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Annie Dillard’s Healing Vision

It is almost a commonplace these days that human arrogance is destroying the environment. Environmentalists, naturalists, and now the man or woman on the street seem to agree: the long-held belief that human beings are separate from nature, destined to rise above its laws and conquer it, has been ruinous.

Unfortunately, the defenders of nature tend to respond to this ruinous belief with harmful myths of their own: nature is pure and harmonious; humanity is corrupt and dangerous. Much writing about nature lacks a recognition that human beings and their civilization are as much a part of nature as trees and whales are, neither better nor worse. Yet without such a recognition, how can humans overcome the damaging sense of separation between themselves and the earth? How can humans develop realistic solutions to environmental problems that will work for humanity and the rest of nature?

One nature writer who seems to recognize the naturalness of humanity is Annie Dillard. In her best-known work, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she is a solitary person encountering the natural world, and some critics fault her for turning her back on society. But in those encounters with nature, Dillard probes a spiritual as well as a physical identity between human beings and nature that could help to heal the rift between them.

Dillard is not renowned for her sense of involvement with human society. Like Henry David Thoreau, with whom she is often compared, she retreats from rather than confronts human society. The critic Gary McIlroy points out that although

Format of heading and title when no title page is required (see also p. 687)

Introduction of environmental theme

Focus on issue to be resolved

Introduction of Dillard to resolve issue

Thesis statement

Acknowledgment of opposing critical view

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Thoreau discusses society a great deal in *Walden*, he makes no attempt “to find a middle ground between it and his experiment in the woods” (113). Dillard has been similarly criticized. For instance, the writer Eudora Welty comments that

Annie Dillard is the only person in her book, substantially the only one in her world; I recall no outside human speech coming to break the long soliloquy of the author. Speaking of the universe very often, she is yet self-surrounded and, beyond that, book-surrounded. Her own book might have taken in more of human life without losing a bit of the wonder she was after. (37)

First response to opposing view

It is true, as Welty says, that in *Pilgrim* Dillard seems detached from human society. However, she actually was always close to it at Tinker Creek. In a later book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, she says of the neighborhood, “This is, mind you, suburbia. It is a five-minute walk in three directions to rows of houses. . . . There’s a 55 mph highway at one end of the pond, and a nesting pair of wood ducks at the other” (qtd. in Suh).

Second response to opposing view

Rather than hiding from humanity, Dillard seems to be trying to understand it through nature. In *Pilgrim* she reports buying a goldfish, which she names Ellery Channing. She recalls once seeing through a microscope “red blood cells whip, one by one, through the capillaries” of yet another goldfish (124). Now watching Ellery Channing, she sees the blood in his body as a bond between fish and human being: “Those red blood cells are coursing in Ellery’s tail now, too, in just that way, and through his mouth and eyes as well, and through mine” (125). Gary McIlroy observes that this blood, “a symbol of the sanctity of life, is a common bond between Dillard and the fish, between animal and human life in general, and between Dillard and other people” (115).

Secondary source’s analysis of Dillard

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For Dillard, the terror and unpredictability of death unify all life. The most sinister image in *Pilgrim*—one that haunts Dillard—is that of the frog and the water bug. Dillard reports walking along an embankment scaring frogs into the water when one frog refused to budge. As Dillard leaned over to investigate, the frog “slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and dropped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent” (6). The frog was the victim of a water bug that injects poisons to “dissolve the victim’s muscles and bones and organs” (6). Such events lead Dillard to wonder about a creator who would make all life “power and beauty, grace tangled in a rapture with violence” (8). Human beings no less than frogs and water bugs are implicated in this tangle.

Dillard is equally as disturbed by birth as by death. In a chapter of *Pilgrim* called “Fecundity,” she focuses on the undeniable reproductive urge of entire species. Her attitude is far from sentimental:

I don’t know what it is about fecundity that so appalls. I suppose it is the teeming evidence that birth and growth, which we value, are ubiquitous and blind, that life itself is so astonishingly cheap, that nature is as careless as it is bountiful, and that with extravagance goes a crushing waste that will one day include our own cheap lives. (160)

The cheapness and brutality of life are problems Dillard wrestles with, wondering which is “amiss”: the world, a “monster,” or human beings, with their “excessive emotions” (177-78). No matter how hard she tries to leave human society, Dillard has no choice but to “bring human values to the creek” (179). The violent, seemingly pointless birth and death of all life are, spiritually,

Combination of quotation and Haley’s own analysis (next four paragraphs) interprets and synthesizes Dillard’s ideas

Mixture of summary and quotation provides context and keeps quotations trim

Discussion of physical identity of all creatures: death and birth

Comment on quotation advises reader what to look for

Quotations, including some long ones set off from the text, convey Dillard’s voice as well as her ideas

Discussion of spiritual identity of all creatures

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two branches of the same creek, the creek that waters the world. . . . We could have planned things more mercifully, perhaps, but our plan would never get off the drawing board until we agreed to the very compromising terms that are the only ones that being offers. (180)

Haley's interpretation of Dillard's ideas

For Dillard, accepting the monstrousness as well as the beauty of "being" is the price all living things pay for freedom.

Resolution of Dillard's concerns

In "The Waters of Separation," the final chapter of *Pilgrim*, Dillard writes about a winged maple key, or seed. At this point in the book, the critic Sandra Humble Johnson notes, Dillard "has been humbled and emptied; she can no longer apply effort to her search for meaning in a parasitic world" (4). It is the winter solstice—the shortest day of the year. And then Dillard spies the maple key descending to earth and germination. "It rose, just before it would have touched a thistle, and hovered pirouetting in one spot, then twirled on and finally came to rest" (267). The key moved, says Dillard, "like a creature muscled and vigorous, or a creature spread thin to that other wind, the wind of the spirit . . . , a generous, unending breath" (268). Dillard vows to see the maple key in all of the earth and in herself. "If I am a maple key falling, at least I can twirl" (268).

Conclusion: ties together divergent critical views, environmental theme, and Dillard's work

According to the critic John Becker, "Annie Dillard does not walk out on ordinary life in order to bear witness against it"; instead, she uses the distance from other people "to make meaning out of the grotesque disjointedness of man and nature" (408). Gary McIlroy says, nonetheless, that Dillard "does not succeed in encompassing within her vision any but the most fragmentary consequences for society at large" (116). Possibly both are correct. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard suggests a vision of identity among all living things

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that could inform modern humanity’s efforts to thrive in harmony with its environment, but she does not make the leap to practicalities. Life, she says, “is a faint tracing on the surface of a mystery. . . . We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what’s going on here” (9). The description, and acting on it, may take generations. As we proceed, however, we may be guided by Dillard’s efforts to mend the disjointedness, to see that human beings and maple keys alike twirl equally.

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