The Writing Life Study Guide

The Writing Life by Annie Dillard

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

This short book by renowned novelist Annie Dillard explores her perspective on the practice of being a writer. Commentary on the craft of writing is juxtaposed with narration of the author's personal experiences, all of which are grounded in the extended metaphor that creating a literary work is, essentially, following "a line of words." The themes of the book are also grounded in that metaphor, specifically in their investigation of the contrasting natures of that line and the simultaneous effortlessness and hard work that go into following it truthfully.

In the first chapter, the author begins with a statement of her central thematic perspective - that a piece of writing is a "line of words" that a writer follows to its natural, perhaps unexpected, end. She then, in considerable and sometimes harsh detail, describes a key component of that process: the cutting away of words, scenes, chapters, characters, incidents, etc. that get in the way of that line being both followed and interpreted clearly by a reader. At the end of the first chapter she returns to the image of the line of words, suggesting that the line is somehow, in some way, connected to the writer's beating heart, and as such will, if the line is followed truthfully, connect to the heart of the reader.

The middle section of the book explores the author's personal experience of, and perspective on, her own writing life. She offers her opinion that a writer needs a certain degree of isolation from the outside world in order to focus on the inner world of the characters s/he is creating, the lives they are living, and the reasons they are living the way they do. She also examines the nature of the ideas and/or originating images at the core of a work of writing, and how those initial images and ideas are often completely transformed and occasionally even discarded as the true nature of the work, the destination of the "line of words," makes itself apparent. Throughout this section, the author's emphasis is on the intense work it takes to craft a piece of writing, exploring the agonies of distraction and avoidance she and other writers put themselves through, the views of non-writers on the writing process, and how the struggle to create distills into the torturous creation of simple, but perfect, sentences. Throughout this middle section, the author develops a variation on the central metaphor. This is the idea that the "line of words" can, and often does, take on a life, a presence, an energy of its own that the writer must simultaneously allow to take shape and struggle to give shape.

The final two chapters are taken up with lengthy narratives of a pair of encounters experienced by the author, encounters that appear to be clear metaphors for the different aspects of the writer's struggle as defined above. Chapter 6 tells the story of a man who was so determined to bring a beautiful piece of driftwood back to his home that he rowed against the tide until the tide changed and eventually brought him back to where he wanted to be. The metaphor here is that the writer, and perhaps even other artists, struggles against the creative tide of the "line of words" until the intentions of the line and the artist merge. In other words, the author is speaking of the struggle to surrender.

In Chapter 7, the author narrates the story of an artist whom she believes (and to continue the image) has indeed surrendered to the beauty of his art. The man is a stunt pilot who, as the author describes him and his flying, follows a "line of beauty" (much as the writer follows a "line of words") effortlessly, instinctively, and always with the pleasure and/or reaction of his audience in mind. In other words, the author here is speaking of the art that can result once the struggle ends and surrender to the momentum, to the life of the work is embraced.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

This short book by renowned novelist Annie Dillard explores her perspective on the practice of being a writer. Commentary on the craft of writing is juxtaposed with narration of the author's personal experiences, all of which are grounded in the extended metaphor that creating a literary work is, essentially, following "a line of words." The themes of the book are also grounded in that metaphor, specifically in their investigation of the contrasting natures of that line and the simultaneous effortlessness and hard work that go into following it truthfully.

Chapter 1

This chapter begins with the metaphoric suggestion that a piece of writing is a line of words that a writer (can? must? will?) follow to its end (see "Quotes," p. 3), and ends with a different metaphor reiterating that suggestion (see "Quotes," p. 21).

Between these two images, the author explores various metaphoric explorations of what it means and/or feels like to follow that line of words. She discusses the necessity for, and ways of, cutting away unnecessary words that obscure the true beating heart of the work, and interjects commentary on how different writers, such as Thoreau and James, among others, view and undertake the process of both writing and cutting. In this context, she also comments on how long it generally takes "serious" writers to complete "serious" novels, suggesting the process can (should?) take at least two years, if not longer. This length of time, she says, is necessary to allow the work to take its shape, either perfecting it or not as opportunities arise (see "Quotes," p. 15 and 16).

In this context, the author also discusses the necessity of allowing the line of words to follow its own path, referring to the helplessness (and occasional resentment) of writers who resist following the line where it seems to be heading. In addition, she juxtaposes the irrelevance of the act of writing (comparing it to the necessary work of a shoe salesman) with its unique, engaging, powerful potential to evoke feeling and meaning in ways that other, more overwhelming means of communication (such as movies) can't.

Finally, the author likens the following of the line of words to connecting with the beating of the heart, and with the exploration of personal wounds. "You may locate them and leave them," she writes, "or poke the spot hard till the sore bleeds on your finger, and write with that blood. If the sore spot is not fatal," she adds, "if it does not grow and block something, you can use its power for many years, until the heart [re-absorbs] it."

