Eastern Philosophical Elements in Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek: an expression of popular culture in the 1970s

by

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Annie Dillard’s narrative, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, is a non-fictional account of her observations of Tinker Creek in Roanoke, Virginia. Critics have analyzed its message in terms of Christian mysticism, high romanticism, ecofeminism, the tradition of awareness in nature writing, narrative memoir, and other genres. The present study focuses on an examination of the narrative within the context of the popular culture when it was published in 1974, giving attention to the general atmosphere of the time and the influence of the spread of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. The narrative explores spirituality by combining the philosophical themes of Eastern and Western perspectives that were prevalent in American society during that time. Elements of Taoism and Zen Buddhism are reflected in Dillard’s narrative, including symbolism of yin yang, the belief in a grand mystery and movement in terms of change, meditation through silencing the mind and loss of ego, and being fully aware of the present moment.

*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a description of experiences of mystical connection. Dillard proposes a philosophy which includes both physical action and reflective practice as a means to understand the grand mystery and meaning of the universe. Intellectual analysis and intuitive receptivity are two approaches that Dillard uses in order to build insight towards mystical union. She experiences moments of divine connection at Tinker Creek as a gift of grace which cannot be forced or produced through one’s own will. However, she also performs scientific observations and consults academic resources in order to learn about her environment as an attempt to deepen her knowledge and elicit a higher level of consciousness. Finally, Dillard’s purpose in writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is to serve as a guide along various paths of discovery and to inspire the audience to seek enlightenment for themselves.
The Influence of 1970s Popular Culture

Characteristics of the Generation

Twenty-nine years old when she published *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard is an early representative of the Boomer generation, delineated between the years 1943 and 1960, according to William Strauss and Neil Howe. In *Generations*, Strauss and Howe label the period of time that Dillard’s generation was coming of age as an “Awakening Era,” which “triggers cultural creativity and the emergence of new ideals, as institutions built around old values are challenged,” usually due to a secular crisis during youth (76). Dillard’s persona in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is typical of her generation because she defies institution. In *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany*, Sandra Johnson characterizes Dillard’s “defiant attitude” as a way to work from a “tabula rasa” so that an epiphany can occur. She claims that Dillard’s approach is dominantly passive in order to rid “the mind of knowledge acquired by institutions or systems” (28).

*The Updated Last Whole Earth Catalogue* exemplifies the climate of the times; upon examining it, we can view the zeitgeist when Dillard was writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. The stated purpose of *The Whole Earth Catalogue* responds to the “gross defects” of “power and glory” via “government, big business, formal education, [and] church,” several key institutions in American society (1). *The Whole Earth Catalogue* claims to provide access to information that will help someone “conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested” (1). Dillard seeks “inspiration” by choosing a specific environment to observe and study at Tinker Creek. She conducts research about the creatures and plants that she encounters there. She applies an objective, analytical view in addition to a view
based on personal, spiritual insight. After her self-directed education, she attempts to share her knowledge with others through her narrative.

Reacting to their parents’ strong emphasis on social institutions and scientific progress, Dillard’s generation turned inward. In Generations, Howe and Strauss explain how “large numbers of Boomers began dabbling in psychic phenomena and experiments in communal living[,] whether immersed in Tai Chi, Zen, beta waves, or other New Age mind states, Boomers built churches in the privacy of their own heads” (311). The message of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek could be interpreted as a spiritual manifesto created in Dillard’s mind, expressed in her book, and followed by her readers. Dillard’s actions could be described as an experiment in living, especially living in communion with nature. By asking fundamental questions about reality and the meaning of life, Dillard is typical of her “Idealist” generation; the personality of her generation expresses a “prophetic life cycle of vision and values, inspiring a spiritual awakening” (Howe and Strauss 74). Along with the Western tradition of scientific analysis, she employs Eastern techniques of meditative silence, passive detachment, and focused attention in her search for answers.

Taoism is an avenue for the goals of this generation because as a philosophy, it rejects institutionalization, has a holistic perspective, and embraces reverence towards nature. Billington suggests that Taoism can allow a sense of religious awe without traditional doctrines (191-201). Though Dillard utilizes scientific information, validated by its institutional authority, she also questions its effectiveness. J.J. Clarke points out that the theories and methods in science were attacked during this period: There was “a decisive shift of attitude in a number of scientific disciplines away from the mechanistic /
deterministic model towards a holistic, organismic and ecological world view” (65).

Dannie Damerville suggests that Dillard asks if scientific thinking can lead to “wisdom” or merely information, which may be “detrimental to deeper human concerns” (21).

Dillard is not the only writer of this time to bridge the ideas of the East and West in order to understand reality. In 1971, Baba Ram Dass published *Be Here Now*, a book that George de Alth reviews in *The Whole Earth Catalogue* as “Western in flavor, Eastern in content and sprinkled generously with the kernels of wisdom” (426). Ram Dass, otherwise known as Richard Alpert, is considered a “guru” for the generation. He experimented with psychedelic drugs in his research with Timothy Leary at Harvard University. Then he traveled and studied in India, and in *Be Here Now*, he brought the cultures together, making the “meditations as familiar to us as our own bath water [and] he makes the Message of the East comfortable for our coffee table studies” (426).

In addition, in the same year that Dillard’s narrative was published, Robert Pirsig wrote a fictionalized account of his own experiences in order to explore his theories in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Phaedrus, the character that represents Pirsig, writes a letter to the chairman of the Committee on Analysis of Ideas and Methods which states that his thesis on Quality might be “a major breakthrough between Eastern and Western Philosophy, between religious mysticism and scientific positivism” (354). Pirsig would respect Dillard’s exploration in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* because though their paths of discovery are different, their conclusions are similar. A comparison between Dillard and Pirsig’s theories would be a fascinating direction for further research.
Parallel Zeitgeist of 1970s America and the Early History of Taoism

In the 1970s, concepts from Eastern philosophies seemed to pervade the media and social context of what the Christian mystic Teilhard de Chardin calls the *noosphere*. Cascone describes Teilhard de Chardin’s concept of the *noosphere* as a part of life and the world that is created by man’s culture and the global ‘mind’ which is grounded in a dimension called the “infinitely complex,” a unified organization of the universe (1). Cunningham elaborates on the concept as the evolution of human consciousness elicited by reflective thought (1). The *noosphere* in America incorporated philosophical ideas from the East during the 1970s. Taoism, specifically, was “an eloquent response to the liberationist demands of this time,” claimed Alan Watts (cited in Clarke 49). During the formation of Taoism, China experienced a zeitgeist parallel to that of the United States in the 1970s, which makes it particularly well-suited for adaptation. In *The Tao of the West*, Clarke cites parallels between the ambiance of the late 1960s and the early 1970s in America and the “political chaos and social distress” of the “Period of the Warring States” in China during the fourth and third centuries BCE (31). Clarke delineates several key features of the Chinese culture and describes how its history played a part in the development of Taoism. First, the people idealized life in small communities. Arthur Waley described the second feature as a “perfection of the self” during a gradual shift of “inward-turning of Chinese thought” (43). During that period in China, people began to seek a quiet life in the mountains and develop meditative techniques. The third feature was a new cosmology that conceptualized the world in terms of holistic components. Clarke explains that “all things were seen as manifestations of a universal energy, *qui*, impelled by the tension between the opposing yet complementary forces of yin and yang.
[which] provided a matrix in which human and natural phenomena cohere in meaningful patterns” (31).

Continuing to place Taoism in its historical context, Clarke shows how it changed faces again in the second century CE through the Lao-Zhuang tradition when the people became concerned with metaphysical problems. This tradition identified the Tao with wu or “nothingness / emptiness.” Taoists were purposefully “eccentric and anti-establishment in both attitude and lifestyle,” cultivating “natural living and self-expression” (35). In Chinese Religions, Julia Ching makes a connection between “the ‘hippie’ movement of the 1960s” and the spontaneous, romantic spirit and non-conformity of the Lao-Zhuang tradition (101). Because the Chinese culture that shaped the development of Taoism was similar to the US in the 1970s, it is no surprise that Taoist elements permeated American culture; therefore, those elements will also be evident in the themes of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.

Perhaps because of the similarities of historical periods and generational personalities, people began to apply Taoism “both in its theoretical and practical aspects, into their own spheres of interest, and reinterpret and reshape it accordingly” during the 1970s (Clarke 49). Alan Watts points to Western trends that share elements of Eastern philosophy, including “Wittgenstein’s theories, Existentialism, General Semantics, [and] the metalinguistics of B. L. Whorf” (3). In addition to these factors, Eastern traditions, from Zen and Tibetan Buddhism to Yoga to Hari Krishna, penetrated Western consciousness due in part to D.T. Suzuki’s work, Japan’s involvement in WWII, and “the climate of scientific relativism” (Watts 3). The influx of Eastern philosophies on the American scene is evident in The Whole Earth Catalogue, a publication that advocates
small communities, natural living, and self-exploration—aspects reminiscent of China’s “Period of the Warring States.”

Taoism also played a significant role in the development of ecological awareness during the 1970s, especially reflected in the Deep Ecology Movement described by Arne Naess in 1973. Clarke advocates the ideas of Taoist philosophy because they open the possibility for “a spirituality which reconnects us with the earth and with the living world,” and it can potentially help in developing “an ecological attitude of mind” (207). Dillard shares the general attitude of the Chinese who, through Taoism, “have developed an especially refined sense of reverence for mountains, rocks, streams, pools, animals, trees, and flowers in which the ever-moving spirit of the Tao is to be observed, and an elevated spiritual awareness is attained” (Clarke 149). The Whole Earth Catalogue encourages the practice of paying attention to nature through books such as Environment and Man by Richard H. Wagner, an introduction to ecological issues (33), and the “Natural History” magazine (374).

In Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Dillard expresses the same truths espoused by the Tao Te Ching. Like Taoism, she presents the world as a place of ever-changing activity and movement. She describes beautiful scenes in nature using opposition in color and characteristics such as the balance between mountains and streams or light and shadow, symbolism which reflects the principle of yin yang. This is the guiding principle for Dillard’s analysis of the natural world and her search for spiritual meaning. She attempts to answer her questions by combining Eastern mysticism and Western scientific observation. Dillard’s moments of epiphany are achieved through the Taoist and Zen
methods of meditation, inner silence, loss of ego, and focusing on direct experience in the present.

Dillard’s ultimate desire is to know the grand mystery of the universe. One can know it through physical, sensory experience with nature either through the spontaneous glimpse of a rare and seemingly miraculous event in nature or through deliberate observation and interaction. Beyond the immediate experience of mystery, one can conceptualize about the significance of the universe and where the person belongs in the grand mystery. Dillard takes her personal, direct experience of nature a step further when she reflects on its meaning. She contemplates it using two ways of thinking. One process employs a left-brained, analytical manner of thinking and the other process employs a right-brained, intuitive, more qualitative manner. After exploring Dillard’s physical and mental journey towards mystery, Dillard’s purpose as a writer will be questioned in terms of the Zen Buddhist concept of enlightenment.

**Major Elements of Taoism**

**The Unknowable Universe**

The idea that we cannot know everything and fully comprehend the Tao is a fundamental principle in Eastern philosophy. We are included within the universe, and therefore, our minds cannot grasp it in totality. In the Chung-yuan translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu, in the very first chapter, announces that “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the Tao itself. / The name that can be given is not the name itself. / The unnameable is the source of the universe” (3). We cannot escape our inevitably limited perceptions because we exist in the realm of the nameable. Tzu continues: “Its wonder
and its manifestations are one and the same. / Their identity is called the mystery” (3). In order to glimpse the meaning and nature of the universe, we simply must experience unification with the Tao.

Dillard attempts to gain knowledge of the world through observations and deliberate research about the animals and plants that she encounters at Tinker Creek. She determines that this method of study appears fruitless in the end. Despite Dillard’s analysis throughout the book, she concludes that the world is still a mystery. Dillard considers the fact that physicists “cannot study nature per se, but only their own investigation of nature” (205). The complication arises from Heisenberg’s Principle of Indeterminacy so that Dillard knows for certain now that “there is no knowing” (205). Damerville explains the scientists’ dilemma as a consequence of the principle: “There can be no objectivity because the observer is not a detached, objective entity, but an integral part of a larger system, which is the entire universe” (45). With the same biting humor of a Zen master, Dillard proclaims that “some physicists now are a bunch of wild-eyed, raving mystics. For they have perfected their instruments just enough to whisk away the crucial vein, and what stands revealed is the Cheshire cat’s grin” (205).

According to Johnson, Dillard’s own narrative, The Living, is also the Cheshire cat’s grin because it is 185 pages of analysis posing questions about the nature of the universe, but in the end, Dillard answers, “I do not know” (60). According to DiSanto and Steele in the Guidebook to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, the response “I don’t know” became a classical answer to koans when Bodhidharma interviewed with Emperor Wu. Koans are puzzling sayings with surprising answers which are intended to direct the student back to reality rather than his thoughts on reality. The significance of “I don’t
know” is ambiguous, but it could refer to the need to forget one’s sense of identity in order to become enlightened (126), and when enlightened, one feels a part of and awed by the mystery.

Dillard’s observations at Tinker Creek lead her to ask about the nature of God and why the world is the way it is. The “intricacy of beauty” in some nature scenes uplifts her, but the “pressure of fecundity” in other scenes disturbs and horrifies her (5). She suggests that God has “spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem” (9). With a limited perspective, we cannot completely comprehend God and the universe. Dillard views our life as “a faint tracing on the surface of mystery,” and though we have glimpses of God through vision or scientific advancement, the “forested mainland” of mystery itself is “implacable, both in its bulk and in its most filigreed fringe of detail” (145). She concludes in agreement with Pascal’s statement: “Every religion that does not affirm that God is hidden…is not true” (146).

Change and Movement

A second basic principle of Taoist philosophy is the idea that everything is in movement. Every object and being is part of the flow of the universal energy. In Chapter 16 of the Tao Te Ching, Tzu explains that “things are unceasingly moving and restless, / Yet each one is proceeding back to the origin” (Chung 47). Feng shui demonstrates this concept in a practical art in which one’s home, desk, car, room, or any location is designed in a manner which encourages a positive flow of chi. Negative flow of chi occurs when the energy moves too quickly and sharply, such as around corners of
walls or down straight stairs. It is also considered negative if the energy is blocked and stagnates; therefore, a curving river is more desirable than a standing pond. The smooth-flowing, non-resistant river, as a matter of fact, is the most prominent image of the manifestation of the Tao. Chapter 32 of the Tao Te Ching states that “to abide with Tao in the world is to be the same as mountain streams flowing to the rivers and to the sea” (Chung 93). It is no surprise that Dillard focuses her search for enlightenment, describing her experiences of oneness with nature, around Tinker Creek.

The mountains and the creek are two symbolic representations of the Tao which underlie the images in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. In the beginning of the narrative, Dillard describes the location of her house and the land around it. Though the creek is in constant motion, the house holds her “at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself,…facing the stream of light pouring down” (4). The house is surrounded by mountains—Tinker and Brushy, McAfee’s Knob and Dead Man. Dillard describes the mountains as “the one simple mystery of creation from nothing, of matter itself, anything at all, the given” (5). Dillard lives in the world of the creek, “with all its stimulus and beauty,” but she recognizes that the “restful,” “passive” mountains are “home” (5). Mountains can be paralleled to the Tao, representing the void of all possibility, “the source of the universe” (Chung 3). The mountains “gather” whereas the creek “scatters” (203). It represents the energetic movement of the universe, the manifestations of the Tao. Tinker Creek is a mystery, “fresh every minute” (4). When Dillard looks upstream, she sees “a distillation of the spirit,” and the “future is the light on the water,” coming towards her “on the skin of the real and present creek” (102). The creek makes Dillard feel more alive because the water is always different and transformative. She
decided to live beside Tinker Creek “in order to shape my [her] life to its free flow” (178).

Dillard’s “horror of the fixed” is allayed by the continuous renewal of the creek (5). It’s as if the soul knows within itself that the energy of the universe is never stagnant, so to be stagnant oneself is to die. Dillard points out that even God reassures humankind in Genesis that “while the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (75). Movement is so significant to Dillard that she perceives it on several levels of being, especially when she is receptive to mystical experience. She lies on her bed after an invigorating day of observations at the creek, and she marvels at the fact that she is “spinning 836 miles an hour around the earth’s axis,” that on the earth, she orbits the sun at 64,800 miles an hour, and that she is part of a solar system that rotates “like a merry-go-round” at 43,200 miles an hour (23). As she wonders in awe about the intricacy of life on earth, she describes creation as “an abandoned energy sprung from an unfathomable font” (the Tao) which “flows so freely wild, like the creek” (139). Dillard recognizes that the universal mystery is the Tao. The movement of the universe’s energy is Tai Chi. The expression of Tai Chi is described in terms of the yin yang principle.

**Introduction to Yin Yang Philosophy**

Since Eastern philosophy spread through the popular culture while Dillard wrote *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, an understanding of the basic tenets of Taoism is necessary. Development of Taoism incorporated China’s earlier philosophy based on the complementary forces of yin and yang. Though yin and yang are opposite forces, they are also interdependent because one cannot exist without the other. Furthermore, there is
no distinct boundary between yin and yang; rather, they flow in relative contrast to one another. Typically yin elements are feminine, soft, black / dark, cool, obedient, passive, silent, and submissive. Yang is described as masculine, hard, light, fire / hot, and aggressive (Thompson 1). Lewith notes how “each of the yin and yang properties of the object is a condition for the existence of the other; neither can exist in isolation,” and thus, they are “changing into each other as well as balancing each other” (1). In Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Phaedrus reaches a “culmination of thought” in examination of the nature of reality (242). He determines that Quality isn’t independently related to the object or subject; but rather, it is the cause and creator of both object and subject. Phaedrus’s moment of enlightenment occurs when he compares his ideas about Quality to the Tao. He substitutes the concept of Quality in the Tao Te Ching and discovers that his notion of Quality and the Tao are practically synonymous (258). Chung-yuan describes the Tao as “preontological experience, which is gained through the interfusion and identification of the subjectivity of man and the objectivity of things,” and “it is the fountain of potentiality from which all things emerge” (xv). The mystery Dillard seeks underlies her inner, sensory experience and her outward, physical experience. Just as Quality arises as an event out of the interaction between subject and object, so the Tao is the underlying matrix behind the expressions of yin and yang.

**Yin Yang Expression in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek**

A close analysis reveals numerous elements of Taoism in Dillard’s philosophy. She experiences the Tao when she feels connected with nature. She observes the physical manifestations of the Tao, i.e. Tai Chi, by noticing the immense possibility of creation in nature. The flow of opposing, yet complementary forces through these
physical manifestations is yin yang. In Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, there are at least four major expressions of yin yang in Dillard’s philosophy.

