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Daughters and Parents: Recollections of Childhood in the Essays of Alice Walker and Annie Dillard

by

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Daughters and Parents: Recollections of Childhood in the Essays of Alice Walker and Annie Dillard* submitted by Natalie Maria Cook in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This study is an examination of the essays of Alice Walker and Annie Dillard, two contemporary American writers who have used the essay genre to describe their childhoods and their families. Alice Walker's essays about her mother, found in the collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, reveal that Walker regards her relationship with her mother as an evolving one. In early essays, Walker regrets the lack of opportunity and freedom in her mother's life, but in the 1974 essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" Walker is able to re-evaluate and re-write her mother's life. Walker's recollections of her father's life a e more complicated and problematic, since he died before Walker could resolve her ambivalence about the injustice and pain in his life, but in the essay "Father," Walker finds resolution through a re-writing of her father's life. Annie Dillard's book *An American Childhood* is a nostalgic recollection of a middle-class childhood; Dillard "awakens" in an enabling, literate environment. An examination of Dillard's memories of her father reveals that while Dillard admires him and associates him with adventure in her childhood, she recognizes his limitations when she is an adolescent. When Dillard recalls her mother, she admires her mother's energy and her political ideals, but I also argue that both Dillard and her mother have an ambivalent relationship with their Pittsburgh community. In the conclusion of the thesis, I compare the essays of Walker and Dillard, keeping in mind how the personal realities of their childhoods are also political, a source of identity.

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I sometimes think that the only reason parents put up with children and children put up with their parents, is to play a game in the evening and forget their battle of the day.

--William Saroyan

Introduction

Both Alice Walker and Annie Dillard have written works which have been reviewed as "autobiography," "life writing," or "memoirs." Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) is a collection of individual essays in which Walker describes how her childhood, her family, and the American South have shaped her political ideology. Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood* (1987) is a book about Dillard's childhood experiences and her family's life in 1950s Pittsburgh. Both authors were born in the United States at the end of the Second World War (Walker was born in 1944 and Dillard in 1945), and their recollections of their parents and their childhoods reflect the particularities of that time period.

An American Childhood has a narrative thread running through it which might prompt some to question whether it is not a novel or a full-length autobiography more than a collection of essays. It is more narrative than Walker's book, but it is divided into clear sections, each of which contains its own exploration or argument. As well, Dillard herself acknowledges that "memoirs" often elude categorization. In the introduction to a collection of memoirs which she edited, she writes, "The writer usually has the privilege, or onus, of labeling the work. Calling it memoir vouches for its veracity; calling it fiction may, on a good day, alert the world to its literary qualities. The writer may vacillate" (*Modern American Memoirs* xi).

Dillard then goes on to describe how various memoirs, or parts of memoirs, have been categorized as essays (xi).

I have based my decision to study Dillard's work as essays on critics who favour stretching the definition of the essay to allow for some freedom and variation. Graham Good's discussion in *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* suggests that since the essay emerged as a vehicle whereby writers could investigate and explore ideas with an emphasis on personal experience, essays will not always follow the same pattern or form. Good favours defining the essay by its exploratory nature, by the fact that the authors of essays "discover" things, rather than by the work's form or length. Good writes:

> The heart of the essay as a form is this moment of characterization, of recognition, of figuration, where the self finds a pattern in the world and the world finds a pattern in the self. This moment is not the result of applying a preconceived method, but is a spontaneous, unpredictable discovery, though often prepared by careful attention and observation. (Good 22)

Good's view that the essay is open and interested in discovery is shared by Chris Anderson, who writes, "the essay is reflective and exploratory and essentially personal. Its purpose is not to convey information, although it may do that as well, but rather to tell the story of the author's thinking and experience" (x). On the basis of these discussions of the essay as personal

exploration, I argue that both Walker and Dillard's autobiographical writings can be read as essays.

Dillard and Walker have both written essays which describe the most personal of subjects, the family. Both authors write more personally than academically, but this is to be expected, since, as Graham Good suggests, the essay offers personal experience, not disciplinary expertise (5), and "the essay cultivates diversity where the disciplines seek unity" (6). The essay's openness allows both Dillard and Walker to make pathways from family history and personal relationships to larger issues.

Because both Walker and Dillard are keenly interested in how the personal plays itself out in a particular context, their essays often reveal how the small family unit is part of a larger social dynamic. For Dillard, the city of Pittsburgh and its core of upper-middle-class Presbyterian families is the context in which her family lived and worked. This context shapes her entire book *An American Childhood*. Walker, the child of Georgia sharecroppers, describes a life of hardship and poverty; her recollections of her childhood and her parents' lives are always affected by this poverty, by the fact that her parents lacked educational and financial opportunity. While each writer acknowledges the importance and influence of family and social contexts, Walker's work is political and direct, whereas Dillard's work is subtle and poetic. The difference between the two styles has been discussed by Janet Varner Gunn, who claims that the difference is one between a "politics of experience" and "poetics of experience" (66). Walker is an activist, a writer

whose essays exemplify a blend of personal presence and political ideology. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* contains thirty-six essays, most of which were originally published in magazines and newspapers or given as speeches. Dillard comments on the political and social realities of American society too, but her politics are more difficult to decipher. She knows that the "boom" which followed the Second World War and coincided with her childhood has shaped her ideology and her identity, but her comments on this era are not overtly political. Instead, Dillard's focus is her own development in a particular context. "What had interested me, in many ways, most about the Pittsburgh book," said Dillard in a 1995 CBC interview, "was uniting the growth of an individual consciousness with the growth of the nation itself, and its bizarre history, and its particular history." In very different ways, Dillard and Walker use incidents from their own lives as "springboards" for discussing larger issues of more universal interest, such as community, identity, social relationships, and wealth.

And so I have chosen to compare the autobiographical writings of two writers who are simultaneously similar to and different from each other. Walker and Dillard are of the same generation and write about unique contexts of 1950s American life. As well, there are certain events or feelings in childhood which both authors describe; this suggests that despite economic and social difference, certain aspects of childhood are common. For example, I can see in both Dillard's and Walker's works a desire for independence co-existing with a desire for closeness and approval. This is particularly true of

each writer's work on her father; both Walker and Dillard recall the father-daughter relationship as one which begins in mutual adoration but must move beyond this to a more honest and full relationship. In this sense differences of class are not significant.

Material reality, however, has a way of affecting every other reality, including childhood and relationships. When Walker is frustrated by her father's authoritarianism and inflexibility, she also reacts to the injustice that frustrates him and keeps his family poor. By the same token, when Dillard recalls time alone with her father on her family's boat, she is describing a very particular, very privileged experience. Similarly, Walker's description of her mother working in the fields alongside her father contrasts sharply with Dillard's description of her mother staying alone in the house while Dillard's father was at work. Families live and work and grow in particular contexts, and in studying the essays of Walker and Dillard, I realized that I could not write about their childhoods without writing about the larger social and material contexts in which they grew and developed. I am interested in how Alice Walker and Annie Dillard view their parents--and themselves. Their childhoods were different from each other, and the politics and social vision of each adult writer reflect the degree to which family context and social context shape identity.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first deals with Walker's recollections of her mother's life and the ways in which her mother's love empowered and inspired her. In the second chapter, I discuss Walker's

relationship with her father and Walker's attempts to heal that relationship after her father's death. In the third chapter, I examine Dillard's recollections of her father and his love for knowledge and adventure, noting that although it is different from Walker's recollections of her father, both Walker and Dillard regard the father-daughter relationship as an evolving one. In the fourth chapter, I discuss Dillard's relationship with her mother and how that relationship contributes to Dillard's notions of community. In the concluding chapter, I discuss how each author's relationships with her parents have affected and shaped her social vision.

I should also mention something about the order of the chapters. I read *An American Childhood* before I read Walker's essays. Originally I thought that it would make sense to put the Dillard chapters before the Walker chapters, not only in terms of my own reading chronology, but in terms of the subject matter: I thought that I would move from the "typical" white childhood to the specific, marginalized childhood of Alice Walker. At a certain point, my supervisor, Dr. Daphne Read, asked me what it would "do" to the thesis to put Walker first. Her question changed my assumptions, my approach to my subject matter, and my idea of what "typical" means. It also changed my mind. Reading Walker helped me read Dillard differently, as though I was looking through a different "lens."

In terms of my own place in this project, I have sought to cultivate diversity and openness rather than academic pontification. I have chosen essays about which not a great deal of critical work has been done, which I

found liberating rather than intimidating; it allowed me to work through the primary works more freely. I have relied more on examples from Dillard's and Walker's writing than on critical reaction to that writing. My own experience is closer to Dillard's than it is to Walker's; I have little personal knowledge of racial discrimination or poverty. I am pleased that I read *An American Childhood* before I read any of Walker's essays, because reading Walker's work made me aware of issues of race and class in ways that may have made me more critical of Dillard's idyllic description of her childhood. Now my reaction to Dillard's book is complemented by my reading of Walker, a blend of appreciation and skepticism which seems appropriate. Each writer has her own style and her own experiences, and I hope that my respect for their differences and individual strengths comes through in my writing as well. I am as wary of critics who begrudge Dillard her privileged childhood as I am of critics who dismiss Walker's writing as too political. Ultimately, I have tried to be fair to Annie Dillard, whose childhood was one of privilege, and to Alice Walker, whose childhood was one of indigence. Each has described in her own words how her parents shaped her life.

Chapter One

Alice Walker's Essays I: Re-writing Her Mother

Alice Walker's 1983 collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* is not a purely autobiographical work; the essays, written from 1967 to 1983, deal with such diverse topics as the Cuban Revolution, poverty in the American South, and the study of black writers at American universities. Only two of the essays—"In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" and "My Father's Country is the Poor"—specifically mention parents in the titles. Yet Walker incorporates details from her parents' lives into many of the essays, making the book as a whole a work which is personal as well as political. In certain essays, I believe that Walker tells her parents' stories simply because these are the stories she knows and appreciates; these are the examples she finds relevant and important. At other points, however, Walker's treatment of her parents' lives is a deliberate re-telling, a way of publicizing the value of lives that would otherwise remain unknown.

An examination of the essays in which Walker discusses her mother reveals a chronological development, a change in attitude. In some of the essays Walker wrote in the late 1960s, she is upset and saddened by the oppression and lack of opportunity in her mother's life. Walker's regrets are not static or final, however; her recollections of her mother lead her to re-evaluate her mother's life in later essays. In time, pity and regret evolve into a determined attempt to turn sorrow into celebration. As Walker re-

examines her mother's life, she becomes aware of the ways in which her mother endured hardship and fostered beauty. Her recollections of her mother culminate in a celebration of survival: Walker's 1974 essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." In this essay, Walker recognizes that her mother flourished despite poverty and racism. In this chapter, I focus on the development of Walker's discussion of her mother, because this evolution is as much about Walker's own development and gifts as it is about re-writing her mother's life. Further, Walker writes about her mother with a keen awareness of social context and community. Walker positions herself and her mother as members of a rich, female, black community which is a source of strength and inspiration.

In her earliest essays, Walker is unable to reflect on her mother's life without feeling anger and sadness. There is a dichotomy between the love that she feels for her mother and her mother's own lack of confidence. Walker notes the ways in which her mother respects others but lacks self-respect. In the 1967 essay "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" Walker describes her mother's reaction to a television soap opera:

> I remained listless throughout her "stories," tales of pregnancy, abortion, hypocrisy, infidelity, and alcoholism. All these men and women were white and lived in houses with servants, long staircases that they floated down, patios where liquor was served four times a day to "relax" them. But my mother, with her swollen feet eased out of her shoes, her heavy

> body relaxed in our only comfortable chair, watched each movement of the smartly coiffed women, heard each word, pounced upon each innuendo and inflection, and for the duration of these "stories" she saw herself as one of them. (123)

Walker goes on to describe how her mother imagines herself a thin, white woman with a witty and charming husband. By aspiring to identify with the soap opera characters instead of seeing the value of her own life, Walker's mother has internalized the belief that white is desirable, and inherently so, not just by virtue of wealth and circumstance. Consider Walker's comments on the fact that her mother seems "lost and unsure of herself" when she comes out of her daydream and realizes she is not one of the white women in the soap opera:

> My mother, a truly great woman who raised eight children of her own and half a dozen of the neighbors' without a single complaint, was convinced that she did not exist compared to "them." She subordinated her soul to theirs and became a faithful and timid supporter of the "Beautiful White People." Once she asked me, in a moment of vicarious pride and despair, if I didn't think that "they" were "jest naturally smarter, prettier, better." My mother asked this: a woman who never got rid of any of her children, never cheated on my father, was never a hypocrite if she could help it, and never even tasted liquor. She could not even bring herself to blame "them" for making her

> believe what they wanted her to believe: that if she did not look like them, think like them, be sophisticated and corrupt-for-comfort's-sake like them, she was a nobody. Black was not a color on my mother; it was a shield that made her invisible. (123-124)

The quotation marks around the words "them" and "they" emphasize the extent to which Walker's mother sees herself as excluded and invisible. Even though every soap opera has a black maid who is "steadfast, trusty, and wise in a home-remedial sort of way" (124), Walker's mother has chosen to identify with the rich white people. And who can blame her? As Walker writes, "In her daydreams at least, she thought she was free" (124). When Walker writes that black was a shield that made her mother invisible, she knows that her mother feels abject, inadequate and anonymous according to the standards of white culture.

Walker can analyze her mother's lack of confidence because she is looking at her mother's life from a particular viewpoint, and at a particular time. Walker wrote this essay when she was twenty-three years old, living in New York, and active in the civil rights movement. Her sadness borders on disdain; she is frustrated that her mother is unable to see the value of her own life. Yet it is the gap between her experience and her mother's experience which allows her to analyze her mother's life this way. Walker has left Eatonton, traveled, and gone to college. Her teachers supported her, books inspired her, and the political environment of 1967 encouraged her to

recognize her own worth as a black woman. Walker's mother did not have these opportunities, nor did she come of age in a time of organized resistance and social change for women.

Alice Walker knows that her mother's belief that white people are better than black people is complex; it goes beyond the simple fact that the white people Walker's mother saw on television were wealthy and beautiful. The freedom and respect given to white people feel out of reach for Minnie Lou Walker, and Alice Walker knows that these feelings of inferiority are not unique to her mother. I would argue that while Walker describes her mother's lack of confidence particularly, she also implies that many black women of her mother's generation lack an awareness of their own worth. While teaching a class on black history to a group of women who would, in turn, teach it to children, Walker encounters many women who fail to see the value of their own lives:

> How *do* you teach earnest but educationally crippled middle-aged and older women the significance of their past? How do you get them to understand the pathos and beauty of a heritage they have been taught to regard with shame? How do you make them appreciate their own endurance, creativity, incredible loveliness of spirit? It should have been as simple as handing each of them a mirror, but it was not. . . Try to tell a sixty-year-old delta woman that black men invented anything, black women wrote sonnets, that black people long ago were every bit

> the human beings they are today. Try to tell her that kinky hair is delightful. Chances are she will begin to talk "Bible" to you, and you will discover to your dismay that the lady still believes in the curse of Ham. (28)

This passage, taken from the essay "But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept on Working. . ." is an example of the larger context which Walker always addresses. Much as her own mother identifies with a free white woman instead of wanting to be a free black woman, so too, these women resist believing the value of their own history. Walker knows that her mother's life is not unlike the lives of the women in her class, and she even writes, "I felt, on my first day, before my class, as if the room were full of my mothers" (28). Herein emerges an aspect of Walker's writing which I cannot ignore: she does not write about her family without writing about the black community, and she does not write about the black community without writing about her family. When Walker laments the fact that her parents lived and laboured in obscurity, she mentions their entire generation as well. In this way, Walker's mother becomes a representative of the black women's community that Walker frequently addresses. She represents the generation before Walker's own, a generation often characterized by endurance rather than public activism.

Again, the dates of these two essays are significant. "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" was written in 1967. Walker's first published essay, it laments her mother's feelings of inferiority and self-

deprecation. Although the essay ends with more positive sentiments (the face of Martin Luther King, Jr. replaces the "beautiful white people" on the television screen), Walker knows that feelings of inferiority are part of her mother's identity, too deep to be easily changed. Similarly, the essay "But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept on Working . . .", written in 1970, presents the frustrations of a younger Alice Walker. The room full of people much like her mother is not an easy place to be. I would argue that as a young writer, Walker is still often incapable of seeing the value of her parents' quiet, anonymous lives. She admits this herself in her 1976 essay "Recording the Seasons": "Many times over the last fifteen years I have wondered how black people managed to keep going through periods of 'benign neglect'" (227). Walker concedes that she came of age at the most visible of all times for black people in America, and that she pitied her parents their obscurity.

This pity does not endure, however. It is replaced by Walker's re-visioning work. In 1974 she writes an essay which addresses her mother's anonymity directly: "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." It is worthwhile to examine Alice Walker's treatment of her mother in her later essays, because they reveal the process by which Walker comes to re-vision and thereby appreciate the worth and vitality of her mother's life. The fact that this essay was written two years before the essay cited above in which Walker mentions "benign neglect" suggests that the chronology is complex, not a straight line. Nevertheless, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" is the essay in which Walker admits that she had been looking in the wrong place for stories of

significance and worth. The stories were there all the time, but she had failed to see them.

