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JOAN DIDION: "TELLING STORIES TO LIVE."

By

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ABSTRACT

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Diana R. Pingatore

A developmental approach to the works of Joan Didion reveals a gradual change in her understanding of the relation of literature to life. As the status of literature in contemporary life occupies a pivotal position in modern literary theory, Didion's attention to this issue places her in the mainstream of American literary thought. Her contribution to the critical debate can be characterized in three basic ways.

First, an analysis of Didon's four novels discloses a pattern of progression in her work which corresponds to a paradigm best articulated by Edward Said in The World, The Text, and The Critic. Said claims that the definitive experience of modernity has been a shift in the cultural modes of relation from filiation to affiliation. Didion's novels reflect that shift as crucial to the American experience. Her first two novels chronicle the effects of the loss of filiation in American life, whereas the last two novels represent and critique the affiliative patterns

that have emerged to replace filiation in contemporary experience.

Another salient feature of Didion's concern is the relation of language to experience. That concern is registered through Didion's attention to narrative, in all forms of cultural discourse. For Joan Didion, narrative provides the requisite link that holds a culture together in the modern shift from filiation to affiliation. It is in Didion's narratives, fiction and non-fiction, that traces of this crucial cultural transition can be detected and given form.

Finally, Didion's understanding of the relation of language to experience, and thus literature to life, is filtered through her historical situation as a writer who is female, contemporary and American. These three factors account for the form, content and distinctive style evident in Didion's narratives. These factors also justify the application of critical approaches which seek to articulate the juncture at which literature meets life. For that reason, feminist criticism that focuses on the development of narrative as a force in social change will dominate the following discussion of Didion's four novels and four essay collections.

For my children, Leisa and Tony,
whose extraordinary love and courage make possible this future;

For my family, the Martins,
whose spirit and struggle provide strength from the past;

And for Gary,
who connects me to all the loves of my life,
past, present, and future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. A MOTHER'S LEGACY: FEMININE ARCHETYPAL PATTERNS IN RUN RIVER 43

III. CULTURAL ORPHANS: THE REPUDIATION OF NARRATIVE IN PLAY IT AS IT LAYS 93

IV. A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER: STORIES OF THE FATHER RETOLD 149

V. DEMOCRACY A NOVEL: A FAMILY OF FICTIONS FROM HISTORY TO ROMANCE 221

VI. DIDION'S NON-FICTION: MESSAGES FROM THE FRONTIERS OF AMERICAN EXPERIENCE 310

VII. CONCLUSION 351

INTRODUCTION

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live".[1] This observation, which appears as the opening line of Joan Didion's second essay collection, The White Album, is the most incisive statement Didion makes about the function of narrative in society. For Didion, the narrative impulse serves both a psychological and social function: narrative is both an act of knowing and a model for action. Narrative (the sequencing of events that constitutes the stories we tell) not only offers precepts to live by, "the sermon in the stone"; narrative also serves to organize and interpret the data of the senses. "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" (WA 11). Thus for Didion, the production of satisfying narratives is an essential activity, both for the individuals that produce them and for the society they construct.

Didion's statement recalls the literary predicament of Scherazade in The Arabian Nights. Scherazade is another woman whose very life depends upon her powers as a storyteller, as do the lives of her sisters in the realm.

Her stories provide distraction and amusement for a patriarchal villain whose pride demands the sacrifice of a new bride each morning as retribution for his first wife's betrayal. But the stories serve another function as well; they offer the sultan alternative possibilities to consider. As such, they function as much of feminist literature and criticism does - to resist the dominant ideology of a patriarchal society. Scheherazade clearly conceives of narrative as an essential human activity with recognizable political ramifications, a concept that literature has deemed significant enough to explore and record.

Yet Didion's understanding of the term 'narrative' in the opening sentence can not be limited to the conventional literary species; the term is understood in its wider application as all cultural discourse, and as such includes religion, science, history, etc. or any system of thought devised in language by human beings to interpret the world and their relation to it. A pertinent analysis of the types and functions of such cultural discourses can be found in The Social Construction of Reality, a seminal work by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. These sociologists examine the processes by which groups of individuals construct a social reality by divising narratives to explain or interpret experience. They emphasize the process by which human beings become detached from the production of such narratives so as to no longer recognize

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them as the work of their own making. Their theory will inform my discussion of the intersection of public and private worlds in Didion's works.

It is the failure of narrative to fulfill its traditional role of cultural transmission in contemporary society that pre-occupies Didion in the late 1960's and 70's. According to Didion, the atomization of American life is directly related to the breakdown of the narrative function. Like other traditions, narrative structure seems doomed to a "tragic obsolescence": "In this light all narrative was sentimental. In this light all connections were equally meaningful, and equally senseless... (WA 43). Didion recognizes that social cohesiveness is achieved through the generation and transmission of narratives which sanction and thus perpetuate cultural values. It is the failure of mid-century American to pass on this cultural legacy that Didion identifies as the cause of the "social hemorrhaging" she observes in Haigh-Ashbury in the Sixties.[2]

> 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 no longer overlook the vacuum, no longer pretend the society's atomization could be reversed. This was not a traditional generational rebellion. At some point between 1945 and 1967 we had somehow neglected to tell these children the rules of the game

> we happened to be playing. Maybe we had stopped believing in the rules ourselves, maybe we were having a failure of nerve about the game (STB 122).

For Didion, as a writer, the failure of narrative constitutes a social crisis of epidemic proportions, with moral and epistemological repercussions. Parents fail to establish generational connections with their children; the accumulation and transmission of knowledge and traditions of the centuries is radically threatened.

But the failure of narrative is not only a cultural phenomenon with social ramifications. The failure has personal consequences as well, especially for writers--the producers of such cultural discourse. Didion details some of the personal ramifications of the social turbulence which characterizes the beginnings of her literary career in The White Album:

> I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequences, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangements, not a movie but a cutting-room experience. In what would probably be the middle of my life I wanted to still believe in the narrative and the narrative's intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical (WA 13).

The rumble of cultural disintegration sends tremors

into the personal sphere as well as into the professional for Didion. Berger and Luckmann find this situation predictable, given the dialectical relationship of the individual to society. The erosion of traditional values creates an abyss between generations that radically alters communal, family, and personal experience. On a personal note, Didion reflects that she will not be able to give to her child what she herself was given as a 'natural' inheritance: "I...would like to give her home for her birthday, but we live differently now and I can promise her nothing like that" (STB 168). Didion's personal predicament is one several female protagonists confront in her fictional works. As mothers, they are unable to provide a personal or cultural 'home' for their children. Indeed, the traditional mother-child bond, and its function as a transmitter of culture, seems an anachronistic in a consumer society as does the abacus in a computer age.

If the experience of narrative failure on the social level is one of chaos, the experience on the personal level is one of profound loss. Didion's writing, as much as that of any writer of our time, evokes a cognizance of what such a loss means. Guy Davenport notes, in a review, that "Miss Didion's version is distinguished by her terrifying sense of what has been lost and how irreparable the damage is" (903). For it is in Didion's narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, (which she continues to write despite her metaphysical doubts about the efficacy of narrative in

modern life) that we encounter the personal ramifications of cultural loss. In this respect, Didion's novels reflect a belief in a literary tradition that is everywhere questioned as to its ontological status. Didion's novels serve to characterize and critique the actual world of experience; there is a presumed connection between literature and life, discourse and power, and creativity and loss. Many critics label her fiction as 'realistic' and thus dismiss her literary efforts as irrelevant to contemporary systems of thought. Brian Morton, however, in an illuminating essay on her work, comments favorably on this aspect of her fiction. He maintains that Didion's use of the devices of realism is never naive; it is actually subversive. "Realism as a literary strategy has less to do with the external relationships of a text--its supposed ability to 'reflect' real life--than with its internal relationships. Realism is heretical; it offers haersis or choice, subversively stripping away the falsifying conclusiveness of mythical and ideological structures" (73). Morton proposes that Didion's fiction appears 'realistic' precisely because she is alert to the "irreducible and ambiguities" between language and experience. "Didion's realism operates precariously in the interstices of words" (74).

The entanglement of language and experience as discussed by Terry Eagleton in Introduction to Literary Theory uses the example of Freud's interpretation of the

famous fort-da game as an instance of the psychological and social function of literary discourse.

> Watching his grandson playing in his pram one day, Freud observed him throwing a toy out of the pram and exclaiming fort! (gone away), then hauling it in again on a string to the cry of da! (here). This...is the infant's symbolic mastery of his mother's absence; but it can also be read as the first glimmerings of narrative. Fort-da is perhaps the shortest story we can imagine: an object is lost, and then recovered. But even the most complex narrative is that an original settlement is disrupted and ultimately restored. From this viewpoint, narrative is a source of consolation..." (185).

The idea of narrative as consolation is an idea that fits Didion's works well. In each of the novels, the fictional world is a world suffused with loss, and every gesture toward narrative is an act of retrieval. This act of retrieval is, in turn, an attempt to comprehend the conditions and consequences of the loss.

For instance, Didion's first novel, Run River, opens with a shot, fired at seventeen minutes to one on August 1959, but at the end of the novel only one hour has passed. In the interim, however, the narrative has accounted for a lapse of some twenty years. Didion uses the classic technique, in medias res, to retrieve the twenty year period that has brought the protagonist, Lily Knight

McClellan, to this particular moment in August. The narrative suspension enables Lily to recall (in a third-person narration) her twenty year marriage to the man who has fired the shot at her lover. When the narrative present resumes at the end of the novel, Lily confronts her husband on the dock but is persuaded by him to return to the house to contact the authorities. He then returns to the dock to retrieve the gun; the novel closes as Lily hears the second shot that signals his suicide.

In Play It As It Lays, Didion's second novel, Maria Wyeth speaks from the mental hospital where she has been committed for aiding and abetting the suicide of a Hollywood director, a man who is also her husband's friend and employer. The novel then attempts to retrieve the circumstances of Maria's life that have brought her to the narrative moment that initiates the novel...the story of Maria's life as a woman in contemporary American society.

Didion's third novel, A Book of Common Prayer, begins after the death of the protagonist, Charlotte Douglas. The narrative emerges as a gesture of grief on the part of its narrator, Grace Strasser-Mendana. As an effort to reclaim the memory of a loved one (Charlotte), the powers of narrative are weighed and found wanting by Grace. Thus the powers of narrative to serve as consolation for loss are put into question.

When Democracy opens, Inez Victor has long ago made her stand, choosing to run a refugee camp rather than to

continue as Harry Victor's wife. The narrator reconstructs the events of Inez Victor's life as wife of a failed presidential candidate almost as a technical exercise in narrative in this fourth and latest novel. The attention paid to narrative structure suggests that it is the form and function of narrative itself that needs to be retrieved and revived in contemporary life.

The principle of narrative as consolation, as an act of retrieval, nonetheless serves as the over-arching concern of the protagonist in each work and of the narrative structure itself. Each novel begins after the most significant event of the narrative has occurred; the retrospective construction of the sequence of events attends as much to the process of narrative construction as to the story being told. But the focal point of both story and structure is loss...loss as the experience the protagonist undergoes, and loss as the privileging of one version of events over another in the production of narrative.

Some of the losses Didion's protagonists suffer include the loss of historical continuity, the loss of community, the loss of personal identity, the loss of metaphysical certainty, and finally, the loss of narrative intelligibility. The specific configuration these losses assume in Didion's fiction changes from story to story as ambiguity replaces absolutes in the protagonists' experience. But a primary loss is certainly that of the

family in its sundry forms. Didion's obsessive concern with this central loss locates her as a direct descendant of modernist thought.

Edward Said contemplates the significance of familial loss in contemporary life in The World, the Text, and the Critic, and points out that the preoccupation of the modern world has been with "the difficulties of filiation or the 'natural' connection of family" (16). Said cites the efforts of major modern figures such as Joyce, Eliot, Freud, and Marx to come to terms with the "failure of the generative impulse" and to effect a "transition from a failed idea or possibility of filiation to a kind of compensatory order" that Said designates as "affiliation" (19). He distinguishes between the two modes of connection by pointing out that "the filiative scheme belongs to the realms of nature and of 'life', whereas affiliation belongs exclusively to culture and society" (19).

This idea is echoed in an essay by Alice Jardine, titled "Opaque Texts and Transparent Context, which offers a proposal for reading texts from a post-modernist perspective. "Modernity is...about the loss of narrative", Jardine claims. "Modernity seems to be about not knowing, about not being sure, about having no story to tell. It also seems to be about loss: loss of identity, loss of truth, legitimacy, knowledge, power--loss of control" (100). As a feminist influenced by American and French intellectual thought, Jardine posits the possibility that

the loss of certitude in every area of social existence can be seen as an opportunity to formulate novel responses to this unprecedented situation. She suggests as an example some French writers whose response to loss has been "to affirm and valorize the loss itself" (100). She argues that it is, in fact, because the patriarchal system has lost its legitimacy as a social and ideological structure in contemporary life that feminist theory has acquired the access required to design future social and ideological systems.

As a woman with little faith in social planning, Didion is not inclined to view the loss associated with modernity as an occasion for social reform. Indeed, she would find Jardine's proposal fraught with the American delusion of "indefinite perfectibility" (de Toqueville 158). This, ironically, is what Jardine would hope to avoid by holding up the French approach to loss as exemplary. However, Didion must acknowledge Said's contention that a new mode of relation must be invented or retrieved from the past to compensate for the loss of filiation, the definitive experience of modernity. Therefore, in each of her novels, Didion examines the failure of the family structure in modern life. She then holds up for scrutiny contemporary versions of the compensatory orders Said maintains are required for survival of civilization.

In Run River, for example, Didion records the disintegration of the family as an institution of social

stability and coherence. Lily Knight McClellan views that passing with considerable anxiety, unable to imagine a future to replace the past she has lost. At the close of the novel, she contemplates the whole history of the familial institution that seems to self-destruct in the novel: "It had been above all a history of accidents: of moving on and of accidents" (246). The only future Lily can imagine as she wipes her husband's blood from her arm is one in which she will construct a narrative of that history for her children. "She did not know what she could tell anyone except that he had been a good man. She was not certain that he had been but it was what she would have wished for him, if they gave her one wish" (248). Thus the filiative impulse still remains strong in Lily, even though it is equally clear that her children will have no appreciation of the narrative Lily would bequeath to them.

Maria, in Didion's second novel, negates even the possibility of a narrative legacy. "Nothing applies," she insists throughout her own narrative (2). So radical a break with the past has she suffered that even narrative possibilities are seriously threatened. Maria can find no conceptual machinery adequate to explain or compensate for her loss. She is bereft of a familial past, present and future. Instead she finds herself surrounded by counterfeit, synthetic, mass-produced imitations of a familial institution long deceased. Her story registers a feeble but courageous protest against such paltry

compensatory orders.

By A Book of Common Prayer, familial institutions are as remote and unavailable as religion in modern life; indeed one becomes equated with the other as the loss of filiation in the novel takes on distinctly religious cast and is expressed in a diction of the liturgy. So trivialized has filiation become by Didion's fourth novel, however, that families are created via the media as a public relation's invention; family life is confined to occasions of photo opportunities while actual family members feel no real connection or loyalty to each other.

Perhaps it is the paucity of value embodied in those modern compensatory orders that accounts for the grieving spirit which accompanies many of Didion's examinations of filiative loss. One such compensatory order is noted by Ewen and Ewen in Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness. "The image, the commercial [reach out and touch someone on] reaches out to sell more than a service or product; it sells a way of understanding the world. The basic premise is that in a corporate, industrial world, it is the agencies of communications that provide the mechanisms for social order. The notion appeals to the businessman's desire for effective management. For the rest of us, as mobile often isolated individuals in an industrial, consumer society, it promises that which is increasingly elusive: kinship and community. Mass imagery, such as that provided by AT&T

creates for us a memorable language, a system of belief, an ongoing channel to inculcate and effect perceptions, explaining to us what it means to be part of the modern world" (42).

Because Didion recognizes Ewen's assessment of modern life as a valid description of the insidious influence of mass culture, she must formulate her own individual, literary resistance to it. Her individual, tentative narrative--fiction and non-fiction--becomes a rival version of the mass-produced totalizing fictions of the media. The act of producing narrative under such conditions literally is an act of artistic survival; fiction is one of the few remaining preserves which registers the single, solitary voice. Only the individual can offer a critical response to the claims made by the media, that nameless, 'blameless' mechanism of cultural production. Said describes the interaction of the individual mind with the cultural environment as the prerequisite condition of criticism. "On one hand, the individual mind registers and is very much aware of the collective whole, context, or situation in which it finds itself. On the other hand, it is precisely because of this awareness--a worldly self-situation, a sensitive response to the dominant culture--that the individual consciousness is not naturally and easily a mere child of the culture, but a historical and social actor in it. And because of that perspective, which introduces circumstance and distinction where there had only been

conformity and belonging, there is distance, or what we might call criticism" (15). Said posits that the critical perspective alone is capable of compassionately assessing the loss entailed in the achievement of that distance; the act of criticism then serves to ameliorate the loss so assessed.

A number of historical and social factors contribute to the particular perspective Didion registers as a critical consciousness in contemporary American life. To some extent, she is, as Said says, "merely a child" of her culture (15). As any number of critics have observed, criticism is characteristic of the contemporary era. As a citizen of late twentieth century America, the most modern and so the oldest civilization on earth (to paraphrase Gertrude Stein), Didion's works reflect the self-consciousness and critical stance endemic to the age.

But Didion's own frontier history also sharply limns the critical consciousness she brings to bear. As a descendant of one of the more fortunate members of the Donner-Reed party who detoured to the north and thus avoided the notorious fate of the others, Didion understood early the consequences of personal and cultural history. That she inherits the frontier legacy of pioneers who literally attained the much sought after American Dream--discovering Eden in the Sacramento Central Valley--lends an additional weight to her critical stance. The frontier legacy itself implies a critical stance toward the

'fictions' of the society at large, just as it manufactures 'fictions' of its own that require a critical appraisal.

As a Westerner, Didion considers herself constitutionally ill-equipped to contend with the subtleties of progressive social programs. "People who keep moving on lack practice in the enlightened art of the possible," Didion sardonically surmises in an early essay for Esquire (14). Her Western inheritance includes a specific narrative about life: "The story that the wilderness was and is redemptive, and that a radical break with civilization and its discontents is distinctly an option" (14). That is a narrative that undergoes considerable revision in Didion's work as the complexities of modern life metastasize to the point no wilderness, redemptive or otherwise, remains to be colonized by force or by the imagination. But the desire to break free of the fetters of the past lingers as a romantic possibility. It is always subjected to clear-headed scrutiny in Didion's work however.

Escape from the past is an option Maria Wyeth and Charlotte Douglas especially attempt to invoke. However, they find that the past provides the only possible route to the future. Even Lily McClelan, who values the past most of all Didion's protagonists, feels she is "afflicted with memory" (230). The protagonist who must successfully achieve a condition of tabula rosa is Inez Victor; as a public figure, her past is jettisoned and recreated at will

and with regularity. In her world, memory is the cost of public life. Each of Didion's female characters work out Didion's escape fantasy; each in turn suffers the loss entailed. In part their failure is a failure of the American Dream; but it is also due in part to their experience as females. As females in a patriarchal society, their identity is rooted in connection, not separation.

Another factor essential to an understanding of Didion's critical consciousness is her view of the female experience in modern life. That view is historically determined by the 'stories' she inherited from her maternal pioneering ancestors. As feminist theory has demonstrated, a woman occupies a position both inside and outside of the patriarchal society (du Plessis 41). Or as Elaine Showalter claims, in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," women exists within two traditions simultaneously, the dominant patriarchal one and the muted female tradition (32).

For Didion, there are obvious similarities between her maternal ancestors' experience as frontier women and her own experience as a female artist. As in the case of the frontier explorer, a woman most exemplifies the values of the dominant culture in her distance from it. The ambivalence inherent in the position as insider/outsider, however, is compounded by the maternal values assigned the female in a patriarchal society. As the primary female

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task is to transmit cultural values, 'to take care of someone' as Didion phrases it, a women intuitively recognizes that the frontier credo of a radical break with civilization is, in fact, suicidal. Didion's ancestors knew in a visceral way what happens when the primary social codes are violated: cannibalism results. Although a woman may well exhibit the unadorned virtues associated with frontier life--courage, ingenuity, perseverance--she can never be 'free' of social constraints to the degree a man may delude himself that he is. For the female, the frontier experiences teaches the lesson of mutual dependence, not radical autonomy. The primary loyalty is to those for whom and to whom one is responsible. Didion expresses this "wagon-train morality" as "one of the promises we make to one another is that we will try to retrieve our casualties, try not to abandon our dead to the coyotes" (STB 159). This is a filial obligation she bequeaths to each of her protagonists; how each one assumes or neglects the obligation determines to a large extent each one's fate. That obligation to retrieve our casualties becomes an affiliative response when it functions as the basis of narrative, as it does for Didion and for some of her protagonists as well.

This adherence to a relatively simple social code places Didion at a distinct disadvantage within contemporary academic and literary circles. Brian Morton makes a note of Didion's "relative unfashionability" in

academic circles and states that Didion's supposed 'excesses' are the critical levy taxed on her ideological heresis" (76). Her insistence that past failures matter, that those failures preclude the social redemption many academics advocate as justification of their own endeavors, made Didion an unpopular figure in American letters.

Morton presents a strong counter-argument for Didion's fictional contributions in his contention that "Didion has suffered from too ready a conflation of her fiction with her political and philosophical concerns" (73). Because her conservative ethos radically resists the prevailing liberal norms, in academia at least, Didion's fiction is treated dismissively as an expression of a fashionable angst or cited as exemplary of the "politics of despair" (Epstein 66). Morton points out that Didion's narrative concerns parallel those of her male counterparts, Pynchon and Mailer, in particular; nonetheless, their literary efforts are regarded as innovative, sophisticated, and seminal, whereas hers are dismissed as derivative, naive, and peripheral.

Morton defends Didion's artistic abilities by pointing to the philosophical and literary backgrounds common to both Didion and Pynchon. As children of their time and as Westerners, both, he maintains, were influenced by the literature of the Beats and the philosophy of the French existentialists. Didion also shares with Pynchon a preoccupation with marginal characters; both "obsessively

employ images of 'waste'; both 'find junk and waste as a correlative of the repressed content of civilization, that which is excluded from rational progress" (75). But most interesting to Morton is the fact that it is Didion, rather than Pynchon, who has "explicitly linked these concerns with their latent populist content, to the notion of the frontier experience which has been so central in American literature" (75).

The tendency to connect the peripheral, the marginal to the female experience is demonstrated in the remarks of a different critic on the topic. Didion's interest in the peripheral reminds this critic of a line from a Dickinson poem. "One thinks again of a line in Dickinson--'The Missing All--prevented me/From missing minor things'--the minor thus becoming major things as they shift from the periphery toward a center empty of transcendental meaning" (Taylor 143). The same critic finds Didion's self-effacing posture as an author reminiscent of Dickinson's disclaimer, "I...am small, like a Wren." While Didion would not be entirely pleased by the association with an 'invalid' and 'marginal female writer, she probably would acknowledge that this perspective does offer a view from which to examine her own preoccupation with the marginal. Indeed, it is a view Didion herself suggests in an essay on Georgia O'Keefe.

What both of these male critics seem to overlook (or perhaps just ignore) is the way the social status Didion is

assigned as a woman might affect the literary status she achieves as a writer. Didion herself collaborates in this benign neglect, preferring to direct her interests and energies to the technical aspects of narrative production. As her frontier history has led her to expect adversity, she is not surprised when she encounters it in the process of claiming a place for herself in the literary system. Her pioneering spirit is also adverse to claiming any special handicap based on her gender. Her warm admiration for Georgia O'Keefe reveals Didion's secret pleasure in having to find her own space for her still small voice. Like O'Keefe, Didion finds opportunity in resistance and conflict. Didion admires O'Keefe's ability to be proud of her difference from the male painters of the time, who insisted they alone knew how to paint a tree. For in the space that her 'difference' created, Georgia O'Keefe discovered an evening star on a treeless horizon that focalized her entire artistic vision. "I had nothing but to walk into nowhere and the wide sunset space with the star" she wrote, and Didion reports in The White Album (130). In Didion's view, O'Keefe made the peripheral central simply by her passionate attention to it.

Didion performs a similar gesture in her narrative of American experience. Although her concern for the effects of the loss of filiation focuses on the individual family, she understands that the universal is validated only through the particular. In fact, Didion herself insists

that her access to the wider world of ideas or elaborate systems of thought is relentlessly through the individual, through the particular. She says of her undergraduate experience at Berkeley, "I would try to contemplate the Hegelian dialectic and would find myself concentrating instead on a flowering pear tree outside my window and the particular way the petals fell on my floor. I would try to read linguistic theory and would find myself wondering instead if the lights were on in the bevatron up the hill" (Friedman 5).

Didion's privilege of the particular signals an affinity with a perspective usually considered indicative of the female experience in Western culture. That focus leads her to examine changes in relationships, filial and otherwise; recent psychological theorists, such as Gilligan and Chodorow, suggest that this interest in relationships is related to the formation of the female identity.[3] For Didion, the examination of relationships exceeds the merely personal or domestic; it leads her to a cultural assessment of the crucial shift from filiation to affiliation.

In the following pages I shall trace the development of Didion's artistic vision as she registers the cultural tremors associated with the shift from filiation to affiliation in contemporary American experience. Narrative function and form operate as the critical elements in this realignment of cultural values for Didion. It is the narrative as a human activity that provides the cultural

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link between past and present, and it is the narrative that enables human beings to project a future out of the detritus of the past. This unadorned, domestic particular serves as the source of power which generates the works of a writer who has been called by James Dickey as the best prose stylist writing in English today (Kazin 113).

My approach to Didion's four novels and essay collections centers on a concern that underlies all of Didion's work: Didion's position as a writer who is contemporary, American, and female. The traditional themes of self as defined in relation to time and place serve as the fundamental structure upon which Didion constructs her narrative of American experience. Didion uses the past as material from which to construct a present or to imagine a future. In Chapters One through Four, I will examine each of Didion's four novels and conclude with a brief look at her essays in Chapter Five. My choice reflects my sense that Didion's novels imaginatively work our problems often ignored or even contradicted in her non-fiction. (I share Marton's view that Didion's fiction is her best response to her critics.) This apparent discrepancy can best be explained by Didion's own account of the differences in the compositional process of fiction and non-fiction. In an interview, Didion observes that the work of an essay is essentially concluded with the investigation of the subject--an act which occurs in the empirical world of experience rather than in the imagination. Non-fiction

writing, for Didion, attempts to capture what has already transpired. In fiction, though, the dynamics of the writing process open up in a new way. Fiction operates at the frontier of the Didion psyche. Writing is literally an act of discovery then. "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking..." she states in a well-known essay, "Why I Write" (Friedman 6).

The critical apparatus I use to discuss each novel also reflects my sense of Didion's growth as a writer over the past twenty-five years. As the emphasis shifts in her fiction, so my critical method alters to accommodate the shifts I perceive in Didion's work. But again, Said's identification of the shift from filiation to affiliation serves as a fundamental paradigm as I move from a feminist archetypal approach in Run River, to an ideological analysis of cultural discourse in Play It As It Lays, to an account of Didion's literary legacy in A Book of Common Prayer, and finally, to a de-construction of literary forms in Democracy.

The feminist archetypal analysis is, in my view, essentially a filiative gesture, attempting to retrieve the cultural and literary legacy that has been lost; as such, my critical method parallels Didion's structure in her first novel. In Play It As It Lays, a transitional novel for Didion, the past is part of what has been aborted. Its imagery is as sterile as it is oppressive. The validity of all narrative discourse comes under scrutiny for its

menacing potential in this work Didion herself has called 'ugly'. Again I take my cue from the structure of the novel itself; I too employ an ideological scrutiny of the cultural discourse produced in the novel, discourse that presents itself as a compensation for the wrenching loss of filiation that the protagonist experiences.

In A Book of Common Prayer I trace a specific literary tradition Didion openly invokes as a way to begin writing again after the narrative deadend she ultimately encounters in her second novel. I argue that Didion seeks a paternal literary ancestor in order to establish an affiliative relation with her literary past; that move enables her to claim the literary legacy she inherits while placing her contribution to that tradition along side as one of equal moment. This is only possible as she has forgone the privilege of filiation implicit in a hierarchal patriarchal structure.

In Democracy, Didion reconsiders her own personal literary history and its relation to her affiliative connections as an American of a certain time and place. Thus Democracy acts as a gloss of her previous fiction at the same time it examines her position as a reporter of contemporary American life. In the process of deconstructing literary forms, Didion explodes the filiative myth of innocence and privilege.

In Chapter Five, I explore the themes of Didion's non-fiction that provide the scaffolding for the novels. Her

position as an inheritor of a frontier legacy, as a native of California, serves as a focal point of that discussion. But, as I have indicated, my primary interest is in her fiction as the novels best reflect Didion's development as a writer.

In her fiction Didion tries to invoke imaginary resolutions to actual social contradictions, as Frederic Jameson suggests all novelists do (77). One of the dilemmas Didion poses for herself is what it means to be a producer of narratives in a time of cultural crisis, a question she shares with many of her artistic peers. She covertly poses that issue as a crucial problem for her characters in the early novels, but increasingly it becomes an issue she overtly discusses as author/narrator in the later novels.

Run River employs a narrative structure indicative of a very conventional approach to literature. Didion herself admits that at twenty-five she simply did not have the technical ability to convey the sense of timelessness she desired in the novel. Some of that longing still lingers in the work, however, as evidenced by the number of critics who detect Faulknerian overtones in the novel.[4] A sense of tragic obsolescence pervades this first novel of Didion's which is a working out of her relation to her own past as a native daughter of California's Central Valley. Sometime between the writing of her first and second novel, Didion comes to perceive that her inheritance as a writer also has

to be included in a past that is now obsolescent. But in Run River she writes with the joy of the newly-initiated, seemingly unaware of how depleted is the literary inheritance she so proudly claims. Nonetheless, the novel itself carries subversive elements within it that will make it impossible for Didion to write another of its kind.

In Run River, the act of narration is already a desperate act of retrieval. As I have noted, the narrative actually holds time in abeyance while a chronological reconstruction of the history of the two Valley families is initiated. The history records the merging of two powerful Valley families, the Knights and the McClellans, and then traces their decline. As the suspension lasts less than an hour, the protagonist is not privileged with profound insight or granted an ephiphanic moment. Rather Didion's point is the weight of the past on the present moment. The protagonist ponders this issue in relation to her inability to understand her husband's shooting of her lover. "Was there ever in anyone's life span a point free in time, devoid of memory, a point when choice was any more than sum of all the choices gone before?" (31).

In retrospect, Didion's writing of Run River is seen as a gesture not unlike that of her protagonist's. Like Lily, she wants to arrest time. Didion, too, appears afflicted with memory; she seeks consolation for what is lost in the narrative form. Her first novel attempts to reclaim and

comprehend a past that is rapidly disappearing. That is a past that includes her own experience in the California of her youth as well as a literary past with stable assumptions about its own workings.

Her admitted nostalgia for the California of her youth conveys a more subtle and covert longing for the 'narratives' of her childhood. Those narratives contained the possibility of happy resolutions--one really could reach the promised land--just as they unquestionably supported the cultural values of order and certitude. The author-work-reader relationship seemed a straight forward affair; authors able to assume absolute power as creators of the discourse they produced and readers passive and attentive, even reverential receptors of authorial inspiration. These narrative assumptions will be seriously challenged in Didion's subsequent novels.

Even in Run River some of the narrative certitude Didion apparently assumes is gradually eroded as the story unfolds. A primary assumption that is challenged is Didion's attempt to create a sense of timelessness in the novel by stopping the forward movement of history at a moment of crisis. Something other than a lack of skill may be at work here. An attempt to fuse past to present as Didion claims she wanted to do, can serve to accentuate the effects of history on the present moment; but another possibility also exists as a subtext of this intention. The attempt may have the effect of rendering all events as

ahistorical, outside of time. Didion appears only somewhat aware of this quandary but evidences a considerable ambivalence about the dilemma in the novel. While the surface text registers how Didion's characters are "afflicted with memory", a subtext threatens to render their experience as ahistorical. This conflict between historical and ahistorical interpretations of experience is best delineated in the lives of Didion's female protagonists.

Writing of the loss of filiation primarily from the perspective of the female, Didion relies on narrative patterns in Run River that feminist critics have identified as the literary legacy maternal artists have transmitted to their female successors. In their study of nineteenth-century female authors, The Madwoman in the Attic, Gilbert and Gubar speculate that "anxiety of authorship" is one of the legacies that female artists both inherit and pass on (50). They propose that these maternal predecessors produced "works that are in some sense palmipsestic, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards" (73). As Annis Pratt has suggested in Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction, feminist archetypal analysis is one critical method for revealing obscured or

concealed aspects of work whose subtext carries traces of its maternal inheritance (9). Chapter One will provide an extensive analysis of Run River employing this critical method. Tracing the patterns of female archetypal images will illuminate a maternal literary connection Didion doesn't always acknowledge or perhaps even recognize in her fiction.

Run River lends itself to a female archetypal analysis in a variety of ways. Again, the strong sense of timelessness acts as a dominant factor in this critical choice. The whole universe of the story seems suspended as an Edenic memory; the novel recalls Didion's cultural childhood as well as her personal one. She discovers in the novel, as her protagonist does, that the country of childhood is one of the "places of the mind" she discusses in an essay "Notes From a Native Daughter." As an archetypal analysis claims to retrieve lost narrative patterns of experience by locating their progeny in new situations, this critical approach emphasizes the ahistorical elements in human experience, ahistorical experiences being those that recur over time.

However, as an American writer, Didion knows only too well the problematics of the ahistorical perspective. Her chronicle of American experience repeatedly points to the subversive role history plays in American life. Thus she must simultaneously register the fulfillment and the failure of the American Dream of starting over, tabula

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rosa. The result is that the dream of ahistorical freedom becomes a historical condition itself. This, too, seems to me the purpose of the feminist approach to archetypal criticism. As defined by feminist critics such as Annis Pratt, Carol Pearson, and Katherine Pope, this critical method functions as an act of retrieval, salvaging from the past literary traditions messages that are particularly salient to the female experience. "For centuries women novelists have been gathering us around campfires where they have warned us with tales of patriarchal horror and encouraged us with stories of heroes undertaking quests that we may emulate" (Pratt 178). Yet feminist archetypal criticism revises the patriarchal archetypal system of men like Campbell or Jung by insisting on the historical nature of the female experience. Thus female archetypal criticism historically situates an ahistorical method; in so doing, it retrieves what has been 'lost' from the narrative of the dominant patriarchal culture.

If Run River is the novel that establishes the loss of filiation as a fact in American life, Didion's second novel, Play It As It Lays records the consequences of that loss. In City of Words, Tony Tanner proposes that "the plot--the situation of the character among things--is a reflection or projection of the author's sense of his own situation among words" (18). Tanner's analogy works well as a way of thinking about Play It As It Lays. For in this work, Didion has to imagine, as a writer, what it means to

be a literary orphan, deprived of the 'natural', 'filiative' ties to language that were severed in the writing of Run River. Didion has to forge a new connection to words themselves--the natural connection between language and experience having been destroyed by a modernist understanding of the two as discontinuous. Whereas language was once viewed as having a filiative or 'natural' connection to experience, now the relationship is viewed as arbitrary, as one of affiliation. In this sense, Play It As It Lays constitutes Didion's frontier experience as a novelist; the novel serves as a radical break from her literary past, just as it records her venture into the now-alien territory of language. Again, it is the structure of the novel that carries the ideological weight of change in Didion's fiction.

In this second novel, the principles of traditional narrative have been replaced by those of film; meaning accrues through the 'electrical' connection of sequence and juxtaposition rather than through the conventional ethical considerations of cause and effect. The narrative structure is stripped bare; 84 clips of staccato prose, comprised of isolated if vivid vignettes, supplant the 26 long chapters of lyrical prose in Run River which weave past to present. While Lily's narrative stands poised between the two shots that open and close the novel, Maria's story begins and ends in the confinement of a mental institution. Grief and loss in Run River have

metastasized into madness and despair in Play It As It Lays. Whereas experience in Didion's first novel exists somewhere in a timeless Eden of the mind, in her second, it is relentlessly anchored to the barren desert of the American West.

Play It As It Lays is an experience in "isolation and adversity" for its protagonist, its readers, and its author (WA 220). The frontier quality of this experience is captured in the central event of the novel, Maria's abortion. This event serves as a metaphor for the entire work, just as it represents Didion's reaction to the decades of the 60's--the general time of the novel. The abortion motif conveys the lack of connection endemic to the displacement of modern life. Characters in the novel are always 'aborting' their pasts and moving on-in true frontier fashion. Didion's use of this image of female experience critiques the American Dream as it was embodied in the frontier experience and as it is re-enacted in modern life.

The narrative itself replicates the abortion motif by short-circuiting any critical response to it. Maria's dictum "NOTHING APPLIES" severs her connections to any system of interpretation the novel appears to elicit. Her repudiation of all systems of interpretation is rooted in a radical individualism that is cultivated by her experience in the American West. The loss of connection--ethical, epistemological, generational--renders each participant in

the novel (character, narrator, reader, writer) entirely responsible for his or her own interpretation. This is a point Didion makes clear in her essay, "Why I Write." She says that Play It As It Lays is "a book in which anything that happened would happen off the page, a 'white' book to which the reader would have to bring his or her own bad dreams" (Friedman 7).

Yet American individualism--the principle usually invoked to justify a radical break with the past--carried with it elements of the opposite tendency which deToqueville foresaw nearly a century and a half ago. The underside of a racial individualism that is based on an abortive break with the past, and that was practiced on the American frontier, reveals a strong disposition toward a sinister conformity. This is a tendency everywhere evident in corporate life in modern times. Maria's story functions to resist the corporate fictions manufactured by the agents of social control in the novel--primarily the film industry, the gambling-entertainment industries, and the institutions of psychiatry. These corporate fictions perpetuate conformity by totalizing all experience under a common rubric.

My analysis of Play It As It Lays in Chapter Two examines Maria's resistances to these agents of social control. It also addresses the resistance to totalization schemes within literature as evidenced by the shifts in power relations among the participants of the literary act

of production in the novel. As noted, the reader shares more responsibility for the production of meaning than in Didion's first novel. Thus literature itself, or to be more precise, all narrative discourse, is implicitly recognized as an agent of social control that vies with other discourses to exert actual power in the empirical world.

Confronted with the loss of a certitude traditionally assigned to the production of narrative, Didion's protagonist suffers an epistemological paralysis. Later, as the narrative progresses, Didion demonstrates that certitude and totalization are attributes of the same world view or symbolic universe. Thus Didion, with Maria, comes to find a value in the production of narratives that resist the very totalization narratives conventionally ensured. When asked by others "Why" live without the certainty of meaning, Maria answers, "Why not?" (213). Didion's own response to her plight as a writer who must write without the certainty of significance echoes that of her beleaguered protagonist.

Although Play It As It Lays explores the limits of radical individualism as characteristic of American experience, Didion and her protagonist find little solace in that lonely solitude of spirit. A racial individualism will not suffice to produce narratives, as survival is the only achievement possible in such adverse circumstances. It is as this juncture in her career that Didion shifts her

attention from the loss of filiation to the possibilities for making new connections. As is characteristic of her artistic vision, she first looks to the past as a way to begin to imagine a community of the future.

The title of Didion's third novel, A Book of Common Prayer, alludes to a primary communal experience of the past-religion. As Said observes in The World, the Text and the Critic, Eliot sought compensation for the loss of filiation finally in the affiliative connection with the Anglican church. "For Eliot the church stands in for the lost family mourned throughout his early poetry" (18). Like Eliot, Didion mourns the filiative loss in her early works; in fact, some critics compare the imagery of her second novel to The Waste Land.[5] Didion's choice of title signals her affinity with Eliot's position even as the novel denies that possibility. In A Book of Common Prayer neither institution--church or family--are available except as an allusion to the past. Indeed, she uses many of Eliot's images and diction from Four Quartets to show how empty those symbolic references are in the post-modern age. So repeating the past is not possible in Didion's world; however, new modes of connection are necessary. The task of the narrator is to discover those new possibilities through the production of narrative.

Didion's return to her literary past as a way to begin writing fiction again is most evident in the structure of her third novel. For the first time, she chooses a first-

person narrator who is not the protagonist of the story. This narrator, Grace Strasser-Mendana, attempts to construct a narrative of the life of yet another woman, Charlotte Douglas. In Chapter Three, I detail the similarities in narrative situation between Didion's novel and the work of her chosen forefather, Joseph Conrad. I argue that Didion chooses Conrad as he is an example of affiliation with the literary tradition that she inherits. Didion's retelling of Conrad's Heart of Darkness, a story of affiliation, from a female perspective validates her connection to her literary past through the affiliative relation she establishes with it.

That she addresses the issue of relationships between women places Didion in a position of revision not only the patriarchal tradition she rewrites, but also of revising her own history as a novelist. In this respect, Didion performs a feminist act, an act which ultimately valorizes the relations of women to each other as relationships between males have traditionally been valorized. Indeed, she finds that for women it is the loss involved in the failure of filiation that provides the requisite link for affiliation.

Some feminist critics have taken up the search for affiliation recently as well as a motif to symbolize their objectives of creating communities among women. In "Forward into the Past," Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the twentieth-century female author may find an affiliative

relation the most suitable one to imagine forging with one's literary predecessors. "In the twentieth century... our own 'anxiety of authorship' must inevitably give way to a paradigm of ambivalent affiliation, a construct which dramatizes women's intertwined attitudes of anxiety and exuberance about [female] creativity" (243).

Other critics have focused on the way women forge new connections by telling their own stories. Rachel de Plessis's work, Writing Beyond the Ending, articulates the ways in which modern writers/narrators break through the barriers of what she calls the 'feminity text' by altering the conventional romance plot (4). Joanne Frye, in Living Stories, Telling Lives, argues for an affiliative relation between text and lives, between language and experience. She argues for an "inquiry into the understanding of the female experience and its relationship to literature. And this inquiry can in turn illuminate the problems and possibilities of literary form as being both part of a complex system of conventions and simultaneously integral to lived experience" (17). The works of these critics informs my reading of Didion's third novel, as she too begins to probe the problem of how and why women become involved in the production of narratives of their own lives. This is a problematic that continues as a subtext of her fourth novel as well.

As noted earlier, all filiative relations have completely deteriorated in Democracy. The Victor/Christian

families exist only on television as images of political rhetoric. Only affiliative modes of connection remain. But rather than valorize affiliation as Said tends to do, Didion dissects the varieties of affiliation produced in contemporary life and made significant distinctions among them. As an American she does so by challenging the modern understanding of a democratic principle that equality is freedom. For Didion, freedom exists in the differences involved in individual efforts, not in the bland sameness of mass production.

Still, she understands the need for new connections. This recognition is reflected in the resolution of the plot in Democracy. Inez Victor finds fulfillment in her work with the refugees of the Vietnam War. Her commitment to the children of the war-torn world, to the casualties of modern life, supercedes her connection to her 'natural' family. In Democracy, the "ethos of responsibility" has been transferred from the individual, nuclear family to those for whom one is responsible as a member of a global community. But the concept of affiliation--connection through cultural relations--serves as more than a replacement of a failed generational impulse. Affiliation characterizes the relation of works of literature to each other and to the life they 'represent'.

In Democracy Didion establishes an affiliative relation between her fourth novel and the three previous ones. She does so by using Democracy to gloss her previous works of

fiction. Themes, characters, and narrative events introduced in Run River, Play It As It Lays, A Book of Common Prayer are re-worked in Democracy. In Chapter Four I will discuss the similar personalities of Didion's female protagonists in each novel; the light and dark male images that repeat themselves in the novels; maternal loss and sexual politics as recurring themes in Didion's fiction. I will examine the rival versions Didion presents of each of her former novels in her fourth work of fiction. The examination will focus on Play It As It Lays, however, as that is the least satisfying of all Didion's work in my view. I see Democracy re-thinking some of the issues that were inadequately resolved in Didion's second novel, such as the relation of public and private life. Also the production of public and private narratives is taken up again in Democracy.

The rival versions of her previous novels act to deconstruct Didion's own previous literary productions. But Democracy also deconstructs the literary forms Didion inherits by calling attention to the problematic status of literature in the post-modern world. This issue is considered from a variety of perspectives, which include: 1) the fact the novel announces itself as a novel; 2) that the title alludes to works of both fiction and non-fiction; 3) that the novel is narrated by Joan Didion, the reporter; 4) that many events and people in the work bear a striking resemblance to actual people and events of contemporary

American life; and 5) that the novel is metafictional in its design.

More than any of her other novels, Democracy establishes Joan Didion as a post-modern American writer. In this work, she examines the ideological basis for the production of narrative in a contemporary, consumer society. She deftly records and deconstructs the corporate 'narratives' produced by the communications industries in Democracy. Didion also deconstructs the way such mass-produced narratives act as agents of social control in public and private life. Furthermore, she examines the role of the media in these productions, and by implication, her own role as a journalist in a consumer society.

Finally, Chapter Five presents a brief look at Didion's four essay collections. Again the focus is Didion's position as a producer of narratives whose frontier history shapes the perspective she brings to contemporary culture. I delineate the factors that make her the kind of writer that she is--a writer concerned primarily with narrative form and with history as the crucial narrative of the American experience. I share with Brian Morton the sense that she is undervalued as an accurate and astute articulator of the American scene. But history itself will render the final verdict in the matter; and when the immediate distractions of fame and fortune no longer could the judgment, perhaps her own particular contribution to American letters can be defined. For here we have a woman

writer who never denies the female quality of her experience, but who never exempts herself from exacting standards by self-serving claims of female ingenuity. Her frontier spirit makes Joan Didion a kind of writer whose vision may not be fashionable, but it also makes her the kind of writer whose voice will transcend the vagaries of time.

A MOTHER'S LEGACY:

FEMININE ARCHETYPAL PATTERNS IN RUN RIVER

Didion's preoccupation as a writer with the loss of filiation as the quintessential experience of modernity displays itself in her first novel, Run River. The novel seeks to recapture a past that is both personal and cultural. Didion attributes much of the novel's attention to landscape, for instance, to a nostalgic impulse. She remarks that the impulse is not uncommon in writers and indicates she recognizes it in James Jones' From Here to Eternity. "I could see exactly that kind of nostalgia, that yearning for a place, overriding all narrative considerations" (Kuehl 151). Didion goes on to suggest the same pattern is evident in her first novel.

Yet, in "Notes From a Native Daughter," in Slouching Toward Bethlehem, Didion reflects that the loss of her personal past in Califonia has corrolaries in the collective American experience of the postwar years. By perceiving her personal situation in its historical context, Didion comes to understand the inter-relations of public and private life, that private life can often serve as a 'code' for collective, public experience. This understanding is reflected in her subsequent novels, as Brian Morton has observed. "The breakdown of relationships

is now seen in the context of history itself, not as an ideological abstraction but as a field on which orphans and lost children wander and meet" (84). I propose that Didion arrives at this seminal understanding of the relation of public and private experience through the writing of her first novel. She has repeatedly maintained that writing for her is an act of discovery, an attempt to find out what she has on her mind. The loss of filiation is what preoccupies Didion's mind as she sets out on her career as a woman of letters.

Didion seeks consolation in narrative form for that loss, a not uncommon response in the modern world. Indeed, as I have indicated, some critics such as Eagleton claim narrative has its origins as an act of consolation. That Didion structures her first and subsequent novels so as to present narrative as an act of retrieval suggests her concurrence with Eagleton's idea.

Narrative serves yet another function, however, in Didion's scheme of things. Said proposes some inherent connection to familial patterns resides in the history of narrative development itself. "From its earliest beginnings, narrative fiction...has been built around the totalizing figure of the family, in which its recurring circumstantial perpetuity is tampered with by the upstart 'original' hero" (154). Said's observation implies that narrative emerges as a literary form in conjunction with altered social and political circumstances that signal the

dissolution of totalization in all its guises, but especially that of the filiative structure. Thus Didion's inclination to see a relation between narrative and family structures appears to be rooted in a historical condition.

Given that Didion's first novel is both an act of retrieval and a record of loss, situated in a historical context, and executed by a female writer about a female protagonist, the critical approach most suited to retrieving the feminine perspective of historical forces is the feminine archetypal approach. For, as we shall see, the aproach has as its objective the reclaiming of a discarded or suppressed past and the establishment of a literary community of women, a community connected by narrative threads that weave in and out of their lives across time.

By calling attention to the narrative connection in women's lives, Didion implicitly signals the historical circumstance that enables a recognition of the value of such a communal tie: the loss of filiation as articulated within the patriarchal system. An analysis of feminine archetypal patterns or systems of order within the larger patriarchal structure but often at odds with the superstructure will reveal patterns of experience that may become paradigmatic for the future. But first, it is necessary to study the aims and methods of this critical approach and determine its application to Didion's first novel.

Feminist critics who have examined works by women writers on a large scale have been particularly drawn to archetypal criticism. They find in that critical approach a methodology that permits them to accommodate a large volume of very different texts and to detect in those texts a similarity of concerns. The archetypal approach also provides a critical vocabulary for articulating the mutual concerns that connect women across the centuries. Thus the approach facilitates a perception of continuity and community among women, a perception that women have expressed a need for in their lives and in their literature.