The author's exploration of what it takes and/or means to be a writer begins with what might seem, to some, a rather harsh take on the process. Her comparisons of a piece of writing to a line of words and of the creation of that piece to following the line are both elegant and poetic, and foreshadow further metaphoric exploration of how that line

functions in Chapter 7. However, her commentary on what is often (sometimes?) necessary for a writer to do while following that line is almost violent in its implications that the process is painful, all-consuming, and not for the faint of heart. Then one must ask (although the author does not) what of any worth is not? In this context, her comparison between the work of the shoe salesman and the work of the writer is particularly telling. It is the drive, the desire, and commitment to that evocation of meaning and feeling that propels the writer (and perhaps by extension all artists) into a field that no-one in their fully right mind (could? should? would?) reasonably contemplate. For further metaphoric exploration of the writer's drive see Chapter 6, while for further metaphoric consideration of the manifestations of surrendering to that drive, see Chapter 7.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

This chapter begins with the author's description of the studio in which she currently works - a small shed in the woods, set away from her house. She describes her ideal of the perfect workspace (see "Quotes," p. 26), and then writes at length of such a space in which she worked when she was in her twenties - a corner of a university library where she worked at night on a difficult book, feeling her way to her desk through the dark.

She writes of several specific experiences during that period in her (creative?) life. One is her realization that a book she felt every night was by Helen Keller (see "Important People" and "Objects/Places"). Another is her narrative of sketching the view from her nearby window, closing the blinds and then taping the sketch onto the blinds so she wouldn't be distracted by the real world. A third is her description of how she was distracted by what she thought was a bug beating itself futilely against the window, but opened the blinds to discover it was the Fourth of July, a date she had completely forgotten. Finally, she describes an ongoing chess game with an unseen opponent, each of them moving their pieces in the dark without the other being present. She writes that sometimes the pieces were completely mixed up, adding that she eventually realized the mess was being caused by the child of a young librarian who occasionally worked late. She concludes this particular story by suggesting that she never learned who her opponent was.

The chapter concludes with the author's reference to a friend's assumption of what her life must be like because she's married, and with her own comment on how the life of her younger self (the life just described) shocks her with its fanaticism.

This chapter consists essentially of metaphors for the writer's life ... isolated in a corner away from the real world, feeling one's way through the dark (towards the kind of truth, the string of words described in Chapter 1), and the replacement of a real view with a created one. The chess game can also be seen as a metaphor, in that the writer is, in creating a new work, is playing a complicated game with the work itself - move and counter move, equal parts intuition and careful consideration, often blindsided by unconsidered moves from the other side. There is also the metaphor of the baby to be considered here, in that the work can be as capricious, spontaneous and indulgent as a small child. Finally, there is the reference to the unknown opponent which has clear resonances with the author's comments in Chapter 1 about the often unknown and/or unknowable nature of the work - in the same way as the opponent here moves his/her chess pieces, the "work" propels and defines itself.

Meanwhile, for consideration of the metaphoric value of the references to Helen Keller and her book, see "Important People" and "Objects/Places."

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

This chapter begins with the author's description of an isolated cabin she once inhabited in order to concentrate on a book she was working on (see "Objects/Places - The Island on Haro Strait"). The specific focus of her description is her narrative of how she learned to chop wood - initial mistakes (witnessed and commented upon by Doe and Bob, a pair of amused neighbors) followed by the realization that she was focusing on the wrong thing. She learned, she writes, to aim for the chopping block and not the wood. Doing so, she suggests, would get her through the wood, rather than just on its edges.

The second part of this chapter describes in some detail the often seemingly bizarre, sometimes even ritualistic, lengths to which the author went to prepare herself and/or to avoid actually writing what was, she points out, a very difficult piece of work. She describes her comments to a neighbor from "the real world," a man who runs the ferry to the island where her studio is. The Ferry Man, she writes, upon hearing of the agonies she puts herself through, asks why she does so. The author writes that she was surprised by the question, and could not come up with a good answer. She then describes a sense of frustration at having a complex essay only understood by one person, and her bewildered relief at having the essay praised, and comprehended, by Brad and Brian, a pair of children.

The third part of the chapter looks at the process of creating a work from another perspective. She describes it as beginning with a vision "of what the projected work of art will be ... no marvelous thing: it is the work's intellectual structure and aesthetic surface ... a chip of mind ... a vision of the work, not of the world." She likens the process of bringing the vision into reality to that of creating a painting, adjusting words in the same way as a painter adjusts "values and hues not to the world, not to the vision, but to the rest of the paint." In other words, the work relates to itself, not to the vision and not to those who might see/read it. Finally, when the work is finished, it has (the author suggests) taken on a life of its own, with the original vision probably less than fully apparent. "It is," she writes, "the relationship between any energy and any work, anything unchanging to anything temporal."