In the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" Alice Walker discusses the black woman's obscurity, and she does so by mentioning forgotten women, women whose stories have not been heard. Walker uses this larger, more public narrative as a means of rediscovering her mother's life. When Walker describes the lives of black women who chose to be artists despite the difficulty that such a choice brought, she also "re-writes" her mother's story, this time with hope instead of despair. "How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century," asks Walker, "when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write?" (234). Walker's questions refer to famous black women artists such as Phillis Wheatley, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larsen, but she returns to her own mother because, she claims, "I found, while thinking about the far-reaching world of the creative black woman, that often the truest answer to a question that really matters can be found very close" (238). This statement is appropriate not only because it reveals the way in which Walker always addresses both personal and larger, political interests, but also because it reveals the extent to which it is crucial for her to return to her mother as a primary source of inspiration. As Barbara Christian notes, as significant as the tracing of black female literary history is, "Walker's major insight in the essay is her illumination of the creative legacy of 'ordinary' black women of

the South, a focus which complements but finally transcends literary history" (43).

For Walker, then, the ordinary is extraordinary, and among the stories of Wheatley and Hurston, we find Alice Walker's succinct version of her own mother's story: she ran away at seventeen to marry Walker's father, and she was pregnant with her third child by the time she was twenty (238). Her adult life was all about work:

> During the "working" day, she labored beside—not behind—my father in the fields. Her day began before sunup, and did not end until late at night. There was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts; never a time free from interruption—by work or by the noisy inquiries of her many children. (238)

Because all of Walker's mother's time was taken up by work, Walker finds herself wondering about the unrealized potential in the lives of black women. However, although Walker's starting point in this essay is the injustice and lack of opportunity in black women's lives, she begins to see—almost in spite of herself—the ways in which black creativity has emerged and made itself known. I say "in spite of herself" because Walker herself admits that she was not initially open to seeing the unconventional or "low" ways that black women's creativity often emerges.

After asking when her overworked mother had time to know or care about feeding the creative spirit, Walker writes, "The answer is so simple that

many of us have spent years discovering it. We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high—and low" (239). This statement is Walker's admission that she was misguided to have judged and pitied her parents earlier. After admitting that she pitied her mother's "obscurity" in the essay "Recording the Seasons" (1976), Walker now goes in search of ways in which her mother made her life her own. Although her mother lacked free time and education, she made art in the everyday activities of her life. She told beautiful stories, she made intricate quilts, and she gardened.

That the theme of gardening is important in this essay is clear from its title. Yet Walker chose to make it the title of the collection as well. I would suggest that Walker's recognition of her mother's talent as a gardener is a unifying theme in the entire book; a beautiful garden becomes a symbol of survival amidst adversity. "My mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in," writes Walker, continuing with a detailed description of her mother's amazing flower gardens:

> Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena . . . and on and on. (241)

Walker describes the garden in detail, thereby advertising and validating the artistic work of her mother. As Thadious M. Davis has suggested, the garden becomes a symbol of survival:

> Walker refers to her mother's gardens as her "art," "her ability to hold on, even in simple ways.". . . . That garden is her recurrent metaphor for both art and beauty, endurance and survival; it is essentially, too, Walker's articulation of the process by which individuals find selfhood through examining the experiences of others who have preceded them. (47)

This ability to hold on, to survive, becomes a source of identity. Walker is grateful that her mother made abject poverty bearable, but her admiration goes beyond this appreciation: she associates her mother's very identity with this artistic, nurturing work. And if, as Davis notes, selfhood is found in community, in looking at the lives of those who have gone before, I would suggest that for Walker, the most significant person who has gone before her is her mother.

Davis suggests that selfhood is more than individual identity; for Walker, identity is found in (and formed by) relationship to family and community. Because Walker sees her mother as a representative of the generation of silent, forgotten black women, the re-addressing of her mother's life leads to a communal re-addressing as well. In this way, Walker's work contributes to the building of a female community. Near the end of the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker states wistfully, "no song or

poem will bear my mother's name" (240). Yet even this obscurity is challenged; this very essay is full of references to Walker's mother, and so indirectly bears her name. Walker publicizes her mother's work because she believes that her mother and women like her mother deserve recognition. As Mary Helen Washington states, "I think that with the aid of these oral testimonies about their mothers as artists, black women writers are beginning to piece together the story of a viable female culture" ("I Sign My Mother's Name" 147).

The image of mother as gardener is complemented by another image: that of Walker's mother as storyteller. Because Walker celebrates all types of creativity in this essay, her mother's gift of storytelling is not separate from her work as a gardener; both stem from female creativity. It is in recognizing her mother's gifts as a storyteller that Alice Walker identifies most closely with her mother. Walker seeks connection with her mother; she finds it when she thinks of her mother as a storyteller. Here Walker merges her identity with her mother's, first by acclaiming the stories her mother told, and then by re-writing (or re-telling) them:

> Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that

> involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded. (240)

The urgency in Walker's tone reveals that she is responding to her mother's stories in two ways. First, as I have discussed, she is addressing the obscurity of her own mother and women of her mother's generation, who worked creatively without fanfare. More significant in this particular passage, however, is Walker's recognition that she is deeply connected to her mother through these stories. They become a source of shared female identity. Walker has merged with her mother, not just as a daughter, but as another woman who will tell good stories. So powerful is the theme of merging here that Walker knows that her best stories are her mother's; her mother speaks through her. Alice Walker, a successful "storyteller," an author widely read and critically acclaimed, returns to her mother, who is not well-known, and acknowledges her as a source of inspiration and identity. In an article which appears in the June 1982 issue of *Ms.* , Walker says to Mary Helen Washington:

> Just as you have certain physical characteristics of your mother's--her laughter or her toes or her grade of hair--you also internalize certain emotional characteristics that are like hers. That is part of your legacy. They are internalized, merged with your own, transformed through the stories. When you're compelled to write her stories, it's because you recognize and

> prize those qualities of her in yourself. ("Her Mother's Gifts" 38)

Walker's connection with her mother is so deep and complex that she has difficulty determining which qualities she has inherited and which are hers alone. Physical similarity is indistinguishable from mannerisms, ways of storytelling.

Walker is so affected by her connection with her mother that she writes of it in terms of physical presence and influence. "It is impossible to list all of the influences on one's work," Walker admits in the essay "From an Interview." Yet before listing her many creative influences, she asks, "How can you even remember the indelible impression upon you of a certain look on your mother's face?" (259) The fact that Walker returns to her mother's influence, and particularly her physical presence, is an indication that her mother has been the primary influence on her writing. Walker delivered her speech "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" at a 1973 symposium called "The Black Woman: Myths and Realities." In an essay entitled "Looking to the Side, and Back," she recalls how, at this symposium, an emotional discussion of the high suicide rate among young black women caused her to burst into tears. She felt that the panel was not open to discussing this problem. Consider Walker's comments on this exchange:

> The same panelist who would not address the suicide rate of young women of color also took the opportunity to tell me what she thought my "problem" was. Since I spoke so much of my

> mother, she said my problem was that I was "trying to 'carry' my mother, and the weight is too heavy."
>
> June, who was sitting beside me, and who was angry but not embarrassed by my tears, put her arms around me and said:
>
> "But why shouldn't you carry your mother; she carried *you* , didn't she?" (318-319)

Walker goes on to describe her friend June Jordan's response to the panelist's criticism as "perfection." Walker will not shy away from speaking and writing about her mother, and she knows that her connection with her is emotional and physical: to speak of her mother "carrying" her implies both physical pregnancy and emotional sustenance. As Walker's mother gave Walker life and carried her, now Walker seeks to give something back to her mother. Her mother's stories are re-born, and her undervalued life is given new life.

Pregnancy and birth are rich metaphors in Walker's writing. Carrying someone else, or giving another person life, is in keeping with the notion that Walker merges her identity with her mother's. Walker looks back to the time when she was joined with her mother, and, in a sense, she "re-creates" that physical closeness by telling the stories of her mother's life. The themes of pregnancy and birth also affirm Walker's commitment to solidarity and female community. In a 1972 convocation address at Sarah Lawrence College, Walker remarks that "each woman is capable of truly bringing

another into the world. This we must all do for each other" ("A Talk: Convocation 1972" 39).

Walker is careful to stress, however, that although she and her mother are intimately connected, her mother also encouraged Alice's independence. Walker recalls her mother as a "large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home," but she also notes that her mother is not invariably meek: "her quick and violent temper was on view only a few times a year, when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children did not need to go to school" ("In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" 238). The same woman who believes others are smarter and better than she is will fight for her children rather than see them do without an education. When Minnie Lou Walker stands up and demands to be heard, it is not for her own rights. Walker sees the poignancy in her mother's anger; when she fights, she fights not for herself but for her children.

Walker knows that perhaps her mother fought for her, the youngest child, in particular. In the interview with Mary Helen Washington which appears in the June 1982 issue of *Ms.* , Walker recalls how her relationship with her mother was perhaps different from the relationship between her siblings and their mother:

> She trusted my ability to go out into the world and learn about the world. I suppose because I was the last child there was a special rapport between us and I was permitted a lot more

> freedom. Once when I was eight or nine she was about to whip my brothers and me for something and when she finished whipping the others and got to me, she turned and dropped the switch and said, "You know, Alice, I don't have to whip you; I can talk to you." (Washington, "Her Mother's Gifts" 38)

This special rapport between Walker and her mother allows Walker a great deal of freedom, not just in terms of discipline, but also in the sense that Walker feels empowered by her mother's trust. "My mother trusted me implicitly and completely," claims Walker, noting that this trust allowed her to pursue her interest in reading and writing (Washington, "Her Mother's Gifts" 38). While her mother worked as a housekeeper for other people and ran her own household as well, she never demanded that Walker do that work; nor did she make Walker feel that she'd be a disappointment if she didn't take on those chores (Washington, "Her Mother's Gifts" 38). When Walker went to her room, shut the door, and read, she knew she would not be interrupted. "No matter what was needed," claims Walker, "there was no word about making me leave a book" (Washington, "Her Mother's Gifts" 38). Because Walker was given this freedom, her decision to write her mother's stories becomes her way of acknowledging her debt to her mother. "I love her too much to let her go without praise. Duty enters in here. I didn't have the duty to wash, cook, bake. But this was my opportunity to wash the dishes, clean the house. She gave me the freedom to tell stories; I was saying thank you" (Washington, "Her Mother's Gifts" 38).

Paradoxically, it is the theme of merging that gives Walker such freedom. In some ways, it seems curious that Walker focuses so much on physical connection and merging before she thanks her mother for independence and freedom. However, it is precisely because she feels such an affinity for her mother that Walker is empowered to leave her and be independent. The freedom Walker received from her mother is physical; she could be in her room, removed from the kitchen where cooking and cleaning took place. Equally important, however, is the emotional freedom and confidence that this free time gives her. As Mary Helen Washington states, "There was a special quality in her relationship with her mother that gave Walker the 'permission' to be a writer, a sense that, farmer's daughter or not, she was a poet and a writer" ("I Sign My Mother's Name" 145). Such unspoken encouragement allows Walker to pursue her interest in writing, and when she does so, she writes her mother's stories as a loving response to the freedom given her.

If this "permission to write" is evident in the simple fact that Walker was not forced to do housework, it is evident in larger, more significant ways as well. In the acknowledgments which precede the essays in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker writes, "And for the three magic gifts I needed to escape the poverty of my hometown, I thank my mother, who gave me a sewing machine, a typewriter, and a suitcase, all on less than twenty dollars a week" (xviii). These gifts are not incredibly costly or rare, but to Walker they are "magic." The fact that her mother paid for them out of her meagre salary

amazes Walker. More powerful, however, is the meaning of the gifts. They are tools which will enable Walker to transcend the social class that has been her mother's fate. Each encourages self-sufficiency and freedom. With a sewing machine, Walker was able to make her own clothes. With her new suitcase, she traveled to Europe and Russia after her graduation, and she notes that "part of the joy in going very far from home was the message of that suitcase" (Washington, "Her Mother's Gifts" 38). The third gift was a typewriter, of which Walker says simply, "If that wasn't saying, 'Go write your ass off,' I don't know what you need" (Washington, "Her Mother's Gifts" 38). Walker knows that her mother gave these gifts as a deliberate attempt to free her daughter from poverty, and when Walker does leave her home town to travel and attend college, she does so knowing that her mother believes in her.

Minnie Lou Walker's hopes and good wishes for her daughter are shared by the women of Walker's home town. When Walker was offered a scholarship to Spelman College in Atlanta, the ladies of the Methodist church "collected $75 to bless her on her way" (Winchell 5). This collection is remarkably like the gifts Walker received from her mother: although not a huge amount of money, it becomes a symbol of the community's faith in her. This faith is undoubtedly gendered; although Walker recalls specific men who influenced and supported her, her strongest celebration of community is the celebration of black women who support and uphold each other. As Felipe Smith notes, "Walker claims that 'there is no story more moving to

me personally than one in which one woman saves the life of another, and saves herself. . .' a feat that 'black women wish they were able to do all the time'" (448). At another point, in her essay "From an Interview," Walker says simply, "For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world" (251). These two statements, though made separately and in different contexts, are a strong indication of where Walker's loyalties lie.

This loyalty is not a simple matter of considering gender issues more important than race issues. Instead, Walker knows that when racial oppression and gender oppression are experienced together, as they are by the black woman, what emerges is a particular type of both pain and survival. In an interview with John O'Brien, she explains, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (195). By looking beyond the "survival whole" of her people and focusing more specifically on the experiences of black women, Walker concedes that stories of black women's survival are more interesting to her than any other narrative.

Why is Walker so interested in a specifically *female* black community? I think the answer lies in the ways in which Walker's mother and the women of Eatonton sent her on her way. Walker's mother gave her gifts that she knew would allow her daughter to travel and be independent. Likewise, the women of the Methodist church wanted Walker to succeed at school. In both cases, the women who supported Walker did so knowing that she would

transcend their level of education and economic class. Instead of being threatened by Walker's chance at freedom and achievement, they expected and welcomed it. These women, like Walker's mother, gave Alice Walker gifts which were symbols of their belief in her. In doing so, they equipped her to survive in a world that is larger than her home town. Walker feels tied to these women because of her love and gratitude, not out of obligation.

Chapter Two

Alice Walker's Essays II: Re-writing Her Father

While Alice Walker mentions her mother often in her early essays, it is not until "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" that she specifically "re-writes" her mother's life. A similar pattern emerges in Walker's essays about her father. Three of Alice Walker's essays, "Brothers and Sisters," "My Father's Country Is the Poor," and "Father," describe Walker's relationship with her father. All three essays were written after her father's death in 1973, but only the last, "Father," is solely about her father's life. In "Brothers and Sisters" (1975) and "My Father's Country Is the Poor" (1977), Walker's agenda is political, her writing quite theoretical, with personal details about her father included as examples. She describes how political and economic injustices affect her family, but she rarely reveals how these injustices affected her personally. In "Father" (1984), however, Walker writes very personally about her father throughout the essay, seeking to understand him--and their difficult relationship--better. In "Father" Walker writes about the heartbreak and rage that poverty caused in her family, about how "living under other people's politics" (11-12) affected her father's life and his relationships with his family.

As Walker's writing about her mother culminates in the healing essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," so, too, "Father" is a purposeful attempt to amend and re-write her father's life. Walker also uses the essay "Father" as

an opportunity to describe her own growth and development, as a writer and as a daughter. The change in tone and focus reveals something about Walker's grieving process. Only after ten years have passed, and only after her father's death, can Walker write more lovingly and poignantly about her father, who caused her much anger and confusion.

Alice Walker knows that her interaction with her father does not reach the same resolution that her relationship with her mother does; in various essays she describes factors which kept her from knowing her father more fully (and, perhaps, which kept her father from knowing her more fully as well). I want to discuss these barriers to closeness that Walker laments, because I believe it is in writing about these barriers that Walker seeks and finds a certain degree of resolution. In the essay "Brothers and Sisters" Walker recalls the sexism her father encouraged within the family. In "My Father's Country Is the Poor" she wonders what her father's life would have been like had he had different opportunities. "Father" is an entire essay about Walker's search for a more meaningful and resolved relationship with her father. As in the essays about Walker's mother, these three essays reveal a clear chronological development, so that by the time Walker writes "Father" in 1984, she is able to make the transition from judgment to acceptance of her father's ways. The journey toward this resolution is a difficult one. Ultimately, Walker makes clear that she cannot be at peace when estranged from her father; she seeks to understand him better, and in writing about this search for understanding, she brings healing to herself in the process.

The essay "Brothers and Sisters" is Walker's attempt as a young writer to come to terms with her father's sexism. Its title refers to the dichotomy between the treatment of boys and the treatment of girls in her family. In this essay, Walker makes it clear that her father's views were grounded in a particular time and place, a context in which sexism was rarely questioned. "We lived on a farm in the South in the fifties," she begins (326). Walker's blunt introductory sentence is more than background information for her reader; in it lies the suggestion that this particular context is significant. Most of Walker's readers will know that she is a black American writer. By adding that she lived on a farm in the South in the 1950s, Walker is recalling a context which is particularly rural, particularly insular. It is the insularity of this context which allows sexism to continue; Walker and her brothers and sisters know no world except this rural atmosphere, where men's and women's roles are clearly defined, and where women have less freedom than men do. In many ways, Walker thinks of her father as a symbol of male hypocrisy and privilege. His behaviour affects the rest of the family; his sexism becomes something to which his entire family must react.