The archetypal approach to literature appeals to those concerned with women's issues for other reasons as well. A primary appeal, I think, is its claim to power. Archetypal criticism derives from Jung's theory of archetypes, defined by Neumann as the "structural elements of the collective unconscious" which determine and direct the development of human consciousness. (XV) Since archetypal images are presumed to determine the range of possibilities available to human experience, they are seen as tremendous sources of psychic power.

Given the concern with the sources of power available to women in a patriarchal culture, it is not surprising that feminist critics would be attracted to a critical theory that presents itself as a repository of imaginative power. The emphasis on the imagination as the active agent

of personal and social change especially appeals to women whose collective history has been one of suppressing or denying their creative potential.

The imaginative emphasis also links feminist archetype criticism to the romantic literary tradition, which values the imagination as the most powerful human faculty. Another link with the romantic tradition is the preference in feminist archetypal criticism for the quest-romance motif. As the fictional mode which most explicitly explores the idea of personal freedom and self-fulfillment, the quest-romance is well suited to the needs of women who see themselves as denied the modes of expression readily available to men. "The quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain reality"(Frye 193). In women's fiction, the quest-motif frequently involves a woman's imaginative search for a personal reality that will allow her to transcend the social limitations which discourage any sense of herself as a heroic being.

Annis Pratt and Carol Pearson/Katherine Pope are exemplary feminist critics who use an archetypal approach to examine the fiction of women. Each takes a system of literary interpretation originally devised by men and revises that system to more accurately reflect contemporary feminist readings of women's fiction. Pratt, for instance, subscribes to Jung's theory of archetypes as "recurrent

literary forms that derive from unconscious originals" (Pratt 3). She differs from Jung, however, in her interpretation of the female archetypal experience. Jung assumes a continuity of archetypal experience from male to female; Pratt argues for a radical discontinuity.

In Jung's system, the journey of the male hero involves as one of its critical aspects the incorporation of the anima or feminine principle into his construct of self as a prerequisite for achieving an authentic self. Jung further postulates that a simple reversal of that process, in which the female hero incorporates the animus or male principle as part of her psychological make-up, accounts for the female archetypal experience. Pratt argues that such a system overlooks important social restrictions placed on the female in a patriarchal society. "Women's fiction reflects an experience radically different from men's because our drive towards growth as a person is thwarted by our society's prescriptions concerning gender" (Pratt 6). Pratt states further that as the patriarchal culture has as one of its structuring principles the devaluation of women, the female hero's confrontation with the animus figure entails a coming to terms with and rejection of the self-loathing implicit in the masculine principle. "Whereas the encounter with the anima is supposed to be the crucial experience leading the male back to society as a superordinate or reborn person, women encounter the animus as a block to full development" (Pratt 142).

A crucial distinction here seems to be the society or social context from which the hero exits and to which the hero must return. The male hero's journey into the unconscious serves to complete his potential as a fully developed human being. This fact is recognized by society which grants him the status of hero. The female hero, however, rarely receives such acclaim. Her heroic journey is not perceived as a boon to society. Instead that journey more often poses a threat to the very fabric of patriarchal society and to herself. As Pratt points out, the female hero's journey into the unconscious forces her to recognize her devalued status in the patriarchal structure. Furthermore, she must come to recognize that she herself has been complicitous with that appraisal of her status. The source of that complicity has been an aspect of her own psyche--the male principle which subscribes to the wider culture's values of rationality, logic, order, etc.

Pratt maintains that the aspects of one's psychological make-up are influenced by cultural factors to a much higher degree than Jung suggests, and that the degree of influence is more significant in the female's development than in the male's as there is a wider discrepancy between her experiences and societal expectations than there is for the male. So instead of embracing and reclaiming as her own the principle of the opposite gender, as the male hero does, the female hero must forego that gesture. It is only

by rejecting those aspects of the male principle that are culturally influenced that the female hero can discover that the 'masculine' qualities that society values--courage, strength, assertiveness--are truly her own.

Yet that rejection of the male principle entails a profound loss for the female hero who has been socialized to perceive her connection to males and to the values they represent as the essential connection. Deprived of that connection, the female has no legitimate access to the patriarchal structure. She is thus forced into a dilemma. Either she must deny her newly-found knowledge in order to gain acceptance by society or she must relinquish all sense of community to gain an authentic self. That is a cost many female characters are not prepared to pay, and thus their female authors often consign them to madness or death. Unlike the male hero, the female hero's death does not redeem society; it is more often perceived as a just punishment for violating the dictates of the patriarchal society. Pratt's reading of archetypal patterns in women's fiction, then, not only revises Jung's theory of the nature of the heroic journey; it also suggests that the very concept of hero is culturally bound to such a degree that it cannot be said to represent all human experience.

Pearson and Pope arrive at a similar conclusion in their revision of Joseph Campbell's model of heroic action. In The Female Hero, these critics argue that the male models do not take into account the female's experience as

'other' in a patriarchal society and thus do not serve as the universal models they claim to be (Pearson/Pope 5). Pratt, Pearson and Pope restructure the archetypal models to more accurately reflect the female experience as codified in women's fiction. In so doing, they recognize what male archetypalists have failed to acknowledge: that feminine archetypes are "repositories of power useful to women" as well as to men (Pratt 8).

Pearson and Pope read the women's fiction they examine almost exclusively in terms of the quest-romance. Pratt, too, designates the quest-romance as the literary motif most important for women trying to articulate the process of their development. Another critic notes that the whole concept "of a coherent self" has been challenged recently by contemporary critics and writers, but maintains the concept "remains cogent for women who for the first time find themselves in a world increasingly responsive to their needs" (Abel 13). Achieving a full adulthood is still a legitimate concern for women. Thus female archetypal critics, such as Pratt, Pearson, and Pope judge the female protagonist by the success or failure of her attempt to achieve an authentic self. Pratt's system, however, allows for an identification of the thwarted quest. Using a developmental approach, Pratt classifies women's fiction according to the stage of psychological development achieved by the female protagonist. She then identifies the archetypal patterns associated with each stage, as do

Pearson and Pope.

All three critics find the female author implicated in the success or failure of the protagonist to achieve an authentic self. They speculate that the writer's vision is determined by the extent to which she has internalized the values of a patriarchal society; values, these critics claim, are inherently contradictory to the aims of a woman writer. Therefore, whether a work is explicitly feminist or not, by virtue of choosing a female protagonist, the writer challenges the patriarchal assumption that all heroes are male. (Pearson and Pope 12) Nonetheless, women writers possess differing degrees of awareness about their problematical relation to such patriarchal values. A frequent result is that "the disjunction between an author's social conscience and her need for selfhood renders characterizations ambivalent, tone and attitude ambiguous, and plots problematic" (Pratt 11). This dissonance, Pratt argues, "stems from what Northrup Frye calls the 'myth of freedom' or romance element, set against the 'myth of concern', or of social conservatism" (35).

In some ways, Joan Didion provides an apt illustration of the female writer these critics describe. She does not align herself with feminist causes, yet implicitly sanctions many of their aims in her fiction. Didion repeatedly chooses female protagonists for her novels and then examines the nature of the female experience in contemporary culture. Perhaps what distinguishes Didion

from the more radical feminist writers is her disinclination to believe in social redemption. In an essay in The White Album, Didion characterizes herself as "...a woman who somewhere along the line misplaced whatever slight faith she ever had in the social contract, in the meliorative principle, in the whole grand pattern of human endeavor" (WA 134).

It is Didion's skepticism about what she calls "the romantic ethic" that provokes the feminists' attacks against her, and her's against them. In another essay in The White Album, Didion writes a scathing invective against the Women's Movement, pointing out how trivialized much of the Movement's rhetoric had become in the early 70s. Didion criticizes the popularized version of the Movement for "its invention of a proletariat, its cult of victimization, and its refusal to come to grips with the ambiguities of adult sexual life"(WA 116). But one critic, Judith Newton, views Didion's critique of the Movement as an attack on women. Newton speculates that Didion's attack is a misguided gesture of self-protection, one that sacrifices other women in order to salvage her own self-respect. Despite my contention that Newton misreads Didion's essay, the tone of the essay is vitriolic and it is that tone that I suspect accounts for Newton's reaction. Newton feels betrayed by a woman writer she had admired for confronting the nature of the female experience in the novel Play It As It Lays. "It is painful--and maddening--

to watch Didion move into the same realm of misery, and that realm of misery peculiar to women whose uneasiness about their own vulnerability provokes distorted visions and defensive judgments of other women who have chosen to admit that, yes, they are vulnerable and who have set about confronting that vulnerability, asking where it all began" (110).

Didion does distance herself from the Women's Movement in the essay, but it is from the social phenomena and not from the women themselves that she distances herself. In the same essay, Didion observes that women's actual experience is as subject to trivialization by the feminists as it is by those the feminists designate as the 'oppressor'. By attributing their victimization solely to men, women deny any responsibility for their own lives. "All one's actual apprehension of what it is like to be a woman, the irreconcilable difference of it--that sense of living one's deepest life underwater, that dark involvement with blood and birth and death--could now be declared invalid, unnecessary, one never felt it at all" (WA 117). It is against such dismissal of woman's experience, against an over-simplification of woman's role as Other in the world, that Didion directs her strident rebuke.

For if we examine Didion's novels, we find an enduring respect and admiration for women, a genuine concern for their problems, and an implicit faith that women are intelligent enough to recognize their own complicity in any

victimization and possess sufficient courage to refuse to be a victim. This belief in the strength and courage of women demonstrates itself in Didion's first novel, Run River, and continues throughout her subsequent works. Play It As It Lays, Didion's second novel, is often cited as an example of a work in which the female protagonist chooses to be viewed as 'the mad wife' rather than to function as the object of the perverted fantasies of those around her. As Pearson/Pope and Pratt note, the 'mad wife' is a common archetypal pattern in women's fiction, reflecting the position of a woman with critical intelligence in a patriarchal society. In A Book of Common Prayer, Didion explores yet another archetypal pattern that recurs in women's fiction: the reunion of the mother and daughter or a reworking of the Demeter/Kore myth. Through a reconstruction of Charlotte's 'narrative', Grace Strasser-Medena comes to understand what Charlotte knew all along: that both women are outsiders who can offer mutual support and friendship to each other. Textual evidence suggests that Didion's latest novel, Democracy, began as Inez Christian's story about her mother: "Imagine my mother dancing..." (21). Although the surface structure of the novel changes radically in the course of composition, and those changes are then foregrounded by Didion, the theme of the loss of mothers and daughters constitutes a significant sub-text.

In addition to the archetypal patterns that surface in

Didion's fiction which connect her to other women writers, she herself perceives a similarity of concerns. In an interview for Paris Review, Didion characterizes herself as a writer of romance. Referring to an observation made by a reviewer of A Book of Common Prayer, Didion recalls that "She [the reviewer] suggested that the women were strong to the point of being figures in a romance, that they were romantic heroines rather than actual women in actual situations. I think that's probably true. I think I write romances" (Kuehl 159). The romance, as we have seen, is a literary motif especially preferred by women who write and critique women's fiction. That preference seems based on the recognition that the romance permits an imaginative exploration of the conditions under which women discover the source of their own strength.

Didion's comment that she writes romances appears to come to her in the nature of a discovery. It suggests she had not previously thought of herself in that context, just as it seems she does not consider herself as a woman writer, but a writer who happens to be female. Her reluctance to attribute any significance to her gender as an important aspect of her authorial vision disturbs feminist critics. Yet an analysis of her fiction will demonstrate quite clearly that she shares many of the insights and concerns of those who write under the nomenclature of feminist.

Didion's first novel, Run River, makes an interesting

case study in this respect. Written in 1963, it predates the popularization of feminist concerns, yet displays Didion's preoccupation with the female experience in a patriarchal society. The title itself recalls a feminine archetype, the Great Mother, who functions as both creator and destroyer. That the title was assigned by an editor indicates that Didion may not have been entirely aware of its significance for her novel. Also, Run River is Didion's first novel, written out of a profound sense of loss and nostalgia, which implies again that she may not have had as much conscious control over her material as she obviously does in her later novels (Kuehl 150).

The abundance of traditional archetypal images also supports such a view. Images of water, fire, and light permeate the novel. Everette McClellan, the protagonist's husband, is haunted by dreams of fire in which he imagines his hop fields burning and Lily, his wife, trapped in the fire, the "ugly image of her fragile bones outlined in the incandescent ruin." Everette's apocalyptic vision represents his fear of impending disaster and a foreboding that all his efforts to maintain control over the green valley of his youth will come to naught.

However, it is water, not fire, which is connected to actual death in the novel. Everette's sister, Martha, and Lily's father and his mistress all drown in the novel. And when Everette shoots Ryder Channing (the lover of both his wife and his sister), and then himself, the shootings take

place on the dock by the river that has already claimed so many of the family's dead. There is, however, a conjunction of light and water images in each of the death scenes in Run River. A flashlight burns through three inches of muddy water near the dock as both Everette and Ryder lay dead in the closing scene, just as the headlights of Walter Knight's (Lily's father) submerged car had shone through twenty-five feet of water some seventeen years earlier. And it is in the "brilliant cold light of the flared" that Lily watches the futile efforts to revive Martha's lifeless body after she is pulled out of the flood waters (RR 210).

The conjunction of light and water suggests that there is some knowledge to be gained from the tragedy that besets the McClellan-Knight family. And it is Lily Knight--wife, daughter, sister, and lover of the victims--who is privy to those insights. Her name connects her to figures of traditional romance that embark on quests to bring about rebirth, as does her privileged role as the protagonist of the novel. These factors strongly suggest that despite the ambiguity of Lily's insights, Didion's first novel is as much a novel of female development as it is a dramatization of a society in transition, as one critic claims (Henderson 92).

Katherine Henderson comes closer to this recognition in her assessment of the novel as "the integration of traditional myths with the private history of the novel's

characters and the public history of their community and nation" (92). Yet Henderson, like Didion, fails to make explicit how factors of gender shape Lily's perception of this troubled time and even contribute to it, or how such factors help to account for Didion's choice of the romance as the genre in which to express her vision.

Insights provided by feminist critics such as Pratt, and Pearson/Pope, however, will prove useful in detecting the archetypal patterns of female development embedded in the traditional framework of Didion's novel. Such patterns, as Pratt observes, often function as "subversive elements" which implicitly challenge the more explicit patriarchal values the novel upholds as traditional (177). Run River presents such a challenge, but in a covert manner. An examination of the archetypal patterns that recur in women's fiction will indicate that Didion's first novel embodies a stronger awareness of gender factors than the author willingly acknowledges or her critics admit to.

In Pratt's terms, Didion's first novel is about a female hero whose quest for selfhood is thwarted. Run River incorporates two of Pratt's classifications-the novel of development and the novel of marriage. The first is a female bildingsroman which explores the female hero's experience of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The second, the novel of marriage, is an account of the female hero's attempt to accommodate society's expectations of her as a married woman. For Lily Knight, the

protagonist of Run River, both of those transitions are fraught with troubling complications. In Frye's terms, she is caught in the archetypal struggle between the myth of concern and the myth of freedom, a situation in which an individual's needs conflict with societal expectations. It is at moments of confrontations, when Lily tries to interpret society's demands of her as a female in light of her own perceptions, that Pratt's system of archetypal patterns in women's fiction seems most enlightening.

The archetypal patterns associated with the novel of development in Pratt's system are the green-world archetype, the rape-trauma archetype, and the growing-up-grotesque archetype. To a degree, each of the three patterns is evident in Run River. But as Pearson and Pope observe, the archetypal stages often over-lap or repeat themselves or occur in a non-linear fashion.

The green-world archetype manifests itself in images associated with nature. The young female finds "solace, companionship, and independence" in nature (Pratt 21). There she finds a source of nourishment for her fledgling dreams of self. But as Pratt points out, images of the green world are most often presented in retrospect and thus are associated with a strong sense of loss. In the case of the young female hero, those images are most prominent just before she is to be initiated into the patriarchal structure of the adult world. Such is the case with Lily Knight. Images of the green-world appear in Run River when

Lily is about to marry.

Lily is eighteen when she renews her childhood acquaintance with Everette McClellan. She has just completed a year at Berkeley, but has no plans to return in the fall. She prefers the security of her father's ranch where her role is clearly defined as his 'princess'. At the ranch she feels in possession of herself and in contact with the natural world around her. On a visit to the family cemetery, Lily confides to her father that "Sometimes I think this whole valley belongs to me" (RR 79). But she loses that confidence at Berkeley where young men expect her to be more knowledgeable about sexual matters than she is or cares to be. The world of male/female relationships is a perplexing one for Lily. Advice from her female friends strikes Lily as contradictory: "Be more fun--be yourself" (RR 48). Lily is able to be herself only when she is on her father's ranch, driving his car on roads he has paid for. She clearly feels that her father's power extends to her and that his power derives from the land he owns in the Sacremento Valley. It is the proprietary nature of Walter Knight's claims to the land that has advanced his cause in the State Legislature, just as it is his mastery of a voluble rhetoric and his Rhett Butler handsomeness that has claimed his only child's heart. Until she meets Everette, Lily is unable to imagine any connection with a man who is not her father.

But in the summer of 1940, Lily's sexuality is awakened; she is acutely aware of the sensual beauty of her world--the coolness of clear water on her skin, the lush green of the hops fields, the richness and ripeness of the warm, heavy pears in the orchard. She senses a connection between the fruit in her father's orchard and her own body and is led to contemplate "the waste of her perfectly good but constantly depreciating body" (RR 51). At some level, Lily is aware that she is ready to enter the world of adult sexuality. But that desire for maturity is clouded by the apprehension that her youth and beauty, like her father's pears, are commodities whose value decreases with time. So when Everette McClellan re-enters her life, she welcomes his return as part of some natural rhythm.

For Lily, Everette takes on some of the aspects of what Pratt calls "the green-world lover", a figure who leads the hero towards social development. Like Walter Knight, Everette is a grower in the valley. Unlike her father, however, Everette actually works the land himself and is therefore more closely associated with nature. All his psychic energies are connected to the planting, growing, and harvesting of the green hops, now a defunct crop. His courtship of Lily takes place almost exclusively within the realm of the green-world; in fact, Lily's sexual initiation takes place on the banks of the river that runs through the McClellan property. After that initiation, Everette offers Lily the opportunity to remain in the green-world; he

promises to protect her from whatever snakes may or may not lurk in the grass of the riverbank. Enchanted by this blond, tanned god-like figure whose "bones seem right to her", Lily agrees to marry Everette. "It seemed as inescapable as the ripening of the pears, as fated as the exile from Eden" (RR 59).

The "exile from Eden" in some women's novels corresponds to what Pearson and Pope designate as the first stage of the journey for the female hero. "In the first stage, the hero exists from the garden when she comes to realize that people she had previously seen as guides for her life...are her captors" (68). Although Lily has come to recognize that her parents are fallible, that her father will never be governor, that he has a mistress, and that her mother is somehow complicitous in that triangle, Lily does not yet perceive her parents as captors. She does understand at a later time, unspecified by Didion, that her father was "a good man but maybe not good enough, often enough, to count for much in the long run. When you know that you know something about yourself, but you did not know it then" (RR 45). As Lily does not yet make the connection between knowing something about her father and knowing something about herself (for instance, that they both possess a talent for self-deception), Lily perceives the exit from the garden of parental dependency as an eviction.

The exile from the garden comes in the form of marriage

for Lily. Once she has engaged in sexual activity with Everette, she finds that he expects her to marry him. Later she understands that her agreement to do so was "really no decision at all; only an acquiescence" (RR 59). Having grown up with the understanding that her father will protect her, Lily is shocked to discover that some action of hers can be construed as an obligation to another person. She wants to question that assumption, but to do so seems to invoke the potential destruction of the green world Everette has promised. "The word why, once spoken out loud, could bring the pears all tumbling down" (RR 59). Unlike some female heroines, Lily cannot imagine any access to the green world apart from a connection to a man. Nature itself is a part of the patriarchal space that is all-encompassing in her world and it does not occur to Lily to question the validity of that male claim. It does occur to her to question the claim that Everette makes on her body.

Although Lily does marry Everette, she does not do so without serious reservations. She begins to question the assumptions of a society which sanctions sexuality only in the context of marriage. She senses in some vague way that marriage will involve a loss of an essential freedom, that it will be achieved only by some "intricate deception" she cannot yet afford to recognize. Lily tries to convey her uneasiness to Everette, but he fails to understand her point. "Sometimes I don't want to marry anyone. Some

afternoons I lie on my bed and the light comes through the shutters on the floor and I think I never want to leave my own room" (RR 61). Lily perceives that marriage will somehow violate her private space, but Everette misunderstands her apprehension; instead he tries to console her with a promise of a whole house to herself. Everette fails to comprehend, and Lily does only dimly, that he cannot give her what she needs and wants--not material space, but psychological space, a room of her own.

So uncertain is Lily about marriage that she cannot bring herself to inform her parents of her intention. Accepting Lily's passivity as acquiescence, Everette drives Lily to Reno to elope. But Everette's assertiveness does nothing to alleviate Lily's anxiety. On their honeymoon Lily imagines that the fact she lied about her age on the marriage license will invalidate the marriage. It is not until she returns to her father's house that she comprehends the irrevocability of her act; marriage is a condition from which even her father cannot protect her. Her exit from the garden of parental dependency is complete.

A second archetypal pattern, the rape-trauma archetype in Pratt's system and the stage of seduction in Pearson and Pope's model, share certain attributes. There is a seducer, usually male, who is sometimes a villain, but can also be one aspect of the green-world lover, once that lover assumes the role of husband. As in Lily's case, the

seducer--Everette--may perpetuate the belief that she need not complete the heroic journey; he will complete and protect her. Instead he becomes another captor, leading the hero into the enclosure of marriage. Pratt observes that the rape-trauma archetype recurs as the most frequent plot structure in women's fiction and is always associated with pain and betrayal.

For Lily, images of pain and betrayal are most clearly associated with sexuality. Although her sexual initiation can in no way be labeled 'rape', it is nonetheless traumatic. On the occasion of that initiation, Lily and Everette go swimming. Lily expresses her fear of the impending experience through a reference to her fear of water--traditionally associated with the birth/death cycle. "I always think I'll be dragged under," she confesses to Everette (RR 56). While swimming she acquires a long scratch which later becomes infected and leaves a scar. That injury to her person becomes connected in her mind with the loss of her virginity, a loss that is both physical and psychological. The linkage of sex and pain is one that remains with Lily throughout the novel. Later when she seeks erotic freedom with subsequent lovers/seducers she can only be aroused when she can recreate the pain-as-pleasure of the original loss.

Feminist critics would read Lily's reaction as one that results from an internalization of society's values which are detrimental to women. Sexual freedom is traditionally

forbidden to females in a patriarchal society and so must be punished. When the punishment is not forthcoming from an external source, the female hero will often punish herself for enjoying a sexual freedom not sanctioned by society. One way to impose such self punishment is to experience sexual pleasure as pain, as Lily does. That Lily's reaction is one that Didion may share at this early stage in her career is suggested by another incident in the novel.

Lily's father, Walter Knight and his mistress, Rita Blanchard, are in an accident in which they are drowned. Again the linked images of sex and water appear. Two passersby discover Walter Knight's car submerged in twenty-five feet of water, the headlights still shining. Although Walter Knight's face is "unmarked", "Rita had been cut, across her left cheek and down that long Blanchard throat" (RR 75). While the male participant in this marital transgression is equally as dead as the female, it is the female who bears the totemic sign of guilt. If Didion herself is not punishing the mistress figure, she is at least indicating that it is the female who will be recognized as the guilty party.

The punishment of the female who seeks erotic freedom can also be connected to the growing-up grotesque archetype. Many female heroes who try to achieve an autonomy that permits them to make choices regarding sex, work, love, etc. are punished as social freaks. In

Didion's novel, it is Everette's sister who most closely follows this pattern. Martha McClellan "is a case" as Lily's mother observes (RR 51). Although Martha claims to be studying agriculture at college because her father wants her to marry a rich farmer, it is clear that what Martha really wants is to run the family farm herself. Martha's passion for the land is one she shares with Everette; however, as a female, she has to revise history a bit to justify her claim to it. In her childhood versions of the winning of the West, it is the women, often the wives of the frontier leaders who are responsible for the settling of California. Obviously Martha is trying to compensate for the lack of female models by inventing some of her own.

Martha's fantasy life is seriously undermined however when Everette, who had supported Martha's feminist version of their childhood dreams, marries Lily and thus makes certain his undisputed claim to the patriarchal inheritance. Martha views his marriage to Lily as a betrayal of that primal loyalty to kin and so accuses him of leaving her alone. In her view, her brother's marriage is a defection from the family unit in which she had seen herself an equal partner. She had understood that Everette's promise to protect her included a promise to support and nourish a vision of herself as a strong and independent helpmate. When Everette's action contradicts that understanding, Martha loses that vision of herself. It is as if at seventeen, Martha discovers for the first

time that the male virtues of freedom and independence are not ones she is allowed to claim for herself.

Denied those possibilities, Martha comes to see herself as grotesque, as some distortion of the valued male identity. She begins to act in ways that will justify her self-hatred; she goes to too many parties, drinks too much, makes a spectacle of herself. She also becomes involved with Ryder Channing, a man she knows will betray and exploit her, out of some disparate need to revenge her brother for failing her. At a party with Ryder where she meets his fiancee, Martha is overcome by depression and a sense of foreboding. She locks herself in the bathroom to stare at herself in the mirror. But she does not recognize the woman who stares back. "Your name is Martha McClellan, she said again and again to the mirror, and then cried because it did not seem to be the Martha McClellan she had wanted to be" (RR 182). She is not the courageous, intelligent woman she envisioned the ideal frontier woman to be. Instead she has become the "gauche, bitchy little girl" Ryder expects her to be. (RR 185) Martha has discovered that to be accepted as female in this society she must grow 'down', not up.

Pearson and Pope point out that the mirror is a common symbol "to express the limiting and oppressive effects of the traditional female role" (22). Those effects are clearly evident in this scene. Since Martha's mother died giving her birth, Martha has grown up in a

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predominantly male household. Without the guidance of a mother who traditionally prepares the young girl to take her place in society, Martha has appropriated the values of the males around her as her own. She is bright, aggressive, competitive, defiant, questioning. As she moves into womanhood, however, she finds these qualities are liabilities, not appropriate attributes for attracting a husband. As she has not learned through example the fine art of pleasing a man, she perceives herself as powerless in the female domain. "You're strong enough to make people take care of you" she informs Lily and thereby discloses her own deficiencies. (RR 97) So Martha sets out to make someone take care of her. If she cannot be the pleasing female, she will be the recalcitrant one. But the discrepancy between the woman she had wanted to be and the one she has become is so great that Martha verges on schizophrenia. Furthermore, most of Martha's actions, especially towards men, are prompted by an overwhelming rage, which, when turned inward becomes despair.

She illustrates also the type of female hero Pratt describes as a young woman "who sets forth with wit and intelligence, only to be punished by an internalized form of self-torture with which she programs herself into atrophy and disuse" (Pratt 31). After graduating summa cum laude from the university, Martha literally wastes the remaining five years of her life. She attends parties, sleeps around, conducts a torrid affair with Ryder

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Channing, and generally upsets the McClellan household. She makes one pathetic attempt to hold a job at a local television station. But by then she has lost all hold on reality and cannot manage simple tasks such as writing letters. Martha's systematic alienation of herself from her family and the world around her is recorded in a journal that Lily finds after her death. "I am so far away from them all it is incredible when you consider" (RR 214). The journal also includes lists of reasons why she should not love Ryder, Everette, or her father--all the important men in her life. Martha's final revenge on a world that has denied her any real accomplishment is to defy nature itself and her own intelligence. She takes a boat out in a storm and is drowned.

The growing-up-grotesque archetype serves another function in Didion's novel as well. It is also associated with the Shadow figure, which "contains all those elements in the personality which the ego condemns as negative values" (Neumann 351). The Shadow is often presented as an antagonist and frequently as a 'dark' sibling around who aggressive tendencies accumulate. In some ways, Martha functions as the Shadow figure Lily must come to terms with. It is Martha who relentlessly questions the value of Lily's wifely gestures--her declared loyalty to Everette while she engages in an affair with Joe Templeton or her tendency to ward off disaster with "domestic gestures of gaiety or grace" (107).

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But it is also Martha who lies for Lily when she has an abortion and who recognizes what Lily refuses to acknowledge--that they are sisters. Above and beyond the familial relationship, they share the sisterhood of being women in a man's world. In that sense Martha functions as the dark sister who accrues the negative qualities associated with the bitch goddess, while Lily operates as her counterpart, the virgin goddess. Yet neither woman fully recognizes that such roles are complementary projections of a patriarchal society which seeks to define women in accordance with its own needs.

Having internalized the devalued status of women in their society, neither Martha nor Lily is able to completely penetrate the myth of female inferiority that Pearson and Pope identify as a necessary step to the completion of the female hero's journey. Still, there are suggestions that both are moving in that direction by the end of the novel. Martha, for instance, tries to phone her 'prodigal sister in the East four days before she commits suicide. When no one answers, Martha concludes "it is too late" (RR 205). That Martha should try to contact her sister whom she has always depicted as an enemy rather than Everette whom she has considered her ally suggests that Martha feels a need to revise her perceptions about her sister's worth and possibly her own.

Lily undergoes a similar revision of her understanding of Martha, but unfortunately the revision is prompted by

Martha's suicide. Didion depicts this scene in strong archetypal images. Martha's body is found in the flood and is retrieved by Everette, who gently places it in a sea chest for burial on the McClellan property, over the protests of family members and the local officials. As Lily watches the hired man help Everette dig the grave, she realizes "that Martha's body could well be washed out by evening, the unnailed lid of the sea chest ripped open and Martha free again in the water in the white silk dress with the butterflies" (RR 207). Despite the grief of the occasion and Lily's horror at her own thoughts, the image of Martha floating free in the water is a soothing one. There is, of course, the sense of a return to the Great Mother, the rever. Furthermore, the scene evokes another archetypal pattern--the birth of the hero, which is often associated with a treasure chest and the sea.

It is almost as if Martha's death is a symbolic rebirth for Lily as it is Lily, not Everette, who gains the treasure of wisdom from the tragedy. It is Lily who is able to detect the pattern of Martha's psychological deterioration in a journal she finds after Martha's death; and it Lily who chooses to protect Martha's secret even though it means Everette will blame himself for his sister's suicide. Lily also defends Martha's memory against accusations that her antisocial behavior somehow explained or justified her death. This subtle shift in attitude toward Martha suggests that Lily understands

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something about their connection to each other she hadn't understood before.

As Didion is noticeably reluctant to pursue the point, a reader must speculate about the nature of the change in Lily after Martha's death. Such speculation is complicated by the fact that Lily herself seems unaware of the precise nature of the change that has occurred. What is clear though is that Lily is no longer willing to let men usurp her power in a relationship; she demands that they be willing to invest at least as much as she does. "What would you give if I would?" (Divorce Everette) she demands of her lover Joe Templeton. Even her subsequent affair with Ryder Channing is conducted on her own terms; he will not exploit her need for affection as he had Martha. Nor will she allow Everette,whom she never stops loving, to consign her to the role of child in a sexless marriage.

A chance encounter on a plane with a man who whispers an obscene monologue in her ear is revealing of Lily's change of attitudes. "What held her in trance was his total lack of interest in anything else about her, his promise of being what she had looked for over and over: the point beyond which she could not go, the unambiguous undiluted article, the place where the battle would be on her terms. There would be no question of whether he liked her or disliked her, no question of approval or disapproval, no roles at all" (RR 229). Although Lily does not persue the encounter, she does understand the

possibility exists that men and women might arrange their encounters in such a way as to avoid the victor/victim pattern that has characterized their history. Or, to be more precise, Lily recognizes that both men and women are victims of patterns that no longer work; as she observes of herself, Everette and Ryder, "they seemed afflicted with memory" (RR 230).

By refusing to be a victim, Lily is beginning to challenge the overriding patriarchal myth--the myth of the inferiority of the female. Such a recognition comes however only after Lily has been married for a number of years. At this point, Didion's novel is more strictly one of marriage than one of development, in Pratt's terms. As Pratt indicates though, similar archetypal patterns govern both types of novels, especially those representing trauma and enclosure.

Didion depicts marriage as a troubled and troubling situation in her first novel. It may be pertinent to recall that Run River is written before Didion herself marries. Her subsequent novels, written after her own marriage, are even more critical of this social institution than is the first one. Whatever redeeming qualities Didion finds in marriage in Run River, those are noticeably absent from the second novel for instance. Even in Run River the negative attributes outweigh the positive despite Didion's apparent efforts to find some equilibrium between them. Pratt observes that novels of marriage are primarily

"accommodationist", seeking to sanction the social institution of marriage while allowing for the development of the female protagonist. This, it seems, is what Didion attempts to accomplish in her first novel.

In a book length study of Didion's works, Katherine Henderson observes that Didion uses the narrative strategy of presenting both Lily and Everette's view to effect the equilibrium she desires. The effect however is to accentuate the emotional isolation that is the essential attribute of the McClellan marriage. "Didion's alternation of Lily's and Everette's points of view serves..to dramatize their growing estrangement." The shift in point of view is used in one instance to portray the very different reactions that Lily and Everette have to his enlistment in the army. Whereas Everette enjoys the solitude of the orderly male environment at Fort Bliss, Lily is left at home to contend with sick children, Everette's quarrelsome father and a disturbed Martha. In fact Everette chooses to enlist because he wants to escape the "peculiarly female disorder" Lily brings to his life. (RR 121) Lily senses an implicit rejection of her in his decision and feels he has deserted her. For her,the desertion constitutes a violation of the promise he made to take care of her when they married. Although both responses derive from the patriarchal myth of female inferiority, Everette's choice permits him a certain degree of comfort while Lily's predicament plunges her into abject

misery.

An even more injurious estrangement develops when Lily takes it upon herself to abort a child she is not certain is Everette's. Because both are so imprisoned in their own sense of failure to fulfill their roles of husband and wife, Everette allows Lily to get an abortion even though he recognizes there is no need for it. It is an act that becomes the focal point for years of recriminations which leave them both feeling alone and isolated.

But there are other reasons for Lily's isolation besides Everette's physical and psychological desertion of her. One is her perception that she is not like other women. She is persuaded that other women possess a secret that she does not, a secret that accounts for their apparently unquestioned accommodation of the roles Lily finds it impossible to play. This isolation from other women extends to, or perhaps begins with, her relationship with her mother. Initially Lily views her mother as a frivolous woman. Edith Knight appears a smiling if not convinced supporter of her husband's political aspirations. It is only after her father's death that Lily understands that it was Rita Blanchard, her father's mistress, who provided Edith Knight with her most important role--that of the long-suffering wife. Lily is not content to repeat her mother's performance, especially as she finds Rita the more admirable of the two women. Nor is Lily able to accept the lessons mothers inevitably pass on to their daughters. One

Christmas her own mother insisted that Lily give all her presents but one to children evacuated by a flood. It was an act of self-sacrifice, Lily muses later, "in which only Lily came out behind" (85).

Although Lily is able to perceive the injustice inherent in societal expectations of women, she is unable to recognize how such injustices affect her life directly, at least this is the case before Martha's death. In this respect Lily is a victim of the feminine mystique. As Henderson notes, "In the portrait of Lily, Didion dramatized the very mystique of which Friedan wrote, the myth that a woman finds her real self in husband, home, and children" (Henderson 58). The other part of that mystique is that if a woman fails to do so, the failure is a personal one. Lily is such a woman.

Lily believes other women do find fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers, and that she should too. Waiting in a bus station after her abortion, Lily contemplates the discrepancy between herself and the other "well-behaved sun-tanned wives getting out of their swimming suits and dressed for dinner" (RR 170). And she understands that Everette deserves just such a wife. "You never would catch one of them standing around the Greyhound bus station in a tea-stained wrinkled suit not wanting to see her husband....There was the kind of wife Everette should have, and look what he had instead" (RR 170).

Lily's perception of her difference from other women

further serves to keep those women at a distance, thus preventing her from discovering the lies such exteriors conceal. When Martha tries to initiate discussions with Lily about the female experience, Lily refuses to participate. Any frank discussion of feelings between women about men or themselves strikes Lily as threatening: "harsh words between women seemed to her unthinkable, an irreparable rent in the social fabric" (RR 111). This failure on Lily's part is different from and more crucial than the kind of failure she experiences when she attempts to imitate her mother's role as a river matron. "Lily turns away from Martha's confidences, unable to deal with the emotions of another woman. Had Lily and Martha been able to communicate with and support each other, Lily's loneliness might have been transcended, and Martha's suicide averted" (Henderson 53). But as Lily aptly perceives, to break the unstated taboo of female silence is to risk the very structure of the patriarchal society.

Lily's experience of isolation and enclosure within her marriage is most precisely detailed in a scene in which she is literally confined to bed after the birth of her second child. Although Lily had accepted the birth of her son with equanimity, the birth of a daughter makes her acutely aware of her responsibility as wife and mother. That is a responsibility for which Lily feels wholly inadequate.

Images of oppression and confinement dominate the hospital scene and serve to embody many of the conflicts

Lily experiences as a married woman. The room is filled with flowers Everette has brought, "sweet and heavy as drugs" (RR 81). It is raining outside and Lily feels "it must be raining in every part of the world, flooding the valleys" (RR 81). She cannot persuade the nuns to open the narrow windows of the room which intensifies her feelings of suffocation and powerlessness. At one juncture, Lily literally covers her head with a pillow to block out the overwhelming sensations which accost her.

The rain and its potential for disaster in the valley remind Lily of the novel A Farewell to Arms. In her panic, she becomes convinced that she faces a fate similar to that of the heroine of the novel: "...she was certain that her baby had died in the night, that the nuns were concealing the death from her, and she knew as well that before long she would begin to hemorrhage and die herself" (RR 81). That scenario makes her cry for Everette as she had undoubtedly cried for Frederick Henry when she read the novel.

It is interesting to note that Lily's empathy is for Frederick and not for Catherine in this instance. Even more, Lily sees herself as a heroine in a man's novel about war, an unlikely circumstance for Lily to identify with. Or perhaps not, if one recalls that Frederick Henry risked dishonor to be with Catherine in her time of need, whereas Lily suspects Everette would never do the same for her.

That the time of the incident is 1942 may contribute to

Lily's pronounced anxieties, especially as she suspects that Everette wants to enlist in the war. However, if her fear was only that Everette might die, her fantasy should have taken quite a different shape. Since it is the woman and child and not the soldier who dies in Hemingway's novel, and in Lily's premonition, Lily's death fantasy may be as much a wish fulfillment as it is an irrational fear. Death would provide an escape from the suffocation she experiences as a wife and a mother; it would also allow her to be reunited with her recently deceased father, another desire she expresses in the hospital scene.

Part of such a wish fulfillment involves a desire to return to the green-world of childhood. Pratt indicates such desires often erupt as the female hero is about to enter the enclosure of societal expectations, most often marriage. Although Lily has already been married for two years at this point, the birth of her daughter revives her conflict about her role as a woman. Lily recalls a cousin who had entered the convent at eighteen and was subsequently disowned by the family. Lily muses that she had wanted "to have Mary Knight with her always, a talisman" (RR 87). Lily admires and envies Mary's abilities to make a decision, to choose her own life. In one respect, Lily's version of Mary's life is an attempt to imagine the ways in which her own life might have been different had she not acquiesced to Everette's demands for marriage.

But Lily also values and envies Mary Knight's innocence of sexual politics and her refusal to participate in them. "I should have taken the Holy Ghost not Everette" (RR 88). Lily's comment can be read in a number of ways as Didion is particularly cryptic here, but one possibility is that Lily suspects that a purposeful celibacy would have been more suitable to her temperament than marriage has proved to be. It would also have allowed Lily to avoid the pain/pleasure dilemma associated with sex, another memory that constitutes a part of this scene. The vividness of her memory of her sexual initiation continues to perplex Lily more than two years after the event.

> Even now, two years later, those few minutes were more vivid than any since: she had lost neither the sense of wonder nor the sense of deprivation that the experience had not been uniquely hers. The summer smell of that morning, river water and sweat and the acrid sting of weeds breaking under them (and that would always be summer's smell), was stronger still than all the roses and jasmine gardenias in whole of Mercy hospital.
>
> (RR 88)

The complex of forces that contributes to the recreation of Lily's experience in this scene reflect the ambivalence of her position, and perhaps, Didion's as well. Pleasurable images of the green-world--summer, water, smell--are linked with images of pain--acrid sting, sweat,

weeds breaking. The vividness of this memory as well as its ambivalence may be accounted for by the fact that it functions as part of the rape-trauma archetype. That archetype is associated with images of invasion of a female sanctuary by an uninvited male. As I have stated earlier, I do not mean to suggest that Lily was raped; she desired the sexual experience as much as Everette did. Nor does the archetype imply forced intercourse is necessary as a prerequisite. It does, however, carry with it connotations of violation and the sense of a sexual experience that violates one's psychological integrity. When a sexual experience, particularly the first one, like Lily's is painful both physically and psychologically, the result can be traumatic. Such an event may be blocked from memory or later reconstructed to delete the painful aspects. My reading suggests that Lily does the latter.

First, though, I want to consider a related factor. When a woman undergoes a psychological experience of violation in the context of a physically painful sexual initiation, it is often difficult for her to separate the factors that contribute to her general impression of pain. As the physical pain of sexual initiation is considered normal, indeed a badge of honor, the woman is likely to conclude that pain is the norm of the experience. Thus a woman's body and the society at large teach her that pain is the norm whether its origins be physical or psychological or both.

Lily seems to be operating on such assumptions when she reconstructs her sexual initiation in this scene. But in so doing, she glosses over important discriminations she had made in her original account of the event, discriminations that could lead her to question the origins of her pain. For instance, physical pain is the primary perception in Lily's original account: "...after a while she began to think it could never happen because it hurt so much" (RR 58). Everette is not aware or at least not sensitive to Lily's experience of pain. Instead, he perceives the experience in terms of a victory. "When Everette finally said, again and again in a kind of triumph, you feel it, baby feel it, she assumed it had happened (RR 58). Yet Lily's subsequent recall of the event conflates the discrepancies in their separate responses so as to suggest that all aspects of the event were shared equally. Clearly such was not the case, and even Lily has some difficulty with the revised version.

Lily cannot align the revised version of her sexual initiation with the knowledge that everyone has such an experience. Partly that dissonance is the result of Lily's refusal to accept an adult's perception of the world which requires one to concede that one's own sensations are not unique. It is this version that Didion appears to support, based on Didion's assessment of the Women's Movement in her White Album essay. What is not pointed out is that in our society, 'adult' is equated with the predominantly male

view of experience; to dissent from that view is to be seen as a child rather than as someone who has a very different view of experience based on a different reality.

I would argue that Lily's inability to conceive of her sexual initiation in terms of its universality is not rooted in an inability to 'grow up', but rather in her actual experience as a female in the male/female encounter. As Lily is not in a position to compare her experience with that of other women, she has no basis for assuming its universality. But what she can know is that her perception differed radically from the one person with whom she shared the experience: Everette. She experienced no triumph in the loss of her virginity. Everette did. It is almost as if he usurped a victory that should have been her own. In that sense, her experience is unique. Her pain isolates her from Everette and his reaction serves to make both her pain and her subsequent isolation from important factors in Lily's perception of the event as a violation. To use her pain as an occasion of triumph, even inadvertently, is a violation of Lily's psychological integrity. Didion's use of the rape-trauma archetypal pattern in this instance suggests an implicit recognition of this violation, even though, she, like Lily, is reluctant to pursue the political implications of the act.

The inability or refusal to articulate the larger patterns that emerge from a sequence of behaviors is a problem that both Didion and her protagonist share in this

novel. Lily first encounters this issue when she discovers Martha's journal after her untimely suicide. "The notebook changed nothing. Everette would only have blamed himself for not having seen before what she now saw with ineluctable clarity: the pattern there all along, worked through it all as subtly and delicately as, in a drawing she had loved as a child, the tiger's face had been worked into the treetops. Once you had seen the tiger's face, you could never see the treetops" (RR 213). In this instance, Lily is forced to acknowledge that Martha's behavior did allow for interpretation, that the pattern of psychological deterioration was clearly visible, at least after the fact.

But at the end of the novel when Lily must try to understand why her husband has killed her latest lover and why he will kill himself, no such pattern emerges. She is only able to recall that their shared past was "a history of accidents" (RR 246). Lily is unable or unwilling to explore what such an assessment can possibly mean, and Didion does not elaborate. Perhaps the writer shares her character's apprehension that further examination might efface the preferred 'treetops'. At any rate, we are left with a descriptive assessment of the McClellan history that neutralizes all cause and effect and implies a very deterministic view of life, a view which is antithetical to the feminist perspective.

Yet Didion's working out of the plot suggests other interpretations if viewed from a feminist perspective.

That perspective highlights the ambiguities Pratt observes are often present in the work of a woman writer who has not yet come to terms with the problematical nature of her relationship to the larger society. If Everette McClellan and Ryder Channing are seen as representatives of the patriarchal structure--as the light and dark images respectively--then Didion's novel describes that structure as one that is doomed to collapse of its own weight.

Everette's motives for killing Ryder Channing and then himself have to do with his need to protect the female in his care and thus defend his honor and property--a basic tenet of the patriarchal doctrine. But Everette is able to conceive of these responsibilities only in the rigid terms of an Old Testament retribution. Everette is so preoccupied with honoring the rational principle of justice that he overlooks the real human needs this principle obscures. Feminist critics, such as Carol Gilligan, have identified this predisposition as one that is common to the masculine view of moral development (164).

Everette can only perceive Ryder as Other--as the intruder who has trespassed on his domain which includes, in Everette's view, his wife and his sister. He cannot recognize or alter the fact that his own aloofness, a male privilege, is a significant factor in both women's turning to Ryder Channing. It is only after Lily and Martha find that Everette will not respond to their needs that they seek out Ryder's attention. The fire images that haunt

Everette throughout the novel are symbolic of his fear that his own inadequacies will destroy him and his family. The fire images represent everything Everette is not capable of--uncontrolled fury, rampant sexuality, devouring passion. "He had been loading the gun to shoot the nameless fury which had pursued him ten, twenty, a good many years before. All that had happened now was that the wrath had taken a name, and the name was Ryder Channing" (28). Equally important is that Ryder represents the thing Everette cannot tolerate--change.

What Didion does avoid, to her credit, is a too-sweeping denunciation of Everette McClellan and the cultural values he represents. Lily does accept the collapse of her world as she has known it and comes to understand that she cannot save her husband from the inevitable consequences of his action and thought. Didion uses this recognition on Lily's part to puncture a common female myth--that women can serve as the salvation of men they love. Lily learns otherwise: "Maybe the most difficult, most important thing anyone could do for anyone else was to leave him alone; it was perhaps the only gratuitous act, the act of love" (247). But Lily's recognition of the limits of her power also brings a recognition of the loss she has suffered and she grieves for that loss. Whatever has been the nature of their common history together, it has been her history as much as it has been Everette's, and its loss leaves her bereft.

Furthermore, there is a forgiving tone at the close of the novel as Lily cradles her dead husband in her arms and contemplates how she will interpret this historical event for her children. "She did not know what she could tell anyone except that he had been a good man. She was not certain that he had been but it was what she would have wished, if they gave her one wish" (248). The ambiguity of this closing statement suggests that Lily understands that according to his own code, Everette was a good man; what she must question is the morality of the code itself. She must question a code whose adherence required an abortion of a child that was not her husband's and demanded the death of two of the men she loved to sanction its principles.

The act of questioning places Lily in the position of the traditional female hero who must examine the nature of her actual experience in light of the patriarchal interpretation of that experience, an interpretation often radically different from her own. It is Lily's son, Knight McClellan, who provides the patriarchal interpretation of Lily's actions in the novel. His insight is the catalyst that sets off the tragic chain of events which shape the novel and spur his father to action. "It's not what I hear, it's what I know. Nobody says it out loud, not around here. But you know what they call her? You know how they think of her still? They call her Lily Knight, not McClellan, Knight. Like she was never married at all"

(236). The son's accusation of his mother is that she has remained a virgin in the sense that she has retained her own identity and has control over her own life. As such, Lily is a threat to the patriarchal structure that demands subjugation of its female members.

But that accusation clearly identifies Lily as a female hero as well, although the precise nature of her heroism remains somewhat obscure. In terms of the patriarchal structure, Lily functions as a scapegoat. She is the sacrificial victim around whom the crimes of society accrue. Her choice to remain self-determining especially in terms of her sexual behavior is perceived by society as a violation of its most sacrosanct principle...that female sexuality is a force so threatening it must be contained and controlled within the patriarchal culture. In this light, Lily can be seen as responsible for the deaths of her husband and lover. But that is not a perception that Didion can permit to stand without challenge.

Clearly, as the protagonist, Lily is to be recognized as the character who represents the moral choice sanctioned by the author. It is Lily who survives the tragic circumstances of the Knight-McClellan family history and it is she who is given the responsibility for shaping the future of the next generation, because it is Lily who must construct the narrative of the family's past, and thus its future.

