

**The Nonfiction of Joan Didion: A Study of Content and Form**

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by

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## ABSTRACT

Writer Joan Didion, who commonly writes about her home, California, is often praised for her criticism of various political issues. However, Joan Didion's writing goes a lot deeper than what many readers may notice. She uses not only her content but also her style and form as a way to offer commentary on what she is writing about. Her writing in both its content and form examines power structures that are imbedded within language, politics, groups, and individuals. She also examines her own use of power, as both a person and as an author.

## Introduction

Joan Didion, whose repertoire includes several novels, a number of essays, a couple of screenplays, and an autobiography, is often classified as a “California writer” because she is a native Californian, writes commentary about California, and often uses California as the setting of her fiction. However, Didion’s themes in writing go far beyond California. Much of her nonfiction writing is political but at the same time very personal. She uses writing not only to express her views on certain issues, but writing is also a way for Didion to work out and explore deeper issues of her own, issues that often relate to the larger political interests she explores.

In order for Didion’s writing to work on these different levels, she labors over her process with an intensity that is probably close to compulsion, which results in a prose that works almost like a complex formula, with numerous calculations and adjustments. However, while reading, her voice comes across with ease and grace, and this is probably the most admirable characteristic of Didion’s writing.

What I found captivating when I began reading Didion’s work were her questions that dealt with narrative because it was the first time I had ever applied the idea of narrative to something other than writing and reading. For Didion, the concept of narrative is both personal and political, and her major breakdowns as a writer and as a person result from questioning the idea of narrative. In the essay “The White Album,” she states very directly some of her thoughts on narrative:

We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have

learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.

Or at least we do for a while. I am talking here about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself, a common condition but one I found troubling. (The White Album 11)

What makes this statement even more interesting is that Didion, as a writer, is constantly creating narratives for her audience, so it would seem that the act of writing and publishing would be contradictory to her distrust of narrative. But through her writing, Didion is able to question narrative and its power in a way that gently pushes (not forces) readers to question it as well. Didion's ability to do this not only lies in what she writes but also how she writes. Because of this, it is important to look at both the content and the style/form of her work. This study will pull the content and form apart in order to see how Didion's writing works equally on both levels. Since she is a prolific writer, I have chosen to analyze two of her nonfiction pieces, Slouching Towards Bethlehem, a collection of essays published in 1961 and Where I was From, her autobiography published in 2003.

In looking at the close relationship between content and form in Didion's writing, I propose that Didion's nonfiction not only shows what she believes to be defective in standard forms of narration, but Didion uses both her content and form to show how the power balances of society are flawed. In a close reading of the content, I will show how Didion sees power balances to be unequal in society, but at the same time, she believes that anybody has the potential to hold power. In an examination of her form, I will show how her approach to writing relates to the power themes in her content.

I am going to break down Didion's writing in a way that illustrates three narrative elements. First is the broader traditional element that is laid out by larger social forces like government and law. Secondly, there is an individual narrative at work that is influenced by larger social forces, but the individual voice is often defenseless against the larger context. Thirdly, Didion's narrative demonstrates both of these forces in relation to each other and attempts to show how it is possible for the individual to take a stand against the larger social forces. By looking at Didion's collection of essays Slouching Towards Bethlehem and her most recent work Where I Was From, one can see a progression of thought in her ideas of power.

Much of my analysis of Didion's writing draws from Bakhtin's theory of authoritative discourse, which looks at power relations and struggles within language. The two conflicting aspects within language are called centripetal and centrifugal forces. In Bakhtin's view, "Centripetal forces produce the authoritative, fixed, inflexible discourses of religious dogma, scientific truth, and the political and moral status quo which are spoken by teachers, fathers and so on" (Maybin 65). What I refer to in Didion's writing as the larger and broader forces are what Bakhtin calls the centripetal forces. For Didion, the larger forces range from government and law to fiction writers and media. Opposing the centripetal forces are the centrifugal forces, which are smaller and less powerful manifestations of communication: "[. . .] centrifugal forces are associated with what Bakhtin terms 'inwardly persuasive discourse,' which is expressed in everyday informal conversations and people's reflections on their experience, within inner dialogues" (65). The two forces do not interact with each other equally. Centripetal forces work as the authoritative discourse and allow little interaction or change: " 'The

authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority fused to it” (227). As I will show, many of Didion’s characters became trapped because of this authoritative discourse, and it was because of their lack of language tools that they were in the situation they were in.

## Chapter One: Literature Review

Joan Didion's writing process has often been classified as neurotically detailed and compulsively planned out. After studying her work, I would find it hard to disagree with those statements, especially because her content and form work together so intimately. Her writing style adds just as much meaning to what she is writing as does the actual content of her words. The following evaluation of Didion critics is organized in a way that shows what I consider a progression of the study surrounding Joan Didion. All of the critics hold a valuable place in the discussion of Didion's work, and I have laid out their arguments in an attempt to show what piece of the puzzle they fit into. I first begin with critics who offer critique and evaluation of Didion's content, and the list progresses to critics who look at her writing style and form. By doing this, I not only want to give a thorough background of what has been said about Didion's writing, but I want to show the progression of thought devoted to Didion's writing. Also, this will help clarify the argument I lay out later, as I build off of and expand upon what many of these critics have said.

### Heikler

Joan Didion's writing style is worthy of in-depth study, especially since she has somewhat adhered to a particular style throughout her career. Where I was From, published in 2003, has a familiar ring to it, and this familiarity comes from more than just the material she deals with, her almost obsessive detailing, and at times sardonic tone. The form (or the organization) in many places follows patterns that she has used in past works. Paul Heikler claims in "The Struggle for Articulation and Didion's Construction



of the Reader's Self-Respect in Slouching Towards Bethlehem" that the critics who have studied Didion's early nonfiction work miss out on Didion's main point because "they focus so intently on particular stylistic or thematic aspects of her essays that they become blind to how these specific elements work in concert toward a more general end" (97). Heikler claims that by looking at Didion's writing in a broader scope and by not obsessing over particular stylistic features or thematic aspects, the analyst will be able to see that Didion is really attempting to draw the reader into a place where he/she can bring personal experience into the reading to understand it. By not making value judgments, Didion is allowing readers to claim meaning for themselves, and the reader will develop a sense of self-respect (the title of a Slouching essay) through the process of reading Didion's writing. Her writing, he claims, "requires each of us to integrate our own experience, to construct literary continuities with her words, and thus to achieve our own individual and 'minor but perilous triumph over nothingness'" (101). And this, Heikler claims, is really the point and significance of Didion's writing.

Heikler's claim has value to it, but he risks giving off the impression that there is no merit whatsoever in exploring the particulars of Didion's writing. His argument also risks being too general, in that it teeters on the edge of implying that Didion does not have a certain goal in mind or a certain point, beyond forming a personal opinion, that she wants readers to take from her work. If this were the case, then Didion would not have commented in "A Preface" that the feedback she initially got for "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" frustrated her: "I suppose almost everyone who writes is afflicted some of the time by the suspicion that nobody out there is listening, but it seemed to me then (perhaps because the piece was important to me) that I had never gotten a feedback

so universally beside the point” (xiv). Heikler definitely makes room in the Didion conversation for the personal to have a place, but he falters in that he does not connect the personal to a bigger picture. It is necessary to look at the specifics of her writing style in conjunction with the content in order to understand the commentary that Didion is making about the faults in the way narrative lines are traditionally constructed throughout American culture, especially narratives that come to a specific point for the purpose of placing value judgments on them.

Didion’s writing almost always seems to explore both a microcosm and macrocosm view, and in doing so, she draws parallels between the two, or perhaps more so, she forces the reader to draw parallels between the two, and this is where Heikler’s view of bringing the reader into the work fits in. He claims that the one of the most important aspects of self-respect is forming a personal and articulate philosophy, and Didion’s writing style allows readers to do this. Heikler does, however, begin to show how as an author, Didion does not attempt to preach to her readers. Didion’s writing style puts the responsibility on readers to find power in her language; it is no longer the author’s role to do that. Part of this power can be found by bringing one’s personal experience to her writing, but this is not entirely how one can find power within language. However, Heikler leaves out the problem that Didion touches on in Slouching Towards Bethlehem and continues in Where I was From: the strategies and processes of the development of personal narratives/philosophies come from homogenous and somewhat formulaic sources and methods that are imposed on individuals through social constructs, which include various political narratives.

## Anderson

In his critique of Didion scholarship, Heikler claims that critics focus too much on the particulars of Didion's writing. In this critique, Heikler spends a considerable amount of time looking at Chris Anderson's article, "The Cat in the Shimmer" where Anderson has broken Didion's writing style into three categories: the rhetoric of particularity, the rhetoric of gaps, and the rhetoric of process. Each of these styles work together, according to Anderson to do three things: 'tell the story of the making of the truth,' fulfill the essay as a form (Critical response 58), and allow "the techniques of the New Journalism [to] reach their highest level of polish and refinement..." (59).

Anderson looks closely at the three rhetorical styles he has outlined and gives concrete examples for each. Anderson believes that the main strategy Didion uses in her writing is the rhetoric of particularity (52). By writing with such strong, concrete images, Anderson claims that Didion "'shows' rather than 'tells,'" and by doing this her writing does not generalize her point; instead she uses particulars to "evoke meanings" (52). In order to evoke rather than explain, Didion must use, what Anderson classifies, the rhetoric of gaps, "the withholdings of interpretation and commentary at every level of language" (54). In order to do this, Anderson claims that Didion must also leave out transitions. What this does is similar to what Heikler claims is the purpose of Didion's writing, to fully engage the reader: "But because Didion deliberately leaves out the connections, we are required to engage in a split-second more of active interpretation." This technique also creates "a verbal collage" (54). Though Didion uses the "gaps" as their own type of commentary, Anderson's rhetoric of process shows that her writing is still able to work through the problems she is exploring and is in fact part of the reason

that she is writing. Anderson claims that “the movement of her sentences is cumulative...a movement which parallels the way the mind actually seems to work in the act of thinking, first fixing on an idea, then discovering its qualifiers and extensions” (57).