In some ways, Walker's mother contributes to this inequality; her sexism manifests itself in passivity and embarrassment. Even though Walker states that her mother's theory about raising a large family was that the mother should teach the girls the facts of life and the father should teach the boys (326), for Walker's mother, this means saying nothing. Walker writes later in the essay that her mother "pretended all her children grew out of

stumps she magically found in the forest" (327). When Walker's mother answers her daughters' questions about sex with the assertion that girls "did not need to know about such things," she perpetuates the sexist rhetoric that excludes her daughters and allows chauvinism to continue.

When young, Walker and her sisters are forbidden to watch the farm animals mate, but one of her brothers explains sex to her using words that their father had given him: "The bull is getting a little something on his stick" (326). Walker is confused, but when she asks her brothers to explain what stick they are speaking of and how the bull managed to pick up a stick, her brothers laugh (326). Even at a young age, Walker feels excluded from the male realms of knowledge and sexuality. She and her sisters have no one, male or female, with whom to speak about sex, and no model of a woman who can speak openly about her own sexuality. Walker's mother's treatment of sex and sexuality is significant in and of itself, but this passivity is also directly connected to Walker's father's treatment of sex. Because Walker's mother is silent and embarrassed by sex, Walker's father's authoritarian views remain unchallenged. His crudeness and chauvinism dominate the family.

While Walker's mother is silent, Walker's father is verbal, and open about his sexism. Walker notes at one point in "Brothers and Sisters" that her father "thought all young women perverse" (327). Walker's father laughingly teaches his sons about bulls and cows mating, a sharp contrast to the ways in which his daughters are restricted and put to shame. While

Walker's brothers are encouraged to chase girls, her sister "was rarely allowed into town alone, and if the dress she wore fit too snugly at the waist, or if her cleavage dipped too far below her collarbone, she was made to stay home" (328). Similarly, Walker's sister is "whipped and locked up in her room" when she responds eagerly to boys (328). Walker's father cannot see the double standard in his behaviour; his is not an intellectual sexism. He cannot understand that when he expects his sons to chase girls, those girls are the same age as the daughters he chastens. Perhaps he restricts his daughters because he knows that other fathers have raised their sons to be as self-indulgent as he has raised his own sons to be. Similarly, Walker notes that while her father encouraged his sons to have sex with young women without any concern that these women might get pregnant, he warned her sister never to come home if she found herself pregnant (329). Such sexism assumes that an unplanned pregnancy is a woman's problem. Walker's examples of her father's attitude demonstrate clearly that in her family, boys and girls were raised differently, with different expectations.

In terms of harsh discipline, however, Walker concedes that most of her father's anger was directed at her sister. Nonetheless, although "Brothers and Sisters" is more about her father's strict treatment of her sister than it is about Walker, the essay also reveals something about Walker's relationship with her father. Since she is, like her sister, a daughter in the Walker household, she shares her sister's feelings of powerlessness and frustration.

The reason for these shared feelings lies in Walker's ability both to empathize with her sister and to remove herself from the situation:

> Sometimes, when I think of my childhood, it seems to me a particularly hard one. But in reality, everything awful that happened to me didn't seem to happen to *me* at all, but to my older sister. Through some incredible power to negate my presence around people I did not like, which produced invisibility (as well as an ability to appear mentally vacant when I was nothing of the kind), I was spared the humiliation she was subjected to, though at the same time, I felt every bit of it. It was as if she suffered for my benefit, and I vowed early in my life that none of the things that made existence so miserable would happen to me. (327)

A number of the statements in this quote demand attention. First, even though Walker speaks of the "things" that make existence miserable, is she not suggesting that it is her father who torments her sister so? (This passage precedes the section of the essay in which Walker describes how her sister was whipped and locked in her room for responding eagerly to boys.) Perhaps the distinction between "things" and "people" or "person" is minor, but then again, when Walker speaks about her sister's abject status and lack of rights, she repeatedly notes that it was because of their father's oppressive ways that her sister is brought so low. Similarly, Walker notes her own ability to negate her presence "around people I did not like" (327). Is she suggesting that her

father is one of these people? I believe that at this point, in 1975, Walker still finds it difficult to state openly that her father caused such suffering. Again, I think the chronology is significant; Walker is a young writer at this point, and her father had died only two years earlier. In 1975, Walker seems unwilling to write more honestly, incapable of articulating the specific pain her father caused.

Significantly, Walker deliberately aligns herself with her older sister. To negate her own presence is an act of solidarity as well as an act of survival. As an adult writer, Walker can remember that even as a girl, she made a choice to be loyal to her sister, a woman. In my discussion of Walker's essays about her mother, I stress Walker's belief in the power of a female community. What is interesting here is that even in an essay that is not specifically about female community, Walker stresses her choice to share in her sister's feelings.

Walker does not intend the essay "Brothers and Sisters" to separate female experience from male experience, however. Instead, the lines she draws separate those who challenge sexism from those who do not. Walker recalls an older brother who did not want to watch animals mate, a brother of whom Walker writes, "My father had disliked him because he was soft" (329). Walker cannot recall this brother, who is much older than she is, but her mother tells her that he was affectionate and tender toward his younger sister, kissing and embracing Walker when she was a small girl. Walker laments

the fact that she cannot remember this brother, but she also writes about meeting him years later:

> At my father's funeral I finally "met" my oldest brother. He is tall and black with thick gray hair above a young-looking face. I watched my sister cry over my father until she blacked out from grief. I saw my brothers sobbing, reminding each other of what a great father he had been. My oldest brother and I did not shed a tear between us. When I left my father's grave he came up and introduced himself. "You don't ever have to walk alone," he said, and put his arms around me. (329-330)

The fact that Walker and her oldest brother find each other and separate themselves from their siblings' grief is an illustration of Walker's refusal to exonerate her father. She chooses to find comfort in the one brother who rejected their father's sexist ideas. This brother, labeled "soft" by Walker's father, offers Walker a comforting and constructive example of manhood. In this way, Walker's oldest brother becomes a father-figure, a replacement for the father whose ways Walker cannot accept.

At this point in Walker's writing, in 1975, there is an attempt to resolve and heal the father-daughter relationship. "It was not until I became a student of women's liberation ideology that I could understand and forgive my father," writes Walker in "Brothers and Sisters" (330). This attempt at resolution is not successful, however. At the end of the essay, Walker's tone is still plaintive, claiming that she desperately needed her father and brothers

to be male models she could respect. Through women's liberation ideology, Walker has the intellectual "tools" to explain her father's behavior, but she cannot completely remove herself from her painful experience. If she offers him any forgiveness at this point, it is intellectual rather than emotional.

Walker concludes the essay by noting that her father "failed" because he did not offer her a model of masculinity that was an alternative to dominating, hypocritical models (330). Similarly, Walker is not sympathetic toward her brothers, who failed to provide financial support for the children they fathered. She chooses and creates a community based on rejection of sexism; this community includes her older brother, but it does not (and cannot) include their father completely. It also cannot include brothers and sisters who accept without question his chauvinist parenting. When Walker sees her brothers at her father's funeral reminding each other "what a great father he had been" (330), she turns away. Signs of community emerge between Walker and the brother who rejected her father's sexism, and some healing is evident in Walker's note that since the essay's publication, all of her brothers have offered their name, acknowledgment, and some support to their children (331). In this essay, however, the father-daughter relationship is unresolved. I would suggest that Walker's inability/refusal to cry at her father's funeral reveals her ambivalence, her inability to forgive completely at this point. The forgiveness Walker offers her father is half-hearted, unconvincing.

In the 1976 essay "My Father's Country Is the Poor," Walker returns to her father as subject. The larger context of the essay is Walker's trip to Cuba and her thoughts on that country's revolution. In this political context, she rediscovers her father; the essay contains many passages which reveal that Walker's struggle to accept her father in spite of his faults has continued. In 1962, at the age of eighteen, Walker attended the World Youth Peace Festival in Helsinki. At that festival, she was impressed by the Cuban students, and she identified with the Cuban people's struggles. She writes about how she became interested in Cuban history and writing after the festival:

> My sense of the Cubans' spiritedness stayed with me. One of them gave me a copy of Fidel Castro's *History Will Absolve Me,* which I read in a tiny, wood-paneled compartment of a Russian train winding its way across the spectacular Crimea, and I read and cried, cried and read, as I recognized the essence of a struggle already familiar to me. (201)

Walker goes on to describe how she could not help but hear the voices of Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X and other black writers in Castro's book. This interest in the Cuban Revolution leads Walker to make further connections between the Cuban experience and the black American experience. By the time Walker travels to Cuba in the mid-1970s, she is able to write poignantly about how the trip affected her.

For a number of reasons, the trip to Cuba is a catalyst for Walker's reflections on her father's life. In Cuba, Walker sees for the first time a

political revolution that has been successful. Before this time, Walker admits that she had been bothered by "political powerlessness" and by the belief that poor people could not win (202). Directly related to this is Walker's despair over "a lack of living models" (202); Walker has had no examples in her own life of successful revolutions or revolutionaries who overcame political oppression. In certain sections, "My Father's Country Is the Poor" becomes Walker's discussion of her father as a model; he was a person whose spirit and intellect she admired. However, Walker also discusses the barriers which often made growth and dignity impossible for her father; she addresses the fact that in some ways he could not be a model to his children.

Walker introduces her father into this essay by describing her dreams about him:

> A week before I flew to Cuba, I began to dream about my father. For several nights he appeared in a pose I recognized but could not place: standing by the side of a road in front of a filling station, his hat in his hands, watching me as I moved farther and farther away from him. (212)

At this point, Walker cannot understand why she is dreaming of her father at this time, but she goes on to describe how her father worked for other people all his life, subsisting on as little as three hundred dollars a year. As Walker continues to describe her trip to Cuba, her experience pushes her to re-evaluate her father's life. Instead of believing, as she did when she was a child, that it was because of her father's own "peculiar failing" (213) that her

family was poor, Walker is now able to see that her father was "a poor man exploited by the middle-class rich, like millions of peasants the world over" (213). This new-found awareness of the things which were beyond her father's control allows Walker to begin to take a more positive, compassionate look at her father's life.

Still puzzled by what might be causing her to dream of her father at this particular time, Walker concludes that her dreams may be her father trying to warn her of the dangers of traveling to Cuba. When she arrives in Cuba, however, Walker is surprised by another "image" of her father:

> But the flight, four hours behind schedule, finally lifted us to Havana. And there, waiting for me on the patio of a lovely old mansion liberated from someone who had to have been shamelessly rich, was my father.
>
> The same dark, coffee-colored skin, the same large nose, the same vibrant and intelligent eyes.
>
> My father's name in Havana was Pablo Diaz, and he spoke in Spanish, which I do not understand. His resemblance to my father—even the timbre of his voice—was so striking, however, that when he opened his mouth and Spanish came out, I glanced about me to locate the source of the trick. (213-214)

This passage is significant because for Walker, physical similarities are important indications of connection. In my chapter on Walker's relationship with her mother, I discuss Walker's belief in a connection that is physical as

well as emotional. As Walker said to Mary Helen Washington, "Just as you have certain physical characteristics of your mother's—her laughter or her toes or her grade of hair—you also internalize certain emotional characteristics that are like hers. That is part of your legacy" ("Her Mother's Gifts" 38). This idea of connection is evident in the passage about Pablo Diaz as well; even though Walker knows that this man is not her father, his eyes, his skin, and even his voice are so similar to her father's that she considers Pablo Diaz a father. As is evident so often in Walker's writing, physical connection and emotional kinship become indistinguishable. Instead of claiming that this man is "like" her father or reminds her of her father, Walker states simply, "My father's name in Havana was Pablo Diaz" (213).

Walker also deliberately parallels her father's poverty and hard work with Diaz's struggle, strengthening her belief that the two men are similar. Walker briefly explains what Pablo Diaz's life had been like before the Cuban Revolution: he had cut cane, and he had worked what Walker calls the "Hey, *boy!*" jobs of big cities like Havana and New York (214). One of the reasons that Walker feels so strongly that Diaz is a man like her father is that he had been, like her father, a poor man who worked hard for other people. As Walker notes, "Before the Cuban Revolution, Pablo Diaz had been, like my father, a man who might have belonged to any country, or to none, so poor was he" (214). In this essay, the title "the poor" refers to a community of people that belongs to no country. The disenfranchised and unheard live

there. Walker's father lived there, as did Pablo Diaz before the Cuban Revolution.

The fact that Pablo Diaz's life changed in terms of economic and educational opportunities while her father's did not leads Walker to speculate about what her father's life would have been like in a different political climate. At the time that Walker meets him, Pablo Diaz is working as a spokesperson for the Cuban Institute for Friendship Among Peoples; he tells "the Cuban Story" to visitors. Walker writes, "From the anonymity he shared with my father, Pablo Diaz had fought his way to the other side of existence; and it is from his lips that many visitors to Cuba learn the history of the Cuban struggle" (214). Even though she is convinced that Pablo Diaz is very much like her father, she also knows that the political changes following the Cuban Revolution gave Diaz opportunities that Willie Lee Walker never had. If this man is indeed Walker's father, he is Walker's father in different circumstances.

Herein lies Walker's ambivalence toward Pablo Diaz—and toward her father. While she admits that it makes her proud to see Diaz's capability and intelligence, she also recognizes that her father had many of Diaz's abilities but was never able to realize or nurture them. Pablo Diaz gains the respect of all who come into contact with him, because he has become an articulate man with an important job. What, then, is Walker to think of her father, who lacked formal education and worked in anonymity for other people all his life? Walker knows that Diaz has a pride that her father lacked:

> Helping to throw off his own oppressors obviously had given him a pride in himself that nothing else could, and, as he talked, I saw in his eyes a quality my own father's eyes had sometimes lacked: the absolute assurance that he was a man whose words--because he had helped destroy a way of life he despised--would always be heard, with respect, by his children. (214)

Before she leaves Cuba, Alice Walker stands beside Pablo Diaz while someone takes a picture of the group of travelers. Later, Walker writes of this photograph, "his hand is resting on my shoulder, and I am easy under it, and smiling" (215). When Walker tells Diaz he reminds her of her father, he replies simply, "You honor me" (215). Despite the comfortable rapport between Walker and Diaz, however, this incident remains bittersweet. I doubt that Diaz realizes how significant the resemblance is for Walker. When Walker writes that she is discouraged by "a lack of living models" (202), she realizes that her father, in many ways, cannot be a real model to his children, but Pablo Diaz's words "would always be heard, with respect, by his children" (214). Walker cannot look at Diaz without remembering the opportunities her father did not have.

Walker's encounter with Pablo Diaz leads her to realize how much her feelings about her father have been shaped by the fact that he remained poor and uneducated while the world (including his own children) changed and grew. This realization is connected to Walker's dreams about her father.

Early in the essay, Walker is puzzled by her dreams, wondering why she is dreaming of her father at this particular time. Now, however, the transformation of Pablo Diaz "from peasant to official historian" (215) impresses Walker and serves as a catalyst for remembering more about her own father; she finally recalls the incident that is the source of her dream.

Walker claims that the story she recalls about her father is a story about economics, about politics, and about class. She also admits, "Still, it is a very simple story, and happens somewhere in the world every day" (216). The story Walker proceeds to tell is this one:

> When I left my hometown in Georgia at seventeen and went off to college, it was virtually the end of my always tenuous relationship with my father. This brilliant man--great at mathematics, unbeatable at storytelling, but unschooled beyond the primary grades--found the manners of his suddenly middle-class (by virtue of being at a college) daughter a barrier to easy contact, if not actually frightening. I found it painful to expose my thoughts in language that to him obscured more than it revealed. This separation, which neither of us wanted, is what poverty engenders. It is what injustice means.
>
> My father stood outside the bus that day, his hat--an old gray fedora--in his hands; helpless as I left the only world he would ever know. Unlike Pablo Diaz, there was no metamorphosis possible for him. So we never spoke of this parting, or of the

> pain in his beautiful eyes as the bus left him there by the side of that lonely Georgia highway, and I moved--blinded by tears of guilt and relief--even farther and farther away; until by the time of his death, all I understood, *truly*, of my father's life, was how few of its possibilities he had realized, how relatively little of its possible grandeur I had known. (216)

After describing in detail the ways in which Pablo Diaz was able to change and grow, Walker now laments the fact that no such "metamorphosis" was possible for her father. These two paragraphs are more than a comparison of the two men's lives, however. From the passages which describe Pablo Diaz, Walker moves into more personal territory: her own relationship with her father. No longer using Pablo Diaz as an example of her father in different circumstances, Walker moves from what might have been to what was. After lamenting the fact that no metamorphosis was possible for her father, she proceeds to describe how her own metamorphosis became a barrier in her relationship with her father.

