

## A GUIDE TO Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Annie Dillard

*I am no scientist. I explore the neighborhood. . . .  
I think about the valley. It is my leisure  
as well as my work. . . .*

### THE BOOK AT A GLANCE

*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is made up of developmentally connected essays, each title reflecting the main subject of the chapter.

**Subject:** The inner life of the spirit, reached through reflecting on the natural universe.

**Setting:** Tinker Creek in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia during a cycle of the seasons.

**Style:** Highly poetic, employing evocative sensory description, metaphor, simile, alliteration, and onomatopoeia, all interwoven with a wide range of allusions.

**Tone:** At times reportorial; often reflective, meditative, or even mystical.

**Themes:** The natural universe abounds in extravagance and intricacy. True seeing is difficult to achieve. Living in the present demands receptiveness and concentration. The wonder is not the brutality of nature but the fact that beauty exists at all. The human task is to experience the world in all its variety.

### SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The work involves no offensive language or human violence. The language is beautiful but may be difficult for less accomplished readers. Squeamish readers may find the accurate depiction of processes of nature repulsive. (Chapter 10, *Fecundity*, is especially graphic.) The book explores concepts of creator and creation that will expand mental and spiritual horizons for most readers; this is a book of wonder.

### BACKGROUND

**Allusions.** Dillard's highly literate essays cite or allude to works and authors from many fields, including *religion* (the Bible, the Koran, ancient Hebrew ritual), *poetry* (Blake, Hopkins, Rimbaud), *art* (Leonardo da Vinci, van Gogh, Picasso), *essays* (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Thoreau), and the *natural and physical sciences* (Edwin Way Teale, Kepler, Einstein).

**Biblical symbolism.** In her final chapters, Dillard goes beyond allusion to define and then make symbolic use of three ritual elements drawn from the Biblical book of Leviticus, the "wave offering," the "heave shoulder," and the "waters of separation." In Chapter 13, she uses a "horns of the altar" allusion without explaining it. The "horns" were projections at each of the four corners (Exodus 27:2, Revelation 9:13). Priests were directed to daub the blood of sacrificed bulls on these projections (Leviticus 4:7).

**The natural world.** Dillard knows and mentions works that range from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (A.D. 77) through recent studies in biochemistry and quantum physics. Her larger purpose is to reevaluate traditional views of nature and God, as Ralph Waldo Emerson does in *Nature* (1836). She ultimately affirms taking the world as it is, with all its brutality and mystery. She never seems to situate humanity within that world, and she is silent on today's environmental issues. She is at her best when she reports personal experiences with the natural world, as in her stories of the malformed Polyphemus moth (Chapter 4) and stalking muskrats (Chapter 11), or when she reports facts little known to the average reader, as in her vivid explanation of the hydraulic power of trees (Chapter 7).

### MAJOR PEOPLE IN THE BOOK (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Except for the neighbors who appear in the flood story of Chapter 9 and a woman who tells a snake story in Chapter 13, the only person in the essays is Annie Dillard, a solitary, immersed in nature and in books.

### SUMMARY

**Chapter 1. Heaven and Earth in Jest.** [January] Dillard establishes the **setting** and **purpose** of her book. Her house clings to Tinker Creek like an "anchor-hold," a hermit's hut. She takes us for an exploratory walk of her valley on a snowy day and reports some of the wonders she has seen. Once a giant water bug sucked a frog hollow before her eyes; once she saw a mockingbird plummet four stories in a joyous

free fall before pulling up. She speaks of living things as survivors on bivouac and wonders about the profusion of nature.

**Chapter 2. Seeing.** [January] Dillard recalls how, as a child, she hid pennies under trees and then drew arrows to help people see the coins. *Seeing* is learned, she asserts. An especially beautiful **description** records her efforts to see the spectacle of hundreds of migrating red-winged blackbirds resting in an Osage orange tree in her yard. She goes on to detail a set of case studies about people surgically cured of cataracts that had blinded them from birth. Newly sighted, they perceived only patches of color; they could not grasp shadows or spatial relationships. They needed to learn the kind of seeing that requires verbalization, ongoing mental interpretation. Dillard pursues another kind of seeing: one that requires emptying oneself and thinking of nothing in order to receive whatever may come.

