

Dillard's Pilgrim: Seeing and Stalking the Action of Creation

"I tell you I've been in that weasel's brain for sixty seconds, and he was in mine. Brains are private places, muttering through unique and secret tapes- but the weasel and I both plugged into another tape simultaneously, for a sweet and shocking time. Can I help it if it was a blank? . . . I would like to learn, or remember, how to live. I come to Hollins Pond not so much to learn how to live as, frankly, to forget about it. That is, I don't think I can learn from a wild animal how to live in particular – shall I suck warm blood, hold my tail high, walk with my footprints precisely over the prints of my hands? – but I might learn something of mindlessness, something of the purity of living in the physical sense and the dignity of living without bias or motive. The weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last ignobly in its talons. I would like to live as I should, as the weasel lives as he should. And I suspect that for me the way is like the weasel's: open to time and death painlessly, noticing everything, remembering nothing, choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will." — "Living Like Weasels"

"Faith would be, in short, that God has any willful connection with time whatsoever, and with us. For I know it as given that God is all good. And I take it also as given that whatever he touches has meaning, if only in his mysterious terms, the which I readily grant. The question is, then, whether God touches anything. Is anything firm, or is time on the loose? Did Christ descend once and for all to no purpose, in a kind of divine and kenotic suicide, or ascend once and for all, pulling his cross up after him like a rope ladder home? Is there—even if Christ holds the tip of things fast and stretches eternity clear to the dim souls of men—is there no link at the base of things, some kernel or air deep in the matrix of matter from which universe furls like a ribbon twined into time?" — *Holy the Firm*

Annie Dillard herself called *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* "a theology book," and it is a species of natural theology that confronts questions of theodicy, though not in dogmatic fashion or even (strictly speaking) in a philosophical one, but rather in a reflective, mystical examination. Her particular brand of mysticism, though one drawing from Christian sources—she self-identified as a Christian during this period—also draws from other religious traditions, in particular Hasidic Judaism, Islam, and traditional Eskimo culture.

Her spirituality is also in extensive conversation with the transcendentalist naturalist writings of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, and with numerous other scientists and writers on the natural world. Her approach can be said to be existential and contemplative, rather than systematic or orthodox, and it is dependent upon seeking and awaiting moments of spiritual insight or illumination. Indeed, at the heart of her journey is the fundamental question of consciousness—how does the divine reveal itself to us through the world, and how do we choose to see and learn from that world, given that we are part of it, albeit a unique part with especially self-aware and symbol-making aspects?

Exploratory Questions

1. Is the world beautiful? How do you know?
2. Likewise, is the world fair (or fitting)? How can you be certain of your answer?
3. Is the world to be wondered at? Why or why not?
4. Do the same kinds of observances and answers apply at the micro-cosmic and macro-cosmic worlds?
5. Do the same kinds of concerns and problems occur in the human and non-human worlds? In the plant, insect, fish, and mammal worlds?
6. How certain should our answers be to the problem of evil?
7. Can we expect to encounter the divine in the natural and material worlds? Why or why not?
8. Is it possible for humans to sense order and purpose in the natural biological world?

Structure(s)

1. The Seasonal Cycle of the Year

Though Dillard had wanted to avoid this structuring device, she found it inevitable. Her choice of moving from winter to winter was perhaps not as inevitable, and it points to something of her interest in sparseness and spiritual reduction. Winter brings home the costs of existence in numerous ways. Spring, summer, and fall also have similar costs and gifts.

2. Via Positiva and Via Negativa

Dillard, as purposefully, organizes the book around the broad poles of two approaches to understanding God and world: the *via positiva*, that which stresses the analogy between God and the creation, that which looks for signs of the divine in the things of the world, and the *via negative*, that way that recognizes that every analogy between God and creation has a non-identification within it: God is *not* this or that natural object, cannot be reduced to this or that symbol or idea. These approaches form the two centers of the book:

Chapter 1 “Heaven and Earth in Jest” [Introduction]

Chapter 2 “Seeing” through Chapter 8 “Intricacy” [The Via Positiva]

Chapter 9 “Flood” [Interlude]

Chapter 10 “Fecundity” through Chapter 14 “Northing” [The Via Negativa]

Chapter 15 “The Waters of Separation” [Conclusions]

3. Anecdotal Experience and Imparting Others’ Learning

I would argue that a third structuring aspect of *Pilgrim* is the interplay between Dillard’s personal experience, either in the present moment, or in memories past, and that of learned insights she gathers from other books—anecdotes, information, and the occasional concept. These, along with her narrative and prose style, give the book its particular arresting rhythms.

