

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek Study Guide

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard

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Summary

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is a philosophical book oscillating between science, natural observations and existential questions. Dillard, the narrator, chronicles her observations and meditations throughout the four seasons at Tinker Creek in the Appalachian Mountains.

The book begins in winter and ends in winter, coming full circle in image and tone. Likewise, the book is symmetrical, with the first half of the chapters extrapolating on the wonders of the natural universe and that of a divine creator. The second half of the book focuses on the darker side of nature, as perceived by human morality, and whether or not God, or the creator, is one that is wondrous and positive, or all-powerful and fearful—with each “positive” chapter mirroring a “negative” one. Dillard never explicitly answers the questions she poses, but rather writes concentric circles around them, with the essays often coiling and collapsing within themselves.

Amidst the philosophy and philosophizing, the book is anchored by her acute descriptions of the natural world at Tinker Creek and her research and extrapolations about Eskimos on the arctic tundra.



Heaven and Earth in Jest

Summary

The book begins in January with Dillard wondering where the tomcat is. A tomcat sometimes sneaks in through the open window in the summer leaving bloody paw prints on her chest and blanket. She cannot decide if the paw prints are a sign of a sacrifice or a sign of beauty. Now, in January when she hasn't seen the tomcat in many months she wonders where he is and if he is alive at all.

Dillard goes for a walk along the creek and notes her observations. She marvels at the water bugs, the dragonfly nymphs and mockingbirds. She then begins to think of other wondrous things in the world, like sharks. Her observations and ruminations begin to form around this question: "What do we think of the created universe, spanning an unthinkable void with an unthinkable profusion of forms?"

Analysis

It is January, a month that in many parts of the United States—especially temperate zones—is associated with death and decay, Dillard sees signs of life. She marvels at the wondrous earth and forces herself to note every detail about everything that she sees. As she does this, she feels more alive, more present as if writing the things she sees makes them more than they are.

From the present observations at Tinker Creek, her wonders spiral outward toward the mountains and outlying areas, all she can see in the light of a late January afternoon. She quotes Einstein and other scientist and philosophers who also have witnessed the wonders of the world and asked the question of a divine creator: does one exist and if so why all the variety of life forms?

Vocabulary

jest, pummeling, emblem, anchorite, hermitage, clamped, heave, slant, chute, gilt, taut, emitting, schematic, bewildered, appalled, subdued, bivouac, absconded, obscure, cunning, brute, gratuitous, insouciant, conundrum, amok, profusions, profligacies, vigor, stratus, unwonted, adversary, fissure, sheathed



Seeing

Summary

“Seeing” starts out with Dillard remembering a childhood compulsion she had of hiding a penny in a tree and then drawing arrows to it on the sidewalk. But she never did see who picked up the penny, but she would check later and it would be gone. From this topic she makes the leap to walking around Tinker Creek on a January afternoon. She notices the ripples in the water, the flash of a fish, insects hovering midair. She wonders about poverty and the worth of a penny, how poor one must be not to even want a penny—how poor one must be not to see the beauty she now sees.

She thinks about lovers and how only they can see their connection, of how once she was with a group of friends who owned horses and they were all cooped up on a cold day and decided to draw horses. All of their drawings were exquisite masterpieces while hers was a crude outline of a horse, hardly a horse at all. She concludes she could not draw the horse because she saw it differently, she didn’t know horses, couldn’t see the minutiae of them. As she’s walking she notices the light as it passes over Dead Man and Tinker Mountain and she longs to see the minutiae of this valley and Tinker Creek.

She sits by the water and feels in this moment she can really see. Dillard recalls reading about blind people who can suddenly see but don’t know what they’re looking at, when the obscured becomes clear in sight, it becomes unclear in the mind. That the newly sighted had to rediscover what they thought they already knew.

Analysis

Dillard likens the blind seeing a new world, rediscovering what they thought they knew through shadow and frame to herself; she knows to really see Tinker Creek, she must gain a new sense of seeing. Sitting by the creek and watching the water wash over the riffles, she feels like she is suddenly sighted and seeing the obscure. But, she knows to really see the minutiae of this world at Tinker Creek she must verbalize it, must write it down to see it anew.

So, she sits at the creek and watches the late afternoon sun wash over the mountains. With exquisite detail she meditates on this. And she knows now to see what she sees anew she must empty her mind of what she thought she knew, just as the blind had to learn how to “see” even though their vision was restored.

Vocabulary

compulsion, merit, lurked, tremulous, dire, rueful, sedges, ascend, nonchalance, minutiae, antlion, spurring, sere, cleft, inexplicable, insoluble, ribband, unencumbered,



apathy, dissimulation, astounded, transfigured, condemned, loomed, Gnosticism,
oblong, discalced, unscrupulous, linear, whetted, abated, spate



Winter

Summary

Part I begins with Dillard thinking about starlings as she wanders along the banks of Tinker Creek. Starlings were introduced into the North America frivolously by a man who simply liked the bird. Because they travel in such large flocks with definitive roosts they can be quite destructive. The town of Radford, Virginia devised expensive elaborate plans to rid the town of the birds, but it failed and the birds continued thriving. One evening Dillard watches the starlings leave their roost and can't help but find them beautiful despite their destruction. At night she hunkers down in her house and reads voraciously—about nature, about God, about science and Eskimos.

