



**Voice from the Void: A Widow's Words.**  
**An Analysis of Joan Didion's Memoir,**  
***A Year of Magical Thinking***

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On December 30, 2003, just after they returned from the hospital's intensive care unit where their daughter lay in an induced coma from septic shock, Joan Didion and her husband, John Gregory Dunne returned home and began to relax for the evening. Dunne started a drink and tended the fire in the living room, while Didion prepared a simple dinner in the kitchen... when she heard a loud thump in the living room.

“Life changes fast.  
Life changes in the instant.  
You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.  
The question of self-pity.”<sup>1</sup>

These are the first words that Didion wrote after the sudden death of her husband. She begins these words in her first memoir after his death, and titles it *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in which she yet again searches for meaning in an irrational world.

This essay is my attempt to analyze Didion's latest work and explain how she deals with the emptiness of widowhood, how she writes about this void, and how her themes are yet again addressed in much the same manner that she has always addressed in her 40-plus years of writing. Although Didion has created this work in the style of Montaigne's informal essay as in her earlier works, this time she seeks meaning in a much more personal world than the world she witnessed in the past. Her latest classic memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, published just a few months ago, yet again searches for her center, as she chronicles the beginning of her widowhood, and finds at this point in her life a choking void, a vortex that is unavoidable as a result of the sudden death of her husband.

When I discovered the review of her book in the *New York Times* last September, I was struck to find her a fellow widow, grappling with the very issues with which I myself have so painfully grappled. I found an irony in reading Didion's latest personal essay in that I am not just relishing Joan Didion's genius of irony and acerbic truths; now I see much more: I see a peculiar bond between us, a strong one, since we share this common

and terrible sting of widowhood, an excruciating emptiness, and now one I relive, when I read her latest work. This unimaginable business of grief is one we both have learned through this common pain of widowhood:... perhaps the deepest in one's life when one has a strong union with another—and the uncontrolled breaking of this bond is so unimaginable to others who haven't had this experience—at least, until it happens to them, as well. As Didion writes,

Grief when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be. It was not what I felt when my parents died... . Grief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life.<sup>2</sup>

She explains it so sharply spot on.

Didion's purpose in her memoir is intrinsic to her search for self, search for center, which is nothing new to her in much of her writing.<sup>3</sup> However, this time her center was not focusing on the world events around her that had been so irrational<sup>4</sup>; no, this time, her irrational world is the loss of her husband. And she writes to attempt to understand his absence, to search for a meaning in his death. This method is an old pattern for her: "The way I write is who I am, or have become, yet this is a case in which I wish I had instead of words... I need more than words to find the meaning. This is a case in which I need whatever it is I think or believe to be penetrable, if only for myself."<sup>5</sup> This is nothing new to her pattern of writing, only this time it is more central to her personal being. As she said in the beginning of her memoir,

This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself.<sup>6</sup>

Joan Didion abruptly lost her lifelong partner, fellow writer and personal editor.

"We had a joint career in an odd way," Ms Didion depicted of their relationship, living and

working together for one month shy of 40 years. “[W]e were each the person the other trusted. There was no separation between our investments or interests in any given situation.”<sup>8</sup>

Not only was Didion facing the specter of the void with the loss of her husband; at the same time, her daughter Quintana was seriously ill<sup>9</sup> in intensive care in a nearby hospital, and it was weeks before she could explain that to her daughter. Further, since her daughter was so ill, Didion was forced to repeat this over and over before her daughter could understand what had happened. In this spare and at the same time elegant work of a very painful personal memoir, Didion attempts to express this—and more—the memories of her marriage, the struggle of attempting to keep her daughter safe from illness and harm, and her own attempts to find some meaning in all of it in her memoir about the first year of her widowhood. I quite agree with her: yes, widowhood is unimaginable; even when one becomes one, even the word ‘widow’ cannot be believed. And yes, the very act of writing attributes to the possibility of finding meaning in a newly empty “world.” Didion’s purpose in her writing is to understand her *self*. But as Didion states, and as I can barely express, the very act of writing in this instance, the thinking about the specter of a direct encounter with death, mere words do not express this piercing experience. Didion has had a history of using her language to define her self, but this time, she says words are not enough. “I [placed] a great deal of emphasis on the amount of control I had. What I realized [after John Dunne’s death] was that I had no control whatsoever <sup>10</sup>.

