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Shadow Mountains

Annie Dillard examines the manifestations of light and shadow as they play across her mountain landscape in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. She defines what shadows are and why they are important for vision. She analyzes the movement of shadows and light across the mountains of Virginia's Blue Ridge, giving the reader a highly visual picture of their shape and form. She uses words and images that give depth, texture, and dimension to her written descriptions. Similar to a painter or photographer, she considers the eye's ability to perceive the dimensions of form through the display of light and shadow. Dillard reveals in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that seeing and writing accurately about the true forms of nature, relies on using an artist's eye to study the appearances of light and shadows as they stand and move across the mountain terrain.

Dillard defines what shadows are. She tells the story of the "newly sighted" girl who asks her mother, "Why do they put those dark marks all over them?," when the girl first saw photographs and paintings. The mother's response is, "those are shadows. That is one of the ways the eye knows that things have shape. If it were not for shadows many things would look flat" (loc. 401). Dillard does not just focus on the sunlight beaming on the mountain faces. She studies the shadows, the movements they make, and the changes they effect in her perception of the landscape. She writes in "Winter," "On the mountains the wan light slanted over the snow and gouged out shallow depressions and intricacies in the mountain's sides I never knew were there" (loc. 717). She uses words like "gouged out" and "depressions," which denote depth and shadow in the lower areas of the mountain

topography. The light “gouges” but, “The shadow’s the thing” that creates depth of vision and reveals the previously unnoticed textures (loc. 890). These two visual spaces of light and shadow work together to give dimension to human vision. She says of shadows, “I see them as making some sort of sense of the light ... They give the light distance” (890). She creates a three dimensional picture of the land with words. She shows the shadow’s role in forming her vision of the land. Without the consideration of the shadows, she and the reader would have a flat, less well defined vision of the mountains.

Shadow exists where the light is blocked, but not eliminated completely. Shadow is a lack of darkness and of light. This shadow medium allows Dillard to more clearly visualize and describe the form and shape of the natural world. She acknowledges that she must use shadow to uncover a more realistic picture of the forms of nature. To illustrate this point, she tells the story of Moses placed in the cliff of the rock. She quotes from the Bible writing, “God says to Moses, ‘I will put thee in a cliff of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen’” (loc. 2913). Because God places Moses in his shadow and only allows him to see the shadowed side of himself, God shields him from the overwhelming brightness of divine light that would blind him. To emphasize this idea Dillard writes, “If we are blinded by darkness, we are also blinded by light” (loc. 332). A comparison can be drawn between this scene and the human eye’s inability to see the full forms of nature by focusing only on the brightness. These passages illustrate that Dillard recognizes that the shadow area - where the full brightness of the overwhelming light is dimmed, is a safe space where a realistic picture of nature can be seen.

The topic of blindness resurfaces when she says, “Darkness appalls, Light Dazzles” (loc. 344). It could be inferred that the best opportunity for seeing clearly might be found in the shadows. Dillard writes, “I live now in a world of shadows that shape and distance color, a world where space makes a kind of terrible sense” (loc. 450). She has lost the flat “color patch” vision of infancy, but gained vision that includes shadows. She is therefore able to make sense of the landscape around her. Her focus on the shadow area allows her to gaze and study nature much longer than if she were just looking at the brightest parts.

Dillard considers shadow a mobile entity. She writes, “I can see the shadow on the fields before me deepen uniformly and spread like a plague. Everything seems so dull I am amazed I can even distinguish objects” (loc. 160). Shadow does not equal complete darkness. Shadow equals less light particles. She can still see objects in the dark shadow. As Dillard writes, “Shadow is the blue patch where light doesn’t hit” (loc 1002). The following quote, from an article on earth optics, illustrates the complex and daunting task of trying to define what a single shadow’s position might be at any given moment, because light and shadows are constantly in motion.

Shadows are a ubiquitous part of nature out of doors. Our personal shadow is curiously distinct (sharp) when the Sun is low. The more distant parts appear equally sharp to those close by. In reality, because the Sun is not a point source but subtends half of a degree, the shadow broadens with distance, but this is exactly compensated by our perception of it. A low Sun casts a blue shadow because the dark portion is illuminated by the overhead blue sky (Livingston, 247)

Livingston references “our perception” of the moving shadows in the preceding quote. Dillard understands that her perception of the movement of the shadows is unique to the present

moment. She portrays these moments to the reader through her active descriptions. She discusses the movements of the cloud shadows which are projected on the mountains as they “slide east as if pulled from the horizon, like a tablecloth off a table,” that cause the mountains to appear as if they are “going on and off like neon signs” (loc. 168). The motion laden words she uses in relation to the cloud shadows like, “slide,” “pulled,” “going on and off,” and the imagery of the high speed ripping off of the tablecloth, delivers a picture of the mountains and clouds that would exist without considering the movement across the mountain faces. Without the shadows, the landscape would be rendered flat and featureless due to her distance from it. The mountains would have no distance or dimension to distinguish them from each other.

