An American Childhood

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANNIE DILLARD

Dillard was born as Annie Doak in Pittsburgh, and her childhood there is the subject of *An American Childhood*. Dillard attended Hollins College in Virginia, where she received both a BA in literature and creative writing, and a MA in English. She published her first book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, in 1974, and it received the Pulitzer Prize. She has since written a number of other books in various genres, including poetry, novelistic prose, travel writing, and literary criticism. Since 1999 she has been a member of the Academy of Arts and Letters.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

An American Childhood takes place in the years after World War II, which was a time of relative prosperity and economic growth in the United States (for many, though, not all groups of people). These years were also the beginning of the Cold War between the United States and Russia, and—as the air raid drills described in the book show—there was a pervasive fear that nuclear war might be imminent, now that both countries could use the atomic bomb. Dillard also refers to the history of Pittsburgh, which is inextricable from the Gilded Age of American history, when "robber barons" like Andrew Carnegie and Andrew Mellon amassed great fortunes from steel and other industries. They were great supporters of the arts and culture, founding universities, schools, libraries, and hospitals; but as Dillard points out in the memoir, their fortunes were also built on the back-breaking labor of working-class people.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The thoughtfulness and attention to the natural world that Diillard displays in the memoir helps to clarify her intellectual trajectory, as she would become an author who wrote an award-winning nonfiction narrative about nature, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. In that sense, the memoir is a kind of pre-history of Dillard's other works. But its title also positions this memoir in the context of other classic American coming-of-age writing, from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (especially with its emphasis on the natural world) to J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Dillard's memoir also influenced the many literary memoirs that appeared in the 1990s; Jeannette Walls's *The Glass Castle* is one work that seems influenced by Dillard.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *An American Childhood*
- **When Written:** c. 1987
- **Where Written:** U.S.
- **When Published:** 1987
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Antagonist:** Dillard doesn't identify one clear antagonist, although she describes her teenage self as considering any authority figures, from her parents to her teachers to her minister, as natural antagonists. *Since An American* Childhood is largely the story of Dillard's intellectual development, much of the struggle for self-definition takes place within Annie's own mind.
- **Point of View:** The memoir is told in the first person, but there is an obvious separation between the child Annie and the mature adult who is telling the story. Often Dillard will intrude in the narration to comment on the limitations of her childhood character, as well as to make general comments on childhood and growing up.

EXTRA CREDIT

When We Were Young In 1974, when she was 28, Annie Dillard became the youngest American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize.

Playing With the Boys After graduating from Hollins College, Dillard's main hobby—other than reading and writing—was playing on the softball team with the male graduate students, a continuation of the baseball games she played with her neighbor Ricky in Pittsburgh.

PLOT SUMMARY

Annie Dillard begins her memoir by recalling her father's decision to leave the family for awhile (with his wife's permission) and take his boat down the Allegheny River to New Orleans—a goal he developed from reading about boat trips in a book. At the time, Annie is reading Robert Louis Stevenson's adventure novel, *Kidnapped*, and she too feels like she is **awakening** into a world where she can both observe and be observed.

Dillard paints a portrait of Pittsburgh in the early 1950s, in the years after World War II when families seemed to want things to get back to normal. In her privileged community, women stayed home rather than working, and Presbyterians and Catholics (not to mention Jews) remained very much apart from one another. At five years old in 1950, Annie is preoccupied by the monster in her room, which turns out to be a shadow cast by light from a passing car. She's amazed to

discover this, and it teaches her that she can use her imagination, but also master and direct it through reason when she needs to. Annie also fixes her attention on other images and sensations, from her parents' skin (which she feels doesn't fit their bodies) to her neighbor Jo Ann Sheehy skating through the frozen streets at night. Before she learns to read, Annie wanders around the neighborhood, playing football with the boys and throwing snowballs—at least until a car stops and the driver chases her and her friend all around the neighborhood. Slowly, the narrator Dillard says, she's "waking up," discovering the external world beyond her own mind, even as she also lives to a large extent within her own head.

Annie's parents are energetic and exuberant: they treat joke-telling as an almost professional process, and include the children as they tinker with ideas and performances. Dillard also introduces her father's parents, Oma and Frank Doak senior, who invite Annie and her younger sister Amy (their youngest sister, Molly, is too young to be included for most of the memoir) to their summer house on Lake Erie, where Annie spends idyllic weeks.

As Annie grows older, she begins to recognize the many layers of history that Pittsburgh embodies, from the ancient past of dinosaurs to its habitation by American Indians, to its use as a fort during the French and Indian War and its role in the American Revolution. She is impressed by and proud of that history, but it remains literary and exciting to her: she doesn't often think about the death and suffering that are also part of Pittsburgh's past.

Annie begins to embrace drawing as a hobby, spending one entire August sketching a baseball mitt in many different ways over and over again. She begins regular visits to the Homewood Library, which is in a relatively poor area of town: she makes her way through much of its stacks, though largely at random. Books seem to her to be entirely private—she never imagines that reading could be something shared among people. When she's ten, in the fall of 1955, Annie begins to attend the all-girls Ellis School, and also begins to attend Friday night dancing school with boys. The children invited are all from a select, exclusive group of Presbyterian Pittsburgh families, though Annie can't understand how the process of invitations works. Annie likes dancing school, but she also enjoys playing baseball with her neighbor Ricky and watching Little League. She also plays games about Indians and war with her friend Pin Ford. It's a time that Dillard remembers being exhilarating: Annie felt happy and energetic simply to be in this fascinating, wide-open world.

Annie reads Sherlock Holmes and decides that she wants to become a detective and remember every detail of her life. But she's also drawn to different ideas and interests: as a result of attending church camp for several summers, for instance, her head fills with "religious ideas"—she thinks the Bible is far more subversive than adults, who look benignly on children who like reading, understand. She then grows fascinated by a rock collection that she inherits, third-hand, from a neighbor, and she begins to investigate how to identify everything she owns. She marvels at how the earth itself holds natural treasure, hidden underground right around where she lives. Annie receives a microscope one Christmas, but after racing to tell her parents what she found under its lens and finding them to react without enthusiasm, she begins to recognize that her knowledge will be precious to her because it will be hers alone.

During this time Annie also spends time with her friend Judy Schoyer, who has an intellectual family that invites Annie to spend time with them at their country house in Paw Paw, West Virginia. Annie loves these outings. Meanwhile, her interests move from rocks to insects to disease and epidemiology: she's fascinated by the fact that it was in Pittsburgh that the polio vaccines was created, and she is optimistic that with hard work, everyone—including her—can succeed in whatever they put their minds to. Her family is moving up in the world, too: after Annie's grandfather dies and Oma moves to Florida, they buy Oma's house atop a hill, and no longer associate as much with the neighbors down below.

Annie's reading tastes move to the historical: she is fascinated by novels, histories, and analyses of World War II. It's now the Cold War, and her family has created a comfortable bomb shelter in the basement: Annie imagines living there if nuclear war breaks out. She begins high school, where dancing school yields to country club dances, though all with the same people. Annie also begins to feel restless and frustrated around this time, raging against the strictures imposed upon her by her family, her school, and the church (which she quits by writing a formal letter to the minister). She dives into the French Symbolist poets, whose dramatic verse and early deaths seem romantic and suited to the way she views the world.

At the same time, Annie begins to better understand her own city and American history overall. While her father continues to believe that people who are successful become so because they work hard, and those who don't work as hard end up in worse situations, Annie begins to pay more attention to the plight of the poor in Pittsburgh. The memoir goes into some detail about industrialists like Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie made millions from steel, gave almost all his money away and founded great institutions of learning, art, and science—but he also paid his laborers very little and instituted a standard of harsh working conditions and stingy benefits. Annie begins to feel scorn and suspicion for the well-to-do families that have inherited Pittsburgh's wealth; but as Dillard, the narrator, also points out, she fails to apply her considerable powers of imagination to thinking about the complex inner lives of her neighbors, schoolmates, and friends.

As Annie reaches the end of high school, she begins to get into trouble, crashing a car at a drag race and getting suspended from school for smoking cigarettes. She reads poetry in

translation and thinks about starting a rebellion against her schoolteachers. Ultimately, though, the memoir ends with the news that she'll be attending Hollins College in Virginia. She hasn't learned much about Pittsburgh as a place, nor its inhabitants, but Dillard notes that she feels she needs to leave in order to be able to regain a sense of curiosity and openness toward the world. In the epilogue, Dillard contemplates the relationship between a life and the places in which it's lived, as well as the process of growing up—which involves striving toward something new without quite knowing what that will entail.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) – While Annie Dillard (the narrator and author of the book) and young Annie Doak, the book's protagonist, are the same person, it's important to note that there is a clear difference between their presences on the page. "Annie Doak" is the character who grows up and changes over the course of the memoir, and "Annie Dillard" (her married last name) is the person writing the memories of her childhood in Pittsburgh, from her early years until she left for college at eighteen. Dillard is often critical of (or at least willing to poke fun at) her earlier self. She describes her childhood self as very precocious, fascinated by books, the arts, and science, but also energetic and lively, interested in sports as much as literature. She is curious and eager to learn, but she can also be self-absorbed and limited in her knowledge, as well as unmindful of other people's feelings. Her intelligence and learning become quite impressive over time, although other people in her family sometimes think of her as a know-it-all. Dillard looks back at her earlier self with both sympathy and skepticism, understanding how little she actually did understand at the time, even while marveling at her own curiosity and ambition.

Mother – Annie's mother is, like most other upper-class women she knew in Pittsburgh, a wife and mother without paid employment of her own. Although adhering to many of the social expectations of the family's milieu, Mother is also far from a stereotypical meek housewife. She adores games, comedy, and practical jokes. She can be excitable and exuberant, and she marshals some of her considerable energy into being creative about the household tasks she's in charge of. She differs from her husband in her more left-of-center politics and her obvious sympathy for the poor. Dillard describes her mother as both inextricable from the context of wealthy Pittsburgh women (she does care a great deal about what people in her world think), but also unique in her strange but alluring personality.

Father (Frank Doak) – Annie's father is also similar to many upper- and upper-middle-class Pittsburgh men: he works in business, believes in hard work, and his politics are somewhat conservative. He is logical and thoughtful, though he can also be silly and goofy: he joins in Mother's comedy routines with glee. At certain points, he seems to dream about a different kind of life for himself, particularly when he sets off on a boat down the Ohio River. He also gets involved in a low-budget horror movie production, which shows his unorthodox creative streak that sets him apart from many of his colleagues and friends. Still, his restlessness never rises to the level of Annie's desires to leave Pittsburgh and devour entirely new spheres of knowledge.

Amy – Annie's younger sister, Amy plays a somewhat peripheral role in Annie's narration of her childhood. The two sisters spend a great deal of time together, but are often thrown together without their choosing, and as Annie becomes a teenager she has less and less patience for Amy. Amy is far less wild than Annie: she is quiet, tidy, obedient, and sweet. She is clearly in awe of her older sister.

Oma (Meta Waltenburger Doak) – Annie's paternal grandmother is an elegant, tall redhead. Oma is alluring to Annie in her willingness to chat about adult subjects and include Annie in her daily domestic traditions. But Annie is also aware of a rivalry between Oma and her mother, who fight to have influence over Annie and Amy. Oma was raised very privileged, but Annie's mother (and thus increasingly Annie as well) think of her tastes as tacky. She is, however, kind and generous to her family, even though she can also be close-minded and even racist.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Molly – Annie's youngest sister, she remains the "baby" of the family for almost all of Annie's childhood. Born when Annie is ten years old, she is not present for most of the shared sister experiences that Annie and Amy have.

Frank Doak, senior – Oma's husband, a jovial banker who remains inside smoking cigars and reading the newspaper during vacations. He dies while Annie is still in school.

Margaret Butler – The maid employed by Annie's parents. She is black, and Annie's neighbor Tommy calls her an offensive name when Annie is a child.

Tommy Sheehy – A rough-around-the-edges Irish Catholic boy who is Annie's neighbor, Tommy insults Margaret Butler for her race, and, as a result, Annie's mother forbids her from associating with him.

Jo Ann Sheehy – Tommy's sister, and the subject of one of Annie's most vivid memories: skating outside in the street one night during a cold spell.

Doc Hall – An old man who lives in the alley next to the Doaks' first house.

Walter Milligan – A red-headed boy who is Annie's first love.

Mikey Fahey – A neighborhood boy with whom Annie gets into trouble when they throw a snowball at a passing car's windshield.

Mary Burinda – Oma and Frank Doak senior's maid, who is light-hearted and cheerful and committed to her Catholicism despite Oma's bemused reaction.

Henry Watson – Oma and Frank Doak senior's cook and driver, who is polite and quiet.

Ellin Hahn – A popular girl in Annie's class at school, who is excluded from Annie's dancing class because she is half Jewish.

Tibby – Amy's friend and a neighbor of the Doaks.

Ricky – Tibby's older brother, who plays baseball in the neighborhood with Annie.

Pin (Barbara) Ford – A friend and neighbor of Annie's who joins her in imaginative games.

Mr. Downey – Annie's grandparents' neighbor whose rock collection Annie inherits after he dies.

Judy Schoyer – A friend of Annie's for years, whose parents are wealthy, well-educated, and highly cultured. Judy is less popular than Annie at school but Annie is enchanted by her confidence outside school, especially at her family's country house in Paw Paw, West Virginia.

Mr. Schoyer – Judy's father, who studied history and literature at Harvard and treats Annie as an intellectual equal.

Linda – A friend of Annie's who goes to church and to dances with her.

Dr. Blackwood – The assistant minister at the church who meets with Annie when she "quits" the church.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE INTERIOR LIFE

As a chronicle of her childhood, Annie Dillard's memoir focuses far less on detailing a progression of socially important milestones than on her intellectual development—on the life of the mind. The "interior life" is a phrase repeated throughout the book to describe Annie's fascination with her own mind, which she usually finds more important and interesting than external events. While Dillard relishes the joy she derives from her interior life, as she narrates from her adult perspective, she is careful to distinguish herself now from her childhood self; she recognizes and points out the limitations of her focus on her interior life, particularly her tendency towards self-absorption.

For Dillard, the development of her interior life is a process distinct from, though sometimes related to, formal education. Mostly, Dillard develops her mind through her own omnivorous reading, drawing, and general observations. As her intellect blossoms, she learns more about the world around her and begins to recognize how much lies outside her knowledge. Significantly, the boundlessness of the unknown excites her, as she feels that her joy in learning can progress forever.

As a child, Annie seems to consider her interior life far more real than her social life—and, indeed, the two are often at odds. She frequently feels confusion and dissatisfaction in social conversations with girls her own age, or—especially when she becomes a teenager—with her parents. The difference between the protagonist and the narrator (who is older and presumably wiser) becomes clear as Dillard attempts to explore the reasons for her childhood disdain for others. Annie's interior life, while it gave her joy and satisfaction, also led her to have a limited and self-centered perspective. She often failed to consider that other people, too, might have complex interior lives, and that the way they behaved in public might not have been all that they are. Dillard describes her childhood self as a bit of a know-it-all, so confident in her knowledge that she tended to dismiss other people's ways of knowing without understanding that people could learn outside the realm of books.

Dillard uses the motif of "**awakening**" as a metaphor for her process of learning and her gradual realization of the vastness of knowledge: it's not that she necessarily creates new knowledge, but rather that she becomes aware of what has been present all along. Part of her own awakening, indeed, is a realization that a focus on the interior life can be limiting. At the same time, the memoir maintains a true sense of delight and wonder at the way consciousness develops over time. Dillard clearly places tremendous value on everything that knowledge and curiosity can bring to a person's life.

CURIOSITY AND ATTENTION

It becomes almost immediately apparent in *An American Childhood* that the protagonist is someone with an unusual capacity for attention and observation—a capacity that is fueled by her peculiar and insatiable curiosity. For Dillard, this curiosity is central to intellectual development, because it is its own, self-sufficient motivation to learn, observe, and explore.

Dillard recalls her childhood fascination with Arthur Conan Doyle's books about Sherlock Holmes; she modeled herself after the detective, looking for clues everywhere that would allow her to see the things that other people were unwilling or unable to see. Many moments in the memoir consist not of important milestones in Dillard's life, but rather of detailed and

unique descriptions of images or moments that struck her childhood attention: she spends pages describing the way that older people's skin appears to fit their bodies too loosely, or on the insects and rocks that she collects with eager care.

At the same time, Dillard's intense attention is coupled with a worry that these moments of fascination will slip away. In part, her observations seem meant to will these objects of interest into remaining present, just as they were when she noticed them. Although Dillard avoids the trap of painting the past as a superior, more ideal time than the present, she does admit to having a certain amount of nostalgia for her childhood—a nostalgia that seems to have been present even while Annie was growing up. Indeed, Annie seems to use her attention as a way to fend off nostalgia and regret: she worries that she will miss her childhood if she doesn't pay close enough attention, and once she declines a visit to her friend Judy's river house in Paw Paw because she knows that the vivid, vibrant days spent there might overshadow her regular life. Annie seems to experience things so deeply, thanks to her penchant for close attention and her devouring curiosity, that even pleasant moments can become painful in their intensity.

Although Dillard never makes this link explicitly, it becomes apparent over the course of the memoir that her curiosity and powers of observation foreshadowed her career as a prolific writer. In many ways, the years she recounts in this book can be understood as a training ground for her later life as an author known for her precise, creative, and original prose.

FAMILY, AUTHORITY, AND INSTITUTIONS

Even if the real drama of Annie's growing up takes place within her own mind, most of her external drama has to do with her relationship to authority. Annie's curiosity means that she's a uniquely self-propelled child, but the flip side of her independence is that the institutions and authority figures that lend structure to her childhood irritate her and become sources of tension between her own desires and her institutional obligations.

