

Seeing is Caring

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English

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No one can deny nature's beauty. When the morning sun overcomes the night, fortunate spectators are stunned in amazement. Amidst nature's canvas, they stand convinced that the morning sky strikes an equally powerful sensation to everyone around the world. Certainly, images such as the sunrise can be objectively categorized as beautiful. Nevertheless, one should be cautious in extending this sublime connotation onto all of nature's elements. While the rising sun beholds unimaginable beauty, there is a cruel, ugly, and amoral world-taking place just beneath the sky. In her book "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," Annie Dillard offers a graphic reminder of nature's darkness. By discussing fecundity and parasitism, Dillard uncovers the death rampant in the natural world. Through a series of meditations, she paints a balanced portrait of nature, challenging the reader to see the world in its entirety. In line with philosophers William James and David Hume, and naturalist John Muir, Dillard urges her readers to observe life as it actually is. When the world is no longer a projection of the observer's emotions, then nature can be fully explored, experienced, and enjoyed. When all of the world's beauty and ugliness become equally visible, people are able to love nature for its own sake.

From a young age, human beings can instantaneously recognize the beauty in nature. Though staying inside yields marginal amusement, nothing compares to the entertainment of recessing outdoors. Even with limited knowledge of the ecological, biological, and chemical processes surrounding them, children still enjoy and revere nature's beauty. Similarly, when Annie Dillard listens to the songs of the mockingbird, she attests that nature's beauty can be perceived without an in-depth understanding of it. While listening, Dillard's "brain started to trill why why why, what is the meaning meaning meaning?" Soon after, she realizes that "any unified field theory" of the mockingbird's lyrics is "slightly less irrelevant" (Dillard, 107). For Dillard, the "real and proper question is: why is it so beautiful?" Curiously, Dillard's incompetence did

not disrupt her from detecting the song's objective beauty. Just as she knows light when she sees it, she is able to sense beauty upon first encounter. According to Dillard, "Beauty is something objectively performed" just as a tree that falls still collapses whether or not witnesses are present (Dillard, 109). However, if beauty is objective, then an objectively ugly opposite exists. After all, light cannot prevail without darkness, nor moral without immoral. While nature is most known for her beautiful components, Dillard shamelessly reveals her uglier side.

In its titular chapter, Dillard states that fecundity makes life "astonishingly cheap...careless and bountiful, and that extravagance goes a crushing waste" (Dillard, 179). When certain species reproduce, the progeny are exponential in number, and the majority of them die off. In the case of fecundity, life becomes a chance game of survival instead of cooperation. Through natural selection, only dominant traits persevere, and individuals carrying unfit ones are ousted. When fecundity is taken into account, nature suddenly appears cruel, treacherous, and competitive. In this case, the value of every life form is based on their evolutionary fitness, not in any intrinsic worth. Unlike "moral" humans that "value the individual supremely...nature values him not a whit" (Dillard, 179).

In the following chapter, Dillard expands the "cheapening of life" by discussing the prevalence of parasitism. She states, "parasitic insects comprise ten percent of all known animal species" (Dillard, 236). Perplexed by this statistic, Dillard asks, "what kind of devil's tithes do we pay?" In these two chapters, Dillard contradicts the traditional stereotype that nature is bountiful, beautiful, and teeming with life. Even in the first chapter, Dillard contrasts the benevolent view of nature. In a little island in Tinker Creek, she witnesses a giant water bug that "seizes a victim with its legs, hugs it tight, and paralyzes it with enzymes injected during a vicious bite" (Dillard, 8). After witnessing the waterbug dismantle its prey, she encourages her readers to, "somehow

take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here" (Dillard, 11). By taking a "wider view," Dillard combats the traditional fragmentary way of seeing. Typically, people look at nature through the lens of a single thought or association. Instead, Dillard proposes to keep the "whole landscape" in perspective, in order that nature's picturesque images and grotesque features become equally noticeable.

At first glance, nature's beauty and ugliness appear to live in direct opposition with each other. However, when people "really see" the world, they will find countless examples of life and death—two ends that dynamically coexist with one another. Just as light consumes the day and darkness night, nature is comprised of both beauty and ugliness. Since they are complementary not contradictory, it is irrational to see the beauty of a single image then associate it with the rest of nature. Likewise, one cannot observe fecundity or parasitism then conclude that nature is purely destructive. Alternatively, to look at nature is to disassociate it from beauty and ugliness altogether.

Yet, seeing the world outside of the beautiful-ugly dichotomy is a difficult endeavor. In William James's essay, "On a Certain Human Blindness," he defines humans to be primarily emotional beings. Due to the emotional center that rules human thought, people's perceptions and subsequent reactions are inescapably subjective. Any object that is seen, James forwards, is the result of the "idea in which we frame it" (James). By this assertion, James suggests that whenever an object is observed, it is always judged and calculated in reference to a feeling or belief. Thus, humans are fundamentally blind to reality and cannot objectively categorize something as beautiful or ugly. Since the visible world is merely a projection of people's ideas, making discrete classifications is an arbitrary task. In spite of mankind's inherent myopia, James offers some solace. In order to bridge the gap between subjectivity and actuality, James advises

to think like a poet. Through poetic reasoning, an individual can “run underground” and “see the world of reality which the judging spectator fails to see” (James). To do this, an individual displaces his feelings and takes on the consciousness of the subject being judged. For instance, when Dillard looks at a tree, she loses self-consciousness and becomes the tree. She says “I lose myself in a tree. I can scent its leafy breath or estimate its board feet of lumber. I can draw its fruits or boil tea on its branches” (Dillard, 82). By giving the judged subject “a voice far beyond singing,” Dillard thinks as a poet and transmutes herself into “true realism” (James).