In Part II of this chapter, Dillard notes it has snowed, and takes a long afternoon walk wandering along the snowy banks of Tinker Creek. Despite the emptying of the land that is traditional with winter, Dillard notices all of the life out in the cold—the coot, the carp, the slugs and snails and other insects. She watches the sky open up and turn warm amidst the heavy snow clouds and remarks weather is a wonder of the world.

Analysis

Dillard finds the clear cut barren landscape of winter especially beautiful, just like she finds the starlings beautiful. She knows she is delighting in things others might not see the wonder in and because of this feels she has gained something. She watches the coot and the carp frozen under the stream, she notes the insect lives still thriving in the harsh conditions and feels thankful for the abundance and beauty of life.

She watches the sky, as she does many times in her year at Tinker Creek, and marvels at the wonder of the sky. The wind picks up and the animals go about their business, at night she imagines them in shelter hunkering down for the long cold night just as she is in her shelter.

Vocabulary

notoriously, feasibility, exterminate, reprieve, morosely, vista, gibbous, pique, oriflamme, weft, quince, immemorial, doggedly, beguiling, hearth, piteously, diffuse, hueless, umbrage, jib, subterfuge, congealed, en masse, gouged, sonant, surd, blunder, foray, infinitesimal, sublimation



The Fixed

Summary

Dillard recognizes how to spot praying mantis eggs. She spends a few days walking around looking for clusters of eggs. She finds one and takes it back to the tree outside of her house so she can watch them hatch in a few weeks. This reminds her of the Polyphemus moth her grade school teacher brought in to show the class. He hatched in the Mason jar and could not spread his wings out so they dried bent back and stuck. The teacher let the moth out during recess and Dillard watched as he hobbled along, disfigured.

Dillard is fascinated by the insect world—by its abundance and variety, the intricacies of survival. She thinks about articles and books she has read about the adaptations of insects and parasites. At night she walks along the creek transfixed by the light of the moon and how in each second the creek renews itself, just as species do, to survive.

Analysis

In “The Fixed” Dillard recognizes in the natural world nothing is fixed, but everything is ever changing and renewing, like Tinker Creek that is constantly being renewed by fresh water. Dillard sits by the creek and feels this renewal metaphorically, it energizes her and she refers to it as “therapy for the soul.”

She walks around in this chapter marveling at the intricacies, abundance and ability of adaptations the insect world possesses. Again, she knows this is part of nature many people don’t delight in and because of that appreciates it more so—like it is her secret world. She recalls the images of the moth from grade school and knew that even then, she had an affinity for the small creatures all around her. She wonders about that moth and if he adapted and how, so he could survive with his wings stuck back. Even all these years later, she mourns for the disfigured moth.

Vocabulary

minutely, uncannily, summoned, grappled, amateur, contrived, concertina, bellows, obscurely, pellucid, excoriate, wraith, obliterate, deluge, scrying, plated, profligate, deciduous, lancets, benighted, extraneous, geomancy, impartial, sinister, parody, pileated, boreal, wan, lambent



Untying the Knot

Summary

At around five pages, this is the shortest chapter in the book. Dillard sets out on a walk to notice the changing of the seasons—from winter to spring and instead she finds an old snake skin coiled in a knot. She takes the snake skin home to try and untie the knot it but cannot figure out where the snakes begins and ends, it seems as if there is no end. Finally she realizes one end is folded into the other as if it is inside out.

Again, she ventures outside to notice the changing of the seasons. She wonders how long it took man to first notice the changes, how many years and seasons did he have to go through before he began to expect the snow to thaw, the heat to relent. She notes her life is marked by these changes, sometimes indistinguishable as a loop.

Analysis

In this short chapter the metaphor of the endless knot of snakeskin where there is no distinction at the beginning of ending of the snake, is likened to time—time as a continuous loop, a continuous ebb from one season to the next. Dillard's life is time kept by these changes, changes she must observe and notice to move forward, but like the snakeskin she cannot untie this loop. She can only observe but never really know when winter has ended and spring has begun.

Vocabulary

quarried, unkeeled, recurrence, assurance, allayed, vanguard, leviathan, morosely, notion, incidentally



The Present

Summary

In Part I of this chapter Dillard thinks about what it means to be present as she is sitting alongside the road at a gas station petting a puppy. She is watching the sky seem to ignite the old oak tree aflame and feels in that moment she is the most present and alive she has ever been. But as she verbalizes the present, she ceases to be present. To be fully present, all of her senses must be engaged.

In Part II and III of this chapter she practices the theory she has laid out in Part I. Part II is comprised of multiple moments in time where she is engaging all of her senses and she explores Tinker Creek. She thinks about sycamore trees and how large and massive they are and how nature has no choice but to be in the present. She sits under the sycamores rooted in the present absorbing the light and the sounds of the creek, and she can't help but feel the primordial past of the ancient sycamore colliding with the present.