The structure of the novel also points to this

conclusion. The novel begins with the shot that killed Ryder Channing. Then it follows Lily as she recalls the history that leads up to the moment of the shot--even though the point of view does shift to include Everette's perspective as well. But Lily's view predominates and shapes the act of writing itself. And it is the act of recall that characterizes the final phase of the traditional heroic journey. As Frye notes, this stage is often signaled by settings of "the mountain top, the island, the tower, the lighthouse, and the ladder or the staircase" (203). Lily is upstairs alone in her room when she hears the shot and it is from this vantage point the novel unfolds. So despite the ambivalence of Didion's explicit assessment of Lily's actions, the implicit structure of the novel supports a feminist reading.

Although in Pratt's terms, Didion's protagonist does not complete her heroic journey because she does not become fully conscious of the gender factors which determine her relation to the patriarchal structure, there is a sense that Didion is more aware of such factors after writing her first novel. That claim is supported by the fact that Didion goes on to write subsequent novels which are immediately recognized as works that primarily concern the female experience, even by her strongest feminist critics.

Yet Didion remains what I would call a cautionary feminist. Her works function as a critique of the feminist position as much as they function as a critique of the

patriarchal structure from which the feminist position evolves. She takes care not to repeat the mistakes of the past--to replace one totalitarian system with another. Confronting the condition of moral ambiguity is a central concern for Didion. And while some of the ambiguity of Didion's position may well reflect her own problematical relationship to the patriarchal structure of our society, that is a condition shared by all women, including her feminist critics.

For Didion, the myth of freedom and the myth of concern must always remain in a precarious balance. The woman writer must function as both the archetypal daughter who ventures forth to imagine new ways of being and as the archetypal mother who must assess and grieve for the loss of what is entailed by that venture. The archetypal patterns that characterize the female heroic journey serve as the legacy each literary mother bequeaths to the daughter of her own creation.

CULTURAL ORPHANS:
THE REPUDIATION OF NARRATIVE IN PLAY IT AS IT LAYS

> The realities of power and authority--as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies--are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics. I propose that these realities are what should be taken account of by criticism and the critical consciousness.
>
> (Said 5)

In this introductory statement to his work The World, the Text and the Critic, Edward Said maps out certain parameters that textual criticism should consider in its analysis of cultural discourse. These parameters--"the realities of power and authority" and the "resistances offered"--are particularly applicable to literary texts which have traditionally claimed the authority to re-present the reality of everyday life, a reality which exists in the social sense as a function of the distribution of such power and authority. Said's statement serves as a focus for examining these relations in the text of Joan Didion's second novel, Play It As It Lays, a novel

whose very title lays claim to one kind of ideological position that demands resistance. In addition, the novel invites an examination of the distributions of power and authority in its fictional society by identifying certain agents of social control and then reconstructing the resistances that one individual, the protagonist, registers against the institutions and systems that shape and control social and psychic life in its fictional milieu.

In Chapter One, I indicated that certain archetypal patterns function as sources of psychic power for women writers and readers in women's fiction. As Pratt, Pearson and Pope observe, these patterns are often less than fully conscious on the part of the female writer. She, the writer, is merely recording the female experience as she observes or experiences it in a patriarchal society. In other words, the writer, as well as the protagonist, may lack a coherent critical perspective of the events which shape the fiction. This is the position Didion finds herself in at the end of her first novel.

In Run River, Didion records the loss of the family unit as the primary social structure, and thus the disintegration of the patriarchy. But Didion records that dissolution from the inside; she registers how the dissolution is experienced by both Lily and Everette McClellan, and to some extent, Everette's sister, Martha. That the story is about the loss of filiation in modern post-war society, and the female's particular experience of

that loss, does not seem entirely apparent to Didion until she writes the second novel.

In Play It As It Lays, Didion addresses the loss of filiation from a quite different perspective, one that employs the critical consciousness referred to by Said. Another critic, Ronald Foust, captures the essence of the shift in relation between writer and work in the title of his article on Didion's second novel: "Family Romance and the Image of Women's Fate." Foust argues that the protagonist's position in Play It As It Lays serves as an archetypal pattern of all women's fate as it is acted out within the traditional family romance--the paradigm of the patriarchal structure. "Maria's is an image of woman's fate in a world dominated by...masculine aggression and insecurity. While Play It As It Lays is not a feminist polemic per se, it is uniquely a woman's novel in the sense that its coded meaning is undecipherable apart from a sympathetic understanding of the specific nature of the female experience" (48).

Foust's statement points to the critical difference between Didion's first and second novels. Whereas Run River attempted to offer both a male and female perspective of the dissolution of the family structure through Lily's and Everette's point of view, Play It As It Lays is focused solely through the point of view of its brutalized female protagonist, Maria Wyeth. The scope of the second novel extends beyond the family unit of Run River to include

several of the institutions and systems of the patriarchy against which Maria, as female, must register a resistance. For Maria discovers, as Lily does not, that the power and authority of the patriarchy is not limited to a father, brother, or husband who may fail or disappoint one. Maria comes to understand in an experiential way that the systems of the patriarchy pervade all structures of society and that the vehicle of dissemination is primarily cultural discourse.

The task of the protagonist is one which Didion shares: to decipher the textual codes by which one lives, and then to register a resistance to those cultural discourses that totalize experience as the patriarchal system does. What both Didion and Maria find is that all cultural discourse is political in that it is intimately connected to systems of power. Said makes this point as well. "Each discourse, each language--of psychiatry, penology, criticism, history--is to some degree a jargon, but it is also a language of control and a set of institutions within the culture over what it constitutes as its special domain" (219).

A primary issue in Play It As It Lays is the politics of interpretation. This is an issue that Didion will continue to address in subsequent works, in Salvador, Democracy, and Miami in particular. But she expresses an awareness of the political nature of interpretation early in her career in a much anthologized essay "Why I Write."

"In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act" (Friedman 5). To characterize the act of writing as "a hostile act" is to acknowledge that discourse has a direct relation to power; that literary discourse in particular is only one of many voices to offer an interpretation of human experience. As evidence of that power, Didion locates her own understanding of the world in literary discourse. She cites the works of James, Conrad, Hemingway and others as influential in shaping her life. "I tended to perceive the world in terms of things read about it...I still do" (Friedman 35). In other words, experience is filtered through the structures of familiar narratives.

The structure of Didion's second novel also foregrounds the issue of interpretation by presenting separate statements from each of its three main characters. The three statements act as a "prologue of sorts" to the novel proper (Chabot 53). The statements are produced by Maria Wyeth, the protagonist; by her estranged husband, Carter Lang, a film director; and by Helene, one of Carter's lovers and the wife of BZ, Carter's producer and the man whose suicide Maria has witnessed. The statements are made some time (perhaps a few years) after Maria has been

committed to a mental hospital on criminal charges related to BZ's suicide, a time which corresponds to the narrative present.

In the fictional world of the novel, these statements function as contested interpretations of the action and motives of the protagonist. Presumably the question of Maria's sanity, and therefore degree of social responsibility in BZ's death, is the point of contention. But as Berger and Luckmann point out in their work, The Social Construction of Reality, a question of sanity is as much an ideological issue as a medical one. "To put it more sharply, psychological status is relative to the social definition of reality in general and is itself socially defined" (176).

The positioning of the three statements at the beginning of the text signals readers that they too must participate in making a determination of Maria's sanity or lack of it and assess the 'resolution' she proposes to the problems posed by her predicament. Given there are social and psychological implications in making such a determination, it is appropriate to examine the vested interests of each of the positions represented in the novel.

That this is not a task without its difficulties is suggested by the varying critical responses to the novel. The reviews of Didion's second novel at the time of publication were mixed. Some reviewers dismissed the novel

as philosophically naive (Segal 1970), while others viewed Didion as perversely concerned with the marginal elements in society (Samstag 1970). Others praised Play It As It Lays as a "triumph not of insight as such but of style" (Schorer 174) or described it as "a fever chart of psychic pain" (Duffy 67). In 1977, one critic adroitly observed that Play It As It Lays "enabled the reader to taste--in Poet Wallace Stevens' phrase--'the unreal of what is real'" (Sheppard 87).

Critical commentary, which is conventionally regarded as a more carefully reasoned contemplation of a work than is the standard review, contains many of the same contradictions. Some critics (Geherin, Goodhart, Chabot) insist that the novel is fatalistic and concerns itself with alienation, madness and nihilation as definitive qualities of the human condition. Others focus their attention on the heroic quest for identity that the protagonist undergoes in the face of overwhelming odds and judiciously document her meager success in this venture (Anderson, Vincent, Wolff). These critics, who employ a feminist archetypal approach to their criticism as advocated by people such as Pratt or Pearson and Pope, find Didion's novel more optimistic than do critics who use a more traditional approach.

While each of these approaches offers acute perceptions that will inform my own analysis of the novel, none of the commentaries directly addresses the dynamics of the

interpretative process itself, a process which Didion's protagonist comes to apprehend is political in nature. The political nature of the interpretative process becomes apparent when it is recalled that readers and writers, as well as narrators and characters, all vie for an audience in the context of a novel. Didion's novel calls attention to the problematical nature of interpretation at two levels--in the world of the story or the diegetic world, and in the non-diegetic universe or the world of the actual experience of the readers.[2] The problematical nature of the interpretative process is signaled in Didion's novel by the protagonist's statement at the beginning of the novel. This statement poses a dilemma which transgresses the limits of the diegetic universe created in Play It As It Lays:

"What makes Iago evil? some people ask. I never do." (Play 1)

This is the opening statement of Didion's second novel and the reader's first introduction to its protagonist, Maria Wyeth. We quickly discover that Maria (pronounced Mar-eye-ah) is thirty-one, divorced, and the mother of a four-year old retarded child, Kate, who like her mother, is currently institutionalized. The first few pages of the fictional text are comprised of Maria's statement, which she describes as a collection of "certain facts, certain things that happened" (2). Maria claims to have produced this account only to be an "agreeable player of the game"

(2) and not as an explanation of her current situation. According to Maria, explanations are futile as too many questions have no "satisfactory" answers. Her litany of pointless questions includes why her daughter has "an aberrant chemical in her brain" (3). The pointlessness of such questions has caused Maria to refuse to contemplate these or any other enigmas. "Nothing applies" she maintains, both as a caution to her audience and as a reminder to herself for those rare occasions when she is tempted toward interpretative activity (2).

Maria begins her statement with examples of questions she claims never to ask any more, although she does acknowledge that she used to ask such questions in the past. "You might ask that. I never would, not any more...I am what I am. To look for 'reasons' is beside the point" (1). Maria's refusal to participate in the quintessential human activity of interpretation becomes problematic for Didion's readers, as well as for the narratee Maria seems to have in mind as she narrates her account of the facts.[3] This narratee is addressed as 'you' in Maria's statement and it seems clear that Maria expects this narratee to be sympathetic to her renunciatory position. Maria even tries to enlist this unnamed 'you' in a conspiratorial coup against the predictable interpretations of the psychiatric staff Maria indicates is her diegetic audience. "They will misread the facts, invent connections, will extrapolate reasons where none

exists, but I told you that is their business here" (2).

Maria's prediction of course also anticipates the reaction of the readers of Didion's novel, an audience literary convention decrees that Maria can have no awareness of as a character. Still, the reader of Play It As It Lays must ignore Maria's stipulations regarding the fallacy of narrative logic or cease to be a reader at all. And unlike film--a recurring metaphor which can defer interpretative activity indefinitely in the novel--the reading process inevitably involves the kind of interpretive activity Maria denounces. This rhetorical gesture on Didion's part thus sets up an uneasy dynamic between reader/writer and narrator/character. The act of interpretation becomes the forbidden fruit the writer uses to tantalize the reader with as writer and reader conspire to assert their non-diegetic authority over mere literary creations.

Obviously this narrative ploy can work to the disadvantage of the protagonist. While Maria's claim may be sufficiently intriguing to incite curiosity on the reader's part, the tacit contract between reader/writer supercedes every other consideration possible between reader and character. And the fact that we as readers are compelled to ignore Maria's implicit judgement of us--as readers who will do exactly what the psychiatric staff does: "misread the facts, invent connections,... extrapolate reasons..."--or forego our

authority as readers, only serves to further undermine the credibility of Maria's renunciatory position.

Apprehension of the dynamics of this reader/writer exchange functions to give weight to a central question of the novel--how suspect is Maria's position? This does seem to be the issue that accounts for the range of response to the novel by its reviewers. Each reader/critic must decide if Maria's withdrawal to a mental institution and away from the world of human intercourse constitutes an act of salvation, sanctuary or suicide. Either the reader/critic privileges Maria's account of events over all other information the novel provides and so finds her refusal credible, although perhaps pointless, or the reader/critic consciously rejects Maria's renunciatory position as untenable and points to some larger design attributable to Didion the writer as a guide to the interpretative activity needed which Maria so resolutely renounces. Whatever the final choice, the reader/critic has been maneuvered into the very situation Maria tries to avoid: he or she has made a value judgment regarding Maria and her story. But the judgement remains an uneasy one, as Maria's dictum will menace the reader/critic who has ventured where narrators/characters fear to tread.

Despite Maria's disclaimers, her opening questions invite more interest than they dispel. When the questions are considered in the light of the rest of the novel, they begin to resonate with all sorts of narrative implications

that Maria would say "do not apply." They are implications that readers cannot but make however, and thus readers find themselves in an adversarial position in relation to this first person narrator who obviously desires and perhaps warrants our admiration and sympathy.

The enticement begins with the literary reference to Iago, a character who is conventionally presumed to embody the essence of evil. "What makes Iago evil?" While Maria's reference to Iago explicitly poses a moral question about the nature of evil, nonetheless, the reference contains a certain ambiguity as well. Either the question emphasizes an individual's moral development--i.e. how Iago came to commit his machinations--or it emphasizes the nature of evil itself and is thus a question about the criteria for determining evil, so that the quality may be assigned to the specific acts of Iago.

Maria apparently has the first version in mind, if the nature of her second question is a reliable indicator of the general direction of her thought. The rest of the novel, however, clearly calls into question the criteria for making moral judgments at all in contemporary society. "Didion repeatedly demonstrates the moral derangements of modern society by patterns of images, sometimes even by abstract verbal patterns or by patterns of association, which capture the inherent distortion of value" (Wolff 485). So Didion's emphasis is not so much a cause-and-effect analysis of the behavior of a person designated as

evil, as Maria's is, but is rather an inquiry as to how such a determination is to be made in the first place. While Maria may be justified in her insistence that "to look for 'reasons' is beside the point" (1), that justification must be restricted to the limits of an individual's biography; questions of morality arise from the social realm of intercourse and thus supersede individual needs and desires. Although Didion remains a strong individualist, even she insists that the preferences of the individual must give way to the wider need to maintain a cohesive social structure.

Maria's reference to Iago points in another direction as well. It calls our attention to the fact that it has been traditionally within the purview of literature to explore such moral ambiguities as the nature of evil. In an essay in The White Album, Didion includes herself as a writer as one of those "who remain committed mainly to the exploration of moral distinctions and ambiguities" (113). (And indeed, critics such as Eagleton concur with Didion's perception that literature does explore such distinctions; but Eagleton would be even more explicit and insist that literature is itself a moral ideology [See Eagleton 22-27].) Thus again we see a distancing of Didion the writer from Maria the narrator, an act which contributes to the narrative tension of the novel. For Maria not only refuses to follow the literary convention she refers to--that of exploring moral distinctions--her denial implies that the

efficacy of literature in resolving such ambiguities is dubious at best. In this respect Maria is aligned with those critics who prefer to discuss literature in terms of its linguistic possibilities and ignore its moral implications.

However, Maria curtails further speculation about this issue by asserting that the Iago question is not a serious one in any case, but merely a rhetorical gesture she finds useful in presenting yet another example of the kind of question that has forced her into a renunciatory position. To reinforce her point, Maria produces another question of this sort: "Why should a coral snake need two glands of neurotoxic poison to survive while a king snake, so similarly marked, needs none. Where is the Darwinian logic there" (2).

So intent is Maria to establish the credibility of her position that she either ignores or neglects to consider the significance of the content of the two examples or to note the electrical energy that passes between those two nodes. She appears to be oblivious to the fact that a literary audience will automatically associate 'Iago' and 'evil' with 'snake', snakes and Iago being two symbols of evil in literary works. And for readers, if not for Maria, there is a connection between this literary representation of evil and a function of narrative, a connection that may help to account for Maria's position.

The reference to snakes of course alludes to the

temptation of Eve in the garden by Satan, who appears in the guise of a serpent. A reconsideration of the Biblical account will produce the observation that Satan seduces Eve as much by his powers as a narrator as by his promise of omnipotence. In fact, the two qualities are related. In part, Satan's seduction is effective because he promises Eve the only thing denied her: complete knowledge--the knowledge of good and evil. And in one sense, a similar principle operates in the Iago/Othello situation as well. Iago incites Othello's suspicions with a narrative that promises to complete Othello's insufficient knowledge of Desdemona.

Surely the promise of complete knowledge has been an important enticement of every conventional narrative, especially those that purport to be mimetic. The one thing (among others) that fiction can supply which everyday experience denies is complete access to the minds and hearts of others, as well as the presence of a grand design under which all information generated becomes comprehensible. (Such designs are labeled "symbolic universes" by Berger and Luckmann and will be discussed in detail later.) But it is precisely this promise of complete knowledge that Maria rejects, and by implication, the promise of literature itself.

Maria also refuses the "consolation of narrative" that Eagleton discusses in his work, Literary Theory: An Introduction:

> Something must be lost or absent in any narrative for it to unfold: if everything stayed in place there could be no story to tell. This loss is distressing, but exciting as well: desire is stimulated by what we cannot possess and this is one source of narrative satisfaction. If we could never possess it, however, our excitation might become intolerable and turn into unpleasure; so we must know that the object will be finally restored to us....We have been able to tolerate the disappearance of the object because our unsettling suspense was all the time shot through by the secret knowledge that it would finally come home. Fort has meaning only in relation to da. (185).

Maria's refusal to be consoled by the power of narrative may have its basis in her intuitive recognition of the discontinuity between language and experience. Objects lost in life are not always returned and narratives anticipating such returns console temporarily, only to bring greater grief. As we discover later, before her breakdown Maria consoled herself with stories night after night about how she would live with her lover and her daughter in a house by the sea. But every morning she knew the stories represented a hollow consolation: "In that empty sunlight Kate could do no lessons, and the mussels on any shore Maria knew were toxic" (114).

In addition, Maria has reason to be suspect of the idea

of consolation itself. In her world, losses such as hers are not even recognized as such. Helene berates her for feeling sad when she gets a divorce, Carter reprimands her for her motherly concern for Kate, and there is a decided lack of sympathy for Maria as she spirals into psychological despair. Most of her friends and acquaintances are much more concerned about how her strange actions will affect Carter's career than they are about Maria's well-being.

Maria's refusal to be consoled by narratives of cultural discourse may also entail the recognition that her losses cannot be compensated for by those narratives. Neither science nor religion, the dominant cultural discourses, can restore her daughter to her care, nor repair the rent in her psyche caused by her mother's death. Only a litany of "certain facts" can prevent Maria from remembering "how everything goes" in this throw-away society and keep her mind focused in the oblivion of "the now" (6).

It is Maria's resistance to all interpretation that a reader must contend with as the rest of the novel unfolds. To aid the reader, Didion presents almost all of the rest of the novel (excepting Carter and Helene's statements) through a close, third-person point of view, a perspective which allows the reader to learn more about Maria than she could tell us directly herself. The perspective also allows the information to come to the reader with more

sympathy than Maria could generate for herself. Part of Maria's problem as a character is that she cannot elicit much sympathy for her plight--there are no other characters in the novel to recognize the metaphysical terror that paralyzes her. BZ is a possible expectation, but then he opts for suicide, an option Maria cannot accept. As one critic notes, BZ simply lives out the inexorable logic of this dehumanized world (Wolff 13). Maria prefers to resist that logic, but her resistance comes at a high cost--she literally risks her sanity.

Feminist readings of the novel suggest that Didion's use of this "mad wife" archetype depicts one option available to women in a patriarchal society. In such cases the woman is usually deemed insane <u>because</u> she cannot or will not comply with societal expectations of her as a female. As Annis Pratt notes, "Maria accepts the accusation that her insanity has led to Helene's husband's death, preferring to act out the role of madwoman than to live in the world outside, which seems even more irrational than the world within" (53).

Didion anticipates sexist criticism of Maria's actions and short circuits that conventional response by presenting that view in Carter's and Helene's statements. As both Carter and Helene are presented in an unfavorable light in the novel, Didion directs her readers to discredit interpretations of Maria's predicament which dismiss her actions as crazy or perverse, whether such views originate

from readers or characters.

Nonetheless, the two contending interpretations impose a severe judgement on Maria's actions and motives. Both Carter and Helene's judgments seem predicated on Maria's failure to conform to certain expectations of females in contemporary society, particularly in the social roles of wife and mother. Both see Maria's resistance to these expectations as a deliberate sabotage to 'injure' them personally and each holds Maria fully responsible for her actions.

Helene attacks Maria as an inadequate woman, one who lacks the virtues of altruism and concern. She accuses Maria of being "selfish" and "careless", of being jealous of Carter's success (9). Helene's account is especially vicious, actually accusing Maria of having "killed" BZ and speculating that Maria "would have killed Carter too" given the opportunity (10). For Helene, Maria is clearly the villain in this scenario and yet there are some curious oversights in Helene's account.

The most noticeable is the lack of grief or loss of her husband. Helene's vitriolic diatribe focuses exclusively on her injured position now that she's been deprived of her means of support. It is implied in the novel that BZ, a homosexual pimp, and Helene remain married primarily because his mother, Carlotta, bribes Helene with gifts to provide a respectable cover for BZ's questionable proclivities. Helene's statement reveals her as an

"aggrieved wife", one of those pathetic and repulsive creatures Maria observes on television. And yet there is just a glimmer of envy in Helene's statement as well. "I could see her resting, I could see her down by the pool in the same bikini she was wearing the summer she killed BZ, lying by that swimming pool with a shade over her eyes as if she hadn't a care or a responsibility in the world" (10). Helene appears to envy Maria's lack of concern about her appearance or the judgement of the outside world upon her actions. Helene's is an envy born of weariness though, not of admiration.

Carter's statement tends to concur with Helene's judgement that Maria is careless and selfish. He expresses his frustration with Maria's incorrigibility as an inability to compose "scenes" of their life together in a suitable sequence as if for the camera. He provides two such scenes as examples of the intractable material he has had to work with. One is a scene in which Maria publicly contradicts Carter's announcement that he likes to eat breakfast out alone. Maria's persistent honesty about the matter--"In fact the last time he got breakfast out was on April 17" (11)--is a source of embarrassment to Carter, a social faux pas which challenges the image of himself he wants to project to his public. The second scene, which involves Maria and Kate, implies Maria cannot be trusted to care for her child properly. Thus Carter sees Maria as a selfish wife and careless mother...two sweeping

condemnations of a woman in today's society. As such, Maria is no longer amenable to Carter's projects; this Maria would not be a suitable subject for that first film he made of her. Like Helene, Carter expresses no grief or loss for his mate; his statement is merely an acknowledgement of a project that has failed.

Yet if the fact that Carter is a film director is taken into account, then it is possible to claim a causal relation between the two scenes which Carter presents as randomly juxtaposed. In an examination of the influence of film on the American novel, the French writer, Claude Magny, notes that "the greatest lesson the American novel learned from the movies...[is] that the less one says the better, that the most striking artistic effects are those born of the juxtaposition of two images, without connection..." (48). Didion's second novel displays a knowledge of this lesson with a precision that stings. As in the case of film, certain images in the novel cohere only after the 'random' sequence of images has been registered on the mind for some time. So it is with Carter's 'clips' of his relation to Maria and to their retarded child. To posit a causal connection is to immediately detect a subversive message about the patriarchy: that separation from her daughter is the price Maria must pay for embarrassing or otherwise thwarting Carter. As Pratt points out, separation of mother and daughter has constituted an archetypal pattern of

punishment imposed on the female by the patriarchy since the Demeter/Kore myths of pre-historical times.

Thus Didion's novel discloses the ideological power of film through a narrative enactment of its technical devices, generally presumed to be neutral. The subversive message in this 'preview' of Maria's story points to a number of important issues at one. One is that the power of film resides in its ability to capture images without comment, to imply that a mechanical recording of experience can avoid or ignore ethical content. Thus film is often granted an ethical neutrality narrative can never claim, as language refers endlessly to itself. At the same time Didion's novel points out that film is not merely a technical device, but constitutes an industry which exerts considerable power over modern society. It promotes a cultural discourse that her protagonist must first decipher, and then resist.

So pervasive is the influence of media in shaping the modern consciousness that the novel reflects this preoccupation in its form as well as in its content. (Not surprisingly, the novel was made into a movie with Didion and her husband responsible for the screenplay.) "The story of Maria's decline from depression to breakdown is told in 84 brief cinematic takes--84 direct hits on a fragile psyche" (Duffy 68). This observation refers to the terse 84 chapters which Didion uses to tell Maria's tale, chapters that approximate the flash of images indicative of

film rather than print. The unnamed, uninvolved narrator of most of these chapters follows Maria as closely as Carter did in New York, recording Maria's actions and feelings from a perspective only slightly less detached than that of a camera. Didion's decision to mimic the structure of film is surely a gesture that implicitly recognizes the competition between print and film in the bid for an audience in the modern consumer market, a marketplace where literature must advertise its value as a commodity to be consumed. So Didion's novel must promise to tell its readers something about film that film doesn't tell us about itself. One of the things Didion's novel indicates is the extent to which the film industry acts as an agent of social control in American life.

Sociologists have noted the importance of film in the development of the American consciousness, especially at a time when the country needed to assimilate the large wave of immigrants which arrived around the turn of the century. "The camera was a powerful mechanism for conveying fantasy and transcendence, its imagery employed a powerful visual vernacular, understandable even to immigrants unable to speak English. Yet at the same time in its ability to docify and capture an objectivist "truth", it was also a powerful mechanism of order and control" (Channels of Desire 34). As these authors go on to observe, the medium of film proved highly instrumental in the process of enticing the masses to relinquish the values and traditions

of their diverse pasts in exchange for a new, shared identity as Americans. So prized was that new identity that few questioned whether or not something of irreplaceable value had ben lost in the exchange.

This 'consumption ethic' permeates the fictional world of Didion's novel as well and the film industry serves as an important purveyor of that ideology. It is the film industry that sets the criteria for personal and social success in the novel. "The major community which is described in Hollywood...where love is a commodity and honesty a breach of taste and age the unpardonable sin" (Vincent 59). Successful people are those like Carter, BZ, and Helene--people who can cut deals because they have something to sell that someone else can be persuaded to buy. The commodity for sale may be a 'property', a function actors serve for producers like BZ or Carter, or a public relations service such as that Helene provides for her husband.

In Play It As It Lays, 'image' as a marketing concept becomes divorced from its origins in film and television and comes to dominate the consciousness of the characters in the novel. The manufacturing and marketing of an image becomes the ultimate concern in the world shaped by the values of the film industry. To a great extent, creating an image of the self has come to replace the more traditional activity of achieving a self-identity. This shift in focus and terminology represents a corresponding

shift in values. The dialectical nature of the process by which individuals arrive at a sense of their relation to society is obfuscated in the first effort. Conversely, the interdependence of individuals and the society in which they find themselves is made more explicit in the idea of self-identity than it is in the idea of self-image. Creating a self-image calls attention to the artificiality of this process and thus hints of its precariousness, as does the tacit expectation that creating a self-image is a self generating and self-sustaining activity; whereas achieving an identity implies a struggle that is cooperative in nature and is thus available for sanction or censure by those involved in the endeavor. Also important is the recognition that the creation of a self-image is necessarily an adult (i.e. conscious) activity, whereas one's self-identity begins at birth and is shaped over time, a condition that likely contributes to the sense of its tenacity.

Berger and Luckmann designate another element as essential to the acquisition of an identity: a sense of place. "To be given an identity involves being assigned to a specific place in the world" (132). In a mobile, industrialized society the possibilities of achieving an identity rooted in a sense of place are radically diminished. Unlike their predecessors in Run River, the characters in Didion's second novel cannot form an attachment to, and thus forge an identity with, a permanent

geographical location as do Lily and Everette Knight to the Sacramento Valley. As Maria observes when she recalls that her birthplace (Silver Wells, Nevada) is now a missile range: "Everything goes" (16).

Instead Maria tries to find a sense of herself in the activities her society claims will provide security and success. Work is one of the those tokens proffered by this society whose corporate structure seeks to replace the family unit--a unit the corporation also disrupts in its bid for power and profit. Workers are encouraged to become a part of the corporate 'family', to assume the 'image' of the corporation which becomes a ready passport to success in the mobile society. Maria's agent sums up this attitude when he informs her that "work is the best medicine for things wrong in the private-life department" (90). Even the terminology used reflects the depreciation of traditional values. The idea of work curing private ills is not new--what is new is that the two worlds are seen as distinct, that private grief is perceived as an 'illness' that needs a cure and that the corporate paradigm 'department' is chosen to describe private space. Rather than recognizing that the demands of the work world contribute to the displacement and disintegration of family units in modern society, the prevailing ideology perverts the cause of the dilemma into a cure. Yet Maria's experience and Didion's perceptions of this relationship tells a different story.

Maria herself looks to her work to salvage her sanity as work has replaced relationships in her life. In fact, Maria's inability to work, usually precipitated by an emotional upheaval, is one of the first signs that all is not well with her world. The loss of her mother and the loss of her daughter are two such times the novel indicates Maria walks off a set, unable and unwilling to work because "everything showed in the camera by then" (8). Yet she tries to work even while she is hemorrhaging from an abortion because she is desperately trying to maintain her tenuous grasp on reality.

Maria's growing alienation is initially conveyed by a lack of identification with the image of herself in the films Carter has made of her. It is important to note that Maria never questions the validity of that perception; nor does Didion focus on the futility of trying to achieve a sense of identity vis-a-vis an attachment to the image of one's body that film can convey. Instead, Maria's inability to forge such an attachment is presented as evidence of her psychic disintegration.

A major loss for Maria in the novel is the loss of her identity, but to some degree, that is a loss that Maria regains when she claims herself as "Harry and Francine Wyeth's daughter" at the end of the novel (209). By this point, Maria has totally rejected the attempts of her culture to force her to accept its requirements of her as a woman of her time. She refuses the consolation of what

Said terms affiliation, preferring instead to connect herself to the original family structure that provided values and morals to live by. But such was not always the case. In her youth, Maria actively sought the approval of the very people and institutions she later comes to resist.

As Maria becomes dissociated from the people and places connected to her youth, she becomes increasingly identified with the symbols of success in a consumer society. At eighteen, she works as a model in New York and finds she can command a considerable amount of money for permitting someone to use her physical attributes to display the goods of society. She discovers that her body has a high market value, not so much for its inherent attractiveness as for its utility in promoting the products and ideas of others. Maria's role in this transaction is a passive one, but it is a passivity for which she is well rewarded.

When Maria begins her work with the film industry some time later, she discovers that as an actress, she has literally become a commodity. She finds that work is not an avenue of self-definition so much as another opportunity to be exploited. She becomes the property that her husband Carter "parlays...into a very nice thing" (29). A chance encounter with a minor actor demonstrates this aspect of Maria's relationship to her husband-director: "the look he gave Maria was dutifully charged with sexual appreciation, meant not for Maria herself, but for Carter Lang's wife" (22). And later when her breakdown is almost complete,

Maria steals a car from an actor she has just met when she wants to leave a party. She is arrested, and when the actor is pressured to drop the charges against Maria, he retaliates: "Just hold on, cunt,...you never told me who you were" (156). Even her agent doesn't take Maria's requests to work seriously; he makes a token gesture to comply only because of her connection to Carter, a man to be reckoned with in the film industry.

Carter is in the "enviable" position because of his ability to "make a deal" (29). In other words, Carter can put together a package, actors, story, director, etc. which a producer will finance. And as Didion notes in her essay "On Hollywood", "the action is everything...the picture is but the by-product of the action" (160, 164). Later when Maria has fallen into despair and can no longer be relied upon to function as a part of any package Carter might put together, he discards her as worthless: "Go to sleep. Die. Fucking vegetable" (184).

While the two films that Maria made with Carter brought him professional success, the films and people's reactions to them only bring Maria pain and further loss of identity. The first film is an avant-garde attempt in which Carter merely follows Maria around New York taking pictures of her. Maria never liked the film, especially the last frame in which Carter threw her image into the negative so that she looked dead. Yet BZ, Carter's producer, insists on watching his cut of the film over and over, even while

well. In this scene, the female serves as a substitute for the desired but forbidden object, other males. Such is the principle of much television/film advertisement. To choose Pepsi, for example, is to acknowledge one's desire for the less accessible qualities of youth and wealth, as those are the images by which Pepsi is made seductive. But even more insidious is the potential that by choosing Pepsi one comes to believe one has acquired the social power associated with the images of wealth and youth. The Ewens examine this phenomenon in their appraisal of the influence of film on American life in the early 1900's: "Beneficence and opportunity were being codified not in an expansion of social power and rights, but in the widely extended availability of images associated with the prerogatives of power" (176). What Maria discovers is that such images are as empty as they are deceptive.

It is the ability of film to evoke fantasy and suggest transcendence that appeals to Maria even as the medium alienates her from any sense of herself. After the dissolution of her marriage, Maria recalls isolated moments of the marriage in a wave of remorse. "The images would flash at Maria like slides in a dark room. On film they might have seemed a family" (136). Maria has unconsciously appropriated the metaphor of film to structure her memories; and indeed she tends to see the events of her married life in terms of scenes like those that express her longing for a traditional family complete with father,

mother, and child. "Quite often with Carter she felt like Ingrid Bergman in Gaslight..." (40). When Maria informs Carter that she is pregnant and probably not by him, her perception is that "in the scenario of her life this would be what was called an obligatory scene..." (50). A number of critics have commented that Carter 'sees' as if he viewed the world through the eyes of a camera, but fewer have observed that the protagonist is equally disposed to a cinematic version of reality. Didion's work suggests that only radical surgery can enable anyone living in such a dehumanized culture to avoid such a fate. Perhaps Didion's adaptation of cinematic techniques to the novel can serve to make readers more conscious of the pervasive effects of the media on the way we interpret our reality.

A radical feminist view would hold that the patriarchal aspects of this micro-society--the film industry--are accountable for Maria's increasing alienation. But Didion's novel insists on calling attention to Maria's own complicity in this matter, and thus to the dialectical nature of the individual's relationship to society. As a woman, Maria has internalized the values of her society to such an extent that she unwittingly contributes to her own illness.

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Maria's most conscious awareness of herself is as a body, the only aspect of her being that film can re-present. Even in the midst of her despair, she diets and forgoes salt to avoid bloating..."no matter what happened

she remembered her body" (16). As a child of her culture, Maria presumes this conscientiousness to be a virtue when in fact it is a symptom of her illness. In this respect, she resembles her antagonist, Helene, although the resemblance is not one Maria cares to consider at length. She does align herself with Helene's fate as a woman, however, when Maria observes that "Helene was not quite so immune to time...that whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women" (46).

The cult of the body is of supreme importance in a society that is as mobile and fast-paced as is Didion's portrayal of contemporary society. People are defined by their ability to project a desired image as vividly and instantaneously as a commercial on television. One's material possessions and physical attributes are employed to advertise one's sexual availability, political preference, occupational status, etc.... The body becomes the focal point around which all other aspects of self-identification coalesce.

Such is the case with the young Maria who has internalized the market mentality of her culture. She perceives her body as a commodity, as an item with an exchange value. Even the concept of ownership has degenerated in this world from its former sense of belonging to something as much as it belongs to oneself--for instance, the land that Everette loves and inherits in Run River has as much claim on him as he does on the land.

In this post-lapsarian universe, however, ownership simply implies the right to dispose of a possession as one sees fit, preferably for the highest margin of profit possible.

Maria has come to think of her body as a possession in the same way that her father thought of the various properties he acquired and lost in the gambling games that he indulged in all his life and from which he extrapolated an ideological position he bequeaths to Maria. That position is one that Maria at first accepts, but must eventually learn to resist, just as she does the ideological stance of the movie colony: "I was raised to believe that what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last. I no longer believe that, but I am telling you how it was" (3).

In fact, it is from her parents that Maria first learns to think of her ability to present a pleasing appearance as a guarantee of success. So it is ironic later that when Maria makes a statement from the mental hospital she asks about the Darwinian logic involved in the principle of mimicry as it refers to the king and coral snake. The principle of mimicry, or survival by virtue of appearance, is a tenet very familiar to Maria. It came to her, as did the guarantee of success, as part of her parental legacy. "From my mother I inherited my looks and a tendency to migraine. From my father I inherited an optimism which did not leave me until recently" (3). Her father's optimism consists of his certainty that, as a pretty girl, Maria

holds "all the aces" in the game of life, a crap game whose probabilities he has taught Maria to assess rapidly (7).

One critic notes that Maria's father sees his daughter as "his ticket to fortune, and like Carter, he had high expectations for the profit to be made from her" (Wolff 488). Maria is just another in the series of hunches he hopes will pay off and justify his faith in his good fortune. That Maria's future is held in ransom so as to satisfy the deluded dreams of an obsessive gambler who happens to be her father never seems to be questioned by either Maria or her father. In her parent's world, as in the film industry, one sells whatever one can find a buyer for; staying in the action is all that matters. A family discussion about an escape fantasy that Maria and her mother share of opening a hash house reveals the rampant commercialism that colors every aspect of public and private life. "Franchises, you rent out your name and your receipt", a family friend advises the women if they want to cash in on the wave of the future (86). So Maria's insight years later in the midst of her breakdown that "the still center of the daylight world was never a house by the sea but the corner of Sunset and La Brea" (a prime commercial property in Hollywood) is not so much a discovery as a confirmation of an ugly reality she first became acquainted with at the family dinner table (114).

Maria's mother, too, contributes to Maria's subsequent dilemma. By her actions and attitudes, she encourages

Maria to seek her fortune as an actress in New York. Francine Wyeth's ideas are shaped by the many movies and magazines she dreams over to fill the time that hangs heavy in the desert ghost towns her husband's fancies have relegated her to. She thinks Maria's career choice is "a nice idea" and cuts her daughter's hair in the style of a favorite movie star (6). Any qualms Francine may have about the kind of life her daughter leads in New York that leaves the girl thin and pale are quickly dismissed by Maria's father: "She can't win if she's not at the table, Francine...you wouldn't understand that" (86). Implicit in his reaction is the presumption that a 'womanly' concern for the well-being of a loved one is a detriment when mapping out strategies for professional success. That the advice comes from a 'professional' loser seems to make no difference as Harry Wyeth's words echo the market mentality so pervasive in post WWII America.

Indeed, Maria's parents expect their daughter to leave home and accept as inevitable the infrequent contact with their child that results from her success. It could be argued that the Wyeth's would have been more disappointed if their daughter had not pursued the dreams they had for her. As the child, it is Maria's fate to live out the American Dream that shapes this family's life, however elusive that dream continues to be. In effect, Maria's parents sanction her rejection of them as part of her past, an action that will ironically but systematically undermine

Maria's precarious success in that wider world Francine and Harry Wyeth can only dream of.

Foust provides another reading of the familial situation in the novel. Referring to the scene that presents Maria's last visit home before her mother's death, Foust suggests that the scene depicts the Freudian dynamics of family life in microcosm. The scene entails an exchange between Maria and her mother that expresses a longing on their part to be together, somewhere else. Maria's father interrupts the exchange with a harsh reminder that Maria needs to be in New York if she is going to become a success. "This scene is a guioco piano, a quiet strategy. Its commonplaceness seems almost irrelevant to Maria's crisis until one senses the connection between its structure and the structure of family romance. Maria is fixated on childhood scenes which depict her other as a nexus of futile despair; her father is the authority-figure who separates mother and daughter; and the child as helpless pawn in the struggle between male and female wills. The sense of hopeless disconnection is made complete when the loved and feared parents wave their farewells 'at the wrong window.' The narrative thrust of the scene emphasizes the futile desire of mother and daughter to unite in a world free of men" (51). Foust's reading of the family romance in Didion's novel illuminates a grim social reality suppressed or ignored in the movie or magazine versions of family on which Maria and her mother

have fed their fantasies. Even more, the scene graphically demonstrates the devastating effects of the patriarchal structure on female relationship to each other, as it depicts the desire of connection as infantile and foolish. Again, the male moral preference for separation is privileged in this patriarchal view of relations; the pain inherent in that separation is dismissed as trivial, thus demeaning the females who experience the pain most intensely.

For it is the severing of ties to her past that precipitates Maria's plunge into a metaphysical despair. The death of her mother is especially traumatic for Maria as it portends the rupture that separates Maria from her past. Not only is her mother's death completely unexpected, but Maria finds her reaction to that loss equally inexplicable. In fact, her grief is almost unrecognizable as such to Maria; instead she refers to her time of intense sorrow as "the bad season in New York, the season when she had done nothing but walk and cry and lose so much weight that the agency refused to book her" (59).

Years later when Maria contemplates an abortion, the questions surrounding the circumstances of her mother's death return to haunt her. Her mind is preoccupied with the pitifully few facts she has about the incident, facts from which she attempts to reconstruct a plausible sequence of events. All Maria does know is that her mother's car ran off the road in the desert, but that her mother's body

was not discovered for two weeks because the coyotes had torn it apart. The only other fact she has is that she could not be reached because she was with some man. In one of the most powerful images in the novel, Maria is described as imagining her mother trying to place a call to New York just before her death, a call Maria fantasizes would have contained a coded farewell message for her. Maria would reconstruct this scene "particularly around the time the sun set in New York, think about the mother dying in the desert light, the daughter unavailable in the Eastern dark...and she would wonder what she was doing in the dark" (60).

As a number of critics have pointed out, Maria's grief is contaminated by a horrific guilt, and the darkness into which she has fallen is the darkness of the damned.[4] For Maria, however unwittingly, has transgressed the basic tenet of the "wagon-train morality" Didion subscribes to in her essay "On Morality". This "wagon-train morality" is a code of ethics which insists that the only valid promise people can make to each other is to "try to retrieve our casualties, try not to abandon our dead to the coyotes" (STB 158). But like the members of the Donner-Reed party whose story shadows Didion's personal history, Maria has become one of those who "somewhere abdicated their responsibilities, somehow breached their primary loyalties" (STB 159). While Maria was distracted by her pursuit of success in New York City, her mother's body was literally

devoured by coyotes.

This brief scene evokes an archetypal pattern of mother-daughter loss as well that finds a resonance in the psyches of contemporary women who, like Maria, feel responsible for the loss of traditional relationships. As the socially-recognized functions of motherhood in particular--emotional nuturance, physical sustenance, moral education--are co-opted by social institutions such as schools, hospitals, and the service industries in general, the individual mother and daughter relationship erodes and become as gratuitous as is Maria's 'mothering' of her institutionalized daughter, Kate. As a result, daughters such as Maria who still inherit vestigial moral concerns regarding maternal responsibility are literally "in the dark" about how to execute such duties in contemporary life. (This is an issue that Didion will explore again in her third novel A Book of Common Prayer.)

And so when Maria has to make a decision about whether or not to comply with her husband's demand that she abort another man's child, she is at a loss to judge the morality of her act or its consequences. The abortion simply becomes one in a series of ploys she and Carter perpetrate in the power game that constitutes their marriage. Maria permits Carter to blackmail her into the abortion by his threats to deprive her of custody of Kate, a threat which one critic notes is hollow as Kate is already institutionalized at Carter's insistence. Nonetheless,

Maria acquiesces to the emotional extortion without examining its rationale. This indicates that the threat of the loss of her daughter is sufficient to dismantle any critical intelligence Maria may possess. Maria does arrive at one conclusion after this encounter with her husband however. "She would do what he wanted. She would do this one last thing and then they would never be able to touch her again" (73). Clearly, Carter is to be included in the ominous 'they' Maria perceives as a threat to her sanity, a threat that represents the demands of a culture that has denied her needs as an individual woman.

Still, Maria recognizes that her resistance to the standards of the movie culture exacts a high cost; her whole sense of reality is threatened when those people in her present social milieu withdraw their approval from her at a time when the people from her past are also no longer available for confirmation of an alternative way of life. This withdrawal is critical, as Berger and Luckmann point out, for it is those people with whom we have constant contact that reaffirm and shape our individual sense of reality. "The significant others in the individual's life are the principal agents for the maintenance of his subjective reality" (150).

It is only when Maria's sense of reality has been placed into question that she encounters the other agent of social control in the novel: the institutions of psychiatry. While a number of critics have observed that

the film industry and the gambling enterprises represent ideological authorities whose rhetoric Maria must decipher and resist, few critics have noted that the psychological systems and institutions serve as equally effective agents of social control.[5] Maria, however, does register this potential threat in her initial statement at the beginning of the novel. She understands very well that her version of what has happened (the narrative of Maria Wyeth's life) is a version contested not only by her family and friends, but also by those empowered to assign her psychological and, therefore, social status. In some respects Maria seems at least dimly aware of the functions of psychological institutions and theories as defined by Berger and Luckmann in The Social Construction of Reality: "...psychological theories re-enter everyday life by providing the interpretive schemes for disposing of problematic cases..." (176).

That she is a "problematic case" is something Maria is aware of herself. Indeed she concurs with almost everyone's opinion that she is, in fact, ill. "I am sick of everybody's sick arrangements" she tells Carter when she informs him of her unwanted pregnancy (48). And later on the desert with Carter, BZ, and Helene, Maria confirms that self-diagnoses. "I don't like any of you," she said. "You are all making me sick" (189). The distinction Maria makes though is that she refuses to be held entirely responsible for her condition.

Unlike the psychiatrist at the hospital or the hypnotist Maria briefly visits, Maria does not believe the cause of her illness is a personal derangement lurking somewhere in her unconscious. She does not believe her illness is like that of her daughter's, an "aberrant chemical" in the brain; nor is she receptive to the hypnotist's theory that a return to the womb will solve her problems. Maria understands that her interaction with her social world has contributed significantly to her condition--the lack of ethical and moral criteria has disrupted her psychological and emotional growth. In fact, Maria may recognize that her social world is the source of contamination, and thus her insistence on the need to withdraw from it completely as she does when she enters the mental hospital. That Maria comes to understand at least in a minimal fashion that definitions of reality are socially produced and maintained is indicated by a statement she makes toward the close of the novel. "Carter and Helene still believe in cause-effect. Carter and Helene still believe that people are either sane or insane" (202).

Maria realizes that psychological status is relevant to the societal body which makes that determination. Therefore, in recognition of the power that resides within the institutions of psychiatry, Maria tries to be "an agreeable player of the game" and produces a narrative she refuses to analyze. She understands that in her world,

hers is a discourse without power, and as such it remains as marginal as she does.

Didion, too, supports Maria's perceptions regarding the influence of social institutions in determining psychological status by her choice of imagery to represent Maria's psychological disintegration. The images which torment Maria derive from the conditions of modern life and are often imbued with a sinister meaning. These images range from surrealistic scenes of modern life as viewed from the freeway to realistic nightmares that conflate public and private history.

Most of these images center around the pivotal event of the novel, Maria's abortion. For instance, on her way to have the abortion Maria's sensitivity to her surroundings is heightened:

> The stillness and clarity of the air seemed to rob everything of its perspective, seemed to alter all perception of depth, and Maria drove as carefully as if she were reconnoitering an atmosphere without gravity. Taco Bells jumped out at her. Oil rockers creaked ominously. For miles before she reached the Thriftimart she could see the big red T, a forty-foot cutout letter which seemed peculiarly illuminated against the

harsh unclouded light of the afternoon
sky. (75-76)

Other critics have remarked on the symbolic content of the "big red T" and have noted that the figure alludes to the Christian crucifixion scene. They point out that such traditional symbols of redemption have become so depreciated in contemporary life that they signal the absence of or the lack of moral qualities such as mercy or forgiveness. Indeed, in a world where Taco Bells have replaced church spires, the only activity to replace religious observance is a trip to the supermarket or shopping mall. Consumerism is the only viable form of communion in this corrupt community.

But if society fails to meet the individual's need for moral categories in Play It As It Lays, the need persists nonetheless. (In fact, Wolff argues that Didion would maintain that morality is essential to identity: "We need moral categories to be" [492]). Maria's dream life retains such categories even if her conscious mind obliterates such ethical narratives. For instance, Maria's conscious mind accepts the banal explanation of her behavior provided by the young man who directs her to the house where the abortion takes place.

Maria turned off the ignition and looked at

> the man in white duck pants with an intense and grateful interest. In the past few minutes he had significantly altered her perception of reality: she saw now that she was not a woman on her way to have an abortion. She was a woman parking a Corvette outside a tract house while a man in white duck pants talked about buying a Camaro. There was no more to it than that. (78)

In other words, by shifting the perspective of this scene from a narrative account to that of a film script, the moral and ethical aspects of the situation are eliminated and only observable activity remains.

That shift suggests the neutrality associated with the scientific method, a view that Didion's novel challenges even as it shows the way film achieves its spectacular effects. But the loss of ethical content--which for Didion is central in relationships, familial or otherwise,--is registered as a disturbing and troubling afterthought in Maria's psychic life.

However in the weeks that follow the abortion, Maria's dreams refuse this expedient interpretation of events. Her dreams repeatedly force her to confront the idea that her actions have moral consequences and not just cinematic possibilities. She dreams of connections to some vague underworld, populated with menacing characters who require

that she supply them with information about the plumbing conditions of a rented house. She is haunted by images that suggest the presence of discarded fetuses in clogged drains.