Whereas the Tao is recognized as a unifying mystical experience, yin yang is defined by its differentiation. Scott Slovic proposes perhaps the most significant expression of yin yang in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek when he suggests that awareness rises from Dillard’s “dialectical tension and opposing states of consciousness” (85). In order to recognize connection to a deeper reality, one must have the contrasting, “shallow” reality. Slovic notes that Dillard “requires the ‘otherness’ of nature to stimulate the prized emotions of surprise and uncertainty, the feeling of looking mystery in the eye” (84). To recognize a sense of oneness with all things, a person must experience a sense of separateness. The connection to nature and the alienation from it are two opposing forces that Dillard faces at Tinker Creek, and as a result, she employs two strategies in order to achieve oneness with nature. The state of awareness or higher consciousness that Dillard seeks can be achieved by forgetting one’s ego and emptying one’s mind (yin) or by intensely focusing one’s attention on something specific (yang). A third dichotomy is found in the use of words or the rejection of words, both in the mind (words as thoughts) or through oral communication. The silencing of one’s inner dialogue is the yin counterpart to the yang verbalization of one’s experience. Finally, a comparison exists between the Western, scientific way of thinking and the Eastern, intuitive way of thinking about the world. Analysis and deliberate experimentation is an aggressive, yang approach to knowledge. On the other hand, natural intuition or open receptivity is a yin approach.
Dillard’s narrative is layered with imagery of the balance between yin yang forces. The yin yang symbol itself shows the flow and integration of light and dark:

![Yin Yang Symbol]

Just as the river is used to symbolize the perfect flow of the Tao, the miniature universe of creatures inside the river’s water is also a perfect expression of yin yang balance. Dillard performs an experiment with two bowls filled with river water that she collected. She paints a black spot on one bowl, and she paints the other bowl completely black except for a clear spot where light can shine in. She discovers that creatures will separate in the water because they have a preference for the light or the dark. Then she examines the creatures under a microscope only to reveal “the Jungle in a Little Drop” (122).

Dillard’s description of scenes at Tinker Creek incorporates the notion that one needs light in order to perceive shadows and vice versa. “Shadows define the real,” she claims, because they make “some sort of sense of the light” (63). Dillard believes that shadows put light “in its place,” but they also put Dillard in her place (63). When she connects with nature, she is one with the light; there is no distance or separate identification between herself and God / the Tao. When she sees shadows, she is aware that she is in “Israel,” on earth rather than in heaven, “in the flickering shade of the nothingness between me [her] and the light” (63). Readers can see parallels between her world and the allegory of the cave described by Plato. Dillard has glimpsed the reality
beyond the cave, but she has not remained in the light. It is the illusory shadows in the
cave that constantly remind her to seek union with the light beyond, a place that is more
“real.” The shadows cause “Nostalgia of the Infinite” (64).

In addition to using the river to symbolize the Tao, Dillard employs the image of a
river to symbolize the yin manifestation of the Tao. “Shadow Creek” is “the blue strip
running through creation”—it chills Tinker Creek, “cuts like ice” under the mountains,
and “storms through limestone” under the forests. Just as the light is associated with life,
Dillard associates the shadows with death, the ultimate expression of yin. “Watching the
world recede into deeper and deeper blues,” while the snow fell in the darkening night
“was like dying” (45).

Death is another expression of yin that Dillard addresses. Chapter ten, entitled
“Fecundity,” is the dark response to the joyous abundance and variety of life in Chapter
eight, “Intricacy.” Diversity and massive reproduction exist because there is so much
death to overcome in order to insure survival. Dillard realizes that mortality is necessary
and inevitable. She reinforces her conclusion with the scientific Second Law of
Thermodynamics as well as Dylan Thomas’s declaration that “The Force that through the
green fuse drives the flower / Drives my green age” (as quoted in Dillard 183). She
paints a balanced picture of creation, which is mated to death in order to exist: “It is as
though each clay form had baked into it, fired into it, a blue streak of non-being, a shaded
emptiness like a bubble that not only shapes its very structure but that also causes it to list
and ultimately explode” (183). This image is particularly expressive because life begins
through fire and as the blue shadow of death grows, life eventually ends with an
explosion. This final burst of fiery life can be interpreted as a release of yang energy
before the ultimate surrender to the yin darkness of death. However, it can also imply a sparkling rebirth, the creation of a new, transformed self either in another realm or as reincarnation.

Dillard’s image of the blue hues of night, snow, shadows, and water evoke certain emotions with a yin essence, including serenity, sadness, and a sleepy passivity. In order to evoke more animated, passionate emotions in the reader, she uses contrasting yang images with red hues, usually associated with sunlight, fire, blood, and life. When observing her goldfish, Dillard notices the blood cells in its translucent tail, which “never wavered or slowed or ceased flowing, like the creek itself” (126). There is a river of energy, expressed in the blood, which pulses through both the fish and the reader. Dillard wants us to recognize our oneness with nature. She extends the connection to a molecular level to include not just animals, but also plants. She describes the little green dots of chloroplasts floating in “the eddying currents of the river of transparent cytoplasm” (127). They are paralleled to the red dots of blood in the fish’s tail. Both chloroplast and hemoglobin are composed of “one hundred thirty-six atoms of Hydrogen, Carbon, Oxygen, and Nitrogen arranged in an exact and complex relationship around a central ring” (128). In a chloroplast, Magnesium is in the center of the ring whereas in blood, Iron is in the center. Were it not for this one difference, the fundamental composition of all life would be basically the same. It is also significant to see the relative similarity between human blood and a plant’s form of blood because chloroplasts convert sunlight into chlorophyll, the primary nourishment at the base of the food chain, or in other words, life for all creatures on earth. This understanding itself elicits a powerful sense of appreciation and awe for God’s creation or the patterns of the Tao.
Yin yang elements are not definitively separate, and they exist only in relation to one another. Dillard notices that even the moon (yin) at night (yin) has warmth and gives off the “lambent” and “utterly dreamed” “luster of elf-light” (71). Though the warmth and light of the moon are examples of yang energy in the night, they would be considered yin when compared to the heat and brightness of the noonday sun. The overlap of the seasons serves to remind us that there is no easy distinction between yin and yang.

Dillard explains that “there is a bit of every season in each season” (76). For example, winter is generally considered a yin period, associated with longer dark nights, cold wind and snow, and the slow, conserved energy of hibernation. Summer, on the other hand, is full of life and yang energy. Flowers are in full bloom, animals are birthing their young, and the light of the sun draws people to be active outside. Yet Dillard points out that even in the fall when most trees are shedding leaves, she sees the growth of a spruce seedling, giving the illusion of spring (254). She opens Chapter 15 complaining about the yang heat on the yin day of winter solstice (266). Finally, Dillard is drawn towards the river because it has its own light (5). To show the relative nature of yin and yang, it is important to notice that though light is yang, it becomes yin in the water because it is a reflection of the light in the sky. It is clear that we cannot label any element as purely yin or yang all of the time because it contains both qualities depending on what we compare it with. Definition of yin and yang qualities is easily manipulated because it is a matter of how you choose to see things in relation to one another. Dillard uses yin yang dynamics to reflect the Taoist emphasis on context and the scientific fallacy of objectivity which was questioned by Werner Heisenberg originally in 1927 with the development of quantum physics, a “new” science which reemerged when Heisenberg died in 1976.6
Direct, Outer Experience

Ways of Seeing

Seeing is one of Dillard’s primary concerns in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. She devotes an entire chapter to address the question of seeing, but it also permeates the philosophical discourse of the entire narrative, a clear example of Eastern influence. According to Chung-yuan, there are three “eyes” in Buddhism that help a person see into the “mystery of mysteries.” The “Dharma Eye” sees differentiation or yin yang; the “Wisdom Eye” sees non-differentiation or oneness with the Tao; and the “Buddha Eye” sees both (5). Seeing with the Buddha Eye implies that the person is enlightened. In Zen Buddhism, enlightenment is referred to as “the vision of the Tao,” and Lee Yearly claims that the aim of Taoism is “to see the world in a new way” (147). In The Tao of Physics, Capra describes the Eightfold Path as “the Buddha’s prescription for self-realization,” and the first step is right seeing, followed by right knowing (35). Dillard’s desire to know leads her to apply several contrasting and complementary approaches to seeing, which will be examined sequentially; however, they are so related that to explain them separately would be oversimplification.

Dillard so desperately desires to catch a glimpse of the divine mystery that she applies every way of seeing possible. She admits that sometimes she has to seek out the spirit in an active, yang manner, and other times she must be receptive and simply allow things to happen in a yin manner. She compares these ways of seeing with a metaphor of a camera. In the first case, she sees the world through the frame of each picture, “reading the light on a calibrated meter” (33). In the second case, without a camera, her own “shutter” is open and she becomes “an unscrupulous observer” as “the moment’s light
prints on my [her] own silver gut” (33). She experiences a sense of unity by focusing her conscious attention through verbal expression (yang). She also takes the opposite approach by sitting silently (yin) in order to lose her self-consciousness and thereby, experience oneness. She accepts Nature as a grand mystery, connecting to it intuitively like Eastern mystics (yin); yet, she also examines Nature through Western scientific analysis (yang) in order to gain some understanding of the universe. Dillard’s moments of epiphany are moments of right seeing; they encompass both schools of thought concerning Enlightenment. It can happen through many years of practiced, disciplined meditation or it can come about as “a gift and a total surprise” (35).