Didion names her book as “magical thinking.” Magical thinking is something that is conceived to be beyond either science or religion: it is non-scientific, and at the same time, non-religious in its connotation. Magic has some similarities in both science and religion. Science and magic both have a sense of similar causal connection, though magic

misconstrues causation for correlation. For example, a widow might think of a “good luck” charm that she carried when she went to a certain event, thinking that that charm “caused” the good luck of the particular event, thus carrying the charm to other events, holding that the charm will affect the events. For Didion, her notion of magical thinking was to bring back her husband by being alone, or by leaving his possessions in his closet because he might come back and would need them. She wanted to keep the dictionary open at the last page he used. She kept his clothing in the closet. “Of course I knew John was dead. ...Yet I was myself in no way prepared to accept this news as final: there was a level on which I believed that what had happened remained reversible. ...I needed to be alone so that he would come back. This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking.”<sup>11</sup>

“Magical thinking” is also a term that historians of religion use to describe a sort of causal reasoning that is non-scientific. 20<sup>th</sup> century Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinoswki<sup>12</sup>, for example, described a belief in a relationship between patterns that we perceive and patterns that actually occur. We are innately able to make patterns in what we see but we do not have a good filter to make those distinctions. It is extremely difficult to change our beliefs; even when we have evidence to the contrary, we’ve already had pre-existing beliefs. When especially we are confronted with something as jolting and uncontrollably confronting as the inconceivable death of the most intimate of our partners, we experience what is called as “cognitive dissonance.” Didion’s husband unexpectedly died in front of her as she stood in disbelief. The very event, replete with paramedics on the floor, machines, tubes, blood, and all that was entailed was an unbelievable event to her. (It might be unbelievable to anyone who finds an event like this: for example, my reading of Didion’s new widowhood shocked me into disbelief; this is a common experience, and one that we all very seldom analyze.)

All of our attitudes about the reality surrounding us, all of the emotions, beliefs or values, all the goals, all the plans, all the interests in our relationships are completely disrupted in that very instant so that whatever had been our driving force to continue with the daily life that we'd had was jerked away into something else that just simply is not a part of the perceptions of reality that we'd had the moment before. Didion's witnessing of that event was watching "magic" that didn't do its tricks, but she continued with the magic, the magic of trying to get him back. (I know; I've tried my own magic.)

As she muses throughout the book, to reflect on the way that widows think when we experience this trauma of the wrenching, uncontrollable separation of spouse from self, Didion shows other instances of "magical thinking." The primary reaction to this is a disbelief in the real, and belief in the fact that he will come back; it will just be a matter of time. For Didion, one explanation was about her husband's shoes. She hung onto his shoes, she hugged them close, because she thought he still might need them. And at even another level, she knew it was irrational, yet she held on.

At the outset, when Dunne was taken to the hospital by the paramedics, Didion's reaction to this stunning event was so unreal to her that the social worker thought of her as a "cool customer"; but she needed to be alone to think—and wait for him to come back. This is what happens to a widow's mind:

"I did the ritual. I did it all. ... But it still didn't bring him back. 'Bringing him back' had been through those months my hidden focus, a magic trick. By late summer I was beginning to see this clearly. 'Seeing it clearly' did not yet allow me to give away the clothes he would need."<sup>13</sup>

Joan Didion's style of writing in her most recent work does not stray from her pattern of writing style. I myself have long had an affinity for Didion's works, yet I am not sure why; maybe by virtue of writing this paper, I might gain a better understanding of this. I certainly have understood that I do not understand things before I write about them.

I too write for understanding. And today, I dare to write about her, who some 40 years ago, early on drew on a Yeats' poem to shape her first autobiographical book of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.<sup>14</sup> Further on, I discovered her expressing the existential dilemmas of heroine Marie in the writer's second novel, *Play it as it Lays*.<sup>15</sup> Shortly, I found Didion's often cynical and always acerbic moral truths in her eclectic California essays in *The White Album*.<sup>16</sup> Years later, I wondered at the seeming nonchalant but again ironic attitude in her novel, *After Henry*.<sup>17</sup> Didion's reviews and her essays in the *NYT*, or *Review of Books* were always gratifying to see again in print, because her comments, remarks and studied views would salve my own acerbic psyche. One common pattern in much of Didion's non-fiction works is the style she uses in her essays, the classic "personal essay" style in the tradition of Michele de Montaigne.