As she sits under these ancient trees she feels both anchored and pulled. As she sits in the present she begins to absorb and notice all that is around her and then her observations spiral out and away from Tinker Creek to ask the big existential questions: how is she both here in this moment and rooted in the past? Like the sycamore, is God the anchor that roots us in the present and yet links us to the past?

Analysis

The structure of this essay is interesting and undoubtedly intentional. In the beginning she lays out her theory and in the second and third parts of the essay she attempts enacting it. But, to be fully immersed in her senses without verbalization, which take her out of the present and puts the recorded in the past, she must not be able to write, or really even think about it. But, as readers who are reading her experiences and writing we know she has not fully followed through on her theory of being in the present.

Likewise, as much as she wants to be in the present, when she sits under the sycamore tree she can't help but think about the past, about the history of the creek, the tree, the world, her life. The past and the present cannot so easily be separated. Metaphorically, she thinks of God this way—that the Creator is an anchor, like the old sycamores that tie the past and present together.

In the last section of the chapter she walks around recording moments during which she is in the present. The form of this part of the chapter mimics recalled memories, anecdotes recorded. It is finally the water, the rushing water, that reminds her of the fleeting moments of the present and this brings her back from the philosophy of the present, from Xerxes and the primordial sycamores, to the present on the banks of Tinker Creek.

Vocabulary

impartially, brome, tremulous, loam, lope, elongate, retract, hummocks, opaque, nostalgia, levitating, vouchsafed, inexplicable, improbably, theologian, verbalization, prerogative, keening, peaked, apogee, eidetic, concentrically, cumulative, emendation, boles, haven, filament, abide, labyrinthine, diverting, peneplain, sedge, lee, fusillade, sodden, lappets, creed, unfathomably, aerialists, masonry, entomologists, deadwood, jaunty, serrate, conjured, regalia, furred, hallowing, pavane, barren, weft, pampero, tramontane, grist, aligned, baited, laving, subatomic



Spring

Summary

Dillard begins this chapter with an anecdote about how, as a child, she thought all other languages were codes for English—i.e. each foreign language phrase had an exact English translated counterpart. She thinks about the birds she hears outside and how scientists have often just dismissed bird calls as mating rituals, but as she's listening to the birds, she thinks there is more communication going on than scientists will ever know. It is spring and the birds are feverishly calling out to one another and she longs to know what they are saying.

The second half of the chapter jumps to the month of May. Dillard imagines the changes in the world happening due to the seasonal changes: the walrus migrating, the Eskimos going carefully upstream avoiding the ice breaks, and what is happening in her own valley. The pond is brimming with algae and new life forms. She thinks about the energy and life in one drop of pond water. She takes it home to analyze the life under her microscope.

Analysis

This chapter is comprised of a collection of seemingly disconnected thoughts, anecdotes and observations. But what ties all of these together is the season of spring. Dillard is trying to paint a picture of spring not only for Tinker Creek and her corner of Virginia but in other parts of the world as well.

In the end she comes back to the protozoan bloom in the pond and the amazement at the life force in one drop of water. She wonders how she is so different than the drop of water, the clod of dirt—all brimming with life. She feels God in these small things—that they are all pure and good and part of a divine plan. As she looks around her at the abundance awakening from the winter, she concludes it is all done in the glory of God, because if it wasn't, what would the point be of the abundance of life forms?

Vocabulary

obstinately, nimble, display, earnestless, trill, objectively, luminous, compulsion, racemes, luminescent, cayman, concave, zenith, luxuriant, etiolated, lambent, infinitesimal, obelisk, bespeak, impregnate, loamy, calving, grate, razes, eutrophic, algal, plating, filamentous, subside, jabbed, emitting, diatoms, submersed, convulsive, gelatinous, slog, sinuate, sober, rotifer, foray, propulsive



Intricacy

Summary

In this essay Dillard explores the intricacies in the world around her. She does not venture out into Tinker Creek in this essay, but rather the “setting” is her mind and reveries with a telescope. Specifically, she focuses on describing the intricacies in the design of her goldfish’s fins, the life in a drop of algae from the fishbowl, the pines outside, dragonfly nymphs that litter Tinker Creek and she even wonders about the blood whirling in her fingers. From the world she knows, she starts ruminating on the intricacies in design in species she has read and heard about like the African Hercules Beetle and honey ants from South America.

In Part II of the essay, Dillard shifts her focus from description of all that is intricate to philosophizing about the creation of the intricate. She recalls facts and figures about how only ten percent of the planet’s total species are now living, and about the largeness of the galaxy, the millions of life forms in a single drop of pond water and is overwhelmed by the enormity. Instead, she chooses to see and focus on what she can observe, to absorb the mysteries of the universe unfolding in front of her, like the insects and animals at Tinker Creek. In this section, she mentions, multiple times, the question of why a creator would go through the effort to create so many life forms and with such detail. She herself cannot answer this question and looks to other scientists and philosophers who have asked the same thing. The only solid conclusion she comes to is all of it is beautiful, which surprises her, because with the sheer number of life forms there is room for much ugliness and disaster.