Anderson evaluates the purpose of these three styles in more detail when looking at her book Salvador. In doing this, he begins to explore Didion’s critique of the general and meaningless use of language in American culture, language that puts simple/general labels on complicated issues. Anderson claims that Didion’s writing style is something she believes could battle the problem of general language use: “...the crisis of abstraction and euphemism can be met by a rhetoric of precision, imagery, and openendedness” (62). Even more precisely and to the point, it is not that Didion is battling general language use; this kind of language is symptomatic of power structures/ power/ powerlessness within language. Didion is attempting to show how language is used in almost every circumstance as a way to gain or lose power, and often those who use language to reach a certain outcome aren’t as powerful as they may seem because they are still trapped within another language system that they are oblivious to.

In looking at language use, Anderson’s argument is more refined than Heikler’s and comes closer to understanding the purpose of Didion’s writing style. It is true that Didion’s writing style forces readers to be more alert and involved while reading as Heikler claims. But so much of her writing brings out the issues of oversimplified/ overgeneralized language use and the power structure built within language—a point that Heikler only implies in his essay. However, although Anderson looks at language issues in more detail, his essay does not link Didion’s claims to the systems that are part of the

language problems; he only offers a diagnosis and a somewhat simple solution. In order to come to a solution that could work, it is necessary to explore where the oversimplifying of language that Didion comments on comes from. In looking at Slouching Towards Bethlehem and Where I was From closely, one can see how throughout time, Didion has explored generalized language use and how this is connected to systems that our culture has become accustomed to accepting. This laissez faire attitude toward language is what causes powerlessness.

### **Muggli**

Though Mark Z. Muggli comments on Didion's journalism rather than her essay writing—these two types of writing are not cut and dry in Didion's collection—in “The Poetics of Joan Didion's Journalism,” his study of Didion's use of symbols is relevant to all of her writing. He comments on the particularity of Didion's writing but importantly notes that what appears to the reader as fact often is not, and the result is a specific type of rhetorical effect. He claims, “Didion does not tell us what she heard, but what she might have heard” (406). And in bringing up this difference, Muggli makes an important note/observation: “This distinction between what happened and what generally happens is the basis of Aristotle's distinction between history and poetry” (406). Because she writes so poetically and incorporates such deep metaphors, Muggli claims that Didion's use of symbols extends to “what we might call ‘emblem’” (407). Her symbols reach the status of emblem because she uses them in a way that can be considered timeless, and the emblems “reverberate with an intensity that suggests a large world of meaning beyond the confines of the particular story” (407-408). Though an emblem of Didion's is very

specific, Muggli indicates that its “most important quality is the high level of generality that it tries to convey, often explicitly” (408).

Muggli is able to effectively describe and explain some of the more mysterious elements of Didion’s writing. By distinguishing between symbol and emblem, Muggli has brought into the conversation an important feature of Didion’s writing, one that he notes transcends the confines of time. There are some connections between Muggli’s argument and Anderson’s. Anderson claims that Didion’s “rhetoric of particularity” allows meaning to be evoked rather than explained precisely. Muggli takes this a step further by showing how particular images come to life through the process of becoming an emblem and by evoked meaning. I aim to incorporate and build off of Muggli’s distinction and explore the way that Didion’s form allows her to produce such powerful emblems in her text and how this is significant to her readers. It is also important to explore what these emblems mean in a social context larger than the one defined by the parameters Didion sets in her writing.

### **Friedman**

Among the critics who analyze Didion’s meanings and philosophies, Friedman offers a concise rationale within Didion’s writing in “The Didion Sensibility: An Analysis.” In the article, Friedman looks at Didion’s work in the context of existentialism and uses Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* as a starting point for her argument. She notes that Kierkegaard claims that there are two ways to live, aesthetically or ethically, and under Kierkegaard’s belief system there “is an ethical pattern to the universe imposed by God. Once the individual recognizes the existence of this pattern, he is defined in relation to it,

whether he defies it or accepts it" (Friedman 84). Not accepting the pattern is to live aesthetically, in the moment, not thinking of a larger pattern or context. Friedman brings Didion into this philosophy by noting that she does not believe in a larger universal pattern but shows how many of Didion's characters live aesthetically, not looking to the past as a tool of guidance. Of course, Didion's characters fail when living in this mode. However, Didion does not believe in universal systems either. Friedman claims, "It is Didion's insistence on the personal rather than the universal that most separates her vision from Kierkegaard's ... The point of living is specific to each individual" (85).

The main characters of Didion's novels and in many of her essays either seem to be content because they have accepted their place in life, or they are terribly unhappy because they don't understand the point in their existence. It is impossible for her characters to escape the systems that surround them, and when they attempt to live by their own guidelines, they become trapped, often literally by a system that places judgment on them. This is because they are still working under a system of language that keeps them ignorant and immobile. Though Friedman's claim that "For Didion, the value and justification for commitments are emphatically internal and personal" has examples to back it up, Friedman does not factor in that it is impossible to escape systems and does not note the systems that Didion incorporates into her writing. These systems in some ways define her characters, and in Where I Was From, she shows how she has made use out of the systems that have surrounded her and how they have shaped her. In showing her process of recognition to these systems and what she has made of them, Didion shows how she has found a personal power.

## Mallon

Thomas Mallon studies the way Joan Didion uses history in her novels, especially its function in explaining current tragic events. He claims that Didion's use of history asks readers the question, "is the view of the past he is about to get a sufficient explanation of the disaster he has already witnessed" (Joan Didion: Essays and Conversations 60) Each main character in her novels shares physical and emotional qualities and each comes to a point where she must consider and explore her personal history. The exploration of their own personal histories causes both positive and negative emotions; however, in the end, the characters do not find comfort in looking at their own histories:

To a large extent, the vague 'optimism' these women initially possess is based on ignorance and evasion of their own pasts. Only when the diffusion of their security and good faith begins do they apprehend their own histories, obtain a sense of where they come from and what they are; the more sharply that new sense of history focuses itself the more each realizes how irrecoverable the past is. In turn, that realization, having come too late, add to their despair and accelerates their decline. (62)

Mallon comes to the conclusion in his essay that the women of Joan Didion's novels have not only struggled with history, but they have lived outside of the narrative forms that history creates: "...[the novels] not only insistently ace the idea and importance of history, but also present such full and sympathetic portraits of women who have ranged outside its orbit" (67).



Mallon's acute observations on Didion's use of history in her novels can easily be applied to her nonfiction works. In Slouching Towards Bethlehem, Didion explores various real life characters who have chosen to live outside of certain narratives and at the same time become trapped within others. In some ways, ridding oneself of a certain framework works, but usually only for a certain amount of time. The difference between when it works or when it doesn't often has to do with the character's intention. In doing this, Didion is commenting on a bigger picture of the power built within narrative constructs and how this works on more than one level.

### **Wilcox**

In "Narrative Technique and the Theme of Historical Discontinuity," Leonard Wilcox explores the way that history plays a major role in Didion's two novels, Play it as it Lays and A Book of Common Prayer. Wilcox lightly touches on how narrative technique adds to this exploration. However, the majority of the essay compares the main characters of the two novels and looks at the similarities and differences in the ways the characters deal with past personal events. Wilcox includes how Didion's definition of history is not just limited to past personal events, but it also contains past national events. Wilcox also comments on Didion's purpose for exploring history in her writing: "Yet her novels are not only historical probes but statements about the value of historical knowledge, its redemptive capacity in a world of exiles from past and future" (Friedman 71). It is evident that Wilcox believes that Didion finds the past to be a key to understanding and living in the present: "both [novels] imply the redemptive capacity of

historical knowledge for a world where the past is devalued and the future difficult to envision” (Friedman 80).

Wilcox’s observations are very keen and sensitive to Didion’s treatment of historical knowledge, and his argument concludes in a manner similar to Heikler’s, in that he emphasizes the importance of individual historical exploration. However, Wilcox gives a much more detailed and well-supported explanation for doing so. He comes to the conclusion, “What is implicit in her often disjointed and oblique narratives is the absolute necessity for the individual, whether reader, ‘witness’ or ‘analysand,’ to experience the process of reconstruction of the past in order to understand and learn from it” (80).

Though this is necessary, Wilcox and well as Heikler leave out the possible errors that a community has in its contribution or lack thereof in working through historical narratives. This may, however, not be relevant in her fictional work, but the idea is present in her early and later nonfiction work. Wilcox also mentions the “implications that the narrative has for recent American history,” but he does not expand on this idea, which is an important theme in Didion’s work (80).

### **Evan Carton**

In his article “Joan Didion’s Dreampolitics of the Self,” Evan Carton gives credit to the power that comes through Didion’s writing in both what she writes and the style of her writing. Carton claims that in the reviews of Didion’s writing, more than just praise is given: “One hears the accents of enchanted submission to her rhetorical power, of almost relieved communion with her vision, of personal identification [. . .]” (35). Part of Didion’s authority, Carton believes, comes from Didion’s honesty about herself in her

writing, and that is what allows readers to connect with her as not just a writer but a person: “In fact, Didion’s obtrusive honesty about her own obsessions, illusions, and limitations constitutes an essential, if paradoxical, element of her authority” (35).

Rather than just evaluating Didion’s power by her personal terms, Carton also includes how this relates to national issues that Didion writes about. He begins to make the connection between Didion’s personal identity and a larger national identity that is shared through what can be called ‘the myth’:

For the drama of America—at least as America has been construed in our literary and political rhetoric—has always been the drama of the self. Our images of national consensus and national identity, that is, have not implied the sacrifice or qualifications of individualism; on the contrary, they are founded on the dream of the insular, autonomous self. It is a dream that, in our time and place, we at once discredit and re-enter. (36)

With this in mind, Carton shows how Didion’s essay collection is about both personal and national crises, both feeding into each other in a way so that eventually the two really cannot be separated. In commenting on the preface of Slouching Towards Bethlehem, Carton claims, “This is the first of a series of indications in Didion’s preface that an internal crisis, a personal vertigo, intersects or even underlies the book’s social analysis” (36). This is important because Didion is not exempting herself from what she comments on. She is not above it; rather, she is part of it, too— though perhaps with a keener eye and sharper awareness— and is affected by it just the same. Her appeal to readers then comes from Carton’s idea that in her writing, “Didion is not ‘at the center’ because she is,

as The Wall Street Journal calls her, ‘ a superb evaluator of American culture’ but because she is a quintessential embodiment of it” (36).

