

"THE MOTH INCIDENT"

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In his essay "Art and Ultimate Reality," the famed theologian Paul Tillich explains the relationship between the two concepts in the title. In it, he describes ultimate reality by saying: "Ultimate reality underlies every reality, and it characterizes the whole appearing world as non-ultimate, preliminary, transitory and finite.... [T]he God of religion is more than ultimate reality" (219-20). To him, ultimate reality is that which is at the base of all being; that constant "lasting in the flux of transitoriness and finitude" (220). Although this ultimate reality is almost impossible to find, Tillich says that "ultimate reality becomes manifest in works of art." One type of this "manifestation" he calls "sacramental" (223). In it, a very common object, something which is not considered to be holy, is given a sense of holiness and ultimate reality. However, these things should not "be used as mere symbols," for then they lose "their independent power of expression" (224). Annie Dillard's story of the burning moth in her book *Holy the Firm* is a competent example of the connection between art and ultimate reality.

The burning moth is an extended metaphor for the artist. In *Holy the Firm*, Dillard recounts how she had read works by the poet Arthur Rimbaud. He, who was an artist like Dillard, "burnt out his brains in a thousand poems" (Dillard 17). Dillard was reading Rimbaud's works in the light given by the moth whose head had burnt off. This image of a burning head connects the moth to the poet. Also, Dillard was reading Rimbaud because his work "had made [her] want to be a writer when [she] was sixteen," and she "was hoping it would do it again" (15). Therefore, the hollowed and light-giving moth is a metaphor for the artist; specifically, the narrator.

The moth had also been hollowed by the flame: "All that was left was the glowing horn shell of her abdomen and thorax—a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube" (16). Dillard later in the book describes herself by saying, "I am hollow" (24). In this self-description, she is explaining her inability to do her "work," which is writing. Only when she is "filled" with the desire to write can she fulfill her duties as an artist. This concept is also present in the moth story. When the narrator sees that the moth is dead, she asks of it, "Had she done her work?" (17). Apparently, Dillard presumes that the moth has no use after death. Immediately following her inquiries, however, she sees the moth's true purpose, or "work:"

And this moth-essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. She kept burning. The wax rose in the moth's body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk. The candle had two wicks, two flames of identical height, side by side. The moth's head was on fire. She burned for two hours, until I blew her out. (17)

The moth's self-sacrifice of death brought light to the world, and that was the moth's true meaning. In the conclusion of her essay, the narrator asks of her students, "Which of you want to give your lives and be writers?" (18) Dillard believes that choosing to become an artist is a sacrifice. Later in *Holy the Firm*, she says, "The world without light is wasteland and chaos, and a life without sacrifice is abomination" (Dillard 72). In this statement, she connects the sacrifice of being an artist with his/her purpose as a light for the world; the artist wants the world to see itself.

Then she explains what this "lighting the kingdom of God" is. She believes that the artist's duty is to be a link from this world to the sacred realm, the world of God. She even claims that a true artist must attempt to be a Christ figure. She states:

[The artist] is holy and he is firm, spanning all the long gap with the length of his love, in flawed imitation of Christ on the cross stretched both ways unbroken and thorned. So must the work be also, in touch with, in touch with, in touch with; spanning the gap from here to eternity, home.(72)

Her two final words reflect her belief that the realm of the sacred is the only true reality. She refers to the physical world as "all these illusions of time and space and lives" (46). Then she calls God "the real." (46) Later she reiterates her belief by quoting Meister Eckhart: "God is at home.... We are in the far country" (62).

The narrator believes that the work of an artist is extremely important. Since she also regards Christianity as the most important aspect of her life, she uses religious imagery in the moth story in order to express her sentiments about the significance of being an artist. First, she scatters words having religious connotations throughout the narrative. Some of the terms are "miraculously" and "buttresses for cathedral domes" (14).

Also, she makes religious references when she describes her own behaviors in the story. First, by using the phrase, "I drop to my knees," (14), she adds a religious tone to her action of looking at dead bugs. This particular phrase reminds the reader of prayer. Second, she makes a picture of herself as holy and angelic when she recalls, "Pale moths massed around my head in the clearing, where my light made a ring" (15). This self-description is not one of arrogance, though. Later in the book, she includes a more extensive description of seraphim, the highest angels. These angels "are aflame with love for God," (45) just as the moth is on fire. Thus, she connects both angel references with her description of the burning moth. Since she has already compared herself to these fiery angels, she is also metaphorically speaking of herself when she refers to the moth.

Next, the narrator is an artist, just as the moth is an extended metaphor for the artist. After using religious imagery when she describes herself, she also extensively utilizes religious imagery when she describes the burning moth. The first time she refers to the moth itself as something holy is the point when the moth has already caught on fire and is dead. The narrator defers her religious description of the "immolating monk" (17) because she believes the moth is only truly holy when she [the moth] is fulfilling her duty. In the same way, the narrator believes that the artist only has real value when he or she is working. She believes the work of the artist must be approached with full dedication; she tells her students that they "must go at life with a broadax." (18)

She sums up her comparison to the angels and the moth, as well as her beliefs about the purpose and required commitment necessary of an artist in the following description: "His face is flame like a seraph's, lighting the kingdom of God for the people to see; his life goes up in the works" (72).

After the "immolating monk" comparison, the author shifts for a moment into poetic language. In this portion of her work, she most openly makes religious references. She describes a moth, a fairly lowly creature, as though it were one of the holiest of God's creations:

[The moth] burned for two hours without changing, without bending or leaning—only glowing within, like a building fire glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God, while I read by her light, kindled, while Rimbaud in Paris burnt out his brains in a thousand poems, while night pooled wetly at my feet. (17)

The moth story was published in the Norton Sampler with the title "Transfiguration." Not only is the title a reference to a biblical event, but

it also refers to the writer. Dillard, as previously mentioned, wants the desire to write. When she reads Rimbaud by the light, she is "kindled" (17). This time is the instant of her self-renewal, or transfiguration.

In *Holy the Firm*, Annie Dillard shows how art itself is part of the ultimate reality. In her eyes, art is a tool that gives this world a mirror in which to see itself. She makes the moth a symbol of the artist, but only when the reader looks into this burning moth can he or she understand the divine purpose of both the moth and the artist. Dillard's work is an example of Tillich's ideas.

THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF SPORTS

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There are many great things about sports. The advantages are numerous, but the reason so many people are attracted to sports is because of the unpredictability of the outcome. Every time you watch or play a game, it is different. This adds an exciting element that you rarely find in other forms of entertainment.

One may go to a play or a movie for entertainment, but every time he or she goes back to see that movie again, it has the same ending. This isn't true with sports. One could go see the Bulls play Orlando ten times in a row, and each game will have be different. This is what is so exciting about sports. Many sports are about reading, reacting, and adjusting. This is why they don't end up with the same result every time. If a team runs the same play in basketball, there is no guarantee that there will be the same outcome. If just one of the ten people on the floor does one thing different, it could change the whole play. The man may miss the shot, or pass instead of shooting. A teammate may miss a pick and the man may never get the ball. The defense may react differently to the play. They may allow the man to shoot, or they may force him to drive. They may foul the man on the play. Football is another sport where it is easy to see how running the same play may result in a different outcome. If the running back chooses a different hole, cuts back, slows down, or speeds up, the play will be different. What happens often depends on what the