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4 February, 2010

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Dillard Essay

### Dillard and Other Voices Reconcile Death

Annie Dillard is an author whose works include a memoir, a novel, poetry, and nonfiction narrative. *For the Time Being* is one such narrative that takes readers through a strain of thoughts and memories, allowing them to draw their own conclusions after sharing Dillard's experiences in a contextual environment that she conjures. Moving through earlier sections alternately characterized by their bitterness and melancholy blended with an abiding sense of reverence and renewal regarding the human condition she is witness to, Dillard steps backstage to allow the words of other people distill the vague quality of her message and create a stable backdrop for her central argument. The continuous references to the human belonging to his or her mortality, the shortness of life, and the struggle of birth and death are masterfully yet subtly brought to clarity in the closing by borrowing from eloquent philosophers. Using these excerpts enables Dillard to unify her opinion of the human condition with that of others, elevating herself from a solitary voice in the dark to the greater consciousness of mankind. Through such a simple narrative, Dillard is able to use the voices of others to point to the human need to reconcile life and death.

First, Dillard reconciles death by stressing that man belongs to his time, and thus his mortality. By doing this, she places a rug underfoot, forcing readers to reexamine their ideas before she inevitably pulls it out again. In her subtlety, the author brings the Chinese clay soldiers back to life by going through a rebirthing process with the earth. The narrative captures them half hanging out of dirt walls, fully alive in frozen animation as the earth was "erupting them forth" (2). This establishes the clay soldiers as living members of a deceased era, and unearthing them brings them to the surface of the earth and time, exposed to something they are unfamiliar with. She takes further pains express the wrongness of this deed in mentioning that "a cleaned clay soldier is unremarkable," just after singing praises to the glory and vitality of the soldiers (2). This paragraph strategy is significant because it leads readers into rapture with her,

only to bring them back to a stark museum atmosphere where the void is that much more palpable.

One of the final paragraphs is a quote by Max Picard, who mentions "old masters" by saying they had just made their way out of a wall, and "seem unsafe and hesitant because they have come out too far and still belong more to silence than themselves" (4). The mentioned "silence" ties history with death, making man both a product and possession of time, rising and falling with the period to which he belongs. Violate this fundamental law, and he feels threatened by entering unfamiliar territory, yearning to return to silent death. This safe, comforting view of death is effectively proposed by Dillard as a way of placing death into its proper, stoic yet still positive if inevitable context.

By using mixed messages from outside sources, Dillard does not attempt to make readers feel better about death, but point out that they want to. The effectiveness in Dillard's demonstrating this is in how she does not suggest to the audience what to think, but instead makes us embrace it on our own by walking us all slowly up to her point, thought by thought along the thread of her writing. Teresa Mancuso, a hermit, put it, "The thing we desperately need is to face the way it is" (4). Betraying the comfort that was established in the paragraph before, the author asserts that readers want to be lulled into a sense of security in their beliefs. Allowing others to vocalize this point keeps Dillard from invalidating her own words, as well as simultaneously letting her endorse what both Picard and Mancuso believe to be true. Both of these people describe the human condition regarding death, but from completely different points of view, ultimately making the audience question how to view death.

With the series of quotes to end her story, Dillard effectively reinforces her own themes with other voices, lending credence and pathos to her own argument. In the narrative, Dillard creates tones of melancholy and bitterness, which seem ambiguous and awaiting resolution that may well never come to pass. She brings up the extinction of the soldiers, the feeling of being dead, and being able to "see our lives from the aspect of eternity" (2). These subjects seem awkwardly placed into the description of the archeological dig, sticking out for readers to consider and somehow fit into her larger narrative thread. The morbid ideas are pieced together by a quote from a Midrash, who remarks that when a baby is born "his hands are clenched as though to say, 'Everything is mine. I will inherit it all.' When he departs from the world, his hands are open, as though to say, 'I have acquired nothing from the world'" (4). In the context of

the narrative, this passage strikes as depressing at best. It is used as a clever tool to fully recover the somber tone and affect the reader. The Midrash suggests that there is no point to life, because people arrive and depart with nothing in their hands. Reading this in context forces the mind to madly grope for some shred of meaning, find comfort in God, anything to reaffirm that this cannot possibly be true.

As a final note on the message, Dillard chooses to layer heavy remorse onto her bitterness. Confucius, known for his wise and succinct words, does not speak in these pages. "Confucius, when he understood that he would soon die, wept" (4). This line ends the narrative with sadness, and brings in an angle of hopelessness that was previously unseen. If there is no way for Confucius to comfort himself in the face of death, then there is no chance for anyone else to do so. It should also be noted that the author used a philosopher native to China, home of the clay soldiers. Bringing the focus back to the soldiers and their surrounding culture is important in humanizing them. Relating them to a real figure like Confucius immediately puts the reader in the moment of forgotten time those soldiers occupy – it forces us to confront their literal moment of mortality, of death, and our own. Dillard spends the entirety of her narrative describing the clay soldiers, then effectively places them in time to struggle and weep with Confucius.

The quoted passages make it impossible to be a passive reader because Dillard is actively leading readers along threads of thought, working hard to make them feel what she intends them to if they are to understand. The story serves as a beautiful surface to question and admire, but is flat and vague without the other voices being lent to solidify Dillard's themes. Each imported voice adds a new dimension to the narrative, moving us past the (shallow?) premises of the writing itself, revealing a message of how humans desire, sometimes preposterously, impossibly, to reconcile their shortsighted lives with the long gaze of an eternal death.