Analysis

This essay is divided into two sections. In Part I Dillard focuses on using descriptive language to explore the intricate designs of her goldfish, the algae in the tank and the pines outside. She marvels at the explicitness in design. She then imagines what it would take to recreate a pine tree. Of course, this exercise is to prove the point that not even the most skilled scientist or sculptor could create a tree so massive and intricate. In these moments in the essay she doesn’t necessarily refer to a God, but to a Creator, who she believes has intentionally created the intricacy and beauty in the world. She would like to see the entire world in all of its detail, but is blinded by the enormity, the magnitude, and so chooses to focus on the beauty and intricacy right in front of her.

In Part II, Dillard leaves (metaphorically) Tinker Creek to discover what other philosophers and scientists have said about the enormity of the universe and all of its life forms. The question she keeps returning to, but never ventures to answer, is why? And Thoreau’s “Whatever for?” Even though she herself cannot answer this question, the question itself leads to a conclusion, that a supreme creator was involved in the creation of the world. The enormity of the detail, the beauty in the fringe of her



goldfishes tail proves this to her. And in the end the only thing she knows for sure is there is beauty in the intricacy when there is room for so much ugliness.

Vocabulary

gilds, lateral, impetus, ventral, variegated, etherized, stereoscope, translucency, paramecia, trooped, vegetative, diminishingly, incontrovertibly, cataracts, sedge, subatomic, gratuitous, minutiae, emanation, ciliated, fascicles, trussing, burgeoning, erringly, lintels, appendages, apt, terrestrial, abode, afferent, efferent, abode, meander, proximal, veritable, striations, meticulously, intricacy, convoluted, aesthetic, perpetuate, processionary, motley, regurgitating, profusion, tangent, exuberance, quarried, boughs, broods, weft, disclosed, whorled, conjured, pallid, fiords, implacable, agnosticism, fecund, culled, errant, grotesque



Flood

Summary

Dillard begins this essay with her observations of a June afternoon. Spring has come and gone and she notes summer has been ushered in after a heavy rainfall. With this rainfall the creek temporarily swells and this reminds her of one year ago when the creek flooded from Hurricane Agnes.

She recalls watching the creek swollen beyond its 4-foot banks as it snaked through the trees. The water was clay-colored and foaming. She thinks about all of the animals that rely on the creek for habitat and for food and how in a flood this destructive, they must be struggling or dead. She remembers how she stood by the creek and saw that her neighbors, whom she had not seen all winter, were gathered near the bridge.

The water was up to the bridge, threatening to go under and they barricaded the bridge so cars didn't drive over it. The water was high and so fast; Dillard knew if anyone fell in they surely wouldn't survive the temperature, the fast currents, especially since the clay and silt had made the water impenetrable. She walked with her neighbors up the creek where a house had been flooded to see if the people needed any help. This bridge too has been overcome by the creek, with its big cement anchors eroded by the deep and swift running water.

Analysis

This essay begins with a very brief anecdote about how Dillard wonders about the ushering in of summer. She is emboldened by the heavy shower and the swelling of the creek, and it comes alive with the changes summer brings. Ironically, this reminds her of Hurricane Agnes and the catastrophic death she witnessed one year ago when Tinker Creek flooded. In this brief essay, she mourns for the death and loss imagined at the creek. But she also notes the scientific phenomena that occur after destruction of this magnitude, and even with all of the death, the life forms will be reborn and multiply.

She moves her discussion from Tinker Creek outward to the James River and other Appalachian areas marred by Agnes. She recalls the houses that were destroyed and people killed, the destruction nauseating. Dillard attempts to reconcile her love of nature and weather with the destruction it has caused and the conclusions he comes to is that nature will allow new life to come forth.

Vocabulary

oppressively, resolutions, lee, etiolated, incongruously, ominously, obliterates, opacity, whaps, acrid, insecticide, mauled, avalanche, chute, flotsam, parody, malevolent, deign, oblige, deliriously



Fecundity

Summary

Part I of this essay begins with Dillard being awakened from a dream by her own screams. She has dreamed she has watched dragon fly larva hatch and thousands of fish eggs have hatched and are swimming in her bed. She is both alarmed at what will happen to the larva that have hatched in her house and the fish swimming in her bed, but even more so she is disturbed by the fecundity of nature—the pressure that all creatures, including plants, have to grow and procreate. She is disturbed by how much life is brought forth—almost carelessly, cheaply.

For the duration of Part I of the essay Dillard thinks about plants and animals with impressive growth and fecundity: barnacles, bamboo, sycamore trees, rabbits, rats. She is amazed at how the wild desperate for growth can thrive in urban settings like rats, cockroaches and the sycamores in New York City. What disturbs her even more so is the drive that animals have to procreate, even when someone of them end up eating their own offspring.

In Part II of this essay Dillard changes from the overwhelming numbers of lives, to the inexplicable deaths and how some life forms survive based on coincidental circumstances, like the horsehair worm and other parasites. She notes deaths in the animal world are not mourned by most animals and perhaps this is why they are able to procreate and grow like they do, even at the cost of their own lives.