The two paragraphs cited above summarize one of the aspects of Walker's relationship with her father that she finds most perplexing. Walker knows that she is fortunate to have been able to leave her hometown, but she also knows that leaving has had consequences. Beyond physical separation from her family and familiar surroundings, Walker knows that to leave is to become "middle class" in her father's eyes. By traveling and attending college, Walker has begun to see things and learn things that her father

cannot understand, and because he cannot understand them, he cannot support his daughter.

This passage reveals one of the most marked differences between Walker's relationship with her mother and her relationship with her father. One of the most moving and heartening aspects of Walker's descriptions of her mother is the fact that even though Walker's mother could not share in her daughter's endeavours and travels, she supported them. Similarly, the community of women in Walker's hometown become "mothers" to Walker, advocates of education and change for their children when these opportunities are not possible for themselves. In the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" Walker likens this support to receiving a sealed letter that the giver could not plainly read (240). The common feature to all of Walker's stories about her own mother and the women of her hometown is this: instead of feeling threatened by their daughters' growth and change, these women welcome and expect it.

By contrast, Walker's father cannot accept his daughter's changing life. In "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring," a story in Walker's collection *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down*, Walker refers to the father of one of the characters as "a door that refused to open, a hand that was always closed. A fist" (129). Even in her fiction, Walker associates the father with barriers and closed doors. As Peter Erickson notes in an article entitled "'Cast Out Alone/to Heal/and Re-create/Ourselves': Family-based Identity in the Work of Alice Walker": "If the mother is symbolized by the flower which blooms

and opens, then the father is implicitly seen as the opposite" (17). Walker's father is a closed door because he cannot cope with his daughter's education. He sees it not as an opportunity, but as a change in status, a change which excludes and alienates him. When Walker writes that she left the only world her father would ever know, she speaks of class and circumstance as well as geography.

At this point in her writing career, Walker writes more sympathetically about her father; after voicing her frustration about the smallness of his world in "Brothers and Sisters," she uses the essay "My Father's Country Is the Poor" to explain the social and political factors which prevented his growth and openness. Walker is careful to mention that neither she nor her father wanted separation from the other. She knows that their separation is an injustice, and she mourns the fact that poverty engenders such fissures. Although she does not write it specifically, I would argue that Walker offers her father a greater degree of forgiveness in the latter essay.

A span of almost ten years separates the writing of "My Father's Country Is the Poor" and another essay by Walker, simply entitled "Father." Written in 1984 and included in Walker's collection of essays *Living by the Word: Selected Writings, 1973 - 1987,* "Father" is Walker's most direct and poignant description of her relationship with her father. It is her attempt to resolve completely what she has previously resolved only partially. In this essay, Walker recognizes that the writing process itself has become part of her healing process. "Father" is a tribute that almost becomes a love letter,

Walker's way of "telling" her father how she feels. As the creator of this love letter, Walker positions herself as writer and daughter simultaneously.

From the opening sentence, Walker prepares herself and her reader for the fact that this essay's topic is a difficult one for her:

> Though it is more difficult to write about my father than about my mother, since I spent less time with him and knew him less well, it is equally as liberating. Partly this is because writing about people helps us to understand them, and understanding them helps us to accept them as part of ourselves. Since I share so many of my father's characteristics, physical and otherwise, coming to terms with what he has meant to my life is crucial to a full acceptance and love of myself. (9)

Walker's admission that it is difficult for her to write about her father gives this essay a completely different tone than her previous essays: instead of focusing on the things which separate her from her father or the aspects of his life which were sad or unfulfilling, Walker begins with herself, simply, as her father's daughter. Throughout the essay, she does discuss economic and educational factors which drove them apart, but ultimately, her intention in this essay is to discuss herself as her father's daughter. Although the personal is still as political as it always must be in Walker's writing, this essay is more intimate than the essays I discussed earlier in this chapter.

I will focus on the aspects of "Father" which demonstrate how this essay evolves as a declaration of love to Walker's father. First, the idea of the

father's physical presence is important to Walker; in the essay "Father" she writes about her father as a disciplinarian, but she also recognizes the ways in which his affection and physical presence give comfort to her. Secondly, the idea that her father was actually "two fathers" allows Walker to offer her father a more complete and resolved forgiveness of his faults. In both of these themes, Walker makes clear that while she does not excuse her father's harshness, she is, in this essay, making a more concerted effort to resolve some of the anger that was previously only partially resolved.

In the opening paragraph of the essay "Father," Walker returns to her belief that physical similarity and emotional kinship are inexorably linked. In the essay "My Father's Country Is the Poor," she could not help but see Pablo Diaz as her father because of physical similarity. In this essay, too, she reminds herself and her reader that physical connection is important: "Since I share so many of my father's characteristics, physical and otherwise, coming to terms with what he has meant to my life is crucial to a full acceptance and love of myself" (9). Walker's discussion of herself as her father's daughter begins at a very basic level: she looks like him, and they share many characteristics. "My father's gifts," writes Walker in the acknowledgments at the beginning of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, "for which I deeply thank him, are daily surprises: my love of naturalness, the tone of my voice, my very face, eyes, and hair" (xviii). Once she has admitted this physical connection, it becomes harder for her to dismiss her father or walk away from

his faults. Walker knows that her essence is linked to his; her own self-worth is dependent upon resolving her relationship with her father.

Parts of the essay "Father" are touching reminders that despite the difficult circumstances of their lives, Walker and her father had a genial and affectionate relationship, particularly when Walker was very young. Walker recalls one incident from her early childhood which demonstrates her father's tenderness toward her:

> Why do certain things stick in the mind? I recall a scene, much earlier, when I was only three or so, in which my father questioned me about a fruit jar I had accidentally broken. I felt he knew I had broken it; at the same time, I couldn't be sure. Apparently breaking it was, in any event, the wrong thing to have done. I could say, Yes, I broke the jar, and risk a whipping for breaking something valuable, or, No, I did not break it, and perhaps bluff my way through.
>
> I've never forgotten my feeling that he really wanted me to tell the truth. And because he seemed to desire it--and the moments during which he waited for my reply seemed quite out of time, so much so I can still feel them, and, as I said, I was only three, if that--I confessed. I broke the jar, I said. I think he hugged me. He probably didn't, but I still feel as if he did, so embraced did I feel by the happy relief noted on his face and by the fact that he didn't punish me at all, but seemed, instead,

> pleased with me. I think it was at that moment that I resolved to take my chances with the truth, although as the years rolled on I was to break more serious things in his scheme of things than fruit jars. (12)

In Walker's description of this scene, her father's body is generous, available. She sees relief on his face and feels physically embraced. Although Walker cannot recall for certain whether her father hugged her, her memory is of receiving comfort and being spared punishment. At this point, Walker's father inspires her to tell the truth in the future, so in this sense he empowers her. This empowerment is important, because Walker often focuses on the aspects of her father which were harsh, and this is an encouraging example of the ways in which he comforts and enables her.

Walker also presents the father's body as oppressive and intimidating. The fact that Walker's discussion of physical violence in her home is sketchy and incomplete suggests the problems and confusion caused by a father's body which is alternately loving and violent. Although violence is not an easy subject to approach, Walker does not shy away from it in her writing, whether it be in fiction or in essays. In fact, fiction and non-fiction meet in the essay "Father" when Walker writes of her father, "We never discussed my work, though I thought he tended to become more like some of my worst characters the older he got" (11). Similarly, the afterword of Walker's 1970 novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* contains the following personal comment on violence in Walker's family: "Its roots seemed always to be

embedded in my father's need to dominate my mother" (344). Such comments obscure more than they reveal; although Walker is not afraid to write about violence in her fiction, her words about her own experience are quite cryptic. She never states openly that her father physically abused her mother, but she hints that that may have been the case.

The issue of family violence in Walker's writing is complicated by the fact that "Father" includes a poem about the topic which may or may not be autobiographical. Walker wrote this poem shortly after she had an abortion at age twenty. The voice is intensely personal in the poem, and this personal voice is enhanced by the poem's short lines. They seem to interrupt the rest of the text. Although she does not mention her pregnancy, she does mention her father, an indication that throughout this ordeal, he has been in her thoughts:

My father
(back blistered)
beat me
because I
could not
stop crying.
He'd had
enough "fuss"
he said
for one damn

voting day.

(10)

I believe that Walker chooses to include this poem about a childhood beating after she has an abortion as a young adult because she feels torn apart physically, "beaten" by the experience. More complicated, however, is the reference to her father's blistered back. Walker does not explain why her father's back is blistered; she does not state specifically that he was beaten. For whatever reason, his is a body beaten down by a difficult life. Walker recalls being unfairly punished by her father, but at the same time, their bodies are connected by oppression.

Later in the essay, Walker writes, "Did he actually beat me on voting day? Probably not. I suppose the illegal abortion caused me to understand what living under other people's politics can force us to do" (11-12). By referring to "other people's politics," Walker makes a statement about the inaccessibility and illegality of safe abortions at this time. Walker's father, who, as a black man, had always lived "under other people's politics" condemned abortion but understood oppression. If Walker's body is not her own, neither is her father's body his own. While pregnant, Walker feared her father's anger, but she also felt immobilized by fear and alienated from her own body. Walker's father, a sharecropper, must have felt similarly disembodied and powerless. Walker is forced to acknowledge that although her father reinforces patriarchy, she is also connected to him by their shared physical oppression.

Equally significant is the fact that Walker chooses to describe this memory in a poem. "Father" is an essay about Walker's relationship with her father, but it is also an essay about writing. "I'm positive my father never understood why I wrote," claims Walker early in the essay (9). This statement suggests that Walker is attempting to understand her relationship with her father on a number of levels: she recalls the relationship they had when she was a child, but she also writes about how that relationship changed when Walker moved away, attended college, and became a writer. In the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker offers a poem about women's strength as a gift to her mother; by doing so, she claims her own heritage and creativity--as a daughter and as a writer. "In search of my mother's garden," writes Walker, "I found my own" (243). So, too, in the essay "Father," Walker presents her poetry. Although her father may not have understood why she wrote, the fact that Walker includes a poem in an essay about her father suggests that she claims the same two identities. Part of her emotional work as both a daughter and a writer is to write creatively and honestly about her relationship with her father.

Consider as well the following passage from "Father," which Walker claims is her sole memory of being beaten by her father:

> The only time I remember his beating me was one day after he'd come home tired and hungry from the dairy (where he and my brothers milked a large herd of cows morning and afternoon), and my brother Bobby, three years older than me and a lover of

> chaos, and I were fighting. He had started it, of course. My mother, sick of our noise, spoke to my father about it, and without asking questions he took off his belt and flailed away, indiscriminately, at the two of us. (9)

Walker says of this memory, "It was the unfairness of the beating that keeps it fresh in my mind . . . And my disappointment at the deterioration of my father's ethics" (12). Even as an adult, thirty-seven years after the incident, Walker is concerned with explaining her father's behaviour and resolving it in her own mind. If this is Walker's only memory of her father's violence toward her, why does she give the subject of violence much attention in her writing?

I think the answer lies in the fact that Walker is a writer committed to understanding the power relationships within and without the family which affect women's lives. Family violence is one of the most obvious and painful examples of the father's body as a site of power. Consider Adrienne Rich's description of power in *Of Woman Born:*

> Power is both a primal word and a primal relationship under patriarchy. Through control of the mother, the man assures himself of possession of his children; through control of his children he ensures the disposition of his patrimony and the safe passage of his soul after death. It would seem therefore that from very ancient times the identity, the very personality of the man depends on power, and on power in a certain, specific

> sense: that of power over others, beginning with a woman and her children. (64)

Rich's explanation of family power relations is pertinent to a discussion of Walker's ambivalent feelings about her father. Walker's admission that her father's need to dominate his family prompted him to act violently reveals an example of masculinity and fatherhood upheld by physical force. In impoverished and disenfranchised families, violence can be an attempt to earn respect and gain control when every other area of life is chaotic and oppressive. Walker repeatedly mentions the fact that self-doubt and even self-hatred are born of racism; many of the passages in which she describes her father's oppressive treatment of his family are also her attempts to cope with the larger racial context which made her father angry and unyielding. Walker knows that much of her father's identity as a black man stemmed from the way he was treated. In fact, a man's oppression of his wife and children can be particularly cruel in a context in which a man himself feels oppressed or excluded. Walker writes near the end of "Brothers and Sisters" that her father failed because he copied the white man's hypocrisy (331), but her father copied the hypocrisy without ever attaining status or power outside his own home. The difference is significant. Patricia Hill Collins refers to Jo-Ellen Asbury, who suggests that "Black men who wish to become 'master' by fulfilling traditional definitions of masculinity--both Eurocentric and white-defined for African-Americans--and who are blocked from doing so can become dangerous to those closest to them" (186). The tension for Walker

when she writes about her father is always the same: she is torn between anger and forgiveness, between holding her father accountable and recognizing that he had little opportunity to grow beyond his limited role. Ultimately, she rejects racial oppression as an excuse for transgressions against the family without completely rejecting her father.

If "Father" is indeed an essay in which Walker seems to fluctuate between exonerating her father and holding him accountable for his actions, part of this apparent dichotomy stems from the fact that the essay presents the father's body as both problematic and comforting. Equally complex, however, is the fact that in this essay, Walker describes her father as "two fathers":

> Actually, my father was two fathers.
>
> To the first four of his children he was one kind of father, to the second set of four he was another kind. Whenever I talk to the elder set I am astonished at the picture they draw, for the man they describe bears little resemblance to the man I knew. (13)

Walker explains that the father that she knew was almost always sick, "not sick enough to be in bed, or perhaps with so many children to feed he couldn't afford to lie down, but 'dragging around' sick, in the manner of the very poor" (13). Walker, a writer always concerned with how physical and material circumstances shape people's lives, realizes that by the time she, the youngest child, knew her father, he was, in many ways, incapacitated by poverty and disease. As his health deteriorated, so did his spirits. Walker

describes how the enthusiasm of his younger years gives way to fear and discouragement:

> There are certain *facts*, however, that identify our father as the same man; one of which is that, in the 1930s, my father was one of the first black men to vote in Eatonton, Georgia, among a group of men like himself he helped organize, mainly poor sharecroppers with large families, totally at the mercy of the white landlords. He voted for Roosevelt. He was one of the leading supporters of the local one-room black school, and according to everyone who knew him then, including my older brothers and sister, believed in education above all else. Years later, when I knew him, he seemed fearful of both education and politics and disappointed and resentful as well. (13)

Walker cannot blame her father for his disappointment. In fact, she seems angry and frustrated by what her father had to endure. "Though he risked his life and livelihood to vote more than once, nothing much changed in his world," writes Walker (13). At this point in the essay, Walker's sentiments are much like those expressed in "My Father's Country Is the Poor"; she focuses on the harsh reality and missed opportunities of her father's life.

In the last section of "Father," Walker makes a transition in tone and focus, moving beyond her acrimony and sadness. Here, while Walker still feels that the American political and social systems failed her father, she accepts her father's life as valid and worthwhile. She "merges" the two

fathers, not just the old and the young, but also the father that was with the father that might have been:

> And thinking of you now, merging the fathers that you were, remembering how tightly I hugged you as a small child returning home after two long months at a favorite aunt's, and with what apparent joy you lifted me beside your cheek; knowing now, at forty, what it takes out of body and spirit to go and how much more to stay, and having learned, too, by now, some of the pitiful confusions in behavior caused by ignorance and pain, I love you no less for what you were. (17)

By this point, ten years after writing "My Father's Country Is the Poor," Walker offers her father forgiveness and a love that is unconditional. To write that she loves him "no less" for what he was is a significant change from repeatedly wondering what his life might have been like in different circumstances. Walker has finished re-writing her father's life; now she is content to write it as it was, including the heartbreaking aspects. Crucial as well is the fact that Walker concludes with a memory of physical affection: her face near her father's. This is what she wanted instead of a sad parting at the side of the road; this is an important reminder of their physical affinity. The conclusion of "Father" suggests that Walker's relationship with her father evolves even after his death, when Walker finds complete resolution of pain that has gone before.

Chapter Three

"My Father's Reading Went to His Head" : Annie Dillard's Recollections of Her Father

"In 1955, when I was ten, my father's reading went to his head." These words, taken from the prologue of *An American Childhood*, are Annie Dillard's way of introducing her father as subject, but they are also significant because they reveal much about Dillard's relationship with her father. When Dillard claims that her father's reading "went to his head," she refers to his decision to take a trip down the Ohio River, a trip which is inspired by his many readings of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*:

> He was a young executive in the old family firm, American Standard; sometimes he traveled alone on business. Traveling, he checked into a hotel, found a bookstore, and chose for the night's reading, after what I fancy to have been long deliberation, yet another copy of *Life on the Mississippi*. He brought all these books home. There were dozens of copies of *Life on the Mississippi* on the living-room shelves. From time to time, I read one. (6)

The fact that Dillard, as a child of ten, reads one of her father's many copies of *Life on the Mississippi* from time to time, suggests that even at an early age, she is already beginning to share in her father's appreciation of this book.