The chapter concludes with the author quoting a letter in which she was asked who could teach the letter writer to write. The author responds by saying "the page" - in other words, the act of actually doing it. She then puts it another way. "Aim for the chopping block," she says.

There are several important elements in this section. The first is the appearance of inhabitants of the so-called "real world", friends and acquaintances whose apparently casual, apparently realistic lives and insights provide the author with almost embarrassingly telling information about herself, her work and her attitudes. The second is the exploration of the process of transforming the work from a vision to an actual

piece of finished creativity. This exploration can be seen as a compliment to the vision of "the line of words" (see Chapter 1), in that following the line of words can be seen as the means by which this process of movement from vision to product (for lack of a better word) can, and often is, undertaken.

The third key element here is related to the second, in that the chopping block can, and perhaps is intended to, be seen as a metaphoric representation of that final product. In other words if a writer, while following "the line of words" focuses on faith that the line will lead to a truth (the chopping block, the actual shape of which may not be known but which is nevertheless solidly there), the process becomes more focused. In this context, it's also important to note the author's apparently deliberate detailing of her process of avoidance and/or preparation. In her elaborate, somewhat hysterical portrayal of herself and her activities, there is the clear sense that she is metaphorically portraying herself as focusing on the wood, rather than on the block, chipping away rather than cutting through.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4

This chapter begins with the heading "SORRY TO TELL YOU A DREAM". In it, the author describes a dream she had of her typewriter erupting - smoke, cinders, noises and fire shooting out of the well in which the keys rested. She describes how (in the dream) she fetched a bucket of water to put out the fire, but discovered that the fire wasn't spreading, only shooting out of the typewriter. The dream concludes with images of the author cleaning it up, of having "no trouble with it since", and the commentary that now she knows "it can happen."

Chapter 5

The author begins this chapter with an examination of what intrigues a writer, and suggests that for each individual, what is intriguing is unique, something that hasn't yet been explored, uncovered, understood, thought about. "Write as if you were dying," she suggests, as though you had no time left to write about anything but this one subject (see "Quotes," p. 68). She goes on to suggest that what is written shapes itself and defines itself by both the boundaries of those who hear the story (which, the author suggests, can and perhaps should be ever so slightly pushed) and by the nature of the story itself. She adds that each project is intimidating in its own way (see "Quotes," p. 72), that readers read with a particular goal in mind (see "Quotes," p. 73), and that part of the writers' life is defined by their individual struggle with their part in fulfilling that goal. She writes of that struggle in terms not only of an entire novel or even of an entire chapter or paragraph, but in terms of the simple sentence, adding that when an idea or image or "what seems good" comes into the act of writing, the writer's responsibility is let it flow when and how it comes ... all the time.

Chapter 6

This brief chapter begins with the author's description of how she is "haunted" by memories of her time in the house on Haro Strait (see "Objects/Places"). The bulk of this chapter is taken up by a particular memory - how a painter friend (Paul Glenn - see "Important People") who was experimenting intensely with a new method of working described how his work was going by telling her the story of a local man named Ferrar Burn (see "Important People"). Burn was, according to Glenn, so intent upon bringing home a beautiful but large piece of driftwood that even though he and the rowboat he was sailing (to which the driftwood was tied) got caught in the tide, he kept rowing against the tide until it changed and carried him back home. Glenn tells the author that that's how his work is going - he's struggling against the (creative) tide that's controlling him in the hopes that it will soon reverse and carry him and the work along with it. At the conclusion of Glenn's story, the author writes that she had a similar experience, her

writing caught up in the stormy elements raging around her on the island and continues to be caught up in surging bursts of powerful inspiration, or inspiring power (see "Quotes," p. 89). She concludes this chapter by asking, perhaps rhetorically perhaps not, whether writers and readers alike shall "go rowing again, we who believe we may indeed row off the edge and fall? Shall we launch again into the deep and row up the skies?"

The image of the erupting typewriter in Chapter 4 is metaphorically tied to the narrative of the writing experience in Chapter 5. Specifically, the author's commentary about the nature of what writers find intriguing and how writers go about creating stories inspired by that intrigue is similar in quality and experience to an eruption - sudden, surging, powerful, and above all unpredictable. In other words, in the conclusion of Chapter 5 the author's implied suggestion is that the writer must find some way to harness the power and momentum of the words/truth flowing from (the typewriter? The creative source?) as they come through, without too much consideration or development, for their truth to be apparent. The difficulty comes, as she herself suggests, in finding the right sort of harness that doesn't restrain and/or dim the power of the surging words and/or images. This, it seems, is the struggle with words, paragraphs and sentences to which she refers.