This tension begins in the home as teenaged Annie feels rage and frustration at requirements as simple as having to sit down for breakfast with her parents. Family is a source of love and nurturing attention in the memoir, but while Dillard makes clear that she loves and admires her family, she is also honest about the ways in which she chafed against even this relatively benign "institution." It's possible, too, that Annie had a model for rebelling against her family; as the tension between Oma and Mother makes clear, families are prone to power struggles, and even good, respectful people can find themselves part of one.

Church and school are the two other major institutions that structure Annie's childhood and adolescence, and she finds herself deeply at odds with both. While her friends can shift their behavior and demeanor to fit different institutional contexts—they can seem like different people at home, at dancing school, and in the classroom, for example—Annie struggles to be anything but herself in every situation. In many ways, this is a sign of confidence and integrity, and it also allows Annie not to accept norms without questioning their value. This means, for example, that Annie is not able to reconcile herself to the segregation of Pittsburgh social life based on religion, and she bristles at any hint of prejudice. However, Annie's struggle with authority can sometimes be haughty and arrogant. By writing a formal letter leaving the church, Annie rebels against what she sees as a stifling and hypocritical institution, only to realize that she has humiliated her parents. As she grows up, though, Annie begins to recognize that it's impossible to run away from all institutions, and that—while she can and should object to distinctions that are drawn based on prejudice—there can also be a certain power to the collective knowledge and authority of institutions like schools and churches.

PLACE AND ENVIRONMENT

At the end of *An American Childhood*, Dillard constructs a kind of thought experiment, asking the reader to imagine how personal memories are tied to a certain place—and how one must accept and trust that these vivid memories are not only beloved imaginative possessions, but also part of a larger world we all share. The sense of responsibility for the environment that stems from this argument is key to Dillard's ethics, and in her memoir she describes how she came to develop such a view. But she also meditates on the difficulties of considering herself as anchored to a certain place, while also trying to appreciate the environment for its own merits—not just what it can do for her.

From an early age, Annie perceives the world around her in sophisticated and rapturous ways that can be understood as the seeds of a lifelong wonder at the natural world. She expresses a great deal of wonder about rocks, for instance, which seem inconspicuous but are—she marvels—some of the oldest objects in the world. Many of the book's most lyrical passages deal with what Dillard calls the "healed rubble" of the earth's surface, physical emblems that signal ancient history on an almost unimaginable scale. But Annie also attempts to manage and even control the vastness of the world around her through various strategies and modes, among them collection, categorization, and visual depiction. From collecting rocks and insects, to sitting for hours as she draws the contours of a shadow on the wall, Annie approaches her environment actively and tangibly. She renders palpable an interest that can otherwise be abstract and philosophical in order to understand how place can shape a person, as well as how people shape their own environments.

Annie comes to understand that Pittsburgh is a place where the

natural and social come together; the book lingers over the city's history, describing the wealth that came from its natural resources of coal and steel, as well as the industrialist Andrew Carnegie's massive influence on the city's landscape, as he used philanthropy to build parks and institutions like museums and libraries. As Annie explores and describes in detail the landscapes around her such as Frick Park and the Glen Arden steps, she comes to recognize how history is embedded within environment: Glen Arden, a wealthy neighborhood built on a hill, literally towers over the poorer, homelier neighborhoods laid out beneath it. The **Polyphemus moth** that Annie's teacher lets loose to escape down the school driveway, in symbolizing Annie's own quixotic determination to succeed and grow, can also be seen as part of the way she learns to relate nature and culture. This relationship is enacted through metaphor, but metaphor that works both ways: Dillard understands the natural world through her specific personified vision, while also coming to understand herself and the people around her by comparisons to the natural world.

Indeed, part of Dillard's memoir is an attempt to understand America overall as a place of both natural beauty and social challenges. Dillard's childhood was distinctly urban, while so much of the country is rural. Her childhood was also privileged, though surrounded by inequality. As a result, Dillard emphasizes that hers is one of many possible American childhoods (which is reflected in her use of "An" in the title of the book, rather than "The"). Annie does draw some generalities: she argues that Pittsburgh's attitude of hard work, religious heritage, and focus on material wealth, for example, are all deeply American. But as she explores the connection between place and identity, she also wants to stress that there is no one-to-one relationship between the two, that both the natural world and individual character are so complex that they can work on each other in a myriad of ways. Indeed, throughout the memoir, Dillard shows how there is no hard-and-fast line to be drawn between the physical environment and the social world; they're instead part of each other in ways that can be both harmful and potentially restorative. As she comes to know more about her own consciousness and develop her interior life, Annie also begins—though still, Dillard notes, in a limited sense—to turn outward to the world beyond her own mind.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

POLYPHEMUS MOTH

One day at school, Annie and her friends gather in awe around a Polyphemus moth in a mason jar. The teacher has accidentally put the moth in too small a jar, so it becomes crippled, unable to spread its wings. The teacher then sets the moth outside on the driveway, where it walks out—seeming, Annie thinks, to be thrilled and excited at its newfound freedom, even though it's about to die. The moth thus symbolizes the simultaneous energy, power, and fragility of childhood; Annie, too, is learning to become self-sufficient and to encounter the world on her own terms. In some ways, Pittsburgh feels to her like a mason jar—cramped and stifling (even though Dillard does signal that this feeling is perhaps a limitation of Annie's own ability to think creatively about her home). Towards the end of the book, Annie imagines her twenty classmates and herself, now about to leave high school, as Polyphemus moths crawling away, unleashed onto the world. She recognizes that she does have the skills and resources to leave home, so she is in a far stronger position than that moth. Nonetheless, its presence in her memory serves as a reminder of how delicate and exhilarating one's upbringing and education, both informal and formal, can be.

AWAKENING

Over the course of the memoir, Dillard uses "waking up" as a metaphor for the workings of her inner consciousness as she comes to recognize the world outside her and her own place within it. Awakening is something that doesn't happen all at once, but rather in steps, making it an apt metaphor for growing up. At the same time, Dillard describes her childhood as a series of awakenings, as waking up multiple times and in different ways. She wakes up from one season to the next, for instance, after having paid little attention to the outside world for a time, and she awakens from middle school into high school. She also wakes up as she begins to embrace reading and writing and learns to see and think in new ways. For Dillard, one of the most important goals in life is to be truly awake: that is, to be alert and attentive to the surrounding world, rather than obsessed with one's own life or with the petty goings-on of society. To grow up is to wake up, then, but awakening is also something to strive for even as an adult.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper & Row edition of *An American Childhood* published in 1989.

Prologue Quotes

Like any child, I slid into myself perfectly fitted, as a diver meets her reflection in a pool. Her fingertips enter the fingertips on the water, her wrists slide up her arms. The diver wraps herself in her reflection wholly, sealing it at the toes, and wears it as she climbs rising from the pool, and ever after.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

After recounting several initial anecdotes about her childhood, Dillard steps back—as she'll do a number of times during her memoir—in order to make more general comments about the nature of childhood. Here she's particularly concerned with a question that will recur again and again throughout the book: the relationship between the interior self and the outside world. In her own childhood, as she will go on to relate, this relationship has varied widely, from her early years to adolescence. The "perfect fit" that Dillard describes here characterizes the earlier period. There's no extra effort required for a diver to meet her reflection as she slides into the pool: it's a natural, even graceful process. Importantly, it happens without any feeling of awkward inaptitude between one's mind and body.

By using this imagery, Dillard wants to make clear how unselfconscious young children can be. They slip into who they are like divers into their reflections, and only later do they come to feel that something doesn't fit. This vivid, evocative image also reflects the way Dillard's mind works—poetically and imaginatively. It provides a glimpse into the mind whose early development she'll track over the rest of the book.

Part One Quotes

❝❝ Who could ever tire of this heart-stopping transition, of this breakthrough shift between seeing and knowing you see, between being and knowing you be? It drives you to a life of concentration, it does, a life in which effort draws you down so very deep that when you surface you twist up exhilarated with a yelp and a gasp.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

As she did with the image of the diver in the prologue, here Dillard also uses metaphoric language in order to describe strikingly and vividly the way she felt in the simple, uncomplicated moments of her early childhood. She's just lingered over several sounds and images that stood out to her as a five-year-old, from the banging of the furnace to the sound of the cars moving by. As a child, Annie stays home with her mother while her father is at work, but she's not bored—instead she remains enraptured by the way she can use her five senses to perceive the world around her.

Dillard reflects here, too, on the way the mind toggles between reasoning or observing, and reflecting on what one sees or recognizes. To truly live, she'll argue implicitly, means one has to stay alert even to the mundane aspects of daily life. She sees her own artistic and literary interest as anchored in these early memories, when she learned how to value each place where she happened to find herself and notice whatever it had to offer.

❝❝ The interior life is often stupid. Its egoism blinds it and deafens it; its imagination spins out ignorant tales, fascinated. It fancies that the western wind blows on the Self, and leaves fall at the feet of the Self for a reason, and people are watching. A mind risks real ignorance for the sometimes paltry prize of an imagination enriched. The trick of reason is to get the imagination to seize the actual world—if only from time to time.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

At several points in her narration, Dillard makes general statements about childhood and intellectual development, arguments drawn from her recollections about her own childhood. This quote might seem surprising coming from someone who clearly so prized the inner life—and who, as a writer of fiction and nonfiction, has continued to structure her professional life around communicating her inmost thoughts. But as Dillard looks back on her childhood, she recognizes the limitations of such a focus on the interior life, too.

The problem that Dillard recognizes in her earlier self is that what was going on in her own mind seemed so fascinating to her that she, at least at times, failed to pay due attention to other people and to the outside world. There is something selfish, she notes, in preferring one's own imagination: it makes it easier to forget that other people

have interesting, complex lives and minds of their own. Dillard concludes by suggesting that the solution is not necessarily to dismiss one's own creativity and imagination, but rather to learn how to direct those forces outward rather than inward.

❝ These are the few, floating scenes from early childhood, from before time and understanding pinned events down to the fixed and coherent world. Soon the remembered scenes would grow in vividness and depth, as like any child I elaborated a picture of the place, and as my feelings met actual people, and as the interesting things of the world engaged my loose mind like a gear, and set it in forward motion.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

While there is a loose chronology to *An American Childhood*, the narrative often moves back and forth through time. Especially for her earliest memories, Dillard tends to relate them as disjointed anecdotes, which are vivid and real to her as images alone, rather than as points in a coherent story. This is the way distant memories work, she suggests here. Children are already very comfortable in their own heads, and in the immediate environment around them. But they aren't able or particularly willing to figure out how these scenes and images fit together logically.

While an earlier quotation had been critical of imagination as potentially self-centered and limited, here Dillard implies that the expansion of one's imaginative universe from the mind into the outside world is a normal process of growing up. "Like any child," she says that she gradually came to link her mind and the world—suggesting that she's not unique in doing so.

❝ Walking was my project before reading. The text I read was the town; the book I made up was a map.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

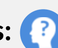
Explanation and Analysis

Annie has a rather substantial amount of freedom for a young girl: her mother allows her to roam around the neighborhood by herself, exploring, playing with friends, and pursuing whatever strikes her fancy. Dillard has already referred to the love of reading that she would develop later on; here she links this obsession to an earlier love, that of wandering. Annie "reads" Pittsburgh like a book: that is, she pays close attention to the signs and features of the town, tries to interpret them, and learns from them. She also "writes" the city in drawing her own maps—maps that have less to do with general landmarks like post offices, intersections, and highways, than with the places that are important to her. Dillard thus implies that there is a close connection between reading and making a place one's own: both need to involve attention, observation and a curious mind, and both helped her to feel at home in a certain place herself.

Part Two Quotes

❝ We children lived and breathed our history—our Pittsburgh history, so crucial to the country's story and so typical of it as well—without knowing or believing any of it. For how can anyone know or believe stories she dreamed in her sleep, information for which and to which she feels herself to be in no way responsible? A child is asleep. Her private life unwinds inside her skin and skull; only as she sheds childhood, first one decade and then another, can she locate the actual, historical stream, see the setting of her dreaming private life—the nation, the city, the neighborhood, the house where the family lives—as an actual project under way, a project living people willed, and made well or failed, and are still making, herself among them.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

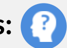
Dillard's memoir is a chronicle of her own childhood, but it is also a depiction of Pittsburgh in the 1950s and 1960s—at least one sliver of the city that she happened to know very well. Here, she meditates on the different ways history and environment can influence people as they grow up. On the one hand, Annie has explored much of her home city, and has read about its history in books. But that doesn't mean

she really knows the place. For a long time, Pittsburgh history remains either an abstract, general notion—something like a scientific law that she knows is true, but doesn't seem to influence her personally—or as something that is already finished and in the past.

But, again relying on the distinction between the inner life and the outer world, Dillard argues that the process of growing up is in part the process of reconciling these two worlds. Here, that involves understanding the history of a place not as something over and done with, but as something that is in the process of being made, even today. Annie, too, will have to learn how to imagine herself as part of the "project" of Pittsburgh history—and she can only do so if she feels that the environment around her both implicates and includes her, and is bigger and broader than her own self and interests.

❝❞ And, similarly, things themselves possessed no fixed and intrinsic amount of interest; instead things were interesting as long as you had attention to give them.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Annie has begun to devote the month of August to following the instructions of a drawing book, borrowed from one of her neighbors. The book directs its readers to complete a certain number of "exercises" each day: gesture drawings, memory drawings, and sustained studies. She realizes that, depending on whether she chooses one exercise or another, drawing the same object—in her case, a baseball mitt—might take a few minutes, or might take all morning. As a result, Annie begins to recognize that there that there's not simply a hierarchy of more interesting to less interesting in the scenes, objects, and even people around her. Instead, she can increase or decrease the interest she has in something simply based on how much attention she devotes to it. This is a freeing realization for Annie, although she can't quite articulate it at the time. While she'll continue to dream about exciting adventures and quests, her drawing studies here have already suggested that she can apply her curiosity to even the most mundane-seeming objects wherever she happens to find herself.

❝❞ They must have known, those little boys, that they would inherit corporate Pittsburgh, as indeed they have. They must have known that it was theirs by rights as boys, a real world, about which they had best start becoming informed. And they must have known, too, as Pittsburgh Presbyterian boys, that they could only just barely steal a few hours now, a few years now, to kid around, to dribble basketballs and explode firecrackers, before they were due to make a down payment on a suitable house.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Annie has started dancing school, where she and the other girls are enraptured by the boys, who seem both more mature and goofier than the girls are. Annie doesn't know enough about them to do more than observe and discuss them with her friends. But looking back on her dancing school days as an adult, Dillard poignantly reflects on the kinds of men these "little boys"—she now knows, decades later—would become. In a way ten-year-old Annie couldn't grasp, Dillard knows now that she grew up in a privileged community of Pittsburgh elites, one in which adults raised their children to pursue the specific kinds of lucrative, respectable professions that their generation had.

Dillard recognizes that she and the boys were lucky to grow up far from poverty and insecurity, but she also considers that there's something sad in the limited, strict trajectory made available to these boys, imposed on them by the authorities of their parents and schools. The constriction inherent to this trajectory is something that's easier, perhaps, for her to see, since she wouldn't eventually follow the same path.

❝❞ There was joy in concentration, and the world afforded an inexhaustible wealth of projects to concentrate on. There was joy in effort, and the world resisted effort to just the right degree, and yielded to it at last. People cut Mount Rushmore into faces; they chipped here and there for years. People slowed the spread of yellow fever; they sprayed the Isthmus of Panama puddle by puddle. Effort alone I loved.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Annie has begun to learn more about the world around her, especially through the seemingly infinite stacks of books at the Homewood Library. One might think that gazing on these huge amounts of books and thinking about everything that she doesn't know might be frightening or intimidating to Annie, but she doesn't think about things this way. Instead she's excited and optimistic about all there is to learn, and she's confident that if people only work hard enough then they'll continue to make advances like stopping yellow fever or constructing Mount Rushmore—advances that she might, one day, be part of.

Although Annie doesn't quite see it this way, her optimism about effort and achievement reflects an attitude that, as the book suggests, is typical of Pittsburgh—or at least of its leaders and elites, who *have* largely succeeded in what they've wanted. Annie thus sees a relatively biased sample of adults, one that excludes both great failures, as well as the potentially unwanted side effects of great achievements. But the narrative treats Annie's optimism fairly, as understandable and even admirable in her eagerness to learn and grow, even if a bit naïve.

> I wanted to notice everything, as Holmes had, and remember it all, as no one had before.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

Annie has discovered the books about the detective Sherlock Holmes, written by Arthur Conan Doyle. They're perfect for her: Annie sees herself as a kind of detective for whom the mystery she's trying to solve is the world itself and all the knowledge within it. By reading, observing, and exploring, she can uncover more clues as to how things work and how they came to be. She also better understands, as a result of reading Sherlock Holmes, how important it is for any kind of detective to pay close attention to everything: Holmes is thus a model for the way she views her own curiosity. At the same time, Annie's optimism and energy makes her want to exceed Holmes's standard. It's not enough, she thinks, to notice—she has to remember everything, as well. This monumental, ultimately impossible task will lead her to feel overwhelmingly nostalgic, as she obsesses over prizing and retaining all her memories. But the fact that she even sets this task for herself underlines Annie's exuberant, marveling attitude towards the world.

