

The effects of literacy in annie dillard's "american childhood" essay sample

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The Effects of Literacy in Annie Dillard's "American Childhood" Essay Sample

Annie Dillard's memoir, *An American Childhood*, details the author's growing up years and gives the reader many insights into herself. Dillard describes many of the things that molded her during her childhood years, including family, humor, nature, drawing, and sports. At various times during her childhood, Dillard's entire world revolves around one or another of these interests, and each of them shape her personality. Although Dillard's many passions influence her life incredibly, it is reading, however, that most molds her childhood worldview. Reading opens the doors through which she eagerly steps, her curiosity prompting her to endless discoveries in books.

Dillard's interest in books emerges before she even truly discovers how deeply she will come to love them. Early in life, books become habitual relief to Dillard; she describes her morning-time habits: "To wake up, I read on the sunporch" (68). Her world begins to open in books; she discovers language similarities between her hometown of Pittsburgh and Scotland in the book *Kidnapped*, which enralls her enough that her "hands were icy from holding *Kidnapped* up" (69). Little did Dillard know as she laid reading *Kidnapped* that books would have such a profound impact on her life.

Dillard's first serious encounter with reading occurs when a friend two doors down lends her his father's drawing book. She writes that she was "amazed that there were books about things one actually did" (78). Having already had an interest in drawing for the previous two years, Dillard's discovery of Kimon Nicolaidis' *The Natural Way to Draw* causes drawing to become an

all-encompassing passion to her. Along with giving her an introduction to drawing, *The Natural Way to Draw* is the first book that Dillard describes as truly exciting: “ Now this book would ignite my fervor for conscious drawing” (78).

Thus Dillard’s addiction to reading begins. She “ began reading books, reading books to delirium” (80). Enraptured by the new worlds at her fingertips, she writes, “ I began by vanishing from the known world into the passive abyss of reading, but soon found myself engaged with surprising vigor because the things in books...roused me from my stupor” (80). Books allow Dillard both to escape the world in which she lives, while at the same time opening her eyes to aspects of the world she had never considered before.

The Homewood free library soon becomes one of Dillard’s favorite places to be. While her mother sits in a chair chatting with librarians, Dillard pours over the stacks of books contained in the library’s high shelves, marveling at their contents and wondering over those who have read the books before her. It is “ in the cool darkness of a bottom shelf” that Dillard discovers the book that perhaps most influences the love of nature that will accompany her into adulthood. *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams*, fascinates Dillard as it discusses “ how to make sweep nets, plankton nets, glass-bottomed buckets, and killing jars”. This volume piques her curiosity, and she positively itches to write the author and ask him where she personally “ might find a pond, or a stream” (81). *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams*

unleashes Dillard's inner naturalist, and the great outdoors develops through the years into one of her raging lifelong passions.

Occasionally, however, Dillard finds disappointment in books. The books adults hand to her reinforce her conclusion that adults can hardly be trusted. Adults recommend books about Nancy Drew, short adults, or the sea; some she finds childish, and others just lacking interest. Although the possibilities in the library are endless, only limited by her ability to reach the upper shelves, Dillard finds that "the going [is] always rocky" (84). Books cause her to grow more independent in her opinions, even at a young age, as she develops a personal taste for reading. She learns to depend on that judgment, rather than on the opinions of adults or publishers. Some books she loves, and others she strongly dislikes; she finds, however, that it is "a plain truth that most books [fall] apart halfway through" (84). While most children do not find this kind of independent thought until much later in life, Dillard, at a young age, begins to develop strong opinions about the books she reads. After reading *Jude the Obscure*, she comments, "It started out so well. Halfway through, its author forgot how to write" (84).

Dillard sums up her love for reading by describing books as something she "plundered...for many years". As many avid readers experience, Dillard is "swept...away" by books and reading (85). Books were believable to Dillard, and she set her hopes and dreams upon them—the dreams she discovered in those same books. One such goal she had was that of being an architect, for after all, "Children who drew...became architects" (80). Books, along with her grandparents' paper boy, also set her on course to become a "rock-

hound", a hobby which sets her about collecting any rock she comes across in her search for dinosaur bones, gold, and precious gems (141). Books do not only influence her passions as she matures into adulthood, but also her future career, as it is likely this early passion for and exposure to the written word highly influenced her future as a writer.

The doors Annie Dillard steps through on her way to becoming who she is are often opened through reading. Many of her defining qualities, including her love for art, nature, and writing, are derived from her passionate hours of reading as a child. When it comes to the endless undiscovered knowledge trapped within the pages of books, Dillard recognizes that, " The sky [is] the limit" (149). The education she finds in books create qualities in Dillard that cause her to be the enthusiastic, curious, naturalistic, writing adult that she is today.