

Before You Read

from *An American Childhood*

Connect to the Memoir

Think back to when you were in elementary school. What is one of your favorite memories from that time in your life?

Quickwrite Freewrite for a few minutes about this memory. What happened? What makes the memory special?

Build Background

An American Childhood is set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Annie Dillard lived there in the 1940s and early 1950s. At that time, the city was at work on the "Pittsburgh Renaissance." People worked to clean up the city's environment, improve transportation, and renew the city's downtown.

- Pittsburgh is located at the point where the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers unite to form the Ohio River. Much of the city lies on hills surrounding this river junction.
- Pittsburgh has many distinct neighborhoods, 90 of which are officially recognized by the city.
- In 1950, more than 675,000 people lived in Pittsburgh. The population has declined since then.

Vocabulary

wholeheartedly (hōl' hār' tid lē) *adv.* completely; sincerely (p. 377). *Keisha passes out flyers about recycling because she wholeheartedly believes that recycling is important.*

solitude (sol' ə tōd') *n.* the state of being alone or separate from others (p. 378). *He may have seemed lonely to others, but Tom enjoyed his solitude.*

embarked (em bärkd') *v.* made a start (p. 378). *After preparing for several months, Catherine embarked on a challenging two-week hike.*

obscure (əb skyoor') *adj.* not clearly seen; remote (p. 380). *After a long drive into the hills, we reached the obscure town.*

prolong (prə lōng') *v.* to lengthen in time (p. 381). *We decided to prolong our vacation by staying one more day.*

Meet Annie Dillard



"Writing a book is like rearing children—willpower has very little to do with it. . . . You do it out of love."

—Annie Dillard

Nature Writer Annie Dillard often writes about the beauty and violence of the natural world. She became interested in nature at an early age. As a girl, she collected rocks and insects and studied tiny organisms under a microscope. "*An American Childhood* is about the passion of childhood," Dillard says, "a child's vigor, and originality, and eagerness, and mastery, and joy."

Literary Works Dillard writes essays, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. *An American Childhood* was published in 1987. Annie Dillard was born in 1945.



Literature Online

Author Search For more about Annie Dillard, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u3.

Set Purposes for Reading

BQ BIG Question

As you read, ask yourself, what makes this experience so delightful for the young Dillard? Why does she remember it vividly as an adult?

Literary Element Tone

Tone is the author's attitude toward the subject, ideas, theme, and characters or people in a text. The tone of a work may be witty or serious, sad or upbeat, scholarly or sarcastic, admiring or angry.

Tone is important because it affects how readers feel about what they are reading. You can identify the tone of a text by paying attention to word choice, sentence construction, the kinds of details the author uses, and the images the author creates.

A memoir, like an autobiography, shares an author's personal experiences. The tone of a memoir can reveal how the author feels about those experiences. As you read, ask yourself, does the author like the people she writes about, including her younger self? Is the tone happy or somber? Is it humorous, serious, or a bit of both?

Reading Skill Analyze Style

When you **analyze**, you look closely at separate parts of a text in order to better understand the entire text. **Style** is the way an author chooses and arranges words and sentences. An author's style often reveals his or her tone and purpose for writing.

To **analyze style**, pay attention to word choice, the use of imagery, sentence variety, and the degree of formality, or seriousness. As you read, think about how these separate elements work together to create an overall effect. Use a chart like the one below to keep track of the details that help create the author's style.

	Example or Description	How does this add to the author's style?
Word choice		
Use of imagery		
Sentence variety		
Degree of formality		

Learning Objectives

For pages 374–383

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing tone.

Reading: Analyzing style.

TRY IT

Analyze If you wanted to write an informal and humorous note to a friend, what words and phrases might you use? How would the note change if you decided to write in a serious, formal style? With a partner, talk about different ways that you could turn an informal, humorous note into a formal and serious note.



Campden Hill Square, 1996. Oil on canvas. Jeanne Maze. Private Collection.

from
An American Childhood

Annie Dillard

Some boys taught me to play football. This was fine sport. You thought up a new strategy for every play and whispered it to the others. You went out for a pass, fooling everyone. Best, you got to throw yourself mightily at someone's running legs. Either you brought him down or you hit the ground flat out on your chin, with your arms empty before you. It was all or nothing. If you hesitated in fear, you would miss and get hurt: you would take a hard fall while the kid got away, or you would get kicked in the face while the kid got away. But if you flung yourself **wholeheartedly** at the back of his knees—if you gathered and joined body and soul and pointed them diving fearlessly—then you likely wouldn't get hurt, and you'd stop the ball. Your fate, and your team's score, depended on your concentration and courage. Nothing girls did could compare with it.