> I had essentially been handed my own life. In subsequent years my parents would praise my drawings and poems, and supply me with books, art supplies, and sports equipment, and listen to my troubles and enthusiasms, and supervise my hours, and discuss and inform, but they would not get involved with my detective work, nor hear about my reading, nor inquire about my homework or term papers or exams, nor visit the salamanders I caught, nor listen to me play the piano, nor attend my field hockey games, nor fuss over my insect collection with me, or my poetry collection or stamp collection or rock collection. My days and nights were my own to plan and fill.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker), Father (Frank Doak) , Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Annie has been given a microscope kit for her birthday, and she has just discovered an amoeba by peering through the glass into a sample she's collected from a puddle outside. She races downstairs to inform her parents, but they are calmly sitting and having an after-dinner drink, and while they seem happy for Annie, they hardly express as much enthusiasm as she might have expected. Rather than being disappointed, though, Annie feels in some way freed. Other children might feel oppressed by their parents' constant interference in their lives—and even Annie, as a teenager, will later feel burdened by the few obligations her parents require of her—but for now, Annie's parents' hands-off approach makes Annie's artistic and scientific explorations her own. She can choose what interests her and map her own path to knowledge and discovery. As Dillard seems to recognize, her parents' attitude doesn't mean they are distant or unconcerned—instead, they are giving her the gift of independence, allowing her to develop her inner life by herself.

❝ I knew what I was doing at Paw Paw: I was beginning the lifelong task of tuning my own gauges. I was there to brace myself for leaving. I was having my childhood. But I was haunting it as well, practically reading it, and preventing it. How much noticing could I permit myself without driving myself round the bend?

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Annie has been invited by her friend Judy Schoyer to the Schoyer family's country house in Paw Paw, West Virginia. She adores the weekends she spends there, playing by the river with Judy, making up games, and fielding intellectual questions from Mr. Schoyer in the evenings. But Annie has such a fierce adoration of the place that it almost becomes physically painful for her to be there: sometimes she is in despair right after arriving, just because they'll have to leave in a few days.

One of the disadvantages to paying such close attention to the events and places around her, Annie realizes, is that she does feel things intensely, and almost painfully at times. According to Dillard's own beliefs, it's a good thing that she'd begun to learn to reflect on "having her childhood" at the same time as she was living it. But Annie recognizes that there's a limit to the amount she can notice without going crazy: she has to learn to manage the waves of images and sensations that sometimes overwhelm her.

❝ At school I saw a searing sight. It turned me to books; it turned me to jelly; it turned me much later, I suppose, into an early version of a runaway, a scapegrace. It was only a freshly hatched Polyphemus moth crippled because its mason jar was too small.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

The Polyphemus moth is an insect that Annie's teacher kept in a mason jar in her classroom at school. Annie and her other classmates watch in fascination as it hatches and attempts to move its wings, but it cannot because of the size of the mason jar. As a result Annie's teacher lets it outside, where it begins to crawl down the school driveway with what Annie imagines is a plucky, stubborn determination to continue on despite its injury.

Annie sees herself, at various points in the book, as a kind of Polyphemus moth: Pittsburgh comes to feel too small and cramped for her, for example, and she longs to be released into the world. The insect may be small, fragile, and weak, but its determination is inspiring to Annie, who maintains an optimism that she will be able to succeed in what she puts her mind to. But Annie also returns to the Polyphemus moth as an example of the wonder she finds in the natural world. The moth is an example of the marvelous unknown that lies waiting for her.

❝ What were my friends reading? We did not then talk about books; our reading was private, and constant, like the interior life itself.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Annie's own reading has turned to books about World War II: she was born just as it ended, and is particularly fascinated by this recent history that simultaneously seems so foreign and distant to her. She lists a number of books that "we" read, referring to her friends at school, but then acknowledges that she could only assume that this was a generational trend, given that she and her friends didn't talk about what they were reading. Dillard does imply at various points that her earlier view that reading should be totally private was limited: reading can also be a shared activity and a source of mutual understanding. The fact that so many other people have checked out her beloved Fields and Streams books from the Homewood Library, for instance, already suggests that there exists a community of people enthusiastic about Annie's private interests that she didn't know about. Still, at this time in her life Annie seems to take pleasure in keeping the experience of reading private and all to herself, something that she can imagine to be all her own.

❝ I was now believing books more than I believed what I saw and heard. I was reading books about the actual, historical, moral world—in which somehow I felt I was not living.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Dillard reflects on the limitations of her earlier self's engagements with literature and the outside world. Although she is critical of her younger self, Dillard does underline the ways in which her reading and imagination formed her into the person she is today. At the same time, though, Dillard unmasks the paradox of choosing to immerse herself in books about the "real world," while failing to see that this world was right outside her window. Books seem more real than reality to the adolescent Annie, who is admirably imaginative, but also who prefers to direct her imagination to certain things more than to others. In order to fully grow up, Dillard suggests, she would have to recognize a continuity between books and life, rather than considering them as being separate and apart.

❝ I left Pittsburgh before I had a grain of sense. Who IS my neighbor? I never learned what those strangers around me had known and felt in their lives—those lithe, sarcastic boys in the balcony, those expensive men and women in the pews below—but it was more than I knew, after all.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Annie is in a period of adolescence when she feels angry at everyone, frustrated by her parents and by school and church, the institutions that seem to press on her unbearably. Throughout this memory, she has been sitting in church and gazing with scorn on the other people there, from the teenage boys to the mothers. Having grown up with these families, she believes that she knows everything there is to know about them, and they no longer hold interest for her. In some ways, through this critique of her younger self, Dillard signals that she had forgotten the important lesson she'd learned from drawing the baseball mitt over and over again: that interest lies not so much in objects as in how you choose to look at them.

Years later, Dillard reflects that she chose not to take the time to really get to know and appreciate her neighbors—this is an implicit and ironic allusion to the moment in the Gospels when Jesus tells his disciples to "love your neighbor as yourself." She shouldn't have needed to leave Pittsburgh to learn from the people around her, but she found that she couldn't appreciate Pittsburgh or its people until she had left.

Part Three Quotes

❝ Scientists, it seemed to me as I read the labels on display cases (bivalves, univalves; ungulates, lagomorphs), were collectors and sorters, as I had been. They noticed the things that engaged the curious mind: the way the world develops and divides, colony and polyp, population and tissue, ridge and crystal. Artists, for their part, noticed the things that engaged the mind's private and idiosyncratic interior, that area where the life of the senses mingles with the life of the spirit: the shattering of light into color, and the way it shades off round a bend.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

Annie has been spending time at the public museums in Pittsburgh, lingering over the natural history exhibits and wandering around the art galleries. Throughout her childhood, she's been equally drawn to art and science—to drawing and to rock collecting, for instance—even though people often divide artistic and scientific pursuits into entirely different fields.

Here, though, Annie considers art and science as part of the same broad goal—to engage the mind and relate it to the outside world. It's just that artists and scientists do so through different aspects of the mind: outward observation for scientists, and introspective consideration for artists. This conclusion gives Annie a sense that she won't need to choose one pursuit over the other. She can continue being curious about the world, and engaged by the questions of style, form, and beauty that appeal to her inner consciousness.

❝ I was growing and thinning, as if pulled. I was getting angry, as if pushed. I morally disapproved most things in North America, and blamed my innocent parents for them. My feelings deepened and lingered. The swift moods of early childhood—each formed by and suited to its occasion—vanished. Now feelings lasted so long they left stains. They arose from nowhere, like winds or waves, and battered at me or engulfed me.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker), Father (Frank Doak) , Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Dillard describes her transition from childhood to adolescence in a number of different ways. Here she again turns to evocative metaphorical language—feelings "leave stains" and "batter" her like the wind—in order to focus on the intensity and acute force of her experiences. These kinds of feelings are familiar to most people: Annie is hardly alone in wanting to rebel against her parents, and at feeling out of sorts and alienated by society itself. The institutions that have always structured her life, from school to church to family, seem more oppressive now than ever.

At the same time, it's possible to trace a path from the equally intense (though more often exuberant and joyful) moods that she experienced as a younger girl, to the way Annie feels now. As aware of herself and precocious as she's always been, her intensity seems to make it difficult for Annie to maintain control over her thoughts and ideas, rather than becoming exhausted by the weight of her own mind.

❝ It galled me that adults, as a class, approved the writing and memorization of poetry. Wasn't poetry secret and subversive?

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

Annie became obsessed with the French Symbolist poets before diving in to Middle Eastern and Chinese poetry, as well as beginning to write herself. She attends a small, nurturing all-girls' school, and her teachers seem to want to encourage their students' artistic pursuits—one of Annie's teachers offers to lead a poetry workshop during their lunch hour. Annie's response, though, is more suspicious than grateful. Her reaction can be explained in light of similar attitudes in the past: because of her parents' hands-off attitude to her explorations, Annie has always been able to feel like books and even the natural world belong to her alone. Now, institutional authority is encroaching on her relationship with poetry, which Annie wants to guard jealously as part of her interior life, rather than having it institutionalized like so much else at school. Dillard adopts the perspective of her younger self here, but she also seems to characterize her earlier perspective with a certain measure of irony: poetry may feel "secret and subversive," but even the poetry she loves has been published and shared with many people, making it part of the wider world, rather than belonging to one person alone.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ The setting of our urgent lives is an intricate maze whose blind corridors we learn one by one—village street, ocean vessel, forested slope—without remembering how or why they connect in space.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

As she prepares to conclude her memoir, Dillard returns to the relationship between the mind and the world outside herself, something that has preoccupied her throughout the book. In this quotation, focusing on setting and place helps her to reconcile reality and consciousness: setting can be understood simultaneously as a physical space, the theater for a person's memories, and the cornerstone of her intellectual development. A person's life is a "maze," according to Dillard, because it's impossible to know in advance where it will take them—people move from one setting to another in part because of willed action, but also because of chance or circumstance.

But the comparison of the setting of a person's life to a maze also makes sense for Dillard because she's so concerned with the memories of her own childhood that have mounted up, one by one. She's structured the memoir more episodically and anecdotally than chronologically

because that's the way she remembers the past: as images and scenes to be noticed and treasured, but without a great deal of connective tissue to make sense out of them.

❝❝ For it is not you or I that is important, neither what sort we might be nor how we came to be each where we are. What is important is anyone's coming awake and discovering a place, finding in full orbit a spinning globe one can lean over, catch, and jump on. What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch—with an electric hiss and cry—this speckled mineral sphere, our present world.

Related Characters: Annie Dillard (Annie Doak) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 248-249

Explanation and Analysis

Dillard continues to reflect on her own childhood while also broadening her purview to generalize about the process of growing up. Here she states most explicitly a point that has been threaded throughout her memoir. While she describes her interior life as vital to her, Dillard also stresses something that it took her longer to learn: that it's less important to think about herself as smart or independent than to think of herself as part of a world far vaster and more marvelous than her own individuality. In fact, it's impossible to totally separate self and world—she is a part of the world by living in it, which only makes it more important to value and treasure everything this world has to offer. Dillard concludes with typically vivid evocative language that attempts to prove how special it can be to consider the world with such wonder.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Annie Dillard, the author and narrator who is recording her memories from almost forty years before, imagines that when she forgets everything else from her life, she will remember topology: the way her city falls around the mountain valleys, divided by the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers, and the land where they meet.

Rather than beginning her memoir with a straightforward account of when and where she was born, Dillard chooses to open her book with an evocative recollection of her hometown, discussing the relationship between environment and consciousness.

Dillard recounts the legend that, centuries earlier, a squirrel could run from one end of Pennsylvania to another without touching the ground by moving across many different kinds of trees. In the middle of the eighteenth century, when Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were living in eastern cities, there was not a single English or Indian settlement west of the Alleghenies in Pennsylvania.

Dillard is still fascinated by the long history of Pittsburgh, one that is wrapped up with the history of the United States as a country. While one might think of Pittsburgh as entirely urban, she stresses here that there is a wild, frontier-like quality to the city because of its history.

In 1753 George Washington decided to make the point of confluence of the Ohio, Allegheny, and Monongahela rivers a fort; later it became a French fort, but not for another ten years would there be any settlers there.

Pittsburgh was a key place in the American Revolution and the French and Indian War, a history that precedes the steel industry the city is known for.

In 1955, when Annie was ten, her father, an executive in the family firm of American Standard, was inspired by a book called *Life on the Mississippi* to pilot a boat down the Allegheny river: he quit the firm and sold his stakes, heading toward New Orleans, home of the Dixieland jazz music that he had always loved. Annie was reading Robert Louis Stevens's book *Kidnapped* while he was preparing, and she recalls watching him outside on the porch, a dreamy expression in his eyes.

Annie's description of her father as an executive implies that he is dedicated to a professional and structured life, but as the subsequent depiction of his decision to sail down the Allegheny river implies, he's more complicated and spontaneous than his job title indicates. Like Annie reading an adventure book, he too wants to go off in search of adventures.

When Annie's parents met, Frank Doak was an only child, a lapsed Presbyterian, and a Republican, with an artistic sensibility. He'd listened to jazz, written poems, painted, and acted as a young man. Now as a ten-year old, Annie was sad that, since Frank was quitting his job as a personnel manager, he'd be leaving his 14th-floor building. He sometimes saw suicides jumping from the roof into the river, or being talked out of it by people gathering on the bridge: these stories thrilled Annie and her sister Amy. The colleagues had a betting pool guessing the next date and time a jumper would appear, though it still counted if the person was talked out of it. They would all shout through the window telling him not to.

Frank Doak seems to have been torn in his life between his parents' expectations for him—expectations he largely followed in shedding his youthful ways and becoming a white-collar employee and executive—and his own artistic dreams. As a child, Annie doesn't see the tragedy at the heart of the story about the suicides. For her, this is another way her father is still adventurous, while black humor better characterizes his and his colleagues' responses.

©2020 LitCharts LLC

The morning Annie was reading *Kidnapped*, her father wandered through the house listening to jazz and snapping his figures. A week later he cheerfully said goodbye to Mother (who was in favor of the plan), his 10-year-old, 7-year-old, and 6-month-old daughters, and started off. After 640 miles he stopped to visit Louisville, Kentucky, and began to feel a little lonely; it was September, so there weren't other pleasure boats out anymore, and New Orleans was still a few months away. Mother told him that she was getting lonely too, and that people were starting to talk: he prized respectability, so he at once sold the boat and flew home.

The fact that Mother is in favor of Father's decision to leave his family and small children to travel suggests that she, too, is somewhat of a free spirit. Nevertheless, there are limits to his sense of adventure: both Annie's parents are not so free-spirited that they disdain what other people think. They are ensconced within a community in Pittsburgh, one that influences their actions even when they choose to break with expectations.

At ten years old, Dillard relates, children "**wake up**" *in medias res* to discover that they already know the neighborhood, they can read, and yet they feel like everything is new. She says that, like all children, she slid into herself perfectly fitted, like a diver into her reflection in a pool. She remembers feeling like she viewed the world as a dizzying precipice, imagining that she was both observer and a possible object of observation herself: a strange but exciting sentiment.

Dillard has a knack for unusual, vivid imagery and metaphors to describe how her childhood felt. Here she attempts to account for the difference between being alive, in a physical, material, sense, and slowly becoming aware of the larger world—a process that takes longer than becoming aware of oneself.

PART ONE

Dillard begins her story at five years old, in 1950. She describes the silence of her neighborhood (and neighborhoods across America), emptied each morning as the men left in a rush, the Catholic schoolchildren raced toward St. Bede's church schools, and the men drove carefully around them. The war was over, and people seemed to want to settle down: Annie was born on the day Hitler died in April 1945. Her mother, like other women, stayed alone at home all day. For now, so did Annie.

In 1950, five years after World War II ended, a new era was beginning in America. This was an era of prosperity for many, but it was also rife with the worries and global political tensions of the Cold War. It was also a time, as Dillard makes clear, of continued differentiation between expectations for men and women in her milieu: her mother is expected to stay home rather than work.

Annie recalls asking herself if she was living while gazing outside the window and sinking into daydreams. The icebox motor jerked her awake and it (or the dripping faucet or other things children notice) told her she was living. It was a marvel, she writes, that so many times a day the world reminded her she was there and **awake**. She asks how anyone could ever get weary of this tug-and-pull of oblivion and awareness.

The icebox motor is something it would be easy not to pay any attention to, but throughout the memoir Annie will be drawn to sights, sounds, and smells that seem unusual to her if not to other people. The attitude of wonder that she feels at even mundane aspects of the world is part of her awakening.

Annie wandered outside, where her mother told her to lie on her back and try to see what the clouds looked like. Annie wondered how anyone could find this worth doing. She hoped the war would break out again and she could have a real use for her cap gun. Little by little, the leaves fell from their trees and, on Saturday afternoons, she watched the men rake them into heaps. It snowed and then stopped, and Annie wandered around the cold neighborhood, looking at the deep blue shadows, until the streetlights came on and **woke her up**: now it was winter.

Annie's mother, too, is interested in the world around her, but this anecdote shows that Annie prefers to lend her attention to what she herself is interested in, not what adults tell her she should find beautiful. Here Dillard fast-forwards through memories that are most likely blurry to her, many years on, as the seasons blend into each other throughout her childhood.

©2020 LitCharts LLC

Dillard notes that the "interior life" is often blinded by self-centeredness, by its imagining that the world revolves around the self. What reason does, she says, is to allow the imagination to get a hold of the real world, if only from time to time.

Annie is, from an early age, well aware of the way her mind works, and precociously able to direct it: but looking back, Dillard suggests that there are drawbacks to this mode.

In 1950, Annie recalls, she had trouble going to bed because "something" would come into her room and she believed that if she mentioned it, it would kill her. Her sister Amy, at two, slept unaware in the other room. Transparent and bright, the thing had a head and tail and moved quickly from the door across the wall, before stopping at the corner and shrinking into itself. Annie wouldn't go to bed, knowing it might return. Finally, one night, she figured out that it was the corner streetlight outside, reflected through a passing car.

Like many children, Annie has a fear of the dark and of the beasts and monsters that might inhabit the night. She is able, like usual, to carefully describe this monster. But this story is also evidence for the power of reason, as mentioned in the section above: Annie eventually is able to link what she believes she sees with an actual phenomenon outside.