Science and Mysticism Combined

Though Dillard’s moments of epiphany ring with mystical undertones, she approaches her observations of nature with a strong, scientific background. A book advertised in The Whole Earth Catalogue, entitled The Stress of Life, claims that “it is up to the scientist to draw a blueprint of the questions he has to ask” in order for the person to understand the mosaic of nature’s answers “in her precise but silent sign language of nods and pictures” (212). Scientific information can help Dillard piece together the “invisible connections” and thus achieve a deeper form of knowledge (Damerville 32). Dillard confesses that she studies quantum physics, astronomy, and cosmology, though the reader doesn’t know if her sources are limited to academic writings or if they include articles in popular scientific magazines. In Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Dillard writes, if I “really believe it all, I might ultimately be able to make out the landscape of the universe” (139). Her statement implies that she accepts science as a theory rather than fact, as something to believe in; therefore, science has the same value as other
philosophies or ways of seeing reality. In analyzing the romantic elements of Dillard’s writing, Johnson points out “the twist” in her style because she gives the reader “the most minute and excruciatingly factual detail from the arenas of contemporary science and history and uses them to scrutinize the very fabric of life” (2). Dillard’s extreme analysis is rooted in her belief that “if you are deep enough, accurate enough, thorough beyond even the most dull scientific fact, deliberate in seeing, then a landscape which lies further than knowledge will be open to you” (Teaching a Stone to Talk, 73 /Johnson 145?).

Dillard validates her observations in nature by finding evidence of them in academic writings. She affirms her perceptions when she reads about other scientists who have also seen the same amazing phenomena and attempted to explain them. After witnessing a mosquito bite a copperhead snake on the head, she wants to find someone— "any hunter going to practice shooting beer cans, any boy on a motorbike" in order to show them the “remarkable sight” (229). As soon as she returns home, she researches in Will Barker’s book, Familiar Insects of North America in order to prove that what she witnessed was real (230). If she doesn’t share the knowledge with someone else, she is too amazed with its existence to fully believe it. In examining creation, Dillard concludes that "the sheer fringe and network of detail assumes primary importance" (130). In her effort to see and understand the universe, she has to start somewhere, so she focuses on the events at Tinker Creek: "I try to deal with the giant water bug in Tinker Creek and the flight of three hundred redwings from an Osage orange, with the goldfish bowl and the snakeskin, and let those who dare worry about the birthrate and population explosion among solar systems" (130). Yet, the detail is not the whole picture. In a beautiful
image, Dillard connects the universal and the particular by showing how a stream of light travels from a star to her eye:

From an explosion on a nearby star eight minutes ago, the light zips through space, particle-wave, strikes the planet, angles on the continent, and filters through a mesh of land dust...Reddened, the light inclines into this valley over the green western mountains; it sifts between pine needles on northern slopes...The light crosses the valley, threads through the screen on my open kitchen window, and gilds the painted wall. A plank of brightness bends from the wall and extends over the goldfish bowl on the table where I sit. The goldfish's side catches the light and bats it my way; I've an eyeful of fish-scale and star. (124-125)

Combining Eastern and Western ways of seeing, Dillard describes the details of the star and the fish scale, which links them to Dillard herself. The image dramatizes a mystical unification of all things in the universe. Throughout the narrative, this method of description reveals that the minute everyday things we see are connected to the all-encompassing, divine picture.

Dillard’s use of scientific analysis to reach mystical understanding is not unique. The argument that science and spiritual truth are not conflicting views of reality was a prevalent theme in the noosphere of America in the 1970s. The Whole Earth Catalogue advertises hundreds of popular books, including the Tao Teh King itself and Chuan Tzu’s Basic Writings (Brand 12, 428). The Bible of the World is “a collection of the essential writings of the eight major religions—Hindu, Buddhist, Confucianist, Taoist, Zoroastrian, Judeo-Christian, and Mohammedan” (Brand 19). Besides purely philosophical themes, The Whole Earth Catalogue lists books with a great deal of scientific thought. For
example, *The New Religions* by Jacob Needleman, includes information from “scientists from the East such as Suzuki Roshi, Meher Baba, Bapak, Krishnamurti, Tarthans, Tulkus, and others” (Brand 407). Charley Tart claims that the book, *On the Psychology of Meditation*, will expand one’s worldview because it is a scientific treatment of meditation (Brand 423). Conversely, R.G.H. Siu’s book, *The Tao of Science*, shows how scientific application can be improved when applied with a Taoist perspective (Brand 23). *The Whole Earth Catalogue* probably attracted the same audience that read Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* because both books incorporate Eastern and Western worldviews in the search for meaning and truth in the universe.

Dillard juxtaposes and combines the scientific (yang) and mystical (yin) approaches in order to find meaning in her observations at Tinker Creek. At the same time that she was writing the book, developments in science appeared to validate the mystical view of reality. Werner Heisenberg, the physicist who proposed the Principle of Indeterminacy, said that “the scientific world-view has ceased to be a scientific view in the true sense of the word” (quoted in Dillard 206). Fritjof Capra claims that the wisdom of Taoist sages, attained through “the careful observation of nature” and “strong mystical intuition,” is now validated by “modern scientific theories” (Capra 114). Developments in physics appear to support the concept of the Tao, for example. Ilya Prigogine describes “self-organizing structures” which seem similar to the concept of yin yang balance within a changing surface reality: “The living and non-living can be seen as achieving order and stability within the context of dynamic flux and dis-equilibrium” (5). In addition, N.J. Girardot believes that “chaos theory of contemporary science has rediscovered part of the traditional Chinese meaning of the Tao” (xi-xii).
Although science gives validity to Dillard’s experience of nature, it does not provide the final insight into or understanding of the nature of the universe. In Chapter 38 of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu warns that “anticipated knowledge is the superficiality of Tao and is the beginning of foolishness” (Chung-yuan 106). Though Dillard uses analysis to increase her knowledge of nature, she ultimately places more faith in the mystery of it all. Expressing the typical skepticism of her generation, she questions the authority of scientists. Dillard notes that Galileo was blatantly incorrect in his conclusion that “comets were an optical illusion” (27). If a highly respected scientist was proven wrong by new discoveries, then there is a chance that current scientists may be wrong in their interpretations about the universe because of limited knowledge. The basic premise of the scientific method is the search for explanations about the way the universe works based on observation and experimentation, given the possibility of paradigmatic shifts when presented with new information. Dillard says, “We can look at what our scientists have been saying with fresh hope” (27). In essence, scientists, spiritualists, and Dillard have the same purpose—to see.

In the final analysis, Dillard determines that mystery and knowledge are not opposite or contradictory paths towards enlightenment. She concludes that “knowledge does not vanquish mystery or obscure its distant lights” (244). Neither does mystery vanquish knowledge because in addition to her “vision of the world of the spirit,” intellectual information helps her understand the natural world. Instead, she concludes that they are “twin fiords cutting into the granite cliffs of mystery,” a more profound mystery equivalent to Pirsig’s concept of Quality, encompassing both objective and subjective experience (245).
Western and Eastern Approaches

Within either the Western or Eastern practices, there are counter-traditions which defy the general principles of the philosophical approach, further emphasizing the lack of absolute dichotomies in a fluid yin-yang organization and understanding of the universe. However, one can outline the more common, comprehensive characteristics of the two viewpoints in order to compare and contrast the approaches. According to Jack Levy in “Zen and the Art of Reading,” the Western mind views the world in a yang manner because it is “discriminative, analytical, individualistic, scientific, organizing, assertive, and disposed to impose its will upon others” (44). The Eastern mind, yin in its view, is “more integrative, non-systematic, intuitive, affective, [and] subjective” (Levy 44). One cannot achieve enlightenment or connection to the Tao through the mind or the Western way of thinking. In Chapter 6 of the Tao Te Ching, Chung-yuan translates ku shen as the “spiritual reality of the void,” which “cannot be reached through intellection or intentional action, but only through emptiness and passivity” (22). Furthermore, Chuang Tzu claims that Samadhi, the Buddhist term for the void, is where “intellection and reasoning, all consciousness indeed, have vanished, and only the awareness of serenity remains” (Chapter XIV, 5:25a). Just as Dillard takes advantage of scientific knowledge, she employs a Western approach towards her study of Tinker Creek; just as she ultimately embraces mystery, she goes beyond the Western approach to a more integrative, intuitive one in order to achieve connection with nature or the Tao.

Rather than exerting one’s will, receptive openness must be expressed in order to achieve ku shen. Dillard realizes that she cannot “cause light” but she can only put herself “in the path of its beam” (35). Ultimately, she does not have control over the Tao,
so she cannot force the mystical experience; she can only wait and be open for a moment of oneness to happen. She says, “When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied,” and then a deeper reality reveals itself to her through the tree with the lights in it or through a falling mockingbird (33). When she unintentionally witnesses these events, she glimpses the mystery that is always flowing through nature but is rarely captured by human sight. When it is seen, the human spirit is renewed with a sense of the miraculous.

