An American Childhood, Annie Dillard: Themes And Emotions

In Annie Dillard's memoir, ?An American Childhood,? it emphasizes the value of pursuing life openly. Dillard's writing in her memoir ?show?s the reader the importance of every memory in her childhood, good or bad. This coming-of-age memoir discusses real-life discoveries about oneself and the world around. But, most importantly the concept of feeling alive. Feeling alive in the things she does in life begins at a young age for Dillard and even when she reaches adulthood. This is initially brought on by Dillard's intense observational skills, "The skin on my mother's face was smooth, fair, and tender; it took impressions readily. She napped on her side on the couch. Her face skin pooled on the low side; it piled up in the low corners of her deep-set eyes and drew down her lips and cheeks." (Dillard 25) , this aligns with the theme of curiosity in An American Childhood?. The emotion of feeling alive played a major role in Dillard's coming of age story because it displays the theme of imagination within a child's heart, that will eventually diminish later in life because of time and experience.

The first time Dillard found interest in her life that seemed to give her a feeling of aliveness was when she found a dime in the side yard alleyway. When her father told her it was dated to 1919, and it may be worth more than 10 cents she was ecstatic. At a young age, when you find something that is of value you finally have a sense of ownership. That was Dillard's mindset. She then sought out to find as much treasure as she could in that alley. At the end of this anecdote, Dillard says, "That I never found another old coin in that particular alley didn't matter at all." (Dillard 41) Being a young child, when mostly everything that comes into your possession is given to you and finally find something yourself that you can have sole ownership of, it's liberating. The role of feeling alive in this small portion of Dillard's life meant a lot to her because it's the first time she's able to say something is hers. In younger generations today we find that people think the value of things worsen over time, but here the dime is the complete opposite. The motif of time is shown throughout this anecdote and it shows that with time, things do increase in value, like the dime. This serves as a metaphor, showing that Dillard is able to get better in time, and being alive is all about change. No pun intended.

The memoir being narrated by an, now adult Dillard, she looks back on her childhood and describes a moment when children first "awaken" and discover themselves and their place in the world. In some ways, Dillard says, they are strangers in a strange land. They don't know how they came, they don't know where they're going and they just have to follow rules given to them and continue to move through time. "Children ten years old wake up and find themselves here, discover themselves to have been here all along; is this sad? They wake like sleepwalkers, in full stride; they wake like people brought back from cardiac arrest or from drowning: in medias res, surrounded by familiar people and objects, equipped with a hundred skills." (Dillard 11) This implies that children are just empty vessels that you can mold however which way you'd like. This erases the theme of imagination that we have seen shown in the memories of the young Dillard. Although at ten you are now conscious in the world, when are you fully alive and able to do what you want, and not what's expected?

When Dillard turns 16, she goes through a major change. She described many mood changes, violence with the world around her, and a boyfriend she so deeply loved. But with so much

freedom, she began to feel transparent, and as if she didn't know herself, unselfconscious. At a young age attempting to please everyone around you, a person will lose their own character as more and more expectations are put onto them. Dillard seems disappointed in her teen years, "So this was adolescence. Is this how the people around me had died on their feet--inevitably, helplessly? Perhaps their own selves eclipsed the sun for so many years the world shriveled around them, and when at last their inescapable orbits had passed through these dark egoistic years it was too late, they had adjusted." (Dillard 224) The thought of being alive has diminished, the moment in life where you're supposed to be the most "alive" is your teen years but you ultimately feel dead. There's not a set agenda for you anymore, and you're supposed to feel liberated but without someone telling you what and how to do it, it's almost like you no longer have a purpose in life, and have no real idea of what life is supposed to be around you because of the adjustments made to please someone else. Being alive is being you. After so much time of adjustment the same spark isn't there.

In summary, the emotion of feeling alive played a major role in Dillard's coming of age story because it displays the theme of imagination within a child's heart, that will eventually diminish later in life because of time and experience. As a child, Dillard's imagination, observation and curiosity are at peak. In a household where she's expected of certain societal expectations (dancing with boys at dance class or becoming a secretary) she's still allowed to do the things that she loves like playing baseball and football. At this time Dillard was able to be as alive as she wanted to be, while still holding up to those expectations of the world around her. As she gets older that diminishes and she becomes unselfconscious, to the point where she doesn't know who she is. But, feeling alive is up to you to take a hold of it even after you feel as if you've lost the feeling. This is shown in Dillard's memoir when she "flies" down the street and gets different reactions from an older woman and a man in a business suit. "He flattened himself against a brick wall as I passed flailing--although I had left him plenty of room. He refused to meet my exultant eye." (Dillard 108) versus, "A linen-suited woman in her fifties did meet my exultant eye. She looked exultant herself, seeing me from up the block. Her face was thin and tanned. We converged." (Dillard 109) It seems that the young businessman never found his sense of self and was stuck in that loop that Dillard described when she was 16, but if a person can recognize themselves, as just that, THEMSELVES. They're able to remain exultant and alive for the rest of their lives.

Works Cited

1. Dillard, ANNIE. ?AN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD?. 1987.