Learning this was memorable in its own right: it showed Annie the process of reasoning. She solved the puzzle by comparing the noise of daytime cars to the noise associated with the monster and by figuring out how a car light could cast a shadow. A summer earlier, she had watched men with jackhammers on Edgerton Avenue and, when she lay down to nap, she heard the same sound—she'd realized that the inside and outside worlds were connected. Now, though, she had to relearn it.

Using her reason to master or at least control her imagination, Annie begins to piece together a number of elements she's noticed, and begins to recognize that they are not disparate pieces of data but all part of a larger world. Annie is learning that the world exists outside of her, and that he is part of something larger.

Annie realized that she could yield to a fictional tale or learn to reason: each night she gave into the fiction, and then took pleasure in replacing it with reason.

Fiction is powerful to Annie, but she enjoys recognizing its limits and controlling its pleasure.

Another object of Annie's fascination was the limp, coarse skin of her parents and grandparents and their friends. Children's hands fit their skin, while adults had knuckly hands that were loose in their skins, and yet they never seemed to notice. Mother would allow Annie sometimes to play with her fingers, lifting them one after another, making ridges like the Alleghenies. She imagined that the trapezoids on her own skin were versions of the dust specks with which God had fashioned Adam and Eve. Sometimes she would try to count these trapezoids.

Once again, Annie shows a curiosity and attention to detail that is particularly remarkable for someone so young. What Annie notices, though, is bound up in her own experience: she doesn't see skin as related to a process of aging, but rather as a fascinating, odd difference between adults and children, one that can engage her attention for hours.

Sometimes, while Annie's mother was napping, Annie would touch her mother's smooth, fair face to see how flexible it was. If her mother woke up, she reminded Annie not to touch people's faces while they were sleeping. Annie noticed a red gash, a welt from the cushion she was lying on, but her mother didn't seem interested. She also noticed the hair on her father's arms and legs, pulling at it until he said "ouch." And at the beach she felt her parents' shinbones and noticed the long bones of their feet, which she also found terrible.

The fascination that Annie feels for something as humdrum (to other people) as skin can lead her to act not quite in accordance with social expectations. But her parents both seem relatively content to allow Annie to explore and wonder about their bodies, treating them like experiments, as they are the living beings in closest proximity to her.

Dillard says that, even though her parents seemed old to her, they were still young, and they were even younger than other parents. She was in awe of them when they dressed up for fancy occasions, marveling how her mother transformed from a napping housewife into a figure of beauty. Her father was taller than everyone else. Annie didn't think the parties sounded like much fun: she could have suggested fun games to her parents, but they weren't interested in running around, just like they weren't fascinated by their loose skin and old age.

Although Annie as a child is fascinated by what seems like her parents' great age, as an adult it's clearer to her that she was raised by relatively young parents. In some ways, her parents are alluring, sophisticated and beautiful. To a child, though, even their parties seem like strange, boring chores, far from the more alluring world of childhood.

In 1950 there was a big snowstorm, requiring Father to walk four miles with a sled to carry back milk. The family had a puppy then, which her parents would toss into the yard where it would pop up and down in the snow. It turned out that the puppy had distemper; a few days later it died.

These memories that Dillard plows up from deep within her childhood are sometimes disjunctive—images and feelings that are powerful and vivid but might lack a clear narrative.

Annie remembered the beautiful, strange sight of Jo Ann Sheehy skating on the street during the second week of the big snow. The Sheehy family was Irish Catholic from a rough neighborhood. One summer, Jo Ann's brother Tommy told Annie to tell her maid she was a "nigger." She told Margaret Butler so when she got home; later that night, Mother came into her room, angry but calm, and told her never to use such words or associate with people who did.

In addition to her parents, Annie's neighbors are some of the first people she interacts with around her. At a young age, she doesn't realize how deeply offensive what Tommy said is, and how hurtful it would be to the family's maid, Margaret Butler. Already, Annie begins to learn about discrimination and prejudice.

The night Annie saw Jo Ann Sheehy skating, they were having dinner in the dining room, the only light coming from the candles on the table and from the blue fluorescent lamp illuminating their fish tank. They ate silently, protected from the dangerous cold. Then Mother looked outside, and Annie followed her gaze to see Jo Ann turning on ice skates, wearing a short skirt, mittens, and a red knitted cap. The packed snow of the street illuminated her from below. Annie marveled, and wondered if a car might come: she herself wasn't allowed to play in the open street. She watched as Jo Ann skated out of the light and emerged again under another streetlight.

Annie's relationship to the Sheehy family is, so far, one of skepticism and suspicion as a result of Tommy's comment. But the observation of Tommy's sister Jo Ann is an entirely different kind of memory—one not of ugly prejudice, but of beauty. The memory, once again, has to do more with a strong, vibrant image, one of great light and movement, than with a clear narrative path—a typical case for the memories of early childhood that Dillard relates.

Annie continued, for a long time, to think of this night as emblematic of the contrast between the beauty and mystery outside the house and the peace and safety within. There was pleasure but also danger because of the night, cold, and forbidden open street, not to mention the fact that Jo Ann was Tommy's brother, who had made Annie the recipient of her mother's anger. The next morning Annie watched Jo Ann walk to school in a blue plaid skirt.

Annie is still attempting to reconcile the outside world with the world of her own mind, and her interpretation of the significance of the memory is also characterized by the limitations of a child's perspective. Dillard implicitly hints that her earlier self was unable to see Tommy's racism as a problem in its own right; instead, she saw it as a danger that could mean trouble for her.

Annie knew that the Catholic schoolchildren had to fill their workbooks with "gibberish" that they had to memorize but also believe. She and the other Protestant children spread rumors that the St. Bede's children worked in the dark and wrote down whatever the Pope said, before returning to their homes with imposing crucifixes and stewed fish for dinner.

Catholics and Protestants are both Christian, but Dillard shows that in Pittsburgh in the 1950s, there was a great gap between Catholics and Protestants, and even mutual suspicion and prejudice based on different religious customs.

One day that spring, Annie waited and watched the St. Bede's students leaving school, followed by a black army of nuns, seeming to be faceless. She didn't know the nuns were the teachers; they seemed like prisoners, with faces that had rotted away. Mother marched Annie outside and asked one of the nuns if she could say hello to her daughter: as one bent down, Annie, realizing she couldn't hide, let out a wail.

Nuns are Catholic, so Annie isn't familiar with them—and lack of familiarity, here, breeds suspicion and fear. Annie's mother, though, wants her daughter to be aware of the humanity behind the masks of the nuns, although in this case her attempt backfires.

Dillard describes how these preceding scenes float without much coherence; soon they would grow more vivid and deep.

Dillard explains the evocative but sometimes jumbled memories that form the early sections of the book.

As Dillard grew, her understanding of things expanded; for instance, she began to know her mother as a person. In her twenties, Annie's mother had a taste for modernist furniture and Gaugin paintings. She spoke with ironic wit, puns, lines from Sinatra songs, and "Scotticisms" like "Put your wee headie down." She wasn't Scotch at all, rather Pennsylvania Dutch and French, but the Pittsburg where she grew up was almost entirely Scotch-Irish, and Mother picked up those expressions.

As Annie grows older, she'll begin to fit certain observations and random events into a more complete portrait. Here her mother emerges as a great wit, a sophisticated woman who knows what her tastes are, but who also doesn't appear to take herself too seriously.

Mother would wake up Annie and Amy by racing into their room and opening the windows to say "It smells like a French whorehouse in here," then running back out. She had great energy and sometimes wild moods. Her father had been a popular mayor who died when she was seven, leaving her with a sense of wistful nostalgia and longing. On Christmas Eve she would carry the girls to the bedroom, open the window, and ask if they could hear Santa's bells from far away.

To Annie and Amy, expressions like these are a mystery—it's only with the benefit of hindsight that Dillard can see the (probably inappropriate) humor in describing a child's bedroom as a "whorehouse." But Mother is also loving and fanciful: one can see her mother's influence in Annie's sense of wonder.

©2020 LitCharts LLC

In a dark room above a dirty alley next to the family's yard lived a "terrible" old man, Doc Hall, and his sister. He would look out from the high set of rooms and curse at the kids playing on his woodpile. His sister went to early Mass each morning, dressed in black with a black cane.

Doc Hall is one of a number of adult characters that populate Annie's childhood and whom she remembers almost as figures from a book, ominous and flat rather than fully rounded individuals. Note, too, that this ominous figure is also Catholic.

Once Annie found a dime in the alley while she was digging under a poplar. She showed it to her father, who read the date, 1919, and said it might be valuable. He explained that soil tends to build up around old things: in Rome, he'd seen doorways several stories underground. Annie marveled, imagining Roman children being buried over their heads. She turned the dime over in her hand and decided her life would be devoted to treasure hunting.

To Annie, a dime from 1919—which was long before she was born—might as well be a piece of treasure from many centuries ago. Her father, too, has a penchant for adventure and for history, and it's thanks to him that Annie develops her first notion of what she might like to do in life: continue to hunt out these sources of wonder.

Dillard concludes, "That's all": there were only a few thoughts repeated over and over in her inner life for many years. She would long be fascinated by treasure, as something you could dig out of the dirt in a dismal, forsaken place away from ordinary life.

While Dillard cannot remember much about her early childhood, she also isolates moments like these as significant in terms of her own intellectual development.

Annie spent a lot of time walking around the streets, memorizing her neighborhood, and exploring on a bicycle. At seven, she fell in love with a redhead named Walter Milligan, a tough Catholic who played football at Miss Frick's field, where she'd sit and watch him before heading home. Across the street from the field was Frick Park—3880 acres, mostly wild woods, named for the wealthy Henry Clay Frick. Annie's father forbid her to go there, saying there were bums living under bridges, but her mother said she could go if she never mentioned it.

Annie's parents give her some leeway in exploring her surroundings and learning things on her own, even if there are limits that her father—more than her mother—sets on her explorations around the neighborhood. She continues to become acquainted with people outside the purview of her family, too, often connecting them to a specific place.

For many years Annie roamed Frick Park, watching people lawn bowling and bird-watching. In summer and fall she imagined coming across undiscovered lands, where she could make a pioneer clearing. In the fall she would collect buckeye nuts from lawns.

Frick Park is a significant place in Annie's childhood that allows her to develop interests that will be sustained over the course of her life and enchants her imagination.

Before Annie's preferred hobby was reading, it was walking. The town was like her text, and "the book" she created was instead a map—one she extended little by little. She felt joyful to find her way home again each night after wandering in the wilderness. Now, Dillard imagines a house and neighborhood map as the expansion of a sense of self, beginning at the skin.

Dillard considers exploring and reading to be similar activities, as both expand one's own world; reading, too, is a kind of "wandering in the wilderness," which contributes to Annie's broadening sense of self.

Annie soon learned to play football with the boys, developing the ability to throw herself on opponents fearlessly in order to support her team. The neighborhood boys also let her join them to throw snowballs, for which she once got in great trouble. It was a weekday morning after Christmas and she'd met some of the boys on Reynolds Street to throw snowballs at passing cars. Annie started making a perfect iceball, squeezing out the snow. A black Buick started down the street, and one snowball hit the driver's windshield. For the first time, the car pulled over and stopped. A man got out and, as the kids scattered, he began running after them. They split up, Annie running with Mikey Fahey around a yellow brick house and through other backyards, across hedges and over picket fences: the man kept going. They kept running, improvising, racing through backyards, and finding that they were losing speed. Finally the man caught them by their jackets and they all stopped.

Although Annie spends a good deal of time by herself, she's also adventurous and eager to play with other kids, including other boys—boys who seem perfectly content to allow her to join games that typically exclude girls. Children can unwittingly transmit prejudices, it seems, but also unwittingly work against them. The snowball game works well with Annie's sense of adventure, risk, and danger. Mikey Fahey won't turn up again in the memoir, but he is important as Dillard sifts among her memories because he is associated with this particular moment, one in which a childhood game seems to ratchet up to much higher stakes.

The man took awhile to catch his breath, before saying, "You stupid kids." They listened to his lecture, but Annie felt a sense of glory: at this point there was nothing he could really do other than talk with his normal righteous anger. She would have died happy had she died then, having been chased all over Pittsburgh, terrified and exhausted, in the dead of winter, by a furious red-headed man.

Annie has known that at the end of the chase would be a somber adult lecturing them on proper behavior. But she also knows that, short of wringing their necks, there's nothing the man can do to take away from the exhilarating glory of a chase all around the city.

Dillard moves on to talking about her parents' penchant for explaining jokes to her, jokes of their own or those in Tom Lehrer albums. They considered joking an art, discussing with the children the technical and theoretical aspects of it and often practicing or analyzing pacing. Annie's father was particularly a fan of stories set in bars with zoo animals or insects. He would linger over details; her mother was short and to the point. They collaborated on reconstructing old classic American jokes. Dante, the Sistine Chapel, and ancient myths were classics that Amy, Molly, and Annie only learned about later: they were raised on different classics.

Annie's parents are in some ways respectable bourgeois members of an upper-class Pittsburgh milieu. But they are also different and unique. Their obsession with telling jokes, one that's shared even though Father has a different way of handling humor than Mother does, is something else that Annie learns to carefully observe as a child. The space of her home might later become grating, but here it is exuberant and fun-loving as a result of her parents' personalities.

On special occasions Annie's parents would trot out a complex, intricate comedy routine they called "Archibald a Soulbroke," which Annie dscribes as being so complicated, thrilling, and likely to fail that performing it was comparable to walking a tightrope over Niagara Falls. There was another joke that required the patience of friends and a long weekend: you told a long, pointless story and then pretended you'd messed up the joke, then, a few days later, you begin another joke and relate it back to the first one from a few days earlier. This performance was appealing to Mother because of how risky it was—she and Annie's father were both sensitive to the potential failure of humor. They also appreciated practical jokes: one Christmas morning Annie awoke to find a leg in her stocking, a department store display that Mother had convinced a manager into lending her.

The way Dillard describes her parents' love for jokes makes joking seem far more serious than usual—which only adds to the humor. Mother, in general, goes to what might seem like absurd lengths for the momentary joy of the practical joke or punch line. There is an element of narrative, in addition to that of performance, to this obsession. It's important to craft a story in the right way, to perform it so that it succeeds in a group—a process that, as Annie learns, is wrapped up in the risk of failure. It's possible to see her own interest in storytelling as related to her parents' jokes.

Dillard moves on to discussing her father's parents, with whom Amy and she dined each Friday night for years. Her grandfather, Frank Doak senior, was a pot-bellied and funny banker; their grandmother Meta Waltenburger Doak, whom they called Oma, was kind and elegant, tall and redheaded. They had only one child: Annie's father. They moved each summer to a summer house on the shore of Lake Erie, where Amy and Annie stayed for a month, with a maid named Mary Burinda and driver and cook named Henry Watson.

From certain features of Dillard's descriptions, it's possible to view Annie's grandparents in terms of social status alone; they are members of a prim, proper, upper-class Pittsburgh community, with a maid and a driver, no less. Dillard is more aware of their social class than her earlier self was of her own, but she also seeks to show the individual idiosyncrasies of her grandparents.

Oma told Annie that, as a teenager, she'd sewed rows of lace on her shirt to make her breasts stand out; Annie marveled at this. Together with Amy the three of them would shower together in the bathhouse, Annie always getting sand in the red sponge. She admired Oma for her freckles and for her ability to float for hours in the lake.

Oma is elegant and sophisticated, but she also doesn't hesitate to speak to Annie as if Annie were much older. What Annie remembers about her time at Lake Erie is mostly specific images and odd details.

Henry Watson didn't like the water, but always asked the women politely how it was. He wore heavy black pants and suspenders as he did errands around the house and washed the car. In the summer he stayed with the family, while in Pittsburgh he went home each night. At the Lake he had one friend, another driver named Cicero. Mary Burinda was thin, lighthearted; she'd lived with them for 24 years, and told Annie that her entire family had died during the 1918 flu epidemic. She had a crucifix hung over her bed; Oma said, somewhat admiringly, that she was "stubborn" about her Catholicism.

Again, Annie's early childhood memories are less imbued with a narrative arc than her later ones: instead, she remembers habits and repeated details, associating these observations with specific people like Henry and Mary. Dillard also recognizes, in a way her earlier self could not, the complexity and even tragedy to the lives of people like Mary Burinda; before, Annie had a difficult time looking beyond herself.

Oma had grown up an only child, rather wealthy, and with a limited view of the world. She referred to the car as "the machine." She relaxed at the Lake, growing less formal and rigid than she was in Pittsburgh.

Lake Erie is a place of escape for Oma, as well, releasing her to a certain extent from the usual rigid expectations she imposes on herself.

Oma's grandfather had arrived in Louisville, Kentucky from Germany in 1848 and opened a brass foundry that became American Standard Corporation. She'd met Frank Doak in 1914 while visiting cousins in Pittsburgh; he was from a Scotch-Irish, Presbyterian family. He became a vice president at Fidelity Trust Bank, and he spent his evenings smoking cigars and reading the financial section of the paper.

While by the time Annie is born the family is comfortable and even wealthy, their longer family history is also a typical American tale of immigration and hardy entrepreneurship.

Annie could see Lake Erie from her bedroom window, watching the waves each morning when she awoke. She sometimes thought about running away to Canada; instead she began to explore on a bicycle. She learned to whistle, spent her afternoons swimming with neighborhood kids, and spent evenings playing cards on the porch or coloring in coloring books with Oma. When they left the Lake, they would rise early and drive through Mennonite country, over a route the Indian traders had used in the 1750s, through Ohio and to Pittsburgh. Oma was proud to claim she'd never worked, but she'd directed the Presbyterian Hospital gift shop as full-time volunteer for twenty years, and she'd return there after each summer. Oma would deliver Amy and Annie, suntanned, covered with poison ivy, and happy, to their mother.