### **Beauvais**

As I have noted earlier, Joan Didion’s writing technique in her fiction and nonfiction is similar and offers much of the same commentary on the systems of knowing. These systems of knowing can be connected to the idea of narrative form. Didion’s content and form are tightly integrated and when read closely can be interpreted as a commentary on accepted and unquestioned narrative structures. Paul Jude Beauvais explores ideas similar to these in “Postmodernism and the Ideology of Form: The Narrative Logic of Joan Didion’s Democracy.” Beauvais uses postmodern studies as a background for characterizing Didion’s writing technique and offers a thorough examination of Didion’s purpose for writing in the style that she does. He looks at Didion’s writing in relation to the concept of grand narratives and points out that Didion uses a metafictional narrative technique that “enables [her] to offer an ironic narrative that calls into question the grand narrative of American democracy” (16). The novel, Beauvais explains, places personal narratives within a framework of certain historical contexts (mainly related to the Vietnam War), and in doing so, questions the relationship between the two. Beauvais characterizes these two different frameworks as internal and external, where the actual narrative techniques that Didion uses are “internal to the text,” and the “historical backdrop against which the fictional story is set” is the external factor (19). But this does not solve or offer solutions to the problem of historical narrative, the problem that “the events of recent history constitute a chronicle rather than a story; that is

they occur in a sequence but lack the discernible connections necessary for a coherent plot” (24). However, in this novel, Didion is able to find a workable angle by using a metafictional technique, where “the narrator Didion” has an active role in the telling of the story. Part of the narrator’s role is to comment on her own problems with the writing of the novel.

I would like to add to Beauvais’s argument and show how Didion deals with the ideas of grand narratives and personal narratives in her nonfiction accounts. However, I would like to take this a step further and enter Bakhtin’s idea of authoritative discourse, centripetal and centrifugal forces into the conversation. By looking at Didion’s technique of narration in relation to the narratives she recounts in her nonfiction works, and in looking at how the idea of historical narrative versus personal narrative fits into this, I am going to argue that Didion is offering a way to respond and interact with the authoritative discourse that Bakhtin claims shuts out any possible ways to interact with. Because Didion explores the relationship between individuals, larger social contexts and the power of language in relation to both of these, it is necessary to look at the places in the text where Didion outwardly discusses language use, and it is also necessary to look at how power structure in language works on macro and micro levels (together and separately) in different types of narrative (family, individual, social, law, historical, etc.). In order to see how Didion goes beyond merely pointing out these power relationships by using her own unique system of narrative form, it is necessary to break down Didion’s narrative structure in great detail. Finally, I will tie in the purpose of her form in relation to her content.

## Chapter Two: Power Structures in Didion's Content

Though Didion does not outwardly state that her essays in Slouching Towards Bethlehem have anything to do with various power structures within society, a close analysis reveals that they deal with that very idea. Before the preface of her collection, Didion cites Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," and in the preface comments:

The widening gyre, the falcon which does not hear the falconer, the gaze blank and pitiless as the sun; those have been my points of reference, the only images against which much of what I was seeing and hearing and thinking seemed to make any pattern. (xiii)

Later in the preface, she makes reference to the Yeats line, "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (xi). However, Didion does not ever make clear what it is that is at the center, though she claims that most of her essays have to do with this center. She never explains what the things are that eventually fall apart.

By taking a closer look at her essays, it becomes more clear that the center Didion writes about in the preface has to do with power (and often a power struggle), and this power struggle is intimately related to language and narrative. Her essays deal with power in different forms and on different levels, and often Didion, though not overtly, questions where power exactly is located and if individual power even exists. As critic, Katherine Usher Henderson notes, "There is a profound tension in Slouching Towards Bethlehem between Didion's conviction that one must assume responsibility for one's own life and her fear that freedom of will is an illusion" (112). A close look at "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" as well as the essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" shows how Didion sees power distributed, used, and often misunderstood in society.

Three of her personal essays in the collection, “On Keeping a Notebook,” “On Self-Respect,” and “On Going Home,” reveal how Didion views power in relation to herself, in an individual sense. Finally, her autobiography, Where I Was From—which was published 42 years after Slouching Towards Bethlehem—examines both large scale and individual powers and helps show Didion’s personal relationship with both types of power, as well as giving insight to how her point of view has evolved.

### **Lucille Miller’s Powerless Narrative and the Centerless Narrative of the Hippies**

#### ***“Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream”***

Often overlooked by critics, Didion’s first essay in Slouching Towards Bethlehem, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” explores in great detail the connection between power and narrative. In building her meta-narrative, Didion shows how, as Foucault says, “power relations permeate all levels of social existence and are therefore to be found operating at every site of social life” (Hall 77). In this essay, power is operating at smaller, individual levels, as well as in larger social forces, in this case, mainly the law.

“Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” is about a woman, Lucille Miller, who is convicted of murdering her husband, Gordon Miller, and the essay is an objective account of the events and different narratives that come into play. Didion carefully presents various components of the people involved and shows how a narrative is constructed by the law—a centralized and higher power, which according to Bakhtin would be a centripetal force—in order to prove the guilt of Lucille. However, at the same

time, Didion exemplifies that there are several narratives at work, and all of these narratives, though perhaps seemingly minor, are important because each aids to illustrate the power dynamics and relations embedded within the essay.

The power structures work on both micro and macro levels, or personal and larger, such as social and historical, frameworks. Though Lucille Miller is the main “character” of this essay, it does not come across as a biography because Didion focuses, not on the person of Lucille, but rather, on the various narratives that affect her.

However, Lucille does not have power over all of these, even the narratives that should be personal and should belong to her. Much of the essay details Lucille’s personal life, and though it is her personal past, it becomes clear that Lucille really does not have any control or power over it. Didion first gives some background information on Lucille:

She was born on January 17, 1930, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the only child of Gordon and Lily Maxwell, both dedicated to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church [. . .]. By the time Lucille Maxwell enrolled at Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington, the Adventist school where her parents then taught, she was an eighteen-year-old possessed of unremarkable good looks and remarkable high spirits. (7)

Although Didion is giving Lucille’s background information, she is using this information for another purpose— to show how Lucille’s narrative is almost planned out, how Lucille seems to have little control over her own situation because she is trapped within a narrative, a narrative that Didion would dub “the Golden Dream.” None of what Didion has given for Lucille’s history is within Lucille’s control. Before giving Lucille’s background information, the author makes this concept more clear: “Of course she came



from somewhere else, came off the prairie in search of something she had seen in a movie or heard on the radio, for this is a Southern California story" (7), implying that Lucille's story has been told time and time again, which makes Lucille's personal narrative also part of a grand narrative, so it works on both a personal and a larger level at the same time.

Didion brings Lucille Miller's marriage into her description, and in some ways, it is almost ironic that she does so because unlike so many classic, fairy-tale (golden dreams) narratives, Lucille's doesn't end happily with her marriage; Lucille's marriage was only the beginning of her powerless plight. Lucille's marriage was almost a narrative in itself, and just as she is part of "a Southern California story" her marriage was just another story that had been retold in American culture: "Unhappy marriages so resemble one another that we do not need to know too much about the course of this one" (8). And even though Lucille and her husband's marriage appeared from the outside to be working, it was, almost predictably, falling apart: "By the summer of 1964 they had achieved the bigger house on the better street and the familiar accouterments of a family on its way up [ . . . ] And they had reached the familiar season of divorce" (8-9).

Though what Didion has given as background information does not appear to be out of the ordinary, it deserves some attention because Didion is reiterating that Lucille Miller is a victim of narrative; she bounces from living within one narrative to the next, with the expectation of a happy ending or just the hope of something coming together, but eventually, Lucille and her husband have to come to terms with settling with what they have: "It seemed the marriage reached a traditional truce, the point at which so many

resign themselves to cutting both their losses and their hopes” (9). Again, Didion adds in a few key words to emphasize that this is not anything new.

Lucille Miller looked to other outlets to fulfill the narrative that she had hoped for, “to find all the promises of the middle class [. . .], to find what she imagined to be the good life” (15). Lucille looked to Arthwell Hayton, “a man who seemed to have the gift for people and money and the good life that Cork Miller so noticeably lacked,” and had an affair with him (15-16). Again, Didion notes how Lucille’s affair follows a typical narrative line: “In some ways it was the conventional clandestine affair in a place like San Bernardino, a place where little is bright or graceful, where it is routine to misplace the future and easy to start looking for it in bed” (16).

Even though Lucille Miller is powerless because she holds so much trust in the stories she is a part of, she is even more powerless because eventually, these narratives are used against her in court in order to convict her of the murder of her husband. And again because of this, in another way, her various narratives work on micro and macro levels. First, they are a part of her personal life and shape her actions; secondly, they follow a somewhat familiar and larger pattern. Added to both of these, however, is the fact that they are taken by a higher power and are used in court in order to determine her fate. By showing how Lucille’s version of the story cannot hold up against the court’s, Didion is demonstrating, in a very precise way, authoritative discourse— created here by the court system— at work. Didion notes that both portrayals—Lucille’s and the prosecutor’s— of the events surrounding the death of Gordon Miller could have been plausible:

Although this [the prosecution's] version accounted for some of the physical evidence [...] it did not seem on its own any more or less credible than Lucille Miller's story. Moreover, some of the physical evidence did seem to support her story [...]. (14)

However, Didion hints at why it was that Lucille's story did not hold up against the court's: she had very little power in comparison to them, and because it seemed as if the court wanted to find her guilty, they were going to do everything possible to make a story that fit her absolute guilt:

[...] the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Office was trying to construct another version of what might have happened between 12:30 and 1:50 a.m. [the time from when Lucille was away from home and the time the police were contacted]. The hypothesis they would eventually present was based on the somewhat torturous premise that Lucille Miller had undertaken a plan which failed: a plan to stop the car on the lonely road, spread gasoline over her presumably drugged husband, and, with a stick on the accelerator, gently 'walk' the Volkswagen over the embankment, where it would tumble four feet down the retaining wall into the lemon grove and almost certainly explode (13-14).

Because the Sheriff's Office had the power to create this narrative, they had to find a way to make it believable and ensure that it was the only version of the story that could be the absolute truth. It was only because they had status in society they were able to have such strong power over narrative. Though this was Lucille Miller's life, she had completely lost control over it at this point because her narrative no longer belonged to her; it

belonged to those who had the power to carefully construct details and reasons and motives: "It was a spotty case, and to make it work at all the State was going to have to find a motive. There was talk of unhappiness, talk of another man. That kind of motive, during the next few weeks, was what they set out to establish" (15). Even though the story had been constructed by those in power, Didion claims that what was used to eventually prosecute Lucille was not concrete evidence but in some ways became part of the case and had to do with a narrative bigger than the court case:

What was most startling about the case that the State of California was preparing against Lucille Miller was something that had nothing to do with law at all, something that never appeared in the eight-column headlines but was always there between them: the revelation that the dream was teaching the dreamers how to live. (17)

Or in other words, an idealized narrative was what some people (the people who fell for it) attempted to live by and fulfill.

