

# Analysis of annie dillard's memoir "an american childhood"

Literature



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Annie Dillard's memoir, *An American Childhood*, is filled and adorned with innumerable instances of figurative language. Using an eloquent, articulate prose, Dillard describes in vivid language and excruciating detail the vast array of memories and experiences that make up her childhood. Each page of the novel contains literary devices presented in the form of figurative language that spring forth from the page and engulf the reader with superb examples of imagery that remain in their memory far beyond the moment of reading the text. In writing her memoir, Dillard uses her masterful command of the English language to convey her personal evocations using literary devices like allusion, symbolism, and simile to more effectively express her memories and to enrich the reader's experience.

*An American Childhood* lacks a solid, continuous plot, and is presented as a series of anecdotes. These anecdotes are not presented as a day to day account of Dillard's childhood, but rather have an impressionistic edge to them, with each anecdote playing an important role in the development of the characters and storyline. For example, the reader learns of Dillard's experience with a fictional monster in her room that was, in reality, a shadow cast by light from a passing car. This event teaches Dillard that her imagination is a tool under her command which she can manipulate and command to create a world beyond the one she was living in. The reader is exposed to many other anecdotes such as her being chased by a driver, her time spent in a lakehouse on Lake Erie, and the time she crashed a car at a drag race. All of these memories continue to be important for Dillard because in each of them she can recall becoming more alert and aware of her own psyche and environment, aiding her development as an artist.

Annie Dillard's memoir, *An American Childhood*, is filled and adorned with references to innumerable literary and 1950's pop culture sources. Dillard starts off the prologue with a backstory that includes Benjamin Franklin having "already invented his stove in Philadelphia by 1753 and Thomas Jefferson was a schoolboy in Virginia." In another part, the author writes, "In 1753, young George Washington surveyed the land for the English this point of land where rivers met." Dillard then takes these allusions as scenery for the exposition of the 1950's period where she grew up and explored. She ties these historical references in by sharing her own experiences growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with cherished anecdotes about her mother's eccentricity and her father's stolid manner that gives you a sense of the conventional American family scheme that she grew up in. Dillard also holds that as children, they grew up living in and believing in the history that Pittsburgh held, but never really knowing that they lived and believed in it. It is the paradoxical concept of when Jean-Paul Sartre in his book *Nausea*, states, "I am. I am. I exist. I think, therefore I am; I am because I think, why do I think?" The children do not see the larger picture of things. They do not see the majesty and authority of Poseidon's trident: they see how shiny and fun it is. It is parallel to how they view Pittsburgh. The children see Frick Park and Mellon Park and how the sun shines right on the water in the pond, but with their peculiar Catcher in the Rye-like innocence, they do not see beyond face value. To the children, there is so much more to see in ordinary things, even as the history has been written.

Continuingly, another allusion that Dillard makes can be found in the first chapter. "They wake like sleepwalkers, in full stride; they wake like people

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brought back from cardiac arrest or from drowning: in medias res, surrounded by familiar people and objects, equipped with a hundred skills." In medias res, is Latin for "into the middle of things," and was first coined by Roman poet and satirist, Horace, in his poem, "The Art of Poetry." Dillard takes an unorthodox stance on growing up as describing it as a scrappy, "piecemeal" stir from a long slumber, only to find that everything is familiar as though it had been done so many times before but did not feel as though it was a mundane task. Instead of a gradual progression, maturing is described as a cyclical forgetting and relearning only to be terrified that you would never be so clearly cognizant of the world ever again. That is why Dillard uses in medias res, to convey the audacity of it all. It is as if growing up is like being thrown "into the middle" of a warzone, and knowing how to fight, but not for what reason.

A significant example of symbolism in the story lies with the Polyphemus moth. The story of the Polyphemus moth is a central image for Dillard in her growing up. The cocoon in the Mason jar opens to reveal a huge moth that could not expand because of the small jar, and its wings "hardened while still crumbled from the cocoon." The jar is taken outside to let the moth go, and it begins walking slowly down the driveway on its small legs. When she is an adult, the author remembers the moth as she walked down that driveway for the last time. "I have told this story before, and may yet tell it again, to lay the moth's ghost, for I still see it crawl down the broad black driveway, and I still see its golden wing clumps heave." As Dillard moves on with her life, the moth is the virtual representation of her life. Never having left Pittsburgh in her life before her departure for college, little Annie is the

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moth in the jar. She spreads her wings when she is let go, and takes a clumsy yet worthwhile walk down the “ driveway” to all that life holds for.