Because Dillard focuses on movement, the natural forms come to life. She writes:

everything is half in shadow, half in sun, every clod, tree, mountain, and hedge. I can't see Tinker Mountain through the line of hemlock, till it comes on like a streetlight ... Suddenly the light goes; the cliffs recede as if pushed. The sun hits a clump of sycamores between me and the mountains; the sycamore arms light up, and *I can't see the cliffs*. They're gone. ... Now the sycamore arms snuff out, the mountains come on, and there are the cliffs again. (loc. 176)

This passage seethes with energy and power. It feels like fireworks are going off the way Dillard goes from seeing, to being blinded, and back to seeing again. Sight is possible because of the ability to discern the difference between shadow, light, and darkness. This “half in shadow, half in sun” state activates the landscape. The mountains and landscape come alive and seem to move. She uses words like, “comes on,” “goes,” “recede,” “pushed,” and “hits.” These words give distance to the forms in relation to each other and show the

power of the light and shadow juxtaposition. This analysis of the constant movement of shadows across the landscape, allows Dillard to infuse vitality and energy into her writing. This translates into a better description of her natural surroundings for the reader. The reader can see and feel the movement of the light and shadow which gives a sense of really experiencing the landscape Dillard writes about at the exact moment she experiences it.

Like a skilled painter, Dillard brings shadow and light together to create form, shape, and give reality to her description of the landscape. She uses an example in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to illustrate how light and shadow create form and reality in art. She describes the ancient Muslim ban on representational art. Because sculpture casts a shadow, it has form, making it an idol. She says they don't strictly follow the ban, "but they do forbid sculpture, because it casts a shadow" (loc. 890). The art has become real because its form is revealed by the creation of a shadow. Dillard concludes, "So shadows define the real" (loc. 890). These considerations of form are integral to a painter or writer as they attempt to create shape or "reality" in only two dimensions. The following quote shows how an artist makes sense of form using value differences. This is similar to Dillard's consideration of the contrasting values of shadow and light in her writing.

The shadowy charcoal background and the artist's fluid, flexible approach to constructing form produce a sense of air and depth around the figures. There are few hard outlines, so forms melt into each other and into the surrounding space, yet the value structure enables the viewer to read the image clearly. (Agar, 40)

Dillard delivers this value structure in her writing. She makes reading the image she creates easier by describing how the different values of light and shadow work together. She illustrates this relationship at work on the mountainsides when she writes, "Everything is

drained of its light as if sucked. Only at the horizon do inky black mountains give way to distant, lighted mountains-lighted not by direct illumination but rather paled by glowing sheets of mist hung before them" (loc. 174). This description gives the reader a realistic image of the mountains, especially those far in the distance. Dillard illustrates these differences in value using words like "inky black," "drained," and "sucked," for the darker dimensions and "lighted," "illumination," "paled," and "glowing" to describe the lighter values. These value differences are especially important for vision from a distance.

Dillard compares her view of the landscape to a static work of art writing, "The sun in the west illuminates the ground, the mountains, and especially the bare branches of trees, so that everywhere silver trees cut into the black sky like a photographer's negative of a landscape" (loc. 164). She compares her vision of the landscape to both a photograph and a photo's negative, which is interesting. Here too, the light and shadow are ever present, painting a picture of the land for the reader. The following quote illustrates how similar a painter's view of the natural world is to Dillard's as a writer.

Her time in the mountains, she says, was life changing. It was at once her introduction to the marvelous power of the natural world and a formative experience for her as an artist. As Baca explained in an interview accompanying the exhibit: 'Surrounded by an intimate and lonely atmosphere, full of spirituality, I dove into a world of shapes, colors, textures and rhythms, where shadow and light reigned.' (Earth Island Journal, 31)

This world where shadow and light rule is all about contrast. The following definition of chiaroscuro and its uses seems appropriate to describe Dillard's expert use of contrast.

Chiaroscuro in art is the use of strong contrasts between light and dark, usually bold contrasts affecting a whole composition. It is a technical term used by artists and art historians for the use of contrasts of light to achieve a sense of volume in modelling three-dimensional objects and figures. (Wikipedia)

An artist working with a flat medium is able to trick the human eye into seeing depth and dimension through an expert application of light and shadow. In a similar way, the reader is “tricked” into imagining the form and dimensions of Dillard’s mountains. Art imitates nature, using light and shadow to create form and dimension, so that the eye knows what it is seeing. Dillard’s art also uses descriptions of shadow and light to create dimension so the reader’s mind’s eye knows what it is seeing. As Pamela Smith writes of Dillard,

The words "seeing" and "vision" occur and recur in interpretations of Dillard's works. It appears that Dillard steadily communicates that this is what the ambiguous human species is for: looking around and taking note. Those who happen to be artists, among whom she numbers herself, have the task of communicating their visions. (Smith)

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek definitely communicates Dillard’s vision. The reader visualizes Dillard’s landscape because she paints a vivid mental picture with words. Annie Dillard takes an artist’s vision of the value contrasts between shadow and light and creates an energetic, alive image of the Blue Ridge mountains.

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