Meanwhile, the stories told in Chapter 6 metaphorically develop images and manifestations of that struggle, and also of the artist's near obsessive determination (like that of Ferrar Burn) to achieve the goal of bringing beauty and/or truth into life.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7

This chapter is taken up with a narrative of the author's relationship with a man named Dave Rahm (see "Important People"), a geologist and stunt pilot. She writes of first seeing Rahm fly at an air show in which his airborne acrobatics flowed seamlessly from one stunt into another without rest or interlude, how he smoothly (and with apparent effortlessness) created a "line" of movement evocative of beauty and vision. "Dave Rahm," she writes, "worked in the cockpit right at the plane's nose; his very body tore into the future for us and reeled it down upon us like a curling peel." She also describes, in considerable detail, a flight she took with Rahm over the mountains, in which he flew extremely (some might say dangerously) close to them without any real risk to himself or his passengers. She then comments that pilots of crop dusters readily acknowledge their short life span (the result of flying so close to the ground so often), and juxtaposes that comment with a narration of Rahm's death performing a tricky maneuver at an air show in Jordan. Finally, she describes an occasion shortly after her flight with him when she saw Rahm practicing flying over the sound, and recalls his comment that if something went wrong, he'd prefer to ditch his plane into the water where it couldn't hurt anyone.

Throughout the chapter, the author refers repeatedly to the flowing "line" of Rahm's flight, commenting that Rahm himself said he spared little thought for what he was doing but instead focused only on what his audience could see. His one rule, according to the author, was not to fly in such a way that the audience would be forced to look into the sun, and therefore be blinded. "When Rahm flew," she writes, "he sat down in the middle of art, and strapped himself in. He spun it all around him. He could not see it himself." Finally, she comments that he never planned what he did, but instead improvised based on the feel of his plane and the momentum of each stunt. "He made," she writes, "his dazzling probe [into beauty] on the run." The chapter, and the book, concludes with a quote from Teilhard de Chardin ...this quote. "The world is filled, and filled with the Absolute. To see this is to be made free."

There is the very clear sense throughout this chapter that the author is carefully developing a metaphor for the process of writing, and doing so without actually saying that she's doing it. The metaphor appears most notably in the author's repeated use of the word "line" to describe and define the path sketched in the sky by Rahm's flight, a "line" (of words) having been her term (in Chapter 1) for a novel or any piece of writing. In other words, by describing in such detail the way in which Rahm approached and defined HIS line, the author is metaphorically suggesting that writers apply the same sort of technique - instinctive but knowledgeable, pure but unpredictable, risky but entirely safe.

Other facets to the author's metaphorical likening of Rahm's flying process to the writing process include the author's description of how Rahm strapped himself into the cockpit and flew from a place in the forefront of the line he was creating, and how he immersed himself in his line without stepping outside to consider, critique, or analyze. The implication here is that writers (perhaps even like the author who, according to her frequent descriptions of herself, spends too much time avoiding and thinking) could and/or should allow what is thought to play a back burner in the process of creation to what is instinctively felt and understood.

For discussion of Teilhard de Chardin, see "Important People."

Characters

The Author

Annie Dillard is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author of novels, essays, short stories, and memoirs. She portrays herself throughout this book not as a writer who has achieved considerable success but as a writer who struggles to achieve truth in her work. It's important to note here that she doesn't suggest that that truth necessarily has to relate to the world or to life, but it must be the work's own truth, the destination of the line of words as defined by the journey to get there. She also portrays herself as having an almost ritualistic set of habits and/or belief systems that she must enact in order to write, almost torturous patterns of simultaneous avoidance and preparation that, at times, seem almost comic in their specificity - half a cup too much of coffee, apparently, is enough to ruin her whole writing day.

Finally, she comes across in this particular manifestation of her near obsession as being wise, perceptive, and of a metaphoric strain of thought, all of which comes across without her pointing at herself. In other words, she may be self-conscious in her self-described habits, but not in the way she writes. She doesn't point to her stories in Chapters 4, 6 and 7, for example, as if to say "Here is a metaphor for what I'm trying to tell you." Instead, she gets out of her own way, simply presents the story, and allows the reader to draw his/her own metaphoric conclusions. In other words, she credits the reader with intelligence, curiosity, and wisdom.