Annie uses her vacation to Lake Erie to continue her explorations and adventures in an entirely new setting. Her descriptions of these summers sound idyllic and untroubled; her memories here are some of her least convoluted and most imbued with nostalgia. Still, Annie always notices specific details, such as the long history of the roads along which they drive, roads that signal the relevance of Pittsburgh to American history. Annie also finds it curious that Oma takes pride in never having worked, although, as a woman in the 1950s, this is a sign of a particular privilege.

Annie sensed a rivalry between her mother and Oma. Mother had won morally, condemning Oma's racism, but she still worried that Annie and Amy would be "annexed" to the Louisville Germans. Oma had too much money without having taste, Annie's mother thought. Annie reflects now that while her family paraded their moral superiority over Oma, they were actually not much better, and it was Oma's gaudy taste that they deplored and not her morals. At the same time, Annie now recognizes that Oma's assessment of Annie's own family was accurate. Oma saw these two little children, about to start prep school and enjoying the fruits of Oma's family's prosperity, as naïve and even spoiled. She saw that the children didn't understand the sacrifices and work that had permitted their privileged childhood.

Annie is beginning to understand the complications of internal family dynamics between her mother and her Mother's mother-in-law, each of whom would like to influence children to be more like herself. Looking back, Dillard now has greater sympathy for her grandmother, thanks to her broader sense of Oma's own trajectory and the way she might have viewed the Doaks.

When Annie was eight, her family moved from Edgerton Avenue to Richland Lane on the far side of Frick Park. Her sister Molly was born there two years later, and it was there that Annie began to **wake up** truly, beginning a life of reading and drawing. During the summer they'd spent at the Lake when Annie was ten, they'd missed Molly learning to crawl.

Dillard moves forward and backward in time, structuring her memoir more in terms of clusters of memories around specific elements of her childhood than around straightforward chronology.

Back in Pittsburgh, Annie resumed swimming at the country-club pool, a comedown from the freedom at the lake. At the club, there were too many adults, and she risked forgetting an old woman's name at the peril of her whole family.

The country club is obviously a part of life for Pittsburgh's more elite residents, a tiny and privileged group within the larger city, though Annie doesn't sense that as a child.

One Saturday morning before Annie started at a new private school, she sat on the porch reading *Kidnapped* (this was as her father was preparing to leave on his boat). The book took place in Scotland, and she read at one point, "when the house is redd up"—an expression also used by working-class parents in Pittsburgh, to mean clean or ready up. She hadn't heard it since the family moved. The wind rattled the sunporch walls; Annie, who was ten, realized she'd likely remain in the double digits till she died. She thought to herself that she was **awake** now forever: she felt time and her consciousness joining together.

Dillard now returns to the scene with which she opened the memoir, but now focuses on a different aspect of the story—not her father's trip down the river, but the book she was reading while he was preparing. As she begins to piece together the colloquial language of the Scottish book she's reading with the idioms used by Scotch-Irish communities in Pittsburgh that she recognizes, she starts to develop a sharper sense of the relationship between herself and the world.

PART TWO

Dillard compares Pittsburgh to Rome; it's a palimpsest, now a new clean city (prompted by postwar money and political action), but with the old Pittsburgh and its original land underneath. Henry Watson dug two holes in their yard to plant maple trees when Annie and Amy were born, and once he found an arrowhead. Each time their mother remodeled the houses they lived in, the workmen found brick walls under plaster and oak planks under that. Some buildings apparently had dinosaur bones under them; layers of natural gas and oil were buried under the city.

A palimpsest is an ancient writing material that one could write on, erase, and then re-use for writing, though faint traces of the old message might remain. It's thus a metaphor for the various layers of history that exist in Pittsburgh (like Rome, where a modern-day city is built atop the ruins of ancient civilization). Pittsburgh, too, has layers of history that run back through the Indians, but also far older, back to the time of the dinosaurs.

Annie lived and breathed her Pittsburgh history, such a part of the country's history, without really believing it: a child, Dillard notes, is asleep, her private life unwinding within her before she locates the actual, historical setting of her private life as a collective project.

Although Annie is curious about things like arrowheads, she treats history as a stage for her own curiosity rather than something real and outside of her—an attitude which, Dillard notes, is typical for a child.

Annie and other children played outside among the big stone monuments of the Pittsburgh millionaire industrialists. They saw the low steel factories by the rivers, the sand at the glassworks beside the railroad tracks, the corporate headquarters downtown of Mellon Bank, Westinghouse Electric, and Gulf Oil. They were surrounded by the industrialists' institutions, from universities to libraries and the Carnegie Museum and Mellon Park, all of which dominated the city's life. These men left a legacy of Calvinism, a mix of piety and wealth acquisition, which continued to characterize the "old money" of Pittsburgh: anti-Semitic, Republican, hard-working, friendly, and also, paradoxically, egalitarian. No one gave any credence to aristocratic senses of hierarchies, and there was a vague pride about the immigrant diversity, even if "we," Dillard says, never visited the hillside neighborhoods of Poles, Hungarians, Italians, and Slavs, who labored in the factories.

Dillard continues to describe the relationship between wealthy Pittsburgh children and the city. Pittsburgh is known, still, as a major city of American history, one that was made famous by industrialists (known as "robber barons" because of their sometimes unsavory business practices) who also founded a number of artistic, educational, and scientific institutions. Dillard attempts to characterize the tone and attitude of Pittsburgh as fairly as she can. She notes the strong egalitarian spirit, but is also careful to point out that there were elements of Pittsburgh's history that didn't fit into this narrative, such as the difficult lives of laborers.

"We" knew, Dillard says, bits and pieces of Pittsburgh history. There was small industry there before big industry, iron and glass manufacturing for instance. Pittsburgh was the gateway to the West for pioneers. Annie treasured some pieces of this history, vivid in her private imagination as a spectacle in which no one got hurt.

Dillard reflects, now, that her youthful understanding of Pittsburgh history was limited—it was based on genuine and appealing curiosity, but it also failed to take account of how other people might have suffered in this history.

Annie began to draw in earnest while her father was boating down the river. At a neighbor's house she found a book called *The Natural Way to Draw* by Kimon Nicolaides, who taught at the New York Art Students League. She'd been drawing for years, and now decided to devote August to the strenuous schedule the book laid out: each day, 65 gesture drawings, 15 memory drawings, and one hour-long "contour-study." She made an attic bedroom into her studio and moved in, drawing her baseball mitt over and over again. She was struck by how the same subject could prompt a one-minute or multi-hour activity. Things were interesting, she concluded, based on the interest you gave to them. The neighbor who'd lent the book to her explained that if you liked to draw, you became an architect, like his father; one didn't become a painter today. Annie was disappointed, resigning herself to architecture school, though she disliked buildings.

Annie's drawing schedule helps to make clear another aspect of her personality: she's curious and might seem even scattered, but she can also be ambitious, committed, and stubborn. Drawing the same thing over and over again acquaints Annie with another aspect of the mystery of the external world, which might seem to be made up of mundane, uninteresting objects—yet the interest of the world is, she learns, perhaps less located in the objects themselves than in the way one looks at them. Annie's parents seem to give her the room to explore artistically, although her neighbor's attitude is more future-driven and pragmatic.

In addition, Annie began reading in earnest. She traveled to the Homewood branch of the Carnegie Library, the nearest one, though in a "Negro" section of town, where she sometimes saw Henry Watson. During the day the reading rooms were almost empty, though they were busy in the evening. The librarians had given Annie a card to the adult section, where she lingered over the Natural History section. There she found *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams*, which explained how to make nets, buckets, killing jars, slides, and how to label insects. It specified the proper costume for going into the "field."

At a young age, Annie is beginning to sense the clear racial and economic divisions of Pittsburgh, where African Americans were segregated into certain neighborhoods and tended to have lower incomes than white residents (Henry Watson, who is presumably black, is Oma's cook and driver). Dillard presents the library nonetheless as a place where some of these prejudices can be overcome.

Annie thought about writing a letter to the author, asking how she might find a pond or stream, and what a "cheesecloth" was. She felt like the first person to stumble across this book in many years, so she was surprised to find, on the sheet glued to the last page, that the card was almost full with stamps—it was quite popular. She imagined contacting one of these adults, commiserating about the slim offerings of fields and streams in Pittsburgh. She thought of the poverty in Homewood, and the dreams of the people who lived there, who had little money or free time.

Living in an urban center, Annie isn't familiar with the country lifestyle discussed in the book she's picked up. Her shock at seeing its popularity is part of a more general realization that books are not just written for her own mind—other people are enraptured by them too. Annie senses, too, the unfairness of the relative poverty in Homewood, whose residents have dreams and imagination like her.

Annie had been driven from fiction to nonfiction, frustrated by her inability to know in advance which fictional works would be good and bad. Adults' suggestions were incoherent; they gave out anything which contained children or animals as a children's book, as well as anything about the sea, or by Charles Dickens or Mark Twain. She was exasperated by *Wuthering Heights*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Innocents Abroad*.

Annie is frustrated by what seems to her to be adults' inability to grasp what children actually want in books, and by the condescending attitude they seem to take in giving her only books about animals or sea adventures. She'll read anything, but she is also curious about the wider world.

Annie was at a loss for how to choose among the thick stacks of fiction. She went for books she'd heard of, like *The Mill on the Floss*, which she enjoyed. She noticed a figure of a man dancing or running on the cover—the Modern Library logo—and began to rely on that. While it brought her to *Native Son* and *Walden*, it also put forward Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, a "bust." Most books fell apart halfway through, she decided, their authors forgetting how to write and limping along. Only a loyalty to the early chapters kept her reading.

The library is an enormous gift for Annie, but it's also overwhelming—with all its stacks of books, there seems to be little way to map one's way through it, or to fix one's attention on something the way she does with observations in her neighborhood. The Modern Library, which prints "classics," is only an imperfect guide—Annie isn't relying on other people but prefers to develop her own opinions.

Annie felt that the Homewood Library part of her life, with its infinite books, was private and obscure: she never expected to meet anyone else who'd read the same things she had. Father sometimes raised his eyebrows at a title of a book she was clutching, but she figured he'd only heard about it, since he never seemed to care as wildly as she did about the books.

While describing her attitude as a child, Dillard is implicitly critiquing it, suggesting that even if she thought books were only written for her, they were not her property alone, and other people (maybe even her father) might have equally important reading experiences.

Dillard describes how a person's interior life expands and thickens: she **wakes up** one day to discover her grandmother, then to discover boys. First there were the "polite boys" of Richland Lane, with parents from the professional class, who took her to movies on Saturday afternoons in white shirts. At ten, in the fall of 1955, she met the dancing-school boys. The leaves were turning colors; Molly was beginning to smile and crawl around. Annie and Amy had started at a girls' day school called the Ellis School.

"Awakening," once again, is used to describe the way Annie begins to notice things and people that were there all along, even if she didn't pay close enough attention to them before. Now her attention turns to boys, as she begins to interact with them more formally than she had in the football and snowball-throwing games in the neighborhood.

Annie started dancing school, which was attended by girls at her regular school, and boys from the all-male private school paired with hers. She'd seen these boys at church and the country club, and knew the girls from school: she was surprised and bewildered to find them all convening here, where they'd be sent every Friday for many years until, eventually, marrying each other.

Annie still doesn't have a sense of the small, closed world of privileged Pittsburgh families, which explains why the same girls and boys keep showing up at each of the different social environments she experiences.

Annie's friend would whisper about a boy she found cute each week: Annie would think of each boy, with his braces or bobbing head. She too, though, thought they were cute. They all wore white cotton gloves, and between dances they held hands, interweaving their fingers so tight that they cut off circulation.

With a dose of humor, Dillard describes the young boys from the vantage point of an adult, though she's sympathetic to the allure that these boys held for girls in a new social context of dancing school.

Annie was mystified to discover that all the dancing school girls were on a "list," one that excluded people like the best-liked girl in her class, Ellin Hahn, who was half Jewish and so had to go to Jewish dancing school. Quiet, plain, and silly girls at school were invited, though, and seemed to find their place here in dancing school: Annie would be stupefied to later see them marrying the liveliest, handsomest boys.

Again, Annie is confused by the social arrangements that have been decided by adults, arrangements that clearly work based on distinctions of race, religion, and ethnicity. Though these distinctions are powerful in the children's' lives, they already seem to Annie to be arbitrary and wrong.

The girls watched the boys in awe as they called each other names and slugged each other on the shoulder. Now Dillard reflects how little she understood them. She thought they were all alike, but she now understands they were only alike in learning to become responsible members of a real, moral world, learning self-control and accumulating knowledge—things the girls dismissed as irrelevant. The girls felt that there was something ahead for the boys that was barred to them. They vaguely understood they were being prepared for something by Latin class and ballroom dancing, but they couldn't tell what.

Dillard is balancing, here, what she felt as a young person –the vague intimations of the future—with what she now knows, especially the fact that what she and the other girls were being groomed for was mostly marriage to these boys. While she implicitly critiques the limitations imposed by gender, she also looks sympathetically on the boys as well, who were also beholden to social expectations and standards.

Dillard reflects that the boys must have known they would inherit "corporate" Pittsburgh, their right as boys: they since have joined the management of Fortune 500 companies and boards of schools and country clubs. They must have laughed so hard then because they knew they didn't have much time left. Annie assumed the boys dreamed, like her, of running away to sea, painting in Paris, or hiking through the Himalayas; later, a few told her they wanted to be top man at Gulf Oil, or a senator. But at the time she loved them. For years she loved two of them particularly deeply: she hoped to change their ambitions, to save them, but that never happened.

Looking back on the dancing school boys now, it's hard for Dillard not to remember them in the light of the kinds of people they became. Dillard obviously doesn't think of the corporate world as her own, and in many ways these men are now alien to her own interests and passions, but she also is thoughtful and even sympathetic about them. In many ways, it only became clearer over time how their desires and ambitions were quite different.

Annie considered Amy the world's most beautiful child. She was smart, quiet, and obedient. She dramatized her dolls' fights with old-fashioned expletives from comic books, "humph" and "pshaw." While Annie had been skeptical of baby Amy, she adored Molly. As a baby, Molly dragged a blanket around and believed that if she draped it over her head, she was invisible. She grew terrified if Mother washed it, until Mother cut it in two so that she could wash one half at a time.

In a typical move, Dillard switches gears and jumps to an entirely different memory, now considering her relationship to her siblings. Annie also notices specific, often comical qualities about her two younger sisters: as the oldest, she can watch them grow up and pick apart their own unique characteristics and personality traits.

When Father returned from his sailing trip, he became the business manager of a small company that made radio spots. He was able to do some radio acting, and would practice around the house. This was a different path from many of his friends: a childhood friend Edgar Speer, "Uncle Ed," would soon become the chairman of U.S. Steel, for instance, while Father was getting involved in making a low-budget local horror movie with the company.

Despite his willingness to adhere to some social norms, Father also continues to have a creative, unorthodox streak, one that distinguishes him from the successful corporate men around him. His involvement with a low-budget horror movie is a humorous example of this difference.

Around this time Annie spent many afternoons practicing pitching against the back wall of the garage, lost in concentration. She drew targets with crayon and pretended she was playing a real baseball game.

Annie's ability to concentrate wholly on something is evident here, as is her wide-ranging set of serious interests, from drawing to baseball.

Amy had a friend, Tibby, whose older brother Ricky began playing a two-handed baseball game with Annie, basically throwing the ball back and forth and calling it as a "ball" or "strike." They had a formal working relationship, playing the game, drinking water from a hose, thanking each other, and leaving. On Tuesday evenings in the summer Annie would ride her bike to watch Little League games, though the league didn't accept girls. Softball at school wasn't exciting enough for her, since the ball seemed so much less real than a baseball in the palm of her hand.

Dillard describes the peculiar nature of many childhood friendships, which can be limited to a single shared activity, and which can vary widely in terms of the intimacy involved. Annie seems to prize her relationship to Ricky in part because it's the only way she can join in playing a sport that is limited to boys (and whose female equivalent, softball, she finds a letdown).

One afternoon a tornado hit Annie's neighborhood, breaking all the windows in the envelope factory on Penn Avenue. Annie roamed around afterward and found a broken power line that was emitting sparks and melting in the street. She watched the sparks pool and crackle around the cable, which was flailing like a cobra: Mother told her needlessly that she'd be a goner if she touched it. During the tornado, Mother had gathered Amy and Molly away from the windows, while Father and Annie ran over to the windows to watch.

The difference between the ways Mother, on the one hand, and Annie and Father, on the other, react to the tornado is indicative of a difference in personality: while Mother can be exuberant and wacky, she is also protective and less attracted by risk and thrill as her husband and daughter. Annie seems to inherit her fascination with nature, too, from her father.

On Penn Avenue ran old, jerky, orange streetcars that jangled around corners, emitting a solemn bell if a car parked at the curb blocked them. The Avenue smelled like gas, exhaust fumes, and burnt grit. The sidewalks were hilly, creased with fissures from which grass sprouted: they were as topographically diverse as Pittsburgh itself. Switching to the second person, Dillard recalls riding her bike over these sidewalks and vibrating all over. The streetcars were hung from wires that cut across the sky, making Penn Avenue a kind of tunnel. They clanged along, sparks flying from their trolleys.

Sometimes Dillard uses the second person while describing something that happened to her; this means that she's telling the reader that this is how "you" felt during a given moment. This has the effect of making the reader feel more present in Annie's memory, as if the reader had lived it (or is, in the present, living it) just as Annie had. This is particularly effective, since Annie is so attuned to such specific details as these.

Once Annie tried to “kill” a streetcar with her friend Pin Ford: they hid across the street, having stuck a stone in the streetcar track. (They’d started with pennies, which a streetcar could flatten and widen.) The streetcar hit the stone, rose like a whale, then fell and broke the rock. At that moment, Annie saw a future in which the car would tip over: she’d have to give herself up to the police, or else live as a renegade.

