' migration habits and their patterns. However, she makes no mention about where she pulls these sentiments about the lives of the eskimos, but continues to state things in a believably factual manner. The very nature of the nomadic tribes' hardships is called into appreciation, as Dillard has a fascination for this "general holocaust" that occurs in the violent "breakup" of an ice sheet (Dillard 116). Dillard's sentiments are reflective of an unexplored curiosity regarding that which is so distant and brought up only in connection to her perceived reality. To simplify, her thoughts on the eskimos are the explanation she provides as to elucidate the connection between her ideas of spring and what it means in nature. The eskimos are a bridge of thought that she traverses, meaning that Slovic's theory about "the delusions of certainty" as paramount for discovery are true (Slovic 356).

At best, Dillard's assertions as fact have proven to be connections made with very little research, perhaps inciting the criticism upon her. However, in a situation where she draws conclusions from very new information, like the discovery of microscopic plankton and microbes in the pond water, an exception should be made. After all, the conclusions she draws from witnessing the plankton zoom about is based in her own interpretation as it is presented to us. Quite a metaphysical concept, as explained by Slovic's assertion that Dillard is having one of her "momentary fluctuations of awareness" in the discovery and establishment of what is

occurring behind the lens of the microscope (Slovic 357). Dillard describes her observations in the best way she can, alluding to her fascination with what she witnesses. "Two monostyla drive into view from opposite directions; they meet, bump, reverse, part. I keep thinking that if I listen closely I will hear the high whine of tiny engines. As their drop heats from the light on the mirror, the rotifers skitter more and more frantically; as it dries, they pale and begin to stagger, and at last can muster only a halting twitch" (Dillard 122). Her understanding is shaped only by what she observes, with no outside influence. This serves as a metaphor for the entirety of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, as the book exists as an exercise of Dillard's attempt to instantaneously frame the moment when thoughts occur. With no inklings to the existence of these tiny creatures beforehand, the section devoted to plankton serves as a genuine and authentic discovery, establishment, and wonderment revolving around things that she can see, think, and sense.

For these reasons, it can be said that Dillard's attempt to capture the ever-fleeting moment does not have to be factual, and it is in fact with the recording of these assertions and non-sequiturs that she finds an independent viewpoint for her findings. To frame these moments take an extreme amount of lucidity, and Dillard is never short of insight when it comes to awareness. Though it may seem impossible to capture every thought, as is the purpose of stream-of-consciousness writing, the established writings in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* are not meant to reveal a truth, but rather a subjective truth. In some circles, perhaps in the ideology of Zen and postmodern absurdism, subjective truth is known as enlightenment, and it is the endeavour of followers of such philosophies to pursue this enlightenment which will bring them closer to understanding how the world functions when facts cannot help. Dillard's assumptions may seem unorthodox, debatable, or flat-out incorrect, but they are one-hundred percent honest, providing them with the title of truth. Annie Dillard's separation from the objective truth and her acceptance of the subjective truth proves that her writing will stand out among the fact-driven pieces, as she becomes one with nature in order to make natural mistakes.