Other Writers and Artists

Several well known writers and artists are referenced throughout the narrative as examples and/or illuminations of the author's points. Novelists like Henry James, Graham Greene and William Faulkner, poets like Wallace Stevens, Osip Mandelstam, and Emily Dickinson, visual artists like Anne Truitt, Jackson Pollock, and Paul Klee - all are referenced, in various ways and at various times, as part of the author's reinforcement of her own belief systems and experiences. The point is not made to suggest that she needs these references in order to understand herself and her experiences. Instead, the point is made to suggest that she offers these references in SUPPORT of her contentions, and also to offer hope to those non-well known writers who, like the anonymous reader at the end of Chapter 4, asks "Who will teach me to write?" On first glance, it may seem ironic that in answer to that question, the author tells that anonymous reader to simply write and let the page be the teacher. On further consideration, however, it becomes clear that what she is doing in offering her own experiences and those of the artists listed above is offering examples of, and guidance in, how to approach that page and communicate with it - or rather, with the line of words (ie the story) that traces itself across that page. That said, the references to other artists offer not only hope, but the suggestion that there is no one way to follow the line - in

other words, the ways to follow the line are as numerous as the infinite number of lines themselves.

The Reader

It is perhaps surprising that in a book about writing, readers are referred to as infrequently as they are in this book. Granted, the points at which such references do occur and the ways in which those references are shaped suggest that on some level, the author does have her readers in mind as she works. However, the relative lack of frequency of those references does suggest that the reader is not her primary focus, and also that she (the author) is suggesting that the reader should not be the primary focus of any writer's work. In other words, there is the very strong sense that the author believes a writer's focus should be on the truth of the work - finding it, connecting to it, and revealing it in the most effective way - and that if that is done consistently, connection with a/the reader will automatically follow.

Helen Keller

Helen Keller was born in the late 1800s and lived through the early part of the 20th Century. Following a childhood disease, she was left unable to see, hear, or speak. The determined efforts of a teacher named Annie Sullivan taught her to understand words, and she (Keller) eventually became able to talk. The metaphoric value of the reference to her here is that the author and other writers are, like Keller, initially operate within a realm of isolation and uncertainty, but as they follow "the line of words" to the truth of their story, illumination, understanding, and communication follow.

Doe and Bob, Brad and Brian, the Ferry Man

These non-writers are portrayed in Chapter 3 as people able to cut through the author's sometimes self-obsessive focus on herself, her process, and her work. The warning implied by their presence and by their pithy interjections is that so much focus can be (is?) both unhealthy and unproductive - that if a writer doesn't have at least some relationship with the so-called "real" world the process, the work, and the writer him/herself can become too self absorbed for genuine, healthy productivity.

Paul Glenn

Paul Glenn is a visual artist and a friend of the author. Appearing only in Chapter 6, his story of Ferrar Burn (see below) and his relating of that story to his own creative process provides the author with a clear, metaphorical description of the creative process.

Ferrar Burn

Ferrar Burn appears only as a character in a story told by Paul Glenn in Chapter 6. His single minded determination to accomplish his goal (to bring a piece of beauty home) in spite of intense struggle and high odds against success, can be seen as a clear metaphor for an artist's struggle to "bring home" (i.e., to finish) a piece of art.

Dave Rahm

Dave Rahm appears only in Chapter 7. He is portrayed by the author as an example of how the flow of a "line" can become instinctive, natural, effortless, and ultimately evocative of a powerful beauty. In Rahm's case the "line" is a string of acrobatic tricks performed in a small airplane, but the metaphor implied in his story suggests that the positive qualities of his line can be found in the "line of words" the author contends is at the heart of narrative writing. It's important to note, however, that the author also suggests that Rahm found such effortless as the result of both hard work and singular focus, suggesting that apparent effortlessness and beauty in the work of a writer can only be obtained in a similar fashion.

The Author's Husband

The author's husband is never actually referred to by name, nor does he play a significant role in the narrative. He is worth mentioning, however, because as the author portrays him he too is a writer, he too has his routines and his idiosyncrasies, and above all he apparently loves his wife enough to give her room to have hers.

Teilhard de Chardin

De Chardin, quoted at the end of Chapter 7's commentary on the life and work of Dave Rahm (see above), lived in the latter part of the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th. He was a philosopher, priest and like Rahm, a geologist. De Chardin's views occasionally led his writings to be banned, but his belief that the human race is in a perpetual state of evolving towards a more spiritually enlightened state was the forerunner of many contemporary, so called "new age" philosophies.

Objects/Places

The Line of Words

The author begins and ends Chapter 1 with this metaphoric description of the product of the writer's process. In other words, for her the act of creation by writing is following a line of words to a truth.

The Author's Study

The study in which the author currently works (at least at the time of this book's creation) is a small, isolated building separate from the rest of her house. As such, it is a clear manifestation of her intent/desire/belief that a writer needs physical, emotional, and spiritual isolation in order to write - that is, in order to focus fully on the world emerging from her inner source of creativity.