Some Key Terms and Ideas

- Attention, Seeing, Stalking
- Mystery
- Freedom
- Creation, Evolution
- Wind, Spirit, Fire
- Intricacy
- Fecundity
- Beauty
- Texture
- Form
- Consciousness
- The Fixed

- Parasitism
- Uncertainty
- Time, Death
- The Alleluia

Linda L. Smith (1991) offers ten observations about Dillard's mysticism:

“First, the spiritual disciple must seek the innocence of a child—“the spirit’s unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object.” That means being playful, curious, and intently observant. . . .

“Second, the spiritual aspirant must be courageous and determined. . . .

“Third, the spiritual aspirant must live fully in the present. . . .

“Fourth, the spiritual aspirant must apprehend the limitations of language and knowledge, elements that cannot encompass God. . . .

“Fifth, the spiritual aspirant must eliminate the consciousness of self that destroys the vision of unity. . . .

“Sixth, after emptying the self of the ego, the spiritual devotee must “receive” the world in an attitude of worshipful acceptance. . . .

“Seventh, the spiritual aspirant must experience the unity of the microcosm and the macrocosm. Emptying the self into the world and taking the world into the self turns everything inside out. . . .

“Eighth, the spiritual devotee must master time by taking part in the sacred rhythm of nature’s cycles. . . .

“Ninth, the spiritual aspirant must experience sacrifice through death. In all mystical traditions death is the necessary condition for mystical regeneration and rebirth. . . .

“The tenth and final step for the spiritual disciple is to become one with the Spirit by sharing in the process of creation.”

Discussion Guide Questions

As you work through each chapter, try keeping a list of your favorite sentences, anecdotes, or natural facts. Are the chapter titles significant? Dillard later regretted using them; should she?

[Introduction]

Chapter 1 “Heaven and Earth in Jest”

- What is the meaning of the opening episode of the bloody tomcat?
- Why does creation have both devouring waterbugs and graceful mockingbirds?
- How does Dillard explore the problems of evil and of the good on page 9?
- How does she conceive of herself as explorer and stalker? (14)
- What makes her project similar to that of Thoreau?

[The Via Positiva]

Chapter 2 “Seeing” (January)

- What makes it important that creation both reveals and conceals, that humans can see many things but not everything?
- What makes speed an important aspect of existence? (23-24)
- What makes seeing risky?
- What insights stand out from the extended discussion of the newly sighted who were formerly blind from cataracts? (27ff.)
- How are form and meaning, as well as sight and verbalization, interconnected? (32-33)
- How are praise and sight and waiting interrelated? (35-36)

Chapter 3 "Winter" (Early February)

- What does Dillard learn from the starlings?
- How is the potential harshness of winter related to human cruelty and enthusiasm?
- In this chapter, Dillard includes a number of anecdotes about watching and observing. Which ones stand out?
- How do the themes of hibernation and restlessness go together?

Chapter 4 "The Fixed"

- What makes the anecdote of the praying mantis cases important?
- Why do even entomologists suffer from revulsion at many insect behaviors? (64ff.)
- What is the horror of the fixed? (69-70)

Chapter 5 "Untying the Past" (February)

- What makes the old snakeskin particularly symbolical?
- What makes time a loop?
- Why is seasonable and unseasonable weather important to consider?

Chapter 6 "The Present" (March)

- What makes consciousness a "bitter birthday present"? (80) Do you agree?
- Why does Dillard pursue total concentration as a form of innocence? (83)
- What makes the layering of consciousness important? (85-86)
- What makes physical courage a necessary aspect of innocence?
- What does it mean to be conscious of the teeming microscopic world, of the macrocosmic world?
- How are experiences of light and water a kind of great chain of being? (101-104)

Chapter 7 "Spring" (April, May)

- Why is birdsong beautiful? Can this be articulated easily?
- Why is the salamander metropolis excellent? (110-111)
- What kind of real power does Dillard find in trees? In ponds?
- Why are "microscopic forays" "moral exercises"? (122-123)

Chapter 8 "Intricacy" (June)

- In general, what makes this chapter the culmination of the *via 4positiva*?
- Why are textures and form important to cognition and to beauty?
- How does Dillard compare molecular structures to great artists? (128)
- What makes intricacy a kind of gratuity?

