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An American Childhood Essay: Prompt 6

In *An American Childhood*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard details the events of her youth, growing up in Pittsburg in the 1950s. Dillard's memoir journeys her first adventure down the street to her last few moments before for college. Dillard's story highlights many coming of age themes, but centers on her acute awareness of the world and hunger for knowledge. Dillard describes herself as an "observer and observed", as she realizes at a young age that her experiences and actions are but a tiny piece of reality (Dillard 6). Annie Dillard establishes herself as both an "observer and observed" in *An American Childhood* by detailing her perceptions of the world, her research, and her awareness of others observing her (Dillard 6).

Dillard's development as an "observer" grows simultaneously with her curiosity; the whole of Dillard's childhood is laced with queries. Her wonder persists from the time she notices the peculiar flexibility of her mother's wrinkled skin, to the times she begins to grapple her place in society. In a time when her life is solely interior, Dillard lies in fright as the ghastly monster that haunts her room creeps up her bedroom walls. While walking home in the dark one day she observes a car pass by her house and discovers the source of the monster. The car's headlights flash over the inner walls of her room and she realizes that the terrifying monster is but a car passing by, not scary at all. From here, Dillard begins to explore her neighborhood, mapping the streets in her mind, bird watching, and pretending to be a detective or an American Indian. Dillard's eyes are opened to the vast amount of information to be learned about the world; she

begins to read books about almost anything that sparks her interest (Dillard 107). Dillard's world expands rapidly as she begins to notice society as well. In her earliest of observations, she watches the people of her neighborhood with innocent wonder. After a big snow, Dillard watches her neighbor, Jo Ann Sheehy ice-skating and is surprised at the "beauty and strangeness" of the act (Dillard 23). Dillard is stunned by the sight because she is learning to disassociate Jo Ann from the behaviors of her rotten younger brother. In her teens Dillard's observations persist. She observes the individuals in church, noting how fake she perceives them to be, "I knew what they loved... knew what they hated... They didn't buy God" (Dillard 135). In both instances, with Jo Ann Sheehy and the people in church, Dillard observes that things are not always as they appear to be. Dillard is an observer of nature and society. Dillard's observations and curiosities about the world remained a persistent feature of her development.

Not only is Dillard an observer, she is a researcher. Dillard finds that she does not only want to learn about the world, she wants to understand it. After reading a book about field experiments in and around ponds and streams, Dillard begins to conduct experiments of her own. Dillard receives a microscope from her parents and sets off to find microscopic life in pond water. After spending day after day peering into her microscope for months, she finally finds the illusive amoeba that she read all about. She then expands her research to insects, and she observes them under her microscope. Dillard devises a do-it-yourself kit for killing insects and attempts to master the art of capturing butterflies unharmed. Despite the cigar boxes under her bed filled with giant beetles, Dillard distinctly dislikes insects. She struggles to touch her beetles and butterflies, though she never gives up, "But you have to study something. I never considered turning away from them just because I was afraid of them" (Dillard 112). Dillard's dedication to her craft is linked to her desire to explore the world on a deeper level. Each book she read

spurred her on to another book or an experiment, all to develop a deeper understanding. Dillard's research was both fueled by her curiosity and the root of it, "[t]he visible world turned me curious to books; the books propelled me reeling back to the world" (Dillard 109). Dillard's appreciation of learning about the world demonstrates her place in it as more than an observer, but an active and eager examiner.

An American Childhood paints Dillard as not only an observer and researcher, but observable to others. Dillard is aware that during her youth, she is watched by the people around her. Even when she isn't looking, the people in her life make judgements and observations about her thoughts and actions. Dillard is bright but has a pattern of making choices that get her into trouble; she is suspended from school in her teens for smoking on school grounds. When it comes time to choose a college, Dillard's headmistress decides to send her to Hollins College in Virginia. She knows the headmistress chose Hollins College for because the headmistress, "sen[ds] all her problems there..." (Dillard 164). Dillard's headmistress is a seemingly irrelevant character in the story of her youth; it can be inferred that she keeps an eye on Dillard even when she doesn't notice. Her days throwing snow at oncoming cars and playing baseball when she was not allowed, blossom her into a disruptive student that frequently angers her teachers. Such impulsivity proves troubling for Dillard to keep bottled as she notes that she had been told by many people all her life to calm down (Dillard 151). Dillard's own parents also watch their daughter and wonder how to deal with her behaviors (Dillard 159). Not all observations of Dillard are negative, however, her dedication to her hobbies is revered by the adults in her life. Dillard says, "my parents would praise my drawings and poems, supply me with books, art supplies, and sports equipment..." (Dillard 101). Dillard's parents allow her to pursue her passions but interfere no more than to watch her imagination and skills flourish. In most aspects

of her life, Dillard is watched by the people around her. This fact illustrates Dillard as more than an observer of life and society, but a part of it.

Dillard's *An American Childhood* develops her as not only a spectator, but an investigator, and more than that, an object of other's regard. In her youth, Dillard witnesses the world with great fascination; she wonders about the natural and cultural aspects of her life. She also takes her interests further by researching them; she conducts experiments to quantify and define what she doesn't understand. *An American Childhood* is not just about how she experiences her world, it is also about how her world experiences her. Dillard is watched through her childhood by her parents, teachers, and many other people. Her actions, as she realizes, have value to her onlookers; they have value to herself. What Dillard learns from her awareness of the world is both: how insignificant she is, yet how every little action has some impact on her world.

Works Cited

Dillard, Annie. *An American Childhood*. 08092013 ed., Pymble, HarperCollins e-books, 2007. RedShelf, redshelf.com/book/351169/an-american-childhood-351169-9780061843136-annie-dillard. Accessed 22 Sept. 2020.