The Author's Carrel

The author's description of her current study in Chapter 2 (with its literal isolation from the rest of her life and the rest of the world) is juxtaposed with her description of where she worked early in her career - a carrel in a university library in which she had to create the isolation she needs. For details of how she did so, see Chapter 2, Summary and Analysis.

The Helen Keller Book

The book by Helen Keller (see "Important People") referred to by the author in Chapter 2 is titled "The World I Live In." The title is metaphorically important because Chapter 2 is itself about the world the author lives in, a world symbolically similar to the world of darkness, silence and isolation inhabited by Helen Keller.

The Chess Game

Also in Chapter 2, the author refers to a game of chess she played during her nights working at the library with an unseen opponent. As discussed in the analysis for Chapter 2, the game can be seen as a metaphor for the creative process.

The Island on Haro Strait

The author refers several times to the house in which she lived on this isolated island off the northwest shore of the United States. In this house, she writes, she experienced

intense struggles with the story she was striving to write, while on the island lived both her non-artist and artist neighbors (such as Paul Glenn - see "Important People").

The Firewood and the Chopping Block

The small house on the Haro Strait island was heated by a wood stove for which the author, as she writes in Chapter 3, had to chop wood. The process of cutting wood and of "aiming for the chopping block" can, as suggested in the Analysis for Chapter 3, be seen as a metaphor for the writing process.

The Erupting Typewriter

Chapter 4 is taken up entirely with a narrative of one of the author's dreams - specifically, a dream that her typewriter was erupting. While the dream can be seen as a metaphor for the creative process, the typewriter can be seen as a symbol of the source of that process - specifically, the initial image/impulse upon which the writing is based and/or the technical skill that enables the writer to follow the "line of words" emerging from that impulse to its conclusion.

Ferrar Burn's Driftwood

In Chapter 6, when Paul Glenn tells the story of Ferrar Burn's obsessive determination to bring a beautiful piece of driftwood home, the driftwood can be seen as a symbol of the writer's goal - a beautiful piece of writing. For further consideration of this metaphor see "Important People - Ferrar Burn" and "Chapter 6, Summary and Analysis."

Dave Rahm's Plane

In Chapter 7, when the author describes Dave Rahm's skill and artistry at trick flying, she comments that in his plane, he is within inches of the art he creates, the air in which he creates it, and the danger of death. The plane, therefore, can be seen as symbolic of the writer's tools - specifically, the typewriter, the word processor, the vocabulary, the research, the insight, etc. For further consideration of this metaphor see "Important People - Dave Rahm" and "Chapter 7, Summary and Analysis."

Themes

Writing as Hard Work

Throughout the book, the author portrays the process of writing in two different ways that, at first, seem contradictory but are in fact complimentary. The first is made apparent in the very first chapter, in which she describes the hard work, at times torturous work, of shaping a piece of writing so that it effectively evokes the "line of words" that she suggests is the core identity of a piece of writing. She goes to considerable lengths to describe how the path of that line cannot, or should not, be allowed to diverge from its destination of truth, and how the writer cannot, or should not, allow him or herself to be distracted from that destination by favorite pieces of writing, habits, or old perspectives.

Meanwhile, the author portrays the process of setting down to work as being just as difficult. Habits of preparation that often veer into habits of distraction or avoidance seem, in the author's experience, to be just as draining as the actual act of writing. It's important to note, however, that she seems to be suggesting that while the hard work of the actual writing is necessary, the hard work of distraction/avoidance is not. In other words, she draws a very fine line between the kind of mental/emotional preparation that's necessary for the true line of words to flow freely, and suggests that each individual writer must, as she herself seems to have done, come to as objective an awareness as possible of where that line is crossed.

The value and necessity of hard work in relation to the writing process is explored metaphorically in the Chapter 6 story of Ferrar Burn and his driftwood.

Writing as Flow

Almost in the same breath as she portrays writing as hard work, the author portrays the process of writing truly as that of finding the flow, of finding the genuine direction in which the "line of words" is heading and going with it. There is the clear sense, in fact, that the author is of the opinion that finding that flow and connecting with it is a direct result and/or manifestation of hard work as defined above. She also seems to be of the opinion, however, that discovering the sense of self-defined and self-motivated flow in a piece of writing is far from automatic. A writer, she suggests, has to get out of his or her own way, eliminating preconceptions, habits and technical practices as much as possible in order to let the idiosyncratic truth of a piece of writing emerge.