> The man in the white duck pants materialized and then the doctor in his rubber apron. At that point she would fight for consciousness but she was never able to wake herself before the dream revealed its inexorable intention, before the plumbing stopped up, before they all fled and left her there, gray water bubbling up in every sink. Of course she could not call a plumber, because she had known all along what would be found in the pipes, what hacked pieces of human flesh. (96)

Later her dreams take on an even more sinister form. Public and private history merge in this dream as Maria imagines herself a participant in the Holocaust. The novel suggests that an individual action has social consequences.

> "This way to the gas, ladies and gentlemen," a loudspeaker kept repeating in her dreams now, and she would be

> checking off names as the children filed past her, the little children in the green antechamber, she would be collecting their lockets and baby rings in a fine mesh basket. Her instructions were to whisper a few comforting words to those children who cried or held back, because this was a humane operation. (125)

The dreams which torment Maria after her abortion clearly designate her as guilty of complicity with evil. They also depict the grave ramifications of an individual's abdication of moral responsibility when compounded on a grand scale. Complicity with evil is an accusation that Maria makes of herself. As Pearson and Pope, two feminist critics, observe, Maria feels she is complicitious in the death of her mother, in the loss of her unborn child, and in the institutionalization of her retarded daughter, Kate. In each instance, Maria has permitted a man's expectations of her to take precedence over her graver responsibilities as mother and daughter. And having abrogated these primary loyalties, Maria is plunged into despair.

Given the weight of Maria's guilt, it is not surprising that she opts to comply with BZ's request that she attend his suicide. Perhaps Maria seeks to do penance, to find a

means of atonement. (Her time in the desert seems like a time of trial; also Didion has mentioned in one of her essays something about going to the desert to be shriven.) Or perhaps she reasons that she will only be punished for contributing to the death of an important person in the community. Psychologically it may seem to Maria that it is not her actions per se which draw the censure of the institutions of justice, but rather the importance of the person against whom the 'crime' is committed that determines the seriousness of her offense. Unborn fetuses, retarded children, and dreamy housewives are not among the protected citizens of this calloused society. Famous movie directors are.

Whatever Maria's motives, both Didion and her protagonist make it clear that Maria chooses to hold BZ's hand as he dies from a deliberate overdose of alcohol and drugs.

> Just once, the week after the desert, when Helene came to see me in Neuropsychiatric, I tried to explain how wrong she had been when she screamed that last night about my carelessness, my selfishness, my insanity, as if it had somehow slipped my attention what BZ was doing. I told her: there was no carelessness involved. Helene, I said,

> I knew precisely what BZ was doing. But Helene only screamed again. (202)

On this point Didion would have her readers reject the accusation of insanity made against Maria as a result of her complicity in this matter. From Didion's perspective, Maria like her predecessors--Didion's first protagonist, Lily Knight McClellan--is doing the only 'moral' thing possible when she does not interfere with the decision of another individual to end his life. As Lily observes when she realizes her wifely pleas will not dissuade her husband from suicide: "Maybe the most difficult, most important thing anyone could do for anyone else was to leave him alone; it was perhaps the only gratuitous act, the act of love. (RR 247) Clearly Didion does not mean for Maria to be censured for her part in BZ's suicide. Yet, neither is BZ's choice entirely sanctioned in the novel. Maria's final remarks to the reader clarify her position on the issue. "I know what 'nothing' means and keep on playing. Why, BZ would way. Why not, I say" (213).

There is something admirable in Maria's courageous if feeble resistance to total despair. Foust places a feminist interpretation on what most readers consider an existential statement, even declared feminists. He says, "She [Maria] has learned from her mother that women are 'nothing'--wives, 'hoarders of secret sexual grievances,' and that they can only passively receive the blows rained

upon them by misogynic males" (51). 'Nothing' in this context takes on political overtones in addition to the metaphysical ones associated with existentialism.

The moral distinctions and ambiguities that Didion maintains constitute the raison d'etre of fiction begin to surface and trouble Didion's account of the resistances her protagonist registers against the institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies of her fictional time and space. For many readers the ambiguities coalesce around the issue of individualism, a characteristic so inherently American that it has come to characterize our culture as no other ideological stance has. It is a characteristic that is mythologized in the creation of our heroes, especially in those heroes whose quests are easily adapt to the silver screen--the cowboy and detective.

> Both the cowboy and the hard-boiled detective tell us something important about American individualism. The cowboy, like the detective, can be valuable to society only because he is a completely autonomous individual who stands outside it. To serve society, one must be able to stand alone, not needing others, not depending on their judgments and not submitting to their wishes. Yet this individualism is not selfishness. Indeed, it is a kind of heroic selflessness.

> Once accepts the necessity of remaining alone in order to serve the values of the group. And this obligation to aloneness is an important key to the American moral imagination. Yet it is part of the profound ambiguity of the mythology of American individualism that its moral heroism is always a step away from despair...there is no return to society, no moral redemption. The hero's lonely quest for moral excellence ends in absolute nihilism. (Habits of the Heart 146)

Feminist critics have observed that for many female heroes, no community exists to support their newly found selves and the critics speculate that this is a problem indigenous to patriarchal societies. (Pratt 38) What the former passage suggests is that the problem of the isolated hero may well be a particularly American dilemma that transcends gender--a position Didion is more likely to subscribe to than the feminist position. In any case, Didion's protagonist finds herself confronting the ambiguity of individualism at the end of Play It As It Lays.

By the novel's conclusion, Maria has literally cut herself off from all forms of human contact. She refuses to talk to anyone; she says she has nothing to say. On one hand, the self-imposed isolation appears to be an ascetic

gesture designed to purify Maria's conscience if not her soul. On the other hand, the isolation seems pointless. Of what value can a secularization of the monastic life be in the late twentieth century?

Didion's novel suggests that another sort of redemption may be an option, an aesthetic one. Maria spends her days composing nostalgic scenes of domesticity with her retarded daughter and focusing on the humming bird directly in her line of vision. This activity could be read as a conscious plan to recreate some of the value lost in her past--to reclaim her daughter and recapture her openness to natural beauty. However when it is remembered that the humming bird is also traditionally considered a good luck charm, a harbinger of luck and love, Maria's absorption in its features can be viewed as a refusal to confront the complexities of modern life; in which case art is escapism. Indeed, her plan to secure the custody of her daughter Kate and support the both of them seems as fanciful as any scheme her father conjured up in his time. Another possibility is that Maria's efforts to 'be an agreeable player', efforts that include the production of a narrative, can be seen as strategic moves in her recovery, a recovery of not just her sanity, but of those connections to family which are needed to preserve a sanity purchased at such a high price. But the futility of Maria's gesture emphasizes how extensive is the loss of filiative structures in modern society, just as the poignancy of her

effort reveals the intensity with which the loss is felt.

It is at this juncture that the problematical nature of interpretation comes back to haunt the novel. Didion has carefully weighted the novel so the narrative remains as 'neutral' as Maria herself claims to be. Readers are left with 'nothing' to guide their understanding of Maria's story, much as she warned would be the case. The text itself resists any totalization--metaphysical, sociological, psychological--and every reader/critic does so at his or her own peril. Bereft of the certitude which accompanies a totalizing order--in this case, the familial institutions which represent the patriarchy--around which atomized fragments of experience can coalesce, and thus create systematic and stable meaning, Maria, and the readers of her story, are susceptible to a "melancholy of disbelief" (Jameson 252). Jameson identifies this condition as the consequence of the loss of value, a condition he equates with nihilism. "The study of value is at one with nihilism, or the experience of its absence" (251).

The ending of Didion's second novel recalls Tony Tanner's remark about the analogous relation of character to event and writer to words. The correspondence seems to obtain in Play It As It Lays. Maria Wyeth exists in a state of metaphysical and ethical paralysis at the end of the novel. She cannot determine a reliable basis for interpreting discourse, even though she participates in the

process in a minimal fashion. Such seems the case with Didion. This novel represents a dead end of the sort Coale suggests in his work, In Hawthorne's Shadow, a study of the legacy of romance Didion inherits from the American literary tradition. "For Didion's vision, however, the form of Play It As It Lays suggest a dead end. The state of soul [nihilism] is so complete, so much the product and process of her California landscape and of Maria's own fears and despairs as a woman and an actress, so much a reflection and creation of the hard cinematic style itself with which Didion conjures up her "hard white empty core of the world," that the book achieves a kind of paralysis in its own right" (190).

Thus, I suggest, Didion envisions an entirely different approach to the task of producing narrative in contemporary society when she writes A Book of Common Prayer, by claiming affiliation with a particular literary tradition she inherits. A discussion of this change will follow in Chapter Three. Furthermore, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter Four, Didion returns to some of the unfinished themes and refrains in Play It As It Lays and reworks ideas that were aborted or discarded in her first examination of the complex relation of literature to life as it evolves in the decades of the 70s and 80s, the decades of post-modernism. Yet, even so, she finds minimal justification in the narrative act in Play It As It Lays, as her response to the question "Why write" would surely

correspond to Maria's "Why not?". For an affirmative answer is sufficient to propel Didion on to write yet another novel, just as Maria's minimal affirmation of life allows her to successfully avoid suicide.

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A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER: STORIES OF THE FATHER RETOLD

In A Book of Common Prayer, Didion takes up the literary challenge presented by Virginia Woolf in A Room of One's Own: that of female friendships which Woolf describes as "...that vast chamber where nobody has yet been..." (88). Accepting the challenge of this modernist writer scarcely gives one pause in today's post-modernist feminist climate that enthusiastically seeks to re-interpret literary history with a view toward renewing or restoring the literary status of this formerly-neglected half of the human species. What is unusual, though, is Didion's particular approach to this "vast chamber," the issue of relationships among women. This issue surfaced only obliquely in Run River and Play It As It Lays. In her third novel, Didion finally confronts it directly. Didion's somewhat belated entry into this no longer empty chamber merits attention because it is curious in a number of respects. Her exploration of female friendships is curious in regard to both her development as a writer and to her relationship to the literary tradition which she inherits.

In the first instance, A Book of Common Prayer represents yet another occasion in which Didion's

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ambivalence regarding her position as a female writer surfaces to become yet another subtext of the novel being written. Didion's ambivalence becomes even more pronounced in A Book of Common Prayer because the novel centers around the difficulties a female narrator encounters in trying to tell a story. The fact that Grace Strasser-Mendana is a female is not inconsequential to her narrative of yet another woman's life. Despite her disclaimers regarding any affiliation with the feminist movement (discussed in Chapter 1), Didion employs a classic feminist strategy in the construction of this novel. Didion creates a narrative whose form and content examines the relationship of two women to each other and to the literature produced by and about them. At the same time, Didion identifies her points of difference from radical feminists while implicitly acknowledging her affinity with women as a group.

Feminist critics such as Showalter, Gilbert/Gubar, and Pratt have observed that female writers have often used seemingly conventional narrative strategies to tell their stories, but then have subverted those strategies for feminist purposes. As was demonstrated in Run River, certain patterns of feminine archetypes provided a subtext somewhat at variance with the surface claims of that novel. Pratt has claimed that such subversive patterns--carried in some cases in the archetypal patterns Pratt identifies--comprise the legacy that literary mothers have bequeathed to their female progeny. An example of this procedure is

located by Pratt in Woolf's novel To The Lighthouse. Of Woolf, Pratt remarks, "She blends this sub-conscious, personal material [her relationship as a daughter to her parents] with the rebirth archetype in incorporating motifs derived from one of the oldest mother/daughter narrative of all, the Demeter/Kore archetype" (132).

However, Gilbert and Gubar's recent examination of the relation of twentieth-century women writers to their literary inheritance provokes a reconsideration of the relation to maternal predecessors. They propose that by the twentieth-century, a woman writer has a choice of either a matrilineal or patrilineal inheritance to claim. These critics speculate in their article, "Forward into the Past," that "in the twentieth-century...Freudian concepts..as well as Freud-derived Bloomian paradigms like the 'anxiety of influence' and our own 'anxiety of authorship' must inevitably give way to a paradigm of ambivalent affiliation" (243). Gilbert and Gubar goes on to contend that writers such as Wharton, Plath, Cather, and Woolf "also perceive themselves as...free to adopt the powers of paternal and/or maternal traditions" (244). These exceptional feminist critics are discovering in the mid 80's what Didion already knew ten years earlier when she wrote A Book of Common Prayer. Still, their analysis is helpful in distinguishing the patterns of relationships that Didion works out novelistically.

After demonstrating through an etymological analysis

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that the idea of adoption resides within the concept of affiliation, Gilbert and Gubar explain the advantage of this concept for the woman writer. Affiliation, they suggest, permits "an evasion of the inexorable lineage of the biological family even while it also implies a power of decision in two historical directions: one may be adopted, and thus legitimized, as a literary heiress; but one may also adopt and thus sanction others to carry on the tradition one has established. Finally...the concept of 'affiliation' carries with it possibilities of both choice and continuity. Choice: one may decide with whom to affiliate--align or join--oneself. Continuity: one is thereby linked into a constructed genealogical order which has its own quasi-familial logic" (244). Rather than repeat the filiative patterns of family romance that Bloom suggests sets up antagonisms between literary generations, the twentieth-century female writer prefers to invoke a new structure for relation to her literary past. The concept of adoption or affiliation avoids the problems associated with patriarchal lineage while ensuring the continuity of tradition still desired.

Instead of following Woolf's example of To The Lighthouse in her third novel, Didion chooses to adopt a narrative strategy often employed by her literary forefathers. As a twentieth-century woman writer, Didion exercises her choice of either a patrilineal or matrilineal heritage. This seems an option she never doubted was

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available to her. Her choice consists of a narrative strategy that has been used to depict the quintessential connections between two male characters, popularly known as male bonding. The connections delineated operate in the social, psychological, spiritual, and literary realms of experience for the male protagonists. In addition, the strategy often reflects an ideological stance--that men have their significant relationships with each other in a patriarchal culture--on the part of the male writer employing the narrative strategy. Didion establishes her claim as the legitimate daughter of her literary forefathers by her adoption of a narrative technique those forefathers have claimed as their own. She then rewrites the narrative of male bonding from a female perspective.

Her revision reveals a profundity of emotional and ethical content in the relationships that women forge with each other. In so doing, Didion calls into question the male prerogative of locating significance exclusively in the male experience. By assigning a corresponding significance to female relationships, Didion makes a distinctly feminist gesture. Pearson and Pope insist that "any author who chooses a woman as the central character in the story understands at some level that women are primary beings...whether explicitly feminist or not, therefore, works with female heroes challenge patriarchal assumptions" (12).

Nor is Didion any less bold in her choice of paternal

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predecessors from whom she appropriates her technique: namely, Conrad and Fitzgerald. Conrad and Fitzgerald are alluded to simultaneously through Didion's choice of a first-person narrator who evolves in the process of narration to become a co-protagonist of the person whose story the narrator relates. Echoes of The Great Gatsby and Heart of Darkness reverberate throughout Didion's third novel. (Some critics, such as Strandberg, have noted this phenomenon, but few have pursued the implications of this insight.)

Furthermore, Didion's narrative tactic has a sense of happy audacity about it. Her choice of narrative device implicitly challenges the cultural assumption that females possessless potential for heroism that males do. Didion's story is about a non-descript, even neurotic, middle-aged, middle-class woman (Charlotte Douglas), who, on the surface, elicits very little sympathy or admiration, but who, through the compelling agency of the narrator's voice and vision (that of Grace Strasser-Mendana's) comes to command both. That Didion dares to imply that Charlotte's story, and Grace's telling of it, is on a par with the stories of Lord Jim, Kurtz, or Gatsby is, to say the least, a bit outrageous...but also utterly delightful. And that sense of outrage mingled with delight is perfectly apprehended by the cool, analytical Grace Strasser-Mendana, whose performance as a first-person narrator with a perplexing story to tell is equally as engaging as the

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stunning narrative performances of Marlow or Nick Carraway. The following discussion will examine the similarities and differences in each of these narrator's performances.

Equally important is the recognition that Didion's gesture toward her literary past is not only a feminist gesture; it is also an implementation of one of the basic tenets of modernism, as formulated by one of the movement's founding fathers, Eliot himself. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot exhorts the practitioners of art to know the past in a way that the past could not know itself. Tradition, Eliot maintains, "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence....This historical sense...is what makes a writer traditional. And at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity....But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" (The Sacred Wood 51-52). That knowledge is part of what every new artist can contribute to the literary tradition. In other words, Didion's novel, by its conscious allusion to the past, can be read as Didion's tribute to her patriarchal predecessors. It can also be read as a critique or re-working of the legacy she has inherited as a literary daughter, a legacy she needs to expand to accommodate the needs of a post-modern world.

And so, this discussion of Didion's novel, A Book of Common Prayer, will use a two-layered approach. One the one hand, the discussion will delineate the similarities between the stories of Joan Didion, a post-modern female writer, and those of her literary fathers of the age of modernism: Conrad and Fitzgerald. On the other hand, the discussion will attempt to articulate the significant distinctions among the stories, including the nonfictional one of the literary tradition the writers share. I will then discuss the implications of the insights that emerge from Didion's venture into Woolf's "vast chamber" of female friendships via the paths worn smooth by the footprints of her literary fathers.

"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" (STB 165). Although Didion made this comment in the 1960's in her first book of essays, the truth of that observation can be detected in her literary activities that span the subsequent two decades. Not only does the disruption of the traditional family unit constitute a major thematic concern in each of Didion's four novels, but Didion is of a generation of artists whose conception of most social relationships, especially literary ones, tends to coalesce around the paradigm of the family structure.

Critics with views as divergent as Frederic Jameson and

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Harold Bloom acknowledge this metaphorical preference, albeit for very different reasons. Jameson reminds his readers in The Political Unconscious that the family as a structure carries with it ideological implications as a social unit. "Sartre's Search for a Method has taught us to read the family situation as the mediation of class relationships in society at large, and to grasp the parental functions as socially coded or symbolic positions as well" (180). Bloom, of course, in Anxiety of Influence, uses the familial paradigm to construct a whole theory of literary relationships between poets and their predecessors. He states that his purpose in that book is to "center upon intra-poetic relationships as parallels of family romance" (8).

And, as I have mentioned earlier, in The World, the Text, and the Critic, Said elaborates on his theory that a major cultural shift in modern times has been the shift from filiation to affiliation. "Affiliation becomes a form of representing the filiative processes to be found in nature, although affiliation takes validatednonbiological social and cultural forms," Said explains (23). In some instances, Said postulates, affiliation can consist of a replication of the familial structure, complete with the attendant authority systems and ethnocentric assumptions of filiation, or it can produce forms of its own. As this shift transpires, contemporary writers such as Didion seemed compelled not only to record the cultural upheaval

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that results, but also to grieve for the losses incurred in the process. Didion records the cultural upheaval primarily in her essays on American life. But it is in the fiction that she most poignantly expresses the loss entailed in this transition.

This idea of transition from the filiative to the affiliative mode of social relationships is particularly relevant because it describes Didion's repeated concerns as a writer. Further, it serves to identify her relationship as a writer to her work, and to the literary past she inherits. Each of her novels takes this cultural transition as a central concern.

In Run River, Didion explores the emotional, psychological, and social repercussions for an individual family caught in a dissolution of family systems. At the end of the novel, however, the protagonist cannot imagine what cultural unit will evolve to replace the familial structure which in Run River has self-destructed. Because Lily Knight McClellan has no explanation for the deterioration of the patriarchal system she finds herself a victim of, she labels the dissolution a "history of accidents" (246). She only vaguely senses that the dissolution may be more widespread. In fact, it should be noted that Didion's comprehension of the scope of the "social hemorrhaging" which she observes in STB comes after the publication of her first novel (85). This suggests that Didion is unaware of the cultural ramifications of the

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failure of filiation when she writes Run River. As I have claimed previously, Run River evolves primarily out of her sense of a personal loss which only later is recognized as cultural too.

In Play It As It Lays, the protagonist refuses all forms of affiliation as expressed by cultural discourse. She thinks such forms are not compensatory for the familial connection from which she feels disenfranchised. Ultimately Maria resorts to a simplistic aestheticism, one which permits a total and probably permanent withdrawal from the struggle to forge complicated connections with others and the world about her. Maria's action seems the result of her discovery that human connections, like discourse, are made, not given. She also finds that discourse is not neutral, but can possess sinister and oppressive implications. In fact, Maria's gesture of repudiation can be seen as that of a radical feminist, one who refuses to participate at all in the male-dominated system that has first silenced her and then judged her act of compassion to be mad and criminal.

Didion's understanding of the cultural crisis of the 60's and 70's is reflected as well in the situations she proscribes for her protagonists. Maria's refusal to participate in the production of discourse is more a gesture of despair than one of principle. That despair is suggested by the fact that she does attempt to be "an agreeable player" in the construction of her life story

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(Play 2). In other words, she makes a feeble, if futile attempt to participate in an effort toward affiliation by producing a quasi-literary discourse which serves to frame the novel.

By the end of the novel, Maria emerges with a knowledge of "what 'nothing' means" (213). She considers that knowledge to be valuable and the exclusive property of those like herself who have dared to resist social pressure to accept the totalization of cultural discourses. However, knowing what 'nothing' means only ensures Maria's physical survival. The knowledge saves her from suicide, but not despair. Maria's metaphysical despair corresponds to Didion's own questioning of the validity of producing narratives that are discontinuous with experience. The 'natural' connection of language and experience has been broken in Didion's second novel, a consequence (or the cause?) of the failure of filiation in modern life. Both Didion and her protagonist face the challenge of finding a reason to continue producing narratives that are disconnected from any absolute sense of truth.

Nonetheless, by the time she writes A Book of Common Prayer, Didion has rediscovered a value in the production of narrative as an essential human activity. By her third novel, she has moved beyond the paralyzing effects of filiative loss in contemporary society. Indeed, from this point forward, both in her fiction and non-fiction, Didion's literary efforts are directed toward the process

of affiliation. The change of direction in purpose is signaled by a change of geographical locale. This is not surprising as geographical locations are "places of the mind" for Didion (STB). She shifts the focus of her attention away from her patria, the American West, to Central America in both A Book of Common Prayer and Salvador and then later to the Pacific in Democracy, and to the Atlantic in her latest work about Miami. The geographical shift is indicative of a search for a new way to forge connections in modern life.

A salient aspect of Didion's reconsideration involves a reflection on and a reassessment of the literary tradition which she inherits, and most particularly, the predominantly patrilineal nature of that tradition. (Bloom's book of poetic family romance, for instance, employs exclusively male terminology and by implication, concerns itself with the dynamics of patriarchal lines of descent.) In contrast, A Book of Common Prayer represents Didion's attempt to locate her rightful place as a female within a literary tradition whose privilege of patriarchal values has frequently denied its literary daughters equal status with their male siblings.

Didion's choice of the conventional canon as the literary institution with which to associate herself, or to challenge if need be, is no less audacious than her choice of Joseph Conrad, the 'father' of modernism, as the predecessor to whom she claims lineage. This preference

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for a male rather than a female progenitor would likely be viewed by some feminists as evidence of Didion's naive internalization of patriarchal values. (Pratt, for instance, makes this argument in her work on feminine archetypes.) Such a view implies a lack of critical consciousness on the writer's part that is simply not supported by any of Didion's fiction. Another possibility exists. The choice of Conrad as a literary father, so to speak, almost automatically legitimizes Didion's claim to inclusion within the traditional literary institution. In any case, it certainly makes clear her claim to that position. An alliance of affiliation with a maternal progenitor may not provide the same legitimacy. I think legitimacy is an issue with Didion at this point in her career. In Gilbert and Gubar's terms, she does suffer a bit from an "anxiety of authorship", although that anguish may not be exclusively the result of her gender. But a stronger case for Didion's choice of paternal predecessor is that it was from her literary forefathers that Didion consciously learned the craft of writing..."the way a sentence works" (Davison 18). Didion says that women writers, such as the Brontës and George Eliot were influential only "in the sense of being models for a life, not for a style" (Art of Fiction 140).

It seems to me that what Didion seeks when she is writing is the authority of her own voice as a writer. Her concern for authority leads her first to the traditional

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canon, where she chooses Conrad over other contenders as a literary predecessor. I expect that is because she perceives an affiliation with him. As an 'outsider' to the English-speaking world, Conrad would have experienced many of the problems of any writer attempting to move from filiation to affiliation. Part of that move entails the discovery of a new source of authority other than the conventional and usually exclusive patriarchal one (national--the land of the father) from which to speak. To put it in slightly different terms Didion chooses Conrad who is himself a subversive element within the filiative structure. In this case the subversive element is an outsider, who may under certain circumstances come to be included as Conrad was, but who more often is decisively excluded.

In this fashion Didion aligns herself with a writer who is in the institutional structure of literature but is not entirely of the structure; someone whose relation to the patrilineal literary system is one of affiliation rather than filiation. Frederic Jameson comments on Conrad's position in this respect. "His place is still unstable, undecidable, and his work unclassifiable, spilling out of high literature into light reading and romance, reclaiming great areas of diversion and distraction by the most demanding practice of style and écriture alike, floating uncertainly somewhere between Proust and Robert Louis Stevenson (206).

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Didion's fiction, especially, creates a similar quandary among academic critics. The exploration of women's experience in Didion's fiction tends to serve as justification for relegating it to the scorned category of popular romance, for instance. On the other hand, critics who value Didion's fiction (males especially) tend to ignore its female content as inconsequential and concentrate their praise on her technical expertise.

Yet, as I have suggested, it is through Didion's imaginative realignment with her paternal predecessors that she discovers the possibility of moving--at least in the imagination--beyond a history of failed filiation to a condition of affiliation. Didion, in fact, comments on the value of affiliation in an otherwise perfunctory interview. "The ideal unit [in society] seems to me to be the extended family, extended either naturally--through the recognition of vast numbers of aunts and cousins and great-uncles--or by force of will, through friendships so close that they seem to the child as constant as family" (105). In other words, Didion's own observations of modern life lead her to a condition of affiliation. Early in her career she perceives that filiative can and does fail, and that some substitute mode of connection with the past is required for continuity. The extended family--an affiliative connection--is the pattern she chooses to replicate in her imaginary connections, literary or otherwise.

In an effort to imagine a condition of affiliation,

Didion writes a novel that has the effect of being a reassessment of her patriarchal heritage, an acknowledgement of any generational indebtedness she deems appropriate, but then directs toward that inherited past the sort of scrutiny advocated by Eliot for one reason and Virginia Woolf for another. In so doing, Didion delineates her differences from the literary tradition she inherits; she also establishes the criteria by which she can be included in that tradition via affiliation with her paternal inheritance.

Another effect of Didion's choice, or perhaps a factor in the decision, is the alliance of Didion with F. Scott Fitzgerald, another American author who 'adopted' Conrad as his paternal mentor. Any number of critics have observed that The Great Gatsby is an American adaptation of Conrad's Heart of Darkness. At least two contemporary critics, Victor Strandberg and John Hollowell, have delineated the relationships between Didion's third novel and this American version of Conrad's work. They emphasize the narrative strategy of Didion's novel as it relates to both of those of her male predecessors. (Again, this is evidence of Didion's contention that she learned the way to tell a story from the male writers of previous generations.) It is the way in which each of the stories are told that make Conrad and Fitzgerald's texts correspond, as the stories themselves are more dissonant than not. That Didion's later version is to be seen as an

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alternative to Fitzgerald's American adaptation of Conrad's work is suggested by the fact that while she, like Fitzgerald, employs a first-person narrator who resembles Conrad's original, unlike Fitzgerald, Didion adapts important facets of Conrad's story as well. In this way Didion's work calls attention to the similarities and the differences between not only her work and that of her male predecessors, but also to the differences between the works of male predecessors themselves.

What adapting Conrad's narrative strategy and story allows Didion to do is to work out the basis of her affiliation with her patrilineal literary heritage. Certain factors come into play through the re-working of Conrad's tale that present Didion with the opportunity for imagining alternative patterns of community, of affiliation; for instance, the dynamics of how such connections might be forged outside of the failed filiative structure of contemporary society. These factors are adapted to Didion's narrative situation--which includes both the story told and the manner of its telling.

The most salient analogies between Didion's A Book of Common Prayer and Conrad's Heart of Darkness center around the relationship of the first-person narrator to the narrative each has set in motion. The parallels continue to obtain in the relationships that each of these narrators, Marlow and Grace Strasser-Mendana, establish with their respective protagonist, Kurtz or Charlotte

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Douglas. Further, Grace and Marlow evidence similar qualities as self-described characters within their narratives and those qualities operate in the personal relationships each undertakes with the novel's protagonist.

Furthermore, the fictional situations which engender the narratives are similar in that both Grace and Marlow construct their narratives only after the death of the narrative's central character. In each circumstance the central character or protagonist is depicted as something of a maverick, a renegade, a marginal and unpredictable element with relation to conventional society, with which the first-person narrators are more closely aligned. One reason for the marginal status of the protagonist is an ability to function almost exclusively in his or her own symbolic universe (to use a Berger and Luckmann term) or version of reality. Indeed, it is the otherness of both Kurtz and Charlotte that provokes the inference that each is an unwitting accomplice in the ambiguous circumstances surrounding his or her own death--Kurtz through his relentless pursuit of ivory and self-aggrandizement and Charlotte through her apparently deliberate disregard of political reality.

But it is the remarkable quality of the protagonists that initially commands the attention of others, including their respective narrators. Rumors of the mysterious behavior of each protagonist precede the narrator's introduction to the prospective protagonist. That

introduction reveals that both Kurtz and Charlotte are striking in their physical appearance, but more notable in their manner of speaking. The protagonists are both envied and feared by the people around them which is a factor in the narrator's interest in them as people and as characters. Both Kurtz and Charlotte present themselves as heroes and heroines of romance--a fact that intrigues their first-person narrators, as much as it puzzles them. Nonetheless, it is the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of the relationship between narrator as character and the protagonist that serves as a paradigm for the relationship that will emerge in the narrative between each narrator and the narrative he or she constructs. Questions of authority, audience perceptions, alternate interpretations all emerge from this narrative situation.

Early in their narratives, Marlow and Grace diagnose or label their respective protagonist in ways that reveal their own character. Kurtz is diagnosed as "lacking restraint," restraint being a quality Marlow values highly. "He was hollow at the core" Marlow says in his final assessment of Kurtz. Marlow finds this hollowness evidence of a lack of "a deliberate belief," a quality without which, Marlow concludes, one is powerless before the forces of nature or man, and from which lack he imagines himself to be exempt (31).

Grace operates similarly describing Charlotte at the onset of her narrative in terms diametrically opposed to

Grace's view of herself. She informs her audience that Charlotte would call herself a 'tourist', but Grace finds 'sojourner' a more suitable term (1). Grace refers to herself as "a prudent traveler" (2), and of course, claims all the privileges to be gained from such a distinction. Grace also prefers to call Charlotte's story of her own life one of "delusion", although Grace acknowledges that Charlotte would call it one of "passion" (2). Grace posits that Charlotte leads an unexamined life, that Charlotte simply revises her grasp of events to coincide with her preferred version of reality. Events which Grace deduces that Charlotte has erased from memory include the deaths of her parents, marital adulteries, abuses, and abandonments. "I used to think that the only event in Charlotte Douglas' life to resist her revisions and erasures was Marin's disappearance" (58).

Grace's sense of her own self-worth is to be found in her differences from Charlotte at this point in her narrative. She prides herself on her more clinical and lucid appraisals of such emotionally laden events as parental deaths. She attributes her more efficient and therefore more reliable attitude to her own early experience as an orphan. "Unlike Charlotte I learned early to keep death in my line of sight, keep it under surveillance, keep it on clear ground and away from any brush where it might coil unnoticed" (120). Grace's experience as a frontier woman, emotionally as well as

geographically (having been raised in Denver early in the century) are revealed by her metaphorical view of death as a maverick snake against which one might defend oneself by alertness or violence.

Another comparison of Conrad's narrator to Didion's is the fact that each narrator critiques the 'narratives' produced by their respective protagonist. Both Charlotte and Kurtz produce written documents during their sojourns in the tropics which Grace and Marlow comment about. Kurtz writes a report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs that Marlow declares provided him with considerable insight into Kurtz's character. The report becomes part of the information that Marlow manages to rid himself of before his visit to Kurtz's Intended. Thus Marlow relieves himself of the obligation to explain the rival versions of reality incorporated in that rather remarkable report. Nonetheless, at the time of its discovery Marlow recalls that he was impressed by Kurtz's literary style even if he was critical of the lack of substance in the report. "This was the unbounded power of eloquence--of words--of burning noble words. There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases..." (44). The latter, the lack of "an exposition of method" constitutes Marlow's severest criticism of Kurtz's report.

Like Kurtz, Charlotte Douglas produces literary documents which Grace critiques in her narrative. The

focus of Grace's criticism, like Marlow's, is that his prose does not conform to certain conventions Grace presumes obtain among educated people. Charlotte's "Letters" from Boca Grande, in Grace's opinion, reflect Charlotte's idle and romantic dreams about what Boca Grande "could become" and totally ignore Boca Grande "as it was" (7). Grace quibbles with Charlotte's rival version of the social and political significance of Boca Grande's position in the world economy as well. In each instance, Grace claims to defend her position from the classical stance, whereas Charlotte's position is described as an example of the romantic viewpoint. Like Marlow, Grace tends to dismiss the literary efforts of her protagonist as misguided and ineffectual, as the production of someone whose basic organization of even empirical evidence is suspect.

It may be their cognizance of the power of alternative interpretations that disturbs the two first-person narrators in both Didion's and Conrad's novels. Indeed the literary efforts of their respective protagonists create an implicit rivalry with each narrator's efforts and within the narrator's own special domain: the production of literary discourse. The basis of both Grace and Marlow's critiques of their protagonist's manuscript is that neither are legitimate: they do not belong to the tradition of literary production; they, therefore, are not products of filiation. In some respects, Marlow and Grace perform as

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critics of Kurtz's and Charlotte's literary discourse, and by pointing to the absences in the prior discourses, create a legitimate space for their own productions. This pattern is one of the possibilities that Bloom presents in his discussion of the patrilineal relations among producers of literary discourse. And it may be that some of the anxiety that Grace and Marlow share as producers of discourse is a reflection of the dichotomy between their functions as critic and creator of such discourse.

For each narrator is self-conscious about his or her authority to assume the role of narrator. Both Marlow and Grace feel compelled to explain their motives for participating in the narrative act. Said comments about this anxiety of authorship in Conrad's work when he observes that "there is an unusual attention paid to the motivation of the stories being told--evidence of a felt need to justify in some way the telling of the story" (90). "I am interested in Charlotte Douglas only insofar as she passed through Boca Grande, only insofar as the meaning of that sojourn continue to elude me," Grace informs her presumed, though unidentified, audience (14). "Give me the molecular structure of the protein which defined Charlotte Douglas," Grace requisitions, and in so doing, recalls Marlow, who in Heart of Darkness, declares that his narrative has the purpose of "trying to account to myself for Kurtz--for the shade of Mr. Kurtz" (44).

In fact, so compelling is this issue that Grace returns

to it a number of times under various guises. She suggests that her venture into narrative may be an attempt to answer the question of whether or not Charlotte was "an outsider to romantic sensibility," (22) or to determine the appropriate terminology for Charlotte's death--murder, or passing. Marlow, too, defends his narrative activity in one of his many digressions from his story: "I have a voice too, and for good or evil, mine is the speech that cannot be silenced" (33).

The self-consciousness of these narrators is also indicated by the interruptions in the flow of the narrative to address the audience directly. Grace addresses an audience even though she has no diegetic or fictional audience as Marlow does. These addresses seek to ascertain the impact of the story--for example, Marlow questions his audience if they "see" Kurtz, or he may taunt them about their privileged positions as Europeans; the addresses are sometimes used to anticipate objections, as when Grace rather defensively cites her sources of information about Charlotte's life; or they have the function of acknowledging shared information, as when Grace uses the second person pronoun in "you no doubt heard the tape" (74). The effect of these interruptions is to remind the listeners/readers that a story, a cultural artifact, is being constructed, actively and in the presence of witnesses. Also, as Said points out in his article, "Conrad's Presentation of Narrative," "the reflective

narrator is always a narrator preventing the wrong sort of interpretation. His narrative invariably assumes the currency of a rival version" (95).

An important way in which both Marlow's and Grace's narratives serve as rival versions of interpretations for events recounted is their shared propensity to demythologize public and private history. Marlow spends considerable time in his narrative revising the romance that has come to constitute a primary cultural discourse in the West--history. His opening account of European imperialism provides a significant contrast to the conventional version of that historical moment offered by the unnamed narrator. That unidentified personage sees the early conquerors as "the great knights-errant of the sea...bearers of a spark from the sacred fire" (20). Marlow provides a corrective version of the account which deflates the mythological posture of those historical acts. "It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a grand scale, and men going at it blind...", Marlow insists (4).*

Grace too punctures the delusions of grandeur sometimes accorded to personal history. She especially attacks the version of an aristocratic heritage that her son, Gerardo, and her in-laws perpetuate. "Gerardo is the grandson of two American wildcatters who got rich, my father in

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*I am indebted to William Johnsen for his dsicussion of this novel; many of the ideas expressed here derive from that discussion.

Colorado minerals and Edgar's father in Boca Grande politics, and of the Irish nursemaid and the metiza from the interior they respectively married. Still he persists in tracing his line to the court of Castille" (14).

Both Grace and Marlow train their discerning eye on their environments as well--in each case, an unknown territory...the tropics. They balance their precise empirical descriptions against the more generalized and widely-held romantic impressions, which even they are not entirely impervious to. "Everything here changes and nothing appears to. There is no perceptible wheeling of the stars in their courses, no seasonal wane in the length of days or the temperature of air or earth or water, only the amniotic stillness in which transformations are constant. As elsewhere, certain phases in these transformations are called by certain names ("Oldsmobile", say, and "rust"), but the emotional field of such names tends to weaken as one leaves the temperate zones. At the equator the names are noticeably arbitrary. A banana palm is no more or less 'alive' than its rot" (157). For Grace, the "equatorial view" does not permit unequivocal assertions. Like Marlow, she finds herself unable to arrive at clear and certain judgments. This holds true even when, or especially when, she juxtaposes empirical evidence against romantic perception.

Marlow is confronted with a similar problem when he encounters the natives as he travels up the Congo River.

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Rival interpretations of his visual experience vie for his agreement. "We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled around a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stomping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the drop of heavy and motionless foliage....The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us--who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings" (31).

The preponderance of rival versions is but one element in the urgency and immediacy Grace and Marlow exhibit with regards to the production of their separate narratives. The impact of the actual encounter with their respective protagonists has prompted both narrators to engage in the telling of tales. Of the two, Marlow has an established record as a spinner of yarns, a notable attribute of his profession as a man of the sea. Of course, as a former anthropologist, Grace would be no stranger to the process of constructing narrative discourses either. Regardless of differences in their degree of experience as tale tellers, both narrators acknowledge an overwhelming need to tell this particular story.

The need in each case is born out of two circumstances: one is that the meaning of the event recounted continues to

elude the narrator of both Conrad's and Didion's novels. Previous quotes allude to this circumstance and indicate that the ensuing perplexity provides a strong motivation for the narrative. The other is that the experience that prompts the narration has radically altered each narrator's life. Grace reports that Charlotte's stories have revised her own memory of even the most empirical objects: "I am now incapable of thinking about the glass at Chartres without seeing through every window the light of Tivoli Gardens" (109). (The Tivoli Gardens and the rose windows at Chartres figure prominently in Charlotte's "demented" version of her relationship to her fugitive daughter.)

Marlow, too, remarks on the scope of the effect meeting Kurtz has had on his life, calling it "the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me--and into my thoughts" (5).

Indeed both Grace and Marlow produce images of light repeatedly throughout their narratives. The light images reflect the multi-dimensional aspects of knowledge and understanding possible, or the lack of such on certain occasions. Often the image of light has a consoling, if inexplicable, effect in the narrative and on the distressed psyche of the narrator. Marlow reports that he retreated to the solace of a lighted mess-room after hearing the announcement of Kurtz's death. "There was a lamp in there--light, don't you know--and outside it was so beastly, beastly dark" (62). Images of light are equated with

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solace for Grace too in Boca Grande. "I continue to live here because I like the light," Grace informs her audience of readers. "And because my days are too numbered to spend them in New York or Paris or Denver imagining the light in Boca Grande, how flat it is, how harsh and still. How dead white at noon" (13).

But just as often the light images suggest the inexplicable or the artificial light of illusion. "Who can say why I crave the light in Boca Grande, who can say why my body grows cancer" (125), Grace intones as she tries to find an adequate explanation for the enigmatic behavior of her protagonist, Charlotte Douglas. As additional details of Charlotte's life are recalled by her narrator, each detail alters the possible interpretation of any one of her acts. "In this light..." is a phrase repeated ad infinitum in A Book of Common Prayer. So too does Kurtz's narrator evoke the image of light in his observations of the Intended's faith--"that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness" (68). It is also by the light of a candle that Kurtz evidently cannot see, but Marlow does, that Marlow observes and thus recreates for his audience, Kurtz's "supreme moment of complete knowledge" when Kurtz utters his resounding and enigmatic pronouncement "The horror! The horror!" (62).

The preference for images of light in narratives immersed in the incomprehensible and enigmatic functions as well to delineate the character of each narrator. Again,

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the similarities in personalities between Conrad's storyteller and Didion's surface. For Marlow, as for Grace, the observance of form and appearances is not only essential; it can become redemptive. Such observances serve to create an effect like the effect created by a light in the darkness: order in the midst of chaos. Marlow admires the Accountant's imposition of order on the squalid out-station, even though he is initially aghast at the fanaticism and myopia required of the Accountant to maintain that order. Especially appalling to Marlow is the Accountant's annoyance at the feverish groans of an ill man placed in his orderly office. Only later does Marlow come to understand what a nuisance simple human frailty (especially another's) can be when all of one's energies are required to keep one's version of reality intact.

In Boca Grande, Grace's home provides an oasis of order and serenity in the center of a pointless but disruptive revolution. Flowers, ice cubes, clean uniforms, all become signifiers of reason and sanity for troubled spirits such as Charlotte's second husband, Leonard Douglas who visits Grace after he fails to accomplish his mission to persuade Charlotte to leave the troubled country where she is only a '<u>tourista</u>'.

Emerging victorious over the messiness and complications of even ordinary life as lived at the equator represents a sort of moral victory for Grace Strasser-Mendana, as it did for her literary predecessor, Charlie

Marlow. Each narrator had received instructions from a self-appointed expert as to how to conduct oneself in the tropics and what activities to avoid or to engage in so as not to acquiesce to the general lassitude of the place and the demoralization that inevitably accompanied it. Despite such well-intentioned advice, both find themselves subject to such dire consequences nonetheless and even make note of such slippages in the course of their narrations. Marlow reports that he was becoming "savage", and thus "scientifically interesting", when he is pushed to the point of exasperation at the folly of the various white men he encounters (17-19). But probably most incredulous to Marlow is the complete lack of "efficiency", the idea that is the European man's salvation (4)--or so Marlow announces at the beginning of his narrative.

Grace admits to being bemused by, even while trying to thwart, one or the other of her brothers-in-law's political machinations. She presumes her lack of emotional involvement assures her of a moral superiority to people, like her son, who "plays only for the action" (229). In fact, later in her narration she realizes, somewhat abashedly, that she introduced Charlotte to her son, Gerardo, mostly "to discomfit Victor", a brother-in-law who had displayed a prior sexual interest in the norteamericana (203). As it is probable that Charlotte's association with Gerardo was a contributing factor in Charlotte's being shot in the back in front of the Estadio Nacional, Grace's tone

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at this disclosure becomes one of remorse and increasing incredulity at her own folly.

But initially Grace and Marlow evidence an ethical arrogance that gradually erodes as the narrative progresses. Both narrators consider themselves immune to the delusion and senseless violence of those around them. That perception persists whether the delusion disparaged entails Charlotte's expectation that her daughter, a fugitive from the FBI, will somehow appear at the Boca Grande airport, as the naive and innocent co-ed Charlotte remembers; or whether it involves the pilgrims' aimless and unprovoked firing of guns into the empty bush that incites Marlow's disgust at his fellow humans. Indeed this moral superiority may well serve as a motivating factor in the inception of the narrative, as it becomes apparent in both tales that it is the narrator who requires the moral education deemed appropriate to the fictional situation.

But perhaps the most compelling reason that Marlow and Grace become narrators of their respective stories is that both have been entrusted with the memory of their protagonist. "I was to have care of his memory...But, there, don't you see, I can't choose. He won't be forgotten' (44). Marlow is designated to dispose of Kurtz' pamphlets, to report back to his family and employers, and finally, to visit Kurtz's Intended. Likewise, Grace is sent, or claims, Charlotte's personal belongings, travel documents, letters and a piece of jewelry. It also falls

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to her lot to contact Charlotte's estranged daughter, Marin, after Charlotte's untimely death. When Grace cannot explain what Charlotte had "'done' to get killed in Boca Grande" as Marin expresses it, Grace, as narrator, ponders the reasons she continues to be intrigued by a situation she cannot decipher the significance of. "Maybe there is no motive role in this narrative. Maybe it is just something that happened. Then why is it in my mind when nothing else is" (217).

This is not a responsibility that either Grace or Marlow sought out--like greatness, it was thrust upon them. In fact, for both Grace and Marlow, the contact with Charlotte or Kurtz began as a matter of coincidence: a replacement pilot was needed for the steamer that was sent to bring Kurtz down river and Marlow happened to be available and in need of work. Charlotte happens to arrive in Boca Grande, a Central American country where Grace lives and is "in putative control of fifty-nine-point-eight percent of the arable land and about the same percentage of the decision-making process..." (12). As the only other norteamericana in the country, Grace extends a cautious hospitality to Charlotte when she becomes ill at Christmas time.

Nonetheless, gestures which were initiated out of simple courtesy or even expediency evolve into a moral responsibility for the memory of the protagonist. Of course, each narrator is a person, as we have seen, who

takes his or her moral responsibility seriously. Yet this grave sense of responsibility is not relieved when either Grace or Marlow seek to fulfill its requirements, which they do by their respective attempts to pass on information or to convey a message to the loved ones of the deceased protagonist. Each attempt is foiled. As with Kurtz' Intended, Charlotte's daughter perversely misunderstands or willfully misconstrues the admittedly ambiguous message proffered by the keeper of the loved one's memory.

In Grace's situation, as in Marlow's, the message intended is not the one received. Nonetheless, the ceremonial visit to the survivor becomes for each narrator a momentous occasion. The visit to pay last respects and thus to discharge any remaining obligations to the deceased's memory becomes the focal point in the narratives. It is a point around which each narrator begins to justify a relationship to the protagonist. As the encounter is retold, both Marlow and Grace evidence signs of finding themselves more culpable than they had originally believed themselves to be. This conversion happens primarily because, in the process of telling their respective stories, each narrator finds him or her self considerably more implicated in the very situations for which they prided themselves on their objectivity and detachment.

Marlow discovers, or at least begins to intuit, that his reasons for making the visit to the Intended may have

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involved more than a desire to observe the social forms he so cherished. His uncertainty in retrospect leads Marlow to indicate more than he intends that his motives for visiting the Intended may have been contaminated by his own romantic expectations. His description of that decision suggests that Marlow was indeed seduced by his idealization of the image of the Intended as deduced from Kurtz' portrait of her that has been in Marlow's possession for some time. He imagines her as pure, faithful, altruistic, trusting, sensitive--all the stereotypical virtues of womanhood as defined by the patriarchal culture--and proceeds to act upon those manufactured impressions. So strong is his visualization of the woman that when he reports his actual sight of her, he continues to interpret her physical features and psychological qualities accordingly.

"All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (44), Marlow remarks mid-way through his narrative, quite some time before he actually describes his encounter with Kurtz. Those words come to resonate in his description of his encounter with the Intended, as does Marlow's previous observation that at one point he had found himself "limped along with Kurtz" as a "partisan" of unsound methods (55). So troubled is Marlow, the narrator, by his recall of this encounter that he even admits that he is still unsure of his motives at the time of the narration. In this instance, as in so many in the novel, rival versions

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compete for credibility; but this is one instance in which Marlow almost deliberately defers exploring the possibility of self-deception. "Perhaps it was an impulse of unconscious loyalty, or the fulfillment of one of those ironic necessities that lurk in the facts of human existence. I don't know. I can't tell. I went" (65).

The fact that Marlow categorically refuses to attribute any significance to his apparently incidental mention of the girl earlier at one of the prolonged pauses in the course of narration also makes the moment suspect. The unguarded musing that Marlow catches himself at reveals that the girl is inextricably linked to his memory of Kurtz. "...The memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. Voices, voices--even the girl herself--now-" (42). This 'lapse' in a carefully contrived narrative presentation, which is Marlow's practice, is in direct contrast to the more detailed, more premeditated account regarding the Intended which Marlow produces at the end of his tale.