In the end, even though Lucille's side of the story could have been just as true as what the court ruled, it is the authoritative discourse that is heard and remembered, with no other point of view possible. As Bakhtin claims, "One must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its authority—with political power, an institution, a person—and it stands and falls together with that authority" (Morris 78-79). As long as the court, the authority, could maintain that their version of the narrative was true (the sentencing of Lucille to prison pretty much ensures that their story would remain undisputed), all differences would remain unheard and powerless.

Though in the end Lucille was found guilty for the murder of her husband, Didion takes an interesting twist and shows that even those who held positions of authority did not necessarily have total control over narrative and are just as powerless in some aspects as Lucille was, which exemplifies Foucault's notion of how power works:

It [power] is never monopolized by one centre. It is deployed and exercised through a net-like organization. This suggests that we are all, to some degree, caught up in its circulation—oppressors and oppressed.

Power relations permeate all levels of social existence and are therefore to be found operating at every site of social life [. . .]. (Hall 77)

Didion ends the essay with a description of Arthwell Hayton's—the attorney who supposedly had the picture perfect life that Lucille longed for—remarriage: “The bridegroom was in black tie, with a white carnation in his buttonhole. The bride wore a long white dress and carried a shower bouquet of sweetheart roses with stephanotis streamers. A coronet of seed pearls held her illusion veil” (28). Hayton, a person who was able to exercise power at one level is still caught up within a discourse that subordinates.

### ***“Slouching Towards Bethlehem”***

In an essay that Didion claims to be the “most imperative” for her to write in the collection, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” deals with San Francisco and its “social hemorrhaging” during the sixties (85). It is also the essay that “had failed to get through to many of the people [. . .] who even liked the piece that [it] was talking about something more general than a handful of children wearing mandalas on their foreheads” (xiv). Mainly, the essay consists of snippets of Didion's experiences and conversations she has with the various people she meets in the District, most of them on drugs and

pseudo-interested in politics. The essay, Didion asserts, is about atomization (xiii), and it was the most important for her to write because it was during a time when Didion “had been paralyzed by the fear that writing was an irrelevant act [ . . . ]”. This thought would be detrimental to any writer but is especially dangerous to a writer who defines herself and her personal power through writing, which is detailed later in this chapter.

In “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” Didion begins to show how power works within a community that appears to be falling apart, a phenomenon that, according to Didion, is related to language and narrative. From the start of the essay, Didion makes reference to language use, and she also places the people that she is writing about in the context of narrative, in that they are not only part of a story, but, like Lucille Miller, they are stories in themselves:

The center was not holding. It was a country [ . . . ] of vandals who misspelled even the four-letter words they scrawled. Adolescents drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins, children who were never taught and would never now learn the games that held the society together. (84)

By the end of the essay, Didion very precisely expresses her belief in language, and clearly makes a connection between language use and power:

As it happens I am still committed to the idea that the ability to think for one's self depends upon one's mastery of language, and I am not optimistic about children who will settle for saying, to indicate that their mother and father do not live together, that they come from a 'broken

home,' They are sixteen, fifteen, fourteen years old, younger all the time, an army of children waiting to be given words (123).

It wasn't just that the "hippies" she was writing about didn't have a narrative; the problem was that they were trying to abandon their narratives and start anew without the past as an influence. In a conversation Didion has with two teenage runaways, Jeff and Debbie, she attempts to understand their motivation for leaving their past. The two complain about chores, going to church, having to dress a certain way, and then Jeff hints at the idea of abandoning the past: "'We're just gonna let it all happen,' Jeff says. 'Everything's in the future, you can't pre-plan it. First we get jobs, then a place to live. Then, I don't know'" (92). When Didion asks about their past and what they wanted to be when they grew up, Jeff responds, "' I can't remember I ever thought about it'" (92). However, forgetting the past just doesn't work, and it is partly because they (Jeff and Debbie as well as most of the other hippies) didn't have power within language. Had they had this power, had they been able to understand the social codes (social language) that they seemed to have rejected, they may have been able to make real changes in society's structure; instead, the people of the District were throwing around jargon that they didn't actually understand: "They feed back exactly what is given them. Because they do not believe in words [. . .] their only proficient vocabulary is in the society's platitudes" (123).

By not having a grasp on language and meaning, Didion's critique suggests that the Haight Ashbury personalities added to social fragmentation because without understanding language, they could not understand what they were trying to be a part of (or break away from):

We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum. Once we had seen these children, we could not longer overlook the vacuum, no longer pretend that society's atomization could be reversed. [. . .] They are less in rebellion against the society than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain types of its most publicized self-doubts, *Vietnam, Saran-Wrap, diet pills, the Bomb*. (123)

Though they were powerless, in the face of social forces, they were not useless. The movement could have been seen as something positive because in the least, it was a sign that something had gone askew.

Within the District, as Didion saw it, no rules applied, and the basics that a society needed to survive were disintegrating. Without a certain degree of social code at work, social life would be non-existent, and Didion and Foucault both agree on this point. According to Foucault, "Men and women are always social creations, the products of codes and disciplines" (Walzer 61), and Didion asserts, "For better or worse, we are what we learned as children" (158). What Didion critiques in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" is related to the idea that she contemplates in her essay "On Morality," where she states, "You see, I want to be quite obstinate about insisting that we have no way of knowing—beyond that fundamental loyalty to social code—what is 'right' and what is 'wrong,' what is 'good' and what is 'evil'" (162). This "fundamental social code" has nothing to do with social institutions, law, or social roles. It's as primary as "try[ing] not to abandon our dead to the coyotes" (158). A lack of this fundamental code is what partly bothers Didion about the social fragmentation of San Francisco. The end of her essay provides a



disturbing example of the breaking of what Didion would consider part of the fundamental social code:

When I finally find Otto [one of the many people that Didion spends time with in Haight Ashbury] he says 'I got something at my place that'll blow your mind,' and when we get there I see a child on the living room floor, wearing a reefer coat, reading a comic book.

'Five year old,' Otto says. 'On acid.' (127)

Though Didion does not support the social fragmentation, she sees it as part of a cycle and doesn't blame those involved. By rejecting the social codes and attempting to start a new way of life, the hippies Didion observed were just as much victims as Lucille Miller was. Their rebellion was just a symptom of the major problems surrounding San Francisco and in the country; they are not to blame because their reaction was normal and possibly predictable. They, like Lucille Miller, were buying into the discourse of the California Dream—the idealized notion that anything was possible in California. About halfway through the essay, Didion writes a direct statement to readers, which explains this cycle:

*Anybody who thinks this is all about drugs has his head in a bag. It's a social movement, quintessentially romantic, the kind that recurs in times of real social crisis. The themes are always the same. A return to innocence. The invocation of an earlier authority and control. The mysteries of the blood. An itch for the transcendental, for purification. Right there you've got the ways that romanticism historically ends up in trouble, lends itself to authoritarianism. (120)*

The examples of Lucille Miller and of the Haight Ashbury dwellers allow for an understanding of how power and, just as importantly, the reaction to that power works. If looked at in Foucault's perspective, the hippies were also doomed from the start: "Power is not something located in and symbolized by the sovereign, but permeates society in such a way that taking over the state apparatus (though a political revelation of coup) does not in itself change the power network" (Hoy, 134). In both essays, Didion is able to show power working on all levels, and also, she gives clues to her belief that power is a greater concept than can be conceived because it lies in a grander scheme of social organization and relations. Perhaps her somewhat vaguely expressed revelation that the center could not hold was really the start of an understanding that power, just as Foucault understands it, has "no focal point, but rather an endless network of power relations" (Walzer 55).

### **Didion's personal essays and power**

In a section of the collection titled "Personals," Didion becomes more present in her essays, making her writing less journalistic and more intimate. These essays not only give readers insight into Didion's life, but they also reveal more directly Didion's personal beliefs and values. In being the central figures of these essays, Didion shows the various ways that she finds personal power within social constructs. In order to have power, Didion finds it is necessary to have an understanding of the self, and for Didion, understanding herself is achieved chiefly through writing and family.

## Writing

In the first essay of this section, "On Keeping a Notebook," Didion explores the reasons why writing in a notebook are purposeful to her. She claims that what she writes in her notebook are not factual accounts of events and that she does not write to merely remember the events that she records: "So the point of my keeping a notebook has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing or thinking" (133). Didion even goes so far as to admit that much of what she writes to herself is not entirely factual because the way she remembers events are not always how they actually played out, and a good percentage of the time, she tells "what some would call lies" (134).