This idea is metaphorically developed in both Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. In Chapter 6, Ferrar Burn's hard work (in rowing against the tide) is rewarded when the tide turns and actually eases his way home. In other words, the writer (like Burn) initially struggles with the momentum of his/her work with the awareness (or at least the hope) that the tide will turn and there will be unity of purpose in both writer and story. Then in Chapter 7, the

author's story of Dave Rahm and the effortless beauty his "line" evokes can be seen as metaphorically illustrating what happens when creator and flow achieve that unity of purpose. This is a sense of beauty, of that beauty naturally evolving out of relaxed effort, of relaxed effort evolving out of intense work, and intense work evolving out of personal desire and passion. In other words, desire and passion is at the core of any eventual creation of literary, and by extension artistic, beauty ... which, the author metaphorically suggests, is in fact truth whether it's literally beautiful or not.

Writing as Pursuit of Truth

While the book clearly portrays "truth" as the goal of writing, and perhaps of art in general, the author seems to be making a clear effort to not offer a definition of what truth is. The closest she seems to come is making a suggestion of what the reader is looking for in a piece of writing (see "Quotes," p. 73). Even then, the suggestion is neither overtly specific nor particularly clear, but instead seems to be referring to an amorphous "something"—which could possibly be understanding, perspective, insight, or even an experience of pleasure or some other sort of feeling—that the reader is seeking, and that the writer therefore has the job and/or the responsibility to evoke effectively. The point must be made, however, and the author makes it herself, that in examining the art and craft of writing from this perspective, the book is focused on "serious" writing - that is, writing for the specific purpose of finding and/or illuminating truth as opposed to writing for sensation and/or escape. The point is not made to suggest that the two sorts of writing are mutually exclusive, but rather to suggest that in most cases, writing for sensation is concerned only with the immediate sensuality of that sensation.

The sort of writing apparently advocated and practiced by the author seems, on the other hand, to be concerned with something more transcendent, something connected to the deeper ways of life as opposed to something skimming the surface of the superficial. Again, the point is not made to suggest that there is no benefit to escape or sensation, but rather to point out that for the author, it seems, there is much more significant value in following the "line of words" to someplace beneath the surface of being human.

Style

Perspective

As discussed in the section on the author in "Important People," she is a noted (and award-winning) writer. As such, she clearly has expertise in her field, and conveys her ideas with the authority of having not only experienced but deeply considered what she's writing about. In terms of her reasons for writing the book and her intended audience, then, there are two possible alternatives, one of which is clearly indicated and the other is implied. In terms of the former, the plaintive cry of "Who will teach me to write?" quoted by the author at the end of Chapter 4, juxtaposed with the author's answer, suggests that on some level she may be writing for those interested in writing. It may be, in fact, that in describing the torturous process she goes through (and, by implication, gone through by other authors, albeit in different ways), she is in fact warning aspiring writers away from pursuing the craft as a way of life. On the other hand, in terms of the second alternative audience, there is the sense that she may in fact be writing for other writers already established in their practice with the idea of encouraging them, of saying they're not alone in their idiosyncratic ways of approaching and/or avoiding the work. The point is not made to suggest that these contrasting target audiences are mutually exclusive. It is, in fact, a manifestation of the author's skill and experience that she is evidently able to speak to such diverse audiences in such a way that both can potentially understand.

Tone

Overall, the book has a tonal quality of sharing confidences. Not secrets - there is no sense here that the author is writing from a place of wanting to keep what she knows just between herself and the reader. There is, however, a certain sense of intimacy about the writing here, of the author being sure that her audience will understand what she is saying without spelling it out overtly. There is a sense of connection, of common interests, of mentor speaking to student not in a lecturing or patronizing way, but in a way that suggests there is much that is valuable that can be learned if attention is paid.

Within that overall tonal sensibility, there are colorfully defined variations. At various times, the author creates a very clear sense of her passion for the process in general, of her idiosyncratically frenzied process of creation in particular, of her longing for a successful following of the "line of words", and perhaps most importantly, of her joy when that following is indeed successful. The complete subjectivity of her experiences, and of her writing about those experiences, will have a different effect on different readers. Fellow writers will easily be able to identify with all the various qualities of the author's experience, while new writers will be alternately, perhaps simultaneously, inspired and/or fear stricken. Both new and experienced writers, however, will find inspiration in the author's tonally evident respect for both the process and its goals.

Structure

There is little or no sense of linear structure about the book. What structure there is can be defined as thematic rather than narrative - in other words, the book is put together to follow a thematic line of thought and / or insight rather than a traditional beginning / middle / end narrative line. In essence, the author presents her core thematic idea (that the process of writing is following a "line of words") in the first chapter, and explores ways in which that line can be followed in Chapters 2 through 6 (with a brief diversion into dream and/or overt metaphor in Chapter 4). In Chapter 7, she re-presents her core thematic idea in metaphorical terms, exploring her "line of words" idea in her commentary on Dave Rahm's "line of beauty." In other words, the book comes full circle, but in thematic rather than purely narrative terms. Meanwhile, there is a certain sense of structure within the various chapters, in that they tend to start with a reference to a particular idea, develop manifestations and/or insights into that idea, and then return to a variation on that idea at the chapter's conclusion. This structural pattern can, in fact, be seen as a smaller scale echo of the larger scale structure of the whole book - spirals of meaning twining themselves around a core meaning that is itself spiraling towards an experience of insight and understanding.