**Chapter 3. Winter.** [February] Hundreds of starlings invade Dillard's neighborhood every winter, and Dillard describes community efforts to control them. In **metaphor** and **simile** she describes the beauty of their flight as resembling an unraveling skein of yarn or a banner. Every winter Dillard reads about explorers and gives spiders the run of the house. She finds winter a meditative time. It opens up vistas summer conceals. Local boys have converted the woods by the creek to a motorbike speedway. Living things still thrive wherever they can find shelter.

**Chapter 4. The Fixed.** [February] Having learned to spot praying mantis egg cases, Dillard now finds them everywhere. She reports what naturalists say about the mantis and what she has observed. One day she watches a mantis laying eggs; her description resonates with **sensory language**. And she remembers a January in childhood when her teacher allowed a large Polyphemus moth to hatch too early, its cocoon warmed by the children's hands. Its wings hardened without spreading, fixed monstrously in place. It could not fly; it could only crawl down the school's asphalt driveway. The memory leads her to explore other horrors of the insect world. She finally decides that beauty and horror meet in mystery; we cannot see deeply enough to understand.

**Chapter 5. Untying the Knot.** [February] In the woods Dillard finds a shed snakeskin formed into a knot. This snakeskin becomes a **metaphor** for seasons, times, and divine power. She realizes that she cannot catch a season by the tail any more than she can unknot the dried snakeskin. She ponders how difficult it must have been for human beings initially to amass and relay seasonal information. Combining the snakeskin metaphor with the **simile** of a child's toy Slinky, she concludes that seasons and time form a continuous knot or loop. We do not know which loop on the cosmic Slinky might represent our time, nor can we clearly grasp whose stairs the cosmic Slinky descends. The

divine power or spirit that we seek rolls along elusively.

**Chapter 6. The Present.** [March] Dazed from a day of Interstate highway driving, Dillard stops at a gas station and sits on a curb. She feels completely alive as she pats a puppy and gazes at a mountain. But the moment she verbalizes her awareness, the experience ends. Self-consciousness destroys the kind of receptiveness needed for immersion in the fleeting moment. At home she sits under her favorite sycamore tree, thinking about trees and time. Trees offer food and beauty; they outlive us and they anchor us. The Persian conqueror Xerxes is said to have halted his army to contemplate a sycamore. There is danger away from trees, in high places or out in the open where anything might happen. She contemplates what is happening in the earth beneath her spine; she thinks of galaxies careening through space and spring seeping north. She looks at her creek, noticing its living, moving water. The creek teaches that you can't pursue the moment with hooks and nets; you must wait to see what the stream brings to you.

**Chapter 7. Spring.** [April–May] As a child, Dillard imagined that English words truly named things and that other languages were merely codes for English. In spring she wonders what key unlocks the language of bird song and then realizes that a more important question is, why is bird song beautiful? Employing **metaphors** and **alliteration**, she continues, "Beauty itself is the language to which we have no key; it is the mute cipher, the cryptogram, the uncracked, unbroken code." She spots some newts in the woods and muses about them; she ponders the incredible physical forces exerted by trees. Teeming life is another **image** of the chapter. In May, when plant life seems to close in upon her, Dillard finds it no wonder that Eskimos prefer the openness of winter ice and snow. The duck pond pops with life; it is brimming with frogs and tangled with algae. Do human beings mill around as aimlessly as microscopic pond life? Dillard concludes that having noticed this proliferation of life, she must deal with it, and so she fetches her microscope.

**Chapter 8. Intricacy.** [June] In **metaphors** drawn from art and publishing, Dillard discusses the complexity and exuberance of life forms in the natural universe. Her 25¢ goldfish and the elodeas (water plants) in the bowl contain incredible intricacy. In fact, the cosmos so teems with minutiae that she cannot hold all the detail in mind. She can focus only on a bit as small as the fringe of a goldfish fin. She wonders at God's extravagance. Why give a big elm six million leaves, each leaf toothed, each tooth further notched and barbed? Van Gogh called the world a study, but for her "the creation is not a study, a roughed-in sketch; it is supremely, meticulously created, created abundantly, extravagantly"; "the creator loves pizzazz." Nor does the creator blue-pencil evolution. Any creature that survives is allowed to do so, however monstrous it may be. For Dillard the wonder is not that monstrosities exist but that beauty does.