Dillard deliberately seeks moments to experience oneness with nature, but she often experiences it by surprise. She desperately wants to spy muskrats on the river because they are naturally elusive. For Dillard, the glimpse of a muskrat is equivalent to a glimpse of God. Muskrats, like all natural events, come and go so quickly that it is a miracle to witness them in action. She compares them to fleeting, unpredictable electrons. She emphasizes her desire to keep her eyes open and look around in order to catch these brief moments of pure, unconscious life in action. Dillard confesses that she “stalk[s] along the creek bank or straddle[s] the sycamore log in absolute stillness, watching for muskrats” (22). Despite her purposeful intention, ‘seeing’ often happens by chance because she merely has the idea or an openness to it. The first time she sees a muskrat, she isn’t sitting on the bridge waiting for it. She is standing there when she looks up casually, spotted it, and felt “a rush of such pure energy” that she “thought I [she] would not need to breathe for days” (194). After all her effort to get a glimpse into nature and connect with it, she realizes that “nature is a fan dancer born with a fan; you can wrestle her down, throw her on the stage and grapple with her for the fan with all your might, but it will never quit her grip” (205). Nature will give “the pearl of great price” only on her own terms, as a small offering of wonder (35).
Dillard does not fall into the trap of assuming that one way of seeing is better or truer than another way, and therefore, she employs both methods. On her way to Tinker Creek, Dillard must walk against the current (yang), the antithesis of going with the flow of the Tao. When she gets to the Lucas’s meadow, she is open to “let come what may,” exemplifying yin receptivity (213). For example, in the chapter, “Stalking,” she states: “I am both waiting becalmed in a cliff of the rock and banging with all my will, calling like a child beating on a door: Come on out! I know you’re there. And then occasionally the mountains part” (207).

Despite Dillard’s recognition that ku shen is reached through passivity, she continues to actively pursue moments of insight. She calls herself an “explorer,” a “stalker,” and “the instrument of the hunt itself” (14). In a dramatic declaration, she professes to the reader that she is an “arrow shaft,” and “this book is the straying trail of blood” (15). She fulfills the seventh step of the Eightfold Path, which is to develop quality mindfulness: a heightened, focused, and controlled awareness of the surrounding environment (DiSanto and Steele 82). Dillard practices ko-wu which means “the investigation of things” in Chinese. For instance, she tests the validity of something she read about how ancient Romans believed that bees were killed by echoes. She hikes through the mountains to a quarry where there is a strong echo and waits for an hour with the hope of discovering a bee. She performs the experiment with the idea that “it might still the bell, even, or temper it true” (266). The bell is a metaphor for the moments when she feels oneness with nature, when the spirit of mystery flows through her and makes her feel more alive. She deliberately seeks to create an epiphany through Western thinking. She explains, “When I see this way I analyze and pry. I hurl over logs and roll
away stones; I study the bank a square foot at a time, probing and tilting my head” (33). DiSanto and Steele would consider Dillard’s “attentive engagement with the world” and her attempt to understand the “inner workings of the things and processes” around her as a means of personal cultivation (93). Paradoxically, mental focus and alertness is a yang technique used to reach the yin consciousness of meditation by “concentrating one’s attention on a single item” (Capra 37).

**Pure, Inner Experience**

In addition to direct, outward experience with nature, Dillard has pure, immediate, inner experiences as a means to connect with the grand mystery of the universe. Dillard is similar to the early Taoists because she turns inward in order to understand her place in the world rather than limiting her experience to active engagement with the physical world. According to Nishida Kitaro, “to experience means to know events [within oneself] precisely as they are” while at the same time, the person “cast[s] away completely one’s own inner workings” (1). He uses the word ‘pure’ to signify “a condition of true experience itself without the addition of the least thought or reflection” about the experience (1). Meditative practice is a way to grasp the meaning of direct, sensory experience with nature. Dillard deepens her awareness by utilizing both the rational and the intuitive states of mind. She sees events in nature with the eyes of her head, she feels the events as a sensation of nature’s gift, and she integrates those experiences into her understanding of the mystery by seeing with the “third eye” of her own spirit.
Meditation, Ego, Silence and the Present

People can practice meditation in a yang manner by deliberately focusing their attention in order to be alert and aware of their present surroundings. Meditation can also be practiced in a yin manner by simply being in the present, which requires a sense of egolessness. If one is conscious of oneself, there is a separation or boundary between self and surroundings, which prohibits one from feeling connected. Quieting the mind’s inner dialogue is necessary to lose self-consciousness, and therefore, it is one aspect of practicing meditation. In Shobogenzo, a classic in Zen literature, Dogen describes the technique of zazen, sitting meditation, which helps the person “stop the intellectual practice of pursuing words” and teaches him to “turn the light around and look inward” (Keizan xv). Through meditation, one can open the self to identify with the Tao, “an immanent reality which resides in the here-and-now, both in the natural world and within oneself” (Clarke 146). Dillard describes a standard yoga pose of meditation and its enhancing effect: “if you sit absolutely perfectly balanced on the end of your spine,” with your legs crossed, then “your body will rock with the energy of your heartbeat” (126).

The practice of silent meditation was endorsed by various groups within the popular culture while Dillard was writing her narrative. In 1974, when Dillard published Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, a Buddhist academic institution, Naropa University, was established in Colorado. Its philosophy was based on three primary principles: meditation, discipline, and knowledge, which would “lead to the discovery of egolessness” (Naropa 2). Chogyam Trungpa, Naropa’s founder, desired that the programs would “cultivate awareness of the present moment” and integrate the traditions
of world religions. According to Buddhism, when one gets in touch with his divine nature, “he establishes in himself an ultimate reality, called Tathata (Suchness),” which is “an everlasting, living stream of present consciousness” (Thein).

Zazen meditation provides a way for a person to “let go of your individual self and be one with the energy behind the universe” (DiSanto and Steele 102). When Dillard watches a muskrat for forty minutes, she loses awareness of her own presence and notices that “even a few minutes of this self-forgetfulness is tremendously invigorating” (200). Slovic contends that “the process of mystical contemplation must be performed in fragile oblivion of the present self” (64), and C.G. Jung refers to the mystical experience as “the art of letting things happen,” a key to avoiding the “interfering habits of rational consciousness” (89). The release of self is called *wu-wei*, “a practice whereby the ego is emptied so that the Tao may fill the soul” (Karcher 8). According to Keizan, when people experience *satori* (enlightenment), they reach the “universal ground of consciousness” and see themselves as the “original mind” (vii). They realize that the ego is a conditioned, temporal identity that is “arbitrarily limited by their cultural, social, and personal histories” (vii). In the *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 7 contends: “When he forgets his self, he finds his self” (25). A paradox exists in which a person lets go of his ego in order to identify with everything in the universe. Ironically, a person without a sense of self is ‘nobody,’ and apparently, the universe is composed of no-thing. It seems anti-intuitive to recognize that *satori* is reached when ‘nobody’ identifies with ‘nothing’ and they are one!

The Bible tells mankind in Genesis that in the beginning, the world was “formless and empty.” Cosmological evidence confirms that the universe generated out of nothing, what scientists call the “quantum vacuum state” (Clarke 65). The virtual emptiness of
reality at the level of low energy vibrations sounds familiar to the Taoist notion of *wu* or the Buddhist term for emptiness, *sunyata* (Thien). Because reality (the Tao) itself is a mystery of emptiness, it is both logical and intuitive that to become one with the Tao, a person must empty himself. Dillard’s first glimpse of a muskrat was the only time she ever saw one floating on its back. She tells the reader, “I had long since lost myself, lost the creek, the day, lost everything” (193), and then she experienced a shift in awareness. All at once, she couldn’t see and then she saw the young muskrat playfully swimming up the creek. She “betrayed” herself when her “consciousness returned,” and as the muskrat disappeared into the bush, she “foolishly pursued it” (193). Dillard is aware that she promotes a sense of egolessness as a means of achieving oneness with the Tao. In the Afterword of the narrative, she explains to a reporter that she writes about the Eskimo culture throughout *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* because the “spare arctic landscape” of Alaska represents “the soul’s emptying itself in readiness for the incursions of the divine” (281).

To abandon one’s ego and become empty, it is imperative to silence (yin) the continuous conversation (yang) inside one’s head. In *Zen and the Art of Enlightenment*, Keizan explains the necessity of teaching people to “clean out their present conditioned stream of consciousness” in order to help them achieve enlightenment (ix). Chung-yuan, in reference to Chapter 23 of the *Tao Te Ching*, explains that “in the state of speechlessness, one’s Being and one’s thinking are the same[,] man identifies with Tao,” which is called *hsuan tung*, or mystic identity (68). Chapter 52 of the *Tao Te Ching* directly addresses the problem of inner dialogue:
Ceasing verbal expressions,
Stopping the entry of sensations,
One is never exhausted.
On the contrary, when one is full of words
And entangled in one’s affairs,
One is never able to save one’s self. (Chung-yuan 143)

Dillard herself “wonder[s] if we do not waste most of our energy just by spending every waking minute saying hello to ourselves” (200). She resolves to “try to gag the commentator, to hush the noise of useless interior babble” that prevents her from seeing (34). Dillard recognizes that in order to see clearly, one must quiet the mind, but paradoxically, it is “counter-productive to try to strive for this state” (Damerville 77). She addresses the problem of constant inner dialogue: “The world’s spiritual geniuses seem to discover universally that the mind’s muddy river, this ceaseless flow of trivia and trash cannot be dammed, and that trying to dam it is a waste of effort that might lead to madness” (35).7 Striving is an active endeavor, a yang approach. It is for this reason that satori is referred to as fu-sho, meaning “unproduced” (yin), because it cannot be achieved if the mind is preoccupied “with its own states or with the search for ecstasy” (Watts 19). Dillard accepts that she keeps a “running description of the present” in her head in order to focus her attention on it because otherwise, she wouldn’t see it (33). She suggests that meditation enables a person to “allow the muddy river” of thoughts “to flow unheeded in the dim channels of consciousness, …acknowledging its presence without interest and gazing beyond it into the realm of the real where subjects and objects act and rest purely without utterance” (35).
Dillard learns that thinking or talking in her mind “dams, stills, [and] stagnates” because it keeps her self-conscious, which distracts her attention from the present moment (82). By being “emptied and hollow,” a person can experience the present “purely” and “catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall” (82). When Dillard sits on the curb beside an empty gas station, she is “more alive than all the world...right now, the present, here” (80). She becomes conscious of her appreciation for the “western wind, this tang of coffee on the tongue,” “the puppy” and “the mountain,” and she writes, “the second I verbalize this awareness in the brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy” (80). Kitaro points out that pure experience “refers to that moment of seeing a color or hearing a sound which occurs not only before one has added the judgment that this seeing or hearing relates to something external or that one is feeling this sensation, but even before one has judged what color or what sound it is” (1). Furthermore, this type of direct experience leads a state of consciousness in which there is “neither subject nor object, and knowledge and its object are completely united” (1). When Dillard realizes that she is naturally enjoying all the sensations of that particular moment with the puppy, she stops being fully present; she separates herself from the Tao by engaging in the inner dialogue (yang) as if she is a distant observer rather than a participant.