One explanation is that Marlow only begins to apprehend that some quality of his encounter with Kurtz's Intended bears a striking resemblance to the encounters of the colonials with the natives. His indulgence in a 'lie' "for the salvation of another soul" marks Marlow's act as one worthy of the "emissary of light" he so cynically scorns at

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The pre-ordained plot embodied in the 'narrative' the Intended constructs of Kurtz has the function of finalizing Kurtz's story, and Marlow's in the process. Her account is one for which Marlow could not articulate the rival version that haunts him at the time, but which he is able to give voice to only later aboard the ship on the Thames. But at the original meeting with her, Marlow falls into the Intended's conventional plot and produces the expected ending to a romance--a statement attesting to the primacy of romantic love. In so doing, Marlow defers an accounting of the rival version of Kurtz's life, a version that would inevitably be produced by the alternate ending--"The horror! The horror!" As Kermode observes in The Sense of an Ending, in human perception it is the end that organizes and shapes the sequence of events that precedes it. It is the end that actually identifies the beginning and lends significance to the middle (33). Marlow's subsequent narrative aboard the ship has the function of creating a new ending and therefore a new interpretation of the events he recounts. And it is in his reconstruction of the narrative that his audience and Conrad's readers may begin to envision patterns of meaning not yet fully apparent to the narrating Marlow.

One new possibility is that Marlow's act of narration serves as an act of expiation for the lie that sets uneasy on his conscience--a lie which involves a resistance to

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articulating an alternate interpretation of events rather than the established pattern of producing history as romance. By his 'lie' Marlow misrepresents his understanding of events. He fails to resist the pattern in part because he (and perhaps Conrad) is still committed to a version of reality that does not permit the new version to come into circulation; namely his patriarchal view of all human experience in which "they--the women--are out of it--should be out of it" (42).

A post-modernist feminist reading would understand the ironic contradiction implicit in Marlow's statement--not only that indeed women are 'out of it' as they are excluded from sources of power and discourse, but also that their exclusion forms the very basis of that patriarchal/imperial power structure. In that light, what is 'too dark' is Marlow's 'unconscious loyalty' not to an individual but to a system, a system which is based on the natural rights of filiation.

In A Book of Common Prayer, Grace Strasser-Mendana comes to a corresponding reckoning of her culpability in the power structures responsible for Charlotte's death. She recalls in her reconstruction of the events that shaped Charlotte's last weeks in Boca Grande that she, Grace, also attended the political 'evenings' hosted by Charlotte for what passed as the intellectual elite in that country. Grace also reveals that only now in the process of producing her narrative about Charlotte's sojourn does she

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begin to apprehend the basis for Charlotte's rival version of experience. "We were voices..." Grace recalls and for Charlotte, one voice was indistinguishable from another. The phrasing of Grace's insight of course alludes to Marlow's narrative and Marlow's perception of his experience as a collage of voices.

Grace also reveals that she was informed by Charlotte's second husband (a lawyer who arranges arms sales for third-world countries) that her own husband, Edgar, had financed a local revolution, and that Leonard Douglas had provided the 'hardware' for it. In exchange, Edgar had given Leonard the square emerald which Charlotte wears as a wedding ring, an object much commented about in the narrative. "I had no idea. I prided myself on listening and seeing and I had never even heard or seen that Edgar played the same games Gerardo played" (247). Grace further discloses that Charlotte mailed this ring to her just before Charlotte took her last walk to the Capilla del Mar on the evening of her death. That gesture palpably suggests that Charlotte knew far more than Grace had credited her with knowing. That possibility seriously undermines all of Grace's carefully constructed credibility as a narrator. "All I know now," she declares at the end of her narrative, and Didion's novel, "is that when I think of Charlotte Douglas walking in the hot night wind toward the lights at the Capilla del Mar I am less and less certain that this story has been one of delusion. Unless

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In summary Grace uses the colonial pronoun 'we' to signal her inclusion in the corrupted political structure of Boca Grande. "I see now that I have no business in this place but I have been here too long to change," Grace explains. In claiming her share of the responsibility for Charlotte's death, Grace concurs with Marlow's observations about life. "Droll thing life is--that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself--that comes too late--a crop of unextinguishable regrets" (62).

The numerous correspondences with Conrad's work display an affinity with the father of modernism that relates Didion to a wide range of male writers who have also claimed the same narrative patrimony. As one critic observes of Didion's use of the elegiac romance, it is "a fictional autobiography which must disguise itself as the biography of a person now dead" (Merivale 46). Merivale also notes that the elegiac romance is a form chosen by other American male writers, namely, Melville, Fitzgerald, Bellow, Kesy and Robert Penn Warren. Of that group, the book Didion's novel is most readily associated with is Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby. This association is based primarily on 'family' resemblances shared by Fitzgerald's and Didion's characters, that of being not atypical Americans.

Although several critics of Didion's work make note of these familial connections between the fictional creations of The Great Gatsby and A Book of Common Prayer, only Victor Strandberg and John Hollowell discuss these similarities at any length. While Hollowell emphasizes the narrative strategies in Didion's novel that resist final interpretation or totalization of events depicted, he does not enumerate a number of qualities shared by Didion's and Fitzgerald's novel, qualities which as I have pointed out are shared by at least one of Conrad's novels as well. Specifically, Hollowell mentions the relation of the narrator to the subject or central character of the novel as the primary factor that enables the two novels to cohere as a recognizable family of fiction. Elements Hollowell mentions include 1) Nick Carraway's (and Grace's) distancing from the central character, (Gatsby or Charlotte); 2) the increasing ambivalence the narrators exhibit toward their major subject as the novel unfolds; 3) the rumors and speculations about the central character prior to the narrator's meeting that subject; and 4) the fact that the narratives are reconstructed after the death of the protagonists (168).

Strandberg generally concurs with Hollowell's assessment of the analogous features in the two novels, but he places a higher priority on the cultural heritage the two sets of fictional characters share. In Strandberg's view, the cultural connection is central for both narrators

and subjects. Gatsby and Charlotte are examples of arrested emotional development, according to Strandberg, as they are both victims of a delusion rooted in the American ethos. That delusion manifest itself as a dedication to self-improvement, a belief in the essentially upward spiral of history, and an unexamined expectation that the world is peopled with others more or less like themselves. Strandberg maintains, although I do not, that Didion is allied with Fitzgerald in a defense of traditional American middle-class values. "Both Nick Carraway and Grace, by rediscovering the values of their respective Midwestern and norteamericana upbringing earn narrow escapes from the corruption of a dangerously subversive alien society, Nick fleeing back West...Grace filling her center by taking care of Charlotte" (157).

My sense is that Didion, some fifty years later, is not able to defend the American ethos quite to the extent that Strandberg implies. Nor is she as able to construct a narrator, whose vision, like Nick Carraway's, in retrospect arrives at the sort of certitude Nick expresses in both the opening and closing passages of Fitzgerald's novel. Grace Strasser-Mendana's "I will be her witness" and "I have not been the witness I wanted to be"--Didion's framing sentences for her novel--reflect far greater epistemological uncertainty with regard to all human behavior, including that of constructing narrative.

Didion's novel itself provides a paradigm for

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elucidating these distinctions. As Grace composes her narrative and attempts to reconstruct the sequence of events that comprise Charlotte's 'story', she often refers to the legal documents she has been given or claimed after Charlotte's death, the only tangible evidence of Charlotte's passing through Boca Grande. Her passport, in particular, contains a description of Charlotte that resonates throughout Grace's narrative: "Nationality NORTEAMERICANA. Type of Visa TURISTA. Occupation MADRE" (15). That document of identification provides Grace with certain facts of Charlotte's 'sojourn,' the meaning of which remains elusive. Nonetheless, these documents--the passport, a visa, a list of personal belongings, a vaccination record, letters,--constitute the 'text' of Charlotte Douglas that Grace attempts to decipher. (Hollowell comments on the textuality of Grace's narrative as well in his article, "Against Interpretation: Narrative Strategy in A Book of Common Prayer.") The specific terms from the document create three central images around which meaning begins to coalesce for Grace.

The question of national identity is one around which much of the dramatic tension of the novel turns. As with her American predecessor, Joan Didion's narrator and central character are norteamericanas, the prefix being a necessary distinction given the fictional locale of a Central American country. The geographical remove affords Didion and her characters a peripheral position from which

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to assess the particular frontier mentality that characterizes many of Didion's heroines. Having resided outside the continental U.S. for some forty years, Grace Strasser-Mendana has earned a privileged perspective of fellow Americans such as Charlotte Douglas.

As she tries to reconstruct Charlotte's history prior to her arrival in Boca Grande two years previously, Grace observes that Charlotte's national identity is one of the "three or four things I know about Charlotte" (55). Katherine Henderson, in her study of Didion's works, also emphasizes the quintessential quality of this aspect of Charlotte's life. "Her nationality is, in fact, one of the few stable elements in her identity. Her character is western American not only in its delusions, but also in its odd mixture of physical daring and intellectual weakness" (79).

Charlotte's national character not only reveals her naive perceptions of the world, it also serves to link her to the assorted men who people her life like extras on a movie set. As a norteamericana, Charlotte is described as "immaculate of history, innocent of politics" (56). This description remains accurate despite the fact that Charlotte first marries an untenured instructor at Berkeley and then a left-wing lawyer who sells 'hardware' to <u>guerrilleros</u> in third-world countries. "You smell American," are Gerardo's first words to Charlotte (202). They also operate as his opening line in his brief and

brash seduction of Charlotte, conducted at first sight and in full view of his own mother. Antonio, Grace's brother-in-law who instigates the revolution in which Charlotte is killed, refers to Charlotte by a part of her female anatomy, assigning it a national identity in a repeated insult he hurls at her whenever he has the opportunity--"Norteamericana cunt" (222).

But the primary link of nationality in the novel exists between Grace and Charlotte. An appraisal of the qualities that characterize Charlotte's national heritage leads Grace to the recognition of a strong bond with this protagonist she has sought to remain distant from.

"A not atypical norteamericana.

Of her time and place.

It occurs to me tonight that give or take twenty years and a thousand miles, Charlotte Douglas's time and place and my time and place were not too different" (57).

That affiliative connection between the women is demonstrated by the fact that Grace purchases a t-shirt "which had the appearance of" an American flag on it to drape over Charlotte's coffin, which Grace accompanies to the plane. As narrator, Grace attributes an ironic significance to the fact that Charlotte's body was found thrown on the American Embassy lawn after she was shot in the back. That would seem to implicate Antonio in Charlotte's murder, but Grace can't be sure--empirically sure, that is.

Another designation on the passport "turista," refers to Charlotte's homeless status as an American in exile, but even more, TURISTA aptly describes Grace's view of the manner in which Charlotte proceeds through the world. Grace formulates this impression of Charlotte when she attempts to warn Charlotte that one of the recurring 'revolutions' frequently staged in Boca Grande is about to take place. Charlotte seems not to see or hear any of the signs Grace find obvious, such as interruptions in mail delivery, rerouted airplane and telephone service, or carbine holes in the railing of the local hotel, etc. "Charlotte would remain a tourist, a traveler with good will and good credentials and no memory..." (201).

As a TURISTA, Charlotte comprehends her surroundings only superficially. While she makes extensive lists of local flora and fauna, catalogs the insects, bacteria, and parasites indigenous to the area, and makes plans for botanical gardens, film festivals, and colorful boutiques, she persists in believing that her lack of interest in the political maneuverings of the Strasser-Mendana males will suffice to exempt her from the ramifications of their power struggles. She apparently feels that if she can but duplicate her own good sense and efficiency and old-fashioned know-how, those Western values will transform Boca Grande into a miniature America. She views the entire country as a "matchbox model" village and shows a marked preference for summary profiles of any situation of the

type Grace provides at the onset of the narrative.

While Charlotte relies on letters of introduction from San Francisco banks, American Express credit cards, and an International Certificate of Vaccination as the 'good credentials' that ensure her a safe passage in her travels, Grace relies on credentials of her own as an educated, professional woman of some means. In fact, as narrator, Grace makes a point of establishing her professional credibility early in the narrative only "to legitimize my voice" (14). And the credentials are impressive, as is the skepticism that inevitably accompanies her exposition of them. "I studied under Kroeber at California and worked with Levi-Strauss at Sao Paulo, classified several societies, cataloged their rites and attitudes on occasions of birth, copulation, initiation, and deathn did extensive and well-regarded studies on the rearing of female children in the Mato Grosso and along certain tributaries of the Rio Xingu and I still did not know why any one of these female children did or did not do anything at all" (2). Grace, too, has traveled essentially as a TURISTA, observing and cataloging human behavior in various parts of the globe but without much insight as to the reasons people behave as they do. Now, in her sixties and dying of pancreatic cancer, Grace relies on a more reliable credential, she informs us--one she acquired via her role as the TURISTA who played anthropologist and later as a relative of the Strasser-Mendanas. Accounting for the sources of her

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information on which she bases her narrative of Charlotte's life, Grace declares: "...Most of what I know, the most reliable part of what I know, derives from my training...in being de afuera..." (53).

This credential too becomes a link that connects Charlotte to Grace as the narrative progresses. As norteamericanas, they are outsiders. As American women they acquire some of the properties of a taboo among the local families. Charlotte's first marriage provides another connection between the two women in this respect. Her former husband, Warren Bogart, with whom she travels for a time, is described by Grace, who meets him only once, as "an outsider who lived by his ability to manipulate the inside" (165). Grace can identify with Warren's technique as it aptly describes her modus operandi within the Strasser-Mendana family. As Warren is dying of cancer too when Grace meets him, Grace speculates that such a coincidence "perhaps made us even more de afuera than usual" (165).

Of course, as a narrator, Grace is an 'outsider' as well. In that role she is the intelligent and discerning observer whose activity becomes menaced by the fact of her inclusion in the activities observed. That is a problem discussed by the non-fictional Levi-Strauss with regard to anthropological observations that becomes Grace's yet again as she ventures into the production of literary discourse late in life. As I have mentioned earlier, Grace resigned

from her studies as an anthropologist because she "lost faith in her own method" (4); she will come to that position again at the end of her narrative about her relation to Charlotte, another de afuera like herself.

The third and final term of identification on Charlotte's passport is Occupation MADRE (15). In Grace's composition of the 'text' of Charlotte, it is not the loss of her patria as Charlotte moves ever southward, nor the implicit homelessness associated with her status as TURISTA in an alien land, but the loss of her filiative role as MADRE that propels Charlotte into the dream that becomes her life. It is the loss of her child, Marin, that initiates the subliminal obsession with mothering activities that Charlotte undertakes after the FBI informs her that her 18-year-old daughter has hijacked a P.S.A. L-1011 to Utah. As a revolutionary terrorist, Marin announces her allegiance to her peers and their cause of "liberation" while disavowing any affiliation with her natural parents, Charlotte and Warren Bogart, whom she labels as "class enemies" (76). This maternal loss is quickly compounded by another--the death of a hydrocephalic infant daughter, her namesake, in Merida after Charlotte has begun her course south. The significance of these facts in Charlotte's life causes Grace to remark on this aspect of Charlotte's plight early in her narrative. "She lost one child to 'history' and another to 'complications'" (1).

This failure of filiation proves to be the most identifiable connection between Grace and Charlotte and is the first promise of affiliation to be presented in Grace's narrative. "One thing at least I share with Charlotte: I lost my child" (13). Although Grace's son, Gerardo, is very much alive and active in Boca Grande politics, when he is not using Europe as his playground, Grace has surrendered any emotional claim on him; she has relinquished him to the paternal world of Boca Grande politics from which Grace maintains a detached, bemused distance. Thus the loss of a child is a source of empathy and compassion for Charlotte in a woman such as Grace who has little of either quality, and whose entire sense of distinction rests in being different from the sort of aimless and dreamy woman Charlotte appears to be.

So affected is Grace by Charlotte's inarticulate grief that some of the most haunting and liturgical language in her narrative accumulates around this pivotal event in Charlotte's life. "Charlotte adored her, [Marin] brushed her pale hair and licked the tears from her cheeks, held her hand crossing streets and wanted never to let go, believed that when she walked through the valley of the shadow she would be sustained by the taste of Marin's salt tears, her body and blood. The night Charlotte was interrogated in the Estadio Nacional she cried not for God but for Marin" (66).

As Grace recreates this crucial time in Charlotte's

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history, she fashions descriptions of Charlotte's actions so as to accentuate the child-like quality of Charlotte's behavior. After Marin's disappearance, Charlotte is so benumbed with grief that she regresses to Marin-like behaviors--she lies on Marin's bed in Marin's childhood room, clutches Marin's teddy bear and tries to recall the trips she and Marin took to Europe or the trips she wished she and Merin had taken to Tivoli Gardens, a point about which neither Grace nor we are ever completely certain. Grace's memory of Charlotte's 'stories' when she arrives in Boca Grande is that Charlotte's verbalizations resemble a child's who expects her listeners to know and care about the details elided from the story told and that Charlotte uses words as a seven-year old might, not at all certain of their meaning. Even when Grace leaves Boca Grande, unable to persuade Charlotte that danger is imminent, Charlotte sees Grace off at the airport and performs the rituals of a child well-taught. She pins a gardenia on Grace's dress and dabs perfume on her wrists "like a child helping her mother dress for a parts" Grace recalls two years later (264).

While Grace appears disapproving or unsympathetic toward Charlotte's immature mannerisms in her early account, she is demonstrably moved by the appeal of Charlotte's child-like innocence and idealism later in their acquaintance. It is scenes like this that Marin's actions become more explicable as the idealistic but doomed

commitments of the very young or the incredible naivete of the not so young. One instance, in particular, evokes a declaration of love for Charlotte when recalled by Grace at the end of her narrative. From that point onward in their relationship, Grace is actively protective toward Charlotte, reserving a seat on the evacuation plane for her, and when she cannot persuade Charlotte to leave, Grace implores even people she intensely dislikes, like Antonio, to intervene and persuade Charlotte to leave Boca Grande. The incident that radically alters Grace's perception of Charlotte occurs when Charlotte is forced to watch Antonio and his peasant girlfriend shoot up cases of cholera vaccine with M-16s. These cases of vaccine were the very ones that Antonio ordered confiscated from Charlotte who had volunteered to give inoculations during a local cholera epidemic. "Cholera. It ran on the street when they shot up the crates" (243) Charlotte reports to Grace after a tearful session at dinner at Grace's house. "I think I loved Charlotte in that moment as a parent loves a child who has...come up in any way against the hardness of the world. I think I was also angry at her, again like a parent, furious that she hadn't known better..." (243).

But perhaps the image that is most vivid in Grace's recreation of the maternal grief Charlotte suffers, however inarticulately, is the description of Charlotte, alone, caring for her dying daughter in Merida. After a two-week vigil, the baby, dehydrated and convulsive, dies in

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Charlotte's arms in a parking lot of a Coca-Cola plant. The local undertaker dresses the infant in a lavender nylon shawl and puts red shoes on her feet--an image that remains with Charlotte for months to come and one she refers to often. But when Charlotte tries to visit the baby's grave just before leaving for the airport, she cannot locate it among the numerous small unmarked graves at the cemetery. She deposits the bougainvillaea she has stolen from the hotel on one of them.

After the vaccine incident Grace can no longer claim that her interest in Charlotte is merely professional. For in her narrative as in her life, Grace has hidden behind several disguises in her relationship to Charlotte. One is her professional role as an anthropologist who studies the rearing practices of female children in various cultures; another is her own maternal role as the matriarch of the Strasser-Mendana family. An important distinction between Charlotte's designation as MADRE and Grace's as matriarch (not a term that Grace actually uses but one that is called to mind by her actions) is that a matriarch is a woman with power--legitimate power while a MADRE has none. In Grace's case, that is a power she accrued from the local patriarchal structure upon the deaths of her husband and father-in-law. It is within the socially sanctioned role as matriarch that Grace initiates her contact with Charlotte, visiting Charlotte when she becomes ill at Christmastime, and somewhat at the promptings of her

brother-in-law than in power, Victor. But as the friendship between Grace and Charlotte develops, the maternal instinct that is camouflaged by the matriarchal posture emerges. Charlotte gives evidence of understanding Grace's unstated attachment to her by the trust implicit in her act of sending Grace Marin's address and the emerald ring that connects all their lives just before her own walk to death. (A number of critics have commented about the significance of the emerald ring as a token of the bonds, fatal or friendly, that connect the major characters in the novel.)

Didion's use of these three aspects of identity to characterize both the narrator and protagonist in A Book of Common Prayer works well to elucidate the paths to affiliation for these two women. A communal spirit can be fostered among those of common origins, status and occupations, official and unofficial. What is neglected, ignored, or overlooked, however, is the obvious factor of gender identity. As gender is a designation that would conventionally appear on a passport, gender presents itself as an option novelistically; so its exclusion may be seen as deliberate. If that choice is deliberate, there may be a number of reasons for it, some of which seem more reasonable than others. An obvious one is that Didion does not wish to focus on the gender of her characters; she may feel that in so doing she risks the danger of becoming entrapped in the differences she creates to distinguish

herself from her predecessors. Another possibility is that to emphasize the gender of her narrator and protagonist is to once again resort to filiative associations rather than the affiliative possibilities it is my contention Didion sets out to explore in this third novel. For it is worth noting that both in her private conversations, and in her fictional discourse, Didion is notable for her isolation of women from each other; she personally claims not to know what to say to women, and often assigns that attribute to her female characters, such as Lily McClellan and Maria Wyeth. The decision not to accentuate gender as a connection factor in A Book of Common Prayer has the effect of calling attention to the social and cultural factors that make possible affiliation between women, as well as those that serve to render that affiliation unlikely--i.e. the political sphere of human activity. The decision not to focus on gender identity also permits Didion to explore the many differences between her two female characters which may in the long view be more detrimental to affiliation than their shared difference from men.

Nonetheless, as in the works of her male predecessors, especially in Heart of Darkness where the issue of gender is also suppressed, it is everywhere present as a salient feature in Didion's novel. Indeed, a significant point of difference from her paternal forefathers is Didion's choice of two female characters with which to rework this generational story of affiliation. Almost any reading of

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Didion's third novel refers to this obvious point. "Until now, the central relationship [in these novels] has almost always been a male-bonding between narrator and subject; Didion seems to be the first to make that central relationship a female bonding" (Merivale 45). Strandberg also acknowledges Didion's achievement "as a female counterpart of The Great Gatsby" (148). He goes on to discuss the role of gender in the novel, particularly in relation to Charlotte's sexuality. Strandberg finds Didion's portrayal of Charlotte remarkable as a portrayal of modern sexuality. His discussion is accompanied by a fairly lengthy analysis of the mother/child religious imagery in the novel. He seems unaware that his emphasis on sex and religion repeats the patriarchal views conventionally employed by men who examine women's fiction. Still, Strandberg remarks that it is "Didion's extended treatment of female identity that comprises the book's most original, profound, and brilliant achievement" (148).

Part of Didion's achievement consists of a depiction of both the world women are excluded from and the world they create within and around that excluded space. In fact, a considerable portion of Didion's novel is devoted to showing how impossible in the late 1970s is Marlow's claim that the women are completely out of it. In Didion's work, the women are very much in it.

Still, there are some readings of A Book of Common Prayer that contend that Didion simply repeats Conrad's or

at least Marlow's disclaimer. Judith Kegan Gardiner's article, "Evil, Apocalypse, and Feminist Fiction," includes Didion's third novel among four contemporary women's novels that "display comparable urgency about connecting personal and political values in contemporary society" (74). That claim seems justified, but then Gardiner goes on to say, "In the novels, the most satisfying and most dangerous emotional bonds are between women and men and women inhabit entirely different public and private spaces" (78). While that description may fit a feminist perspective of novels or even of reality, it seems off target with respect to Didion's third novel, although it could well apply to her two previous works of fiction.

My contention is that the gender issue has entirely infiltrated both public and private space in Didion's novel, and not necessarily to the benefit of the females involved. For instance, both Grace and Charlotte lose their only child (at the time), a male and a female respectively, to the realm of politics/history. These are areas of social activity that Gardiner labels "inviolably male preserves in the novel" (78). Also in Boca Grande, public life or political experience is integrated with private life; politics are quite literally a family affair, the notorious and frequent revolutions being conducted entirely by "people we know" as Grace admonishes early in her narrative. Nor are the politics "ethically...neutral" as Gardiner maintains, as evidenced by Grace's sense of

incredulity and then remorse when she finally realizes her own culpability in the 'political' act of Charlotte's death. Indeed, it is only in this instance that Grace in the process of her narration begins to understand the implicit privilege accorded her designation as de afuera. To be out of it, to be truly an outsider, comes to be seen as one of the many comforting illusions of the novel.

As a matter of fact, politics prescribes the arena for interaction between men and women in public life, in the novel, just as sex does in private life. Such public and private alliances tend to be fraught with "personality," delusion, and violence in the fictional world of Boca Grande; in short, all are struggles for power. Grace and Victor cautiously barter tidbits of information in their see-saw struggle for dominance in their legitimately yoked control of Boca Grande politics. Warren Bogart, Charlotte's first husband, uses the power of his personal appeal and outrageous violations of social conduct to dominate private social occasions. Alone with Charlotte, he exudes a sexual charm over her which he manages to reinforce primarily by frequent and repeated incidents of violence and humiliation. If that machismo technique displays signs of weakening, as when he is ill and dying of cancer and is rendered impotent, Warren will resort to inflicting guilt on Charlotte by implying that their daughter, Marin, 'left home' because of Charlotte's inadequacies as a mother and wife.

Despite her victimization by Warren, a condition in which she does participate for some time because of her guilt for leaving him and lying about it, there are instances where Charlotte demonstrates a single-minded courage as when she saves four people when a bomb goes off in the birth control clinic she works in. This is a fact Charlotte fails to mention when she tells her second husband, Leonard, of the bomb; she remembers only that she bled all over the clinic as she was in the midst of changing a tampon when the bomb went off. But this is the sort of a physical courage that is Charlotte's inheritance as a Westerner; an ethical courage in the relationships she has with men is more difficult to come by, but she finally discovers it within herself. She leaves the hospital with the deformed baby that neither Leonard nor Warren or even the doctor wanted her to see. "She was not going to do what they wanted her to do. She was not even sure what they wanted her to do but she was not going to do it....She was going to leave here alone with her baby" (179). Charlotte's decision not to do what the men in her life wanted her to do regardless of what that was is a decision that her predecessor in Didion's fiction, Maria Wyeth, also arrives at; at some point, the issue seems almost but not quite irrelevant--it does seem to usually be connected to the women's maternal selves--these women rebel against the patriarchal restrictions placed on them. But first the woman has to sever the insidious connection she has with

the males in her life.

Part of the appeal that women like Charlotte have to men like Warren seems to be a question shared by her of the extent of his sexual power over her. His interest, and perhaps hers, is sustained until that limit is exceeded. Women like Charlotte assume that the sexual interest a man demonstrates is an interest in them personally-which rarely proves to be true. Usually the mutual sexual attraction wanes once the limit of his sexual power is established. For Charlotte, the limit of Warren's sexual power over her was reached when Warren hit the young girl he insisted travel with them through the South. Warren exceeded his limit again when he and Leonard argue that their respective claims on Charlotte should take precedence over her responsibility to her dying infant. She leaves Leonard to bury the dying Warren, as it turns out, and proceeds southward toward Boca Grande and Grace Strasser-Mendana.

Another way the issue of gender differentiates Didion from her literary forefathers is by her specific creation of Grace-Strasser-Mendana as the female narrator of Charlotte's story. As a fictional construction herself, Grace violates several taboos regarding conventional female behavior. She is educated, intelligent, wealthy and powerful. She is also old, and she is dying. Although she acquired her wealth and power through her marriage to Edgar Strasser-Mendana, the eldest son, that acquisition is nonetheless perceived by Victor and Antonio, the two extant

sons, and lawful male heirs, as a usurpation on Grace's part. (Thus Grace has cause to suspect that the rage and violence and suspicion the two direct against Charlotte is actually intended for herself.) Grace's method of acquisition of 59.8% of the control in the family empire duplicates that of both of her sons grandfathers. Both were men who failed in their youthful professions as 'wildcatters' or adventurers and con-men, and so married the local equivalent of wealth and power where they happened to settle. It is interesting that Grace apparently "lost faith in her own method" somewhere about the same time as she discovered that her mentor, Claude McKay, had published her work under his own name. Only after that little-mentioned incident did Grace 'retire' from her career and then revert to the traditional female plot: marriage. Grace knows, however, that power corrupts and by the end of the narrative, realizes that she, and by implication, all women, are susceptible to that corruption, no matter how detached from its source they claim to be.

By engaging the characters of Grace and Charlotte in a dialectic within A Book of Common Prayer, Joan Didion has an opportunity to examine rival versions of the female experience. One of her characters, Charlotte, is evidently modeled after the maternal history Didion inherits from her own Western past, and which she reconstructs through family stories and heirlooms. In a revealing Esquire essay, Didion refers to this maternal inheritance after describing

a number of the artifacts her female ancestors constructed on their journey westward. These artifacts are proudly displayed in Didion's home.

"I came into adult life either equipped or afflicted with a specific narrative about the nature of life as the women in my family had understood it. These women were pragmatic and in their deepest instincts clinically radical, given to breaking clean with everything and everyone they knew....They tended to accommodate any means in pursuit of an uncertain end. They tended to avoid dwelling on just what that end might imply....They could shoot and they could handle stock and when their children outgrew their shoes they could learn from the Indians how to make moccasins..." (10). In this vignette, we easily recognize the physical courage and domestic efficiency demonstrated by Charlotte's killing a chicken with her bare hands, or staying awake for 34 hours to inoculate the local population against a cholera epidemic, in many cases against the population's superstition. There is also the willful resistance to analytical thought and the tendency to dreamy rationalizations so characteristic of Charlotte's demeanor when confronted with ambivalence.

But the vignette also displays the potential for ingenuity in resolving private and public problems. These women are not restricted to repeating the patterns of their past, but are willing to learn new modes of doing and feeling. This is evident in their willingness to replace

old shoes with new moccasins. That act carries within it a recognition that the maternal commitment must supersede all other allegiances--even political ones. For at that time, of course, Indians were generally perceived as the enemy to the forward expansion these women risk life and limb to achieve. Yet their emphasis is directed to methods of cooperation rather than competition with the natives for the resources of the land. In this way these women ignore, as Charlotte does, the changing political alliances around them and turn their energies and emotions to the transhistorical and transpersonal tasks of caring for those that are entrusted to their care. Didion's dictum "take care of somebody" has its origins in the 'narratives' of her many mothers' lives.

In contrast to Charlotte's portrayal Didion's portrayal of Grace Strasser-Mendana represents another version of female experience. This portrait appears to be more closely aligned with Didion's adult and learned perception of the world. In Grace, we see a woman who has appropriated and absorbed all the patriarchal values of that system as her own. It may be notable that the women in Didon's novels who presume the autonomy usually deemed a male attribute in Western society are women whose childhood was spent either free of maternal influence, such as Martha in Run River, or as an orphan like Grace. Didion may be suggesting that autonomy comes more 'naturally' to those women who pay attention to what men do and not what they

say, especially in relation to women.

As in the case of Charlotte, gender is not a pressing issue for Grace, but for very different reasons. First, of course, is that Grace possesses all the qualities women presumably envy in men: education, wealth, power, intelligence, eloquence. And then, Grace is--because of her age and illness--comfortably beyond the reaches of sexual passion that by its nature facilitates contact between the sexes, but as easily can trigger conflict. Yet it appears as if Grace was never subject to passion, given her predisposition to the "mechanical view" of experience Grace prefers in her narrative. "Reverse the entire neutron field on my lawn, exhausting and disturbing and altering not only the mood but possibly the cell structure...of everyone there" (206) is the way Grace describes sexual attraction when it is her son who is seducing a woman she is coming to care about. Grace's faith in the scientific method and its trappings, namely a kind of scientific aestheticism, is still prevalent at this stage of the narrative. Otherwise she might recognize that her detached objectivity is dependent upon her <u>not</u> recognizing the potential for harm in Gerardo's seduction of Charlotte.

Grace prefers empirical fact to feeling as demonstrated by her explanation to Charlotte that "fear of the dark is an arrangement of fifteen amino acids" and that it "exists irrelative to patterns of child-rearing in the Mato Grosso

or in Denver, Colorado" (5). Grace provides this exchange early in her narrative as an example of the oppositions between herself and Charlotte. When Charlotte responds that she doesn't "quite see why calling it a protein makes it any different," Grace tries again to clarify her point. However, in retrospect, as readers we understand that it is Grace more than Charlotte who is being obtuse. This point becomes clear when Grace insists on challenging Charlotte's denial of fear of the dark; but the oblique reference to the existence of the phenomena in Denver, Colorado, irrelative to child-rearing practices, indicates that Grace herself is susceptible to that fear. The fact that Grace "craves the light in Boca Grande" also supports that submerged fear she must have felt as a child left alone in the Brown Hotel for six years after her parents' death.

When 'facts of this sort are extrapolated from the empirical contexts in which Grace, as the narrator, submerges them, it is easier to explain the affinity Grace felt for Charlotte and the denial of it that Grace imposes on their relationship, even after Charlotte's death. It is only in the construction of her narrative that Grace becomes aware of her own faculty for sublimal perceptions. These perceptions exist somewhat like Charlotte's do, mixtures of fact, feeling, and fiction, but severed from the particular history, personal and cultural, from which they are derived. And so, like Marlow, her paternal predecessor, Grace's experience as narrator is not totally

transparent to her, nor to us. Possibilities of meaning accumulate beneath the "sleek surface" Didion aims for in her art. For Grace it is her own traumatic experience of the profound loss of all her filiative connections that enables her to appear--even to herself--as the prescient observer of human behavior she claims to be. But Grace does come to realize, ultimately, that knowing is not enough, but then neither is unexamined feeling of the sort that overwhelms and drives Charlotte to extreme commitments. Neither knowledge nor passion is natural and therefore filiative modes of human experience; both are cultural forms of affiliation, but it is only in the construction of a dialectic between the two that such connections can be made. The pursuit of either one in isolation necessarily precludes a measured consideration of the other, or a recognition of the pivotal relationship between them.

In trying to explain to herself why Charlotte was the victim of Antonio's hatred, Grace contemplates: "I suppose she was a norteamericana, she was a woman, she was an unpredictable element. I suppose she was a version of me at whom he could vent his rage" (219). In this statement Grace brings together a number of elements that can stand in contradiction: the reference to norteamericana can signify one's resourcefulness and vitality, or it can signify one's otherness and exclusion. "Unpredictable" can indicate a lack of stability, an untrustworthiness or it

can suggest the promise of possibilities unexplored. The statement also suggests that one can be victimized by elements other than gender while indicating that power protects, regardless of gender. It also alludes to Grace's discovery that self-deception is not limited to male narrators, but is rather to be examined as a rationalization for one's power.

In The Political Unconscious, Jameson postulates that "ethics is the informing ideology of the binary opposition" (114) when whatever is Other is evil and the self is good. Didion has utilized this ethical ideology to explore the dialectical relationship between the American versions of the historical forces of empiricism and romanticism, as represented by Grace and Charlotte respectively in the novel. In choosing to work out the difficulties of rival versions of reality in this manner, Didion accomplishes what is presented as a possibility later in Jameson's work. There he proposes to read 'a given style as a projected solution on the aesthetic or imaginary level, to a genuinely contradictory situation in the concrete world of everyday social life. The purpose of this possibility is to "restore, at least methodologically, the lost unity of social life" (226). Didion's technical choices then have an effect similar to that of Conrad's, about whom Said comments: "Quite literally, therefore, Conrad was able to see his narrative as the place in which the motivated, the occasional, the methodical, and the rational are brought

together with the aleatory, the unpredictable, the inexplicable" which are then described as "an interplay of antithesis" (92). Circumstances from the everyday social world are brought into literature where in the realm of the imagination such contradictions as knowing versus feeling are tolerated to a higher degree than possible in every day life. Grace posits this possibility when she acknowledges that she has no business in Boca Grande, that all her assumptions about her self and its relation to history require reconsideration, but in actuality, it is too late to do anything very effectual about her dilemma. Still, the process of reconstructing her relationship with Charlotte has provided the opportunity to find community inside differences.

A prior reference has been made to Didion's comment in an interview regarding the illusions she had struggled against in her personal life. Her response is "...I was one of those children who tended to perceive the world in terms of things read about it. I began with a literary idea of experience, and I still don't know where all the lies are" (Art of Fiction 162). Like the way one accepts without question the virtues of one's family, Didion accepted literary discourse as a valid interpretation of her world. With the passing of years and experience, however, she has come to reassess that literary heritage and to examine the ideological implications of even the most 'empirical' evidence regarding such aspects as

technique, style, voice, etc.

As I have demonstrated, Didion's adaptation or 'adoption' of Conrad's narrative strategy from the Heart of Darkness is a gesture which effects a relation to other literary progeny of Conrad's, for instance, Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby. As a consequence Didion's third novel is situated within a 'family' of fictions that share certain features in common but also call attention to the valid distinctions to be made between them. Nor does Didion's participation in this family of fictions seem to be one of conflict with her paternal predecessors as Bloom's "family romance" would indicate should be the case.

In fact, Didion's impetus toward affiliation seems more radical than mere challenge or competition: she insists on inclusion within the extended literary family; she expects to have her rival version accommodated within the existing structure. Indeed, she uses the ideas and concepts expressed in that literary legacy to justify her position as a true literary daughter of the traditional literary institution.

Upon reflection, Didion finds pride in her literary heritage and a high value for its rich and varied traditions. She incorporates the literary products of the past into her own contemporary milieu as an artist and public figure much as she integrates the historical artifacts of her personal history with the contemporary design of her family home. In an effort to understand not

just the past, but her relationship to that past, Didion allows history and experience to interrogate each other within her works.

Referring to her literal maternal ancestry and its relation to her present status as a contemporary woman (some years ago), Didion admitted to "a certain native ineptness at tolerating the complexities of post-industrial life" (10). Her essay collections of the 60s and 70s, as well as her fiction of the same period, generally attest to that difficulty and to Didion's struggle to come to terms with it. Yet, as Frye notes in her book Living Stories, Telling Lives, "our self-histories change as a function of the questions we put to the past" (68). When Didion begins to question her relation to her paternal literary inheritance, at a time when the fashion is to establish a working model of one's connection to a maternal legacy, her fiction becomes more complex, more compelling, and more compassionate.

That is not to suggest that there is not a rich legacy from their mothers that all women writers can lay claim to. It is just to indicate that an examination of her paternal heritage produced in Didion a recognition of the value implicit in differences. She discovered the contrast between the principles of affiliation and those of filiation. For it is the principle of filiation to duplicate,to repeat, to value sameness. That is a principle that frequently operates in feminist criticism.

But the principle of affiliation offers the opportunity to value difference; to learn that out of difference what is communal is relationship; that the relationship between the differences is more important than the differences themselves.

In A Book of Common Prayer, Joan Didion makes a quantum leap toward tolerating the complexities of contemporary life. That movement is made possible by her willingness to accept the necessity of finding in affiliation the source of comfort and strength, unity and coherence once provided in her work by the structures of filiation.

JOAN DIDION: "TELLING STORIES TO LIVE."

Volume 2

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DEMOCRACY A NOVEL:
A FAMILY OF FICTIONS FROM HISTORY TO ROMANCE

In her fourth and latest work of fiction, Democracy, A Novel, Didion's pre-occupations with the cultural shift from filiation to affiliation are reconstructed as a dialectical relationship between literature and life. These modernist concerns coalesce around her non-diegetic position as a writer who is female, contemporary, and American. Issues of gender, time, and place-predominant and recurring themes in all of Didion's work, fiction and non-fiction - provide the focus for the diegetic world of Didion's novel as well. Her concerns as a writer, and the concerns of her characters as fictional constructs, blend and blur in this intricately woven story of politics and literature.

Reviewers nearly all indicate the intricacy of Democracy's design. An early review by Joyce Carol Oates is representative: "The construction of "Democracy" feels like the working out of a jigsaw puzzle that is slowly being put together with a continual shuffling and re-examination of pieces still on the edges or heaped in the middle of the design....Despite the fact that the pieces are known to us, face down and face up, almost from the start, there is an intense suspense, which seems to be

causeless...suspense arising from the assembly of the pieces, that is, from the procedures of narrative themselves" (18).

That Didion's fourth novel is likely to be somewhat unconventional in its design is intimated by the title itself. First, the title points to the historical conditions of the work's construction. Democracy A Novel situates Didion as a writer of a particular time and place: an american of the post-modern period. "Democracy", of course, recalls the satiric novel by Henry Adams of the same name, as well as Alexis de Toqueville's prescient assessment of the model of American democracy he observed in 1831-32. To the extent that both of these works function as critiques of the democratic process as it was worked out in the New world, they serve as models of the authorial stance Didion takes in her latest work toward this once again timely topic.

Didion's affiliative relation to her paternal predecessors in Democracy A Novel is not a repetition of the filiative pattern of her relation to Conrad in A Book of Common Prayer. In this novel, however, the relation is more removed and alluded to only indirectly rather than openly declared. The nature of Didion's relation to the literary past in this work is more intrinsically affiliative, as work to work, and as such operates rather as Said describes the function of the critical consciousness in The World, the Text, and the Critic: "The

critical consciousness is part of its actual social world and of the literal body that the consciousness inhabits, not by any means an escape from either one or the other...cooperation between filiation and affiliation...is located at the heart of critical consciousness" (16).

Like Adams' novel, Didion's novel concerns itself with the nature of political life in contemporary America. And as with the Adam's work, the focus of that concern is a female protagonist in Didion's Democracy as well. As a female, the protagonist is someone whose position is marginal or peripheral to, and yet intimately connected with, the fate of the primary 'players' (the politicians) who in the 1970's as in 1868, are male. So the relationship of gender to politics is an immediate and overt issue in Didion's latest novel, just as it was in A Book of Common Prayer. Didion's protagonist, Inez Christian Victor, disaffiliates herself from political life just as Adam's Mrs. Lee does. Yet Didion's heroine is always more implicated in political life than Adams' heroine is. For it is Inez Victor herself who must finally relinquish "the American exemption" from the immorality of political life, a gesture that Adam's Mrs. Lee is permitted ultimately to avoid by a tour of the historical monuments of Western Judaeo-Christian civilization.

As with the Adams' novel, Didion's work, at times, appears a thinly-disguised version of actual people and events from contemporary life; in other words, it is a

roman à clef, or literally a 'novel with a key'. Indeed, this is one of the haunting and somewhat perplexing qualities of the novel. Oates observes in her review that the Victors appear to bear some resemblance to the Kennedys (19), a connection that Martha Duffy makes as well in her Time review. Duffy speculates that Didion's actual reporting on the Reagan term as governor may also influence Didion's depiction of political life. "Although the Victors have Kennedyesque political notions and glamour, the hilarious back room detail in Democracy may come from Sacramento" (114).

Part of the key, though, to understanding the novel's design, I think, lies in the remaining words of the title: A Novel....Didion's point of difference from her predecessor. Her deliberate attention to the specific nature of the literary genre she is producing accomplishes several objectives at once. First, the gesture appears to function as a query of the dialectical relation of literature (A Novel) to life (Democracy). But on further consideration, democracy of course is not life as such, that is unmediated reality, but already an idea, an interpretation of reality, complete with the ideological implications of such a symbolic universe. Then, the title clearly declares itself as a work of fiction; however, the fact that such a declaration is deemed necessary just as clearly situates the work in its contemporary historical context. It does so by announcing itself as a piece of

literary prose whose ontological status may be in question , an ever-recurring problematic of the post-modern era.

That the novel refers simultaneously to a work of quasi-fiction, Adams' Democracy, and to a work of non-fiction, de Toqueville's essay, "Democracy in America," also supports the deliberately ambivalent status of Didion's work. This particular ambivalence, that of the work's uncertainty regarding its literary status, is mirrored in Didion's choice of narrator for Democracy A Novel: a reporter called Joan Didion. Thus, some of the 'facts' of the novel correspond to the 'facts' available about Didion's actual experience as a reporter. "What is a live fact--Joan Didion--doing in a work of fiction?" Oates inquires in her New York Times Book Review article. "In current theories of fiction, much attention is given to the role of the narrator, considered as sheer verbal device, without correspondence to any anterior reality. Yet if I understand Joan Didion right, here she is doing the exact opposite, inserting an attestable fact--herself--into the moving sands of fiction" (19).

This ambivalence regarding the status of the literary production points to other analogies explored in all of Didion's works as well; namely, the relation of literature to life, the relation of culture to nature, and the relation of affiliation to filiation. "The filiative scheme belongs to the realms of nature and of 'life',

whereas affiliation belongs exclusively to culture and society" (Said 20). In Didion's life, and now in her fiction, the relation of fiction to non-fiction becomes an issue for her both as a writer and as a female in contemporary American culture. This issue will be considered from both perspectives in my discussion of Didion's works. In this chapter (4), I will discuss this relation as an issue reflected upon within her latest novel; in Chapter 5, I will take the issue up again in the context of the history of Didion's literary production of both fiction and non-fiction over the past twenty-five years.

The ontological status of all literary production surfaces in Didion's fourth novel almost as an echo of the emphasis given to the production of narrative itself in A Book of Common Prayer and Play It As It Lays. Indeed, many of the specifically narrative concerns of those two novels (the literary precursors of Democracy so to speak) are reintroduced in this later work and set into play with each other. The focus shifts from how to tell a story or how to produce a narrative to the conditions under which narratives are produced at all. The shift entails a movement from the private and personal to the public and political realms of experience. Having satisfactorily established in A Book of Common Prayer an answer for Maria's implicit question in Play It As It Lays--Why produce narratives at all--(the answer being to forge

affiliative connections, especially with other women), Didion is free to pose other questions regarding the nature of this life-sustaining activity, the production of narratives. Focusing on the literary status of narrative indicates a wider grasp on Didion's part of the 'political' nature of literature itself. As Terry Eagleton remarks in Literary Theory An Introduction, "Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, is an ideology. It has the most intimate relations to questions of social power" (22).

If the literary status of Democracy A Novel is problematic, that situation is complicated by another facet of the work. The novel presents itself as a work of metafiction. The structure of the narrative provides evidence of this. It is a story within a story about the production of 'stories'. This concern with the convoluted internal workings of producing narrative resonates a concern about fictionality that is shared by many of Didion's contemporaries, feminist and non-feminist alike.

The purpose of fiction in post modern society recurs as a preoccupation of many literary critics. In his introduction to a collection of essays, Surfiction Fiction Now and Then, Raymond Federman maintains that "the primary purpose of fiction will be to unmask its own fictionality" (8). Richard Poirer in The Performing Self sees this movement toward metafiction as one that carries political overtones for the relation of the writer and the critic:

"A considerable body of literature seems determined...to evade analysis by being exhaustively and often satirically self-analytical" (viii). Each critic cites the works of male writers such as Barth, Barthleme, Mailer, Pynchon, etc. as evidence of the prevailing interiority of post-modern fiction. This preoccupation with the internal workings of fiction is not without its critics. On the other hand, critics such as Gerald Graff in Literature Against Itself sound a note of alarm at the ease with which some literary critics accept and even valorize the demise of literature as we know it and embrace the "ultimate refutation of philosophical and literary realism" (19).

Whereas the predominantly male version of this dispute about the relation of literature to life, or the lack thereof, generally progresses to a stance that focuses exclusively on textuality as the basis of literature, the American feminist version arrives at quite a different conclusion. Feminist critics insert themselves in this debate about the purpose of literature in modern life. They decline the abstractions preferred by males because the feminist recognize that literary ideology functions directly in their lives. Feminist critics see metafiction as an effort to delineate a woman's relation to both life and literature. Joanne Frye, in Living Stories, Telling Lives, claims that "a feminist poetics of the novel can examine the novel's capacity both to represent women's experience and to redefine the premises of representation"

(16). In Writing Beyond the Ending, Rachel du Plessis argues that the female's dilemma in relation to life and to literature is essentially the same dilemma. Referring to Virginia Wolf's sense of the duality of women's lives, especially as evidenced in the works of nineteenth century women writers, du Plessis states, "The debate between the inheritor and critic is a movement between deep identification with dominant values and deep alienation from them" (39). The woman writer then is in a position to require a duplicitous structure for her narrative. She needs a structure that permits her to depict her attachment to those cultural values, including literary ones, that she has inherited. She also needs, simultaneously, to register a critique of that attachment, based on her marginality to the dominant culture. As Didion's position in regard to her literary past (as I have constructed it in Chapter 3) is precisely that of "inheritor and critic", the feminist position seems most promising as a method of assessing her position as a post-modern writer. Didion's focus is always on the relation of literature to life, and not on literature's distance from lived experience.

As I have indicated, Democracy A Novel consists of two stories--one is a romance, the other a history. The romance explores the public and private lives of Inez Christian Victor, daughter of a Hawaiian family "in which the colonial impulse had marked every member" (26). Private life is rooted in the twenty-year affair of the

heart that Inez Victor and Jack Lovett conduct with each other, and which runs parallel to their respective marriages to other partners. The public life evolves around Inez's role as wife of Congressman Harry Victor, a failed presidential candidate; it also touches on Jack Lovett's reputation as a quasi-CIA agent, someone who had "various irons in the fire" (39). This romance narrative is framed by another: a history of the romance narrative, as constructed by Joan Didion, the reporter who follows the enigmatic figures of the romance over a twenty year period, roughly spanning the time in American history from the advent of the atomic bomb to the Vietnam War.

The metafictional structure of the novel enables Didion to posit a dialectic between her actual roles as a public figure: the 'factual' reporter and the writer of fiction. As such, the structure examines the relation of fiction to non-fiction and the relation of literature to life. In so doing, it engages Didion, a contemporary American writer, in a post-modern/feminist dialogue.