Didion's drive behind her personal writing, then, has to do with something much deeper than recording events or creating stories, or even communicating a point. She claims, "[. . .] not only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters" (134). Anthony Paul Kerby, in Narrative and the Self, makes connections between a person's memories and what makes the self, and his exploration is often reminiscent of Didion's personal journey. First, Kerby examines the imagination and its connection to memory: "Imagination very often presents us with a past that we wish we had lived, or with the past as we now wish we had lived it. We might say [...] that imagination augments recollection and the values of the memories recollected" (25). Didion recognizes the role that imagination plays in her memory recollection:

The cracked crab that I recall having for lunch the day my father came home from Detroit in 1945 must certainly be embroidery, worked into the

day's pattern to lend verisimilitude; I was ten years old and would not now remember the cracked crab. The day's events did not turn on cracked crab. And yet it is precisely that fictitious cracked crab that makes me see the afternoon all over again [...]. (134)

For Didion, this is not a bad thing at all. Instead, these fictional additions are what make the experiences unique to Didion: "*How it felt to me*: that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook" (134-135). Didion slowly makes her way throughout the essay to realize that writing in her notebooks is a way to affirm her selfhood even though at times she "imagine[s] [. . .] that the notebook is about other people" (135). It seems odd that Didion would even consider that at her notebook's center is other people, but the confusion of this lies in the idea that

we are brought up in the ethic that others, any others, all others, are by definition more interesting than ourselves [. . .] But our notebooks give us away, for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable 'I'. (136)

It is useful to work in Kerby's notions about memory and its purpose to ourselves because whether they actually happened or not, Didion is recording her memories or her versions of reality. Kerby notes, "The empiricist John Locke viewed memory as central to our experience of personal identity [. . .]," and Kerby examines how the idea of 'then' and 'now' influence perceptions of selfhood (24). Memory and perception not only have to do with the past, but they also have to do with the present: "Memorial experience (recollection) is not simply of the past; it is, as we have said, the past for me *now*, and this

qualification makes a considerable difference” (24). And with that, the past can in some ways change as a person changes. In looking back at herself, Didion recognizes that she has changed in so many ways that her old self no longer really exists:

I have already lost touch with a couple I used to be; one of them, a seventeen-year-old, presents little threat, although it would be of some interest to me to know again what it feels like to sit on a river levee drinking [. . .]. (You see I still have the scenes, but I no longer perceive myself among those present, no longer could even improvise the dialogue.). (139-140)

Part of Didion’s purpose in keeping a notebook is to not let herself completely forget who she once was because that is what affirms who she is today. After time, Didion claims, “We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were” (139). In keeping a notebook, the purpose is to keep in touch with yourself, and Didion comments, “I suppose keeping touch is what notebooks are all about. And we are all on our own when it comes to keeping those lines open to ourselves: your notebook will never help me, nor mine you.” (140).

By Didion giving herself a personal voice in her notebooks, one that only she can learn and grow from, Didion is using writing as a way to affirm not only her existence but also her power. Through writing, Didion has the power to create her identity, one that is unique and not defined by just national forces. Evan Carton shows the importance of Didion’s writing to herself:

This striking image [of Didion having trouble drafting], with its linkage of the act of writing to the possibility of effective identity, suggests not only

the difficulty of composition for Didion but its stake. Writing is not, in any ordinary sense, a matter of self-expression; rather, it is self-recovery, self-collection, self-preservation. (37)

Writing is a way for Didion to become something more than a product of personal and national stories; it is a way for her to identify with the power within herself, and this power is self-creation and self-exposure. Carton also touches on Didion's power in her personal writing: "As Didion's own lost self is retrieved in the writing of essays that seem to explore its disintegration, a powerful personal identity is reconstructed through her Manichean dramas of centrality and chaos" (44).

Didion's personal writing may seem to be a powerless centrifugal force because her notebook is only a response to what she sees and interprets, she is actually having a conversation with the centripetal forces, and in doing so, she is able to bring awareness to herself. And what is interesting is that the centripetal and centrifugal forces both exist within her since her identity is made of unique personal experiences as well as national and shared myths. Writing allows Didion to respond to and also manifest these two forces.

### **"On Self-Respect"**

Didion's personal writing and personal identity is connected to the concept of self-respect, a subject that Didion writes about in the appropriately titled essay, "On Self-Respect." Though in this essay she does not connect self-respect to the act of writing, the connection is almost obvious if her writing is viewed as a way to form her personal identity. Didion first reflects on one of the first major incidents in her life—being rejected from Phi Beta Kappa— that made her realize what self-respect was: "Although to be

driven back upon oneself is an uneasy affair at best, rather like trying to cross a border with borrowed credentials, it seems to me now the one condition necessary to the beginnings of real self-respect" (143). The importance of self-respect rings familiar to Didion's claim in "On Keeping a Notebook" that "we are all well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not" (139).

Knowing the self is intimately related to self-respect because as Didion claims, self-respect "has nothing to do with the face of things, but concerns instead a separate peace, a private reconciliation" (144). Unlike "our grandparents [who], whether or not they had it, knew all about it" (145), today, self-respect is something that the conditions of our society do not allow to be as prevalent and is something that Didion believes needs to be learned because it isn't just given: "That kind of self-respect is a discipline, a habit of mind that can never be faked but can be developed, trained, coaxed forth" (146). In having self-respect, one has personal power: "To have that sense of one's intrinsic worth which constitutes self-respect is potentially to have everything: the ability to discriminate, to love and to remain indifferent" (147). And the consequence of not having respect is to lie awake some night, beyond the reach of warm milk, phenobarbital, and the sleeping hand on the coverlet, counting up the sins of commission and omission, the trusts betrayed, the promises subtly broken, the gifts irrevocably wasted through sloth or cowardice or carelessness. However long we postpone it, we eventually lie down alone in that notoriously uncomfortable bed, the one we make ourselves. Whether or not we sleep in it depends, of course, on whether or not we respect ourselves" (144).

By affirming the self and by finding power within one's individuality, it is possible to not only think for one's self but also to make decisions based on individual needs. Self-respect and knowing one's self allows individuals to find the power "[. . .] to free us from the expectations of others, to give us back to ourselves—there lies the great singular power of self-respect. Without it, one eventually discovers the final turn of the screw: one runs away to find oneself, and finds no one at home" (148).

### **"On Going Home"**

In a clip that gives readers a closer look into her home life, Didion also shows readers what she would consider to be an ideal upbringing. Not only does family provide Didion with personal power because it is the root of her individuality, but it also provides release from a society that is falling away from family traditions and values.

Though she lives far from her family, the place where Didion grew up is where she considers true "home" to be. She claims that the difference between the two places—where she lives with her husband and where her family lives—"is a vital though troublesome distinction" (164). It is quite possible that it is troublesome because she finds that her "home" and her past are what define her, not the family that she trying to build in the present, but she had to leave what defines behind. Didion also makes a distinction between the ways of her "home" family and the ways of her family now: "My husband likes my family but is uneasy in their house, because once there I fall into their ways, which are difficult, oblique, deliberately inarticulate, not my husband's ways" (164). For Didion, this distinction has to do with a shift in time and can be seen almost as a gap between modern living and the values of the past:



Sometimes I think that those of us who are now in our thirties were born into the last generation to carry the burden of 'home,' to find in family life the source of all tension and drama.[. . .] The question of whether or not you could go home again was a very real part of the sentimental and largely literary baggage with which we left homes in the fifties; I suspect that it is irrelevant to the children born of the fragmentation after World War II. (165)

This is troublesome to Didion because she finds herself caught between two places, one where there is a simple and concrete center, void of external powers (but also idealistic) and a place that consists of daily struggles within an atomized world. Breaking away from the former is necessary though bittersweet, and takes power to do so: "Marriage is the classic betrayal," Didion claims (165), and though it is difficult Didion does not have regret. In talking about her own daughter's family life, Didion writes, "She is an open and trusting child, unprepared for and unaccustomed to the ambushes of family life, and perhaps it is just as well that I can offer her little of that life" (167).

Because Didion didn't write many of the essays of Slouching Towards Bethlehem with the intention of collecting them in a single book, the pieces provide a somewhat fragmented glimpse of how Didion sees herself in relation to power. A closer look at her autobiography shows how Didion sees power in both a broad and narrow scope, but also, it shows how different power structures relate to her. In her autobiography, like the essays, Didion doesn't make clear connections for readers, but because the book was written as a single entity, the reader knows that there are connections to be made.

### Where I was From

What is most interesting about Where I was From is that if it wasn't in the autobiography section of the bookstore, it could easily pass as a commentary on California and its history. But by looking at Didion's past work and understanding that, for her, the self is unique but at the same time a result of many influences, then as an autobiography, Where I was From makes perfect sense. In Slouching Towards Bethlehem, the reader only gets bits and pieces of how, with her concept of the self in mind, power can work. Where I was From shows how Didion sees herself in the grand scheme of her own history and of California's history. These types of histories are blurred for Didion because she struggles in making a distinction between larger scale events and personal triumphs.

Many critics have evaluated Didion's use of history in her writings, and these include evaluations of both personal histories, such as a character's past along with a larger, shared history, which influences personal histories in different ways. Both are integral parts of Didion's autobiography because, as explained earlier, she sees herself as an individual influenced by these different forces, forces that go as far back as the settlement of California and the ideals that surrounded it.

In looking at the power structures Didion deals with in her autobiography, it is necessary to evaluate different aspects of power and its causes and effects because, again, power is multi-layered. For a good part of the book, Didion examines the foundation of where she is from, which involves her family's role in going west. By considering themselves native Californians, Didion often comments on being brought up in an environment of ideal thinking, one where causes and effects don't seem to matter, where

concepts don't exactly add up. Didion also looks at and comments on various, recent incidents of California-gone-wrong, which don't seem to relate to her personally, but they do relate to ways of thinking in California. Toward the end of the book, Didion's writing becomes more intimate, and she more directly puts all of this in relation to herself.

### **Didion's distant past**

Didion begins her autobiography with a thorough and slightly hard to follow history lesson on her family, dating back to 1766. Her purpose in going so far back in history may at first seem ambiguous: even though she writes about her family, the events do not seem to immediately be connected or important to her personally because she presents the information almost as it would be in a history book. However, in looking at the book as a whole, it becomes more clear that she is putting her family history in perspective to California's history, California's thinking, and the present state of California. It is necessary for Didion to go back to what she sees as the core of California in order to understand it as a whole. Unlike those she writes about in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," Didion does not attempt to leave the past behind. Rather, she aims in understanding how it all fits together. Realizing that certain aspects of California "did not add up" left Didion somewhat incomplete (17), and this is why it is so important for her to search for answers. Early on she writes,

You will have perhaps realized by now that this book represents an exploration into my own confusions about the place and the way in which I grew up, confusions about America as much as California, misapprehensions and misunderstandings so much a part of who I became that I can still to this day confront them only obliquely. (17-18)

Didion's personal past is related to a bigger history, and both relate to power structures present in California.

Didion begins the autobiography by writing, "My great-great-great-great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Scott was born in 1766, grew up on the Virginia and Carolina frontiers [ . . .]" (3). Three quarters down the first page, when Didion finally uses "I," she still does not talk about herself directly: "I have it on the word of a cousin who researched the matter that the husband, our great-great-great-great-great grandfather, 'appears in the standard printed histories of Arkansas as 'Old Colonel Ben Hardin, the hero of so many Indian wars''" (4). It becomes more clear that what was thought to be important for Didion is her family history, though Didion hints that some of what has been passed down to her is minute and possibly insignificant. This comes through in Didion's irony, first in talking about her great-great-great-great-great grandmother: "I know nothing else about Elizabeth Scott Hardin, but I have her recipe for corn bread, and also for India relish [ . . .]" (4). Again Didion is slightly ironic when talking about the legacy of her great-great-great grandmother, Nancy Hardin Cornwall, who briefly traveled with the Donner-Reed party while going west:

My mother was sent the photograph of this marker by her mother's cousin Oliver Huston, a family historian so ardent that as recently as 1957 he was alerting descendents to 'an occasion which no heir should miss,' the presentation to the Pacific University Museum of, among other artifacts, 'the old potato masher which the Cornwall family brought across the plains in 1846.' I have not myself found occasion to visit the potato masher[ . . .]" (5).