When she applies her own emotions and morality to the death of so many lives, she is overwhelmed but knows it is only a problem she faces, and not the species she mourns for. The conclusion she comes to at the end of the essay is it is only natural with so much life, there also must be so much death and perhaps instead of mourning it, it should be included in the beauty of life.

Analysis

One of the reasons Dillard's dream about the larva and fish in her bed disturbs her so much is that she doesn't know how they will survive. She is both mesmerized and disturbed by the urge and pressure to procreate, yet she doesn't know how she'll save all of this life now in her home. This dream is really what the entire essay is about.

Dillard is constantly marveling at the multitude of life on earth—in all of its forms. But taken to the extreme, to create life animals and plants sometimes cause destruction and death. She applies her own human morality to the amoral world of nature and is conflicted: even though she logically knows death is part of the cycle, she can't help but think that the magnitude of death cheapens life. Just like the ease with which thousands and millions of eggs are laid, it cheapens life. She wonders if God cares about the



barnacles as much as the human soul, she wonders if God mourns all of the death in the world, or only that of humans.

At the end of the essay she recognizes a curse on mammals, dogs, elephants, otters, humans, is that we give life but we mourn the inevitable death that is part of the natural cycle. She implies without the anchor of emotion, death would not be destruction at all but beautiful in how it creates room and space and breath for more life.

Vocabulary

burgeoned, fecundity, ethereal, degradation, viscid, appalls, ubiquitous, extrude, memento mori, turgid, mewling, regeneration, exuberance, imbecile, regeneration, proliferation, proscribing, boggle, anathema, pelagic, molting, appendages, flaccid, insatiable, macabre, patently, quiescent, emerge, diminution, ordained, encyst, fortuitous, circuitous, substratum, holdfast, flotsam, diametrically, whit, askew, abominably, exile, wastrel

Stalking

Summary

In Part I of this chapter, Dillard recalls information about what the Eskimos do in summer, since it is also summer at Tinker Creek. Eskimos have a harder time foraging and hunting in the summer because the animals are harder to find. Since the caribou leave the tundra, the Eskimos oftentimes have to resort to eating tiny birds, and they also make shirts out of their skin and feathers. Dillard no longer knows if these are still the customs of the Eskimos, but their seasonal rituals fascinate her nonetheless.

It is summertime at Tinker Creek and Dillard stalks. There are two ways she stalks either by pursuing or waiting. She has come to realize that often if an animal doesn't want to be seen then it will not be seen. She has had the best luck watching animals using her waiting method of stalking—so, she sits and waits along the creek bed or on the pedestrian bridge and she watches the fish, the herons and even had a run-in with a beaver. But, what she enjoys watching the most are the muskrats.

Part II of this chapter chronicles Dillard's stalking of muskrats. She is particularly fascinated by them because of they are so difficult to see. She's done extensive reading about the animal and knows that many of the muskrat observations by scientists are made by evidence of muskrats but not by actually watching the animal. She takes this as a challenge and devotes a lot of time during the summer to this pursuit.

She decides one afternoon to sit on the pedestrian bridge until she see the muskrat. Once she sees him she will move closer when he looks away and then hold still. She has learned through her own observations if she is still enough then the animals assume she is part of the landscape. She sees a muskrat and when he looks away shuffled up to him. She gets within 10 feet of him and crouches on her belly watching him, afraid to breathe lest he move.

In Part III Dillard examines what she sees of the natural world compared to Newtonian physics and wonders if there is room for something in between. She recalls and quotes metaphysicists and other scientists who have wondered this same thing.

Analysis

In "Stalking," Dillard recounts her experiences stalking animals and wonders why they hide at all—if it is just some coincidence of if the animals collectively have a larger intelligence than science can explain. In Part III, she gets a sense that what she is seeing is more than just fleeting observations of nature, she feels a small part of something much larger and much grander. She seeks out other scientists who have grappled with this same question.



With her stalking of the muskrats, beavers, frogs and fish, she realizes it is like stalking God. Watching the light brush from the creek to the field and up the sides of the mountains is only part of what she sees, that there must be more and she will wait for it, she will wait for God. In this chapter she uses the word God, rather than 'creator.' She looks to the Bible for answers to science but nothing she finds can accurately account for the ethereal sense she gets when the light touches her face. In bed, she wonders if the Eskimos feel this too since they live so closely to the land.

Vocabulary

dredge, snare, becalmed, literally, foolhardy, languorously, dissipated, extricated, conical, modicum, intrusion, galling, inadvertently, vain, convivial, repose, abide, fallacy, grapple, sinew, hummocks



Nightwatch

Summary

In this chapter, Dillard heads to Lucas's Field to spend the night. Lucas's Field is one of her favorite places which includes Tinker Creek and the only area that was clear cut long ago. From there she can see the pond, the creek, and the quarry and rock ledges. She is hedged in by woods while she sleeps in the open meadow. But she doesn't sleep. She watches the night sky and thinks about how grasshoppers in moments of crazed destitution turn into locusts.