Joyce Carol Oates describes the romantic aspects of the novel best in her New York Times Book Review article: "One must applaud the author's nerve in making a C.I.A. agent in his 60's the love interest and parfait gentile knight of her book. Actually, this is a romance, even a sentimental novel, with the C.I.A. man and the Congressman's wife as a pair of eternally faithful lovers, constantly separated and constantly reunited till his death and burial under a

jacaranda tree--after which Inez Christian Victor has only one choice, in essence the choice of Guinevere: to take the veil. Kuala Lumpur is her Almesbury" (19).

As any number of feminist critics have observed, the romance is a genre of fiction preferred by women writers and one traditionally implicated in the maintenance of the patriarchal structure. "Women have been bound by the anticipated resolution of plot difficulties in marriage, death, or painful isolation, by definition of character in terms of the traits of "femininity", by the presentation of reality as the relational and domestic social context that the dominant sexual ideology presumes for women, and by the coherence of the love story," claims Frye (36). And as we have seen, Didion's novelistic resolutions display some characteristics of these conventional plot resolutions. All of Didion's women end up alone, although not necessarily in painful isolation. Lily Knight McClellan is widowed when her extramarital lover is shot by her jealous husband who then commits suicide; Maria Wyeth prefers the confinement of a mental institution to the supreme madness of the entertainment industries, film and gambling; Charlotte Douglas is shot, a victim of sexual politics as much as of revolutionary politics, and Grace Strasser-Mendana waits in the light of Boca Grande to die of pancreatic cancer, "neither hopeful nor its opposite" (14). Only in this latest novel does the heroine escape marriage, death, or ostracism. Inez literally abandons her grown

family without repercussions. Rather than continue as Harry Victor's wife, or Adlai and Jessie's mother, Inez chooses to run a refugee camp in Malaysia. But this apparent anti-romantic reversal of the conventional femininity plot is made problematic by the fact this resolution is presented as romance. Nonetheless, as I shall show later, Didion's frame text serves to critique this subtly seductive resolution so as to reveal the political implications of the romance.

In so doing, I shall argue that Didion achieves what Rachel du Plessis defines as "writing beyond the ending" in her work of the same name (5). For this feminist critic this position is arrived at when a woman writer "produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised" (5).

But before turning attention to the frame narrative of Didion's novel that critiques Didion's use of the romance, I want to examine in greater detail the traditional trappings of the realistic novel as contained within the romance narrative. Specifically I want to compare certain elements of characterization, theme, plot, etc. with those of Didion's previous novels. As I indicated previously, this fourth novel serves as a gloss of its literary precursors, Didion's previous novels. This relationship, a primarily textual one, and therefore affiliative in nature, seems more pronounced in this novel than does the

attachment to Didion's actual literary predecessors.

This perspective remains valid despite the fact that more than one reviewer comments specifically about the paternal legacies that are apparent within Didion's novel. Of course Henry Adams work is cited as a precursor, but echoes of Hemingway, Orwell, Mailer, Eliot, and James Jones are cited as well. I find Oates remarks about the strong influence of Conrad's vision in the novel most pertinent to my discussion. "This powerful relation to film, stronger than that of any other current author, must account for her affinity with Joseph Conrad, whose tales and romances--above all "Nostromo," "The Secret Agent," and "Heart of DArkness"--seem to have anticipated film, like an uncanny prophecy" (18). Oates goes on to note that Conrad's ability to create potent images is what "one senses [of] Conrad in Miss Didion's "Democracy"; he has passed through this territory, making trail blazes" (18). While Oates' comment is valid in my view, it is also true that Didion retraces novelistic paths that are as much her own as they are Conrad's. It is as if Didion is trying to imagine rival versions for her own previously imagined narratives. This retrieval of her own literary past is very much in keeping with her narrative technique in each of her novels; it is also in line with her clear understanding that we are each a product of a very particular history. In an early essay which is included in Slouching Toward Bethlehem, Didion says of the people of her native California "they

will have lost the real past and gained a manufactured one" (186). Twenty years later of course Didion realizes that all pasts are manufactured to some extent and Didion uses the creation of Democracy A Novel to assess her own part in that manufacturing process. Therefore I want to look at elements in this novel which echo those of the earlier works while also of course accentuating the differences in those elements of representation.

An obvious feature to begin this analysis with is the choice of a female protagonist. For in many ways, Inez Christian Victor is yet another Didion heroine. Martha Duffy, a frequent reviewer of Didion's work in Time magazine, described Didion's heroines in the 1970s in the following way: "the Didion girl-woman has taken shape. She is as sensitive as a Geiger counter, articulate in feeling but not in speech, an incurable romantic with vast moral expectations of herself and others--especially men" (67). Physically these women, like Didion, are thin, fragile, nervous yet pretty. But perhaps the most telling detail is that they are all some years past their youthful attractiveness. Everette McClellan notices Lily's fading prettiness when she comes to meet him on the dock where Ryder Channing's body lays between them. "No one had ever called her beautiful, but there had been about her a compelling fragility, the illusion not only of her bones but of her eyes" (14). A couple eye up Maria, a model and an actress who finds it difficult to get work, in a

restaurant as a possible sexual partner and pronounce her as "thirty-six...but a good thirty-six" (168). Charlotte's presence is made conspicuous, according to Grace, by an "extreme and volatile thinness" and a "strain of exhibitionism" (19). Inez Victor, too, is described in terms that render her physically vulnerable. "She is a woman at that age (a few months over forty in her case) when it is possible to look very good at certain times of day...and not so good at others....Her dark hair, clearly brushed by habit to minimize the graying streak at her left temple, is dry and lusterless..." (76). And like Charlotte, some disrepair of her expensive clothing suggests "some equivalent disrepair of the morale, some vulnerability, or abandon" (19).

Only one reviewer, Michael Wood, in the London Review of Books, makes a point of the similarities of Didion's heroines. In the same gesture however, he questions Didion's preference for this type of protagonist. "I have always found it curious that Didion, who in her essays is such an alert and diligent observer of the busy world, should construct her novels around such withdrawn, benumbed women, but I take it that these pieces of her working life do match, make a picture: the journalism saves her from what the characters in the novel are always in danger of becoming. Democracy doesn't offer a different type of heroine, but it does address the question her heroines pose for Didion, and it permits her to wonder how much of a

novelist she is" (16).

Wood's comments are validated in part by Didion's own reflections on the purpose of her heroines and their plots in her fiction. "You know how doctors who work with children get the children to tell stories? And they figure out from the stories what's frightening the child, what's worrying the child, what the child thinks? Well, a novel is just a story. You work out things in the stories you tell" (160). Jameson, in The Political Unconscious, posits this idea as an argument for the ideological nature of narrative itself. "Narrative form is...an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary of formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (79).

Based on this perspective, Didion's view of such social contradictions is clearly focused on certain identifiable issues that occur repeatedly in her novels about women. Maternal loss and sexual politics are two such issues that capture the Didion imagination. As Grace Strasser-Mendana wryly observes in A Book of Common Prayer, Charlotte's dreams dealt only with "sexual surrender and infant death, commonplaces of the female obsessional life. We all have the same dreams" (53).

Maternal loss, the rupture of the primary filiative connection, is a grief that is shared by Maria Wyeth, Charlotte Douglas, and Grace-Strasser Mendana. Only Lily McClellan is exempt from this traumatic loss, except in the

form of submitting to an abortion she doesn't really desire. It appears as if Inez Victor, too, will be subject to the same debilitating trauma when, at a critical point in the novel, her daughter, Jessie, flees from a drug rehabilitation center to look for a job in Saigon. As this is the Saigon of the spring of 1975, when American forces and support personnel are evacuating the city, Jessie's decision proves to be even more dangerous and incredulous than it seemed when she nonchalantly mentioned the possibility to her mother during a Christmas visit.

As it turns out, Inez Victor is not doomed to this frequently imagined gate of Didion's heroines. Due to the capable if questionable intervention of her lover, Jack Lovett, Inez's daughter is rescued. Unlike Charlotte Douglas, Jessie Victor is not required to live out the inexorable narrative logic of her naive actions in a volatile political climate. Unlike Charlotte, Inez can and does 'save' her daughter from the fateful consequences of impetuous and youthful choices. Like Persephone, Inez Victor negotiates an arrangement with the gods whereby her daughter is reclaimed. So redemptive is this maternal act of salvation that Jessie remains in felicitous contact with her mother, and with the narrative Joan Didion, the reporter, even at the close of the novel when we learn she is in Mexico City writing a historical novel.

Whereas Maria Wyeth's impractical dream of rescuing her daughter, Kate, and herself from their common fate as

institutionalized females constitutes only a minimal hope at the end of Didion's second novel, both Inez Victor and her daughter are pursuing their own vocations as autonomous but responsible women at the close of Democracy. In contrast to Charlotte Douglas or her surrogate mother, Grace Strasser-Mendana, women who too late recognize the value of affiliation, Inez Victor not only reclaims her natural female child, she also extends her maternal concern to the refugee children of Kuala Lumpur.

Ironically, these children are refugees from the Southern Asian countries in which America has been waging a war--a war that is at the center of the dispute between the males in Inez' public and private life. This is the same war Jack Lovett views as a business enterprise whereas Harry Victor belatedly finds it a potent issue for his failed presidential campaign. It is also the same war that reveals the hypocrisy that Inez's son, Adlai, shares with his father. Adlai is the sort of young man who calls his sister a slut, who informs his mother when she inquires as to his intentions to visit a girl hospitalized due to Adlai's drunk driving that the girl "is definitely on the agenda" (62). When, in the midst of the crisis of her sister's death and her daughter's disappearance in Saigon, Inez is confronted by Adlai's sardonic comment that perhaps his sister "can score" in Saigon, Inez slaps him.

By the end of the novel, it is clear that her son remains on the periphery of Inez Victor's life. So this

modern day Persephone relinquishes any emotional claim to her cherished daughter's male twin as part of the inarticulate bargain she strikes with the gods. In this apparently expected loss of her male child, Inez Victor resembles Grace Strasser-Mendana more than she does any of the other Didion heroines. It is almost as if such a loss is so early anticipated that these women never even register a clear protest against it as they most certainly do on behalf of their daughter's. In her work, Women Writing About Men, Jane Miller notes that "of all the descriptions of themselves with which women have had to grapple, those which define them as mothers, and especially as mothers of sons, have been the most contradictory and the most silencing" (103). Miller goes on to locate the difficulty in this relationship in the "ambiguity of women's collusion with male dominance" in the experience of motherhood, especially of the male child (105). Miller also suggests that women have been most evasive about this aspect of motherhood in part because "there is no story which tells them why and how they love their sons" (114). An important facet of this issue in regards to Didion may be, but not necessarily, the fact she has no son; however, she does have a brother, so she would have observed the mother/son relationship first hand. It seems more likely to me that it is the impoverished state of literature in this respect that may be the most significant factor in the rather collective evasion of this issue.

Yet, if the mother/son relationship is peripheral in the lives of Didion's female protagonists, their relations to the males who are their sexual partners is a focal point. This is another matter in which Inez Victor reveals her sisterly connection to Didion's previous heroines. While there are significant differences in the working out of these sexual relationships, certain patterns repeat themselves regularly in Didion's work. The most predominant is the pattern of both a husband and a lover, represented as light and dark images, which is in effect a polarization of the attributes that attract and connect each protagonist to these men. Indeed, so persistent is this pattern that these male pairs are metamorphized over and over again in Didion's novels. The use of the double image whose facets are polarized is a recurring pattern of course in the works of male writers who portray women; the virgin/witch motif is well documented in feminist writings. Not so well documented is its reversal in the writing of women such as Didion. What seems to be different in Didion's portrayal of the double image is that there is no rigid assignment of the dark or light features based on the legitimacy of social status. For instance, either husbands or lovers can accrue positive or negative qualities, and indeed, in some cases, a man's image may change from light to dark or dark to light.

First, it should be noted though that contrary to the assumptions of a patriarchal society, none of Didion's

heroines are exemplars of marital fidelity. In fact each of them explicitly transgresses this dictum, often more than once. Yet none of them appear to suffer untowardly because of this failure of loyalty expected of the conventional wife. In fact, contrivances of plot indicate that the heroine often resorts to sexual independence as a way of provoking her indifferent or unresponsive husband to some kind of emotional reaction. Both Lily and Maria turn to lovers when their respective husbands withhold sex and affection from them as a stratagem in their embattled marriages. Charlotte's marriage to Leonard Douglas has become celibate by the time she embarks on her odyssey of sex and death through the American South with her ex-husband, Warren Bogart. While the taking of a lover often does not elicit the desired response from the husband, it often does establish a sense of control and freedom for these wounded women. What does not seem possible, even in Didion's latest novel, is an avoidance of the polarization of male attributes; as a consequence, a realistic but affectionate and mutually supportive marriage is never envisioned in Didion's works.

This duality of male images begins in Didion's first novel, Run River. Lily Knight McClellan is attracted to both her husband, the blond, bland, conservative Everette, and to his rival for her affections, the dark, menacing and reckless Ryder Channing. In fact, her attraction for both of these males is a duplication of a previous one on the

part of Everette's sister, Martha, for both men. Ultimately, however, both women lose both men. In Maria Wyeth's world, all men are representative of the power structures that exploit women and each other. The only exception is a very minor character, a friend of her parents, who offers a sincere but ineffectual comfort to Maria. Still, Maria finds some degree of relief in the laughter and affection shared with her married lover, Les, whereas a state of war aptly characterizes her relationship to her manipulative husband, Carter Lang. Only the bisexual pimp, BZ, appears to understand Maria's despair, but he too exploits the vulnerability in Maria that he shares. Charlotte's loyalties are torn between the conventional appeal of her liberal, wealthy, and reliable husband, Leonard, and the dark and febrile attraction that her roguish exhusband, Warren, exerts over her.

Inez repeats this pattern of the double image, but with a difference. Aligned by marriage and accident (she was two months pregnant when she married Harry Victor) to a shallow man whose public persona requires that she suppress her own identity, she preserves that small private self that remains untouched by her public image via her largely platonic relation to Jack Lovett. For Inez, the twenty-year romance becomes emblematic of her threatened selfhood. As reflected in Jack Lovett's eyes, Inez can recall a vestige of her former seventeen-year-old self, the self that audaciously initiated the love affair with the married

and much older Jack Lovett; the self she was before she abdicated her own identity to become the packaged commodity that became known as "Harry Victor's wife".

An interesting reversal of the dark/light images occurs in this latest triangle in Democracy A Novel. It is the husband who emerges as the dark and unsavory character, whereas it is the lover who collects all the images of integrity and light. All of which seems rather remarkable as Jack's genuine concern for Inez, his actions as her 'parfait gentile knight' is his most admirable quality. The only other redeeming quality he possesses is perhaps his clear-eyed realism, or what passes for that scarce commodity in the company of the rhetorical morons who inhabit the universe of the story. In Jack Lovett's view, information is power, "an end in itself" (30). He is a man capable of putting together isolated bits of information from vastly different sources so as to deduce the need for action, and then implementing such action almost singlehandedly. He recognizes economic interests as indigenous to war and apparently is not squeamish about doing whatever is necessary to accomplish the task he has undertaken. His only aversion seems to be to publicity, which places him in direct contrast to Harry Victor who thrives on his status as a celebrity. True to his code, Jack Lovett dies as anonymously as he lived; the news of his death becoming public several weeks after the fact.

Jack Lovett appears to be based on a certain type of

man that Didion displays a fondness for, the prototype of which is John Wayne. His primary attractions are his sexual authority, an ability to devise his own code and to live by it, (no matter how simplistic that code may be) and that implicit promise to protect the female of his choice, to take her to "the bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow" (STB 30). What Didion appears to admire in Jack Lovett is an "emotional solitude, a detachment that extended to questions of national or political loyalty" (219). But perhaps it is necessary to recall that it is a fictive Joan Didion, in the guise of a reporter, that is making these comments, although the nostalgic emotion attached to the descriptions seems attributable to Didion herself. But it is a romantic nostalgia that Didion fights all the way.

For of course what emerges in this construction of Jack Lovett is the typical hero of romance. The hero is a literary construct against which actual men never quite measure up, contaminated as they are by loyalties of all sorts, and the first of which is not likely to be a loyalty to the woman they love.

In her book, Becoming a Heroine, Rachel Brownstein points out that "real women, like realistic novels, are haunted by the shaping shadows of romance" (32). In her portrayal of Jack Lovett, Didion reveals as much as anywhere in the novel the shape such shadows have taken in her consciousness. Still, there are elements in the novel

which strain against this powerful tendency toward romance. One resisting element is Jack's age--a 60-year-old man, in custom-made seersucker suits, with a slightly military bearing, is but a faded copy of a once virile notion. As Didion indicates in the frame text, what appears as realism can veil a hopeless romanticism. He exhibits a machismo that is as vulnerable as it is wistful. His touching insistence of the simple and lucid view of reality can all too easily slip into a simplistic avoidance of actual complexity.

Jack Lovett's romanticism is revealed in his vision of Inez as the seventeen-year-old girl he met twenty years previously. "The picture he had was of Inez listening to something he was telling her, listening gravely, and then giving him her hand. In this picture she was wearing the gardenia in her hair and the white dress she had worn to the ballet, the only dress in which he had ever seen her, and the two of them were alone. In this picture the two of them were in fact the only people on earth" (87).

"Pretty goddamn romantic," even Jack Lovett admits some twenty years later when he discloses his secret vision to the reporter, Joan Didion (87). Didion's inclusion of all these details and the commentary on them draws attention to the nature of romanticism--in many ways an emotional solitude shared by two people, a detachment from all other loyalties, personal and political, that people usually engender by their multiple connections to each other.

Instead, romance sets one apart, makes heroes and heroines of ordinary people in the narrative they each construct of their fortuitous encounter. So, in a sense, Jack Lovett's recognition in the spring of 1975 just before Inez leaves her husband to be with him, his recognition of Inez as "Harry Victor's wife" (15) is an implicit violation of his twenty-year fantasy of Inez as a solitary being whose only meaningful intercourse has been exclusively with him.

To some degree this fantasy is reminiscent of one shared by another Didion male with whom Lovett has an affinity--Everette McClellan of Run River. Everette, too, has a version of the woman he loves that seems impervious to the onslaught of evidence to the contrary. He refuses to acknowledge Lily's flagrant affairs, even when she takes Ryder Channing as a lover, a man whose maltreatment of his sister, Martha, at least contributed if not precipitated her decline into despair and finally suicide. When Everette's son reports the rumors of his mother's indiscretions, the father can no longer ignore Ryder's presence in the marital triangle. Everette dimly perceives Ryder as a threat to his own seventeen-year-old daughter as well. Given Ryder's propensity for the McClellan females, Everette's fears may well be justified, especially as Julie is developing into a combination of Lily and Martha. But if Everette cannot ignore his rival, neither can he accommodate a revision of his version of reality. As we have seen, he uses his father's gun to shoot Ryder and then

himself, and thus acts out to its logical conclusion the heroic drama of the patriarchal myth.

If these 'positive' male characters are shown to be disabled by their romanticism, their darker brothers that populate Didion's works display no such vulnerability. These men are insensitive, outrageous, manipulative and denigrating of all women, but especially of their 'chosen' female. Both Carter Lang and Warren Bogart enjoy demeaning their women in public and private. Both men expect their wives to tolerate their blatant male infidelities while the women's adulteries are severely punished. Their particular brand of cruelty keeps Maria and Charlotte enthralled with these dark demons of the heart, as the women have been taught to be in the stories they have read about love. The relationships also re-enact the spiritual dilemma of their Protestant heritage. On one hand, they feel chosen, set apart, and special, even as recipients of exceptional cruelty. On the other, they are mired in the unpredictability of these acts, never certain of the males' response, a victim of the whims of the powerful man who is as likely to badger or beat the selected female as he is to caress or comfort her. As victims of torture have so succinctly and tragically pointed out, the alternation of cruel and kind acts is the perfect recipe for victimization.

The less volatile male, husbands such as Leonard and Harry, are simply too involved in their own careers to be

much concerned with their wives' personal crises. Each marriage has entailed a 'rescue' of the wife from messy circumstances--Harry 'saved' Inez from an illegitimate and unwanted pregnancy and Leonard was there to pick up the pieces of Charlotte's life when she divorced Warren. That rescuing action seems to weigh on both couples as an obligation whose worth is never quite determined and therefore always due on demand. The social status extended by the male to the female of the couple ends up being a kind of extortion. Whatever degree of social security the women derive from these marriages, these models of husbandry never incite the imagination of the women as do the darker, or even the lighter, brothers.

But none of the plots of Didion's male heroes are exempt from a fatal resolution. In each of Didion's novels, the significant male character dies. Some are killed, (Ryder), some commit suicide (Everette and BZ), and some die natural deaths (Warren and Jack). The other men with whom the protagonists have connections are abandoned by them and their author when the protagonists jettison their pasts (Carter, Harry, Leonard). In any case, the connection to the male which so completely defined the protagonist at one point, albeit for a variety of reasons, is the connection that must be severed, voluntarily or not, for the female protagonist to achieve an autonomous state.

That autonomous status, one much valorized by feminist

writers and critics, is not unproblematic for Didion's heroines. The independence achieved can sometimes appear as much a relief due to the cessation of conflict in these war-torn marriages as it can a true victory over debilitating dependence. Autonomy, for females as well as for males in Didion's world, always entails loss.

So, if Inez Victor escapes the entrapment of the conventional femininity text, perhaps she does so because the circumstances of her life have enabled her to avoid the crippling fate that her literary sisters could not. Inez, through a combination of luck and loyalty, does not violate Didion's frontier code of morality: not to abandoned one's dead to the coyotes. While Inez, like Maria and Charlotte before her, is not present at the death of either of her parents, unlike the other two women, she does maintain that painful but redemptive vigil on two occasions; once, at the bedside of her only sister, and then again, at the unexpected death of her lover.

In fact, a significant point of distinction between Inez and her literary precursors is her possession of a sister whom she cares about. As their mother, Carol Christian, had abandoned the family when the girls were quite young, Inez assumed a maternal responsibility for her younger outspoken sister. The Christian sisters remain in close contact with each other despite their mobile lives and despite the fact that the contact consists almost entirely of cross country phone calls devoted to a recall

of their shared past. But this pattern is a significant departure from past practices for Didion. Lily McClellan is unable to make significant connections with any woman, even her mother or her sister-in-law who desperately seeks that contact. Maria's relationships to the females in her world is not one of mere detachment; the other females are as vicious in their judgments and as eager to exploit her vulnerability as the men in the novel are. And, as I have shown, Charlotte and Grace are initially quite wary of each other, and even later as their mutual love and respect grows, are reticent about any overt expression of that affection.

Inez, on the other hand, is adamant about her loyalties to her dying sister, Janet. She demands that a picture of Janet be put back in its usual place and not in a position that renders it a memorial gesture. She refuses to participate in the Christian family's bizarre version of a wake while Janet is still unconscious at the hospital. For her, Janet is not as she is for the family, "available to be dead" (157).

In fact, the events of this romance are set into motion by the shooting of Janet Zeigler by her bonafide lunatic father, Paul Christian. The only ostensible reason provided for Janet's murder is her dalliance with a native Hawaiian Congressman, whose dead body is found on Janet's liani with her own. Her father appears to be outraged by the racial implications of Janet's affair rather than by

any ethical considerations. In any case, Janet is left unconscious, a state she remains in for several days until she can be pronounced medically dead. Only Inez remains by her bedside faithfully, and with Inez, Jack Lovett.

Waiting for her sister's death is the first act Inez undertakes after she walks out of the Christian family home and away from her family with Jack Lovett. As with Didion's other heroines' belated rebellion against the status quo, some crisis of maternal responsibility precipitates the action. Maria leaves Carter after she gets the abortion he demands she have or lose Kate, and Charlotte leaves both her husbands when they try to interfere with her decision to care for her dying infant daughter. For Lily, the change occurs after her sister-in-law's suicide. In each case, the heroine feels her adherence to patriarchal values has compromised her graver obligation to care for someone. For the Didion heroine, Carol Gilligan's "ethos of responsibility" (165) always finally supercedes the standard of justice imposed by the patriarchal society they are part of. The moral choice, however, depicted as an act of strength by and for women is likely to be viewed by men as a betrayal, as a failure to honor a tacit contract. Because these women have internalized both value systems, they are likely themselves to feel highly ambivalent about their decision and to experience considerable anxiety in its implementation. Perhaps the unresolved inner conflict is what finally

causes these women not just to make a change, but like Didion's maternal ancestors, to make a radical break with their pasts. Each becomes, to varying degrees, what Maria claims as an identity at the end of her narrative, "a radical surgeon of my own life" (202). "It's too late for the correct thing," Inez Victor tells Jack Lovett just before she leaves with him for Hong Kong to search for her lost daughter, Jessie (187). Inez best represents the position of these adult women who seek autonomy. When the reporter Joan Didion sees Inez in the refugee camp at Kuala Lumpur, she observes that not only had Inez fulfilled a long-standing desire to work with refugees, but she "had herself been a kind of refugee. She had the protective instincts of a successful refugee. She never looked back" (56). Thus, whereas Grace faults Charlotte for her inclination to live an unexamined life, in Didion's fourth novel, Inez is praised for her ability to turn her back on a past that demanded only her passive endurance.

Frye recognizes that the subversive acts of adult females present different problems for their author than do those of the younger heroine. "The conventional assumptions about womanhood are already in place as a part of novelistic characterization...the representation of adult women seems from the beginning to be confined within the femininity text" (109). Part of Didion's quarrel with the feminists is their preference for versions of experience that avoid or elide the complexities of adult

life, when adult is defined as intrinsically related to the very social structures feminists would have one repudiate. For Didion the difference between the quintessential crises of the young versus the adult female protagonist is the difference between foregoing what one never had experience of and losing what one holds most dear. To renounce the future is a far different gesture than to relinquish the past. For this reason, these adult heroines seem to require some event must intercept the ordinary quality of their experience to make them aware of the ideological dangers in the social structure within which they seek security.

This emotional/psychological paradigm holds true even when ordinary experience is far from ordinary, as is the case of Maria Wyeth. In this respect, Inez's story most strongly resembles that of Didion's protagonist in her second novel. A crucial feature the two protagonists share in common is their celebrity. While Maria's public image is derived from her work as an actress and a model, Inez's status is derivative not of active work but of static position, that of Harry Victor's wife. Maria finds the discrepancy between her image on film and her actual experience an intolerable conflict. Inez has virtually no private life to conflict with or critique her public persona. The narrative Joan Didion reports that Inez found it difficult to conceive of life beyond the camera range by the time the story unfolds. That is part of the appeal of

her tenuous but tenacious connection to Jack Lovett--it is one of the few events of her life which is conducted out of the public eye. So valued is the quality of privacy in Inez's life that she feels it imbues the romance with a mysterious power and accounts for its inexplicable longevity.

As public figures, Maria and Inez finally realize that their lives are scripted entirely by others, mostly males. Neither woman possesses the power to tell her own story. At any number of occasions in the story, Didion makes a point of reporting Inez's silence; most often, these are occasions that she should be the speaker. Part of Maria's paranoia about the production of any narratives in the novel has its roots in her experience of always being scripted by others, and inadequately so. Yet so addictive is that usurpation of human experience that Maria comes to rely on someone else's, anyone else's, version of events to make sense of her own life. The degree of her addiction is demonstrated by the episode with the young man in the duck pants and white Corvette who drives her to the place she gets the abortion. In and through his eyes, Maria's moral dilemma is diminished to a casual encounter about the relative values of different models of cars.

As the wife of a political figure, Inez's life is even more circumscribed than Maria's is. A public relations man, (a function adapted from the movies and applied to political life) Billy Dillon, one of the most memorable

characters in the novel, has the expressed purpose of providing Inez and her family with sanitized scripts of their lives, past, present and future. This man insinuates himself in even the most private of moments, advising Inez about how to cope with her jealousy of Harry's female groupies that accompany them on various political trips. This modern-day travesty of John the Baptist prepares the way for the newly-announced saviour of society in 1970, Harry Victor, who must be accompanied by the golden nuclear family.

When a crises occurs in the Victor family, the emphasis is not on how to solve the problem or how to determine its causes; their collective energy and time is spent deciding how to "advance" it to the press. An elaborate scenario is worked out between the local district attorney and the Christian family men about the disposition of their loony relative when he is indicted for the murder of his daughter and her lover. These "mutually choreographed proceedings" are conducted without consulting the man's closest living relative, his daughter, Inez (179). One of the best lines in the book belongs to Inez who is almost always silent during these absurd exchanges of inflated rhetoric. Billy Dillon informs Inez that he is at a loss about what to tell Harry to do when Harry's plan to collect Jessie by private plane to attend her aunt's funeral is derailed by Jessie's refusal to attend funerals as a matter of principle. "Tell him he should have advanced it better," Inez retorts (171).

A disinclination to be caught up in the "stories" produced by others causes Maria and Inez to be reticent in the production of even their own narratives. The first-person sections of Maria's story comprise only 15 of the total 212 pages of the novel, and much of those fifteen pages is left blank. When pressed to explain her decision to remain in Kuala Lumpur, Inez Victor produces only thirteen words in her defense: "Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air. Four fucking reasons. Love, Inez" (232). Like Maria, Inez resorts to the aesthetic aspects of her environment as a focus for her newly-achieved autonomy. "Carter called today, but I saw no point in talking to him. On the whole I talk to no one. I concentrate on the way light would strike filled Mason jars on a kitchen window sill. I lie here in the sunlight and watch the hummingbird" (213). Thus Maria explains her austere repudiation of the social structures that have circumscribed her experience.

While Inez Victor's position at the end of her story is clearly preferable to that of Maria's (unlike Maria, Inez is content and engaged in productive work), nonetheless both women share a sense that it is pointless to explain their actions to those who will never understand. A point of difference though is that Maria assumes no one will understand, whereas Inez at least gives Joan Didion the opportunity to try. Even more, Inez entrusts Didion the reporter/narrator with her story. This is a significant

gesture considering Inez's previous experience with the press. On one occasion when queried as to the "major cost" of public life, Inez responds, "Memory, mainly" (51). When prompted to elucidate her remark, Inez indicates that public life causes one to lose track of one's whole life, that it is as if one had undergone shock treatment. She informs the press agent that "things that might or might not be true get repeated in the clips until you can't tell the difference" (53). When the reporter protests that she wants the 'true' version from Inez herself, Inez replies, "You might as well write it from the clips. Because I've lost track. Which is what I said in the first place" (53).

By the time the narrative Joan Didion visits Inez in Kuala Lumpur, she is Didion's sole source of information surrounding the events of Jack Lovett's death. Inez's memory has improved considerably by this time, precisely because it has not been tampered with by press agents or news releases for several months. In fact the reporter, Joan Didion, has to make three separate requests for an interview before Inez inexplicably grants one six months after the murder of her sister, the disappearance of her daughter, and her decision to leave Honolulu with Jack Lovett in the spring of 1975. During the summer and fall that follows, the narrative Joan Didion conjectures that Inez "seemed to have renounced whatever stake in the story she might have had, and erected the baffle of her achieved serenity between herself and what had happened" (216).

During that time Inez directs Didion to the stories produced by Harry Victor or Billy Dillon as sufficient explanations of her actions.

Only when a number of stories begin to circulate about Jack Lovett's activities during and after the Vietnam War does Inez Victor reconsider her vow of silence. The reporter Joan Didion assumes Inez's decision to talk with the press is, in effect, a ploy to allow Jack Lovett to defend himself against the mounting allegations of wrong-doing. Didion discovers that assumption to be "too easy a reading of Inez Victor"; as it turns out, Inez wants to inform Didion of Jack's death two months previous to her visit; therefore he will be unavailable to answer the congressional subpoena issued for an investigation of his wartime conduct. In the romance story, Inez's gesture seems worthy of Guinivere in Camelot, as an attempt to salvage the damaged reputation of her much aligned hero--a quintessential romantic gesture. Hers is an effort to offer a rival version of the many stories produced by the press of Jack's activities and Didion's own in Democracy A Novel.

But the double sense of critique of and attachment to the romance story produced in the novel is to be discovered in the relationship of the frame text to the story it encloses. It is in the dialectic between the "romance" narrative, whose characters and events recall 'factual' occurrences, and the history of the "romance", constructed

by an apparently 'factual' Joan Didion, that the complexity of Didion's novel reveals itself. The pivotal point of intersection of the two tales functions to critique the democratic ideal referred to by its title. It is also where this deceptively sleek and transparent fiction begins to double and redouble back on itself. "This is a hard story to tell," the narrative Joan Didion claims on page 15 at the end of Chapter One. The sense of the difficulty the narrator struggles with becomes apparent only when one tries, as I do, to articulate the patterns of significance in this intricately-woven story of public and private life in contemporary America.

A focal point for this novelistic intrigue resides in the position of the narrator--as the reporter, Joan Didion. The factuality of this narrative agent as well as the particular approach she uses to present her narrative are aspects of the novel much commented upon in reviews of Democracy A Novel.

Many reviews complain about the anti-fictional devices employed by this narrator just as others ignore them; still other reviewers grudgingly admit the novel warrants its complexity. Two reviewers focus on the individual scenes that remain with the reader after the book is read. Both Anne Tyler and Laura Berman find this Conradian influence the primary appeal of the novel.

Martha Duffy of Time Magazine and Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of The New York Times find the metafictional

techniques unnecessary and ultimately unjustified. Duffy calls this self-conscious attention to narrative "throat clearing" (114) while Lehmann-Haupt accuses Didion of "mostly fashionable gestures of despair" (23). (The latter accusation is an oft repeated one by critics who tend to revolve around either end of the political extremes.)

The review of Christopher Hitchens in Times Literary Supplement depicts Didion's allusions to her literary past in the most unflattering light, referring to stylistic choices that reflect "the undigested influences of Kurt Vonnegut" or that display the credentials of "a student with some, but not many, courses in Hemingway" (1018). He then proceeds to dismiss Didion as a writer who like her character "must be introspective, even self-doubting. The cuticles, perhaps, a little gnawed" (1018).

In Yale Review, Howard aptly notes that Didion's narrator is not required as the teller of her tale in the way that "Gatsby and Daisy need to have Nick around....I can find no development in this character, no pressure, emotional or artistic, that exerts itself within the text to include her as more than an arty stage manager who switches the scene in front of us" (xiv). This reviewer calls Didion's resolution to Inez' story more sentimental than Henry Adams'. "Didion elevates Inez to cinematic sainthood, a romantic solution" (xvi). While he touches succinctly on questions that need to be raised regarding Didion's novel, his answers are too simplistic. Howard

notes the disregard for literary convention or the questionable employment with equal deprecation; but more seriously, I think, without crediting the authorial Joan Didion with the literary finesse to make these discontinuities intentional.

Not that Didion's novel ever truly escapes being "deeply enigmatic" as Oates observes in her review. Oates, too, wonders about the book's "knowingness", but speculates that it may be connected to the novel's celebrity theme (19). Oates" perception that "everyone in '_Democracy_' is some kind of insider...the author herself has some complicity in the insider-outsider game" (19) rings true in my reading as well and is a point I will return to later.

But first, the two reviews that provide the most comprehensive look at Didion's novel perceive a relationship between its title, its style, its structure, and its subject. Michael Wood, in _The London Review of Books_, detects these salient features of the work in his comparison of Didion's novel to one by Angela Carter. "But what if the first freedom [the freedom to juggle with language] is illusory, if all we have to juggle with is cliché, the language of others, a shabby idiom we can't refresh and can't abandon? What if the 'shop-soiled...romance'...seems...merely worn down, beaten thin, at best only the shadow of an old puzzle? This is the dilemma that confronts the narrator and characters in Joan Didion's _Democracy_, a novel whose title itself mimes a

slippery problem. Democracy, in Didion's work, is not a form of government, but an item of rhetoric" (16).

In the New York Times Book Review, Thomas R. Edwards supports Wood's observations with his own account of the importance of unrelated facts as a metaphor for the democratic value of literal equality. "The significant relations [emphasis added] of events wash away in a flood of facts those equally circumstantial details that news reporting democratically represents as being about equal in import" (23). Thomas, too, focuses on the slipperiness of language and meaning in contemporary society by his statement that "...the larger subject must be the evanescence of thought and moral judgement in a world of ceaselessly unsortable information" (23). At the end of the review, Thomas acknowledges that Democracy "finally earns its complexity of form...and the presence in it of "Joan Didion" trying to tell it is an essential part of its subject" (24).

The metafictional structure of Didion's novel allows her to fictionalize her persona as a public figure in the guise of the reporter-narrator. Thus the structure is a narrative devise which merges fictional and factual information. It is necessary to examine Didion's narrative strategy from both perspectives--that of reporter and that of narrator--in order to comprehend the larger issues in this complex novel. Examining Didion's actual status as a reporter of contemporary culture will illuminate and inform

my reading of the narrative function this persona performs in the novel. For it is through the reportorial persona that the metafictional devices reveal and critique themselves in the work.

Perhaps the blurring of fact and fiction is most readily ascertained in the factual knowledge of Joan Didion's writing which is included in the novel. She did, in fact, work as a feature writer for Vogue for six years; she did subsequently travel around the globe interviewing famous people for various magazines, such as Saturday Evening Post, Life and Esquire. She has also taught novel courses from time to time at her alma mater, Berkeley. And like her characters in Democracy, Joan Didion has achieved a modicum of celebrity.

The celebrity status for a moderately successful writer as for a moderately successful politician comes "with the life", as Billy Dillon would and did say to Inez Victor (48). This contemporary phenomenon, which applies as much to the fiction writer as to the journalist, constitutes an object of study itself. In his work, Fact and Fiction John Hollowell addresses the celebrity status of writers. "Like the novelist, the reporter has created a public reputation for himself in the same way that movie stars and politicians have for some time" (51). This development of a personality Hollowell attributes, in the case of the journalist, to the shift in perspective in the new journalism. "Our usual vision of the journalist as a

dispassionate observer who gathers facts but stays out of the action himself has yielded to that of participant-observer" (52). The works of Mailer, Wolfe, and Hersey are cited as examples of the new approach.

Nor is the writer of fiction excluded from this altered relationship with the reading public. Hollowell refers to John Raeburn's observation that "...the writer has become a commodity to be consumed by the public" (54) as evidence of the epidemic spread of the cult of personality. Raeburn goes on to posit that "the mass media and the celebrity have a symbiotic relationship: in return for the fame they bestow on him the celebrity allows his private life--his character, his tastes, and his attitudes--to become a commodity to be consumed by the mass audience" (54).

As part of that breed of new journalist, Didion is subject to or perhaps seeks (depending on which critic one reads) the publicity attendant to making oneself the protagonist of one's own work, as Hollowell claims these writers do (14). Interviews with Didion and her writer-husband, John Gregory Dunne, regularly appear in the nation's popular magazines. Hollowell finds John Aldrige's remark a suitable description of this cultural phenomenon. "Literary production in our society can no longer be separated from its promotion" (49). Like other writers, Didion and Dunne are active in the promotion of the work they produce. Each magazine article is an insurance policy against the sales of past and future books.

So Didion's choice of her public persona, or "personality", to include as narrator of her tale, troubles this novel. For as a public person, as a certain kind of "celebrity" whose books are always reviewed in the most prestigious magazines, or who periodically appears on Phil Donahue to promote her latest book, surely she herself, and not just her narrator-mime, is as implicated in the scathing critique of this cultural phenomena the novel provides as are its characters, Billy Dillon, Harry Victor or Jack Lovett. In Democracy, Didion, the "outsider" has definitely become an "insider", as Joyce Carol Oates so aptly points out (19).

Some of Didion's critics see her as not only implicated by the nominal celebrity that accompanies the sale of her books, or her work with her husband as screenwriters, but some also see her as contaminated by the greed, avarice, and envy associated with the very rich in America. To achieve commercial success as an American writer in the 1970s and 80s is to become suspect, to be dismissed as a cohort of the television and movie personalities so disdained by academic and literary circles. Lahr maintains that to seek fame or to become famous in this climate is to foster an elaborate cultural self-deception. "Fame dramatizes vindictiveness as drive, megalomania as commitment, hysteria as action, greed as just reward" (228). This critic claims that it is the famous who justify the perpetuation of an American Dream that is

everywhere else questioned or disproved.

As a denizen of the Hollywood milieu, Didion (with her husband) is especially singled out for such censure. Her critique of that culture is dismissed as an act of complicity. "She needs the fiction to rationalize the fact she is part of the problem she analyzes....She is obsessed with the moral emptiness around her because she embraces it. The story she tells is that her suffering sets her apart..." (206, 213). Labeling Didion as a "technician of trauma", and thereby displaying some of his own complicity with the penchant for catchy phrases, this critic condemns Didion to the "aristocracy of success" which seems to preclude finding any redeeming quality in her work whatsoever (213).

From one perspective these comments have a certain validity, especially if one is repulsed by the cult of "personality" as this critic appears to be. Also the fact that Didion does address this issue of celebrity, and include a representative of her public self in that address, in her fourth novel lends additional credence to some of the observations put forward in this exceptionally vituperative assault on her work.

Other observers of the dilemma of the writer in contemporary culture offer a rather different and more efficacious view of this situation however. They attribute the foregrounding of the self in a writer's work (a crucial point of contention in the previous censure of Didion's

work) to very different conditions. Hollowell insists that the subject and style of the new journalists (among whom he includes Didion) is determined by the extreme experiences of the 60's, the decade this new genre blossomed on the American literary scene (40). Thus the new journalists chose as their subjects the celebrities and personalities making news, the youth subculture, the extraordinary crime or violent protest movement. He sees the writer's placing of him or her self in history as an admirable gesture and one that is radical in its political implications. "Almost by definition, new journalism is a revolt by the individual against homogenized forms of experience, against monolithic versions of the truth," John Hellmann declares in Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction (8).

The emphasis on the personal perspective functions as a resistance to the "corporate fictions" manufactured daily by the media rather than as a gesture of self-aggrandizement for the new journalist. In describing the condition of contemporary culture in the 60's, Hellmann asserts that "the contemporary individual was in less need of facts than of an understanding of the facts already available" (3). The new journalism took as its mission the insertion of the personal perspective into an assessment of collective phenomenon, and in so doing, declares a specific origin for the relationships established among the multitude of random and isolated facts proliferated by the media.

The position of the new journalism however always leave its practitioners vulnerable to the lure of fame and fortune, to the seduction of the celebrity image. John Hollowell mentions this intrinsic difficulty in his assessment of the development and success of the genre. "Despite the actual literary accomplishments of the best new journalism, then, the rhetoric of its promoters [i.e. Tom Wolfe] has greatly amplified its impact. It became a dominant form of writing in the sixties, not only because it describes the important changes that took place in that decade, but also because it was itself the object of such scrutiny. The new journalism as a cultural phenomena, then, must be seen both as an agent and as an object in a society dedicated to making experience continually more surprising and exciting" (62). In this respect, all literary efforts, fiction and non-fiction, and by extension, the producers of such efforts, like Didion, are implicated to some extent in the American quest for novelty as an end in itself. But surely writers, such as Didion, who perceive and address the ambiguity of their positions deserve recognition for that self-critical effort; for no writer or critic is ever exempt from the cultural phenomena critiqued in his or her work.

As part of a small female minority, Didion participated in the journalistic revolt conducted by males such as Mailer, Thompson, Capote, Hersey and Wolfe. (The issue of her gender in relation to this experience is a topic

explored in Chapter Five.) Indeed, it was through her work as a journalist rather than as a fiction writer that Didion gained the recognition she has acquired in literary circles. So it is ironic but exceedingly appropriate that she subject that aspect of her public self to narrative scrutiny as the narrator of a novel about celebrity.

That version of her public self however does not easily comply with conventional expectations of the first-person narrator. As Lahr mentions, the "narrative Joan Didion" fails to become a recognizable character in the novel; she remains a voice-piece, a director of rather than a participant in the narrative action she sets in motion. It is unclear what connection she has to the story she relates; if she is fascinated by a truth (Inez Victor's romance) stranger than fiction, or if that interest is only a pretext for examining the limits of narrative itself, if narrative structure fails to contain even the most formulaic versions of reality, the romance.

To examine these questions, it is necessary to delineate the clues of this relation between the narrator and her narrative as they are embedded in the text. Susan Lanser has defined point of view in her work, The Narrative Act: Point of View in Fiction, as distinct from other aspects of the novel because "unlike such textual elements as character, plot, or imagery, point of view is essentially a relationship rather than a concrete entity" (13). Lanser then sets out certain procedures whereby the

relationship between the narrator and narrative produced (among others, the relation of narrator to audience, to author, to society) can be retrieved from the text. Because these multifaceted relationships are both foregrounded (as metafictional techniques) and subverted (as incidental clues) in the text of Democracy, Lanser's model will help to illuminate aspects of the novel that have perplexed or frustrated its readers.

Susan Lanser's model is derived from Speech Act Theory and so views its subject from three angles: status of speaker (literary and social); mode of contact established between narrator and narratee; and stance of narrator toward characters and events narrated (130). In addition, Lanser addresses the issue of silence in a text; who does not speak or see, what is not said, what is not shown. "Indeed, it is this inquiry into absence that can reveal most dramatically the relationship between ideology and technique through the structuring of point of view; the exploration of absence uncovers the system of values which has made the textual perspective seem natural (or purely technical) rather than ideological" (214).

The first indices Lanser designates as significant in this exploration is the status of the literary speaker as a literary and social construct. That status is comprised of the distance from the authorial voice, the narrative privilege granted the narrator, and the narrator's social and psychological identity.

In Democracy A Novel, the voice of the narrator is to be considered as virtually equivalent to that of the authorial Joan Didion. "The equivalence of author and narrator implies an authorial responsibility that is similar to an author's responsibility for his or her nonfictional work. The responsibility is imaginative and ideological whether or not it is referential" (153). The only distinction to be made between the narrative and authorial Didion is the distinction between the public and the private Joan Didion. This is a distinction the novel clearly indicates may be vast. Thomas Edwards makes a note of this distinction as an important clue in understanding the enigma of Jack Lovett. "If there is a point to Lovett's combination of qualities, it may simply be that public performances don't reliably fit the contours of the private self inside" (24). This is a point about which Didion would be sensitive as she has a reputation as a minor celebrity. Also, as with other women writers, Didion's private self is identified with not only her public persona but also with the image of her fictional characters. As I have shown, many critics see Didion as interchangeable with her female characters. This is a perception she both cultivates and resists in her portrayal of her public self as the narrator of her fourth novel.

Another characteristic which reflects the literary status of a narrator is the privilege accorded to the narrator with regard to the range of perception he or she

exercises in the novel. The query to be posed is whether the narrator is confined within the limits of human perception or if he or she can claim omniscience. The position of Didion's narrator is near the end of this continuum, claiming to be a reporter of people and events in the public eye and therefore subject to human limitations as to what she can know. All information comes to this narrator either through direct observation or via the report of others. And over it all is the consciousness of a mind selecting, interpreting, and juxtaposing details. This mind of the reporter recalls the consciousness that emerges in the new journalism, which essentially adapts the techniques of fiction to factual reporting.

Given that many of the "fictional" characters and events in Democracy bear a striking resemblance to "factual" ones from that actual time period, the referential claim of the novel becomes somewhat problematic. Zav, in The Mythopoeic Reality, discusses the differences between works that are mono-referential and those that are bi-referential. Monoreferential works refer to one world, either factual or fictional, such as conventional fiction or journalism. Bi-referential works refer to both actual and imagined worlds at the same time; works such as Mailer's Armies of the Night and Capote's In Cold Blood are examples of the latter. Didion's fourth novel, in Zav's terms, is a work of fiction which masquerades as a work of non-fiction; a monoreferential

text which mimics the characteristics of a bi-referential text. Zav's discussion of the differences in plot between what he designates as the "fictive" novel (i.e. conventional) and the nonfictional novel will help to demonstrate the nature of Didion's literary gymnastics. "Although the plot of the fictive novel may be taken in greater or lesser degree from actual events, it is, in its entirety, a narrative correlative for the author's reading of the "human condition"...the "plot" of the non-fiction novel is one with the author's donneè" (80). The fictional situation of Didion's reporter-narrator can be seen to correspond with this author's donneè, even though it is also fairly clear that the plot also constitutes Didion's reading of the human condition. As an actual reporter who follows the careers of public figures and creates their "stories", Didion is highly cognizant of the "textual" nature of such reports and of public life in general. But that situation applies to Didion as a producer of texts as well. That producer of texts is what is codified in this novel as Joan-Didion, reporter-narrator. This strategy permits the novel to achieve a kind of bierefentiality then, by announcing itself as a fictional construct that directly refers to an aspect of Didion's factual existence. Such a strategy reveals the fictionality of fact and the factuality of fiction.

A third category of characteristics that depict the status of a fictional narrator is the narrator's social and

psychological identity. The overt social identity of Didion's narrator is confined almost entirely to her professional status. The reader is informed that the narrator is a professional journalist who sometimes teaches a course at the university. Even the reference to the narrator's production of fiction is oblique. That situation is implied only by the attention given to the narrative construction of the novel. Other facts of social identity are to be inferred; for instance, that the narrator is female, that she is an American, of Caucasian ancestry, and of the upper middle class. Sexual preference and marital status are factors neither addressed directly or in any way alluded to. This omission contributes significantly to the impression of certain readers that the narrator is not a fully developed character and thus does not justify so obvious a presence in the novel. The omission of gender-specific could also serve to direct attention to human problems that are what Didion has claimed are more general than that of being female.