What Didion finds significant, however, are the attitudes toward the past of those previous generations, an attitude that was conditioned to just leaving the past behind and starting a new life. In discussing her great-great grandmother's family, Didion comments,

They tended to accommodate any means in pursuit of an uncertain end.

They tended to avoid dwelling on just what that end might imply. When they could not think what else to do they moved another thousand miles, set out another garden. The past could be jettisoned, children buried and parents left behind, but seeds got carried away. (7-8)

This attitude was passed on through the women of her family but competed with the pride that came from being a native Californian:

She [Didion's mother] spoke enthusiastically, on the other hand, about moving to the Australian outback.

‘Eudene,’ my father would say, a remonstrance.

‘I would,’ she would insist, reckless.

‘Just leave California? Give it all up?’

‘In a *minute*,’ she would say, the pure strain talking, Elizabeth Scott's great-great-great-great granddaughter. ‘Just *forget* it.’ (14-15)

Didion was brought up with the knowledge of a clear distinction between an old and new California, natives and non-natives. The values of the two were different, but for Didion, one is no better than the other because both hold contradictory notions. The old Californians and those who are of “old-Californian stock” (which would include Didion) believed that they deserved something in return for their settlement, their redemptive crossing to the west, and because they didn't get what they believed they deserved—

power— they were bitter toward the new people, or those who had come to California after World War II :

New people, we were given to understand, remained ignorant of our special history, insensible to the hardships endured to make it, blind not only to the dangers the place still presented but to the shared responsibilities its continued habitation demanded. (95)

The new people were not versed in what Didion's grandfather considered, "the code of the West," the responsibility to kill a rattlesnake if one was seen, which is an idea that relates to the basic moral duties people have to each other that she writes about in Slouching. However, Didion does not share her grandfather's disdain toward the new people of California and does not believe power should automatically be in the hands of those whose roots are "Old California." Didion keeps in mind that "less than a century before, [her] grandfather's family [had] been [new people]" (96). Didion's bitter grandfather did not quite see as Didion did the value of the new people: "New people could be seen, by people like my grandfather, as indifferent to everything that had made California work, but the ambiguity was this: new people were also who were making California rich" (96).

Though Didion does not place blame on the "new people," she finds error in the way the past is viewed in California and in the concept that one's history can be left behind because it has no real connections. This idea seems to frighten her because such an ideal of individualism, of a lack of connection to the past as well as to each other, can lead to disaster:

Stressing as it did an extreme if ungrounded individualism, this was not an ambiance that tended toward a view of life as defined or limited or controlled, or even in any way affected, by the social and economic structures of the larger world. To be a Californian was to see oneself, if one believed the lessons the place seemed most immediately to offer, as affected only by 'nature,' which in turn was seen to exist simultaneously as a source of inspiration or renewal and as the ultimate brute reckoning, the force that by guaranteeing destruction gave the place its perilous beauty. (66)

Through exploring the economic development of California, Didion attempts to get at the root of the power that has caused drastic change in California. Change is an unseen force that Didion does not really ever identify but seems to understand, and it is a force that Californians don't want to fully acknowledge because if they ignore it, then possibly, it will go away: "Good times were the core conviction of the place, and it was their only gradual apparent absence, in the early 1990s, that began to unsettle California in ways that no one exactly wanted to plumb" (129). The attitudes of the "old Californians" set up the new California to be a place that is unequipped to deal with reality, thus producing a system full of powerless people. This observation rings familiar to Didion's analysis of the hippie movement forty years ago. Only now, power is distributed differently, and the reaction to that power is not as centralized.

## Language

The evidence of powerlessness comes through quite clearly for Didion in her observations of language. As in *Slouching*, Didion still sees a deep connection between language use and power, or perhaps more accurately, language misuse and powerlessness. Her most concise example of language as evidence of “something gone terribly wrong,” is her critique and disgust at a 1993 group of high school boys known as the Spur Posse, who held a contest to see how many girls they could sleep with, a contest that almost led to rape charges and an enormous amount of media attention. Her discussion of this incident also hints that power has been misplaced at different levels.

The power struggle, in this case, is one that Didion does not necessarily buy, at least the one that the Spur Posse members were trying to sell. They blamed their actions on unseen forces that were uncontrollable, and that was the real epidemic—the fact that they believed they could get away with using any available scapegoat:

Each of these speakers seemed to be referring to a cultural misery apprehended only recently, and then dimly. Those who mentioned ‘blowing it out of proportion’ were complaining specifically about ‘the media,’ and its ‘power,’ but more generally about a sense of being besieged, set upon, at the mercy of forces beyond local control. (112)

Though in some ways Didion sees the Spur Posse as victims, she feels no sympathy for them. The message that Didion is attempting to get across has to do with the idea that those in power should hold responsibility. What often happens (in other examples as well) is that those who try to hold power shift responsibility to another source. The Spur Posse could not take responsibility because they did not have enough power over



language to do so. They tried to fake their way through language, in order to make themselves appear to be innocent, and miserably failed:

There was the refusal or inability to process the simplest statement without rephrasing. There was the fuzzy relationship to language, the tendency to seize on a drifting fragment of something once heard and repeat it, not quite getting it right, worry it like a bone. (111)

One of these buzz ideas that they tried to sell was the issue of condoms in school:

The news that some schools distributed condoms had been seized in mid-drift, for example, and pressed into service as an extenuating circumstance, the fact that Lakewood High School had never distributed condoms notwithstanding. 'The schools, they're handing out condoms and stuff like that, and like, if they're handing out condoms, why don't they tell us you can be arrested for it?' one Spur asked [ . . . ].

It's almost as if they were using Didion's claim from "Slouching" that they were never "taught the games that held the society together," to get away with what they did (84).

This idea goes even a step further when a Spur Posse parent blamed the incident on a general idea of society: "'The whole society has changed,' one Spur parent told me. 'Morals have changed. Girls have changed'" (112).

What was wrong was that Lakewood, the home of the Spur Posse, was a powerless community that believed it had power. It was an area of people who didn't realize that they were the lower end part of a system and were being taken advantage of. In their case, authoritative discourse almost worked exactly as Bakhtin describes, except perhaps it was more powerful because authority was not obvious and could not be

acknowledged. Lakewood believed that they were a middle-class community, one that could not be touched by the immorality of the outside world: “What seemed most perplexing to these Lakewood residents was that the disruption was occurring in what they uniformly referred to as ‘a middle-class community like this one,’ or sometimes, ‘an upper-middle-class community like this one’ (112). They were clueless to the cause and effect within their history:

Lakewood exists because at a given time in a different economy it had seemed an efficient idea to provide population density for the mall and a labor pool for the Douglas plant. [. . .] Such towns were organized the sedative idealization of team sports, which were believed to develop ‘good citizens,’ and therefore tended to the idealization of adolescent males. When towns like these came on hard times, it was the same adolescent males, only recently the community’s most valued asset, who were most visibly left with nowhere to go. (115-116)

Their powerlessness is able to continue because they remain ignorant by the system, by some greater, unnamed force: “Good citizens were encouraged [. . .] to see their problem as one caused by ‘the media’ or by ‘condoms in schools [. . .]’” (116). Didion is not even sure what this force is; she does not ever identify who or what encouraged these “good citizens” to use such scapegoats. She does, however, bring in the idea of the McDonnell Douglas Plant, part of the aerospace industry, which provides and pretty much supports communities like Lakewood. In describing the inner-workings of the industry and noting its delicacy, Didion observes, “One tree falls and the food chain fails [. . .]” (139). But the power that the community of Lakewood believed they had and the power that McDonnell

Douglas held over them is fueled by something greater than this and can be understood in a revelation that Didion had while doing a about Hermiston, Oregon, a town that worked to keep a nerve gas storage plant in operation: “[. . .] the settlement of the west, however inevitable, had not uniformly tended to the greater good, nor had it on every level benefited even those who reaped its most obvious rewards” (151).

This revelation is the connection between what seems to be a commentary on the west to what is personal to Didion. It is also a revelation that shows how power works on different levels and how power, though positive in Foucault’s terms, does not necessarily propel progress.

Because so much history and political commentary is in the autobiography, it’s almost frustrating to read because Didion does not connect of these ideas directly to her life while writing about them. However, Didion sees this work as being her most intimate and personal. But it is not until the last fifth of the book that Didion writes in a more personal style and reveals personal information, and it is not until almost the end that Didion explains why all of the history and political commentary were important to her.

While walking with her mother and daughter, Quintana, who is adopted, outside of a saloon that was owned by Didion’s great-great-grandfather, Didion realizes the burden that history has had on her. And at this particular moment, when walking with her mother and daughter (symbolically her past and future), she realized that the future mattered just as much, if not more, than the past:

Any ghosts on this wooden sidewalk were not in fact Quintana’s responsibility. This wooden sidewalk did no in fact represent anywhere

Quintana was from. Quintana's only attachments on this wooden sidewalk were right now, here, me and my mother.

In fact I had no more attachment to this wooden sidewalk than Quintana did: it was no more than a theme, a decorative effect. (219)

Didion realized at this moment that she had been living under the influence of the narratives that had been passed down to her, and her life had been ruled by the past rather than the future. She explains this more clearly:

Later it seemed to me that this had been the moment when all of it—the crossing, the redemption, the abandoned rosewood chests, the lost flatware, the rivers I had written to replace the rivers I had left, the twelve generations of circuit riders and county sheriffs and Indian fighters and country lawyers and Bible readers, the two hundred years of clearings in Virginia and Kentucky and Tennessee and then the break, the dream of America, the entire enchantment under which I had lived my life—began to seem remote. (220)

Though in her past works she had criticized about this very same type of powerlessness, Didion realized that she, too, had been living under ideal narratives, and in some ways had been powerless because of them. Didion was able to see, to an extent the effect that narrative had on people, but she was not able to see how much her own personal history, one that had been filled with adventure and despair but in the end led to freedom, had affected her. She was not able to put her own scale down her own life and put it into perspective. Didion, like those who lived in Lakewood, did not realize that she was powerless because of an authoritative discourse.