Genetically speaking, grasshoppers and locusts are the same. It is in times of drought when the grasshoppers can't find food that they mutate. They frantically lay more eggs and then go dormant for a number of years in hopes that when they awake, there will be food. Dillard marvels at the extravagance of this change, of this fight for survival—this reminds of her how eels will travel hundreds of miles upriver for fresh water and then go back to the ocean. She spends the night in the open field waiting and watching for animals, listening to the creek and thinking about animals' enchanted fights for survival.

Analysis

Dillard refers to Lucas's Field as her paradise. From here she feels like she is on top of the world able to spy on all of Tinker Creek. As she lay under the stars she thinks about the magnitudes of the galaxy and the light particles that are light years away—she's overwhelmed by the sheer size of it. She then turns her focus to the creek, the sounds around her, and the grasshoppers and wonders if God cares about her as much as He cares for the other creatures in such a large world.

There is a moment where Dillard begins to drift asleep and she imagines waking in a torrent of locusts; the thought terrifies her, but she recognizes in order to be so close to nature she is taking a risk. This is one of the first times Dillard mentions the possible danger of nature. But she also notes to see this beauty is worth the danger, and she must do this to really be alive. Her belief in God does not absolve her from these dangers, rather it is the contrary because all around she sees death, death that has been both sanctioned and created by whom she believes is her creator. But she doesn't know if her human life is worth any more than the other millions of lives in the world.

Vocabulary

barrage, legion, detonate, salvos, berserk, elongate, voracious, jostle, cunning, instigating, squadron, enow, oxbow, secluded, foray, limned, eke, initiatory, swathed, subdue, deciduous, adaptive, ascending, hove, errant, fixity, adept, stridulations, anarchistic, lorn, obstinate



The Horns of the Altar

Summary

Dillard goes to the quarry to sit in the September sun and sees a copperhead snake. She does not see snakes that often but always carries a small anti-venom kit with her. She recalls a story she heard about a boy who was playing near a creek when his mother called him in for dinner. He told her he had seen a snake. Later that evening his leg swelled to the size of his trunk and the mother saw two small snake-bite teeth marks. Snakes are furtive and sneaky and can bite you so fast you may not know it. Dillard gives the snake space and finds somewhere else to sit. But, she knows where she lives copperheads and other poisonous snakes are abundant.

Before she leaves the snake she watches a mosquito sit on the snake's head for over a minute. The snake didn't move. She is so enthralled by this that she goes home to look up whether or not a mosquito can penetrate snake scales. While she is looking this up she recalls other amazing things that pests and parasites can do. She wonders at all of the species that lives with parasites and the extravagant coincidental lives that parasites live—like the horsehair worm. Despite the fact that parasites are pests and can kill or maim their host, she is amazed at their life forms and abundance.

Analysis

Dillard is coming to her intense study of parasites and pests late in the year, many months since her initial foray into observing life at Tinker Creek. She knows that now, after living among the world at Tinker Creek, that she is beginning to see the world anew and so she sees wonder and abundance and amazement in the intricate lives of the parasites. She does not value them as a lesser life form—she has come to accept God has created both the good and what humans have deemed “bad”.

With this realization she has come to acceptance with the bad: parasites, overabundance, animals eating their own, death. With the potential for so much ugly, so much world that is tired and worn out, she stills sees the beauty in the parasites, and marvels that they exist at all. The beauty she realizes is in their imperfections.

Vocabulary

sinuosity, scathed, undulating, canted, crescendo, turgid, plaintively, hagiography, formic, abound, ovipositing, pupate, askew, stylops, vestigial, degenerate, profoundly, exuberate, scabrous, burgeoning, rapacious, fritillary, cull, fontanel, ludicrous, vantage, assails, serrations, malignant, facile, tallith, purulent



Northing

Summary

She wakes one autumn morning to hear the birds excited about migration. Already, she hears the low honk of the Canadian goose heading south for winter. Some birds have come to Tinker Creek for winter, as it serves as their south.

Summer is over and the overabundance of the season is full of rot. The woods are restless and she spends her days wandering through the warm afternoons. And then one day, she feels the air has changed. It is October and fall is rushing in. Monarchs alight on Tinker Creek for five days. She imagines where they are going and where they have come from. She longs to have a “Northing” to be drawn by a primordial force in a singular focused direction.

Analysis

Dillard’s longing for a northing—for a singular focus pulling her forward— is ironic because to the reader she has been on this journey all along. Her observations and patience with nature, her ability to sit for hours and watch and wait and be enthralled with the minutiae she sees as her northing—the creek constantly releasing her and then calling her home again.

It is the change of the seasons—from fall to winter—nearly coming full circle from the beginning of the book and her journey. She greets the overabundant death and rot at the end of summer with a welcome—a change the reader may not have seen at the beginning of the book. She accepts death as a natural part of life without the attachment of human morality and emotion.