Dillard uses descriptive language to capture moments of unification with nature, but she realizes that words limit the experiences and can’t fully describe them. Numerous times Dillard reinforces the experiences with brief, intense details. She explains how her passion does not encompass her when she stalks muskrats. Dillard notes that she is “not excited” at the creek, but rather, she writes, “I slow down, center down, empty...I am saying nothing. I go calm...I am a tissue of senses. I am the skin of
water the wind plays over; I am petal, feather, stone” (203). At first glance, this experience of oneness may appear to be hsuăn tung, the mystical identity. However, Chung-yuan warns that “one must simultaneously be free from both the wonder of Tao as an object of study and from the idea of the mystery as subjective feeling” in order to achieve chu wang, which means “both things and myself are forgotten” (6). Meditation requires egolessness, silence, stillness, and detachment from sensations. Lao Tzu elaborates on this notion in Chapter 56 of the Tao Te Ching:

Ceasing verbal expressions,

Stopping the entry of sensations,

Dulling it sharpness,

Releasing its entanglements,

Tempering its brightness,

And unifying with the earth:

This is called the identity of Tao. (Chung-yuan 154)

Dillard argues that sensations are a necessary doorway to experiencing oneness in the present. She denies the message of Chapter 56 in the Tao Te Ching when she explains that “there is more to the present than a series of snapshots. We are not merely sensitized film; we have feelings” (85). Dillard uses trees as a symbol for connection to the present because they are solid, inhabiting our own realm, yet reaching below the earth with roots and reaching above in the sky with branches. She professes, “So long as I stay in my thoughts, my foot slides under trees; I fall, or I dance” (88). For Dillard, the present is shown by how “consciousness dashes and ambles around the labyrinthine tracks of the mind, returning again and again, however briefly, to the senses” (88). She
believes that children show the way to divine connection with God because “only children keep their eyes open” (91). She explains that “the only thing they have got is sense; they have highly developed ‘input systems,’ admitting all data indiscriminately” (91). Based on studies in child development, even newborn infants clearly have selective attention, but their immediate experience is still rooted in physical sensations rather than conceptual thoughts. In the Bible, Matthew implores people to become like children in order to enter into the kingdom of Heaven (Chapter 18, verse 3).

The experience of sensation and emotional intensity is a possible difference between Dillard’s philosophy and the path to enlightenment espoused in the Tao Te Ching. Dillard very clearly uses emotional sensation in order to identify with mystery. Once the connection is achieved, she may be so involved in the present that she forgets the intense emotions and her conscious experience of them. In Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Pirsig claims that subjective reality and objective reality are both subsets to the overriding essence of Quality, or the Tao. He addresses the significance of being fully present compared to the intellectualized experience of the moment. He compares riding a motorcycle to television, and he comes to the same recognition as Dillard that “you’re in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming” (4). Furthermore, during his analysis of Quality, he explains why Dillard loses her in-the-moment feeling when she consciously thinks about it. Phaedrus points out that there is a time lag between the moment a person actually sees a tree and when they become aware that they’ve seen the tree. “Any intellectually conceived object,” he says, “is always in the [immediate] past and therefore unreal. Reality is always the moment of vision before the intellectualization takes place” (250-
Sandra Johnson indicates that once Dillard becomes self-conscious—or intellectualizes the puppy—she is “feeling” the moment, which Phaedrus would categorize as the subjective reality of the mind, “and this is something less than experiencing the moment” (67). Baba Ram Dass implores us to “exist in no mind, be empty, here now,” and as a result, we will define ourselves as “in-flow with the universe, and whatever comes along is grist for the mill of awakening” (Spiritwalk 2).

In the chapter “The Present,” Dillard concludes that connection to the divine is the “spirit’s unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and total concentration” (83). The combination of these methods results in the final step of the Eightfold Path. DiSanto and Steele explain that “engaged attention is not enough” because “if egocentric desire is to vanish,” then “engagement [yang] must be complemented by letting go and detachment [yin]. Nothing can be forced” (82). Alan Watts believes that satori can lie along both roads, either with a “non-grasping attitude of the senses to experience,” or through the “discipline of directing one’s utmost intensity to a single, ever-elusive objective” (23). Even in The Whole Earth Catalogue, a brief excerpt from John Cage’s A Year from Monday subscribes to this notion. The character is “totally involved in each game” that he plays, but he also isn’t attached or “moved” by the outcome of the game (21). The two ways of “seeing” or attaining enlightenment—aggressive, scientific analysis or quiet, receptive meditation—are “complementary, neither being sufficient on its own to allow for complete human experience” (Slovic 91). The Zen notion of satori occurs when a person sees beyond the contradictions to a deeper reality and experiences a sense of unity with the divine.
Dillard’s Purpose of Writing

The Tao and Enlightenment

Dillard hopes to enlighten her audience, to guide them along the first steps towards enlightenment, or at least, to inspire them to seek unification with the divine. In order to understand her philosophy, exploration of other theories about mystical experiences would be helpful. In *The Tao of the West*, J.J. Clarke defines the characteristics of peak moments as “an ineffable quality that goes beyond language, a sense of timelessness and of the sacredness of things, a conviction of the oneness of all things, and an overwhelming experience of certitude and intuitive insight” (142).

In the Oxford English Dictionary, mysticism is “the belief in the possibility of union with the Divine nature by means of ecstatic contemplation; reliance on spiritual intuition or exalted feeling as the means of acquiring knowledge of mysteries inaccessible to intellectual apprehension” (Damerville 50). Furthermore, Morris Beja points out that the illumination is “fleeting and momentary” as “an affirmation of God or a divine spirit and a denial of self” (25). Abraham Maslow, the founder of humanistic psychology, defined a “peak experience” as one that “tends to be unifying, noetic, and ego-transcending; it gives a sense of purpose to the individual, a sense of integration” (Stahlman 1).

Readers can identify several of these characteristics in Dillard’s descriptions of unification in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. The yin approach which relies on intuitive receptivity, the “exalted feeling” of mystery, the denial of ego through loss of self-consciousness, and the inability of language to fully capture the sensation of oneness of connection are various elements of mysticism already examined. Dillard recognizes the oneness and sacredness of all things in nature. She implies a sense of worship when she
suggests that “we ought to display praying mantises in our churches,” and rather than feel
disgust for the behavior of insects, Dillard “look[s] to them for a glimmer of
companionship” (65). She read the statistical analysis of life in a teaspoonful of soil, as
determined by biologists. Not including the microscopic population, there is an average
of 1,356 creatures in each square foot of dirt. Sitting under a tree, reflecting on this
information, Dillard decides to include those creatures in her experience of the moment.
She explains, “Admitting them, one by one, into my consciousness might heighten mine,
might add their dim awareness into my human consciousness, such as it is, and set up a
buzz, a vibration like the beating ripples a submerged muskrat makes on the water, from
this particular moment, this tree” (95-96). She makes a deliberate effort to bring
creatures into her awareness of the moment in order to elicit a mystical experience of
oneness.

Dillard’s connection with other creatures extends into a play with time. She is
aware of the existence of the other creatures that she saw in the past, bringing them into
her present consciousness. She runs through a series of images—the eggs of the praying
mantis hatching, the snake that shed its skin in a knot now crawling in the woods, the
moth with broken wings walking down the driveway, and the house spider spinning a
web. To emphasize her point, she asks the reader, “And where are you now?” (100). In a
waking dream, Dillard visualizes time as a colorful fabric. She “understood with perfect
clarity” that everyone was “living at that very moment with great emotion, in intricate
detail,” and she urges readers to “keep in mind the scope of texture’s motion in time”
(142-143).
A similar shift of perception occurs with spatial dimension during mystical moments. When she pets the puppy, her perception of space transforms as “the whole mountain looms miles closer” (79). She complains that space actually causes her to feel separate from her surroundings because then she can analyze things as objects: “Nor can I remember ever having seen without understanding; the color-patches of infancy are lost…I live now in a world of shadows that shape and distance color, a world where space makes a kind of terrible sense. What Gnosticism is this, and what physics?” (32). She recognizes the difference between the innocence of Eden and the awareness that followed tasting the apple on the tree of knowledge. Physical distance makes Dillard aware of disconnection with God through intellectualization. Conversely, when she does not feel separate from her surroundings and sensations, she experiences unification with God. She wishes to see without dimension the way blind patients see after they undergo surgery to remove cataracts. She read Space and Sight, by Marius von Sender, and determined that “for the newly sighted, vision is pure sensation unencumbered by meaning” (28). Therefore, ironically, the best way to experience mystery is to simply see it without trying to understand it or give it meaning.