More significant than Dillard's reaction to the book, however, is her reaction to her father's decision to travel down the Ohio River by boat. Dillard's father's trip in 1955 is an important event to Dillard because it is the most obvious example of her father's wanderlust and desire for adventure. By choosing an excursion based on a fictional story, Dillard's father offers his daughter an example of living out an adventure. In fact, Dillard acknowledges in the epilogue of *An American Childhood* that her entire vision of her future was shaped by this event: "I grew up in Pittsburgh in the 1950s, in a house full of comedians, reading books. Possibly because Father had loaded his boat one day and gone down the Ohio River, I confused leaving with living, and vowed that when I got my freedom, I would be the one to do both" (251). These words capture Annie Dillard's fascination with travel and her desire to live life fully and dramatically. They also reveal just how much Dillard has looked to her father as a role model and inspiration.

Much of Dillard's writing about her father incorporates this reverence for adventure and this belief that living fully is associated with striking out on one's own. Alice Walker, in her recollections of her father, acknowledges that the relationship is an ever-evolving one, even after her father's death, because she has moved beyond sadness and judgment to acceptance of her father. Dillard also develops the idea of the father-daughter relationship as a journey, although in a less overt way than Walker does. Dillard recalls that as a child, she shared her father's love of books and wanted to be included in his adventures. As she grows older, however, gender difference becomes a

factor in her relationship with her father, because she becomes less able to emulate and imitate his adventures. As an adolescent, she is also less willing to identify with her father, because she sees his limitations and reacts against them in an attempt to assert her selfhood. Ultimately, Dillard, like Walker, has to recognize her father's limitations before she can fully accept her father and claim her own independence.

There are also similarities between Walker's approach to social context and Dillard's. The economic and social environments of their childhoods were very different, but each writer acknowledges that social context and material reality contribute to and create identity. Just as the American South and its poverty are the contexts which colour all of Walker's recollections of childhood, so, too, Dillard's work is geographically and materially situated. Dillard's childhood was one of material comfort and leisure. Born Meta Ann Doak, Dillard was the oldest of her parents' three daughters. In a 1977 interview, Dillard described growing up in a world of "country clubs, girls' schools, that kind of thing" (Lindsey 7). This world contributes greatly to the things Dillard writes about and the way she approaches life. In *An American Childhood*, Pittsburgh middle-class society is more than a backdrop; it is the context in which Dillard finds and claims an identity. The larger context of Pittsburgh and the more specific, personal context of Dillard's family create an environment in which Annie Dillard observes, awakens, and grows in confidence and independence.

Dillard describes the social context of her childhood in the first essay after the prologue:

> The war was over. People wanted to settle down, apparently, and calmly blow their way out of years of rationing. They wanted to bake sugary cakes, burn gas, go to church together, get rich, and make babies.
>
> I had been born at the end of April 1945, on the day Hitler died; Roosevelt had died eighteen days before. My father had been 4-F in the war, because of a collapsing lung—despite his repeated and chagrined efforts to enlist. Now--five years after V-J Day—he still went out one night a week as a volunteer to the Civil Air Patrol; he searched the Pittsburgh skies for new enemy bombers. By day he worked downtown for American Standard.
>
> Every woman stayed alone in her house in those days, like a coin in a safe. Amy and I lived alone with our mother most of the day. Amy was three years younger than I. Mother and Amy and I went our separate ways in peace. (16)

In this passage, Dillard specifically mentions her father's individual task, while emphasizing the typicality of her mother's life. When Dillard describes her father, she speaks of the individual's adventure, a recurring theme in *An American Childhood*. In contrast, her descriptions of her mother suggest an isolated domesticity which Dillard implies is universal for women. (Dillard's descriptions of her mother do move beyond this, however, and later in the

book she describes in detail her mother's strong character and individuality.) At this point, however, she offers her father more recognition and admiration. Early in *An American Childhood*, Dillard reveals her propensity for romanticizing her father's life. When he searches the skies for enemy bombers, it is a nighttime adventure, something different from his daytime job at American Standard.

By focusing on the prosperity which followed the Second World War, Dillard implies that her parents are "typical" members of their generation, and in a certain sense, they are: Dillard's father goes to work while her mother stays at home. While this clear division of gender roles may have been the norm for white, middle-class Americans during this time period, Dillard does not address the fact that this routine was not the norm for everyone. By claiming that "every woman stayed in her house in those days, like a coin in a safe," Dillard is referring to a particular economic class of women, women whose husbands' well-paying jobs allowed them to be safely cloistered in their homes. Alice Walker, in contrast, points to the fact that her mother had to work in the fields with her father. Her mother cleaned other people's houses to earn money and took care of other people's children in addition to her own; both activities run contrary to Dillard's image of the home as a safe where a woman spends her days alone. Though often dismayed by her father's sexism, Walker recognizes that her parents did have a certain degree of equality precisely because they worked together. In Dillard's memoir, the roles of men and women are clearly defined and

separate; in making this her starting point, Dillard reveals that she considers her father part of the public, more desirable world.

"For every morning the neighborhoods emptied, and all vital activity, it seemed, set forth for parts unknown" (15), Dillard writes. This description betrays the degree to which Dillard has exalted the freedom and autonomy of non-domestic work. "*All vital* activity" takes place away from home. This passage, in which Dillard describes how men set forth for parts unknown while women and children stay put, directly follows the book's prologue, in which Dillard writes about her father's trip down the river. After Dillard has described her father's trip so affectionately and energetically, the structure and commonness of 1950s domesticity are a striking contrast. At this point, as a very young child, Dillard is part of the domestic world, unable to "set forth for parts unknown" with her father.

However, despite the fact that Dillard is a young girl without a great deal of autonomy, she links her experience with her father's by describing her own awakening in the same essay. She is on a journey in the sense that she is moving from unawareness to self-awareness. By paralleling her father's trip with her own awakening, she is able to share in and appreciate her father's journey. Immediately following the description of her father's decision to abandon his trip and return home, Dillard writes, "I was just waking up then, just barely" (10).

Why does Dillard choose to juxtapose her father's journey with her own awakening? In both cases, I would suggest, the tension between trance

and wakefulness is paramount. In describing her father's trip down the river, Dillard begins with dramatic language:

> A week later, he bade a cheerful farewell to us—to Mother, who had encouraged him, to us oblivious daughters, ten and seven, and to the new baby girl, six months old. He loaded his twenty-four-foot cabin cruiser with canned food, pushed off from the dock of the wretched boat club that Mother hated, and pointed his bow downstream, down the Allegheny River. (9)

Although Dillard's tone is playful, and although she is exaggerating the drama of the situation, she does present her father's trip as a dramatic and even heroic adventure. In this sense, the event is more like dream than reality.

After a few weeks, however, Dillard's father feels very differently about his endeavour:

> It was a long way to New Orleans, at this rate another couple of months. He was finding the river lonesome. It got dark too early. It was September; people had abandoned their pleasure boats for the season; their children were back in school. There were no old salts on the docks talking river talk. People weren't so friendly as they were in Pittsburgh. There was no music except the dreary yacht-club jukeboxes playing "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?" Jazz had come up the river once and for all; it wasn't still coming, he couldn't hear it across the

> water at night rambling and blowing and banging along high and tuneful, sneaking upstream to Chicago to get educated. He wasn't free so much as loose. He was living alone on beans in a boat and having witless conversations with lockmasters. He mailed out sad postcards. (10)

After only six weeks, Frank Doak is pulled away from his dream and back to the reality of his middle-class life.

The reasons for his return home may lie in the dichotomy Dillard constructs between "real life" and desire. Throughout the essay, freedom and responsibility face off against each other, freedom being part of the dream world while responsibility is associated with reality. While life in Pittsburgh offers security and structure, Frank Doak dreams of traveling and hearing great jazz. In 1955, Dillard's father is a young executive in the family firm, but when he travels on business, he repeatedly buys and reads copies of *Life on the Mississippi*. The businessman who attended private schools and the Presbyterian Church gives in to his craving to quit and go "down the river" (8), but he is incapable of being completely free; one of the main reasons for his decision to return home is the fact that people are talking about him. As Dillard notes, "For all his dreaminess, he prized respectability above all" (10).

After the description of her father's disappointment and his subsequent return to Pittsburgh, comes Dillard's personal statement, "I was just waking up then, just barely" (10). Structurally, this sentence seems odd, misplaced.

Thematically, however, it links Dillard's experience to her father's. The following paragraph provides the connection:

> Children ten years old wake up and find themselves here, discover themselves to have been here all along; is this sad? They wake like sleepwalkers, in full stride; they wake like people brought back from cardiac arrest or from drowning: *in medias res*, surrounded by familiar people and objects, equipped with a hundred skills. They know the neighborhood, they can read and write English, they are old hands at the commonplace mysteries, and yet they feel themselves to have just stepped off the boat, just converged with their bodies, just flown in from a trance, to lodge in an eerily familiar life already under way. (11)

This paragraph is more than a comment on Dillard's own awakening and discovery of self; its very language captures and describes the ways in which people fluctuate between sleep and wakefulness, trance and awareness. The references to travel and flight subtly link father and daughter; Dillard's father, who literally "steps off a boat" and flies in "from a trance," has experienced the bewildering fluctuation that Dillard describes. He re-joins a familiar life already well under way: his own.

In this sense, the trip down the river becomes a symbol of escape, a dream characterized by freedom. Interestingly, for both Dillard and her father, the freedom is appealing because it is based on feeling rather than knowledge. Dillard admires her father's spunk; in a 1995 interview Dillard

said of her father's trip, "I was terrifically proud of him and thought it was a grand thing to do" (CBC interview). The word "grand" betrays Dillard's fondness for drama. The stories that she and her father love typically involve escape. One of the main projects of Sandra Humble Johnson's book *The Space Between* is to analyze Annie Dillard as a neo-Romantic. "With her insistence on the importance of the moment Dillard has revealed a propensity for extreme romanticism," claims Johnson (3). In addition to this emphasis on the moment, however, is Dillard's reiteration of the Romantic's credo of excess (Johnson 19). The illuminated moment is deeply felt, and carries with it an all-or-nothing ultimatum. Dillard describes waking up to find herself already alive as "sad," another indication of her belief that life should be lived fully. Frank Doak is drawn to live out on the river because he believes it will be an adventure, an anti-intellectual moment, and it is. But it is also a dream rather than a sustainable reality, because he returns home. Dillard seems to know that for both father and daughter, moments of escape are few and far between.

Dillard admits, "I noticed this process of waking, and predicted with terrifying logic that one of these years not far away I would be awake continuously and never slip back, and never be free from myself again" (11). Already the child predicts "with logic," and the Romantic ideal of a deeply-felt (anti-intellectual) moment is less likely. Annie Dillard's father seeks to enter the dream of the riverboat after years of only reading about it, but he returns to his home and his family. I am convinced that Dillard wants to compare

her own fluctuation between sleep and wakefulness with her father's dream-like trip. For both Dillard and her father, the challenge is to be fully conscious in everyday events, and to awaken from a deeply-felt dream is bittersweet if the same enthusiasm and heightened awareness are not present in daily life.

This desire for an experience which is more dramatic than "everyday" life is also evident in Dillard's childhood fantasy about living in the family's basement after a bomb goes off:

> After the bomb, we would live, in the manner of Anne Frank and her family, in this basement. . . Our family could live in the basement for many years, until the radiation outside blew away. Amy and Molly would grow up there. I would teach them all I knew, and entertain them on the piano. Father would build a radiation barrier for the basement's sunken windows. He would teach me to play the drums. Mother would feed us and tend to us. We would grow close. (181-182)

Dillard longs for a situation which is both domestic and adventurous. The fact that she is given undivided attention by her father (she is the only one who is taught to play the drums) while the whole family is cared for by her mother suggests that Dillard, like her father, is ambivalent about striking out on her own. Although she longs for adventure, she imagines a domestic situation that is not altogether different from the one she lives in every day: her father teaches her something, her mother takes care of her. In turn, she teaches her sisters much as her father has taught her. At this age, Dillard's

desire for adventure is almost identical to her father's; both want great adventure with all the comforts of home. Both are ambivalent individualists, unable to strike out completely on their own. Finally, the statement "We would grow close" is a plaintive conclusion to the fantasy, Dillard's wistful romanticization of life in confinement.

However, the blending of domesticity with adventure is only a part of Dillard's whole dream for herself; the larger dream is still mainly about Dillard's awakening and self-discovery. This is directly related to her relationship with her father: by imagining herself as Anne Frank, Dillard follows her father's example of choosing a dream based on a story. Because Dillard shares a love of literature with her father, the situations she imagines herself in are patterned specifically after stories. Together they take part in a specific type of play-acting; they are pretending to live out great American stories of exploration and adventure. Their heroes in these stories create a narrative which allows Dillard and her father to participate. "The great American stories impelled my father," claims Dillard, mentioning Indian legends and stories of the American railroad as examples (CBC interview). Interestingly, all of these stories include travel. "*An American Childhood* is full of yearning and *wanderlust*," writes Eugene H. Pattison (323).

The passage in which Dillard imagines her family living in their basement is part of an essay in which Dillard recalls many of the books she read as a child. In her journey of self-discovery, Dillard is drawn to the idea of living in the basement after a bomb because she thinks it would be an

adventure, like life on a boat or in the woods. What Dillard fails to recognize as an adolescent, however, is that Anne Frank's diary is not a typical adventure story. Anne Frank's diary is a story which, despite its charming and inspirational passages, describes in blunt detail the anguish of war and the frustration of confinement. Instead of defining Anne Frank's story as a tragedy, Dillard reads it as an adventure story, like *Life on the Mississippi*, or *Kidnapped*. Thus, even Dillard's imagining of life in a bomb shelter is based on a story--a true story, but a story nonetheless, and one that can be romanticized. In this way, Dillard, either intentionally or unintentionally, patterns her dreams for herself after her father's dreams for himself, and after the stories he has taught her to love. She wants to live Anne Frank's story much like her father wanted to live *Life on the Mississippi*. For Dillard, a reverence for literature is part of the child's awakening process; it provides a context in which father and child communicate, share ideas, and imagine themselves story-book characters.

Consider the ways in which Annie Dillard repeatedly associates her father with reading and with knowledge. In the riverboat essay, reading is the impetus, the inspiration for taking the trip, but the references to books and knowledge also reveal a great deal about Frank Doak's background and character:

> When our mother met Frank Doak, he was twenty-seven: witty, boyish, bookish, unsnobbish, a good dancer. He had grown up an only child in Pittsburgh, attended Shady Side Academy, and

> Washington and Jefferson College in Pennsylvania, where he studied history. He was a lapsed Presbyterian and a believing Republican. "Books make the man," read the bookplate in all his books. "Frank Doak." (8)

In the description of her "bookish" father, Dillard notes the exclusive schools where he studied history. She also refers to his bookplate, which suggests a reverence for reading, as though one's books define one's character.

This description serves as a revelation of her father's character, but it also suggests that the father-daughter relationship is shaped and affected by this respect for intellectual knowledge. As a child, Dillard sees her father as a person who explains things. At age five, when Dillard finds an old dime in the alley behind her house, she brings it to her father, who explains that it might be worth more than ten cents because it is so old (40). When a tornado hits the neighborhood (years later, when Dillard is ten), Dillard finds a broken power line and can't bring herself to leave the spot except to go back to the house to get her father. She wants him to see "this violent sight" (102), and she notes that when the tornado approached, she and her father watched it, whereas her mother and sisters kept themselves safe:

> While the tornado itself was on--while the buckeye trees in our yard were coming apart--Mother had gathered Amy and Molly and held them with her sensibly away from the windows; she urged my father and me to join them. Father had recently returned from his river trip and was ensconced tamed in the

> household again. And here was a pleasant, once-in-a-lifetime tornado, the funnel of which touched down, in an almost delicate point, like a bolt of lightning, on our very street. He and I raced from window to window and watched. (102)

This moment, like many that Dillard shares with her father, combines knowledge with adventure. Dillard and her father are both drawn to the wildness of the tornado, and relish the chance to view something so uncivilized. It is an opportunity to see something they have only read about in books. However, the fact that this incident occurs quite soon after Dillard's father's riverboat trip makes Dillard's recollection of watching the tornado wistful. Dillard's feelings of admiration for her father were heightened when he left the domestic scene. Now, when he has returned, she still loves to learn from him and share exciting experiences with him, but he is confined by domesticity once again. The fact that Dillard refers to her father as "tamed" and "ensconced" in the household suggests that they also share the feeling that things "out there" are compelling, and that to be kept in the house, safely away from the windows, is restrictive. Interestingly, it is Dillard, and not her father himself, who uses the word "tamed." Because Dillard's relationship with her father is based largely on a shared love of adventure, she feels personally disappointed when his adventure comes to an end. Although it is difficult to know how Dillard's father felt about coming home, Dillard's descriptions of his homesickness suggest that he felt relieved to end his trip;

he didn't like the adventurous life as much as he thought he would. Dillard herself, on the other hand, seems sad that his adventure is over.