Vocabulary

stammering, conventicle, careening, disquieted, vain, induce, ascended, descent, keel, bestow, vaulted, cache, calamitous, supplicant, feign, clamor, rufous, hie, lustrous, pelage, undulates, leviathan, druidical, bleat, guises, thrall, insouciance, ventral, viceroy, atrophied, redolence, cloyed, flensed, cessation



The Waters of Separation

Summary

It is winter again and Dillard is reviewing the year. She recollects all that she has observed and wonders if she too has become part of the wild. She likens the feeling to an Eskimo story she had read: a mother was jealous of the affections given to her daughter by a handsome young man. The suitor and daughter had plans to meet later that evening. The mother helps the daughter prepare by braiding her hair and then strangles her with it. The mother then skins the daughter's face and wears the skin as a mask when the young man comes back later that evening. During the lovemaking the skin mask gets wet since the young man is damp from hunting out in the rain. The skin mask shrinks and slides from her face revealing a disfigured, ghostly old lady face.

Dillard feels that she has become part of this wild place—that her place has been earned at Tinker Creek. She recalls the tomcat that would visit her in the early mornings leaving bloodied footprints on her chest—this image brings the book full circle back to where the first chapter begins.

Analysis

This is the concluding chapter that is supposed to mirror the first chapter “Heaven and Earth in Jest”. She concludes by marveling all she has witnessed in the last year: the intricacies of the beauty of the world, the amazement at the minutiae of life, and the overwhelming death. Her mind, like in many of the other essays, contrasts this landscape full of life and changes with that of the arctic tundra and the Eskimos.

The story that she recalls about the mother skinning the daughter's face is gruesome and bizarre, but Dillard wonders after all of these hours logged outside observing, falling in love with this singular place lodged in a valley in the Appalachians, if she has put on a mask. And if it was taken off would what was underneath be old and ugly? Dillard feels that once stripped of the mask, she would become totally wild and part of this place—and in some ways through her observations she has already done this, earning her rightful place among the dragonfly nymphs, muskrats, brown long-legged herons and frogs.

Vocabulary

veering, exalted, coyness, tolled, vigils, discarded, tentatively, quaver, lorn, resounding, taut, sere, perpetually, wan, yielding, fugitive, vaulted, opaque, consecration, wen, maimed, ludicrously, intricately, quickening, incursion, snared, pellucid, shale, runes, profusion, acrid, laving, plundering, ordinance, yoke, wholly, purgation, vagabond, sojourner, pirouetting, rondure, exuberant, burgeon, excoriates, porous, stringent, indelible, divinity, solemn, alchemist



Important People

Annie Dillard, the author and narrator, is the only person in this book. Throughout *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* she is unnamed but Dillard has acknowledged the voice as her own. Dillard chooses to spend a year observing the wilderness at Tinker Creek. The book begins and ends in February outlining the changes of the four seasons. Dillard grapples with her image of God and life as she observes all that is around her—often not being able to separate the two.

Though Dillard weaves science, philosophy, theology, naturalism and mythology together throughout the book—the different schools of thought echo the same existential questions—the same questions Dillard asks herself as she wanders through the creek valley.



Objects/Places

Tinker Creek

Tinker Creek is the creek that Annie Dillard observes for a year.

Appalachia

Appalachia is the mountainous region of the Appalachian Mountains. Tinker Creek is part of the Blue Mountains, but still in Appalachia.

Muskrats

Muskrats are the beaver-like rodent Dillard stalks at Tinker Creek.

Nymphs

Nymphs are dragonfly larva before they get their wings.

Eskimos

Eskimos are indigenous people in the arctic tundra.

Lucas's Field

Lucas's Field is what Dillard calls paradise. It is an old farm field that was clear cut about the quarry and creek.

Pedestrian Bridge

The pedestrian bridge near Dillard's home is where she sits to observe animals in the creek.

Creator

Dillard used the word creator interchangeably with God.

Tomcat

Dillard begins and ends the book with the image of the tomcat leaving bloody footprints on her chest.

Frog

Dillard watches a frog at Tinker Creek be sucked out of its skin by a parasite.



Themes

God (or creator) as Light or Darkness

A major theme that Dillard explicitly explored is God as lightness or darkness. At times she avoids using the endearment God and simply says “creator.” The book is divided into two halves with “The Flood” serving as the bisector. The first half of the book looks at the wondrous intricacy and abundance in the world. Dillard talks a lot about light and feeling the abundance of God, of feeling divine intelligence in the natural world.

At a roadside gas station she has a transcendental moment in when she feels she is part of something more than this world or this moment and that these moments must belong to a higher creator. Again and again as she is walking beside Tinker Creek fascinated at the abundance of life she recalls the moment when she is patting the puppy and feeling something larger than the whole—in this she feels God’s abundance. She asks the questions of why and how God would create the world as it is, but offers no definitive answers except for her philosophical ruminations and natural observations.