Is Western analysis misapplied?

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is Dillard’s effort to record and understand an analysis of her own mystical experiences. Because science holds more validity in the Western mind, people use it in support of the studies on subjective experience. Reflecting the mood of the generation, Maslow believed that transcendent experiences were universally recognized, and he wanted to secularize the experience apart from religious doctrine by giving it specific terminology. He applied the scientific method to his field of
psychology in order to measure and examine the “frequency of occurrence and variation of the experience” (Stahlman 1).

The expectation of repeatability to establish validity, however, may be a Western strategy that has been incorrectly applied to Eastern philosophy. In the history of Zen, two branches developed with different paths to Enlightenment. They are characterized by Alan Watts as “Beat Zen” and “Square Zen.” He differentiates between them in terms of a Hindu metaphor called “the way of the monkey and the cat” (22). The kitten gives no effort to act when the mother carries her in her mouth (“Beat Zen,” yin). The monkey, on the other hand, has to struggle to hold on to the mother’s hair (“Square Zen,” yang). Beat Zen is equivalent to Soto Zen, which allows the sudden and spontaneous moment of enlightenment, whereas Square Zen compares to the tradition of Renzai Zen, where gradual enlightenment can only be achieved after years of meditative, disciplined practice with a master. Dillard recognizes that the effort to quiet one’s mind through meditation “is really a discipline requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle; it marks the literature of saints and monks of every order East and West” (34). Essentially, though, Dillard believes that “the secret of seeing...is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise” (35). If people can only wait for moments of connection and not actually create them, then they can’t measure or predict the experiences with any scientific accuracy. The procedure becomes more unreliable when comparing experiences between people. One can only conclude that different practices yield a range of experience and understanding for those who practice.

Capra paralleled the scientific method with moments of divine connection. He explained in the *Tao of Physics* that a person must train for many years in order to
conduct a repeatable experiment in subatomic physics, and “only then will he or she be able to ask nature a specific question through the experiment and to understand the answer” (36). Similarly, a deep mystical experience requires several years as an apprentice to a Zen master. Capra claims that “the repeatability of the experience is, in fact, essential to every mystical training and is the very aim of the mystics’ spiritual instruction” (36).

A problem with this assessment is the fact that *satori* is not contained in one specific moment. When someone attains enlightenment, peace of mind and a sense of unity continue to pervade their normal activities. When “living entirely in the present and giving full attention to everyday affairs,” people are constantly connected to the Tao and therefore, they experience “the wonder and mystery of life in every single act” (Capra 123). Dillard is “thinking of nothing at all” when she chances upon the tree with the lights in it. She had been searching for this vision for years when one ordinary day, to her wonderment, she saw “the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost, charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame” (36). She was “knocked breathless” by the “powerful glance” of God, her body and soul ringing with the potent force of mystery. Throughout the remainder of the narrative, Dillard hopes for other moments when she feels like a bell that has been “lifted and struck” (36). She only rarely gets a glimpse of the divine because “the vision comes and goes, mostly goes,” but she lives for “the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in” (36).⁹

**Enlightenment: Just a moment**

These incidences of dramatic, transformative vision, however, stand as isolated events. The moment passes and Dillard laments, “When it comes again, the light, you
hold your breath, and if it stays you forget about it until it goes again” (12). The mystical experience repeats itself, but Dillard cannot will it to do so. She hopes for occasional, accidental discoveries, and she believes that “beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there” (10). Dillard points out that even Moses was only allowed a brief glimpse of the glory of God, “and the rest is denial and longing” (207). Even if these glimpses were more common, they are so intense that we wouldn’t be able to fully appreciate them. “We have really only that one light,” Dillard explains, “one source for all power, and yet we must turn away from it” lest we are “blinded by the light” (24-25).

According to Capra, because the sense of oneness is not permanent, Dillard has not reached enlightenment. Concentrating on the intense sensory experiences of the moment can inhibit a person from attaining true satori. Zen Master Keizan warns in The Transmission of Light that “eagerness for quick results” may cause a person to be inadequately prepared. Therefore, they “mistake exciting states for the enlightening experience” or they can’t sustain it because of “carelessness of its aftermath” (ix). Another trap is the fact that immature satori can itself become an object of attachment. Dogen, the founder of zazen meditation, emphasized the need to consummate satori by paying attention to the aftermath, not just the moment, rather than “arousing emotional enthusiasm about satori” (Keizan xii). In this sense, Dillard’s desire to share with readers actually blocks her from enlightenment because she consciously attaches to the fleeting moments of connection in order to remember them and write about them. The descriptions may inspire readers, but they do not recreate the experience of oneness.
Readers must experience it for themselves. This direct experience is true knowledge, and it can only be found by closing Dillard’s book and opening their eyes.

**Enlightenment: Shared and Sustained**

Without a doubt, individual, direct experience is the most effective way to learn. In *Meditation in Action*, Trungpa shares his belief that first-hand experience is necessary to learn “rather than learning from books or from teachers or by merely conforming to an already established pattern” (Brand 423). To know mystery the way Dillard knew it along Tinker Creek, the reader has to take action and literally *be* in an awareness of the present moment. If Dillard had been reading an academic book about forests when she was walking through the back yard, she wouldn’t have seen the cedar tree full of lights.

One reason people must directly live their own connection with the divine is because such an experience cannot be captured in words, as stated in Chapter 56 of the *Tao Te Ching*. Buddhists do not believe that “language and logical thinking” can effectively grasp the profound nature of reality, but they can only be used “to observe and analyze the surface of the human world and the universe” (Thein).

Though we cannot fully understand the Tao in rational ways, we can catch a glimpse of it through conative, or experiential knowledge (yin), and examine it through cognitive knowledge (yang). In *Guidebook to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, DiSanto and Steele explain the difference between a mystical and a metaphysical moment. When you know something metaphysically, you can talk about it because you have a certain distance from it; when you know something mystically, “the distance vanishes and you can’t talk about the known because you’ve entered it and *are* it” (117). This sense of total being and involvement is reflected in Zen writings which
are full of allusions to the transcendental nature of *satori*. Keizan reminds students that once enlightened, one should complete the experience by returning to the ordinary world, which means he should transcend “the inner silence used as means of access to *satori*” (xi). A traditional saying in Zen tells students not to “linger in the land of detachment; come back to the misty bank and lie on the cold sand” (xi). Dillard must leave the mystical realm in order to make it metaphysical and share it with her readers. She must look away from the cedar, go inside her house, sit at the table with her goldfish, and find words that can recreate the beautiful vision of the tree.

Dillard reaches out to the readers through her book in order to open a doorway for them to be touched by the spirit. She introduces *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* with a proclamation that she “wake[s] expectant, hoping to see a new thing” (4). The rest of the narrative provides a plentitude of examples on how to see in a new way, and clearly, her intention is to encourage readers to approach life in the same manner, to wake them up. Even as a child, she desired to create surprises for people. She would hide pennies along the sidewalk and write labels to direct people to discover them. She tells readers that she was “greatly excited…at the thought of the first lucky passer-by who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe” (16). In this sense, Dillard is playing God. Nature conceals “the pearl of great price,” and as Dillard stands at Tinker Creek experiencing the mystery, she professes repeatedly, “I never merited this grace” (103). The narrative is her grown-up attempt to be an arrow pointing towards enlightenment; the descriptions provide readers with signposts that lead to mystical experience.
In *The Tao of Physics*, Capra notes how “the masters talk as little as possible and use their words to shift the disciples’ attention from abstract thoughts to the concrete reality” (123). Dillard philosophizes about the nature of reality by indirectly posing abstract questions to the reader through her detailed observations and intense emotions about the concrete world—the animals and plants and their activities at Tinker Creek. Dillard’s writing style “wraps you up in the event - making you feel like you are there with her…Through her stories, she transports us to the mystical dimension -- her stories invoke an understanding of the mystical that goes beyond words” (Stahlman 1994). Her poetic use of metaphor elicits a heightened level of consciousness because the metaphor is first felt before it is understood rationally. How the parts of a metaphor create a whole picture is a little mystery which serves to give readers a flash of awareness. Scott Slovic, in *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, exposes Dillard’s devices most clearly:

The mystical text is an illusion, an effort to reconjure for the reader—and probably for the author herself—the thrill of vital feeling, the intense rush of awareness which was actually experienced in a linguistic vacuum. The repeated emphasis on solitude, the use of the present tense, and the almost complete reliance upon sensory (mainly visual) imagery make this a compelling, believable description of an experience which, by definition, must defy full verbal communication. (81)

Slovic points out that Dillard laments “the intrusion of self-reflexive consciousness,” but at the same time, she manages to provide a powerful, detailed description of her experience (63). Zen Buddhists say that a finger is needed to point at
the moon, but that we should not trouble ourselves with the finger once the moon is recognized (28). Dillard’s book points the way to experiences with the mystery, and she uses words “as a net to try to capture a nonverbal reality” (DiSanto and Steele 122). As Dillard builds up to a moment of ecstatic insight, she “finds solace in the moment which strains toward anti-definition, a moment which by its very nature defies rationality” (Johnson 2). She uses figurative language in order to create strong emotion—“an indicator of awakeness”—in the reader (Slovic 70). The degree of awakeness is only one level of consciousness which “hums at every moment its own secret melody in its own unique key” (86). She lists a series of sensations and writes it in the perspective of second person in order to give readers the sense that they are actually experiencing this wakefulness. All of a sudden, the “force of the present you’ve forgotten sets you reeling, staggering,” and you are overwhelmed by your very own presence in the immediate surroundings, aware of “the full moisture in your lungs, the heat from the pavement on your lips,…the blood pumping up your thighs,…exhilarated, energized” (86). The irony is that readers aren’t directly experiencing the moments that Dillard describes, but they are made conscious of their own present moment, the texture of pages under their fingertips, the smell of coffee where they’re reading, or the softness of cushions where they sit. If Dillard has accomplished her purpose, the audience may find themselves at a pause in the reading, inspired to be in the moment rather than being distracted by the words in her book. More importantly, they will actually go into nature in order to seek out that experience with receptivity towards identification and unification with God.