Boys welcomed me at baseball, too, for I had, through enthusiastic practice, what was weirdly known as a boy's arm. In winter, in the snow, there was neither baseball nor football, so the boys and I threw snowballs at passing cars. I got in trouble throwing snowballs, and have seldom been happier since.

On one weekday morning after Christmas, six inches of new snow had just fallen. We were standing up to our boot tops in snow on a front yard on trafficked Reynolds Street, waiting for cars. The cars traveled Reynolds Street slowly and evenly; they were targets all but wrapped in red ribbons, cream puffs.¹ We couldn't miss.

I was seven; the boys were eight, nine, and ten. The oldest two Fahey boys were there—Mikey and Peter—polite blond boys who lived near me on Lloyd Street, and who already had four brothers and sisters. My parents approved Mikey and Peter Fahey. Chickie McBride was there, a tough kid, and Billy Paul and Mackie Kean too,

¹ **Cream puff** is slang for "an old, used car that is in good condition." It is also slang for a "weakling" or "pushover." By calling the cars **cream puffs**, the narrator means that they were easy to hit with snowballs.

Vocabulary

wholeheartedly (hōl' hār' tid lē) *adv.* completely; sincerely

Analyze Style Notice the sentence variety in the paragraph you just read. What impressions are you forming of the author's style?

BQ BIG Question

What activities did the narrator take delight in as a child?

from across Reynolds, where the boys grew up dark and furious, grew up skinny, knowing, and skilled. We had all drifted from our houses that morning looking for action, and had found it here on Reynolds Street.

It was cloudy but cold. The cars' tires laid behind them on the snowy street a complex trail of beige chunks like crenellated castle walls.² I had stepped on some earlier; they squeaked. We could have wished for more traffic. When a car came, we all popped it one. In the intervals between cars we reverted to the natural **solitude** of children.

I started making an iceball—a perfect iceball, from perfectly white snow, perfectly spherical, and squeezed perfectly translucent³ so no snow remained all the way through. (The Fahey boys and I considered it unfair actually to throw an iceball at somebody, but it had been known to happen.)

I had just **embarked** on the iceball project when we heard tire chains come clanking from afar. A black Buick was moving toward us down the street. We all spread out, banged together some regular snowballs, took aim, and, when the Buick drew nigh,⁴ fired.

A soft snowball hit the driver's windshield right before the driver's face. It made a smashed star with a hump in the middle.

Often, of course, we hit our target, but this time, the only time in all of life, the car pulled over and stopped. Its wide black door opened; a man got out of it, running. He didn't even close the car door.

He ran after us, and we ran away from him, up the snowy Reynolds sidewalk. At the corner, I looked back; incredibly, he was still after us. He was in city clothes: a suit and tie, street shoes. Any normal adult would have quit, having sprung us into flight and made his point. This

2 **Crenellated castle walls** have battlements, or notches, along the tops.