Annie is playing at “killing” the streetcar with her friend, but she immediately realizes, as the car rises, that this isn’t just a game for the two of them—it might have real consequences for other people, and even pose a danger to them. This is another moment in Annie’s childhood in which she realizes that the world is not limited to her.

Dillard thinks about the “inexpressible joy” of children as they realize the extent of the world’s knowledge. For Annie, beginning to understand the magnitude of the unknown was alluring, rather than scary. Annie took joy in effort, but also in the world’s ability to yield to that effort, like the faces people cut out of Mount Rushmore

Knowledge is not described here as something to memorize, nor as an intimidating manifestation of the unknown. Instead, knowledge is appealing because there’s always more to learn.

Dillard recalls running down Penn Avenue, imagining she might use up her store of joy by trying to fly. She raced past the drugstore where she once tried to steal a box of chocolates, reading “sampler” as “free sample.” She waved her arms, knowing she was foolish, but she still felt proud as she whizzed past a man in a business suit looking embarrassed for her. A linen-suited woman saw her from far away and gazed at her warmly, as if they shared a common sensibility. Finally she began to tire and slowed, still feeling exultant: she thought that dignity didn’t count for much, and she’d never give up joy for it.

In this memory, Dillard stresses the moments of pure joy and exhilaration that were part of her childhood. Here she describes hurtling down the streets, pretending to fly, as a way of burning off her wild energy, even as Annie is also aware and proud of the way that “foolish” games like this actually set her apart from other people. Dignity is prized in her social milieu, but she doesn’t care about it.

One Sunday afternoon Mother entered the kitchen where Father was listening to the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball game: she heard, “Terwilliger bunts one!” (Terwilliger being a player). She couldn’t imagine this was English, and for years she made the phrase her own, always testing a pen or a microphone by writing or saying it. She relished other odd syllables too, like the “Tamiami Trail” they visited on a trip to Florida. This was the road people had built from Tampa to Miami, across the muck and alligators and jungle of the Everglades. Building it was a 14-year task with the result that now anyone could drive over the Everglades without a thought.

Mother doesn’t care for sports, but her penchant for odd phrases, jokes, and witticisms, makes her eager to take up new phrases like children fiddle with toys and games. Mother has a profound love of language, not just in order to communicate beautifully, but to appreciate the sheer fun of words—something that Annie, too, comes to adopt, though she’s also interested in the history behind these words.

Mother often played games with words, telling Annie to spell “poinsettia” and “sherbet,” to remind her that there were things she didn’t know. Mother loved making up new jokes. When the children got older, she included them in her games: if someone called and it was a wrong number, she’d tell Amy to take the phone and pretend her name was Cecile. Once, when Annie and she were at the zoo, she approached a random couple and pretended she was the man’s former lover, then walked away quickly. During a game of checkers, she’d get bored and move the checkers around the board when no one was looking. At bridge she’d show her hand or bid wild amounts, driving Father crazy.

Mother enjoys knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but through the games she plays with Annie it also becomes clear that Annie, as precocious as she is, can sometimes act like a know-it-all. Dillard describes her mother’s antics with obvious affection and humor. While Father, too, appreciates jokes, and spends time cultivating them with his wife, it’s she who is the most fun-loving and exuberant member of the family, in some ways almost like a child herself.

After moving across town, Mother persuaded the post office to let her keep her old address forever, since she'd had stationery printed: every new post office worker over decades had to learn mail was addressed to one place and delivered to another. She followed politics closely and saw how things should be run, although she wasn't in a position to change them; instead she worked within the household, drawing up plans for new appliances and challenging the form of every pair of scissors and tape dispenser.

As Dillard attempts to characterize her mother in the light of how she saw her growing up, she also adds to her depiction by drawing on certain things that she has come to understand as an adult—in particular, the ways in which Mother compensated for not being able to have a job outside the home.

Mother kept a number of unfashionable positions. She was anti-McCarthy. She asserted that people living in trailer parks were poor rather than evil, and that they should be allowed to settle on beautiful lands. She insisted that steelworkers and country-club workers and bus drivers were "people," which was not a point of view that was very common among their social milieu.

The first of Mother's opinions suggests that she is more liberal than most of the Doak family's social milieu in Pittsburgh. Dillard links her mother's politics to her general sense of compassion and sympathy for the poor.

Annie was, around this time, obsessed with the French and Indian War. She was impressed by its high stakes: the American continent. She wasn't sure whom to root for, but she kept reading, enraptured. She felt the war's presence even in modern-day Pittsburgh, built on the site of the French Fort Duquesne. At the same time, Annie felt the war had a magical, literary quality, that it took place right outside her window with costumed characters and antique rifles—it might as well have taken place within her own mind.

Dillard switches gears again as she returns to another element of her reading, this time about a war that took place between 1754 and 1763. The fact that Pittsburgh was a site for the war helps to explain Annie's fascination, though she generally enjoys the imaginative quality of history (and even has trouble, sometimes, separating fiction from fact).

Dillard reflects that parents have little idea that their children, in their bedrooms, are reading in horror and awe, preferring the wild world of books to the actual world. Children become limp and breathless, thrilled but unable to tear themselves away. Annie felt she was born too late; she would have been a great war scout, walking silently in the woods as a look-out.

Dillard emphasizes the ways in which childhood and growing up often take place outside the purview of adults. Dreams and imaginative realities, she suggests, are also real parts of one's life, even though they take place inside one's head.

At school, Annie memorized a poem about the Indian children that used to play where they now live. On quiet Richland Lane, Annie and her friends played "Indian Ball" (a baseball-like game) in the street. "Indian Burns" were punishment for cheating at a game, wringing a bare arm with both hands until the skin chafed. "Typewriter torture," also understood to be Indian, was the worst, involving tapping one's fingertips lightly on the breastbone endlessly. Annie and Pin Ford (her real name Barbara) played straightforwardly at Indians too, practicing knife-throwing, baking clay bricks, naming the trees. They came home to find their mothers tanning together, holding up silver cardboard reflectors to their chins.

In many ways, the games that Annie describes are a typical part of children's lives, especially in neighborhoods where many kids can play together. But Dillard also draws attention to the way that even children's games are wrapped up in the history of a place—as well as in stereotyped ideas about Indians. Dillard ends this memory by contrasting it to the "games" of adult women, spending their summers tanning rather than playing.

Annie had drawn her baseball mitt in the attic bedroom, which was a studio, office, fort, and treehouse. She was especially drawn to a brown water stain there that looked like a ship bent over in a storm: she examined it closely for months. Annie, sometimes with Pin Ford, would play at detectives from that room, looking out onto the street for suspicious activity. One rainy afternoon Annie spied a case of beer inside the trunk of a man's car: she memorized the license number and the man's appearance, then went to the attic to write down everything she could remember. She closed her eyes tight as she tried to remember what he looked like to draw it. She wished she could memorize sentences and then reel them off like rolls of film, though she knew it didn't work that way.

Annie's penchant for observation, her natural curiosity and attention, comes to the fore once again in the way in which she is drawn to the stain, something that most other people would think of as ugly or unworthy of attention. Annie's interest in detective work makes sense in this light: to be a detective requires seeing the world as a set of clues, as mysteries that only someone observant and clever enough can decode. Still, Annie is frustrated with the limitations of her own powers of observation.

Annie was suspicious of the Homewood Library librarian, who, the week before, had given her (in broad daylight) the book that held the key to Morse code: at home she memorized it and burned the paper. She read the library's collections on forensic medicine and ham radios and its copies of Sherlock Holmes. She dreamed of drawing sketches of criminals that would be printed on the front page of a newspaper or on wanted signs. Soon, Annie became obsessed with drawing things and people she knew, but also the faces of people she saw in the streets.

Looking back on this particular memory, Dillard sees the humor in the way her childhood self, for a time, was obsessed with cracking codes and solving mysteries. This obsession, like so many others in Annie's childhood, takes shape in large part thanks to the books that teach her about the world of detectives and spying.

Like Holmes, Annie wanted to notice everything. She missed the house on Edgerton Avenue and worried about beginning to forget its floor plan or details of her old neighborhood. But scenes dissolved, leaving only fragmented images.

In Sherlock Holmes, Annie finds a model for the kind of person she wants to be—even as she worries that she won't be able to live up to that standard.

Fragmented words, in turn, also rattled around Annie's head: phrases from the Bible, from the Gospels mainly. She and Amy went to Presbyterian church camp every July for four years and became much more pious than their parents realized or wanted. They memorized Bible chapters and had nightly prayer devotions. Annie was drawn to religious ideas as the first kind of intellectual life that she encountered. Phrases about gaining the world and losing the soul, about one's neighbor, about the earth being the Lord—all in a traditional, formal Biblical language—enraptured her. She studied this language at camp, at Sunday school, and at Thursday in regular school: they were crammed into her brain.

In this section of the memoir, Dillard reproduces a number of phrases from the Bible, stringing them together in a way that makes them seem like poetry. Although her father has been described as a "lapsed" Presbyterian, and religion is more social than spiritual for the Doak family, Annie comes to see religion as set of knowledge and truth about the world much like the science and literature she admires. The Bible, then, is another vehicle for knowledge, just like the books she checks out from the library.

If the adults had actually read the Bible, Annie thought, they would have hidden it, recognizing its danger and opposition to their serious world and obsession with wealth ("Sell whatsoever thou hast" was one phrase she recalled). Now Dillard repeats these phrases, seeming to relish in their musicality.

Already, Annie is developing a sense of opposition to the wealth and worship of material possessions that she sees around her in the privileged Pittsburgh community she's grown up in.

©2020 LitCharts LLC

Dillard moves on to the subject of her rock collection, which began as a gift from her grandparents' paper boy, who got it from an old neighbor named Mr. Downey, who'd given the rocks to him before he died. Now they were Annie's; they were all different colors, and the children's books at the Homewood Library failed to satisfy her desire to know what they were. Instead she used Frederick H. Pough's *Field Guide to Rocks and Minerals*, using Mr. Mohs's homespun tests for rock hardness. With scratch tests she learned what was yellow pyrite and black limonite. In the books, people also dripped acid and shone ultraviolet lights on them. At the end, Annie could hope to learn what was inside those bags.

Like other interests of hers, Annie's rock collection comes to her through a series of random, almost arbitrary events—not too dissimilar from pulling a book a random from the library shelf. But once she has the beginnings of a rock collection in her possession, she applies her natural curiosity to it with eagerness. And again, it's through books that Annie learns most of what she needs, applying the information in those books to her specific circumstances.

Finally, Annie identified the rocks as bauxite, barite, obsidian, and chalcopyrite, among others. She learned from her book that beautiful, precious stones were hidden in the earth. In Maine someone had discovered a twenty-foot crystal with a hammer; she'd never thought to knock open rocks and see whether they contained billion-year-old gems. Now, Annie decided rock collecting would be her new aspiration. The earth newly seemed to her like a shut eye: she could pry it open and unearth its treasures.

Annie is very interested in the information and straightforward data she's gathered about the rocks in her collection, but there is also a poetic element to her interest. She's enraptured by what she thinks of as the beauty hidden in the earth—for her, science is akin to artistic beauty.

Annie wasn't nearly as moved by the story of the movement of the earth's crust, but she was fascinated to find that there's one reason the ground doesn't shatter and become a heap of broken rubble with all that friction: it's silicon, which seeps underground and fills in the earth's scars. The entire planet was "healed rubble," she realized.

Again, Annie reads voraciously in order to learn specific information, but she also clings on to certain pieces of information more than others, based on what strikes her fancy and on what kind of beautiful images she can extract from the data.

"Rockhounds" were, Annie learned, the moniker for the amateur rock enthusiasts whose obsession went beyond wealth—these books advised their readers not to sell crystals to a gem dealer, since they were more beautiful uncut, and not to refine any found gold, since that would oblige the person to sell it to a gold dealer or to the U.S. mint. Annie was struck that these books were about how to avoid making money—in America, no less.

Annie is learning, as she grows up, about what matters to society at large—in her community, it's money, success, and hard work. But she's also learning how that differs from what seems important to her. It's in books and in hobbies like rock collecting that she discovers views more similar to her own.

Annie learned how one could find fossil oysters and clams turned to agate in Puget Sound, dinosaur bones turned to jasper and petrified wood, and other mineral discoveries in New Jersey, Germany, Westchester County, and Mexico. She thought she might specialize in interesting names: sillimanite (found in Connecticut and named for a Yale professor), radio opal, agaty potch. She didn't spend much time differentiating between the rocks she had and those she imagined, making this an ideal hobby for a reader like her. Eventually she had 340 rocks and labeled them all, cutting up index cards and cataloguing her collection by name, date, and locality (often the Carnegie Museum shop). She wondered about Mr. Downey, taking off for Oklahoma, perhaps, to scour the hills with a hammer. She wondered if he hadn't died—if maybe he was simply underground Pittsburgh, exploring the crystal cavities of cobalt, onyx, or jacinth. Of course he wouldn't come back, she thought.

The world seems to open up to Annie as more than simply names on a map or globe: places like New Jersey and Germany are now familiar to her in terms of the minerals and gems that they contain hidden within the earth. Annie's interest in rock collecting is not based on what's most rare or valuable, but rather on her idiosyncratic tastes—on what she finds most odd and interesting. But she also continues to appreciate structure and organization, as well, just as she set out a daily schedule for drawing a single baseball mitt. Finally, Annie's imagination lingers on the donor of her rock collection, as she unleashes her creative fancy to wonder if Mr. Downey hadn't died after all.

Annie was thrilled to receive a microscope kit for Christmas that year. It included an array of test tubes, which she could peer into in awe all winter. She was committed to finding the famous amoeba. Finally, one week that spring she gathered puddle water from Frick Park and, after waiting a week, spread a drop of it onto a slide. Peeking in, she saw a grainy blob, recognizable from pictures. Annie ran upstairs, where her parents were smoking and drinking their after-dinner coffee. Mother seemed happy Annie had found something interesting to her, but she made it clear that she was enjoying herself too.

A microscope kit is the perfect gift for Annie, who loves observing things on her own: it's like an extra set of eyes, enabling her to examine whatever interests her and discover even more about it. These interests take place, once again, in close proximity to her parents, though they might as well be in a world totally distinct from the after-dinner coffee and cigarette that her parents enjoy.

Annie realized, as a result of her parents' indifference, that passions must remain private. Her parents always would support her artistic and scientific pursuits, but they wouldn't ask about her exams, listen to her play piano, or examine her insect collection with her. Her life was, instead, her own.

This realization is not disappointing, but rather liberating for Annie: indeed, Dillard seems to approve of her parents' low-key attitude in retrospect, as well.

Dillard compares the feeling of being alive to shedding your dusty clothes and standing under a waterfall, barely able to breathe as the hard water is pelting you—though you do learn to breathe, even amid the racket. Time is what's pounding at you: you might fall asleep, but knowing you're alive means to feel the planet hurling you around, as you're aware that life is only for a short while and **awake** to life.

Here, Dillard uses a different metaphor from that of "awakening." This description doesn't emphasize the gradual process of growing up, but rather the intense, overwhelming, even wild feeling that being alive can also bring.

Annie's friend Judy Schoyer, a thin, shy girl with curly hair she often forgot to comb, was from an old upper-class Pittsburgh family: her ancestor Edward Holyoke had been Harvard's president in the 1700s. The family spent weekends at a farmhouse outside Paw Paw, West Virginia, four hours away, and they sometimes invited Annie. She adored the place with its careening river and bridge and bucket showers: when she arrived on Friday afternoons, she would already be mourning how close Sunday was.

Annie often socializes with the children of well-off, old-money families in Pittsburgh—another example of the ways her idyllic childhood was also the result of a sheltered, privileged life (something that Dillard is at pains to point out). Still, that doesn't make her memories any less vivid or powerful: Annie's curiosity and joy in living also lends her a sizeable dose of nostalgia.

Annie loved Judy and was impressed at how much more comfortable she was at Paw Paw, treating Annie with amused detachment, even though Annie was the one who was more popular at school. With Margaret, another friend, they would spend Saturday mornings boiling and eating river mussels, or staging and writing plays. After dinner in the evenings, Mr. Schoyer would tell them Victor Hugo stories. He'd studied classical history and literature at Harvard and he asked the girls about intellectual questions, assuming they knew about the speech of Pericles or capital punishment. Once, Annie declined an invitation to the Schoyers' because she couldn't bear to leave it again. She was having her own childhood, but also haunting it with her nostalgia, struggling between living and memory.

Annie recognizes that, like at dancing school, the divisions created by certain institutions can be arbitrary and can fail to mean anything outside those places. Dillard describes these weekends at Paw Paw with evident joy and wistfulness. While her own father is clever and friendly, Mr. Schoyer provides a model for a different kind of intelligent man, one who is steeped in the classics (rather than the classic jokes) and treats the children as intellectual equals—something that Annie finds very appealing.

Dillard argues that children know bewilderment but not wonder: they treat the world around them as equipment for their games. Now she recalls a teacher named Mrs. McVicker with fondness, but recalls that she was more enraptured by caterpillars, leaves, and snowflakes than the students.

Wonder, Dillard suggests, requires not only a sense of self but also a feeling of the wider world's separation from the self: as a child, she doesn't quite manage to understand that distinction.

At thirteen, though, the world was coming to seem marvelous to Annie. She began to lose her sense that the whole world was a backdrop to her own life, and she became amazed by the actual world. Science, medicine, drawing, painting, and criminology now held the center of her attention. Literature and ideas would become central interests again only a few years later.

Dillard traces her process of growing up as, in part, a growing awareness that there is a world outside her own head that has little to do with her, other than the fact that she can be fascinated by it for its own sake.