If Dillard is disappointed in her father at this point, it is because a great deal of her own identity is invested in the alternatives to domesticity that he makes possible. Her relationship with him allows her to participate freely in the outside world, away from the domestic scene. When he becomes less than adventurous, as he does when he abandons his trip, she feels confined because she had looked to him for permission to be outdoors, away from confining roles. While Dillard and her father both live lives which are simultaneously adventurous and predictable, this occurs for completely different reasons, as her father, an adult male, has much more choice and agency than Dillard does. In her discussion of *An American Childhood*, Margaret McFadden comments on Dillard's recollections of gender inequality and how it affected Dillard's relationship with her father:

> Gender stereotyping and the stultifyingly limited choices for girls growing up in the 1950s are also themes. This is surprising because Dillard's work heretofore has been remarkably unconcerned with current issues of contemporary feminism. Her resentments surface strongly in the sections about her passion for baseball (especially pitching) and her early realization that Little League did not accept girls. At dancing class and at Sunday School, boys were mysterious and clearly better--they were in control and had real choices. "The boys must have

> shared our view that we were, as girls, in the long run, negligible. . . We possessed neither self-control nor information, so the world could not be ours." In the 1950s, women spent most of their time alone in their houses, their work and identities invisible: "No page of any book described housework, and no one mentioned it; it didn't exist. There was no such thing." No wonder, then, that Dillard identified so strongly with her father; the book is in a sense a love letter to her father, beginning and ending with his love for travel, adventure, and jazz music. (27-28)

As McFadden argues, *An American Childhood* is Dillard's declaration of love for her father. Dillard is attracted to the choice and freedom she sees in her father's life and she wants to be included in that freedom. When her father's trip ends, it is because he doesn't like life on the river as much as he thought he would, and he cannot bear the thought of people talking about him. He is attracted to the idea of traveling, but his actual trip is disappointing; he yearns to come home, and he is free to make that choice.

For Dillard herself, the situation is more complex. As her father's eldest daughter--in a family with no sons--Dillard holds a privileged position. She is included in her father's adventures and learns to love the things he loves: music, literature, travel. At a certain point, however, she realizes that despite her father's inclusive behaviour toward her, she is not a full participant in his world. As McFadden notes, Dillard resents the lack of

choice in the lives of women and young girls. As a child, she stays home with her mother when he goes to work; she remains in the domestic sphere. As an adolescent, she gains mobility and a certain degree of freedom, but she is not impervious to 1950s conventionality. She takes dancing lessons, and she is excluded from Little League. She has fewer choices than she would have if she were a boy; she is, in her own words, "negligible."

With her father, Dillard seeks to be part of the adventurous, anti-domestic realm, but like her father, she experiences these adventures as limited experiments, not sustainable lifestyle choices. Her father returns from his trip to go back to work; similarly, Dillard evolves from a child playing in the woods into a young woman who attends her first formal dance. The difference is that for Dillard's father, conventional life is a choice. For Dillard, much of her ambivalence toward the chauvinism and conventionality in her life stems from the fact that she does not choose. She enjoys her first formal dance, but feels ambivalent about the fact that she is being groomed by her parents to be "a young lady." When Dillard writes, "the world could not be ours," she acknowledges that she is part of the female world that will remain invisible, that will not inherit the world. By joining in her father's activities, Dillard has rebelled against this exclusion, but she cannot overcome it completely, nor does she resist her own development as a young lady in Pittsburgh indefinitely. She is a guest, not an heir, in her father's world.

In this regard, Dillard's relationship with her father is similar to Walker's relationship with her father. In the essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self," Walker recalls being allowed to accompany her father into town to see a county fair when she was very young:

> I am two and a half years old. I want to go everywhere my daddy goes. I am excited at the prospect of riding in a car. Someone has told me that fairs are fun. That there is room in the car for only three of us doesn't faze me at all. Whirling happily in my starchy frock, showing off my biscuit-polished patent-leather shoes and lavender socks, tossing my head in a way that makes my ribbons bounce, I stand, hands on my hips, before my father. "Take me, Daddy," I say with assurance; "I'm the prettiest!"
>
> Later, it does not surprise me to find myself in Miss Mey's shiny black car, sharing the back seat with the other lucky ones. (361-362)

In this passage, Walker recalls the utter confidence she had as a child that she would be accepted and included by her father. This incident is one of the few in which Walker writes about her father receiving her unconditionally and eagerly. Here, her confidence is rooted in gender difference and appearance; she is a pretty girl.

This harmonious relationship cannot last, however, because Walker grows into a child (and then a young woman) who challenges her father in ways he cannot accept. In the essay "Father," she describes how she rejects her

father's attention because she cannot bear to see him be cruel to her sister. In the chapter on Walker's father, I have already discussed this choice as an act of female solidarity which inevitably changes Walker's relationship with her father: "I, of course, took the side of my sister, forfeiting my chance to be my father's favorite among the second set of children" (14). This forfeiture removes Walker from her privileged position in her family, and she begins to feel less included, less confident in her relationship with her father. Further discussion of exclusion comes in Walker's essay "Brothers and Sisters," in which she describes her father's sexist treatment of his daughters, and in the essay "My Father's Country Is the Poor," in which she discusses how her own education and travel became a barrier in her relationship with her uneducated father. Walker's descriptions of her father often focus on the ways in which their relationship was limited and problematic; the adoration she felt for him as a young child evolves into a love which is different and more complicated; this evolution is a necessary part of Walker's own growth and learning.

Based on the passages in which Walker laments her father's harshness, sexism, and lack of opportunity, it is tempting to conclude that Walker's relationship with her father is completely different from Dillard's relationship with her father. True to her style, Dillard is neither plaintive nor forthright about her family's faults. (In a CBC interview, Dillard states simply, "the last thing I was going to do [in *An American Childhood*] was air any family linen.") I would suggest, however, that although Dillard's

relationship with her father is largely a positive one, she, too, recalls her father's limitations. Both writers, I believe, describe the father-daughter relationship as one which begins in adoration and closeness, but must evolve and change as the daughter grows.

In *An American Childhood,* this evolution is subtle, almost unnoticeable. Dillard's descriptions of her father are seldom negative or critical; most hints of disappointment or criticism about her father are fleeting and quite gentle. For example, early in *An American Childhood,* Dillard recalls her desire to go to Frick Park, a huge, wooded park in residential Pittsburgh:

> My father forbade me to go to Frick Park. He said that bums lived there under bridges; they had been hanging around unnoticed since the Depression. My father was away all day; my mother said I could go to Frick Park if I never mentioned it. (43)

In this passage, Dillard recalls feeling limited by her father rather than encouraged. Dillard does not state openly that her father limited her in ways that her mother did not. Instead, she juxtaposes her mother's enabling trust--"My mother had given me the freedom of the streets as soon as I could say our telephone number" (42)--with her father's confining worry. Dillard usually describes her father in terms which emphasize his inclusiveness and affability, but in this passage, her father seems remarkably like Walker's father: provincial, suspicious, fearful of the outside world. His worries may be well-founded; his daughter is a child, and he fears for her safety.

Nonetheless, in this incident, Dillard's father, usually an advocate of movement and freedom, restricts his daughter's freedom, and defines her space for her: she should stay closer to home, in a place which is safer than Frick Park.

Dillard also implies that her father is limited and confined by his worry about what other people might think. When he returns from his trip down the river, one of the main reasons is that people may be talking about him (10). Similarly, the discussion that he and Dillard have when she writes the minister a fierce letter and quits the church as an adolescent indicates that he is concerned about how this appears to other people:

> Father began with some vigor: "What was it you said in this brilliant letter?" He went on: But didn't I see? That people did these things--quietly? Just--quietly? No fuss? No flamboyant gestures. No uncalled-for letters. He was forced to conclude that I was deliberately setting out to humiliate Mother and him. (227)

Here Dillard's criticism is subtle, and dependent on contextual information. In an earlier passage, Dillard writes, "My parents didn't go to church. I practically admired them for it. Father would drive by at noon and scoop up Amy and me, saying, 'Hop in quick!' so no one would see his weekend khaki pants and loafers" (195). By contrasting her own dramatic and vehement departure from the church with her father's entreaty that she leave the church more quietly--as he himself must have done--Dillard exposes her

father's hypocrisy. She describes her letter to the minister of Shadyside Presbyterian Church as "fierce," while her description of her father focuses on his embarrassed concern with what other people must be thinking. Instead of asking his daughter what prompted her to quit the church, what issues have caused her to struggle and leave, he simply asks that she do this more quietly.

Dillard's conversation with her father reveals much about the way in which her relationship with her father has changed. Previously, Dillard looked to her father as source of knowledge, someone who explained the world to her. Now, however, Dillard focuses on her own anger and skepticism, revealing that she reached a point in adolescence when she could no longer accept her father's views unquestioningly. Of the changes that occurred when she turned sixteen, Dillard writes, "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" (222). Dillard's reflections about her adolescent self are interesting: she admits that her anger must have been difficult for her parents to handle, but her recollections of this fierce letter also suggest pride in her honesty and vehemence. By describing her parents as "innocent," Dillard acknowledges that her adolescent rage is, in some ways, unfair, because her parents have not changed, and her anger has little to do with anything that her parents have done. Instead, she has changed. She has evolved from a child who looks to her father for explanations and information to an adolescent who sees the limitations of his logic.

Another incident which demonstrates the evolution of Dillard's relationship with her father occurs in an essay in which Dillard describes an argument between her parents about trickle-down economics (200-204). The very structure of this essay is significant. It opens with a description of Dillard's past outings with her father: "Years before this, on long-ago summer Sundays, before father went down the Ohio and ended up selling his boat, he used to take me out with him on the water" (201). Midway through the essay, Dillard writes, "Father on these boat outings answered my questions at length" (201). Dillard's reconstruction of these long-ago events is deliberately nostalgic, focusing on her father's intelligence and inclusiveness, as she has done so often in *An American Childhood*: "Whenever I was on the river, I seemed to be visiting a fascinating place I had forgotten all about, where physical causes had physical effects, and great things got done, slowly, heavily, because people understood materials and forces" (201). Here Dillard's reverence for her father is also a reverence for American history, in which logical, hard-working people--much like Dillard's father--worked and solved problems. She is nostalgic about the stories her father told her when she was a child; it is from him that she learned how the railroad was built, how a dam was built, and how a water system works. She respects the logic and work ethic of people like her own father.

From this familiar starting point, however, Dillard's tone and focus change. Years later, when Dillard's father begins to explain economics to the

family, he is as logical and confident as ever, but Dillard's reaction to him is very different.

> While we were making sandwiches, though, Father started to explain the world to us once again. I stuck around. There in the kitchen, Father embarked upon an explanation of American economics. I don't know what prompted it. His voice took on urgency; he paced. Money worked like water, he said. (203)

Dillard's father concludes that if enough money, like water, got high enough, it would flow by gravitation, all over everybody (204). This logical speech is accepted by all family members--except one:

> "It doesn't work that way," our mother said. She offered Molly tidbits: a drumstick, a beet slice, cheese. "Remember those shacks we see in Georgia? Those barefoot little children who have to quit school to work in the fields, their poor mothers not able to feed them enough"--we could all hear in her voice that she was beginning to cry-- "not even able to keep them dressed?" Molly was looking at her, wide-eyed; she was bent over looking at Molly, wide-eyed.
>
> "They shouldn't have so many kids," Father said. "They must be crazy." (204)

Dillard does not write at length about how this exchange between her parents affected her. She concludes simply, "The trouble was, I no longer believed him. It was beginning to strike me that Father, who knew the real world so

well, got some of it wrong. Not much; just some" (204). This comment speaks volumes about how her relationship with her father has changed. She has seen a flaw in her father's logic: his explanation of water systems--which worked so well when Dillard was a child and when he was speaking literally--does not work as an analogy about economics. Recognizing that no one, not even her father, is perfect, Dillard knows that she will have to critique and evaluate even the best of stories as an adult. This realization is an "epiphany" for Dillard, a moment in which she recognizes and claims her own agency and responsibility.

The nature of Dillard's recognition of her father's limitations is very different from Walker's. When Dillard disagrees with her father's theory of economics, she does so as an adolescent who is just beginning to question everything and assert her own selfhood. When she rejects his ideas, she still acknowledges that he "knew the real world so well" (204). Her rejection of her father's ideas is not a rejection of him, and in fact, Dillard's matter-of-fact tone suggests that her acceptance of her disagreement with her father is also a starting point, something which will allow for a more equal and honest relationship with her father.

In contrast, Walker's recognition of her father's limitations is much more problematic for her. The essays in which Walker discusses her father create a chronology in which she moves slowly through anger and feelings of guilt before she can accept her father's limitations. It is only after Walker has examined her father's sexism and his mistrust of education and political

activism that she can accept her father without trying to change him or lamenting what his life might have been like in different circumstances. It is only at the end of the essay "Father," written after "Brothers and Sisters" and "My Father's Country Is the Poor" that Walker can write to her father, "I love you no less for what you were" (17). For Walker, accepting her father's limitations is a life-long process in which she has had to examine her own life as well: "Since I share so many of my father's characteristics, physical and otherwise, coming to terms with what he has meant to my life is crucial to a full acceptance and love of myself" ("Father" 9). In fact, Walker admits in the essay "Father" that her relationship with her father did not improve until after his death (9). The nature of Walker's struggle is different from Dillard's, but so is the chronology; not only does Walker have more problematic and complicated issues to resolve, but she does that work by looking back after her father's death.

Dillard's writing suggests that her transition from judgment to acceptance of her father is relatively smooth and painless. Once she realizes her father is not right about everything, there is a change in the relationship, but not one which brings alienation or anger. In the book's epilogue, Dillard returns to the topics of jazz music and travel, which she introduced in the prologue essay about her father's trip down the river. Again emphasizing her father's role as teacher, Dillard writes: "Our father taught us the culture into which we were born. American culture was Dixieland above all, Dixieland

pure and simple, and next to Dixieland, jazz" (252). Dillard goes on to describe the pure joy and abandon with which her family danced:

> We did a lot of dancing at our house, fast dancing; everyone in the family was a dancing fool. I always came down from my room to dance. When the music was going, who could resist? I bounced down the stairs to the rhythm and began to whistle a bit, helpless as a marionette whose strings jerk her head and feet. (253)

In the midst of this crazy dancing, Dillard's father asks her if she remembers the line in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* in which Kerouac says that the only time he ever got to hear the music played loud enough was in a little bar in Mexico. Dillard does remember, because they have had this conversation before: "I knew what he was going to say, because he said it every time we played music; it was always a pleasure" (254). Dillard begins and ends *An American Childhood* with descriptions of her father's love of music and travel. Here, the delight she shares with her father is much like the delight she took in his adventures when she was a child.

The dancing at the end of the book also reflects the evolution of the father-daughter relationship, however. Dillard is no longer a child who is left behind when her father goes on a trip. There is a certain degree of equality between them. Dillard dances with her father; she also prepares for her own trip. Dillard's preparation is literal--she is getting ready to go to Hollins College in Virginia--but it is also figurative. Dillard's whole book, which has

been concerned with the individual's growth and self-consciousness, ends with Dillard as an indomitable and confident teenager: "I was gaining momentum. It was only a matter of months" (254).

Now, as a teenager with everything before her, Dillard looks at her father differently than she did when she was a child:

> If it had ever been at all, it had been a long time since Father had heard the music played loud enough. Maybe he was still imagining it, fondly, some little bar back away somewhere, so small he and the other regulars sat in the middle of the blaring band, or stood snapping their fingers, drinking bourbon, telling jokes between sets. . . Did he think of himself as I thought of him, as the man who had cut out of town and headed, wearing tennis shoes and a blue cap, down the river toward New Orleans? (254)

After adoring her father uncritically in childhood and questioning that adoration in her adolescence, Dillard emerges as a daughter who sees her father as a flawed but beloved person, and she remembers her father's belief that life should be lived adventurously--and with music. The final words of the book's epilogue are a simple question: "In New Orleans--if you could get to New Orleans--would the music be loud enough?" (255) This concern suggests that Dillard is once again linked to her father, not only by what she has learned from him, but also by the fact that she values and seeks a meaningful waking life: she wants the music to be loud enough.

Chapter Four

"Torpid Conformity Was A Kind of Sin":

Annie Dillard's Recollections of Her Mother

Throughout *An American Childhood*, Dillard is careful to describe her parents as individuals, rather than as an always-joined couple. Dillard's parents complement each other, and Dillard's writing reveals an obvious affection for both parents, but her feelings for her mother are different from those she has for her father. While Dillard associates her father with knowledge and convention, Dillard repeatedly refers to her mother's spunk and irreverence. The first mention of this comes in the riverboat essay in which Dillard's mother and father speak on the phone while he is away:

> From phone booths all down the Ohio River he talked to Mother. She told him that she was lonesome, too, and that three children--maid and nanny or no--were a handful. She said, further, that people were starting to talk. She knew Father couldn't bear people's talking. For all his dreaminess, he prized respectability above all; it was our young mother, whose circumstances bespoke such dignity, who loved to shock the world. (10)

At this point, very early in the book, Dillard does not elaborate on precisely how her mother loved to shock the world. Instead, this passage is one of the

first hints of Dillard's enduring respect for her mother's spirit. In fact, although Dillard opens and closes *An American Childhood* with descriptions of her father, Dillard's admiration for her mother is evident throughout the book. According to Linda L. Smith, "As Dillard describes her mother, she was wickedly witty, irreverent, nonconformist to an extreme, vigorously energetic, an amateur inventor, and an inveterate player of practical jokes" (3). Dillard is inspired and motivated by her mother's strong beliefs; she is also empowered by her mother's love. In this sense, Dillard's relationship with her mother has certain similarities to Walker's relationship with her mother. Differences emerge, however, between the two authors' notions of community. Whereas Walker recognizes her relationship with her mother as a valuable part--and indeed the very source--of female community, Dillard, whose mother has encouraged her to be very independent, has an ambivalent relationship with her community in Pittsburgh.