3 Light can shine through something that is **translucent**.

4 When the Buick **drew nigh**, it came close, or approached.

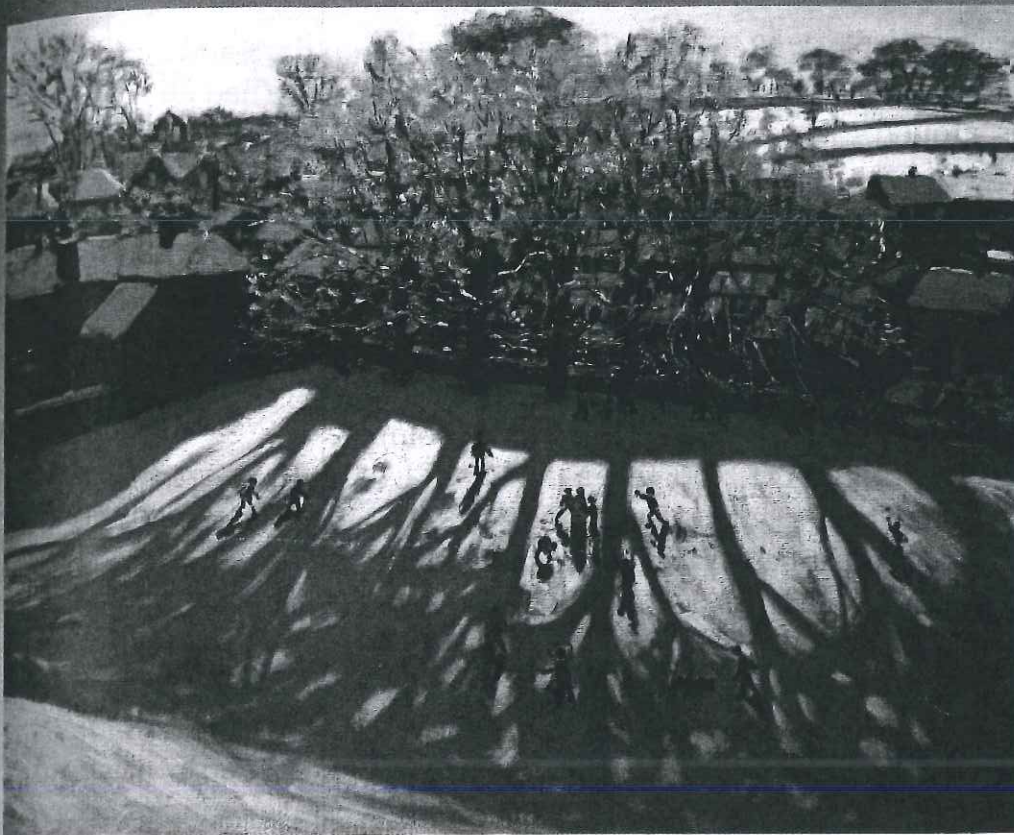
Vocabulary

solitude (sol'ə tōd') *n.* the state of being alone or separate from others

embarked (em bärkd') *v.* made a start

#3

Analyze Style How does the repetition in this sentence show the author's attitude?



Tideswell Berbyshire. Andrew Macara. Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76.2 cm. Private Collection.

man was gaining on us. He was a thin man, all action. All of a sudden, we were running for our lives.

Wordless, we split up. We were on our turf; we could lose ourselves in the neighborhood backyards, everyone for himself. I paused and considered. Everyone had vanished except Mikey Fahey, who was just rounding the corner of a yellow brick house. Poor Mikey, I trailed him. The driver of the Buick sensibly picked the two of us to follow. The man apparently had all day.

He chased Mikey and me around the yellow house and up a backyard path we knew by heart: under a low tree, up a bank, through a hedge, down some snowy steps, and across the grocery store's delivery driveway. We smashed through a gap in another hedge, entered a scruffy backyard and ran around its back porch and tight between houses to Edgerton Avenue; we ran across Edgerton to an alley and up our own sliding woodpile to the Halls' front yard; he kept coming. We ran up Lloyd Street and wound through mazy backyards toward the steep hilltop at Willard and Lang.

#4
Tone What does Dillard's tone reveal about her feelings toward the chase?

#5
Analyze Style In this paragraph, how does the author's style capture the excitement of the chase?

He chased us silently, block after block. He chased us silently over picket fences, through thorny hedges, between houses, around garbage cans, and across streets. Every time I glanced back, choking for breath, I expected he would have quit. He must have been as breathless as we were. His jacket strained over his body. It was an immense discovery, pounding into my hot head with every sliding, joyous step, that this ordinary adult evidently knew what I thought only children who trained at football knew: that you have to fling yourself at what you're doing, you have to point yourself, forget yourself, aim, dive.

Mikey and I had nowhere to go, in our own neighborhood or out of it, but away from this man who was chasing us. He impelled us forward; we compelled him to follow our route. The air was cold; every breath tore my throat. We kept running, block after block; we kept improvising, backyard after backyard, running a frantic course and choosing it simultaneously,⁵ failing always to find small places or hard places to slow him down, and discovering always, exhilarated, dismayed, that only bare speed could save us—for he would never give up, this man—and we were losing speed.

He chased us through the backyard **labyrinths** of ten blocks before he caught us by our jackets. He caught us and we all stopped.

We three stood staggering, half blinded, coughing, in an **obscure** hilltop backyard: a man in his twenties, a boy, a girl. He had released our jackets, our pursuer, our captor, our hero: he knew we weren't going anywhere. We all played by the rules. Mikey and I unzipped our jackets. I pulled off my sopping mittens. Our tracks multiplied in the backyard's new snow. We had been breaking new snow all morning. We didn't look at each other. I was cherishing my excitement. The man's lower pants legs were wet; his cuffs were full of snow, and there was a prow of snow beneath them on his shoes and socks. Some

⁵ Events that happen *simultaneously* occur at the same time.