Soon, though, Annie would become invaded by a blind rage. She would gaze with hatred out the car window onto the rocky hills, carved of sandstone and covered with soot and coal dust and car exhaust: she wanted to flee the dull, bleak sight. At thirteen, though, she still looked at these rocks in amazement.

Dillard briefly skips ahead to a later moment in her life, when her amazement and sense of wonder would be replaced with an adolescent rage at everything around her, including her city, parents, and teachers.

Annie imagined there must be fans of every cranny of knowledge, from birdwatchers to violin makers and Islamic scholars: these people could teach her about what she didn't yet know. Having written a paper on William Gorgas, the doctor in charge of workers' health during the construction of the Panama Canal, she grew fascinated by medicine.

Annie's curiosity is bolstered by the idea that she doesn't need to start from scratch with every realm of knowledge herself: there are other people who have done background work before her—knowledge on which she can build.

One sight that particularly struck Annie, at school, was a newborn **Polyphemus moth**, crippled because its mason jar was too small. The students watched around the teacher's desk, transfixed, as it tried to spread its wings and couldn't. They followed the teacher as she set it outside on the asphalt driveway, where it crawled out toward the rest of Shadyside, a fashionable, expensive area where people like Annie were expected to settle after college. She knew it was not long before the moth died, and yet it seemed to have amazing vigor and excitement at being born.

Annie's fascination with the Polyphemus moth makes sense in light of her interest in insects and the natural world. But there also seems to be something about the fragility and delicacy of the moth that appeals to her, together with its stubborn determination to make it on its own. In that sense, she seems to see something of herself in the insect, and she also sees an inspiration to have greater strength in her own self.

For awhile, Gene Stratton Porter's *Moths of the Limberlost* was Annie's favorite book. Porter had been a curious kid in the wilderness of Indiana. Once Annie found a yellow swallowtail, a large beautiful butterfly: she wanted to show it to her father, but as she ran over to him she tripped and her fingers tore through the butterfly, killing it: Annie thought it was like her father's bar jokes.

Gene Stratton Porter is an apt role model for Annie, since this author too spent her childhood exploring and learning about nature. At the same time, Annie's interest is not always as compassionate as it could be: she sees the act of killing a butterfly, even accidentally, as more funny than upsetting.

Annie continued reading about beetles, wasps, and caterpillars. She collected them in jars, but was frustrated: in comparison, her stamp collection never tried to crawl away. Butterflies die with folded wings, and it involves an elaborate process to spread their fragile wings to display them: Annie gave up. She was afraid of insects, but never imagined she wouldn't study them as a result. They were barely visible, which was why she liked paying attention to them.

Annie has moved on from one collection to another as her interests change and evolve. As with the "monster" that turned out to be the reflection of car lights in her room, Annie is convinced that the way to get over a fear is not to hide from it, but to pay greater attention to it.

Annie went from an interest in medicine and microbes to a biography of Louis Pasteur, who established the germ theory of disease. Mother's own favorite story was about a modern-day mystery: premature babies were turning up blind, and finally doctors realized that there was too much oxygen in the hospital incubators—hospitals all around the world changed the air mixture and fixed the problem.

Sometimes, Annie prefers to style her investigations as entirely self-driven. But here, it becomes evident that she's also influenced by her parents' interests. Her mother, too, is curious, and enjoys learning and sharing what she's learned.

Right in Pittsburgh, Annie had seen the polio epidemic crushed. The University of Pittsburgh had created a controversial vaccine for it in 1953: people said they had gone public too quickly, rather than waiting for a safe live-virus version, but almost all Pittsburgh parents signed the consent form for a doctor to test the vaccine on their children.

Before the 1950s, polio was a devastating disease that often led to children becoming disabled or paralyzed (President Franklin D. Roosevelt was in a wheelchair because of childhood polio), so it makes sense that Pittsburgh parents would be so eager to test a cure.

Annie was learning that all things could be solved with hard work. Old, dirty Pittsburgh air had become clean and the city was becoming renewed. The Russians had shot Sputnik into space, and down the Ohio River a generating plant using atomic energy was being built. Jonas Salk was working 16-hour days to isolate strains of polio virus in tissues cultured from monkey kidneys. Annie was exhilarated by the idea of devoting her life to one monumental task.

Looking around her at the projects happening in Pittsburgh and the discoveries being unveiled in the news, it seems clear to Annie that one should take an optimistic attitude towards the future. She also sees herself as contributing to this unending process of discovery and improvement in some way.

Annie had little idea of the malice and greed in the world. She thought that she'd never harm anyone and that she'd never meet an unsolvable problem. She didn't know anything about parting or mourning, like her own mother whose father had died when she was seven. Still, she was familiar with longing and loss even though she'd lost no one. Loss came and went with the seasons: she lost memories, neighborhoods, details. For her life's work she'd remember everything, she thought.

Dillard acknowledges, here, that she grew up in relative privilege, without tragedy striking her or her family—a childhood that enabled her to look at the world optimistically. At the same time, her sheltered childhood didn't, she argues, protect her from the kind of loss that comes from the process of simply living.

The year that Annie got a microscope and traveled to Paw Paw was also the year her grandfather died. She was a bit put out not to be able to attend an upper-school dance at the boys' school, then ashamed of herself for feeling that way. Oma sold the Pittsburgh house and moved into a penthouse apartment for the fall; in the summer she, Mary, and Henry went to Lake Erie, and in the winter and spring to Pompano Beach, Florida.

Dillard continues to acknowledge the self-centeredness that can sometimes be a part of childhood. Oma's move is one of the inevitable changes that Annie faces as the people around her grow older; she has to acknowledge, then, that their lives are changing just as hers is.

Annie's family had bought Oma's house, high on a hilly street: nowhere higher up to go in life, Annie thought. It was close to the Edgerton Avenue house horizontally, but separated by the Glen Arden concrete steps where children played on the cliff. The first spring, the family walked down those steps to watch the Memorial Day parade. Afterward, the families from the two sides of Dallas Avenue were left to look at each other—Annie's family's earliest neighbors. Mother waved, but the Glen Arden families mostly climbed back up and shut their doors.

Throughout Annie's childhood, her parents seem to be growing wealthier—each time they move they go to a nicer, more expensive and exclusive neighborhood. Although Annie might not be quite aware of it at the time, Dillard draws attention to the way in which the Pittsburgh of her childhood was segregated by race and by economic status, even if her mother tried to cross those barriers.

The new theme of Annie's reading was the Second World War, a popular topic for teenagers her age, who read Anne Frank and Leon Uris's novels about the Warsaw ghetto. In fact, Annie never talked about what she was reading with her friends: this was part of her private life. But she imagined they were reading the same things—the theaters of war were the settings that stirred her generation's imagination like earlier European children had read *The Count of Monte Cristo* or about Robin Hood.

Ten years after the end of World War II, there are beginning to be a number of histories and novels that deal with the traumatic—but, to a young person, also exciting—events of the war. Annie's generation, unable to remember the war themselves, rely either on others' memories or on these books to learn about the past.

Annie imagined running a submarine and parachuting enemy lines, using her high-school French and German to practice her Resistance effort. Her librarian gave her Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, but she felt far too old for that. Since Hitler had fallen, they now read about the atomic war too, and had air raid drills at school. The teachers would lead the students to the basement, stand in the middle of the room, and tell the students to fold their arms over their heads against the walls and lockers.

Reading about the war gives Annie another set of ideas about the world, ideas that allow her to imagine a different kind of future for herself (one that she imagines to be more exciting than the portrait of American life in the South she'd get from Thomas Wolfe. The war, and now the Cold War with the Soviet Union, seems far more real to her.

In the basement of Annie's house was a room with tables and chairs, a couch, fridge, sink, piano, and record player, among other things. There were other larger underground rooms with a washer and dryer and canned and frozen foods: they could live there for many years, Annie assumed, based on what she read. One day she asked Mother, who said there wasn't much more than two weeks' worth of food there.

Dillard describes a version of the bomb shelters that many families in the United States kept for much of the Cold War, when there was a constant fear that the United States and Soviet Union would descend into nuclear war. Annie knows the danger, but also sees it as an exciting adventure.

Annie wasn't sure why adults approved of children who read, when the reading was so subversive. Now, she believed books more than the actual world she was living in. the French and Indian War had been a literary event for her, although WWII, whose survivors sometimes visited her classrooms, was different. Still, she sought imagination and depth of feeling in war: she wanted books where the surfaces actually matched the complexity of the inner life. For people of her parents' generation (to whom she refers as "we") who had grown up in the Warsaw ghetto, had family die in the death chambers, knew Morse code and battled Hitler, how could they settle down and send their children to dancing school, she asked?

Annie is able to read so much in part because reading is such a well-regarded activity by adults—and yet the content of the books themselves sometimes seems to flout the adults' own authority, or to contain descriptions of dangers they would never want their children to read about. By using "we" to describe events of WWII that Annie and her peers never experienced, Dillard ironically alludes to just how strongly books allowed her earlier self to imagine her way into even devastating events.

Annie noticed the boys beginning to change, gaining knowledge of Cicero's opinions or the Battle of the Marne. The girls were astonished at the originality of something like paying attention in Latin class, and would copy them. While the girls whined under their parents' authority, the boys waged war on them and disobeyed them outright, to the girls' admiration.

It seems to Annie that the boys are always one step ahead of the girls—earlier, it hadn't quite been "cool" to express interest in one's learning, but now that's changed, and the girls have to rush to catch up with this new standard.

One year dancing school faded into the past, replaced by country-club subscription dances. It was the same boys and same girls who showed up, and Annie wondered how the hosts knew. They dined on shrimp cocktails, the few adults along the walls ignoring them and being ignored in turn. Annie's dinner partner was a redhead from St. Paul's school, polite and delicate, but she was grateful not to have to fall in love with him. Afterward there was dancing: in the bathrooms the girls talked about which boys they found cute, usually the ones that had grown tall.

Once again, Annie doesn't manage to understand the closed, exclusive community of her parents' white, Presbyterian Pittsburgh social circle, which involved the same families and their children from infancy to adulthood. Her description of the dance underlines the parents' expectation that events like these would be preparation for a lifetime of such social intermingling.

Annie noticed one blond boarding-school boy who was wearing patent-leather pumps with satin bows, and learned again that there were more possibilities in the world than she'd thought. He went to a Connecticut boarding school and, when home, visited whorehouses on the Hill, in the all-black ghetto. Annie danced with him and he swung her around. She and the other girls groaned when the dance was over: they didn't know how to manage goodbyes smoothly, and a ride back home on the bus still awaited them.

Although the boys are mostly familiar to Annie, this one is different from everyone else, which proves alluring to Annie. The way Dillard describes him suggests that there might be something dubious in his eagerness to seek thrills by visiting poor black areas, but at the time Annie is too dazzled to perceive that.

On Sunday morning, Mother asked Annie how the dance was and she barely remembered: the morning made it seem like another world. That morning in church the girls and boys from the night before all reconvened: though they were familiar, Annie was now struck that she didn't really know these people at all. Generally, because she was a teenager, she felt she knew everything (and approved nothing).

Although Annie socializes with the same groups of people, she does so in what seem like different worlds, between home, school, and dances. She's struck, here, with the difference between knowing someone in a social setting and truly understanding him or her.

The church was a grave stone monument, carved with keys, pelicans, and anchors, decorated with a mosaic of Christ, that Annie now noticed in a moment of boredom. She imagined the war between the boys and their parents about whether they had to go to church. Looking down from the balcony, she felt like the families in the pews below seemed to have been planted there just after the Flood, the same old Pittsburgh families running the show. Annie knew the women better than the men, prizing gaiety and irony, sighing and coping, living basically alone as they managed their households. These families gained not closeness but respect for each other by seeing each other in carefully prescribed identities and institutions.

As Annie sits in church, her boredom leads her to examine the most minute details of the place, as well as to let her mind wander vaguely over the people who surround her at the congregation. With a dose of humor, she imagines different situations and thinks about the numbingly long histories of the Pittsburgh families there. But it's Dillard in the present who describes the status of the women in these families, and the respect that she has for them, given the strict limits to their roles in the 1950s.

Sometimes, some of the women would go a bit wild, appearing at parties in wild clothes, singing and dancing and acting like clowns. These were the best loved women.

Dillard suggests that the strict social mores of her community are not all-powerful; but perhaps the rules need these small exceptions in order to be maintained.

Annie's parents didn't go to church and she "almost" admired them for it. They dropped the kids off to listen to the dramatic, British-sounding minister who was actually from a Canadian farm. Annie had been devout for a time, but now she disdained church like she did everything, seething about her parents' hypocrisy and the hypocrisy of the people around her—once she could figure out how, she would quit church. On this, the first Sunday of the month, there was Communion, with its extended rituals of passing the collection, the juice tray holding grape juice, and the silver platters heaped with bread cubes, down the aisle. Annie passed up both and glanced at her friend Linda as if to confirm the absurdity, but Linda was silent and solemn.

Although Annie's parents don't attend church themselves, it's important to them that their children grow up with some kind of authority outside home and school. As Annie noted earlier, she grew up having a religious sensibility, one tied to her own intellectual development. But now she sees religion not as an opportunity for further learning, but yet another requirement imposed on her by her parents and by other authority figures—and thus one that, as a teenager, she finds inevitably absurd.

Annie glanced at the boys and, to her shock, saw that it seemed like they were praying. She wondered if they and the others were pretending to pray, so she kept watching. She knew these people, knew their world, that they loved their families, country clubs, hard work, and summer parties; and hated labor unions, laziness, spending, and wildness. But it seemed that people were, in fact, praying: she couldn't understand. She never learned who her neighbors really were before leaving Pittsburgh.

It seems impossible to Annie that anyone else her age could fail to see the absurdity and silliness of the rituals of church—especially the boys, who in other situations could be goofy and break rules. Dillard reflects, now, that as a teenager—despite her imaginative capacity—she sometimes had failures of imagination when it was a question of people familiar to her.

Years earlier, before Father sold his boat, he used to take Annie out on the Allegheny River. They stopped to swim at islands, tying up at Nine-Mile Island for Annie to jump from a high rope-swing into the water (he refused to watch, fearing she'd be hurt). Each time they visited, Annie seemed to be visiting a fascinating place she'd forgotten, where great things like bridges were completed because of slow, careful labor. Father would explain to her how dams worked, how the river locks worked, how glass was made from sand. He explained so much technology to Annie—steam engines, suspension bridges, and pumps—that for a long time she confused technology with American culture, assuming everything invented came from America, where people had figured out how to get rich from tapping into the natural power of water just rolling down the continent.

Dillard moves on to a quite different memory, moving backward in time from her Sunday mornings as a teenager to a time in her childhood when she had, it seems, a more genuine fascination with the world around her, rather than a near-constant irritation with authority figures like her father. Instead, Annie was impressed by everything her father knew, as well as by all the technology that he was able to explain to her. Annie seems to have gotten much of her penchant for exploration from her father, whose optimism about technology and discovery is mimicked in Annie's own life.

Now, nine years later, Father picked Annie and Amy up from church and, back home in the kitchen, began to explain American economics to them: money worked like water, he said, like the way water flowed from water towers into their attic bathroom, or the Allegheny into the Ohio into the Mississippi. Mother disagreed with him, recalling the blatant poverty they've seen. Father said those families shouldn't have so many kids, but Annie was beginning to realize that Father might have some things wrong.

Returning to the memory described earlier, Dillard now suggests that there might be something more than innocent optimism to her father's earlier explanations: that is, there's a certain politics to the idea that the natural world is there for the taking, and that all people have to do is work hard and they'll be successful. Mother has a different set of politics.

PART THREE

The section begins with a description of Andrew Carnegie, a vital character in Pittsburgh history. He was the son of Scottish immigrants who were in favor of universal suffrage, and against privilege and hereditary wealth (he'd later refuse a title from Edward VII). He started making steel, wrote four books, and preached what he called the "Gospel of Wealth," that a wealthy man should give his money away rather than "weaken" his sons with it. At 66 he sold his company to J.P. Morgan, and spent the rest of his life giving away a $350 million fortune.

The difference between Mother and Father regarding the easy availability of money and resources leads to a more general historical account of Pittsburgh, beginning with its most famous resident, whose great wealth changed the city (and the country) for good. Dillard does suggest there's something very Pittsburgh-esque about this combination of religious ethics and material wealth.

Carnegie enabled 2,509 libraries to be built, all with "Let there be light" engraved over the doors. But one steelworker told an interviewer that they'd rather have higher wages than have a library built. The workers' conditions were long, difficult, and dangerous; most didn't life past their forties. In 1892, Carnegie's manager Henry Clay Frick had sent hired men to fight unarmed strikers and their families in Homestead, Pennsylvania, leading to a brawl; Frick called in the whole state militia, whose armed occupation quashed all steel unions until 1936.

Dillard balances her account of Pittsburgh's history, giving a nod both to the generosity of Andrew Carnegie in material terms, and to the major criticisms that have historically been leveled against Carnegie: such harsh treatment of workers led to his characterization as a "robber baron" industrialist.

Pittsburgh's wealth came from iron and steel but also from many other industries. Andrew Mellon, a Pittsburgh banker, invested in aluminum before anyone thought it would be useful; later he'd be named Secretary of Treasury, and he became one of three Americans who had ever possessed a billion dollars. When Carnegie sold his company, though, Pittsburgh's death rate was also the highest in the country. The city council members wouldn't spend money to filter the drinking water, so epidemics kept recurring.

Again, Dillard tries to give both sides of the story. On the one hand, the great wealth that stemmed from Pittsburgh industries permitted many improvements and the founding of different kinds of cultural and educational institutions; on the other hand, these changes came at a high cost for many Pittsburgh residents.