### Chapter Three: Didion's style and form

After taking a closer look at the different power themes that are within the content of Didion's nonfiction, it is now necessary to take a look at her writing from a different angle. Looking at her text from just the perspective of content is not enough because her exploration and commentary of power goes beyond just *what* she writes; rather, much of her commentary lies in *how* she writes (structure and form). Though it is not possible to completely pull content and form apart, it is essential to do so for the purposes of understanding the relationship between content and form in Didion's writing.

As explored in the previous chapter, for Didion, there are different layers of power. First is the larger historical element that is laid out by larger social forces like government and law. In Bakhtinian discourse this would be classified as the centripetal force. Secondly, Didion's work includes the individual narrative (including her own) that is influenced by the centripetal force. This would be the centrifugal force. Didion's content demonstrates both of these forces in relation to each other, but her writing style offers an alternative to the Bakhtinian system of authoritative discourse. In this balance and at times competition that Didion demonstrates through both her content and form, she offers a way to respond and use a discourse that Bakhtin claims does not allow interaction, questioning, evaluation, or change.

#### Didion and Narrative Structures

An evaluation of Joan Didion's content and form relationship, requires an in-depth understanding of the various narrative instruments that are common to her nonfiction writing. Chris Anderson has categorized three types of techniques that Didion

uses: the rhetoric of particularity, the rhetoric of gaps, and the rhetoric of process; however, I would like to modify and add to that list, not because I find Anderson's work to be unfit but because his three categories do not completely and sufficiently describe Didion's writing style, and Anderson doesn't take into consideration the power Didion has over language within these styles. This task of categorizing her various styles, however, is at times difficult because there are overlaps within the categories, but breaking her form down and looking at her different styles separately will prove to be fruitful when analyzing the purpose of this form. The three broad narrative strategies into which I have broken Didion's writing down are specific versus vague, lack of conclusions, and developing two or more narratives within one framework. In looking at these five narrative structures, I am going to continue to focus on both Slouching Towards Bethlehem and Where I Was From in order to show how Didion's strategies have remained consistent yet in some ways have evolved.

### **Specific versus General**

Didion's writing mixes both specific and vague language in conjunction with specific and vague ideas. However, she mixes and matches language use and idea portrayal in such a way that frequently, very precise language actually represents something other than what has been visually described. The result of this is similar to what critic Muggli describes as Didion's creation of emblems, which are symbols that are timeless and work in a world greater than the one Didion lays out and creates in her writing. In looking at her precise descriptions more closely and in context, it becomes evident that her idea is actually very general, but note, that is not to say that her idea is meaningless. Didion even comments on this writing style in the preface of the essay

collection in reflecting on the essay, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," which features various snippets of Haight Ashbury personalities: "I had failed [. . .] to suggest that I was talking about something more general than a handful of children wearing mandalas on their foreheads" (xiv). By saying that the ideas were general, Didion does not mean less important; her writing style just does not point out exactly what she believes is important for the reader to pick up on. Instead, she often tells a story with so much detail that nothing in particular sticks out to the reader, and that is part of her point. It is very difficult to separate completely Didion's specificity from her generality because often when being specific on a smaller scale, Didion is really making a general observation or point on a larger scale.

In discussing her reasons for writing "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," Didion writes, "I went to San Francisco because I had not been able to work in some months, had been paralyzed by the conviction that writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed. If I was to work again at all, it would be necessary for me to come to terms with disorder" (xiv). This essay demonstrates what Didion's general idea of what disorder looks like—absolutely no power or central driving force—and the form of her writing parallels this very well. It is close to impossible to follow any type of plot in the essay because there are so many mini-plots happening. Didion is not quite as concerned with the individual, specific stories and their details as she is with the way their meanings work on a larger scale.

### *Descriptions of Settings*

Characteristically, Didion is very specific when describing the settings of her essays (as well as her descriptions of her characters' pasts), and she does so in a way that

her details are overzealous and may seem unnecessary because she does not explicitly connect her purpose in doing so. In the opening essay of Slouching, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” Didion gives the reader so many specifics about the setting of the story, that it is almost impossible to see the purpose of this. Many of the details that she dwells on do not seem to have a strong connection to the events in the essay, and Didion does not outwardly make the connection for the reader. She provides so many seemingly obscure details about the setting that the inattentive reader loses the main idea driving her writing:

The San Bernardino Valley lies only an hour east of Los Angeles by the San Bernardino Freeway but is in certain ways an alien place: not the coastal California of the subtropical twilights and the soft westerlies off the Pacific but a harsher California, haunted by the Mojave just beyond the mountains, devastated by the hot Santa Ana wind that comes down through the passes at 100 miles an hour and whines through the eucalyptus windbreaks and works on the nerves. (Slouching 3)

She includes as much information as possible in as little space as possible so that none of her descriptions take precedence over others. The hot sun and the cutting wind are equally important in adding to the description of the San Bernardino Valley. But her description of the setting represents an idea that is vague, that can't really be pinpointed. For Didion, the geographical characteristics have a very direct relevance to the events in the story. The ominous feeling of the San Bernardino Valley— the haunting of the desert, the unbearable sun and wind— are tied to a general notion that Didion wants to get across in the essay, but it is one that she never quite makes clear and leaves for the reader to



speculate. She wants there to be a connection between the ominous feeling of the geographic location and the events in the story and relate these to the ideal California versus the real California. But this is not explained or even set up in a way that the connection is obvious or clear. However, by reading the rest of the essays and Didion's other work, her feelings about California are more clear, and this idea that she tries to get across in her detailed setting descriptions makes more sense. Katherine Usher Henderson comments on the author's use of obscure details, given that often these details reappear in other works: "The Santa Ana winds that blew on the day that Miller's Volkswagen burned are the subject of an entire essay in 'Los Angeles Notebook.' Reading Didion's discussion of the impact of these winds on individual behavior, we wonder about Lucille Miller's freedom of will on October 7, 1964" (Joan Didion 96).

This technique of almost over-description occurs in her autobiography as well. In chapter two, after discussing the different attitudes present in California, Didion begins in her quintessential style, where the writing is so winding and packed with information that the reader is unsure of where he/she is going to be led and is also unsure how Didion moved from her previous topic to her current one. In the first sentence, Didion mentions about five different qualities or descriptions of Lakewood, California in such a way that she doesn't stress the importance of one quality over another:

Lakewood, California, the Los Angeles County community where in early 1993 an amorphous high school clique identifying itself as the Spur Posse achieved a short-lived notoriety, lies between the Long Beach and San Gabriel Freeways, east of the San Diego, part of that vast grid familiar to the casual visitor mainly from the air, Southern California's industrial

underbelly, the thousand square miles of aerospace and oil that powered the place's apparently endless expansion. (103)

The sentence is so loaded with different types of information that she gives an equal amount of importance to everything that she mentions: the Spur Posse, the exact locale of the area and the economic grounding of Lakewood, and the reader is not really sure which of these topics she is going to focus on. By doing this, Didion is not trying to confuse readers but rather uses her form as a way of showing, not merely telling, how enmeshed these different components are. Didion's detailing overlaps a bit with the technique of parallelism that Henderson comments on, where Didion places "like ideas in like grammatical form." Didion also uses "antithesis, in which *opposed* ideas are arranged in parallel form" (133-134). In the above example, the different elements at first seem to be opposed ideas; however, in completing the chapter, the reader becomes aware that Didion sees those different elements as connected.

### *Descriptions of Characters' Pasts*

Didion continues to use very specific language in describing the people in her essays and what happens to them. In her first detailed description of Lucille Miller, Didion writes,

She was born on January 17, 1930, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the only child of Gordon and Lily Maxwell, both schoolteachers and both dedicated to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, whose members observe the Sabbath on Saturday, believe in an apocalyptic Second Coming, have a strong

missionary tendency, and, if they are strict, do not smoke, eat meat, use makeup, or wear jewelry, including wedding rings. (7).

Again, she uses so much detail that is overwhelming and easy to disregard, especially since this one sentence is buried within a paragraph describing other characteristics of Lucille. And even though there is a connection to be made between Lucille's upbringing to her eventual circumstances, Didion does not dwell on the connection, leaving it vague and easy to ignore. Lucille's attitude about starting over and leaving her past behind can be connected to her involvement in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, but this is not made specific by Didion. Didion's technique of over-description and seemingly useless details allows Didion to make a generalized comment on people's motivators and reasons why their actions take the turns that they do.

The lack of making connections like this within the text is related to what Anderson calls the rhetoric of gaps or "the withholding of interpretation and commentary at every level of language" (54). Her writing techniques may not seem connected to any theme of power, but it is her style and form that allows her, as an author, to manipulate power. In looking at Didion's rhetoric of gaps in "On Going Home," Anderson notes, "Each scene is preceded or concluded with interpretive statements, but because these interpretive statements are short and suggestive rather than elaborated, the scenes bear most of the burden of significance. We must read them" (55). As in "read," Anderson does not just mean viewing words on a page; rather, the reader must interpret for themselves what the words suggest. As Paul Heikler notes, her style, "develops, trains, and coaxes forth the reader's self-respect. It requires each of us to integrate our own experience, to construct literary continuities with her words, and thus to achieve our own

individual and ‘minor but perilous triumph of being over nothingness’” (101). By being so overly specific in her prose and general in her meaning, Didion is pulling the reader in by giving the reader power, and in some ways giving up some of her own authorial power. Didion’s style functions so that she does not control every conclusion that the reader makes, which places more power in the hands of the reader.

### **Lack of Conclusions**

Didion’s lack of explicit commentary on her writing is connected to another narrative technique she often employs, the lack of conclusions. Though similar to not adding commentary, this technique is not exactly the same because conclusions of events do not require Didion’s personal opinions, whereas commentary does. This does not mean that without conclusions, Didion is abstaining from having an opinion on the events she writes about; actually, her lack of conclusions allows her to add more commentary to what she is writing.