Quotes

"When you write, you lay out a line of words ... a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year." Chapter 1, p. 3.

"The feeling that the work is magnificent, and the feeling that it is abominable, are both mosquitoes to be repelled, ignored, or killed, but not indulged." Ibid, p. 15.

"...original writing fashions a form. It unrolls out into nothingness. It grows cell to cell, bole to bough to twig to leaf; any careful word may suggest a route, may begin a strand of metaphor or event out of which much, or all, will develop." Ibid, p. 15.

"...original work fashions a form the true shape of which it discovers only as it proceeds, so the early strokes are useless, however fine their sheen." Ibid, p. 16

"...the more literary the book - the more purely verbal, crated sentence by sentence, the more imaginative, reasoned and deep - the more likely people are to read it." Ibid, p. 19

"The line of words is heading out past Jupiter ... and its cumbrous dizzying orbit; it looks neither to the right nor to the left. It will be leaving the solar system soon, single minded, rapt, rushing heaven like a soul ...right now, you are flying. Right now, your job is to hold your breath." Ibid, p. 21.

"You can read in the space of a coffin, and you can write in the space of a toolshed meant for mowers and spades." Chapter 2, p. 26

"Appealing workplaces are to be avoided. One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark." Ibid, p. 26

"A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time ... a mock-up of reason and order - willed, faked, and so brought into being; it is a peace and a haven set into the wreck of time; it is a lifeboat on which you find yourself, decades later, still living." Ibid, p. 32

"There is no shortage of good days. It is good lives that are hard to come by." Ibid, p. 32.

"Writers ... surround themselves with other writers deliberately to enforce in themselves the ludicrous notion that a reasonable option for occupying yourself on the planet until your life span plays itself out is sitting in a small room ... in the company of pieces of paper." Chapter 3, p. 44

"I do not so much write a book as sit up with it, as with a dying friend. During visiting hours, I enter its room with dread and sympathy for its many disorders. I hold its hand and hope it will get better." Ibid, p. 52.

"A writer looking for subjects inquires not after what he loves best, but after what he alone loves at all." Chapter 5, p. 67

"What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?" Ibid, p. 68.

"Writing every book, the writer must solve two problems: Can it be done? And Can I do it?" Ibid, p. 72

"Why are we reading if not in the hope that the writer will magnify and dramatize our days, will illuminate and inspire us with wisdom, courage, and the possibility of meaningfulness, and will press upon our minds the deepest mysteries, so we may feel again their majesty and power?" Ibid, p. 73

"Admire the world for never ending on you - as you would admire an opponent, without taking your eyes from him, or walking away." Ibid, p. 78

"The irrational haunts the metaphysical. The opposites meet in the looping sky above appearances, or in the dark alley behind appearances, where danger and power duel in a blur." Chapter 6, p. 89

Topics for Discussion

Answer for yourself the questions in this quote: "What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?"

Consider the point made in the quote from p. 73, and discuss both why and what you read. What do you get from reading a novel? What do you think makes a novel, or a piece of writing, successful? What makes it unsuccessful?

What is your experience of writing? Do you agree with the writer that solitude is necessary? Why or why not? Do you agree that it's often difficult, sometimes even painful, to help a project find the shape it needs?

Have you ever had an experience of a piece of writing taking on a life of its own? If yes, describe that experience. What kind of struggle was it for you to allow that to happen?

Consider the author's examination of the work of Dave Rahm, and her metaphoric contention that the work he did as a stunt pilot was comparable to that of a writer. Do you accept her argument? Why or why not? If you do, what other professional non-artists can you think of whose process of work can be likened to an artistic one?

Begin a new creative writing project - perhaps a short story, or piece of poetry. Allow yourself to explore different circumstances for working - in a noisy café, plugged in to music, in a silent library, at night, in the morning, etc. Examine the quality of the work that results from each circumstance, and determine the times and situations that work best for you, and which don't work at all.

Have you ever had an experience similar to that of the author in Chapter 2? Specifically, have you ever experienced becoming so absorbed in creative work that you lost track of time and/or important dates? What were the circumstances that led you to becoming so absorbed?

Consider the quote from page 2 in which the author praises the values of a schedule. Do you agree with her contention that a schedule is a good thing? Or do you experience schedules as conflicting with the free flow of creative thought and work?