While James’s poetic solution sounds viable, he warns that humans “are but finite, and each one of us has some single specialized vocation of his own.” According to James, everyone’s mind is uniquely shaped by their own “particular duties.” Consequently, the mental hardwiring of each individual shuts off “the heart toward everything unlike them.” In turn, anything that appears “unlike them” is never seen, understood, or appreciated. Since people only identify with familiar images, they resist anything outside their personalized definition of what ought to be. Surely, this conflict with dissimilar forms further detracts someone from “really see[ing]” the “whole landscape.” For someone to truly see nature, they cannot fall captive to their presuppositions that delude them into only seeing what they believe they should. This notion is clarified in David Hume’s “A Treatise of Human Nature.” In his famous inquiry, Hume presents the “is-ought problem,” and states that people cannot reasonably extrapolate how something *ought to be* from examining *what is*. From a philosophical standpoint, Hume finds it illogical to think in terms of the ideal. In essence, *what can be* observed is always more real than the abstraction of *what should be* observed. In fact, Hume’s distinction between the positive and normative, or the actual and the ideal, is so sharp that contemporary scholars refer to it as “Hume’s Guillotine” (Barash). Indeed, Hume’s coined term aligns with James’s poetic reasoning

as well as Dillard's sentiments towards the waterbug, fecundity, and parasitism. In drastically different ways, all three writers argue that it is fallacious to maintain an unwavering conviction that nature is solely beautiful or ugly. When a single element of natural beauty is extended to all cases, then "Hume's Guillotine" is undone, and the world becomes an irrational, self-manufactured utopia. However, if someone can manage to disregard their preconceived notions of beauty, think like a poet, and evaluate *what is* apart from *what ought to be*, then, finally, they can love and enjoy nature for its own sake.

When someone sees nature as it actually is, then they can begin to truly love it. Put succinctly, "the lover can see, and the knowledgeable" (Dillard, 20). Just as seeing cannot depend on emotions or presuppositions, love, too, cannot be attached to ideas or expectations. If anyone claims to love something, it must be an act or feeling in the present moment. For instance, if someone does something noble on the account of repaying a past deed, then such an act is compensatory. Moreover, if something is done with the expectation of receiving a future gift in return, then the underlying motive is entirely self-centered. As with seeing, love can only reside in the present moment and apart from self-interest. Dillard brings this principle to life when studying a tree. In the midst of observation, Dillard notes that "the second I become aware of myself at any of these activities...the tree vanishes" (Dillard, 82). When Dillard consciously includes herself in seeing or loving, the motive and essence of the act itself becomes undermined and deterred. Thus, both activities selflessly and utterly magnify the observed while minimizing the observer's own interests. For this reason, nature-lovers like John Muir are just as excited, if not more, about a storm on the horizon than a sunrise. Since Muir loves nature for what it is and not for any expected benefit, he willingly throws himself into the strong winds and heavy rain. In his "A Wind-Storm in the Forests," he recounts a time when a storm "began to sound" he "lost

no time in pushing out into the woods to enjoy it” (Muir, 91). In fact, Muir is so passionate about the same phenomena people instinctively fear and escape from that he is astonished “that anyone...could ever have found a period sufficiently stormless to establish themselves” (Muir, 91). As evidenced by Muir, it takes an unconditional love to see and enjoy all of nature’s aspects. Nevertheless, Dillard suggests that seeing is not only for the “lover,” but for the “knowledgeable” as well.

When a person loves something genuinely, he inadvertently pursues to know and care for it endlessly. It can be argued that the current degradation of the environment stems from people failing to love and see nature for what it actually is. Nowadays, people tend to care about nature when it fulfills their definition of “beautiful.” In such a case, these people will be let down the next time the sky turns gray. When “Hume’s Guillotine” and James’s poetic reasoning are contradicted, people will only love nature when their model of *what ought to be* is satisfied. Consequently, this limited mindset hinders people from seeing and acquiring full knowledge of the environment. As a result, people have turned into “urban nomads” who care little about their place. It is in this spirit that Wendell Berry wrote “without a complex knowledge of one’s place, and without the faithfulness to one’s place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed” (Buell, 63).

Throughout “Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,” Dillard warns of the temptation to see the world in fragments. However, when nature is limited by human emotions, an entire world is left unseen. So long as people fail to acknowledge and overcome their blindness, nature will never be properly loved, known, or cared for. Perhaps, if people saw nature for what it is, then the world will look like what it ought to be.

Works Cited

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