**Chapter 9. Flood.** [Summer] An oppressive summer day reminds Dillard of the Tinker Creek flood a year earlier, caused by Hurricane Agnes. In rich **sensory** and **figurative** language, she **describes** the rise of the waters and **narrates** what happened in her neighborhood. She ends by reporting two curious incidents: that of a light bulb glowing despite a flood-related power outage and that of a giant mushroom her flooded neighbors later baked for several guests. Though the flood had nothing to do with the mushroom, she likes to think that the flood provided it as a consolation prize.

**Chapter 10. Fecundity.** [Summer] In a nightmare, Dillard watches moths copulate and produce eggs that hatch into slimy fish all over her bed. She is led to ponder the fact that profuse plant life does not upset us, yet animal fecundity often repels us. Acres of wheat or tulips we find beautiful; large numbers of rats or cockroaches we find repulsive. She reports the millions of offspring produced by a variety of creatures, many of them cannibalized at birth, and asks what kind of world deals in so much death. She concludes that we are called neither to judge nature nor to be as amorally wasteful as nature but to recognize that death is simply part of the contract.

**Chapter 11. Stalking.** [Summer] Dillard “stalks” creatures to observe them. If one approaches actively, one risks scaring them and altering their behavior. But by taking the way of “emptiness,” centering herself and waiting in stillness, Dillard has closely observed fish, insects, birds, and even the wary muskrat. This kind of presence in the moment requires holding oneself still and mute, yet the process is invigorating. In quantum physics Dillard finds a world symbolically like the world of her creek: At the subatomic level, the experimental situation in itself affects what is observed. At all levels the universe is a swarm of untamed energies, and Dillard stalks its bridges and banks, seeking moments she cannot predict.

**Chapter 12. Nightwatch.** [Summer] In a meadow near a cabin where Dillard is making a kind of retreat, she steps into the middle of a torrent of grasshoppers. This is what she came to see: real things, moving and still. She looks around her, **describing** trails and rimrock and terraces and forested cliffs. She describes the cottage itself and a rabbit and a goldfinch that heave into view. Later she lies in her sleeping bag, awash in sounds. She strains to feel the starlight. She imagines an absurd event she once read about, expanses of eels slithering down streams and across fields to the Sargasso Sea. If she stumbled across an eel migration, she wonders, would she hide or feel compelled to start walking? Such thoughts dizzy her. Like a juggler’s ball, Dillard says, our world spins headlong, yet it feels surprisingly good.

**Chapter 13. The Horns of the Altar.** [September] From four feet away, Dillard watches a motionless, poisonous copperhead. She is amazed to see a mosquito land and suck blood from the snake’s head for two or

three full minutes. The experience leads her to research the varieties of parasitic insects and summarize her findings. She asks how we are to take the fact that parasitic insects make up ten percent of all known animal species and that many other creatures are outright predators. Everything is being eaten. Adapting the **metaphor** to humankind, she writes that we too are somewhat “frayed” and “nibbled” and that we do our own share of eating away at other people. In death we are bound to the horns of the altar of the world, whose creatures then eat us. Yet she continues to be awed by this dangerous world and all its creatures.

**Chapter 14. Northing.** [October–November] In October birds are restless before migration, and the woods rustle with the affairs of squirrels and chipmunks and insects. Caribou migrate in the Arctic. Dillard feels the urge for what Arctic explorers call northing, as in, “We accomplished 20 miles of northing today.” She wants to accomplish a trek toward a place where she can slough off layers; a place where winds will make of her a pure slip of bone, like a fragment of sea shell no longer identifiable with the creature that once inhabited the shell. She receives instead the gift of southing. North winds pour across her valley and color the maples, and for five days she witnesses the southerly migration of monarch butterflies. By November the year is rolling down and plunging into the spare climate she desires. She dreams of an ice and snow tunnel leading to death; she reads the sayings of desert hermits. She recalls the day the sheer slap of air created by migrating Canadian geese stunned her. If she waits for what she needs, it comes. This is the time for the “wave breast of thanksgiving,” a ritual of praise in ancient Israel, in which the priest literally waved the offering before the altar. The wind does the paring work Dillard sought, and she thanks God.