The narrator's psychological identity is established through her credibility as a teller of tales. She appears honest and reliable in relation to the 'facts' of the story she tells; her competence to assess the relation of those 'facts' to each other is a point she questions herself however. As narrator-reporter, she professes a lack of skill that stands in ironic contrast to the skill with which she displays her ostensible incompetence. She finds

her material intractable and her conceptual machinery inadequate to the task. In this respect, the narrator's situation is reminiscent of Maria's in Play It As It Lays; it is as if Didion takes up Maria's problem and reworks it in Democracy, A Novel.

"I have no unequivocal way of beginning" (16), the narrator informs her audience, and then proceeds to detail all the ways of beginning that have been rejected. That retrieval of the rejected beginnings serves as the initiating point of the narrative. So there is a certain dissumlation on the part of the narrator which creates an element of suspense in a story whose outcome is known in advance.

The kinds and modes of contact between the narrator and the narratee is another factor that determines point of view for Lanser. That contact can range anywhere on a spectrum from direct to indirect contact. For instance, neither the narrative "I", no the narratee "you", exists in Didion's first novel, Run River. As Lanser observes, the occurrence of the personal pronouns in the third-person narrative structure of such a novel "would constitute a breach of the decorum of the text"; although used sparingly, the occurrence of the personal pronouns is not disruptive in Maria's narrative, most of which is related through a close third-person perspective. The direct "I" and "you" appear in both A Book of Common Prayer and Democracy, A Novel. Lanser states further that only when

there is a possibility of "I-you" contact is it possible for narrative self-consciousness to exist (176). Thus Didion's novel become, as does the age she lives in, increasingly self-conscious.

The degree of narrative self-consciousness is another measure of the contact established between a narrator and narratee. In Democracy, that consciousness threatens to displace the story being narrated. As a corollary to this, the novel can insist that the narratee remain a passive observer of the narrative's activities or become an active participant in the re-construction of the narrative. Didion's fourth novel demands the highest degree of activity from its narratee. Christopher Hitchens refers to the effort required by this demand in Didion's novel. "Effort must be expended in turning back pages for brief and testing refresher courses. But the effort is often worthwhile" (1018). What emerges in this highly active interchange between narrator and narratee is a focus that so strongly accentuates the production of narrative as a collective event. The story or the content of the narrative then becomes a pretext for this indirect but essential writer/reader contact. Texts themselves, by requiring that readers actively participate in the production of meaning, come to function as affiliative modes of contact in contemporary society.

The effort toward affiliation is supported by the attitude toward the narratee/reader that is embedded in the

text. Again, Lanser points out a range of possibilities exist from confidence to uncertainty, deference to contempt, and formality to informality (178-79). Didion's narrator displays a great deal of confidence in the narratee, directly addressing that textual personage: "as a reader you are ahead of the narrative here" (160). But then Didion's narrator goes on to suggest that if the reader has not already guessed the outcome of the story, "you might have seen the film clip I mentioned" or remembered the event from television and news stories (160). Here the reader as well as the writer conspire to blur the edges of fact from fiction. The intimacy of this mode of contact permits the inference that Didion's narrator presumes a position of relative equivalence between herself and her audience. (An audience, by the way, the narrator obviously imagines to be like herself--literary, educated, intellectual.) The intimacy established though is through the nature of the activity shared-making meaning--and not through other points of affinity--i.e. social factors. In this respect, the narrator's lack of or oblique reference to certain facets of social identity can aid in establishing the contact desired. This is especially true for writers such as Didion whose personal identity may and does alienate those who do not share her social privilege. To suppress those real differences of social context while emphasizing the potential for intellectual exchange between the narrator

and narratee is analogous to the formal but beneficial exchange that occurs between teachers and students...the roles often assumed by strangers engaged in the most intimate intellectual activity. Indeed, Didion's narrator not only refers to her role as teacher of the novel, she actually assumes it in this narrative; she employs her professional knowledge as a reporter as a teaching model. "I was trained to distrust other people's versions, but we go with what we have. We triangulate the coverage. Handicap for bias. Figure in the leanings, predilictions, the special circumstances which change the spectrum in which any given observer will see a situation. Consider what filter is on the lens. So to speak" (124). That model of course is also good advice for reading the narrative.

The equivalence of power shared in the construction of the narrative also points to a felicitous application of the democratic ideal so cynically scrutinized in the content of the novel. Thus the narrative structure operates to provide a rival version of the cynical if valid perception of American democracy in the late twentieth century. This conscious attempt to establish an affinity between narrator and narratee (writer/reader) also distinguishes Didion from her literary predecessors, Henry Adams. The attempt also aims to avert the condition Said describes as typical of written discourse especially: "far from being a type of conversation between equals, the

discursive situation is more usually like the unequal relation between colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed" (179). Like Inez Victor, Didion discovers she needs to relinquish her "American exemption", that "her passport did not excuse her from...history..." (211). To engage in this democratic technique of narrative construction is a radical change from the Didion who claimed almost total power over a reader in "Why I Write".

The third item of consideration in this relation between technique and ideology that Lanser posits is that of stance. Stance is the term Lanser uses to describe the conventional aspects of point of view as technique. Lanser opposes the tendency to focus almost exclusively on "how" point of view is presented while neglecting the "what" that technique conveys. She employs Boris Upinsky's framework of four planes (A Poetics of Composition) to describe the levels at which stance is operative and can be retrieved from the text: phraseological, spatial and temporal, psychological, and ideological. Lanser privileges the ideological and psychological, claiming that the first two planes are merely structuring devices for the latter (184). What seems most important though in her analysis is how the plane overlap.

The phraseological plane distinguishes the discourse of the narrator as narrator from the discourse of characters, called mimetic discourse. The narrator's own discourse is designated as diegetic and represents the extreme of this

continuum. In one sense Didion's novel operates at this extreme position because all language in the novel is the narrator's direct report of events, including the discourse of other characters. Indeed the ability of the narrator to critique directly or indirectly the speech of the characters comprises an ideological function of the text: to display the underside of the move toward affiliation in a contemporary democratic society. The increased significance attributed to linguistic functions and the discontinuity perceived between language and experience occupies a privileged position in contemporary thought. The preference for democracy, an affiliative mode of government, rather than for a filiative mode such as monarchy, points to the loss of hierarchal structure in the political realm as in the epistemological sphere. These forces combine in particularly volatile fashion in the late twentieth century America. "In place of a communal language of values, there have developed a myriad of idiolects which have in effect created a new Tower of Babel in the nascent cybernetic metropolis" (Zav 29). This is a cultural phenomena that Democracy A Novel records, represents, and repudiates.

Examples of inane rhetoric abound in the novel and supply many of its humorous or marcarbe moments. Didion's narrator captures the versatility of this linguistic disease as it encroaches upon virtually every profession: legal, medical, educational, entrepreneurial, the military

and the press. Dick Zeigler informs the public relations agent, Billy Dillon, that "there's considerable feeling here that we can contain this to an accident" (119) when referring to his wife's murder by her father. "The problem at hand, as you put it, is substance habituation," the therapist chides Inez when she consults him about Jessie's addiction to heroine (63). The police report of Janet Zeigler's death contains its own version of the linguistic mutation: "OFFICERS ENTERED RESIDENCE VIA OPEN DOOR, NOTED NO EVIDENCE OR DISARRAY OR STRUGGLE, AND PROCEED TO LANAI, THEREBY LOCATING FEMALE VICTIM LATER IDENTIFIED AS JANET CHRISTIAN ZEIGLER LYING FACE DOWN ON THE CARPET" (113). The entire document which goes on for a couple of pages is in capital letters as if the use of the upper and lower case might violate the objectivity aimed at in the report. Paul Christian, a lunatic murderer, indulges in his own version of rhetorical madness that is virtually indistinguishable from the 'sane' versions offered by the medical or legal professions who treat him. The medical profession is equally obtuse in matters of life and death, claiming it is not an either or position. "The patient was not technically dead, no. The patient's electroencephalogram had not even flattened out yet. Technical death would not occur until they had not one but three flat electroencephalograms, consecutive, spaced eight hours apart" (151).

Michael Wood aptly expresses the situation of the novel

when he says "the book is in one sense about the language these characters inhabit, the awful homes of stereotype they make or borrow to live in. Didion creates a sort of chamber music of their jargon..." (16). The reader/narratee will succumb to this incantation at his or her own peril however, as crucial bits of information are tucked in between the folds of this inflated prose. For instance, in a listing of things she does have to work with, the narrator details several photographs of the Christian family. Included in her description of the photograph of Paul Christian is the first mention in the novel of the central event of the plot, but the mention seems incidental as do the other details given the plethora of information made available without a context in which to construct meaning from it.

The spatial and temporal planes of narrative stance correspond to the more conventional notion of point of view. In Democracy, the narrator is free to shift focus from character to character but remains technically outside of the character's consciousness attending to the surface detail of speech or gesture in the true reportorial stance. The narrative relies on the reconstruction of conversations and scenes as reported by one of the main characters, often reported in the diction of that character, or on reports or documents connected to the evénts. The temporal aspect of point of view is securely posterior in that all events of the novel have ben completed before the narrative begins.

However, the narratee/reader is provided with clues in a piece meal fashion, many of which as I have indicated appear trivial or irrelevant when first encountered. The process of accumulating detail through repetition and development of content replicates the process by which humans acquire, decipher and assess information, separating the significant from the trivial after the fact. Didion's narrator comments on this epistemological method of the narrative form within the metafictional structure of the text. Referring to a repetition of Inez Victor's four reasons for staying in Kuala Lumpur, the narrator says, "I told you the essence of that early on but not the context, which has ben, you will note, the way I tried to stay on the wire in this novel of fitful glimpses" (232). There is a certain temporal factor involved in this acquisition of knowledge which will vary for each reader and for each reading of the novel.

Psychological aspects of point of view are revealed through the distribution of scene and summary in the conventional novel; the idea being that whatever character or event is given more attention, the greater the importance of that element in the novel. Implicit in this rationale is the understanding that the narrator will establish an affinity for a character or event so attended to and supply a maximal amount of information about that aspect of the novel. These expectations are radically challenged in Democracy A Novel as part of the book's plan

to deprive the narrative of such conventional scaffolding. The most important psychological factor appears to be repetition of certain phrases and scenes as a method of acquiring significance and thus meaning. What changes in each instance is the context in which these items are placed; as the context accumulates more detail, meaning is accrued.

The opening chapter serves as a good example of this strategy. It is a record of the conversation between Inez Victor and Jack Lovett the night she walks out of the Christian family home in Honolulu. Jack is speaking rather elaborately of the bomb tests conducted in the Pacific atolls in 1952, the year he meets Inez Victor. When the reader first encounters this scene it is Jack's aesthetic description of the sky during the tests that grips one's attention. It is not until several repetitions of certain segments of this scene that the real significance of those bomb tests for Jack is made clear; the bomb tests are his way of remembering his first encounter with the seventeen year old girl he embarks on a twenty year affair with. But in the original scene it is "the light at dawn during those Pacific tests" that "are something to see. Something to behold" (11).

But Didion's narrator is careful to disperse the elements of repetition almost randomly throughout the novel so as to defer, delay, or diffuse significance. Reading the novel is literally an exercise in making one's way

through a plethora of 'facts', many of which are merely digressions, to achieve a state of comprehension whereby the relation of these disparate facts begins to coalesce into meaning. This process is complicated by the design of the novel which provides several versions of events without privileging one over the others. In addition to the narrator's story, the novel presents the 'stories' of Inez Victor, Jack Lovett, Billy Dillon, Harry Victor, Dwight and Paul Christian, Dick and Janet Zeigler, and Adlai and Jessie Victor.

As Lanser indicates in her work, the psychological and ideological planes combine especially in the attitude of the narrator toward characters and events described. The narrator's attitude may range from complete disapproval to unqualified approval, or register somewhere along that spectrum, and may vary from character to character and from event to event. Inez Victor, as protagonist, is the character's whose story is resolved most satisfactorily. Thus she clearly emerges as the most approved character in the novel. The narrator protects Inez from the most serious indictment in the novel--the use and abuse of language. As noted, when most of these rhetorical abuses are happening, Inez remains noticeably silent. As Wood observes, "Didion's given her an oblique, almost speechless romance" (17). Also, Inez changes, as does her daughter, something no one else in the novel seems to be able to accomplish. Indeed most of the women in the Christian

family are treated with some kindness even though they are not always immuned to the linguistic plight that devastates this social milieu.

The family men fare less well, and indeed receive the most severe censure by Didion's narrator. Harry and Adlai Victor, as well as Dwight and Paul Christian, are portrayed as little more than linguistic buffoons. As Billy Dillon manufactures rhetoric as his profession, he is seen as a more conscious and even humorous dispenser of such jargon. The fact that despite this venial fault, he silently cares for and about Inez apart from her role as Harry Victor's wife also exonerates Dillon. Jack Lovett, of course, is the male outsider and the only one truly given the badge of approval by Didion's narrator. Even so, as I have indicated, his portrayal is not unequivocal. He, too, parades his own brand of machismo/military cliche; "I told you when I saw you in Jakarta in 1969, you and I had the knack for interesting times," he tells Inez. "Jesus Christ, Jakarta. Ass end of the universe, southern tier. But I'll tell you one thing about Jakarta in 1969, Jakarta in 1969 beat Bien Hoa in 1969" (14).

Then there is the questionable nature of Lovett's activities which makes transparent the ease with which business and the military merge their rhetorics in contemporary society. Although Didion's narrator comes to Lovett's defense, declaring that what "Jack Lovett did was never black or white, and in the long run may even have

been (since the principal gain to him was another abstraction, the pyramiding of further information) devoid of ethical content altogether..." (219), the fact that he is portrayed as the hero of the romance narrative whose truth value is questioned by the larger design of the novel renders that defense less unqualified than it seems at first. Also of note is the fact that while Jack Lovett is the gun-runner in this novel, and is connected to the military-industrial complex that constitutes big business in post-war America, the liberal lawyer, Leonard Douglas in A Book of Common Prayer defended liberal causes and arranged for the sale of hardware to Third World countries. Clearly Didion the author, sees all political factions as imbricated in the coalition of business and the military.

Lanser identifies "three focal issues concerning any given narrator's or character's ideology: the way it is expressed, how its 'content' relates to the cultural text, and the position of power and authority held by the particular voice" which supports a given ideology (216). Using this system of analysis, the narrator's position is privileged over that of all the characters', as it is the only consistently dominant voice in the novel. Part of the narrator's task is to determine the nature and the value of the story she reports and thus the relation of literary systems to everyday life. The way the narrator's ideology is expressed is through explicit and implicit commentary on the 'content' of the narrative she constructs; the romance

of Inez and Jack as a literary genre, but also as a reading of the cultural text of a failed colonialism in conflict with or as a contrast to the linguistically diseased democracy portrayed in Didion's work. The other "stories" in the novel are the various themes that combine to produce the cacophony of sound that is Democracy A Novel. From that cacophony Inez emerges as "a troubling lyric in the middle of a song, a fragment of a song caught up in a narrative whose grace itself is suspect, and which the persistent song keeps threatening to unravel into mere rags of rational guesswork" (Wood 17).

The narrator's own discourse in the novel is a discourse of critical commentary on the romance she produces in an effort to tell Inez Christian Victor's story. As such, she engages in the "debate between the inheritor and critic" DuPlessis characterizes as an essentially post-modern feminist act. The reporter Joan Didion indicates her deep attachment to this cultural value--the romance as a link between life and literature--while she simultaneously critiques the impoverishment of that literary system in a post-industrial, democratic society. The focus of that critique is to be found in the narrator's commentary on the narrative process in which she is engaged.

The narrator's predicament begins when her narrative begins: "I have no unequivocal way of beginning..." the narrative Joan Didion informs her readers after she has

presented and discarded a couple of possibilities. Chapter One, the literal beginning of Didion's novel reconstructs the pivotal scene in the Happy Talk Bar between the lovers, Inez Victor and Jack Lovett. But the narrator finds that opening inadequate, so looks to the literary past for assistance. "Call me the author. Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion, upon whose character and doings much will depend of whatever interests these pages may have, as she sits at her writing table in her own room in her own house on Welbeck Street. So Trollope might begin this novel" (16).

The literary allusion, which is implicitly discarded even as it explicitly remains, acquires real significance only in retrospect. On a first reading, it appears as a rupture in the structure of the novel. But that rupture signals two important features of the novel which follows. First, the reference to Trollope suggests the production of a certain kind of literary work--a realistic romance. Thus the gesture of allusion to her literary past registers the narrator's position as an inheritor of a literary form; her rejection of the form establishes her as a critic of the past she inherits. The other important feature of this initial posture the narrator assumes is that the passage is a sample of literary rhetoric. In a book that is composed of the various idiolects that have replaced a common language this passage implicates reader and writer in the production of the very discourse--a literary one--these

individuals privilege.

The sample of past literary rhetoric is contrasted with another which the narrator presents as contemporary: the standard composition assignment. "Didion begins with a rather ironic reference to her immediate reason to write this piece. Try using this ploy as the opening of an essay; you may want to copy the ironic-but-earnest tone of Didion, or you might try making your essay witty. Consider the broader question of the effect of setting: how does Didion use the scene as a rhetorical base?....Consider, too, Didion's own involvement in the setting: an atmosphere results. How" (17). In addition to signaling the nature of academic rhetoric, this passage provides a glimpse of a writer noting the uses to which her words are put once they have achieved the autonomy of the printed page. In its context, the passage functions to juxtapose the narrator's uncertainty about the relevancy of narrative itself. (A problem the actual Didion discusses in The White Album.) The academic commentary implies a certainty and intention on the part of the writer that Didion's narrator finds dubious at best.

Another problem Didion's narrator encounters is the lack of narrative machinery to aid her in the story-telling process. "So I have no leper who comes to the door every morning at seven. No Tropical Belt Coal Company, no unequivocal lone figure on the crest of the immutable hill" (18). While these images remain enigmatic, they point to a

centrifical force around which narratives conventionally evolved. Later the narrator discovers in the process of telling the story that she has a scene which will perform the same function for her. "This scene is my leper at the door..." (78). However the revision is rendered ambiguous as it is situated between two scenes: one a glimpse of Inez as she will look at the bedside of her unconscious sister and the other Jack Lovett's view of Inez as she embarks from the plane in Honolulu "at 5:47 A.M. on the morning of March 26, 1975, crushing her lei in the rain on the runway.

Jack Lovett watching her.

"Get her out of the goddamn rain," Jack Lovett said to no one in particular" (78).

As both scenes focus on the few gesturesof concern expressed by anyone in the novel, they represent the ethos of responsibility Didion has stressed repeatedly in her works. The scenes are also linked by the fact that it is the death of her only sister that prompts Inez to follow the unfinished script of her life with Jack Lovett.

But at the beginning of the novel, the narrator withholds this connection because she says later, she knows "how not to tell you what you do not yet want to hear" (162). Instead, the narrator distracts the attention of the narratee/reader by detailing the history of the story she is producing, a history that consists of all the versions of the narrative she has "abandoned" (18).

But even her "abandoned" stories about the local history of the Islands centers on the lives of the Christian women. The narrator admits to a preference for the story of Carol Christian, Inez's mother; a woman who left her family without much explanation apparently. As this is more or less an act Inez will repeat later, the discarded story foreshadows the one Didion's narrator will reconstruct. The narrator offers a sample of the beginning of that story, complete with revisions and commentary. "Imagine my mother dancing," that novel began....You will notice that the daughters in romantic stories always remember their mothers dancing..." (21), the narrator points out. Carol Christian is then limned out as an ultra-romantic who invests even the most mundane occasions with an aura of the exceptional. That the story of Carol Christian is one that bears a strong resemblance to Didion's own literary history is suggested by the dismissive comment: "What I had there was a study in provincial manners, in the tyrannies of class and privilege by which such people assert themselves against the tropics" (22). The narrator cites her interest in Carol Christian's position "as an outsider", an interest Didion has demonstrated in a previous novel, A Book of Common Prayer. As the discarded story of Carol Christian is primarily about her propensity to view her life as an enactment of a romantic dream, the narrator has suggested, although not explored, a link between the "colonial impulse" and the

"romantic sensibility" Didion has used to describe Carol's predecessor, Charlotte Douglas. The potential linkage is one that will surface again in Carol's daughter's story, which proves to be a reworking of her mother's predicament.

The other distraction offered by the narrator-reporter Joan Didion is the bits and pieces with which she announces she will construct a story. There are "certain things" she has "in mind": lines from a Wallace Stevens poem, Inez Victor's four reasons for remaining in Kuala Lumpur, Jack Lovett's pink dawns, and her own recurrent dream "in which my entire field of vision fills with rainbow, in which I open a door onto a growth of tropical green...and watch the spectrum separate into pure color" (17). The only apparent connection between these four fragments is the absence or irrelevance of human endeavor. Jack Lovett's "pink dawns", which no painter can capture, being a possible exception, although even they are noted because of their aesthetic value. "Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air," explains Inez are her reasons for preferring Kuala Lumpur to Honolulu or New York. Of course, as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Inez Victor's stated reasons for her decision and her action--"spent on the administration of what are by now the dozen refugee camps around Kuala Lumpur" (234)--do not exactly coincide, although they do not collide either. By the end of her narrative, the narrator has come to view these factors as fused into one

image: "a sudden sense of Inez and of the office in the camp and of how it feels to fly into that part of the world, of the dense greens and translucent blues and the shallows where islands once were" (234).

This fusion of the historical processes of nature which includes human activity represents a shift in the narrator's position over the course of the novel. In her initial statement, it is the absence of the human or at least its insignificance that appeals to her. The poem by Wallace Stevens is a case in point:

> The palm at the end of the mind,
> Beyond the last thought, rises
> In the bronze distance,
> A gold-feathered bird
> Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
> Without human feeling, a foreign song.

This preference for the post-historical is indicated in the narrator's analysis of why she lacks the familiar reliable machinery of narrative. "In fact no immutable hill: as the granddaughter of a geologist I learned early to anticipate the absolute mutability of hills and waterfalls and even islands....A hill is a transitional accommodation to stress, and ego may be a similar accommodation. A waterfall is a self-correcting maladjustment of stream to structure, and so, for all I know, is technique" (18). In this statement the narrator reveals her post modernist tendency to see personality and its representative

narrative as passing historical moments. "Consider any of these things long enough and you will see that they tend to deny the relevance not only of personality but of narrative" (17) she instructs her narratee/reader. Thus narrative activity is represented as literary rhetoric is--as only one possibility among many available as human endeavors. The particular dilemma of the post modern reader/writer (or narrator/narratee) is the loss of reliable systems of privilege. Not knowing what detail may prove to be significant in life as in literature, both writer and reader undertake the risky task of making meaning together.

On her way to that end, the reporter-narrator Didion begins to weave together the narrative fabric made of the "fitful glimpses" called Democracy A Novel (232). As part of that process, she provides overt and covert critical commentary about the material she finds available for this questionable endeavor. An important feature of this critical commentary is the demythification of the standard clichès of the romance narrative.

"First looks are widely believed instructive...I wonder," the narrative Joan Didion contemplates as she begins the novel proper. Then she proceeds to reconstruct her own first sight of Jack Lovett, who she remembers thinking might be Inez's father. "The instructiveness of that moment remains moot" (34) she remarks later, and thereby deconstructs the myth of love-at-first-sight which

encourages a deterministic view of the romance narrative. As the narrative Didion reminds her narratee/reader, "these are considered obligatory scenes, and are meant to be remembered later, recalled to a conclusive point, recalled not only by novelists but by survivors of accidents and by witnesses to murders; recalled in fact by anyone at all forced to resort to the narrative method" (32).

This demythification process also serves to provide the reader/narrator with guidance for deciphering the tale being constructed by this dissembling narrator. The "first looks" provided by this narrator are not immediately "instructive" either. As I have noted, the "first look" at the novel--Chapter One--operates more as a decoy than a foreshadowing of the novel to follow. The important elements of Didion's novel only accrue significance as they are repeated in various contexts and expanded upon. David MacFarlane of MacLean's finds a quote from Democracy applicable in this respect. "'Let me give you a little piece of advice,' says Inez's uncle in Democracy. 'Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards. Kierkegaard.' What makes reading Democracy so difficult, but finally so rewarding, is that precisely the same can be said of Didion's writing" (67). First encounters, for readers and characters, are likely to be trivial, random, and superficial rather than portentous, destined, or profound. This narrative principle is one that informs all of Didion's fiction as all are narrated in

retrospect. Thus the emphasis is always, overtly or not, on the production of narrative rather than on the events themselves.

The retrospective look though is not thereby automatically granted immunity from the difficulty of constructing meaning, as we have seen in the narrative of Grace Strasser-Mendana. The brilliance of hindsight is itself questioned in Democracy by the narrator who observes Inez Victor's tendency to rely on this narrative ploy. Inez uses coincidence such as the fact she and Jack Lovett were at the same place, but not at the same time, as a way to close the wide gaps in the lengthy but limited connection she had to this man who died shortly after she ran away with him. "During the five days I spent in Kuala Lumpur Inez mentioned such 'correspondences', her word, a number of times, as if they were messages intended specifically for her, evidence of a narrative she had not suspected. She seemed to find these tenuous connections extraordinary" (230). The narrator dispels any inclination to agree with Inez by reminding the narratee/reader of Inez's particular history, a history sufficient to account for Inez's perceptions. "Given a life in which the major cost was memory I suppose they were" the narrator observes of Inez's will to believe in these "correspondences" (230). Didion's narrator indicates that a deliberate if not conscious amnesia is required to shape any narrative, that a good deal of information has

been deleted or discarded along the way. Her effort to identify what she herself has "jettisoned" represents an attempt to include and retrieve what is usually lost in the production of narrative: its history.

That gesture foregrounds not only the specific narrative the reporter-narrator Didion is constructing, but also the history of the literary genre she works with as well--in this case the romance as it is situated in the development of the novel. And so the commentary about romantic heroines in general. Rachel Brownstein examines the seductiveness of this literary concept in her work, Becoming a Heroine. She notes that "a heroine, like a novelist, can convert the least promising of lives into art, by the way she looks at it" (91). In the previous passage cited, Didion's narrator has pointed to Inez's performance as a heroine, and by that gesture, reflected her own similar practice. What is more, the authorial Didion is included in this gesture as well given that all female producers of stories are subject to this narrative seduction. Didion chooses to create art from the lives of women--Lily Knight McClellan, Maria Wyeth, Charlotte Douglas--whose lives are not promising as heroines. Only in Democracy is the process of creating a heroine called to the narratee/reader's attention as the construction proceeds.

For there are resistances to that practice embedded in the novel's structure. When the Didion narrator reports

Inez's change of perspective, a decision which radically changes her life from a public to a private figure, the narrator makes of point of deflecting any heroic significance from that change in status. "This period in Hong Kong during which Inez ceased to claim the American exemption was defined by no special revelation, no instant of epiphany, no dramatic event" (211). The moment of decision, a private one, is never revealed in the narrative, nor even re-imagined. Even its report is carefully constructed to deflect any undue significance.

To deprive the event of a sense of moment is to attack the literary convention of the romance at its center, if not to entirely disable it. Again, the comment serves as a "narrative alert"--to warn the narratee/reader that conventional expectations will be thwarted in this narrative of politics and romance (164). Another way in which the dismantling of clichèd plots and phrases is revealed is in the depiction of the romance between Inez Victor and Jack Lovett. The relationship is characterized primarily by its absences. As the 'heroine', Inez is never described in a physical manner, except once, very briefly through Jack Lovett's eye when she lands at the airport in Honolulu. Their conduct as lovers is not portrayed in any detail and any conversation between the two would never comply with the expectations of romantic talk as encouraged by novels or movies. Describing bomb tests as "something to behold" scarcely acts as a conventional seduction

strategy. Nor is the Happy Talk Bar a idyllic place for the cultivation of romance; one is more likely to hear the rhetoric of war in this military establishment than the rhetoric of love.

The romance, deprived of its conventions, reveals its ideological implications. Whereas Carol Christian could persist in maintaining her romantic version of the male-female relation despite evidence to the contrary--"when a man told a woman her dress was too revealing it meant he adored her"--, her daughter is less susceptible to such narrative self-deceptions. Given her history as Harry Victor's wife, Inez discovers early on how "heroines" are created--as self-serving manipulations of fact by men such as Billy Dillon on behalf of failed presidential candidates. In Inez' world, the heroine is no longer a private self-creation as in her mother's time, but a collective enterprise to be resisted as much as possible. Still, Inez Victor is not unaffected by her mother's literary creations of her own life. Carol Christian explains that Paul Christian's extended absences from their marriage and family life in her typically romantic fashion: "'When a man stays away from a woman it means he wants to keep their love alive', Carol Christian advised Inez and Janet" (24). This is one story that Inez apparently does believe, as she puts that belief into practice in her relationship to Jack Lovett. "Often enough, during those twenty years [illegible] Inez Victor and Jack Lovett refrained

from touching each other, refrained from exhibiting undue pleasure in each other's presence or untoward interest in each other's activities, refrained most specifically from even being alone together, to keep the idea of it quick. Quick, alive. Something to think about late at night. Something private" (92).

The seduction of becoming a heroine continues to tempt Inez, like her mother before her, long after she has gained awareness of the contrivance involved in that process as manifested in her public life. Instead, Inez claims exemption for the private sphere of experience, as do most heroines since their public roles rarely confirm their private versions of their heroism. In the private realm, Inez does retain the capacity for memory. "Thinking over one's story and seeing its pattern, discerning in that the meaning of one's integral self, is an exquisitely self-defeating mode of claiming mixed literary and moral distinctiveness--of becoming a heroine--that continues to be tempting" maintains Brownstein in her 1982 critical examination of this phenomenon.

That "mixed literary and moral distinctiveness" is something Inez Victor relinquishes during the silent time in Hong Kong. As reported by the narrator, Inez came to understand that public and private narratives can trap as well as free their heroines, even as they attribute an inflated significance to the acts and thoughts of these heroines. "She had spent her childhood in the local

conviction that the comfortable entrepreneurial life of an American colony in a tropic without rot represented a record of individual triumphs over a hostile environment. She had spent her adult life immersed in Harry Victor's conviction that he could be president" (211). Once Inez relinquishes her "American exemption" from history, "the convulsions of a world largely unaffected by the individual efforts of anyone in it," Inez achieves an "eerie serenity" (211). She discovers a freedom in the release from narrative, both personal and private versions. An Inez awaits the rescue of her daughter from the fall of Saigon alone in an apartment in Hong Kong, her understanding of her place in history alters. "As she listened to the rain and to the voices fading in and out from Nakhon Phanom Inez thought about Harry in New York and Adlai at school and Jessie at B.J.'s and it occurred to her that for the first time in almost twenty years she was not particularly interested in any of them. Responsible for them in a limited way, yes, but not interested in them. They were definitely connected to her but she could no longer grasp her own or their uniqueness, her own or their difference, genius, special claim" (208).

Of course that freedom from internal narratives is ironically juxtaposed with the narrator's and the narratee's awareness of Inez as the subject of yet another narrative--that of the novel being written and read--but the narrator's story of Inez's experience exerts less

control over its protagonist than does the narratives Inez Victor inherited as a child. Zav remarks on this characteristic of the metafictional novel in The Mythopoeic Reality. "The main counter-technique of metafiction are two-dimensional flat characterization, consciously contrived plots, and paralogical, non-causal, and anti-linear sequence of events..." (39). The flat characterization, contrived plots, and anti-linear sequence of events are features some reviewers consider artistic inadequacies in Didion's fourth novel. But Said sees this movement from the individual/personal forms to "transpersonal" forms in literary as in non-literary discourse as evidence of the "transformation of naturally filiative into systematically affiliative relationships. The loss of the subject...is in various ways the loss as well of the procreative, generational urge authorizing filiative relationships" (20).

This movement is replicated in Inez Victor's own life as well. She finds she loses "interest" in familial relationships after the death of her sister. The ethos of care that she shares with all of Didion's heroines is transferred to a global 'family', the refugees of war. The administration of those refugee camps is an affiliative relationship in which Inez's "personality" is absent, and the "transpersonal function" she performs is foregrounded. But this 'positive' pattern of affiliation in the novel is presented along with a less desirable one; one in which

each profession develops its own language as a way to separate rather than bring together those who do not share filiative claims. In this emerging social pattern, all groups claim access to the production of meaning and significance, thus usurping the privilege conventionally accorded literary artists in the past.

Thomas Edwards makes reference to this artistic dilemma that Didion shares with her predecessor, Henry Adams in his view. "In both of them, irony and subtlety confront a chaotic new reality that shatters the orderings of simpler, older ways. Both face such a world with an essentially aristocratic weapon, the power to dispose language and thought, at least, against those empowered to dispose just about everything else"(24). The equal access to information through the media is far more rampant in Didion's age of the post-industrial democracy; the leveling of language in the late twentieth century represents the darker side of affiliation in Didion's view. In this social milieu, bomb tests are occasions of aesthetic experience, a war becomes an exchange of favors, a protest is not so much a political act as it is an apprenticeship in public relations, drug abuse is not a sin, nor an expanded experience, but a "consumer decision", the events of one's life are diminished or elevated to the status of "photo opportunities", and personal and public narratives are reduced or promoted to press releases.

But in the release from the filiative structures of

relationships and meanings, a freedom is discovered by the artist nonetheless. A journalist can write fiction and a novelist can report news. Indeed, as Grace Strasser-Mendana discovers in A Book of Common Prayer, writing as an affiliative act can attempt to reclaim what has been lost in the repudiation or irrelevance of the filiative one. Didion's narrator in Democracy also achieves an artistic freedom in her production of the narrative she engages in. She expresses that discovery in terms of the possibilities that remain open because of the loss of certain narrative conventions. "Perhaps because nothing in this situation encourages the basic narrative assumption, which is that the past is prologue to the present, the options remain open here. Any thing could happen" (233), the narrator speculates at the close of the novel. The narrative Didion can even imagine bequeathing a literary legacy to a younger female writer and thus initiating a tradition the authorial Didion generally ignores: a maternal literary tradition. "Imagine my mother dancing I had hoped that Jessie's novel would begin, but according to a recent letter I had from her this particular novel is an historical romance about Maximilian and Carlota" (233). In other words Jessie will write the sort of novel a reporter-narrator could be expected to write.

In Democracy A Novel, the narrator describes her production of narrative in contemporary American society as "a high wire act" (232). And in many ways, that

description is an apt one. To attempt to produce meaning from a set of circumstances without at the same time creating a totalization of experience proves to be a difficult challenge. To risk inclusion of many rival versions of the American experience as this narrator does is to risk misreading, misinterpretation; but only if the narrator makes a filiative claim to all possible productions of meaning that reside in the linguistic environment of the novel, which this narrator does not. Instead, the narrative Joan Didion chooses to set not only her narratee/reader free from such obligations, but also her own creation--her heroine. "Since Kuala Lumpur is not likely to dispatch its last refugee in Inez's or my lifetime, I would guess she means to stay on, but I have been surprised before", (234) the narrator speculates about her heroine's future. In so doing, the narrator accomplishes an action similar to that of George Eliot's narrator in Middlemarch. Brownstein claims that at the close of that novel, Eliot "lets Dorthea go...The ending...releases her [the heroine] from self-consciousness. Doing that, it rephrases the question of whether the romantic or literary or fantastic aspect of a woman's self is so deeply implicated in her consciousness that it must inevitably immure or entomb her" (153). Brownstein would claim that Eliot thinks otherwise, the same claim I would put forth for Didion's view of the female's relation to narratives about and by her. As has

been noted, Didion finds considerable autonomy in the narratives of the women of her maternal history who shared in the opening of the frontier.

Keeping Didion's own particular history in mind, the resistance to totalization of experience demonstrated in this fourth novel through its metaficitonal structure bears a striking analogy to another pattern in women's art: quilting. Elaine Showalter examines the correspondences between these two arts in her article "Piecing and Writing". "The history of quilting is closely associated with the recording of American female experience as one historian notes, women 'were stitching together the history of the country, making the great American tapestry'" (255). Showalter notes that a number of female writers and critics have found the process of quilting an apt description of the process of producing narratives. She cites the work of Rachel Blau DuPlessis as exemplary in its envisioning of this possibility. "According to...DuPlessis, a pure women's writing would be 'non-hierarchical structures, making an even display of elements over the surface with no climatic place or moment, having the materials organized into many centers. In the "verbal quilt" of the feminine text, there is no subordination, no ranking" (274). This description which sees the quilting process as a metaphor for narrative production seems particularly suited to Didion's novel as it incorporates the important elements of that work: the American, female and contemporary literary

experience. Furthermore, Didion prizes, as I have noted, actual quilts of her maternal ancestors which hang in her California home. One of Didion's remarks about the construction of one of those prized heirlooms suggests that she recognizes a correlation in these female activities. Didion details the experience of a maternal great-great-grandmother who crossed the country in a covered wagon., The woman twice suffered from fever, buried one child and gave birth to another on this long and arduous journey. "In that quilt of Elizabeth Reese's are more stitches than I have ever seen in a quilt, a pointless and blinding compaction of stitches, and it recently occurred to me that she must have finished it one day in the middle of the crossing, somewhere in the wilderness of her own grief and just kept on stitching" (Esquire 10). Didion has since used the sewing analogy to describe her construction of A Book of Common Prayer. In an interview for Paris Review, Didion told Linda Kuehl that she had "to work that revolution in on the bias, had to ease out the wrinkles with my fingers" (155).

In Democracy A Novel Dildion has constructed a "verbal quilt" of American life which uses whatever material is at hand to design her story; she understands, as does the quilter, that "piecing is an art of scarcity, ingenuity, conservation and order" (Showalter 228). In so doing, Didion represents what is best in American tradition, and what is not. The narrative resembles a quilt, each piece

democratically equal to the next, each contributing to the entire design. Democracy A Novel involves the painstaking care of a female art that proudly displays Elizabeth Reese's talent for making art out of grief and loss--an art of scarcity and survival.

DIDION'S NON-FICTION:
MESSAGES FROM THE FRONTIERS OF AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

There is no fiction or non-fiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative...

E.L. Doctorow

This post-modern description of literary production particularly applies to writers such as Joan Didion whose prose is situated at the literary juncture Doctorow deconstructs. As a producer of both forms as they are conventionally defined, Didion has acted as a narrative pioneer on this literary frontier. Her perspective has allowed her to recognize that all narrative constructs are 'fictional', but that those 'improvised' constructs are nonetheless required for survival in both literature and in life. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live", Didion announces and thereby establishes literary claim on the disputed linguistic borders of the post-modern narrative landscape. The 'we' in her statement suggests Didion's view of narrative as a communal activity, just as the pluralization of 'stories'implies the multiplicity of productions entailed.

This sense of venturing beyond the conventional borders of fiction/non-fiction is characteristic of the

journalists of the 60s and 70s. As noted in Chapter 4, Hellmann envisions the situation of the new journalist as a conflict in which the demythologizing perceptions of the individual mind are pitted against the mass produced corporate fictions that pass as news. "New journalists directly confront the actualities behind these images and interpret them for us, fulfilling the functions of explorers who pass through the frontiers of ordinary experience and then return to tell us what is on the other side" (139).

The report from the other side exposes the fictionality of all fact by examining the empirical evidence from which that 'fact' was extrapolated. The report takes the conventional form of the journalistic essay, a form Said has compared to an x-ray. "If...the various forms of literature are compared with sunlight refracted in a prism, then the essay is ultraviolet light" (52). In other words, the narratives produced by writers that fuse fact and fiction display their skeletal structure as interpretative methods imposed on "the shifting phantasmagoria" of actual experience. Because of its focus on interpretative methodology, new journalism is seen by critics such as Hellmann as "a genre of the new fiction; it deals with fasts through fable, discovering, constructing, and self-consciously exploring meaning beyond our media-constructed 'reality', our 'news'" (xi).

Nowhere is the fusion of factual and fictional devices

more apparent in Didion's work than in her book-length essay Salvador. Published in 1983, after the 1977 publication of A Book of Common Prayer but before the 1984 publication of Democracy, the contents of Salvador reflect its publication history as part of Didion's literary production. As noted by a number of critics, several passages in Salvador bear an uncanny resemblance to some in A Book of Common Prayer; issues that emerge again in Democracy first surface in Didion's depiction of this enigmatic country, notably the idea of democracy as a linguistic commodity.

Published subsequent to A Book of Common Prayer, the novel I claim is pivotal in Didion's development as a writer, Salvador represents the narrative shift from filiation to affiliation in Didion's non-fiction that I have claimed for her fictional works. Contemporary America, but more precisely, her native California, served as the internalized geographical locus for Didion's observations of cultural phenomena in the first two collections of essays. In Salvador her range of vision expands to include the political turmoil of our southern neighbors in Central America. Democracy incorporates an even broader geographical sweep, one that arcs from New York to Honolulu to Saigon to Kuala Lumpur. In a truly American fashion, Didion's gaze turns in a westerly direction.

Didion's change of venue, however, is not merely a

matter of personal preference. It also reflects corresponding shifts in American foreign policy, as documented by the 'corporate fictions' of the media. In Salvador, Didion enacts Hellmann's version of the new journalistic stance toward the official media. She pits the resources of her individual, female, and contemporary mind against the polyglot, masculine, and corporate fictions manufactured by both Salvadoran and American government officials.

Some critics find this stance inadequate to the task at best, claiming "she mystifies her subject" and thus makes her personal failure seem a universal quandary (Videz 33). Still others are even more vociferous in their attacks, calling Didion the "Meryl Streep of U.S. Letters, an intelligent craftsman of high strung sensitivity" (Ross 40) or accusing her of almost treasonous acts. George Will writes a la Colonel North: "But books such as Didion's--a reaction of revulsion, visceral yet controlled, in response to savagery of all sides--can weaken the tenuous hold Americans have on this truth: There are national needs--such as the need to prevent the multiplication of Cubas--that are important regardless of the nature of the company we must keep when pursuing them. Fastidiousness is a virtue in literature and an impossibility in politics" (LSJ 14).

Interestingly, those of either political extreme are dissatisfied with Didion's approach. The far left

denounces her failure "to think clearly through the muddled political debate" (Ross 40), while the far right accuses her of making "the tiny republic of El Salvador into a mirror reflecting her own basic contempt for liberal democracy and the American way of life" (Falcoff 68). Eder, in a National Review article, engages in a savage attack on the book and on Didion herself. His method is a curious reconstruction of Didion's literary history. He accentuates her six years as a feature writer for Vogue (in her early twenties) and then he points to her work as a screenwriter in Hollywood. He totally ignores her considerable repute as an essayist and acknowledges only in passing that she "produced four minor works of fiction. Salvador must be regarded as her fifth effort in that field although written in the guise of a documentary" (829). Eder proceeds to defend the Salvadoran election process he feels Didion's has attacked, he deliberately misreads Didion's critique of a local arts and crafts festival, and then Eder suggests that Jean Kirkpatrick would be a more reliable and reasoned source of information on El Salvador.

The two British reviews are more incisive in their comments, to my mind. Both point to the noticeable lack in the book of any discussion of the insurgents or guerrillas--a frequently cited and, I think, justified criticism of the work. But in the Times Literary Supplement, Whitehead declares "her main achievement is to dissect the language used by American officialdom "which he maintains is used to

disguise the reality of Salvadoran life and to distract the public from "the disagreeable work" American officials are performing there (663). My discussion will center on the linguistic analysis Didion employs as an ideological strategy in the book. In so doing, Salvador will be considered, as Acherson of the London Review of Books describes it, as "a study of the connections between fear and unreality, atrocity and illusion" (111).

But first an observation about the highly critical assessments of Salvador seems in order. What is most remarkable about even the most vicious attack on the book is how accurately the derogatory comments describe Didion's work, despite the intense disapproval voiced in those descriptions. For instance, Will's description of the work as "a reaction of revulsion, visceral yet controlled, in response to savagery on all sides" catches precisely the mood so carefully and consistently evoked in Salvador. It is the potential effectiveness of the mood that worries Will; readers, indeed, may be so repulsed by Didion's reconstruction of the daily horrors in that tiny country that they may well question American policy in the region. Will's accusation of "fastidiousness" on Didion's part, in this light, becomes a pejorative term, perhaps even a sexist one, for what in other circumstances would be recognized as moral rectitude. And while it is true that Didion finds that the American involvement in El Salvador reflects the political ambiguities that originate from

Washington, her critique of those policies is contemptuous, not of democracy as such, but the rhetorical manipulation of such terms as "liberal democracy" as occurs in El Salvador.

Those critics who decry Didion's lack of a _solución_ to the Salvadoran situation, and by implication, the U.S. Central American policy, either have their own solutions to offer (as Videz does), or they ignore Didion's point that it is the "illusion of plausibility" and not a _solución_ that is aimed for in the region (87). As for the critics, such as Forche, who want more detail about "what life is like for a majority of Salvadorans" (241), Didion's response permeates the entire book; the majority of Salvadorans live--on a daily basis--the abject terror Didion experienced only as an outsider for a brief two-week period. Forche's concern, that a tendency toward literary interpretations can act to deny the reality of daily atrocities, is an appropriate one; but it is a concern I believe Didion shares and takes pains to resist.

The two comments that best represent, however inversely, the salient features of _Salvador_ are Ross's criticism that the "tragedy" of El Salvador appears "as if it is happening inside the writer's head" (40), and Eder's conjecture that _Salvador_ could be mistaken for a work of fiction. If Didion's position as a practitioner of the new journalism is taken into account, then her approach to _Salvador_ seems less vulnerable to the more pejorative

readings these critics suggest. In a perceptive analysis of Didion's modus operandi as an essayist, titled "The Implacable 'I': Joan Didion," Gordon Taylor posits that Didion is able to draw "the world into the self" (141). Commenting about The White Album, Taylor reports that Didion "exerts throughout the book her power to personalize the world, less relentlessly intent on remaking it in her own image than on making her way into it by seeing it in her mind" (147). Didion's propensity to envision empirical reality in language that always bears the mark of her personal stance acts as her signature on any piece of prose she produces. It is the process by which Didion signals how the "narratives" or stories we tell in order to live come into being--"in the mind". Samuel Coale finds Didion's tendency to construct narratives around the pictures she sees in her mind a not unusual narrative practice. "Didion admits that the images haunted her first, as in many ways they did Faulkner", Coale observes in his essay of Didion in his work In Hawthorne's Shadow (184). Viewed from this angle, Ross's comment reveals her own lack of insight about how narratives are produced; when that process is taken into consideration, then it is clear that the "tragedy" of El Salvador had to be taken into Didion's mind in order for her to write so evocatively about it; however, that circumstance in no way need to suggest that the lucidity of Didion's account of the tragedy pre-empts the stark reality

of it. The exposition of Didion's method however does support Eder's contention that Salvador possesses fictional qualities, if 'ficitonal' is understood as those properties which reveal that a piece of writing always gives evidence of the mind of its maker.

The 'fictional' properties of Salvador resemble those of what Zav, in The Mythopoeic Reality, calls the testimonial non-fiction novel. Zav characterizes this borderline genre as a "narrative of encounters between the author--the historical person whose name appears on the title page, not a fictional 'second self'--and the brute or physical facts" (130). Salvador provides just such an account. The brute facts overpower the very slim volume of Didion's account of her encounter with that very small troubled country. The reader is introduced, as Didion was, first to the body dumps and forensic photographs that pass for local interests. "The photograph...shows a body with no eyes, because the vultures got to it before the photographer did. There is a special kind of practical information that the visitor to El Salvador acquires immediately, the way visitors to other places acquire information about the currency rates, the hours for the museums. In El Salvador, one learns that vultures go first for the soft tissue, for the eyes, the exposed genitalia, the open mouth. One learns that an open mouth can be used to make a specific point, can be stuffed with something emblematic; stuffed, say, with a penis, or, if the point

has to do with land title, stuffed with some of the dirt in question. One learns that hair deteriorates less rapidly than flesh, and that a skull surrounded by a perfect corona of hair is not an uncommon sight in the body dumps" (17). Passages such as this pull the reader into the powerful rhythms and stark images of Didion's prose. The tourist-like scenario, created in a flat, even diction, jangles against the sites being detailed. The abrasive juxtaposition of language and experience in Salvador alerts the somnolent reader to the "endemic apprehension of danger in the apparently benign" (105). Didion cautions the reader early on that language in this prose country is a mine-field and one needs to tread carefully through its well-worn paths.

Didion recounts several occasions when she and her husband were confronted by aimless threats of violence and concludes that "terror is the given of the place" (14). In this respect, the country retains its frontier quality for Didion. The "local vocation for terror" seems inexplicable to her except in terms of the fact that the "place remains marked by the meanness and discontinuity of all frontier history" (73). Didion supports that impression with the fact that El Salvador was never really settled by either the Mesoamerican or South American cultures that invaded the country. A visit to a native crafts exhibit only reveals that what passes for native culture in El Salvador is "a learned idea of local culture, an official imposition

made particularly ugly by the cultural impotence of the participants" (75).

This encounter with the reality of a war-torn country demoralizes Didion in ways she as a norteamericana has been privileged not to have known. Small ironies loom large in this alien territory of fear. She notes that the forensic photographs are kept in photograph albums with plastic covers that have pictures of American dating scenes on them. In a country where "romance is dead" (Hanley 25), countless women come each day to search the albums for a clue as to the whereabouts of their husbands, sons, or brothers who have been "disappeared".

