

ANNIE DILLARD'S TRANSCENDENTAL VISION OF MODERN WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Annie Dillard, born in 1945, is one of the leading American environmentalist writers. She is best known for her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* which she published in 1974, winning the 1975 Pulitzer Prize. The present article studies this text in regards to Dillard's vision of the modern world. Dillard's vision attempts to get people out of the sense of despair and alienation that dominate them and calls for, to use R. W. Emerson words, "an original understanding" of the world, the human and nonhuman. It is a vision that looks at the contradictory processes of nature as essential and necessary in the natural world.

Keywords: despair, transcendental, alienation, earth, observation

INTRODUCTION:

Annie Dillard (1945-) is a contemporary American writer who lives in an age when people have been devastated by a sense of alienation and despair. Scientific ways have led people to separate themselves from earth, exploiting it and damaging both the environment and themselves as human beings. Dillard does not, really, follow the tradition of Eliot and many other contemporary writers in describing the wasteland of the modern age. Rather, Dillard looks for the wild and uncultivated to reconsider modern misery and to seek a way out of despair. She describes the world around her in detail using a mixture of literary images and scientific terms. Dillard describes her experiences and celebrates the connections between humans and the earth as inspiration of the wilderness and the food chain.

I am interested in the ecological implications of Dillard's writings and looking at man as part of a larger world, yet I do not only read Dillard as an environmental writer in this article but also as a post-modernist writer who rejects the overwhelming sense of despair of the modern man. She asserts that humans should understand their position on this planet and their relation with the other that is the natural world. Dillard writes out of the modern landscape in reaction to the alienation and fragmentation that dominate modern culture and literature. Wars, violence and conflicting cultures have demolished traditional beliefs. People are occupied with the material aspects of life while the world is dominated by shallow relationships and consumerism as well as being threatened by ecological disasters. The spiritual side of humans has been ignored and seemed a desolate place with a lack of meaning of life that led people to despair. In *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Dillard(1982) writes:

These are enervating thoughts, the thought of despair. They crowd back, unbidden when human life as it unrolls goes ill, when we lose control of our lives or the illusions of control, and it seems we are not moving towards any end but merely blown. Our life seemed cursed to be a wiggle merely, and a wandering without end. Even nature is hostile and poisonous as though it were impossible for our vulnerability to survive in these acrid stones. (p. 152)

Dillard depicts the temper of modern man, his despair and doubts of nature which he looks at as being hostile. Nature, however, is not always hostile since human understanding of the wilderness is more a reflection of humans themselves and what they want to see rather than of the actual world itself. Dillard (1982) writes, "Now we are no longer primitive; now the whole world seems not-holy. We have drained the light from the boughs in the sacred grove and snuffed it in the high places and along the banks of sacred streams. . . we want to love where we want to live" (p. 69). Modern man lives with a number of illusions—illusions of endless progress, unlimited resources of the earth, the superiority of humans over nature and the supremacy of culture. These illusions are destructive and result in a state of environmental degradation which cannot be easily healed.

PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK:

Dillard's book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), is a book of observations and speculations of a year of wandering the banks of a creek near her home in Virginia; it is a spiritual autobiography focused on the earth, creation and creator. The narrator, the pilgrim, strives to understand the human condition through observation of the world around her; the creek, the woods along the creek and the creatures that inhabit them. Dillard (1974) declares, "We don't know what is going on here" (p. 8). The narrator needs time to explore the creek near her home, she sits and waits for muskrats and describes what she sees, recording what she encounters and her reactions. The opening pages of the book introduces the narrator's subjects; violence, beauty, death and God. She demands "We must somehow take a wider view, look at the landscape, really see it, and describe what is going on here" (Dillard, 1974, p. 9). The creek seems to be a microcosm of the larger world and the narrator sees herself within this larger world. She is interested in the particulars she encounters but she wants to connect her encounters with images that are traditionally used to symbolize universal truths and concepts. Dillard's observations are based on biologist and naturalist writers. She uses scientific methods to study phenomenon, yet, she does not approve of science's principle that fact and value are unconnected. In every chapter, Dillard's pilgrim

connects her scientific analysis with ethical and metaphysical questions about the phenomenon she observes. By constructing mythic images of scientific text and merging those images with religious images, she tries to bridge the gap between unethical science and the human culture's ideas of ethics. She relies on "the customary categories and discrimination of traditional Western thought" and their methods but she goes beyond the limits of these categories to conceive of her own vision (Fritzell, 1992, p. 239).

The narrator looks to examine paradoxes that ostensibly contradict one another but are truly bound to one another. The first paradox Dillard finds in her world is beauty and violence; she questions how beauty, which she adores, is indisputably bound with violence. "Looking so closely at eternity, Dillard was torn between beauty and horror throughout her 'mystical excursion' in *Pilgrim*" (Tietjen, 1988, p. 104). On the first page of her book, the narrator describes how her old tomcat jumps into her bedroom from the night outside, "stinking of urine and blood", and covers her body with paw prints of blood until she looked as if she were painted with red roses (Dillard, 1974, p. 1). As Norwood (1996) remarks, Dillard attempts to "reconcile the images of beauty and horror: humans and their civilization are really the only holders of moral beauty in the world; or the terror itself contains beauty if we only look correctly, or in the contradiction, beauty does not exist" (p.341). Dillard is aware of those paradoxes in the world, but as she explores the natural world, she increasingly realizes that she is part of the horror as well as the freshness. She is not innocent and unfamiliar to the violent spread of blood or to the frog sucked by the giant water bug:

I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty beats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them, under the wind-rent clouds, upstream and down. (Dillard, 1974, p. 242)

Dillard depicts an image of the world which blends contrasts between good and evil, ugliness and beauty. Dillard sees much cruelty to which human acts of evil seem pale and acceptable in comparison. She sees creatures eating other creatures alive; she sees a female creature eating its young once they are born. Dillard seems uncertain of her interpretation of such contrasts but seems to accept it and is not irritated by it. She even tells us that the frightening creatures of the world are dear companions to her. Beauty and violence are bound to each other; renewal is impossible without decay. Grasshoppers and locusts are the same insects. The contradiction of violence and beauty is only an ostensible one. They are inseparable parts of the natural world. Accepting violence also means accepting death. Death and life are opposites but they are also inseparable. As Margaret Loewen Reimer (qtd in McCintock, 1994) points out, Dillard's experiences "lead her to see the unity and the diversity, the order and the chaos, the uplifting and the destructive . . . The power of Dillard's vision arises from her strength to maintain the contradictions within a single vision" (93).

Humans should care equally for both life and death and should not oppose the rule of the wild. Once the narrator accepts the fact that her life is inevitably causing the death of other organisms, she is able to live in unity with the world and connect her temporary existence to a larger and more meaningful whole. The narrator understands the history of human culture which accepts death as a release from fear through her journey. "You see creatures die, and you know you will die. And one day it occurs to you that you must not need life (Dillard, 1974, p. 270). The narrator, then, realizes that she is closely connected to other living beings. It is this connection with the other elements of nature which may save her from the sufferings of isolation and despair in the modern world.

Understanding the world according to science may not be desirable to the narrator. She can only accept it when she connected to the world during overwhelming moments where her self is reduced and she joins the world around her. Dillard calls her search for these moments "stalking," a kind of controlled unself-conscious awareness, "seeing that involves letting go" (Dillard, 1974, P. 31). Experiencing nature needs to drop the self and the awareness that we are only a part of a larger system (Berman, 1981, P. 177). A diminishing of ego is necessary for an individual to transcend the self. The death of the self

enables one to escape self-boundaries, boundaries that cause the despair and sense of alienation that have pervaded most of modern literature. Death is, therefore, nourishment and it is salvation for human beings, "The death of the self of which the great writers speak is no violent act. It is merely the joining of the great heart of the earth in its roll (Dillard, 1974, p. 258).

Dillard thinks that she needs to drop her ego if she wants to truly see with the fresh eyes of an infant. However, to understand what she sees, she must give the shapes in front of her eyes forms she has learned from human culture which requires a self-conscious that unavoidably corrupts her true vision. As Fritzell (1992) says, she wants "on the one hand, to see through and beyond her own language, to see without words, so to speak; on the other hand, to recognize that human can only 'see' through language, that what she and(her readers) 'see' here is a function of her own (and their) compositions"(p. 231). Dillard describes two kinds of seeing, the first is "very much a matter of verbalization" (Dillard, 1974, p. 30) and the second "involves letting go." The second "seeing" can be attained only when she can diminish her ego and, therefore, can experience what is around her at the moment more purely. Dillard tells us how she was sitting at a gas station drinking coffee one day and she forgot herself. The world became more real than the hollow of her own mind:

This is it, I think, this is it, right now, the present, this empty gas station, here. This western wind, this tang of the coffee on the tongue, and I am watching the mountain. And the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. I am opaque, so much black asphalt. But at the same second I know I've lost it, I also realize that the puppy is still squirming on his back under my hand. Nothing has changed for him. . . It is ironic that the one thing that all religions recognize as separating us from our creator— our very self-conscious---is also the one thing that divides us from our fellow creatures. It was a bitter birthday present from evolution, cutting us off at both ends. (Dillard, 1974, p.78)

The narrator should only live in the present without seizing it, physically sensing each moment's movement in order to experience her world in its true nature, continually changing, of which she is only a transient part of it. The irony of the narrator's dilemma is that though self-consciousness separates us from God the creator, the present is always present everywhere with its beauty and violence, life and death. If the narrator stops pursuing time's transience, the present comes to her. She looks up the creek, at the water moving toward her:

This is the present, at last, I can pat the puppy any time. This is the now, this flickering, broken light, this air that the wind of the future presses down my throat, pumping me buoyant and giddy with praise. . . . You don't run down the present, pursue it with baited hooks and nets. You wait for it, empty-handed, and you are filled. You'll have fish left over. The creek is the one great river. It is, by definition, Christmas, the incarnation. (Dillard, 1974, p. 102)

God is shown in the world, present and eternal. This is the junction of the material and spiritual, a resolution of sensual experience and sacred myth. Although it lasts for only a moment before the narrator moves to other inquiries about life, this is a vision. (Scheick, 1985, p. 54).

Dillard creates thus a vision of the world as opposed to that of modern writers, often characterized by despair and alienation. Her vision of a contradictory world of beauty and violence, life and death, created through metaphors and images from different scientific and religious traditions and the images she finds in her walks, seems to be considerably transcendental. Dillard looks at the conflicting processes of nature, as Scott Slovic (1996) points out, as the most essential and common process in the natural world (p.358). Dillard creates a vision which reminds us of Thoreau and Emerson, the leading figures of American Transcendentalism of the nineteenth century. It is a vision which asserts hope in the modern world and restores the spiritual and religious dimensions of our existence that have been seriously damaged in the modern age.

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