Vocabulary

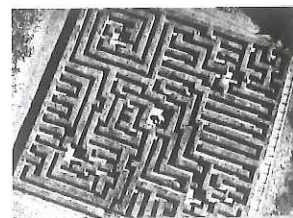
obscure (əb skyoor') *adj.* not clearly seen; remote

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Tone What is the tone of the memoir so far? What is Dillard's attitude toward the discovery she made that day?

Visual Vocabulary

A **labyrinth** is a set of winding, interconnected passages in which it is easy to get lost or lose one's way.



trees bordered the little flat backyard, some messy winter trees. There was no one around: a clearing in a grove, and we the only players.

It was a long time before he could speak. I had some difficulty at first recalling why we were there. My lips felt swollen; I couldn't see out of the sides of my eyes; I kept coughing.

"You stupid kids," he began perfunctorily.⁶

We listened perfunctorily indeed, if we listened at all, for the chewing out was redundant, a mere formality, and beside the point. The point was that he had chased us passionately without giving up, and so he had caught us. Now he came down to earth. I wanted the glory to last forever.

But how could the glory have lasted forever? We could have run through every backyard in North America until we got to Panama.⁷ But when he trapped us at the lip of the Panama Canal what precisely could he have done to prolong the drama of the chase and cap its glory? I brooded about this for the next few years. He could only have fried Mikey Fahey and me in boiling oil, say, or dismembered us piecemeal, or staked us to anthills. None of which I really wanted, and none of which any adult was likely to do, even in the spirit of fun. He could only chew us out there in the Panamanian jungle, after months or years of exalting pursuit. He could only begin, "You stupid kids," and continue in his ordinary Pittsburgh accent with his normal righteous anger and the usual common sense.

If in that snowy backyard the driver of the black Buick had cut off our heads, Mikey's and mine, I would have died happy, for nothing has required so much of me since as being chased all over Pittsburgh in the middle of winter—running terrified, exhausted—by this sainted, skinny, furious red-headed man who wished to have a word with us. I don't know how he found his way back to his car. ☹

⁶ Something done *perfunctorily* is done in a routine way, with little interest.

⁷ The Central American nation of *Panama* is known for the Panama Canal, which connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Vocabulary

prolong (prə lɒŋg') v. to lengthen in time

Tone What is surprising about Dillard's tone as she remembers the chase?

BQ BIG Question

Why was Dillard happy about running from the driver? What made this a memorable moment for her?

After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

1. Using your own words, describe the main events of this episode from Annie Dillard's memoir of her childhood. [Summarize]
2. In what ways might the young Dillard have been different from other young people in her neighborhood? Explain. [Infer]
3. What do the events in this account tell you about Dillard's personality? Give details from the text to support your answer. [Analyze]
4. Describe the ending of the story. Do you feel that the ending was satisfying, considering what came before? Support your answer with details from the text. [Evaluate]
5. **BQ** **BIG Question** Dillard says that being chased delighted her because "nothing has required so much of me since." Think of a task or adventure that required much of you. Did it bring you the same delight? Explain. [Connect]

Vocabulary Practice

Choose the sentence that uses the vocabulary word correctly.

- A. He did the chores **wholeheartedly**, without interest in finishing.
 - B. The actor threw himself **wholeheartedly** into learning the part.
- A. The woman in the **obscure** hat asked me for directions.
 - B. Olivia may live in an **obscure** area, but she travels often.
- A. Silas did not want to **prolong** the wait for another hour.
 - B. We have to **prolong** the entire distance to their house.

Academic Vocabulary

The driver's reaction was exciting to Dillard, in part, because it was **unpredictable**. To become more familiar with the word *unpredictable*, fill out the graphic organizer below.

definition	synonyms
unpredictable	
antonyms	sentence/image

TIP

Evaluating

Here are some tips to help you evaluate. Remember, when you evaluate, you make a judgment or form an opinion about something.

- Reread the description of the chase. Look for details that make the chase seem exciting. Also, look for places where Dillard explains how she feels about the chase.
- Think about the kind of ending that would be as exciting as the chase itself.

FOLDABLES Study Organizer

Keep track of your ideas about the **BIG Question** in your unit Foldable.

LOC ON



Literature Online

Selection Resources

For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u3.