The second half of the book, God as fearsome and volatile, begins with “Fecundity”. In “Fecundity” Dillard is distraught by the sheer amount of procreation she is seeing and that it is being done with a dire urgency. But, what upsets her most is nature’s lack of reverence for creation; it is simply something that must be done, like eating and drinking. In her research she recalls species left to fend for themselves, species that will eat their own young if necessary and she questions a God that would allow life to enter the world so cheaply, so easily and so unceremoniously be taken away. What Dillard is acutely aware of in spring’s fecundity is with the abundance of new life is often hapless death.

Dillard struggles with reconciling the abundance and beauty of life with the darkness of an urgent need to procreate and the death that inevitably follows. In the end she concludes this is only a problem for human morality and the animal does not struggle with the issue because it is simply living out its divine plan.

Capturing the Present

One goal Dillard has throughout the year is to live in the present moment. Throughout the book she has a few epiphanies about this: in the beginning of the book she feels to fully capture all that she sees, to really notice the details—like lovers do of each other—she must write about it. She must write about all that she sees, hears, feels, smell, touches. But, the moment she writes it, it becomes something of the past. Like Tinker Creek new water—new moments, a new present—is being pushed forward.

Later, when she is sitting and patting the puppy’s belly, sitting alongside the road watching the oak tree aflame in the afternoon sun—she knows she is in the present. And that to be in the present she must have all of her senses engaged. She also notes



she cannot verbalize the present and be in the present at same time. For a writer, this poses a problem—to think, to acknowledge one's own thought, or a moment—is to verbalize it. Tinker obviously does this as she's writing a book about it.

Life & Death as Viewed by Human Morality

Throughout the book Dillard is marveled by all of the life and also all of the death she sees every day. Constantly she is wondering about a God, or creator, that would feel the need to create such destruction when so much of the world is alive. But she comes to the conclusion animals die because they have to, it is simply the way that it is.

It is only through the lens of human emotion and morality that death becomes a bad thing. She wonders if the God she believes in mourns the death of barnacles the same way she will be mourned when she dies. But, she seems to have missed her own point—or not explored one part of the equation. She must then assume God has human-like emotions to mourn like a human. If humans were to accept death easily as an inevitable part of creation—of the equation—then the darkness questioned about God would be a moot point—there would be no dichotomy of lightness and darkness, but just creation.

Styles

Structure

Dillard favors long complex sentences with multiple pauses, clauses and phrases. Her transitions at times are weak, and are only realized until the reader is done with the subsequent paragraph. This form, or seemingly lack of, lends the reader to feel like they are walking right alongside her at Tinker Creek listening to her tangential thoughts and how the elaborate connections she has made between the natural world of Tinker Creek to the modern world to science to God and metaphysics. Sometimes the connections seem tenuous at best, just as when one moment in time can trigger a memory seemingly unconnected in the human mind. Her chapter structures amble—somewhat aimlessly—until the end when she closes with an image or motif that has been repeated throughout the chapter. Often, her writing circles around a question or an idea, never fully or explicitly answering the question, but meditating on it. This gives the reader a sense they are reading in concentric circles getting closer and closer to the truth just before she backs out and ends the essay. Her manipulation of form and language inform her content—all of it intentional.

Perspective

Tone



Quotes

That it's rough out there and chancy is no surprise. Every live thing is a survivor on a kind of extended emergency bivouac.

I came down to the water to cool my eyes. But everywhere I look I see fire; that which isn't flint is tinder, and the whole world sparks and flames.

If we are blinded by darkness, we are also blinded by light.

All that summer conceals, winter reveals.

I'm getting used to this planet and to this curious human culture which is as cheerfully enthusiastic as it is cheerfully cruel.

That the insects have adapted is obvious. Their failures to adapt, however, are dazzling.

The calendar, the weather, and the behavior of wild creatures have the slimmest of connections. Everything overlaps smoothly for a only a few weeks each season, and then it all tangles up again.

On that cedar tree shone, however briefly, the steady, inward flames of eternity; across the mountain from the gas station raced the familiar face of the falling sun.

The present is a freely given canvas. That it is constantly being ripped apart and washed downstream goes without saying; it is a canvas, nevertheless.

These trees stir me. The past inserts a finger into a slit in the skin of the present, and pulls.

The creator, I would add, churns out the intricate texture of least works that is the world with a spendthrift genius and an extravagance of care. This is the point.

Does he stoop, does he speak, does he save, succor, prevail? Maybe. But he creates; he create everything and anything.

What if God has the same affectionate disregard for us that we have for barnacles?

The pressure of growth among animals is a kind of terrible hunger.

Precisely, we are moral creatures, then, in an amoral world.

I didn't know, I have never known, what spirit it is that descends into my lungs and flaps near my heart like an eagle rising.

The creator is no puritan.

Beauty is real, I would never deny it; the appalling thing is that I forget it.



Topics for Discussion

Topic for Discussion 1

How does Dillard change over the course of the year? What conclusion does she come to about nature and God?

Topic for Discussion 2

How does Dillard present both a positive and a negative God?

Topic for Discussion 3

What effect does Dillard's word choice have on the tone of the book? What about the structure of the individual chapters—does her form reinforce her content?

Topic for Discussion 4

Does Dillard contradict herself in her quest to be present by her keen verbalized observations?