

Analysis of "the wreck of time" by annie dillard



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Will M. Annie Dillard's "The Wreck of Time" Annie Dillard's "The Wreck of Time" is a unique piece of writing. The essay has no clear thesis statement, lacks transitions between paragraphs and provides no obvious connection between its various subsections. Upon first reading Dillard's piece, one might think that it's little more than a series of unrelated statistics and a series of unanswered questions. But by using this unique style, Dillard puts the focus and thinking in the hands of the reader. The reader is left to make sense of the statistics, fill in the gaps, and draw his or her own conclusions. There is a very important message Dillard tries to get across this way in "The Wreck of Time". Through her use of rhetorical devices, Dillard exemplifies our view that the numbers are just numbers, and nothing more. However, after a few reads it becomes clear through constant questioning in the piece that these numbers should mean more to us than they do. Dillard is trying to show us that we do not have enough compassion for our fellow human beings. She shows us this through marked use of statistics, questions, comparisons, contrasts, and quotations from many sources. Statistics make up a large part of Dillard's rhetorical evidence. "Two million children die a year from diarrhea, and 800,000 from measles. Do we blink? Stalin starved 7 million Ukrainians in one year, Pol Pot killed 1 million Cambodians, the flu epidemic of 1918 killed 21 or 22 million people... shall this go on?" Dillard bombards us with overwhelming numbers to get an emotional pull out of the reader, and instill a feeling of shame that comes from realizing that we simply do not feel like putting in the effort to be compassionate to others. "Do we blink?" Her questions are meant to think about how we isolate ourselves and simply disregard the suffering of others. After giving us overwhelming numbers and statistics, Dillard then questions us often. This statistic-reflective question

syntax is one of Dillard's main methods of development in the essay. It is intended for the reader to think beyond the numbers, to really show that these numbers represent real people. In another example, Dillard presents a quote from her own daughter showing that we simply do not feel remorseful when a tragedy affects people we are not closely related to. " On April 30, 1991--on that one day--138, 000 people drowned in Bangladesh. At dinner I mentioned this to my daughter, who was then seven years old that it was hard to imagine 138, 000 people drowning. ' No, it's easy,' she replied, ' Lots of dots in blue water'" This quote mainly exemplifies that learning to be compassionate is simply not easy, especially when it comes to people you have never met or known. However, Dillard's message is saying that is imperative that this compassion is learned, so that the next generation is not as apathetic as the current one. Dillard uses this statistic-question setup often. " What were you doing on April 20, 1991, when a series of waves drowned 138, 000 people? Where were you when you first heard the astounding heartbreaking news? Who told you? What, seriatim, were your sensations? Did you weep? Did your anguish last day or weeks? " In this quote, Dillard's intent is the same. By demonstrating the fact that most people simply went about their day when, or even if, they heard about this tragedy, she exemplifies the fact that most of us were unfazed by this news and compassion for these victims was completely nonexistent. Comparisons are another big theme in the essay and to which Dillard uses very effectively. " We see generations of waves rise from the sea that made them, billions of individuals at a time; we see them dwindle and vanish. If this does not astound you, what will? Or what will move you to pity? " This visual metaphor helps put nature into perspective of human relationships. We care no more

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for a person or a group of people we do not know that pass away than we do when waves crash on the beach and disappear. And Dillard gives us plenty of statistical reasons for this as well. " Ten years ago we thought there were two galaxies for each of us alive. Lately, since we loosed the Hubble Space Telescope, we have revised our figures. There are nine galaxies for each of us. In our galaxy, the Milky Way, there are sixty-nine suns for each one of us alive... These astronomers are nickel-and-diming us to death. " With such astronomical numbers that exist in our universe, what value could an individual human being possibly have? She tells us " Head-spinning numbers cause mind to go slack... But our minds must not go slack. " Dillard wants us to think about individuality and to think about these numbers and determine for ourselves whether having nine galaxies to each one of us really changes the fact that we are each individuals. Dillard also contrasts to help give the reader a different viewpoint. " One fifth of us are Muslims. One fifth of us live in China. And every seventh person is a Chinese peasant. Almost one tenth of us live within range of an active volcano. More than 2 percent of us are mentally retarded. We humans drink tea- over a billion cups a day. Among us we speak 10, 000 languages. " It may seem that Dillard pulled these different facts randomly, but it is just that that represents who we are.

Quotations are used frequently in the essay, mainly to help jolt the readers mind into thinking about the opposite point of view. For example, Dillard includes a quote from Stalin, " A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic. " And other from Mao, " The atom bomb is nothing to be afraid of. China has many people. The deaths of ten or twenty million is nothing to be afraid of. " Her intent for including these quotes is to make ourselves question. Josef Stalin killed millions of his own people, and Mao the same. Is

this type of thinking from the best of sources? Without compassion for one another, statistics remain statistics and we lose what makes us human. This is what Dillard wants us to realize, and this is what she wants us to correct. We'll end up being in another "ordinary time, a slice off like any other" and the next generation will be no different than the current one and the lack of compassion will continue to plague human society if this is allowed to continue. Someday, maybe, these numbers will have true meaning to us. But we can only hope.