The passages in which Dillard describes her mother most elaborately are found in an essay often anthologized as "Terwilliger Bunts One" (110-117). This essay is full of descriptions of Pam Doak's mischievous desire to shock the world:

> When we were young, she mothered us tenderly and dependably; as we got older, she resumed her career of anarchism. She collared us into her gags. If she answered the phone on a wrong number, she told the caller, "Just a minute,"

> and dragged the receiver to Amy or me, saying, "Here, take this, your name is Cecile," or, worse, just, "It's for you." (113)

Pam Doak loves to surprise people, and even make them squirm. By describing her mother's antics as a "career of anarchism" (113), Dillard suggests that mother's wit is an intentional rebellion against order and temperance. She cheats at cards, or gives up, throwing her cards all over the place, something which, Dillard notes, "drove our stolid father crazy" (114). Passages such as this emphasize how different Dillard's mother is from Dillard's father. Where he is stolid and controlled, she is indomitable and silly.

That these antics drive people crazy is more than an amusing anecdote; Dillard's mother's mischievous and tenacious manner challenges her family, and extends beyond the practical joke. "Torpid conformity was a kind of sin; it was stupidity itself, the mighty stream against which Mother would never cease to struggle" (116), notes Dillard, and she recalls how her mother demanded that she think for herself:

> Always I heard Mother's emotional voice asking Amy and me the same few questions: Is that your own idea? Or somebody else's? "*Giant* is a good movie," I pronounced to the family at dinner. "Oh, really?" Mother warmed to these occasions. She all but rolled up her sleeves. She knew I hadn't seen it. "Is that your considered opinion?" (116)

Similarly, Dillard's mother is "scathingly sarcastic" about the McCarthy hearings, frantically opposing her husband's "wait-and-see calm" (117). In this essay, Dillard begins by describing her mother's good humour, but she also recognizes how her mother challenged her family and encouraged her daughters to think for themselves.

In particular, the closing paragraphs of this essay speak volumes about what Pam Doak expects from her daughters:

> Opposition emboldened Mother, and she would take on anybody on any issue--the chairman of the board, at a cocktail party, on the current strike; she would fly at him in a flurry of passion, as a songbird selflessly attacks a big hawk.
>
> "Eisenhower's going to win," I announced after school. She lowered her magazine and looked me in the eyes: "How do you know?" I was doomed. It was fatal to say, "Everyone says so." We all knew well what happened. "Do you consult this Everyone before you make your decisions? What if Everyone decided to round up all the Jews?" Mother knew there was no danger of cowing me. She simply tried to keep us all awake. And in fact it was always clear to Amy and me, and to Molly when she grew old enough to listen, that if our classmates came to cruelty, just as much as if the neighborhood or the nation came to madness, we were expected to take, and would be each separately capable of taking, a stand. (117)

The order of these two paragraphs is significant; it demonstrates that Pam Doak has taught her daughters by example rather than merely by lecturing them. Dillard does not resent her mother's mental vigor and strong will, because she has seen her mother take on the chairman of the board "selflessly" and in "a flurry of passion." Such words suggest that Dillard admires her mother's boldness. Dillard predicts that she and her sisters will be capable of "taking a stand," not only because their mother has challenged them and demanded it, but also because they have seen her take a stand many times herself.

The fact that Dillard's mother rebels against "torpid conformity" also has ramifications in her concept of social justice. Repeatedly, Dillard notes her mother's ability to see beyond her own privileged situation. She notes wryly that her mother "had been known to vote for Democrats" (115). She recalls with admiration her mother's absolute commitment to egalitarianism and human rights. When Dillard, at age five, refers to her family's maid as a "nigger" because a neighbour boy tells her to do so, the severity of her mother's reaction terrifies her:

> She explained, and she made sure I understood. She was steely. Where had my regular mother gone? Did she hate me? She told me a passel of other words that some people use for other people. I was never to use such words, and never to associate with people who did so long as I lived; I was to apologize to Margaret Butler first thing in the morning. (29-30)

Later in the same essay, Dillard says of this incident, "I had put myself in danger--I felt at the time, for Mother was so enraged--of being put out, tossed out in the cold, where I would go crazy and die like the dog" (31). In this incident, Dillard recognizes the power of language, and it is significant that she is disciplined by her mother.

Throughout *An American Childhood*, Dillard recalls incidents in which her mother's reverence for language is clear. Dillard's mother loves the sound and the drama of words, as in this recollection:

> She served us with other words and phrases. On a Florida trip, she repeated tremulously, "That . . . is a royal poinciana." I don't remember the tree; I remember the thrill in her voice. She pronounced it carefully, and spelled it. She also liked to say "portulaca." (110-111)

In her childhood, Dillard sees in her mother a respect for language and the meaning of words; it is not surprising that her mother reacts so strongly to her daughter saying "nigger." In this incident, Pam Doak teaches her daughter something about the power of language. Although Dillard was only five years old at the time of this event, she clearly remembers her mother's steeliness and anger. She learns at a very young age something about her mother's belief in justice and human decency.

The issue of language and its power, demonstrated in this incident, also has much to do with class. When Dillard's mother reacts to the word, she reacts as a member of a class which does not use language that way.

Sidonie Smith comments on language as a marker of class in *An American Childhood:*

> Jo Ann Sheehy embodies the working-class Irish community at the borders of Dillard's childhood neighborhood. Dillard's narrative suggests that as a child she is intrigued by the Irish children but that she is separated from them most dramatically when her mother disciplines her for calling the family's maid "a nigger," a phrase she has learned from Jo Ann Sheehy's brother. For her mother, the child has spoken forbidden words, words that are a violation of manners, of the right use of language, of a liberal humanism that eschews expressed bigotry. It is precisely this differential use of language that marks the boundaries between classes. Since the Irish are positioned as the crude and unmannerly, when Dillard comes home and repeats Tommy Sheehy's phrase, she effectively speaks as one of the "low." Through that speech she momentarily inhabits the body of the other, and so she comes too close to the "low" for comfort. (136)

A number of Smith's points are valid. I agree both that Dillard's mother reacts strongly because she is afraid of her daughter speaking like someone from a lower class, and that Dillard's mother sees this behaviour as a violation of manners and an improper use of language. However, Smith's tone suggests that Dillard is only disciplined because of her mother's suburban fear of being too much like the blue-collar Irish people, and I would

argue that Smith misses Dillard's mother's belief in equality and dignity. Dillard's mother reacts with extreme anger because she believes that what her daughter has done is wrong, a violation of human rights as well as a violation of manners.

The significance of this event goes beyond the fear that Dillard felt when she was five; from her mother's anger, she learns of her mother's belief that everyone is worthy of respect. This belief is not popular or readily accepted, however, particularly concerning racial and economic issues. Pam Doak, although herself part of the upper middle class which employs black maids, holds many opinions which are unpopular in the 1950s: "She asserted, against all opposition, that people who lived in trailer parks were not bad but simply poor, and had as much right to settle on beautiful land, such as rural Ligonier, Pennsylvania, as did the oldest of families in the finest of hidden houses" (117). As an adult, Dillard realizes that her mother's opinions were exceptional in a time of racial and economic segregation:

> Her profound belief that the country-club pool sweeper was a person, and that the department-store saleslady, the bus driver, telephone operator, and house-painter were people, and even in groups the steelworkers who carried pickets and the Christmas shoppers who clogged intersections were people--this was a conviction common enough in democratic Pittsburgh, but not altogether common among our friends' parents, or even, perhaps, among our parents' friends. (117)

Dillard sees her mother as an individual who, despite her own privileged position, believes in equality. By admitting that her mother's views may not have been common among her parents' friends, Dillard notes that her mother resisted snobbery and spoke out about inequality even though her own social circle might not have agreed with her views.

Dillard's mother's belief in equality is not simple or easily dissected, however. Her conviction that anyone has the right to settle on Pennsylvania's most beautiful land seems incongruent with her own life of wealth and comfort. It is her ancestors who did, in fact, settle on Pennsylvania's most beautiful land, and her lifestyle has been shaped by this privilege. Her lifestyle is dependent on the very fact that wealth is *not* equally distributed among the people of Pennsylvania. I do not question Dillard's mother's sincerity, but I would argue that her political ideals have limitations. For Dillard's mother, any challenge to inequality takes place within the structure of middle-class life, and is one of ideals and philosophy rather than overt activism. Her belief that the disenfranchised are "not bad but simply poor" (117) is commendable, and her belief in racial equality is remarkable, particularly in the 1950s, a time of conspicuous racial segregation in the United States. But Dillard's mother is incapable of or unwilling to make the transition from ideology to practice.

From her mother, Dillard learns a particular kind of egalitarianism: liberal humanism, with an emphasis on thinking for one's self. When Dillard's mother encourages her daughters to "take a stand," she emphasizes

the importance of speaking out against cruelty or injustice. She does not demand that her daughters give up the privileges of wealth, nor does she give up these privileges herself. The difference between Dillard's mother and Walker's mother is not one of ideology; each writer describes her mother's strength and compassion. Instead, the difference is between theoretical humanism and practical humanism. Whereas Dillard notes how her mother argues passionately with the chairman of the board, Walker watches her mother take in other people's children in times of need and share food with her relatives in times of scarcity. Dillard admires her mother's wit and tenacity, but Walker is moved and inspired by her mother's self-sacrificing acts of mercy.

The examination of these two writers' descriptions of the mother-daughter relationship is directly related to the notion of community. Walker is very interested in the concept of community, particularly female community. In a 1973 interview with John O'Brien, Walker states, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (195). This commitment is visible in many of Walker's works, and she credits her mother and other black women with teaching her the value and power of female community. Dillard, on the other hand, is ambivalent about her relationship to the Pittsburgh families that make up her family's community. From her mother

in particular, she has learned to value independence more than connection with other people.

Much of this ambivalence has to do with Dillard's approach and technique in *An American Childhood*. In her autobiographical writing, Dillard is the observer, but she is also the subject; this duality of roles means that Dillard is relentlessly introspective, always re-constructing and re-evaluating herself. This introspection is best exemplified by the essay in which Dillard sits in the balcony at church and observes people worshipping. She looks down on them--literally and figuratively:

> Almost everyone in the church was long familiar to me. But this particular Sunday in church bore home to me with force a new notion: that I did not really know any of these people at all. I thought I did--but, being now a teenager, I thought I knew almost everything. Only the strongest evidence could penetrate this illusion, which distorted everything I saw. I knew I approved almost nothing. That is, I liked, I adored, I longed for, everyone on earth, especially India and Africa, and particularly everyone on the streets of Pittsburgh--all those friendly, democratic, openhearted, sensible people--and at Forbes Field, and in all the office buildings, parks, streetcars, churches, and stores, excepting only the people I knew, none of whom was up to snuff. (191).

Dillard's adolescence has created a change in viewpoint, and this change is evident in the adult Dillard's narrative stance. Previously, Dillard has written "like a child" to recreate (seemingly uncritically) the mind of a child. Since Dillard's commentary on herself in *An American Childhood* is always filtered through her memories of what she was feeling at the time, her tone and narrative stance must change with her adolescence as well. In this section, when Dillard recalls being intolerant and angry in her adolescence, her commentary on herself becomes less forgiving as well.

Recalling the church service in which she judged other people, the adult Dillard comments on her sardonic, adolescent self. She keeps her eyes open while others pray. At first she is confident that none of her classmates are taking the prayer seriously, and that the adults downstairs are only going through the motions. "I'd keep watching the people," she writes, "in case I'd missed some clue that they were actually doing something else--bidding bridge hands" (198). Dillard is bold in her suspicions because, as she claims, "I knew these people, didn't I? I knew their world, which was, in some sense, my world, too, since I could not, outside of books, name another" (198). The irony in the fact that Dillard longs for all people in Africa, India, and Pittsburgh, but not in her own church, is a suggestion that she is incapable of seeing the value of her own community until she is removed from it.

Dillard does not discuss community often in *An American Childhood*. In many ways, this is understandable; she is interested in the individual's growth and the child's journey to full consciousness more than she is

interested in communal issues. What the church incident suggests, however, is that if Dillard does not discuss community at length, it is not because community does not exist. It does exist, but the adolescent Dillard is incapable of seeing its value and is, therefore, unwilling to join. Dillard can only admit in writing (and twenty-five years later) that she judged these people harshly, that she didn't really know them.

I have already discussed how Dillard implies that her parents have been hypocritical in lecturing her about quitting the church when they have stopped attending (albeit more quietly) themselves. What the church incident also suggests, however, is that Dillard's ambivalence toward the people in her church is a symptom of a larger issue: her ambivalence about community. In particular, Dillard's mother has given her daughter many examples of simultaneous rejection and acceptance of community. She remains within the social circles of Pittsburgh's upper middle class while voicing her unpopular opinions on racial and economic equality. She is, in many respects, a "typical" woman of her class in the 1950s, alone in her house "like a coin in a safe," but she also challenges this domesticity with her antics. She does not attend church, but neither does she "cut the cord" by quitting, and she is horrified when her daughter quits. Pam Doak is full of contradictions, and Dillard notes these contradictions when she compares her father's cautiousness with her mother's vigour: "For all his dreaminess, he prized respectability above all; it was our young mother, whose circumstances bespoke such dignity, who loved to shock the world" (10). Her mother's

contradictions offer Dillard many examples of how to exist within a community without being completely subsumed by it. Dillard's mother enjoys the benefits of wealth and participation within an elite society without surrendering her individuality.

Dillard enjoys similar freedom herself, but as an adolescent she has difficulty asserting her individuality within the communal context. She is convinced that her sense of self cannot exist within her community, and she is determined to leave. When Dillard quits the church, her mother is shocked:

> I quit the church. I wrote the minister. The assistant minister, kindly Dr. James H. Blackwood, called me for an appointment. My mother happened to take the call.
>
> "Why," she asked, "would he be calling you?" I was in the kitchen after school. Mother was leaning against the pantry door, drying a crystal bowl.
>
> "What, Mama? Oh. Probably," I said, "because I quit the church."
>
> "You--what?" She began to slither down the doorway, weak-kneed, like Lucille Ball. I believe her whole life passed before her eyes. (226)

This exchange, which precedes the passage in which Dillard's nervous father tells her that people usually do these things "quietly," suggests that her mother, who usually espouses openness and questions authority, does not

approve of this decision. Like Dillard's father, Dillard's mother is more upset by Dillard's brazenness than by Dillard's refusal to attend church. Ironically, her daughter is only questioning authority and unilateral thinking as her mother has taught her to do. Dillard's mother reacts to the fact that her daughter has drawn attention to herself and to their family, but she does not chasten her daughter for taking distance from the community. It is not independence but scandal that frightens Dillard's mother. Dillard has learned a great deal about questioning authority from her mother, but at this point, as an adolescent, she has not acquired the tact and restraint that her mother has. Instead of taking a certain amount of distance from her community while remaining "within" as her mother has, the adolescent Dillard is convinced that she will leave and never come back.

When Alice Walker recalls leaving her hometown to attend college, she is overwhelmed by the sense of community she feels with her mother, who has given her a suitcase and a typewriter, gifts which symbolize her acceptance of her daughter's decision to travel and go to college. Similarly, Walker is moved when the women of the Methodist church collect $75 "to bless her on her way" (Winchell 5). When Walker leaves Eatonton after high school, she is grateful to her community and empowered by the self-sacrificing love of many people, particularly women. Walker is keenly aware of her responsibilities to the community which has supported her; her college education is an opportunity that her mother and the women of Eatonton did

not have. Her education is their chance to contribute to social and economic change for young black people.

Dillard's departure is different. She questions her place within the community, and instead of leaving with an awareness of her responsibility and connection to other people, she is eager to find out who she is as an individual. What is ironic is that despite all of Dillard's eagerness and all of Walker's fears and mixed feelings, it is Walker, and not Dillard, who enters unknown territory. Walker's education is a new life for her, a drastic change from the insularity and poverty of her childhood, whereas Dillard's education simply continues the process which began in her childhood. The small, exclusive Hollins College is the next logical step after the country club and dancing school. Walker depends on the love of her community, which enables her to leave and enter something completely different. Dillard leaves confidently, without as much need for community, because she will still be within the realm of the familiar, and because she has been taught to value the individual journey. Instead of experiencing something her parents never did, as Walker does when she goes to college, Dillard follows the lead of her mother, who has always valued independence and education. Dillard writes, "Mother knew we would go; she encouraged us" (214). Dillard's parents have prepared her for this experience, which will be both new and familiar for her. Near the end of *An American Childhood,* as Dillard prepares for her departure from Pittsburgh, her focus is herself: "I was gaining momentum. It was only a matter of months" (254).