Throughout “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” Didion does not add specific conclusions, even in places where it seems as if she is building toward a conclusion. The lack of conclusions first comes across in her view of Lucille Miller, in that she never asserts whether Lucille was guilty or not guilty; she only shows how Lucille was *found* guilty. Her power of being the author would permit her to structure the essay in a way that builds to a certain conclusion—one that would fit her opinion of Lucille’s guilt or innocence. Instead, her style of writing remains almost withdrawn from the actions that she is writing about, and when describing the events, she, the author, consistently remains distant:

She says that she was driving east on Banyan Street at about 35 m.p.h. when she felt the Volkswagen pull sharply to the right. The next thing she knew the car was on the embankment, quite near the edge of the retaining wall, and flames were shooting up behind her. She does not remember jumping out. She does not remember prying up a stone with which she broke the window next to her husband, and then scrambling down the retaining wall to try to find a stick.” (10)

Where a conclusion seems to be building, Didion only describes places and events, leaving out any type of drama within the story.

Toward the end of the essay, Didion has a conclusion, but it would be considered weak if looked at in terms of traditional narrative conclusions, especially since Didion does not appear to be outwardly moralizing the events. She ends the essay by showing where all of the characters of the essay are now, but she does not attempt to include any type of moralizing nor does she attempt to win the sympathy of the reader. The way that she ends the essay only shows that the cycle of power and misconception goes on. After naming different murderesses of Frontera, other “girls who somehow misunderstood the promise,” she nonchalantly mentions that Lucille Miller had a baby while in prison (25-26). She then gives a description of the house where the Millers once lived: “The Millers never did get it landscaped, and weeds grow up around the fieldstone siding. The television aerial has toppled on the roof, and a trash can is stuffed with the debris of family life [. . .]”(27), images of a dream gone sour. She quickly moves from this description to briefly describing her encounters with Lucille’s attorney, Lucille’s friend and the prosecuting attorney. The essay ends somewhat ironically, driving Didion’s point

even harder, with a description of Arthwell Hayton's marriage to his children's governess. Usually when stories end with a marriage, they do so with a happily-ever-after ending. However, by ending this essay with a marriage, Didion is not only showing how a cycle continues on, but she is also making the point that buying into the power structures of marriage is not really an ending but possibly an ugly beginning.

Didion concludes "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" with a very similar approach. She ends what seems like more reporting of the lives of the people she is observing. Had the last paragraph been placed somewhere else within the essay, it would not have been at all out of place because it does not really differ in what she had been writing throughout the essay:

Sue Ann's three-year-old Michael started a fire this morning before anyone was up, but Don got it out before much damage was done. Michael burned his arm, which is probably why Sue Ann was so jumpy when she happened to see him chewing on an electric cord. 'You'll fry like rice,' she screamed. The only people who were around were Don and one of Sue Ann's macrobiotic friends and somebody who was on his way to a commune in the Santa Lucias, and they didn't notice Sue Ann screaming at Michael because they were in the kitchen trying to retrieve some very good Moroccan hash which had dropped down through a floorboard damaged in the fire. (128)

This does not appear to be a conclusion because Didion ends very abruptly in *medias res*, but Didion still manages to get her point across. No positive change has occurred in the characters throughout the entire essay, and the ending is no different. There really was

not any other way for Didion to end this essay. By ending it this way, with no change, her emphasis on how distorted the values of the time had been is even stronger. At the same time, by abstaining from her power to give some moralization of this situation, Didion is making the point that she does not have the power to change it. The only ones who need and could gain control over it are those involved.

Didion's nontraditional version of a conclusion in "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" and "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," is also reminiscent in her autobiography. The book stops almost abruptly, leaving the reader with little explanation or sense of closure. The last paragraph of the book deals with her mother's death. She explains that while on her deathbed, her mother gave Didion and Quintana (Didion's daughter) silverware that she had been saving. After Didion explains that she had taken the silver ladle that her mother wanted her to have, the book ends with two abrupt and seemingly unconnected sentences:

I protested: she had already given me all her silver, I had ladles, she had given me ladles. 'Not this one,' she said. She pointed out the curve of the handle. It seemed that she had what she called 'a special feeling' for the way the handle curved on this particular ladle. It seemed that she found this ladle so satisfying to touch that she had set it aside, kept it. I said that since it gave her pleasure she should continue to keep it. 'Take it,' she said, her voice urgent. 'I don't want it lost.' I was still pretending that she would get through the Sierra before the snows fell. She was not. (225-226)

Again, Didion's technique of not having an obvious conclusion, one where she explains to readers what she means and where the events she has written about left her, forces

readers, but to be more involved and active in the story. If the reader does not take the energy to understand why Didion would end her autobiography in this way, then Didion's point would be missed. Didion, who seemed to protest conclusions in her earlier writing, had trouble dealing with conclusions in her own life. When she gave up pretending that her mother would be okay and still alive, she only could move forward. The death of her mother gave Didion the opportunity to have a new start, and when her mother died, there seemed to be nothing left for Didion to talk about in the past.

### **Developing multiple narratives**

Probably the most unique of Didion's writing strategies, building multiple narratives within one story, serves more than one function within the text. As described briefly in the previous chapter, this technique occurs in "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," and her autobiography. In this technique, Didion shows how the same phenomenon occurs in different situations. She also shows how different narratives affect one person, as in the case of Lucille Miller. First, Lucille was a victim of the idealized California: "Here [California] is the last stop for all those who come from somewhere else, for all those who drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways. Here is where they are trying to find a new lifestyle, trying to find it in the only places they know to look: the movies and the newspapers" (4).

The other narrative Didion deals with is the one that was constructed by another authoritative discourse, the law. It is implied that Lucille's side of the story or any evidence supporting her innocence was of no help to Lucille because those who were in control had the power to create a narrative that described the supposed crime in a way that worked against her, even though both sides of the story could be very plausible.



After describing one side of the story, one of Didion's few conclusions is "Although this version accounted for some of the physical evidence, it did not seem on its own any more or less credible than Lucille Miller's story" (14). Further on, Didion gives clues as to how the authorities abused their powers: "It was a spotty case, and to make it work at all the State was going to have to find a motive. There was talk of unhappiness, talk of another man. That kind of motive, during the next few weeks, was what they set out to establish" (15). But in the end, she shows how even those who supposedly came out on top are still trapped believing in some type of authoritative narrative that promises rather than fulfills. The end of the essay shows how the same narrative works on different levels and on people. Even people who are supposed to hold more power are unable to find power within certain narratives. As noted earlier, this essay ends in a description of a wedding. She describes how Arthwell Hayton, the attorney Lucille had an affair with and the man who was able to avoid any type of public scrutiny, ended his narrative supposedly happily ever after: "The bridegroom was in black tie, with a white carnation in his buttonhole. The bride wore a long white dress and carried a shower bouquet of sweetheart roses with stephanotis streamers. A coronet of seed pearls held her illusion veil" (28). The illusion of marriage and empty promises of the Golden Land work on all of the characters of the essay.

Again in the essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," there are multiple narratives being developed. In this essay, it is probably more noticeable, given that there are more characters involved and Didion skips from point to point. However, even though there are the smaller narratives of each character, all of their stories are part of a larger narrative, one that considers the breakdown of culture and power structures, even outside of

California. This is why Didion was disturbed with the feedback (previously noted) that she had received on this essay. Critics and fans were more interested in the smaller narratives that appear to depict the problem of drugs and the shock value rather than seeing these as something larger and paying attention to Didion's bigger point.

It is easy to see how readers could have missed the larger narrative that Didion was writing in this piece because the smaller, individual narratives were interesting and more accessible. For example, toward the beginning of the essay, Didion writes about how she was supposed to meet up with a person named Deadeye, and while waiting for him, she enters into conversation with a random teenager on the street:

'I've been out of my mind for three days,' he says. He tells me he's been shooting crystal, which I already pretty much know because he does not bother to keep his sleeves rolled down over the needle tracks. He came up from Los Angeles some number of weeks ago, he doesn't remember what number, and now he'll take off for New York, if he can find a ride. (86).

Didion then describes more people she meets while still in her search for Deadeye and finally tells her encounter with him:

The room is overheated and the girl on the floor is sick. Deadeye says she has been sleeping for twenty-four hours now. 'Lemme ask you something,' he says. 'You want some grass?' I say I have to be moving on. 'You want it,' Deadeye says, 'it's yours.' Deadeye used to be an Angel around Los Angeles but that was a few years ago. 'Right now,' he says, 'I'm trying to set up this groovy religious group—"Teenage Evangelism."'

(87)

Then Didion skips right to another group of people that she follows a bit while in San Francisco. She does not introduce them; rather, she jumps right into their narrative as if the reader knows who she is talking about: "Don and Max want to go out to dinner but Don is only eating macrobiotic so we end up in Japantown again. Max is telling me how he lives free of all the old middle-class Freudian hang-ups" (87-88). This essay continues pretty much in the same way, with Didion going quickly from person to person, event to event, where she finally ends it in a nontraditional conclusion. By doing this, Didion is showing how different people use the same narrative, and because of this, their stories are not all that different; just their circumstances differ.

## Conclusion

Any good author pays close attention to the way she expresses her ideas; however, Didion's genius is due to her going beyond paying attention. Her obsession with language is what makes her such a unique writer. Because of this, it is almost impossible to pull apart her content and form; however, it is also necessary in order to examine her work so closely and attempt to understand how the two work to convey her themes. Her content shows how she feels about power and its distribution. Her style allows her execute her beliefs and, in a sense, practice what she preaches. Didion believes all to have the ability to possess power. However, not everyone has the tools to do this. Didion's style forces readers to find the tools they need to make conclusions and connections because Didion will not do that for her readers.

Power is a significant theme in Didion's writing, but critics have yet to closely examine the role of power in her writing. It is important because power structures in her work are so integral not only to writers but to readers and people. Awareness is the first step of gaining personal control, and it wasn't until Didion realized that she was living under the influence of the past that she was able to gain personal power and realize what really was important to her. Didion's writing examines power on all levels. She looks at the relationship between author and reader; she looks at how individuals gain, lose, and abuse power; she examines the way organized groups use power. But most interestingly, through all of this, Didion looks at power in relation to herself. Didion sees power working on all levels, and when she realized she had lived her life under the enchantment of the American dream, Didion found the power to influence her daughter to live

differently than she had. Perhaps the idea of content and form can be applied to more than just written word, and when Didion had her revelation, she changed the patterns in her life in order to influence the content of someone else's.

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