Part of Didion's privilege though comes from another fact of her experience; it is not one she comments about, although a critic, Lynne Hanley, does: the fact that she is a woman faced with the barbarianism of a civil war. In her article, "To El Salvador," Hanley states that Didion's account of this troubled situation constitutes a departure for her as a female writer. Hanley maintains that Didion has in the past followed the lead of most women novelists and scrupulously avoided the actualities of war. Didion, she says, has preferred to report from the periphery about the seismographic tremors felt on the homefront. She cites Didion's focus on Haight-Ashbery rather than on the cause for which it was a symptom: the Vietnam War. But in Salvador Didion engages her sensibilities in the painful process of confronting and

recording horrors she can neither assuage or avert.

That effort is one that demands of the journalist that she refuse to employ her literary craftsmanship as an evasive tactic. As Hanley remarks, Didion's experience of war has been "literary and imaginary" (23); her expectations have been shaped by the accounts of James Jones, Ernest Hemingway, and Norman Mailer. Furthermore, Didion had herself imagined a country like El Salvador in A Book of Common Prayer. Still, her subsequent visit to El Salvador to dispel the literary idea of the place reveals how persistent literary ideas remain. Henley speculates that Didion had to confront not only the chaos and terror of everyday life in a country smaller than San Diego County, but also had to resist her own tendency to fictionalize her experience. "To get at the facts, le verdad, Didion had to penetrate both the fictions about El Salvador and her own desire to disassociate, to fictionalize" (24).

The literary influence is signaled immediately by Didion's inclusion of a passage from Conrad's Heart of Darkness as the preface of Salvador. The passage contains Marlow's description of Kurtz's report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Echoes of the passage reverberate throughout Didion's text. "'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded'" was an idea that fired European imperialism a century ago, and it is

the idea that propels the American version of that gesture today, in Didion's view.

Conradian images and phrases punctuate the text of Salvador almost unavoidably; as a result, it is as if Heart of Darkness itself comes to function as one of the many rhetorical commodities that compete for its share of this jumbled linguistic market. When Didion is informed that a Salvadoran official had to be divested of his belief that Franciscan nuns and priests were French, her reaction imitates Marlow's in the Congo. "This was one of those occasional windows that open onto the heart of El Salvador and then close, a glimpse of the impenetrable interior", (49) Didion remarks. The prevalence of anti-Semitism and the official discrimination of the native Indians, especially among the oligarchy, prompts Didion to speculate that "in many ways race remains the ineffable element at the heart of this particular darkness" (74). But, as Hanley points out, Didion also departs from Conrad in an essential way: whereas Conrad's language becomes increasingly abstract the closer he approaches the horrors of white civilization, Didion's "grows more relentlessly concrete in the face of the unspeakable" (24). Didion is ultra-sensitive to the potential of the abstract to mask hypocrisy and even atrocity in El Salvador; and thus even her lapses into abstract language refer to a concrete text, call up a particular history against which to measure the present incantations. Part of the history recalled is her

own.

Oblique references to A Book of Common Prayer also appear in Salvador; in some ways Salvador functions as a 'factual' version of its previous fictional self--A Book of Common Prayer. Hanley finds the rather unusual reversal of Didion's works (the fictional precedes the factual) inevitable for Didion. "Her experience of war has been literary and imaginary, her inclination has been to improve upon these accounts" (23).

What Didion finds in El Salvador (or what she looks for?) is what Grace knew in Boca Grande: that civil wars are often waged by "the already entitled", and that the guerrillas are pawns in these cyclical realignments of power (34). One suspects that Didion's expectations were shaped by her own reading about El Salvador prior to her visit--reading that may also have been concurrent with the writing of A Book of Common Prayer. She lists Mantaza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932, The War of the Dispossessed: Honduras and El Salvador, 1969 and El Salvador: Landscape and Society as works for which she is indebted for general background. Another source of information, the Area Handbook for El Salvador, published by the United States Government Printing Office, captures Didion's imagination in more obvious ways though. In this booklet of basic facts are two sentences that arrest Didion's attention; the sentences describe the social programs of general Martinez, dictator of El Salvador

between 1931-44. "He kept bottles of colored water that he dispensed as cures for almost any disease, including cancer and heart trouble, and relied on complex magical formulas for the solution of national problems....During an epidemic of small-pox in the capital, he attempted to halt its spread by stringing the city with a web of colored lights" (54).

Those colored lights appear in A Book of Common Prayer and apparently in Didion's mind's eye while she is in El Salvador as well. "Not a night passed in San Salvador when I had not imagined it strung with those colored lights...", she reports (54). In an uncanny way Didion at that moment almost becomes the fictional protagonist of her previous novel. That interchange also holds true for her descriptions of the airport, the empty tourists hotels, the general sense of unease one experiences when landing in El Salvador. "To land at this airport built to service them [the defunct resort hotels] is to plunge directly into a state in which no ground is solid, no depth of field reliable, no perception so definite that it might not dissolve into its reverse," sounds as much like Grace Strasser-Mendana's assessment of Boca Grande as it does Didion's of El Salvador. Like Boca Grande, El Salvador has no history, either as a republic or as a colony. "So attenuated was El Salvador's sense of itself in its moment of independence that it petitioned the United States as admission to the union as a state," Didion notes

But if some fictional aspects of her third novel foreshadow the 'facts' of El Salvador, others are emphatically revised. In A Book of Common Prayer war and politics are men's games from which women are perfunctorily excluded. That fictional model no longer applies in Salvador. Didion's actual experience in the war-torn country "strips away the fictions that insulate women from war", explains Hanley (25). In El Salvador, Didion has to witness the effects of war on the women, children and the elderly, the only civilian population left after years of civil strife. In El Salvador, as in Boca Grande though, war is waged by men that the women share lives with--by brothers, fathers, sons. "The dead and the pieces of the dead turn up...everywhere, everyday" (19). Whole families "are disappeared" in El Salvador, the personal and political are merged, no one is immuned to the terror or safe from the atrocities that qualify for ordinary experience in this country under siege. While visiting Puerta del Diablo, a well-known body dump situated high on a steep ridge, Didion notices a woman backing up a Toyota pickup to the edge; she executes this maneuver several times, apparently taking instructions from a man who signals to her with his hands. Three children play nearby. Didion assumes the woman is learning to drive. Only later does it occur to Didion to question the choice of a well-known body dump as a place to learn to drive. The implications of course is that the woman was learning, not

to drive, but to dump bodies. "This was one of a number of occasions...on which I cam to understand, in a way I had not understood before, the exact mechanism of terror," Didion declares (21).

One aspect of that mechanism is to make the actual appear illusory and to infuse the apparently benign with the threat of the malefic. The preferred method for achieving connections "between fear and unreality and atrocity and illusions" in El Salvador is to sabotage the conventional relations of language and experience. Words take on a life of their own in this country which has historically employed language as a tool to invent rather than to report reality. Only in El Salvador does Didion come to see Gabriel Garcia Marquez "as a social realist" (59). This tendency toward a linguistic inflation is supported by the physical landscape of El Salvador as well, as it suggests 'literary' interpretations, as Didion wryly observes. "The place presents itself as a pathetic fallacy: the sky 'broods', the stones 'weep', a constant seepage of water weighing the ferns and moss" (20).

The tendency to dress fiction in the clothing of fact, to perform a linguistic hocus-pocus, is never more evident than in the official rhetoric of El Salvador. "Among officials of the country language is appreciated not for its descriptive but for its fictional possibilities" (Hanley 26). As such, political rhetoric functions in a sphere of reality totally separate from the activity of the

body politic. Political rhetoric, like contemporary fiction, is self-reflexive, referring endlessly to itself as a textual code; in effect, a metalanguage. Didion admits to being seduced by this incantation while visiting Deane Hinton at the ambassador's residence. "It was not until late in the lunch..that it occurred to me that we were talking exclusively about the appearance of things, about how the situation might be made to look better, about trying to get the Salvadoran government to 'appear' to do what the American government needed done in order to make it 'appear' that the American aid was justified" (93). The circular aspect of the American effort in El Salvador, according to Didion, can be deduced from the periodic reports of 'improvements' in the human rights situation, which are followed by a worsening of that situation, which in turn 'improves' again when certification of such improvements is required for the receipt of U.S. aid.

In Fables of Fact, Hellmann discusses the introduction of Dispatches, Michael Herr's non-fictional novel about Vietnam, in terms that are relevant to Didion's observations of El Salvador. "The relation of a map to a territory is of course a common semantic analogy for that of language to reality and Herr's opening use of the map suggests not only the literal alteration of the landscape by American technology but also the self-deceiving alteration of that destructive reality by a deceptive language" (129). Didion's appraisal of El Salvador finds an analogous

situation to Herr's depiction of the American position in Vietnam. "That we had been drawn, both by a misapprehension of the local rhetoric and by the manipulation of our own rhetorical weaknesses, into a game we did not understand, a play of power in a political tropic alien to us, seemed apparent, and yet there we remained" (96). Although Didion doesn't produce a map of El Salvador, she does report the alterations of reality in this miniature country as well as the official fictions produced to justify the American presence there.

But in Didion's report, all efforts to find a solution to the civil strife are radically undermined by the language used to propose them. She maintains that the language used in El Salvador is the language of advertising and the product being marketed is a political solution crafted in Washington, Panama, or Mexico, "which is part of the place's pervasive obscenity. This language is shared by Salvadorans and Americans, as if a linguistic deal had been cut," (65). In this environment, 'democracy' becomes a linguistic commodity that materializes by virtue of having been named--as if invoked by magic, or by a misplaced faith. The historical understanding of linguistic capabilities as merely 'situational' explains the Salvadoran preference for this ephemeral manipulation of words perhaps, but fails to account for the American complicity in that practice in Didion's view.

Didion invokes medical terminology to describe the

official American perception of El Salvador as a smaller version of the United States, but "'sick', a temporarily fevered republic in which the antibodies of democracy needed only to be encouraged..." (96). The American reliance on the empirical assumption that all problems can be cured, quickly and easily,--one that contradicts all social history--permeates American foreign policy in El Salvador from Didion's perspective. De Toqueville's assessment of the American character in this respect provides an apt description of this predilection. "The practice which obtains amongst the Americans, of fixing the standard of their judgement in themselves alone, leads them to other habits of mind. As they perceive that they succeed in resolving without assistance all the little difficulties which their practical life presents, they readily conclude that everything in the world may be explained, and that nothing in it transcends the limits of the understanding" (144). He proceeds to speculate that Americans deny what is beyond their comprehension, or as Didion suggests, transform the situation by a manipulation of language so as to render it amenable to comprehension. Thus a man like Robert D-Aubuissoon, noted for his association with the right winge death squads, can be characterized as someone who has to be encouraged to "play ball" (29).

In this context, Didion's admitted lack of comprehension of the "vocation for terror" in El Salvador

departs from the stereo-typical American response. As in the case of her literary counterpart, Grace Strasser-Mendana, Didion has to conclude that simple soluciónes lie beyond her grasp and that of most norteamericanas. After a visit to a shopping mall which produced for Didion the usual ironic detail a reporter seeks out to illuminate the story being written (the juxtaposition of a guard who conducts a weapons check with the availability of American products for the socially upwardly mobile), she concludes the detail is irrelevant. As she leaves she sees soldiers herding a young civilian into a van, guns at his back, but she walks straight ahead, "not wanting to see anything at all" (36). She then begins to suspect the 'story' will never be illuminated, that it will remain a "true noche obscura" (36).

Indeed, what emerges from Salvador, ultimately, is the central theme in all of Didion's work, fiction and non-fiction: what it means to be an American of a certain time and place. It is the American national character that is on trial in Salvador more than it is the oppressive regime of the Salvadoran government. Didion's examination of the troubled situation is, in fact, predicated on the official American intervention in that small country south of our borders; a country that shares with us the nomenclature American and presumably a desire for democratic government, American-style. "My interest wasn't in Salvador...as a political idea...I was interested in what the United States

was doing in Salvador," Didion explained to Leslie Garis of the New York Times Magazine in February of 1987 (52). Didion's statement refines her intention in Salvador by evoking a different 'political idea', but one that has intrigues her for a quarter of a century: the question of the American identity. In fact, this concern supercedes that of all others in her work.

To be an American, then, for Didion is to operate collectively according to a specifically Western narrative--the narrative variously encoded as the American Dream, Manifest Destiny, etc. The perpetuating of that national narrative generates the tenuous connections that link Americans in bonds of affiliation with each other. These affiliative bonds have been characterized as a "community of memory" by the authors of Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (153). A "community of memory" is one "that does not forget its past...is involved in retelling its...constitutive narrative" (153). The severing of our filiative bonds with Great Britain, an act of self-generation, serves as the constitutive narrative of our democratic society. For Didion, the radical break with the past which engendered our collective identity as Americans also gave birth to our national sense of rootlessness, sometimes experienced as supreme freedom, sometimes as grievous loss. Didion, too, finds the American national identity serves as one of the few communities of memory extant in modern American life.

The authors of Habits of the Heart speculate that "Americans identify with their national community partly because there is little else that we share in common but also partly because America's history exemplifies aspirations widely shared throughout the world..." (153). Didion's investigation of the American role in El Salvador suggests that the American democratic model may not be readily exported to a country with a history quite different from that of the United States. Also, her report indicates that for some Third World countries, American history exemplifies something other than ideal aspirations for a free society. As in El Salvador, some factions see American military and economic assistance as a form of imperialistic extortion. The fact that this view which is couched in rhetoric associated with the left traditionally is voiced by a group linked to the right in El Salvador "suggests how latent... good will remains" for Americans there, Didion testily observes (96).

The allegation also constructs a version of American history very much at odds with Americans' view of themselves and their role in history. The "colonial impulse" is an issue Didion concerns herself with more directly in her next work, Democracy; however, she does so only after that impulse has become a historical fact. The fact that she does examine the 'colonial impulse' as it exhibited itself in Hawaii, however belatedly, does indicate that Didion has begun to perceive a connection

between the 'colonial impulse' and the 'frontier mentality' she claims a personal affinity for as definitive of the American spirit.

The definition of the American character occupies a central position in Didion's first two collections of essays that examine contemporary culture. The definition of the American character centers around aspects of the self in relation to time, to place, and to society. Of these factors, the ahistorical quality of the American experience surfaces as the pivotal concern in Didion's works. The national tendency to consider the past as obsolescent permeates all levels of American life, high and low. The ahistorical perspective is of course derived from a sense of having started over, tabula rosa, subsequent to a radical disaffiliation from our colonial past. But Didion's most recent works chronicle how persistently that disavowed past continues to haunt contemporary life, just as her earlier works document the repercussions of the disavowal itself on the American spirit some two centuries later. The essays in Slouching Toward Bethlehem and The White Album record Didion's perceptions of these national dilemmas over two tumultuous decades in American life.

From Didion's perspective the ahistorical sense is deeply embedded in another--that of a particular place. The particular place that most embodies this conjunction of time and space for Didion is her native California.

Critics have noted Didion's passionate interest in her native land parallels that of literary ancestors she speaks of in a piece about Hawaii. "A place belongs to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image..." (WA 146). California belongs to Didion in the same sense that she claims Honolulu belongs to James Jones, or Oxford, Mississippi to Faulkner, or Kilimanjaro to Hemingway.

Didion maintains that California is a particularly fitting metaphor for America at large as it is in California, "here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent" (STB 172). Brian Morton, too, in his brilliant essay on Didion, proposes that "California inherits the full ambivalence of 'manifest destiny'" (76). In the 1960's and 70's Didion could detect residual evidence of the 'frontier mentality' in California, residues of the spirit that propelled her own maternal ancestors westward some five generations earlier. In the story of Lucille Miler, a woman convicted of murdering her husband in order to obtain the legal and economic freedom to marry another who denies any attachment to her, Didion detects the predilection of Americans to reinvent their life. In the story of James Pike, a man who views questions about his past divorce and remarriage as attempts to 'thwart' his election as the Episcopalian Bishop of California, Didion finds Pike a "Michelin to his

time and place" (57). In the story of twenty-two year old Dallas Beardsley, who took out an ad for $50 down and $35 a month for eight months for the fifth page of Daily Variety announcing her own uniqueness and intentions to become a movie star, Didion finds a "representative from the invisible city" (WA 105). In these stories of Californians and many like them, Didion intuits that "time past is not believed to have any bearing upon time present or future, out in the golden land where everyday the world is born anew" (STB 28).

These people, like so many of California's dispossessed, came "from somewhere else" to pursue their dreams of easy success in a land of sun and surf, "a long way from the cold, a long way from the past" (STB 19). What they discover, though, is something quite different. Instead of perpetual warmth and sunshine, they find a climate "characterized by infrequent but violent extremes" of wind, rain, and fire (STB 219). "The city burning is Los Angeles's deepest image of itself," Didion claims, and attributes that apocalyptic predisposition to the weather, especially "the violence and unpredictability of the Santa Ana...which shows us how close to edge we are" (STB 221).

A predilection for extremes is reflected in the lives of many Californians who live at the edge of a frontier that collapsed in on itself over a century ago. Didion has stated that she finds Frederick Jackson Turner's declaration that the closing of the frontier constituted

one of the most significant events in American history especially prescient in relation to the development of her native land. Both Turner and de Toqueville before him recognized what many Americans apparently fail to take into account: that the frontier spirit, so intertwined with our conception of the American way of life, was always a function of the immense geographical space the Americans were fortunate to find (or powerful enough to appropriate) in the New World. Yet, as Didion's account of the 60's and 70's in California demonstrate, that spirit has detached itself from its historically relevant geography and now floats free; it hovers over the collective experience of American life as an uneasy sense of primal betrayal in the midst of chaos and change.

When the betrayal of the frontier spirit takes the shape of the right to impose one's will on a resistant environment, a senseless violence, a petty vengeance, or an intolerance of small irritations is the result, and the underside of frontier life is exposed. Didion finds evidence of this enduring hostility in the proliferation of bike movies which she sees as "ideograms of the future" (WA 100). She speculates that the movies will set the style for an entire generation. Twenty years later the propensity for senseless violence takes the form of perverse and unprovoked shootings of anyone who happens to cross one's path on the LA freeway or in a local MacDonald's.

Another facet of the Western experience that Didion finds in the California of her past is a sense of loss, a tragic obsolescence. "All that is constant about the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears", she observes in Slouching Toward Bethlehem (176). Her family has lived in the lush Sacramento Valley for five generations and as such she inherits an insular, agrarian past which resembles that of the American South, and is thus consigned to a similar fate--"the Valley fate which is to be paralyzed by a past no longer relevant" (STB 184). She comments that when the agrarian way of life disappeared her family went into real estate as they recognized "no reality other than land" (STB 184). This attachment to the land may account for the Faulknerian overtones discerned by a number of critics in Run River. Didion herself admits much of the landscape detail was included because she was so nostalgic for her native land while writing the novel and living in New York.

Just across the desert from Didion's beloved Central Valley a mirage of modernity floats above the horizon. As the embodiment of the secular spirit, Las Vegas stands in stark contrast to the traditional spirit fostered by the California of Didion's personal past. In Didion's eyes, this most artificial of cities panders exclusively to the baser underpinnings of the American Dream. "Las Vegas is the most extreme and allegorical of American settlements, bizarre and beautiful in its venality and in its devotion

to immediate gratification" (STB 80). In Las Vegas, one can completely escape the burden of a historical identity. One is not restricted to a given time or place, and one's past is rendered obsolete with each roll of the dice or turn of the wheel which creates a whole new set of possibilities. "There is no 'time' in Las Vegas, no night and no day, and no past and no future...neither is there any logical sense of where one is..." (80), Didion states in defense of its magical appeal to modern Americans. Las Vegas capitalizes on what is left of the frontier spirit, on the propensity to risk all in one stupendous moment of intense exhilaration. The myth of progress, of the upward spiral of history permeates the place, while the democratic impulse assures each courageous gambler that every one has an equal chance to win an unimaginable fortune.

That gambling spirit which brought pioneers westward also made possible the adventure of literally creating a paradise out of a desert. Much of the precariousness of California's existence is due to the lack of a natural source of water in the state sufficient to support it human life. Didion notes that water is the only natural force that is controlled in the golden land. Because of its scarcity, however, she views water "with a reverence others might find excessive" (WA 59). She experiences an ephiphanic moment on a visit to Hoover Dam and possesses a catechismic memory of the intricate networks of waterways that transport the sacred liquid from the Colorado River to

her kitchen sink. She reverts to a litany of facts about these waterworks as an incantation to induce an elusive sleep. Hoover Dam represents a sort of original force in Didion's mind, "the several million tons of concrete that made the Southwest plausible, the fait accompli that was to convey in the innocent time of its construction, the notion that mankind's brightest promise lay in American engineering" (WA 198). For her, part of its appeal is that the dam functions as a "monument to a faith since misplaced", but its compelling beauty, efficiency, and isolation exceed its relation to the human efforts implicit in its making. The dam is a kind of secular god for Didion, whose supreme omnipotence reveals itself ultimately only in an absolute freedom from its creators..."a dynamo finally free of man, splendid at last in its absolute isolation, transmitting power and releasing water to a world where no one is" (WA 200).

The aridity of the climate and the imperative to import a water supply make this land of paradise less than truly habitable. "The apparent ease of California's life is an illusion, and those who believe the illusion real live here in only the most temporary way", Didion points out (WA 64). Even in Malibu where Didion lived for seven years, major roads collapsed regularly or were often impassable due to torrential rains or to raging fires that leapt across the Pacific Coast Highway. Didion captures something essential of the Californian spirit, and perhaps America's as well,

in her description of life at Malibu. "I had come to see the spirit of the place as one of shared isolation and adversity" (WA 220).

The sense of a "shared isolation and adversity" also characterizes the experience of two of California's fetishes: the shopping mall and the freeway. Both a visit to the shopping mall and a drive on the freeway entail a release from the self that Californians find redemptive. Both are democratizing experiences, available to all regardless of color, creed, or credit card rating. Both are communal in their demand for conformity; Didion describes the freeway experience as "the only secular communion Los Angeles has" (WA 83). The driving itself constitutes a mystical experience for the initiated. "Actual participants think only about where they are. Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway. The mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over" (WA 83). This mechanized rapture reaffirms the American myth of individual mobility for those who navigate the freeways of California. In the shopping mall, too, one moves for a while "in an aqueous suspension not only of light but of judgment, not only of judgment but of 'personality'" (WA 85). In both situations, the self is suspended in the now, free of future and past. In the sameness of experience, both the freeway and shopping mall provide a "sedation of anxiety" (WA 185). One cannot be

contacted or constricted by human limitations in these ephemeral zones of experience; one is alone with the gods of consumerism and commerce.

Another example of the cult of individualism as practiced by Californians is the establishment of what Brian Morton calls "exclusive groups" (78). Morton sees this cultish phenomenon as one that unerringly attracts Didion's attention. "Everybody in California lives according to a set of fictions generated by what ever clique or profession or sect one adheres to; it is an 'immigrant' world, burdened by the 'pre-Einsteinian dimension of the immigrant's symbolism, his lack of a sense of time' and by a tendency to break up into...' little pathological groups'" (77). Morton explains that Didion's fascination with such groups focuses on the way each constructs a narrative, a 'community of memory', so to speak, involving a distinct if often incomprehensible jargon, and a "shared ideology or practice" which often generates a "microcosm of order outside of clock or social time" (Morton 78). She locates these characteristics in groups as diverse as the Hollywood film industry, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, the California Department of Transportation or Caltrans, the Santa Monica Junior Chamber of Commerce, Brother Theobold and his Friendly Apostolic Bible Church, or the lifeguards at Zuma beach in northern Mailbu. As Morton recollects, de Toqueville foresaw this tendency toward solipsistic

behavior and associations as potentially harmful to American society, as it "induces a fatal abdication of the responsibilities of social order" (Morton 77).

Didion shares de Toqueville's concern. For her, the hippies of the Haight-Ashbury district in the 1960's most forcefully depicted the 'atomization' of society implied in de Toqueville's premonition. The title piece of her first collection of essays portrays in graphic detail the "social hemorrhage" that indicates the lack of social cohesion de Toqueville predicted could result from the cult of individualism. Didion introduces, in that essay, Deadeye, a young man who isn't sure where Chicago is but who wants to start "a teen Evangelism"; Max, who has gotten rid of his middle-class Freudian hangups but drops acid every week; Sharon, Max's "old lady", who gets high on washing dishes; and Susan, a five year old who takes acid regularly and who can name the other children in her kindergarten class who do as well. Didion's small vignettes of these individuals she meets in San Francisco are presented without much commentary; they tell their own stories which she records and arranges in a narrative pattern. Only towards the end of the essay does she assess the stories of the lives she has drawn. Her assessment attends in particular to the loss of filiation evident in this cultural upheaval. "We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum...These were children who

grew up cut loose from the web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors who had traditionally suggested and enforced society's values...These are children who had moved around a lot" (STB 23).

Didion sees these orphaned children as the future that America had at some point aborted and "butchered the job" (85). The specter of lost children continues to haunt Didion's subsequent works as I have pointed out in previous chapters. So emblematic has the lost child become for the condition of American society that nearly all of Didion's protagonists are themselves orphaned, as well as being parents who 'lost' their children "to history" or "to complications". In Didion's fiction and non-fiction, she records the working out of de Toqueville's vision of filiation in a democracy: "the woof of time is every instant broken, and the track of generations effaced...not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart" (194).

From the solitude of her own heart, as a child of her times, the America of the 50's, Didion views the Sixties phenomenon with compassion, empathy, and wistfulness. But, ultimately, she has to consider the movement in a historical context, and when she does, she recognizes it as repetition. "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 justification. Right there you've got the ways that romanticism historically ends up in trouble, lends itself to authoritarianism. When the direction appears" (STB 123). In her assessment, she detects the longing for a lost filiation, both in the nostalgic return to innocence and in the yearning for a restored authority.

The impetus for social action is a temptation she recognizes but rejects as an avoidance of the personal, which for her consists of the "dread of meaninglessness which was a man's fate" (205). As a member of the silent generation, Didion maintains that social action is essentially a romantic panacea; but as de Toqueville points out, it is also the logical consequence of the democratic condition. In a democratic society without intrinsic limits on one's capacity to succeed, a theory of infinite perfectibility is likely to develop without contradiction, de Toqueville speculates. Implicit, too, in the very American idea of infinite perfectibility is the practice of planned obsolescence. As technology appears to perpetually 'improve' our standard of living, it also fosters a devaluation of the past, so that all hope and value resides in the future; thus the situation also encourages a view of the upward spiral of history that Didion consistently

questions.

As I have argued, Play It As It Lays is a working out of Didion's position as an individualist who tries to live outside history. In the novel, the reader discovers, if Maria does not, that a separate peace is as romantic a quest as is the zeal for social protest that Didion kindly disparages in the Sixties. Maria's position at the extreme edge of individualism is a historical position; the idea of living outside history being quintessentially American and romantic. This is the discovery that Grace makes in A Book of Common Prayer and is one that Inez Victor shares in Democracy. Nonetheless, in "On the Morning After the Sixties," Didion reasserts the stance of the silent generation; even so, by then her youthful certitude is cracking. "What I have made for myself is personal, but is not exactly peace," she admits (WA 206). In her later works (Salvador and Democracy), even the 'personal' signifier is put to question. By the late 80's, it has become apparent to even the staunch individualist, Joan Didion, that the personal is political, and the political, personal.

The generational loss of the Sixties is accompanied by another loss, a linguistic one. At first, Didion perceives this cultural phenomenon to be endemic to the generation of children begat in the social hemorrhage of that decade of unrest. "Because they do not believe in words...their only proficient vocabulary is in the society's platitudes...they

are less rebellious against society than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicized self-doubts, Vietnam, Saran-wrap, diet pills, the Bomb" (STB 123), she ascertains. The lack of language and the systems of meaning that Didion still believes at this point inevitable accompanies language strikes her as a crucial disability. The lack of a constitutive narrative, the failure of the community of memory to function, renders these homeless children susceptible to anyone who possesses what they lack: words. "They are sixteen, fifteen,fourteen, younger all the time, an army of children waiting to be given words" (STB 123).

Later Didion finds her personal and professional life has been infected by the cultural malaise she had first glimpsed symptoms of in Haight-Ashbury; it was there she first encountered evidence that the controlling metaphor of culture was shifting from one of order to entropy. Whereas Didion recognized the lost children and their synthetic language as emblematic of cultural waste in the mid-sixties, it is a few years later before she understands that her own communities of memory have been rendered obsolete. As a writer, she is paralyzed by that realization. Referring to the disconnected sequence of events that include Robert Kennedy's funeral, the first reports from My Lai, and an account of a woman who put her five year old daughter out to die on the median of Interstate 5, Didion surmises that "certain of these

images did not fit into any narrative I knew" (WA 13). She presents a psychiatric report that describes her as "a personality in the process of deterioration" (14) when she is tested to determine the cause of attacks of vertigo and nausea. Later she is diagnosed as having a disease of the nervous system, probably multiple sclerosis. In retrospect she argues that "an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968", a summer that ended for her with the Charles Manson killings (WA 15).

Didion's questioning of the efficacy of narrative itself as an agent of social cohesion occurs when evidence of the failure of the constitutive narrative of American life can no longer be denied. In this crisis of spirit, which is both personal and cultural, psychological and physical, Didion found "it necessary to revise the circuitry of my mind" (WA 13). She finds the functions of the nervous system (which in her case has broken down) to be paradigmatic of the impulse to narrative as well. Taylor remarks on this discovery, noting that Didion finds a way to overcome the loss of narrative and neural functions, and that "the neurological report is a model" of her discovery (145). "Neural paths of prose work their way out from the points of blockage represented by the reports, revising mental circuits toward what Didion calls a "revisionist theory of my own history", though she also calls such a theory an 'illusion'" (142). The nervous

system apparently heals itself by gradually changing its circuitry, so that it locates healthy nerves to carry the message that a blocked, inflamed nerve is unable to transmit. Thus Didion finds the failure of the filiative system of narrative she essentially inherits as a child of her time can be the focal point for initiating rather than terminating narrative possibilities.

"The writer tells a 'story', performs the literary act, in order to survive," Taylor informs us in "The Implacable 'I'". That act of survival functions as an act of affiliation as well. Affiliation is the relationship that presents itself as an alternative to the failure of filiation. As such, it serves as the compensatory neural circuit, the one engendered to allow transmission of the constitutive narrative which in modern times is the narrative of the failure of filiation. The construction of narrative itself becomes an affiliative act which must declare its origins and limitations, as Grace Strasser-Mendana discovers in her narrative of Charlotte's life and death. The relationship between the writer and characters can also duplicate the lost filiative connection. Didion says of her characters that they become "your family, closer to you than anybody you know"(Davison 35). In her observation resides the clue to the alarm she sounded when she discovered the children of the Sixties were a culturally orphaned generation without the solace of words. For it is only through language and its infinite

possibilities that the necessary connections must be regenerated if we are to continue to tell the stories we need in order to live. Taylor finds Didion's description of her Malibu home an appropriate analogy for this accomplishment. "The spirit of the place she has come to see as one of 'shared isolation and adversity', the phrase first suggesting a Native Daughter's sense of the Western past, then crystallizing as an expression of her adverse narrative spirit, paradoxically communal in its isolation" (150).

The sharing of isolation and adversity is an action common to Didion's beloved maternal ancestors whose courage and sheer determination were instrumental in the opening of the Western frontier. The daughters of these strong women recorded in their journals patches of history the mothers embroidered into quilts, appliqued to calico and muslin, or embedded in recipes of corn bread and India relish. From one such daughter we learn that a grieving aunt carried a dead baby in her arms "a long time" for fear the child would be buried in the wilderness; from another child that her mother threatened extermination to Indians that were rumored to be intent on killing her family. "They tended to accommodate any means in pursuit of an uncertain end" Didion recalls, and in so doing describes her own will to narrative. (Esquire 10) "There is something like exhilaration for the reader in the demonstration of her will to narrative act" (Taylor 143). That is a will to

narrative that Didion inherited as a daughter of the frontier. She has learned, with other women writers, that writing is an art of scarcity, but even so, the affiliative bonds must be forged, the filiative promise must be kept. Thus Didion knits together the pieces of her past, maternal and paternal literary legacies, fact and fiction, personal and cultural, in a reconstruction of the constitutive narrative of American history to bequeath to the children lost to the future.

CONCLUSION

"The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (Kundera 3).

This astute observation is made by the narrator of Milan Kundera's work, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, a work which examines contemporary life in Czechoslovakia under a repressive regime. Joan Didion's just recently published work of non-fiction, Miami, echoes many of Kundera's concerns about the relation of power to memory. Miami is Didion's attempt to engage the American consciousness in a struggle against the forgetting of its own past. As in the case of Kundera's narrator, Didion detects the threat of totalitarianism in the routine and deliberate revisions of national history perpetrated by any system of government, democratic or otherwise. In Didion's case, she finds this deliberate dissociation of language (narrative) from experience (history) evident in the peculiar relations that have evolved over the last quarter century between the City of Miami, Florida and Washington D.C. "Of American cities Miami has since 1959 connected only to Washington, which is the peculiarity of both places, and increasingly the warp" (14).

Always on the alert for signs of significant cultural

upheaval, Didion's unerring eye is drawn to this American city whose "feel" in the early 80's seems "that of a Latin capital a year or two away from a new government" (27). The cultural upheaval that directs Didion's attention to the city of Miami in the past few years results from the rampant increase of Cuban exiles in that southernmost American city. The huge influx of Cuban exiles into Miami has radically altered the complexion of one of America's fun-in-the-sun cities and Didion's latest work seeks to chronicle the whys and wherefores of that change.

Miami also crystalizes the increasingly political nature of Didion's cultural observations which have been most overtly displayed in Salvador. The new book represents an extension of the shift in emphasis away from private experience and toward public life, a shift which began in Didion's non-fiction with the publication of Salvador in 1983. Like Salvador, Miami addresses overtly political issues that dominate our national public life - the relations of the Washington government to our southern neighbors in Cuba and Central America. As I have indicated in Chapter Five, the concern with public affairs represents an alteration of focus from the essentially domestic concerns Didion addresses in her two early collection of essays, The White Album and Slouching Toward Bethlehem. The political shift also corresponds to a shift from what is conventionally considered the female's sphere of influence - the realm of private experience - to what has

conventionally been held to be an exclusively male privilege - the public domain. Thus Miami reaffirms Didion's implicit claim as an important observer of American culture whose scope of observation transcends the domestic, the peripheral, or the female perspective.

For in Miami, Didion comes into her own as an astute analyst of the contemporary political scene. Her gender functions, as does her Western heritage, merely as an angle of vision from which to speak, nothing more, nothing less. Still, there is something less tenuous about the authorial voice in Miami than say in Salvador. The confident and incisive, but curious, mind of the reporter is at work in Miami; that mind carefully and systematically processes the information offered for its inspection just as it persistently persues the elusive fact that evades easy interpretation.

Didion's journalistic stance in Miami provides a sharp contrast to the more literary posture she assumes in Salvador. This is a Didion who has obviously read and taken into consideration the valid criticisms raised about Salvador; a Didion who has sought to avoid the pitfalls encountered in her previous document of our times. The change in perspective accentuates the differences in the two works. In retrospect, one sees that Didion constructs, in effect, a poetics of terror in Salvador, her own Letter from Central America. The stylistic effects created by Didion's reconstruction of her experiences in El Salvador

are of an aesthetic as much as an ideological nature. The 'literary' quality of the place permeates Didion's response to this Central America country in conflict. Our emotion rather than our intellect, is most directly engaged in reacting to the horror Didion so vividly evokes in Salvador.

In stylistic terms, reading Miami after having read Salvador is analogous to venturing into the underworld of a Raymond Chandler hard-boiled detective story fresh from the fictional parlours of a Jane Austin novel. The effect is abrasive. Reading Salvador engages the literary sensibilities in the impenetrable mysteries of an unknown world; it constitutes a journey into the inexplicable heart of a modern darnkess. Conversely, reading Miami forces one to confront the starkness of the contemporary sensibility as developed via the media. In contrast to its nineteenth-century counterpart - the literary sensibility which evokes haunting but remote images - the modern media sensibility produces images whose immediacy stings like a slap in the face. To visit Miami is to confront this media - induced sensibility directly. Its syncopated pace jangles, its neon images glare, its synthetic diction mesmerizes. Salvador is a journey into the past, while Miami is a glimpse of the future. In Salvador Didion observes the effects of an American presence in a Third World country. In Miami the Third World has claimed a portion of American soil as its own - Florida's Dade County. In both

instances, place becomes a metaphor for a certain Spanish cast of mind Didion finds intriguing but also revealing of an American weakness for romance.

Miami is divided into four sections, and each section presents the story of that place from a slightly different angle. The first section sets the stage for Didion's narrative in two characteristic ways. First, the city of Miami is depicted as a tropical capital, a metaphor central to Didion's vision in other works as well. The focus of life in Miami is a 19th century Havana for the thousands of exiled Cubans who comprise 56% of Miami's population in the 80's. Secondly, Didion's tropical metaphor is extended through the use of a diction related to theater, opera, or romance. Didion uses this literary language to describe how the exiled Cubans express their Spanish heritage and its influence on thought and experience in a modern Miami.

An anniversary celebration of the Bay of Pigs incident some twenty-four years after the event symbolizes the cause that unites all Cubans in exile in the U.S. "They shared not just Cuba as a birthplace but Cuba as a construct, the idea of birthright lost. They shared a definition of patria as indivisible from personal honor, and therefore of personal honor as that which had been betrayed and must be revenged. They shared, not only with one another but with virtually every other Cuban in Miami, a political matrix in which the very shape of history, its dialectic, its tendency, had traditionally presented itself as la lucha,

the struggle" (17). Thus Didion labels the Bay of Pigs incident "an ideal narrative, one in which the men of the 2506 were forever valiant and betrayed and the United States was forever the seducer and betrayer and the blood of los mártires remained forever fresh" (19). Didion indicates at the close of this section that la lucha over the past twenty-five years has become a matter of American interest as well, involving American citizens, institutions and even three American presidents. That is a connection she explores more fully in Section Three.

Section Two analyzes the Third World character of the city. Didion notes the ostentatious display of wealth in the midst of abject poverty. "...Miami was a city, like so many to the south of it, in which it was possible to pass from walled enclaves to utter desolation while changing stations on the car radio" (19). She details the political violence engaged in by warring factions of Cuban exiles over issues more pertinent in Havana than in the U.S. that nonetheless create an image of a city overrun by gangsters and lawlessness. As in Salvador, Didion observes that racial tension fuels the fires of discontent in Miami. Didion remarks on the disenfranchisement of the native black minorities as the exiled Cubans rise easily to power in this Southern city. "Not often does a social dynamic seem to present itself in a single tableau, but at the Omni in Miami one did, and during the time I spent there I came to see the hotel and its mall as the most theatrical

possible illustrations of how a native proletariat can be left behind in a city open to the convulsions of the Third World..." (47).

Didion implies that Miami's welcoming of exiled Cubans into positions of power at the expense of the native blacks may prove a serious error in judgment. The threat comes, in Didion's view, not so much from the dispossessed blacks as from the potentially powerful exiles. Didion stresses the concept of exilio as central to the Cuban coalition that runs the city of Miami; for, as she sees it, these are not immigrants, be they American citizens or no, but rather true exiles who fully intend to return to their homeland as victors over the communist regime that displaced them. That the Anglo community of Miami persists in seeing the Cuban exiles as potential candidates for assimilation seems to Didion to miss the point of the political unrest in Miami. In this context, it is the Anglo community that is naive at best and wrong-headed at worst. Their insistence, for instance, on the use of English as an official language in a predominantly Hispanic community constitutes, in Didion's view, "a cry from the heart of a beleaguered raj" (67).

Nor are the Cuban exiles especially amenable to the intracies of democratic government. Miami Cubans are tuned instead to an autocratic political mode, as "heirs...to the Spanish Inquisition" rather than trained in good citizenship under the systems of checks and balances

provided by the American Constitution (75). Didion perceives a connection between the preference for a facist government - as expressed by the pro-Batista elements of the exiled Cubans - and the romantic view of history and politics, as conceptualized by la lucha. In the romance of history, Spanish style, any political resolution of problems is tantamount to betrayal, and thus any form of democratic government is suspect, based as it is on compromise. Didion believes it is this romantic tendency in Spanish culture that accounts for the Cubans view of Washington as the betrayer, given that compromise always seems preferable to martyrdom among such Anglo-Americans.

In Section Three Didion explores the machinations of Washington policy over the last 25 years in regard to its neighbors to the south, especially in Central America. Miami has become a focal point for any operations in this southerly direction. The Miami-Washington connection emerges in this section as a clandestine operation befitting any "romance of the tropics" (33). "A disposal problem" is the term used by the Kennedy administration to describe "the possible consequences of aborting the projected Cuban invasion" (83). Didion remarks that only after she had spent time in Miami did she come to see the attitude of the Kennedy administration toward the 2506 Brigade which it had trained and then abandoned as "the cannon which the protagonist brings onstage in the first act so that it may be fired against him in the third" (83).

Duplicity characterized the language as well as the action of Washington during the Cuban crisis, according to Didion's investigation. Special vocabularies were constructed by special groups connected to the CIA to comprise "a language in which deniability was built into the grammar" (94). Didion makes it clear in her report that the more recent actions of Colonel North, et al., merely repeated the policy and practice of the privitization of government functions begun some three decades earlier. What concerns her, as it should concern Washington in her view, are the long-term consequences of such actions. "That each move left a certain residue on the board was what some people in Washington had called their disposal problem, and some people in Miami their betrayal" (179). Didion reports that some of the residue left on the board in this political game includes Cuban 'terrorists' trained by the U.S. and now operating on the other side in the conflict in Nicaragua.

The final section of Miami looks at the Reagan White House and its policy on Central America. Didion notes that Reagan's 'stories' about how the world operates in the Southern Hemisphere bear all the trademarks of propaganda. "The Reagan reworking was interesting on its own, a way of speaking, later to become familiar, in which events could be revised as they happened into illustrations of ideology" (157). Speaking of the advertising language employed by the entire Regan White House, Didion notes that those who

employ that diction are not "arguing a case, but counting instead on the willingness of the listener to enter what Hannah Arendt called, in a discussion of propaganda, 'the gruesome quiet of an entirely imaginary world'" (159). The focus on language echoes the concerns Didion raises in Salvador, where linguistic deals are cut that create the desired impressions without ever altering the reality of the lives lived under a repressive regime.

This attention to appearance is presented as a major concern in the Reagan White House in Section Four. Didion lists the activities of the president on a day in 1984; the result is a listing of photo opportunities in which nothing of a substance occurs, but rather the President is presented in interesting settings, as contrived and implemented by the President's men. "It was...taken for granted that the presidency had been redefined as an essentially passive role, that of 'communicator' or 'leader' which had been redefined in turn to mean that person whose simple presence before a camera was believed to command support for the policy proposed" (177).

By the end of Miami it is clear that Didion feels Washington is as complicitious in the move toward the privitization of government as is any Central American country. She cites the now well-known activities of people like Colonel North and General Singlaub to use workings of the government to achieve their own desires. The Miami-Washington narrative is one in which "the actions of

individuals had been seen to affect events directly, in which revolutions and counter-revolutions had been framed in the private sector; that narrative in which the state security apparatus existed to be enlisted by one or another private player" (206). And for the private players, actions and words do not necessarily carry long-range consequences for which one can be held accountable. The extent to which that attitude pervades Washington is signaled by the final passage in Miami - a quote by President Reagan claiming the idea to support the 'freedom fighters' in Nicaragua was his "idea to begin with" (208).

In the struggle of memory against forgetting, twentieth-century America seems to be losing the battle, according to Didion. Miami, like her other works of fiction and non-fiction, seeks to put together the puzzle of the past. Implicit in that effort is the consequence of forgetting the history of a nation: totalitarianism. For Didion sees the struggle of memory against forgetting as an act of serious consequences, for individuals and for the society they create. For without memory, there is no narrative; and without narrative, there is not community; and without community, there is only madness.

For Didion, narrative as an act of retrieval serves to remind humans of their connections to and differences from each other. But the form can be misused and abused, as works such as Salvador and Miami clearly indicate. But with narrative comes the possibility of the critical

consciousness which, in turn, makes freedom possible.

As an American of a certain time and place, Joan Didion endeavors to ensure the continuation of freedom through the production of narratives that connect the past to the future. As a woman, she is not content to settle for an exclusively male view of experience. As an American, she is not content to settle for a purely feminist understanding of contemporary life which tends to negate the definitive experience of national consciousness. As a contemporary writer, she is highly conscious of the influence of history in determining all human experience.

These distinctions make possible Joan Didion's particular contribution to American Letters. Hers is a vision that places gender in relation to history, and time in relation to place. Hers is a voice that speaks for and through women of the importance of connection to a past and with a future. Hers is a narrative whose message will only be fully interpreted in a future that remains to be created. If history should prove the shift from filiation to affiliation a successful transition, Joan Didion's record of that cultural upheaval will serve as a significant link in the chain of memory that connects us with that future generation.

INTRODUCTION

NOTES

[1]Didion, The White Album (11). Subsequent references to this work will be designated as WA and will appear parenthetically within the text.

[2]Didion, Slouching Toward Bethlehem (122). Subsequent references to this work will be designated as STB and will appear parenthetically within the text.

[3]These theorists propose that females achieve a sense of identity through a connection to and duplication of the mother's relation to her daughter. Thus identity is connection, is relationship. Males, on the other hand, achieve identity through separation from the mother; hence, all subsequent connections to females threatenes the male sense of identity. Identity for males is separation, especially from females. Female moral development, then, organizes itself around an 'ethos of responsibility,' whereas male moral development centers in the 'ethos of justice.'

[4]Both Brian Morton and Samuel Coale comment at length about the Faluknerian quality of Didion's first novel. Morton notes how Faulknerian is Didion's image of Westerners, as are the cadences of her language in Run River. "They had been a particular kind of people, their

particular virtues called up by a particular situation, their particular flaws waiting there through all those years, unperceived, unsuspected, glimpsed only cloudily by one or two in each generation, by a wife whose bewildered eyes wanted to look not upon Eldorado but upon her mother's dogwood, by a blue-eyed boy who was at sixteen the best shot in the country and who when there was nothing left to shoot rode out one day and shot his brother, an accident" (RR 221).

Samule Coale identifies qualities shared by Didion and Faulkner in his work, In Hawthorne's Shadow. "As Faulkner's fiction, doom, decay, and corruption stalk favored agricultural lands. Old agrarian cultures shatter before the fiery assaults of a postwar boom" (182). Coale goes on to observe that "Didion admits that images haunted her first, as in many ways did Faulkner" (184). Didion herself collaborates with the impression by her admission that she tried to create a sense of timelessness, a fusion of all times, in Run River--a technique often associated with Faulkner's works.

[5]Again, Morton mentions the images of waste and sterility in Play It As It Lays and likens them to Eliot's images in The Waste Land. He also notes that "echoes of Eliot" appear in such lines as "the dead still center of the world" (53).

I would also claim that echoes of Eliot reverberate through A Book of Common Prayer. Eliot's voice and vision,

especially from Four Quartets, are recalled and reinterpreted in numerous rhetorical gestures that characterize the fictional voice in Didion's third novel. For instance, Grace Strasser-Mendana adopts the position of a scientific aestheticism Eliot advocates in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," when he exhorts the artist to become a medium through which art is created. She also claims the objectivity of the scientific method as a narrative function. In addition, the title of the novel, A Book of Common Prayer, alludes to the affiliation with the Anglican/Episcopalian discourse that Eliot and Didion share; the two writers also share a strong preference for diction associated with the Anglo-Saxon linguistic heritage of legal and religious discourse. "At the still point of the turning world" is a phrase from Eliot that reappears in several variations in Didion's work, as do images of light that "glow morbidly." Like the poet Eliot, Didion employs refrain, repetition, and litany as rhetorical devices to evoke mystery, nostalgia, and solace from a linguistic performance.

RUN RIVER

NOTES

[1]Didion, Run River. Subsequent references to this work will be designated as RR and will appear parenthetically within the text.

PLAY IT AS IT LAYS

NOTES

[1]Didion, Play It As It Lays. Subsequent references to this work will be designated as PLAY and will appear parenthetically within the text.

[2]The terms, diegetic and non-diegetic, are Gerard Genette's and refer to the fictional and non-fictional worlds of experience, respectively.

[3]Narratee is Genette's term for the fictional audience indicated in a text through the use of the second person pronoun. The narratee is a fictional construct that corresponds to the narrator.

[4]Foust summarizes the critical response on this point quite well, pointing out that while David J. Geherin declares Maria's despair to be 'ontological', that view cannot account for the horrific guilt she experiences after the abortion. It also diminishes the female quality of the experience, a point that Foust, like myself, finds significant to the novel's theme. "Women's dependence on men, and the inevitable brutalization and coarsening that comes with that dependence, is the ultimate 'misery peculiar to women,' and it is the novel's true, if buried theme" (53).

[5]In fact, even Foust, whose reading of the novel I have

found insightful, ultimately neglects this crucial point. But then, his intellectual association with the institutions of psychiatry predispose him to that neglect. Still I find his perspective helpful as he situates the family romance paradigm within the patriarchal structure and thus avoids the totalization that Didion's novel clearly resists.

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