Dillard reflects that Pittsburgh was, in fact, a great town to grow up in as a result of all the artistic and scientific institutions. She felt most herself at the natural history museum, which had a generator you could try out, hundreds of insect specimens, and dinosaur skeletons. Sometimes she climbed the stairs to the art gallery, where she also went with school once a year for the International Exhibition. Each year contemporary artists competed for a prize, and the museum's curators could buy what they liked: in 1961 Giacometti's sculpture *Man Walking* won.

Although now, as an adult, Dillard is very aware of the drawbacks to Pittsburgh's wealth, as a child she wasn't aware of them: in her ignorance, she could blissfully enjoy the fruits of Carnegie's and Mellon's great wealth. For a young person like Annie, free museums, libraries, and exhibitions were a great gift to her intellectual development.

Annie went to the gallery again and again to see Giacometti's sculpture, a wiry, thin person, six feet tall in bronze. She began to think of him as the perfect embodiment of the inner life, a thinker moving through an abyss: pure consciousness. Annie drew him again and again. Her passions grew divided between the arts and the sciences: scientists were curious about the external world, whereas artists noticed the particularities of the interior mind, adding beauty to the scientists' visions.

Even as she is growing up, Annie is aware of the importance she should place on the inner life, and on different kinds of metaphors that better allow her to understand how consciousness develops. She herself is torn between science and art, but here she perceives them as part of the same project.

Annie read hoping to learn everything and to be able to combine her father's logical mind with her mother's imagination and energy. Still, the books were pushing her away from Pittsburgh—something Mother always knew, as she actually encouraged her daughters to leave.

Dillard uses foreshadowing here in order to suggest that her childhood in Pittsburgh would eventually push her away from the city, even though she loved it.

Annie **awakened** again into a new stage of life, the speed and excitement of high-school life. She and her friends were blond and blue-eyed; they spent summers comparing tans and playing cards. Annie longed for New York, for Brooklyn or the Lower East Side, where she imagined the thoughtful people from books lived. Rather than living deeply like them, she looked critically at the other girls with their polished fingers and gold bangle bracelets and just-washed, just-set hair—not imagining that their chatter was not all their lives consisted of. Still, she felt that her world was the known one, of women as volunteers and housewives and dutiful mothers. Books didn't describe housework—it was as if housework didn't exist.

Once again Dillard employs the motif of awakening in order to characterize her development of a new way of viewing the world. As she enters high school, Annie no longer prizes her Pittsburgh environment, instead longing for exotic places like the ones she reads about in books. Dillard signals the limitations of Annie's desires for something different, showing how little she understood what did surround her.

Now Dillard imagines that there is something beautiful about living and dying where you were born, like people used to: as your grandparents took you to Sunday night dinner at the country club, you too would take your own grandchildren there, the adults drinking old fashioneds and the children eating maraschino cherries and orange slices. From the terrace, sunburnt in their cotton dresses, they'd look longingly at the children in the pool below. This was the world Annie and her friends knew best.

Dillard contrasts her younger self's impatience at the homogeneity of Pittsburgh life with a more broad-minded appreciation of different kinds of life choices. Through these images and descriptions, she allows herself to imagine how this kind of life could have continued for her—even if it's a life she never did want, and chose not to have.

Annie also knew Oma's world, but that was changing, now that Annie was working in the summers selling men's bathing suits. For a few spring vacations as a teenager, Amy and Annie visited Oma in her Pompano Beach apartment. On her last visit, Annie was fifteen and infuriated by everything she was required to do. She and Oma argued over whether "overstuffed" was the right way to describe upholstered furniture: she couldn't believe Oma when Oma said she might know something Annie didn't.

This vacation to Florida contrasts with the idyllic summer vacations Annie and Amy used to spend at Lake Erie, when Annie was able to appreciate the small joys of daily life with her grandparents. Now she's less able to appreciate these small moments, given how sharply she feels the burden of authority.

One day Oma returned from "looking at shoes," as she said, and broke down, grieving for her husband. Mary tried to comfort her, then said it'd been two years. When Oma said he'd never been cross with her, Amy asked if he hadn't even once. She launched into a story about him driving on a high mountain road in Tennessee, winding and careening: she cried that they were surely going to go over the cliff, and he said she could either hush or get out—then he was cross. The story lightened everyone's mood.

This anecdote provides a chance for Dillard to return to one of the few positive memories from her vacation in Florida with her grandmother—though even this memory relies upon a memory of its own, as Oma returns to a time when she, too, was happier, when her husband was alive.

Annie would bird-watch in the Fort Lauderdale park nearby, catching sight of the rare smooth-billed anis and filling a notebook with sketches and records. Seeing the pleasure cruise on the canal through her binoculars, she would wonder why anyone would prefer that to bird-watching. During the day, Oma and Mary shopped, and in the evenings they went out to dinner. Amy was bored too, but Annie ignored her. Everyone knew it'd be their last Florida trip.

Annie manages to find ways to continue to pursue her interests and observations. But she has little patience for Oma and Mary's way of life, with their shopping and dinners out. Dillard's gentle irony is meant to show that Annie was acting spoiled, though also with the typical frustrations of adolescence.

At sixteen, Annie felt set on a new path, feeling drawn down a long tunnel like the turnpike tunnels near Pittsburgh, although Annie felt pitched forward against her will. Her moods shifted wildly between violent anger and uncontrollable hilarity. She read a few books reverently, from start to finish, over and over again. She played a loud, crashing overture on the piano over and over again. She had a boyfriend whom she loved so strongly she imagined she might "transmogrify" into vapor. When she felt bored, she would feel nauseous and then weak and raging. People called teenagers like Annie a "live wire": she couldn't manage to control herself.

Dillard's image of the turnpike tunnel underlines the way in which her dark moods and feelings of frustration seemed inevitable and dramatic. Annie's moods have tended to rise and fall in the past, but never to this theatrical extent. In a way, what's happened is that Annie is unable to manage the many different feelings and frustrations that she experiences in her daily life—she's unable to direct them anywhere productive.

For most of her life Annie had felt unselfconscious, curious and directed to the outside world. Now she couldn't shed her own body and mind, nor imagine how to forget herself. She was vaguely conscious that this might just be an adolescent stage, but she worried about losing the world she'd so loved forever.

After learning slowly to pay attention to the outside world, and not just focus on her own inner mind, Annie is forgetting that capacity, as her own body seems both aggravating and impossible to forget.

Annie soon quit the church by writing a strongly worded letter to the minister. Father came to Annie's room (something that increasingly drove her crazy) to ask her about the letter: he said she seemed bent on humiliating him and Mother. Annie had a meeting with the assistant minister of the church, Dr. Blackwood, in his office. He lent her a copy of C.S. Lewis's radio shows for a paper she was writing. She'd just written one on the Book of Job, and was interested in the problem of suffering: she liked Lewis's *The Problem of Pain*.

Although Annie's parents don't attend church themselves, they feel that it's an important part of their community, and that Annie is refusing to attend to spite them (a conjecture that has some truth to it). Still, Annie remains precocious, interested in the intellectual aspects of religion, as her conversation with Dr. Blackwood shows.

It was now May and baseball season, a year into the wild feelings Annie couldn't rid herself of. She drove around all of Pittsburgh, asking herself why she was trapped at home and at school. In study hall, 40 or 50 girls in green jumpers sat, bored to tears, reading *Hamlet* or *L'Étranger* (by Albert Camus). Feeling restless, Annie wrote a boy's name in her notebook, picturing his face. It was maddening to her to realize that the students outnumbered their teachers, and yet no one thought to revolt.

Dillard describes one particular day that's indicative of a broader trend during this time in her life, when she feels trapped and shut in by the same city that she used to feel was full of endless possibility. She still enjoys reading and learning, but it's the fact that study hall is imposed on her by school that is maddening to her.

Annie was fascinated these days by the French Symbolist poets, some of whom went insane; she loved Rimbaud, who ran away as a teenager and wrote a poem called "The Drunken Boat," before dying young and tragically. She daydreamed and wrote poetry about the older prep-school and college boys whose wit, knowledge, and boldness mesmerized her. She understood that while they drank, played word games, and cracked jokes in public, they were serious and studious, reading voraciously, while alone.

The French Symbolists are alluring to Annie at this time because of their dramatic, romantic, evocative poetry, but also because of their exciting and dramatic lives. It's also simultaneously frustrating and alluring to Annie that the boys she feels she knows seem to have an inner life too, though one that's shut off to her.

Annie had started to get into trouble: she'd been in a drag race the previous September, and was hospitalized after a crash. She started to feel the ground spinning beneath her after this—only a moment ago, she felt, she'd been on the swing set or chasing butterflies. She'd been suspended from school for smoking cigarettes: her parents both wept. She wondered what would happen if she didn't straighten out—unable to glimpse a future without the French poets or her constant rage.

Annie's feelings of frustration, restlessness, and enclosure have become more intense, even dangerous. At the same time, she feels as though her childhood is slipping away from her without her being able to control or manage it. Although Annie doesn't seem to take pride in acting the way she does, she can't imagine how things will change, feeling as though she's condemned to this existence for life.

Annie's parents grounded her for the school suspension, and Amy began visiting her in her room. Amy had become tidy and pleasant-looking as a thirteen-year-old. In Annie's room, Amy listened to her sister rant and laughed at her jokes. She was going to boarding school the next year in Philadelphia, part of their parents' attempt to stave off more issues like Annie's. Mother sighed and asked what they were going to do with Annie; Annie couldn't think what.

As Annie feels like her life is spiraling out of control—even if in a relatively safe and limited context—Amy is also changing and growing up. She seems to view Annie as mature and worthy of admiration, even as their parents continue to worry about what to "do" with Annie.

Annie moved on from the French Symbolists to the British war poets, and started reading Asian and Middle Eastern poetry in translation. She wrote poems herself: one teacher met with Annie and others during lunch to discuss them. Annie was almost offended by this, feeling that poetry should be hidden and subversive, not sanctioned by authority.

Annie is no longer obsessed with insect or rock collections, but she still has an encyclopedic array of interests, and a voracious appetite for learning. There's also continuity in her feeling that learning should be private and secret.

One afternoon, at Judy Schoyer's house, Annie saw a book called *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius, from the first century BC. It was ancient physics mixed with philosophy: Mr. Schoyer was reading it, and he lent it to Annie, who found it dull and confusing (why read wrong science?) but admired Lucretius nonetheless. Judy had grown tall and graceful; her family took Judy and Annie to the ballet, the symphony, and the arts festival in Pittsburgh.

A balance between continuity and change also characterizes Annie's relationship to the Schoyer family, whom she's known since spending weekends with them in Paw Paw as a younger child. Mr. Schoyer continues to be a source of intellectual knowledge in a way that's different from Annie's own father.

Annie read linguistics and all of Freud's works that spring, reading greedily and without snobbery. She devoured social criticism and novelists like Updike and Henry Miller. She learned about Platonist philosophy through Emerson, writing a paper on his notion of the soul. She was enamored with his flouting of authority and his appeal to each person to develop his or her own relation to the universe.

Annie's tastes and interests have changed, although her broad curiosity and penchant for reading many different kinds of things has remained constant. For this point in her life, Emerson seems to align with Annie's own desire to challenge authority and create her own path.

One one of these spring mornings, Annie was called into the headmistress's office to hear what one of her teachers, Madame Owens, had written as part of her grades: "Here, alas, is a child of the twentieth century." Annie didn't know what to think about this, other than that it was indicative of the individual attention one got at private school.

Madame Owens seems to be a more old-fashioned girls' school teacher: her comment seems to mix bemusement with despair as she identifies Annie as characterizing the modern world, for better or for worse.

Annie drew all morning in class, sometimes with intent but sometimes doodling at random. She also drew at home: always faces and bodies, mostly of women and babies. In class, though, she couldn't bear to listen if she wasn't drawing, and one of her English teachers let her sit in the back of the classroom and paint. She paid no attention to what came from her pen: when she did, she realized they were often monstrous, swollen figures. Sometimes, though, she'd be on a family trip or walking to school when she'd seem to recognize a stranger, then realize with a jolt that she'd drawn his or her face.

Annie's interest in drawing has continued from a young age, although now it seems linked to her inability to concentrate on what authority figures say, rather than on what she'd like to pursue herself. Dillard continues to describe this time in her life as largely taking place inside her own head—the figures around her seem more real as a stage for her own wild imagination than as people in their own right.

The fall of her senior year, Annie recalled the smell of the Nabisco plant baking sweet white bread wafting across the field to her school. She knew the twenty other students in her class like her own family; she imagined them all leaving, crawling away like the **Polyphemus moth** down the driveway. Annie loved French and Chinese poetry, but she knew almost nothing about her own city: it was the poems that told her there was another world.

Dillard often describes memories from her childhood as relating to an image or another sense, from taste to smell to feel. The idea of Polyphemus moth returns with the notion of running away, intent on a destination, even without recognizing one's own fragility or weakness.

Annie knew she was going to Hollins College in Virginia, where the headmistress had gone. The headmistress sent all the "problem" students there, because of the school's renowned English department. She hoped she'd be able to maintain her rough edges there. Still, she'd visited, and it was beautiful.

Dillard will end her memoir chronologically with the end of her time in Pittsburgh, and with it the end of her childhood. How Annie would become the writer Annie Dillard remains unwritten.

EPILOGUE

Dillard notes that a dream is not much more than its setting: someone is climbing into a ship carrying a baby, or lying on tree branches in an alley, or dancing in a darkened ballroom. The setting of our lives, she says, is a maze: one by one we learn its corridors, without remembering how they connect.

In the epilogue, Dillard adopts a more surrealist, dream-like quality to her prose, as she lingers over something that's preoccupied her throughout the memoir: the relationship between a life and the places in which it occurs.

Dillard describes one setting, of a car trip into the mountains in September. The mountain curves away and you walk toward the ridge, she writes: you might then pause to notice that you're living, and imagine a map and locate this mountain ridge on it, in which a dot would represent you. You might wonder what happened to the other "dots" that made up your life, swimming in the river, swinging a bat, being kissed, stepping into a warm field.

Dillard is talking about herself here, but she switches to the second person in order to make her narration more abstract and general—she's making a larger point about the ways in which people deal with the relationship between their individual lives, the memories that make them up, and the broader world where they have taken place.

Dillard moves from the impersonal "you" back to the first person to admit that she does wonder. But she doesn't want to focus on her personal trajectory. Instead she says that what's important is for any person to **awaken** and discover a place, to find the globe already spinning before his or her eyes. She returns to describing the imagined mountain slope, and broaches another problem: "you" might have different, disparate memories, but no proof that all those memories belong to the same person. "You" have to just trust that all these memories are set in the same, wider world. All of your cells have been replaced in the meantime, she says, as well as most of your feelings, except for two: one of lowering your foot into a hot bath, and the other of the subsequent sensation: noticing that you're here.

Throughout the memoir, Dillard has pointed to places where she felt that her earlier self was too wrapped up in her own personal trajectory. At the same time, however, she's traced her own awakening, her realization that she inhabits a magnificent world that she should appreciate and learn to wonder at. Living should not just be a process of moving mechanically through each day, she argues: it requires a second step, one of paying attention to all that happens.

Dillard compares the many different places the reader might be reading this book with the setting where she's writing it, at a wide desk in a pine shed with young oaks growing outside. Lost in the past, she imagines her own mother, still young and energetic, approaching Annie to bring her back to when she was young. Then she reminds herself that she is here, now, with her own family: she goes back and forth from this awareness many times a day.

Now, many years after the childhood that she has recalled throughout the book, Dillard is equally anchored in a specific place to which she pays close attention. But she is also returning to places and moments of the past, poignantly recalling her mother as a young woman, which she can no longer be.

Dillard briefly characterizes her childhood: Pittsburgh in the 1950s, in a household of comedians, a childhood filled with books. Perhaps it was because her father left to go down the Ohio River one day that Annie always equated living with leaving, she thinks. She recalls Mother persuading Father to perform or "do" Goofus, an old pantomime routine about a farm boy, grinning stupidly in his character.

Dillard attempts to draw a few specific conclusions from the memories she's laid out. But as she tries to conclude with a general, logical characterization of her childhood, she finds herself slipping back into specific images and moments from the past.

Father instructed the children that true American culture was Dixieland, and then jazz. It was a culture of the stock market crash and the Depression and Dust Bowl, all because businessmen realized all at once that paper money was only paper. Of course, Annie thought, as her father explained it to her. She describes other things that "meant" America, from the Golden Gate Bridge to the Chrysler Building, the Chicago World's Fair to the Erie Canal, and especially the wanderers like Daniel Boone and Johnny Appleseed.

Here Dillard reflects on what she's meant by titling her book "An American Childhood." She's focused on specific details about life in Pittsburgh, but now shows how many of these details are emblematic of American culture, with its combination of hard work, striving for material improvement, and spirit of adventure—both positive and negative qualities, in her account.

They danced a lot in Annie's house, and Father always reminded the children of a line in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, when the narrator was dancing in a Mexican bar and said this was the only time he ever got to hear the music loud enough. Annie was speeding up, getting ready to leave. She drove up and down the highways and over the Pittsburgh bridges. She wrote poems and played piano fast, listened to jazz and wondered if, in New Orleans, the music would be loud enough.

In ending, Dillard returns to the final months before she left Pittsburgh, implying that she wouldn't return. She suggests that as she prepared to leave home, she was continuing an attitude of curiosity and openness to the world, striving to "hear" the world's music in a way that would allow her to live to the utmost.

©2020 LitCharts LLC

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Baena, Victoria. "*An American Childhood*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Jun 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Baena, Victoria. "*An American Childhood*." LitCharts LLC, June 29, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/an-american-childhood.

To cite any of the quotes from *An American Childhood* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Dillard, Annie. An American Childhood. Harper & Row. 1989.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Dillard, Annie. An American Childhood. New York: Harper & Row. 1989.