- How does the multiplicity and freedom of creation also testify to its creator? (145ff.)

[Interlude]

Chapter 9 “Flood” (Summer)

- How does the flooding caused by the hurricane shape this chapter?
- What makes this chapter different in some ways than the others before and after it?
- Why end with a story about a giant mushroom?

[The Via Negativa]

Chapter 10 “Fecundity”

- What makes fecundity a theodician question?
- How is it a *memento mori*? (162)
- Why does Dillard realize that her portrait of the natural world needs to include death and other negatives? (163ff.)
- What are the two possibilities Dillard considers for the disruption between human consciousness and the rest of creation? Why does she prefer the second option? (177ff.)
- Why is living agreeing to die?

Chapter 11 “Stalking” (Summer)

- What are the two kinds of stalking that Dillard practices? (186-187). What makes each significant?
- What are some examples of stalking in the chapter?
- What makes stalking muskrats particularly important? (192ff.)
- How and why does stalking require centering down? (200-203)
- What does a spirituality of uncertainty imply about human consciousness and the universe? About the hiddenness of God? (204ff.)

Chapter 12 “Nightwatch” (Late Summer)

- What makes the change of grasshoppers to locusts significant?
- What other lessons does Dillard learn on the Lucas property and at the Lucas cottage?
- Is the bobwhite’s forlorn call a positive symbol? (220)
- What does it mean to imagine the traveling eels? (221-223)

Chapter 13 “The Horns of the Altar” (September)

- What makes the anecdotes about copperheads significant?
- How is parasitism a theodicy? (232-237)
- What kind of symbols are the various animals in disarray? Is wholeness then accidental, as she suggests? (238-241)
- How is the world experienced as both old and new? (244-245)

Chapter 14 “Northing” (October, November)

- How is restlessness found in both bird migration and in fall leaves?
- What does it mean to seek a “reduction” (255)
- What is meaningful about the monarch butterfly migration?
- What does it mean to seek the death of the self as a kind of wave offering? (262-264)

[Conclusions]

Chapter 15 “The Waters of Separation” (Winter Solstice)

- Why does Dillard include the Roman story about the echo and the bee?
- Why does she think of the heave offering as trying to get the Lord’s attention? (269ff.)
- Why does she conclude that beauty is real and not just a divine ruse? (270-271)
- What makes the red heifer and the waters of separation significant?
- Equally, why is the maple key an act of praise? (273-274)
- Why does Dillard stress the absolute seriousness of the divine intent? (275)

Dillard: Modern and/or Post-Modern?

Even given the lack of consensus upon what post-modernism is (or was), the period between 1968 and 2001 (or up to the present) has often been defined over against the period of Modernism, which itself can be defined as the period after the French Revolution and/or the period between WWI and the 1960s. While some insist that post-modernism is really just hyper-modernism; that is, that it is simply the natural trajectory of modernist politics, aesthetics, and or philosophy and culture, other insist that something has fundamentally changed in one or all of these areas. For example, it can be defined as:

1. An extension or a break with twentieth-century modernism. It continues to stress modernist traits of fragmentation, solipsism, alienation, and subjective history.
2. Yet is also rejects modernist interests in symbols and form for an interest in the surface, chance, the impersonal and/or local.
3. A tendency to ironic quotation of past motifs and figures.
4. Strong interest in post-structuralism and deconstruction, theories that find language’s ability to communicate highly problematic. All language is tied to what it seeks to describe. No objectivity.
5. It often stresses a cool, detached, emotionally uninvolved style.
6. It argues that no coherent, unified reality is possible.
7. The (dis)connection between modernism and post-modernism can also be seen not as two discrete movements, but as two poles of an experience:

Modernism	Post-Modernism
search for an absolute	admission of relativity
romanticism/ symbolism	surrealism/ dadaism
form/ function	anti-form/ disjunction
trust in the author and intention	power of the reader and relativity
purpose	play
design	chance
hierarchy	anarchy / collapse
mastery/ logos	exhaustion/ silence

art object/ finished	process/ happening
creation	deconstruction
belief in progress	circularity or repetition
presence	absence
centering	dispersal
root/depth	surface/ rhizome
interpretation	(mis)reading
grand narrative/universal	local history only
erotic	androgynous
origin and cause	indeterminacy

Is Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* a modernist and/or a post-modernist text?