"I hoped to combine my father's grasp of information and reasoning with my mother's will and vitality" (214), writes Dillard of her parents, admitting that she wanted to blend and adopt their best characteristics. The fact that Dillard's departure from Pittsburgh is a welcome and expected development is a tribute to her independence. This independence is best exemplified by an incident which occurs when Dillard is twelve, when she receives a microscope from her parents. When, after much trying, she sees an amoeba under the microscope, she wants to share it with her parents:

> Before I had watched him at all, I ran upstairs. My parents were still at the table, drinking coffee. They, too, could see the famous amoeba. I told them, bursting, that he was all set up, that they should hurry before his water dried. It was the chance of a lifetime. (148).

Dillard's parents do not accept her invitation to come and see the amoeba, and at first she is surprised. Soon, however, she understands: "[Mother] did not say, but I understood at once, that they had their pursuits (coffee?) and I had mine. She did not say, but I began to understand then, that you do what you do out of your private passion for the thing itself" (149). Dillard recalls feeling that she had been handed her own life (149). She had been handed her own life, not just in this incident, but throughout her childhood and adolescence. As Dillard remarked in a 1995 interview, "I had been raised to be completely independent; and was given my own head" (CBC interview). By supporting her endeavours without sharing in them, Dillard's parents teach

her that her own experiences are important. Dillard "awakens" in an enabling environment, largely due to her parents' generosity and trust. In her parents, Dillard witnesses a wonderful, complicated blend of respectability and risk-taking. Dillard is moved by her mother's spunk, her rejection of trickle-down economics, and her ability to teach her daughters that they "didn't know it all just yet" (112). Although Dillard's father taught his daughter to love stories of adventure, Dillard learns more about compassion and equality from her mother. Ultimately, Dillard emerges as a person who has been influenced by both her parents. From her mother, she has learned to think critically and to think of other people, but not so much so that she abandons her father's love of adventure and self-discovery.

Dillard's journey is one in which she moves toward independence, and *An American Childhood* is a detailed description of her growth as an individual. Alice Walker, on the other hand, is constantly reminded of the lives and experiences of other people, and her journey brings her toward greater awareness of community. Walker takes every available opportunity to remind her readers that her agenda involves working to correct imbalances of economic power; she does so because she saw her parents and many other people in her community live without power and freedom. If it is true, as I have asserted, that Walker's parents taught her to value community whereas Dillard's parents taught her to value individualism, then what effect does this difference have on adult identity and the writer's social vision? This is the question I will address in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion

After discussing how Dillard and Walker were both shaped by their families and by their relationships with their parents, it is equally important to discuss the larger social vision of each of these writers. In their recollections of childhood and adolescence, both women write about American society and the political and economic contexts in which they lived and grew. In particular, I am struck by how race and class and material reality defined and affected the lives of Dillard and Walker. The fact that Dillard "awakens" in an enabling and affluent environment affects her social vision, as does the fact that her parents encouraged her to be independent. Walker, on the other hand, realizes that her parents and many people in her community never had the educational opportunities that she did, a fact which keeps her very interested in social justice, particularly for the black community. Walker's vision is direct, radical, and single-minded; she will work for nothing less than equality and social justice. Dillard's social vision is more complicated. Although her agenda is not to change imbalances of economic or political power, she is a relentless observer and commentator on her social and familiar world, and I argue that she subtly challenges and questions the insularity of her childhood environment.

In *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard is recalling a particular era and a particular society, both of which are based on security and prosperity.

When Dillard describes the prosperity of 1950s America, she does so as someone who experienced that prosperity first-hand: hers is not every American childhood, but a particular one. I have already discussed how Dillard excludes and perhaps even alienates certain audiences by implying that her domestic reality was every child's domestic reality. In fact, Dillard's attempt to be the universal narrator has prompted some critics to use the word "generic." According to Sidonie Smith, the very title of Dillard's autobiography signals Dillard's identification with the universal subject:

> The indefinite article followed by the national modifier generalizes the subject of the autobiography. The narrator claims she speaks as an American about a universal cultural experience, a generic American childhood. Rhetorical gestures throughout the narrative solicit the reader's acceptance of the shared nature of experience and assume the reader's identification with the autobiographical subject. (131)

Smith notes the way in which Dillard's writing becomes a gesture which establishes the narrator as the one who knows, an authority on common experience (132).

Similarly, Janet Varner Gunn reminds readers that the title of Dillard's book reveals much about what Dillard includes and excludes:

> Suggesting a national report, the title of her autobiography turns out to be apt. She does, in fact, portray an American (or U. S.) childhood, a childhood very much like my own, removed from

> the poverty around her and oblivious, except through books, of the cost for such a childhood that much of the rest of the world has had to bear. (74)

Gunn goes on to claim that "the Western autobiographical tradition has been defined in large part by those whose place on that stage has been secure" (75).

Gunn and Smith both react to the fact that Dillard speaks for others at times, and that she feels free to do so because her place "on the stage" of autobiography is secure. What Gunn and Smith do not discuss in any detail, however, are the ways in which Dillard plays with this notion of the universal narrator and alternates between generalities and specificities. Dillard occupies a number of narrative positions; at times she is elusive as the subject of her own book, "erasing" her own identity by hiding the personal in the inviting, more generalizing narrative. Dillard has even said about *An American Childhood*, "When people write memoirs they're apt to get quite carried away. . . You just have to be very careful not to make yourself the subject" (CBC interview). Thus Dillard often avoids making herself the subject by writing about "everyone's" childhood--whether everyone shared her experience or not. And yet Dillard repeatedly demonstrates that after being the "universal" narrator, and after hiding in the larger narrative, what she desires most is to describe her own experience in all its specificity. When she describes the very specific context of her childhood (her parents, her grandparents, her Pittsburgh roots) she is very much the specific, identifiable subject. When Dillard writes as though every other American's childhood

must have been like hers, criticism is warranted, but it must be tempered by the acknowledgment that *An American Childhood* does not focus only on shared experience. By alternating between the universal and the specific, Dillard creates complex narratives in which she can be and cease to be the subject; she can draw attention to herself, or she can deflect that attention by suggesting that others have shared her experience or had similar experiences.

Ruth Frankenberg comments on the need for specific identities in her book *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters:* "While feminist women of color have worked to specify their histories and the contemporary shape of their lives in gendered and racial terms, however, a corresponding particularism has too often been lacking on the part of white feminist women" (10). Frankenberg implies that white women have failed to discuss their lives in racial and gendered terms because of neglect or lack of thought: they simply have not been pushed to do so. What Dillard's *An American Childhood* reveals is that this lack of specification can also be a choice. At times, Dillard seeks to be the universal narrator, using such phrases as "like any child" (34) to describe her childhood experiences. Such gestures are inclusive, an attempt to smooth over or erase differences between people. Dillard does not remain in this unspecified position, however. After writing about the "unconscious" child who is unaware of difference, Dillard removes herself from the narrative and comments on this lack of specificity. For example, Dillard writes of her family, "We were vaguely proud of living in a city so full of distinctive immigrant groups,

among which we never thought to number ourselves" (76). This wry comment is gently self-deprecating, and suggests that Dillard is keenly aware of ethnic difference and the absurdity of "racelessness," but this awareness only comes in adulthood. Thus Dillard is both general and specific; she alternates between the voice of the child who does not think about specificity or difference, and the voice of the adult who comments on the naiveté of the child--and the insularity of the child's world. Throughout *An American Childhood,* Dillard plays with the position of the universal subject, but she does not fail to describe the specificities of her life.

Walker, whose place on the stage of the Western tradition of autobiography is by no means secure, and who often discusses her people's silence and exclusion, does not have the luxury of entering and then exiting her own essays. Every word on every page of Walker's essays demands that her readers recognize her identity and her history. She is speaking now because in the earlier stages of American history, her people's voices were silenced. If Walker speaks for another person, it is not because she seeks to be the universal subject, but rather because she seeks to build community and tell the history of her community and the stories of people whose stories might otherwise be forgotten or remain unheard. There is a communal focus to Walker's writing that is simply absent from Dillard's essays. In this sense, Walker's work shares the characteristics of "Third World Autobiography," as discussed by Janet Varner Gunn:

> Third World autobiography must perform a collective experience. It differs in two respects from mainstream Western autobiography, both male and female. First, it involves an unmasking or what I have called a denostalgizing of the past; second, it orients itself toward a liberated society in the future. In the first respect, it is a form of resistance literature; in the second, it is a form of utopian literature. (Gunn 77)

Walker's work performs this collective experience of which Janet Varner Gunn writes; it also is both anti-nostalgic and utopian, because while she acknowledges the hurts of her people's past, she demands that she and her entire community continue to work for social change:

> No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice. We inherit a great responsibility as well, for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love. (21)

By focusing on responsibility and inheritance, Walker gives her work a communal focus which enhances and strengthens her message.

If Dillard's work is more individualistic than Walker's is, and if Dillard herself is not entirely consistent as the universal narrator, where do her politics emerge? Some critics have referred to Dillard's writing as "apolitical,"

and it is true that Dillard's aims in writing have more to do with artful description than with changing or correcting social inequalities. Dillard is keenly aware of economic and social realities, however, and after occupying the position of universal narrator, she always ultimately returns to her own life experience. I would argue that her detailed and clever descriptions of her childhood environment are a challenge to its insularity and privilege.

Consider how many passages in *An American Childhood* are full of the history and politics of Pittsburgh. As Suzanne Clark writes, "Dillard's family and the family business, American Standard, were part of the great capitalist industrialist class of Pittsburgh--her genealogy entwined with the history of the Carnegies and the Mellons" (174). Indeed, the affinity Dillard has for local history and Pittsburgh is due in part to the fact that Pittsburgh history is *her* history. Her family's wealth and influence allow her to trace local history with pride, and to write about her place in it. These same factors, however, allow her to challenge and question the privileges her family enjoys. Just as Dillard has entered and exited her own narrative, playing with her dual role as personal subject and universal narrator, so, too, it is difficult to "locate" Dillard in Pittsburgh. At times she is very much a "Pittsburgh girl," full of pride about the city's history, its citizens' work ethic, and its tradition of wealth, education and privilege. At other times, these are the very things she criticizes.

"Mother's handsome father was the mayor," writes Dillard early in *An American Childhood.* "He was so well liked that no one in town voted for

his opponent" (37). Dillard mentions this fact with pride. Less obvious and less unilateral, however, are Dillard's opinions of the core of wealthy families of Pittsburgh, a group she calls "the old guard" (75). The wealthy families that founded Pittsburgh are part of her own family's social context, but Dillard does not always write about these families lovingly:

> The country-club pool drew a society as complex and constraining, if not so entertaining, as any European capital's drawing room did. You forgot an old woman's name at some peril to your entire family. What if you actually, physically, ran into her? Knocked her off her pins? It was no place for children. (67)

Dillard finds the environment constraining, but by comparing the country club to a European capital's drawing room, she also betrays her pride: Pittsburgh is just as entertaining as Europe. Dillard goes on to describe how she discovered a wild bird, a rose-breasted grosbeak, in the hedge beside the pool at the country club. "The dumb cluck, why a country club?" she asks, wondering why the bird would touch down there when it could go anywhere. This is a typical example of Dillard's ambivalence toward her family's social position and wealth. Immediately following the passage in which the young Dillard sees the bird in the hedge at the pool, she writes, "Mother said Father was going down the river in his boat pretty soon. It sounded like a swell idea" (67). By describing the country club as a place which is boring at best and restrictive at worst, Dillard returns to one of her favourite themes in *An*

American Childhood: the child's desire for a more meaningful, more exciting life. To stay at the country club is to be like a bird, trapped and unable to fly.

At this point in her childhood, Dillard is convinced she will always choose adventure over conventional or domestic activities. What she does not realize as an adolescent is that she is as much a product of a middle-class upbringing as her father is. She longs to escape, but she also revels in the experience of her first formal dance, an event as traditional and constraining as any social activity her parents enjoy. When she describes her family's move into her grandparents' old stone house, she writes, "Houses rarely changed hands; from here, there was nowhere in town to move to. The next step was a seat at the right hand of God" (175). It is difficult to determine whether Dillard makes this statement with pride, disgust, or irony. When describing her family's wealth and status, Dillard's tone is often playful, making her true feelings difficult to gauge. She makes comments about snobbery, but these comments are never so pointed that they completely condemn the people of Pittsburgh; to do so would be to implicate her family and herself. Thus Dillard can be both bold and cautious; she is bold because no one knows these people and this city as well as she does, and she is cautious because she is a part of everything she describes.

Dillard is similarly cautious when describing the racial inequality that was so much a part of her childhood. When Dillard writes about race, she acknowledges that as a child, she was both aware and unaware of racial

difference. Although Dillard's mother teaches her to think of everyone as a person worthy of respect, her family lives in a very segregated society:

> The Homewood branch of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Library system was in a Negro section of town--Homewood. This branch was our nearest library; Mother drove me to it every two weeks for many years, until I could drive myself. I only rarely saw other white people there. (80)

Systematic racial segregation always includes a power imbalance. The family's maid is black, as is the man who drives Dillard's grandmother's car. As a child, Dillard has little contact with people of other races who are not servants. If she does, she remains quite separated from them--they don't live in her neighborhood, but in their own. Even Dillard's childhood friend, Ellin Hahn, has to go to a different dancing school because she is part Jewish. Dillard's life is not untouched by racism, no matter how egalitarian her mother's ideals are. Once again, however, Dillard's opposition to such racism is subtle, and only emerges later, when she is writing about it. At the time, Dillard simply accepted this fact and went to dancing school with other "purely" white children. When commenting on this situation years later, however, Dillard notes that Ellin had to go to a different school "because she was precisely fifty percent Jewish" (89). The word "precisely" suggests that Dillard now finds such racial distinction arbitrary and ridiculous.

Dillard's approach to economic matters in *An American Childhood* is equally complex and subtle. She admits this herself, having said, "Just to

make trouble, I wrote about money" (CBC interview). When writing about Andrew Carnegie, one of the wealthy and influential men of Pittsburgh's history, she acknowledges Pittsburgh's debt to him. He gave over $40 million to build 2,509 libraries; one of them is the Homewood Library, where Dillard sat cross-legged on the floor and learned about so many things, enjoyed so many books. She also attended free art classes in Carnegie Music Hall every Saturday morning for four years (210). Much of Dillard's childhood education in literature and art is due to the fact that Carnegie made these resources available to Pittsburgh children. If Frank Doak's theory of economics can be invoked here, the benefits of wealth have "trickled down" to Dillard herself. She is very aware that old Pittsburgh money is the source of her family's comfortable lifestyle. To her, Andrew Carnegie is a symbol of Pittsburgh, and she is reluctant to condemn the capitalist, Republican work ethic which has given her family such affluence.

However, Dillard also mentions unfair labour practices and horrid working conditions in Carnegie's steel factories:

> But a steelworker, speaking for many, told an interviewer, "We didn't want him to build a library for us, we would rather have had higher wages." At that time steelworkers worked twelve-hour shifts on floors so hot they had to nail wooden platforms under their shoes. Every two weeks they toiled an inhuman twenty-four-hour shift, and then they got their sole

> day off. The best housing they could afford was crowded and filthy. (209)

Dillard, who often romanticizes Pittsburgh history, does not do so here. By discussing the human cost of public programs and endowments, Dillard recognizes the complexity of the issue; she is indebted to Andrew Carnegie, but she will not unequivocally sing his praises. As in the incident in which Dillard sees her mother challenge her father's theory of trickle-down economics, Dillard presents facts which make small but noticeable dents in the pleasant, one-sided story of American prosperity.

The comments that Annie Dillard makes about the insularity and inequality of her childhood environment are not enough to convince every critic that *An American Childhood* is a political or socially conscious work. Sidonie Smith writes that "despite her gentle and even biting irony in pointing to the exclusionary practices of her Pittsburgh world, her narrative and rhetorical strategies move gently to contain those differences, homogenizing human experience in a normative classlessness and racelessness" (137). I would agree that Dillard seeks to contain difference, but I believe she does so intentionally, and only in certain passages. By alternating between the voice of the universal or general narrator and the very specific voice of her own experience, Dillard can write about human experience and her own experience in the same work.

Annie Dillard's project in *An American Childhood* is very different from what Alice Walker is trying to communicate in her essays. Alice

Walker is an activist, and many of her essays read like speeches, straightforward and passionate. Dillard is cagier; she can be both nostalgic and critical when writing about her Pittsburgh roots. She questions certain things about her family and the wealth of her childhood environment, but she does not make herself vulnerable to her reader by revealing her political views directly. I love the artfulness of Dillard's writing, although I find it oblique at times. Even when I find passages in which she reveals her political views, I never feel that I have her "figured out." Walker, on the other hand, incorporates into each essay her keen awareness of the inequalities that are part of her experience. As Gloria Wade-Gayles writes, "[Walker] understands that race, sex, and class are the major axes on which power and influence turn in white America" (303). Ultimately, Walker sees her work as a writer as an act of redemption; she uses the term "saving of lives" to describe what writers do: "It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. . .We do it because we care. . . We care because we know this: *the life we save is our own*" (15). Walker's re-writing of her parents' lives is thus also a redemptive act. Her vision of social change is poignant and powerful, and ultimately more compelling and more complete than Dillard's.

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