Reader response theory indicates that the interaction between the reader and the text is a creative process. Perhaps the “knowing” that arises from that interaction is
parallel to Pirsig’s notion of Quality as an event between subject (reader) and object (narrative). Dannie Damerville acknowledges that we are not passive, objective watchers because “we select and, in a sense, create what we see by injecting language into the raw physiology of perception” (74). Dillard chooses which words to use while writing and which details of the scenery to emphasize for the reader; meanwhile, the act of reading is also creative, drawing upon the reader’s personal history, memories, beliefs, and values (Welch 77). When readers identify with Dillard and connect her experiences to their own, maybe this is a secondary form of satori. Keizan claims that Zen is taught and communicated in terms of “mutual recognition of awakened minds” (xviii). Similarly, in The Varieties of Religious Experience, William James indicates that “one must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one’s self to understand a lover’s state of mind” (300). In this sense, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is a framework for Dillard to share her moments of insight with readers who have experienced oneness with the divine nature of the universe (Tao).

When examining Dillard’s purpose in writing Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, as well as her personal attainment of satori, a paradox develops. Taoism rejects the notion that enlightenment can truly be expressed in verbal or written forms. This final declaration ends the Tao Te Ching in Chapter 81:

When words express truth, they are not refined.
When words are refined, they do not express truth.
One who is proficient does not depend on verbal disputation.
One who depends on verbal disputation is not proficient.
One who knows is not encyclopedic.
One who is encyclopedic does not know.

The wise does not accumulate.

The more he works for other people, the more he gains.

The more he shares with other people, the more he receives. (Chung-yuan 210)

Neither can the Tao be intellectualized in a Western fashion or captured with sensory descriptions. Yet, a person is connected to and expressing the Tao if he or she lives in service and shares with others, if he or she returns to the bank to lie on the wet sand. This message is not too different than Christ’s command that people should love others and live as an example. Dillard makes a grandiose and laudable effort to fulfill this goal. As the writer, Dillard shares her experience and knowledge with readers much like the Ancient Mariner. She is obsessed with the details of creation; because she has tasted the mystery, she is crazed with the desire to share her knowledge with "some innocent at a gathering," meaning "to change his life" (134). There is no doubt that other people of Dillard’s generation had similar intentions, as evidenced by the efforts of Baba Ram Dass, the mission of Naropa Institute, and the stated purpose of The Whole Earth Catalogue. The people who voiced the cultural noosphere were eager to explore, express, and live the "new" philosophies from the East that quickly spread into American culture. Dillard may not have been conscious of how the zeitgeist influenced her actions, beliefs, and perceptions as she wrote Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, but it is clear that she serves as a model representative of her generation because she espouses an individualized, non-institutionalized philosophy that has common elements parallel to the principles of Taoism and Zen Buddhism.
Works Cited


I also recommend the Stephen Mitchell translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. 
End Notes

1. Self-cultivation is also a characteristic of Abraham Maslow’s humanistic psychology concerning self-actualization and Gestalt therapy.

   In his book Schopfiesche Freiheit, Wolfgang Metzger (1962) refers to Taoism and empathically recommends the study of Zen-Buddhism. Some of his central ideas concerning the work with living beings, the problem of reality, and the body-mind problem are compared with core positions of Zen-Buddhism and Taoism in order to show that fundamental theoretical and philosophical ideas in these Eastern schools of thought resemble positions of Gestalt theory or are even equivalent to them. For further information, see Rainer Kastl’s About the Relation Between Wolfgang Metzger, Taoism, and Zen-Buddhism. Gestalt Theory, 12 (1990), No. 3, pp 141-149.

2. However, we can stop searching for the meaning of the universe. The computers and rats have determined simply that the Answer to Everything is 42, and we must walk that many roads. Special thanks to the messenger of this great discovery, Douglas Adams in The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.

3. There is a trend in Western philosophy that also endorses the idea that change is constant and the universe is ultimately a mystery. Alfred Whitehead and Heraclites are just two examples to consider. This suggests that Dillard’s understanding could have a Christian basis which happens to correlate with Taoist elements.

4. Eastern religions overlap in their basic principles. There’s a classic saying that “Every Chinese wears a Confucian cap, a Taoist robe and Buddhist sandals” (Clarke 22). Pilgrim at Tinker Creek will be examined through a general analysis of Eastern elements rather than limiting it to a specific philosophy.

5. Pirsig makes a direct comparison between the idea of Quality and the “Tat tvam asi” truth of the Upanishads,” a sense of oneness that is reflected in “modern street argot” such as “digging it,” “grooving on it” (297) and the verb that Robert Heinlein coined in Stranger in a Strange Land, “to grok.”

6. For further information, see:


7. The concept of silencing the inner dialogued pervaded the popular culture. John Lennon confesses the same dilemma on the 1971 Beatles album, “Let it Be”: “Thoughts meander like a restless wind inside a letter box that / tumble blindly as they make their way / Across the universe.”

8. J.J. Clarke addresses the question in terms of cross-cultural studies in The Tao of the West. Are mystical experiences pure and unmediated, common to the human experience,
and therefore, “universal”? Or are they shaped by “distinct languages, values, and belief systems” within particular cultural contexts? (141). In the case of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, this question becomes irrelevant because the mystical experience is sought and experienced through a blend of both Eastern and Western practices.

9. In Divine Right’s Trip, Gurney Norman’s story published in The Whole Earth Catalogue, D.R. has parallel vision in a cave before he faces his alter ego, David. He sees a light that “pours down in a shower from up above. It streams, it falls, it’s a column made of light, a light that’s shaped like stone and a stone with light inside. The light’s a mass of molded stone hanging in a chamber like a frozen waterfall” (Brand 291).
Research Process

This essay began as a paper for a graduate class on Cultural Studies for Tom McLaughlin. The first draft was an overwhelming amount of convoluted research. The most difficult part of the writing process was organizing all the information into clear sections and providing transitional flow. The connection to popular culture evolved into an overriding umbrella to provide a framework for exploring the elements of Eastern philosophy in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. It seemed natural to focus on yin yang dichotomies because I had already written a paper analyzing Maxine Hong Kingston’s narrative, *Woman Warrior*, in terms of yin yang balance. I already had an awareness of Taoism and Zen Buddhism because of my personal spiritual explorations, so it was only a matter of finding resources to validate my ideas. I chose Annie Dillard’s narrative simply because I loved reading it so I knew that I would enjoy analyzing it for tedious details without growing bored with it. Originally, I was also interested in exploring feminine spirituality in terms of nature, but that line of research had to be rejected for the sake of time and effort.

Further Research

Given time and interest, I would suggest several avenues of further investigation of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. I would compare the ideas and writing style with later works written by Annie Dillard. I would also like to see a comparative analysis with other writers who have similar themes in their writing, including Thoreau and Edward Abbey in terms of nature and Maxine Hong Kingston in terms of narrative. This research already exists in several resources, but I didn’t include it in my own journey due to time and topic constraints. Themes in the book that can be explore in more depth include, but aren’t limited to, the idea of a waking reality vs. dreams, Beauty, Grace, the meaning of life (intricacy) and death (fecundity), and how perception of time opening, slowing, and stopping shifts during mystical experiences.
Abstract

Annie Dillard was influenced by the atmosphere of American culture in the 1970s when she wrote Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. The narrative explores spirituality by combining the philosophical themes of Eastern and Western perspectives that were prevalent in American society during that time. Elements of Taoism and Zen Buddhism are reflected in Dillard’s narrative, including symbolism of yin yang, the belief in a grand mystery and movement in terms of change, meditation through silencing the mind and loss of ego, and being fully aware of the present moment.

Intellectual analysis and intuitive receptivity are two approaches that Dillard uses in order to build insight towards mystical union. She experiences moments of divine connection at Tinker Creek as a gift of grace which cannot be forced or produced through one’s own will. However, she also performs scientific observations and consults academic resources in order to learn about her environment as an attempt to deepen her knowledge and elicit a higher level of consciousness. Finally, Dillard’s purpose in writing Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is to serve as a guide along various paths of discovery and to inspire the audience to seek enlightenment for themselves.
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Future Professional Plans:
I plan to teach English in a high school in a metropolitan mountain community in NC for at least four years. Then I hope to teach English in various foreign countries as I travel around the world with my son, Raymend. Eventually, I intend to pursue a Masters degree and a PhD in several possible subjects including Linguistics, Criticism of Popular Culture, any area of Literature, Curriculum and Development, and Gifted Education.