**Chapter 15. The Waters of Separation.** [December] On the winter solstice, Dillard walks down into the nearby quarry to test the ancient Roman belief that echoes of the human voice can kill a bee. The bee she addresses drones calmly on. She follows the creek and revisits places already mentioned. She recalls another ancient Hebrew ritual, that of the “heave shoulder,” in which the priest hurls the offering toward the altar. She finds this violent way of catching God’s eye appropriate. People must speak up for creation and call God’s attention to cruelty and sorrow and waste. She recalls yet another old Hebrew ritual, the burning of a red heifer with fragrant woods in order to combine the ashes with fresh running water, thus creating “the waters of separation.” This special water purifies anyone sprinkled with it. For Dillard, the waters of Tinker Creek serve as “waters of separation.” As the year cycles to a close, she feels like a pilgrim seeking signs, and a sign comes. A windblown maple key reels down toward her, looking like a Martian spaceship. The wonder of the experience reminds her that one must not skulk along the edges of

life but must look for disparities that unlock the universe. She decides that God created such a profusely varied world not in jest but in earnest. It is the human task to grow and to experience it. Like Emerson, who dreamed that an angel brought him the world reduced to the size of an apple, we must eat the world, every bit of it.

## APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

### 1. Talking About Nature

Small groups of students might talk about their observations of nature.

- Students might describe a process or thing in nature that made a deep and lasting impression on them. Ask them what feelings were aroused.
- Students might discuss their feelings about the natural world in general. Is nature basically benevolent, or does it require “taming”?
- Students might also discuss their reactions to Dillard’s attitudes toward nature.

### 2. Estimating Effort

Dillard reports that writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* was a grueling project. She worked fifteen to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, for eight months and filled hundreds of index cards. You might choose two or three pages of Dillard’s essays that contain a lot of details about nature itself or about the author’s feelings toward nature. Ask students to re-read the pages and then do the following:

- analyze the pages carefully, listing every element or detail they find that required Dillard to check facts or spend time in careful observation
- comment briefly on their conclusions about the work involved in writing even a few pages of a book like Dillard’s
- observe something in the natural world and then, imitating Dillard’s style and approach, write a few paragraphs about it

### 3. Narrating a Catastrophic Event

Ask students to study Dillard’s seven-page narration of the Tinker Creek flood described in Chapter 9. Then ask them questions like the following:

- How does the author establish where you are in the **setting**?
- Where does Dillard employ **sensory detail** that enables you to see, hear, taste, smell, or feel the flood?
- Where does she intensify drama and meaning by weaving **allusion, metaphor, and simile** into her account?

## MEET THE WRITER

**Annie Dillard** (1945– ) was born in Pittsburgh and attended Hollins College in Virginia. She has taught poetry and creative writing and has served as scholar-in-residence at Western Washington University and as distinguished visiting professor at Wesleyan University. Her first book was a collection of poetry, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (1974), but she is best known for her meditative essays on the natural world. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) won the Pulitzer Prize; critics hailed it as an American original in the spirit of Thoreau’s *Walden*. She has published two additional essay collections in the same vein, three works on literary craftsmanship and the writer’s role in society, and an acclaimed autobiography, *An American Childhood* (1987). Her first novel, *The Living* (1992), depicts the logging culture of the Pacific Northwest at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

## READ ON

**Annie Dillard**, *The Writing Life* (1989). Dillard’s views on literary craftsmanship and the writer’s role in society.

**Anne Morrow Lindbergh**, *Gift from the Sea* (1955). A small book of simple wisdom based on observations at the seashore.

**Henry David Thoreau**, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854). Eight essays arising from Thoreau’s experiment in simple living on Walden Pond in eastern Massachusetts from 1845 to 1847.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**, *Nature* (1836). An essay reflecting on the human relationship to the natural universe.

**William Wordsworth**, “*Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*” (1798). A poem that not only delights in the experience of nature but also shapes the experience into something lasting.

**Richard Wilbur**, “*The Beautiful Changes*.” A meditation on our shifting perceptions of nature by a noted contemporary American poet.

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