Didion's memoir is in the style of an informal essay, where, as Katherine Henderson argues,

"a writer may create an informal essay without witnessing any newsworthy events or interviewing a single human being. The subject of the informal essay, whether social or philosophical, derives from the conduct or ordinary life... . The personal essay is... more succinct, often witty, often rambling in structure."<sup>18</sup>

Where Henderson calls it "rambling" I call Didion's style the shape of a chambered nautilus. She starts with a point, where she circles it, and as she induces in ever-widening circles, Didion comes back to her point and finding it a center. Often those points, and especially in this book, the center is her search for her self in its new identity, widowhood.

Henderson argues that Didion is following the Montaigne's style, using her "self" not as exposing intimate secrets, but as more of an illustration or example of the points that she attempts to figure out for her own understanding. And in the process of Didion's figuring it out, her work helps the reader understand things better, as well.

Writer of no less than four literary genres, Didion has had serious contributions to journalism, novels, screenwriting, as well as her books containing personal essays. Much of her screenwriting was in collaboration with her husband, no slouch himself to the cadre of prolific writers (starting with *Panic In Needle Park*, 1971). This book is another example of Didion's style of writing much like her other informal personal essays. As *The New York Times* book reviewer, Michiko Kakutani said,

“Throughout their careers, Ms. Didion and Mr. Dunne wrote about themselves, about their marriage, their nervous breakdowns, the screenplays they worked on together and the glittering worlds they inhabited in New York and Los Angeles. Writing for both of them was a way to find out what they thought; the construction of a narrative was a means of imposing a pattern on the chaos of life.”<sup>19</sup>

Even during dark times of their month-shy-of-40 years' marriage, Didion and Dunne worked side by side... editing each other's work. Didion obliquely writes of this in earlier work<sup>20</sup> and rethinks it in *YMT*.

Didion's narrative style and structure remind me so much of the Renaissance ways of Montaigne<sup>21</sup>, and his personal essays (French for “attempts”)... the man who changed the classic form of argument into a more personal musing, one that allows the reader to enter the writer's mind. Montaigne established the informal essay as a major literary art form in the sixteenth century; Joan Didion must have studied Montaigne during her college years in her native California's Berkeley<sup>22</sup>, as she has imitated his style quite well. Didion allows that form to let us see her mind, which is trying to figure out what this world is all about and where she fits into it. More than that, she uses her writing as the method of making meaning. She interjects lots of authoritative support for the points she wants to make, one major crux of her arguments that are strengthening all she says. As Phillip Lapote argues, “Montaigne began writing his book so that he could talk to someone; the reader took the place of La Boetie [his tutor].”<sup>23</sup> Didion's pattern is uncannily similar to

Montaigne: where he wrote in place of his tutor, she writes in place of talking to her partner. She wondered how she could write without his editing.

Mark Winchell reiterates what all along I have thought about Didion's work, both past and present, since she keeps her style so well:

Her writing seems to be a search for identity, an attempt to create a fictive persona with which to impose artistic coherence upon the randomness of life. What she strives for in the written word is what most of us strive for in a somewhat less deliberate and less verbal form—self knowledge.”<sup>24</sup>

Didion herself says, “...even as a child, long before what I wrote began to be published, I developed a sense that meaning itself was resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs, a technique for withholding whatever it was I thought or believed behind an increasingly impenetrable polish.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1976, her essay, “Why I Write” for the *New York Review of Books*, she explained how it is for her that the very act of writing points her way to sense. When she compares the grammar of a sentence, the arrangement of words and their subsequent meaning, much like the angles of a camera can change meaning, Didion says, “The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words, and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture... . It tells you. You don't tell it.”<sup>26</sup>

Still, 30 years later, Didion's methodology obtains: the purpose for her writing, is related to her writing style, as well. Her personal essays are always at once enlightening and insightful, well-researched to support her opinions, injected into her prose, casually, lightly, with a flow that allows the reader to slip from the personal interior experience to what the world is all about. She is a chambered nautilus. The reader gets a peek into Didion's mind, and Didion figures out her mind in the process of her writing.

This essay, she explores the center of her new identity, her new world of widowhood. Ms. Didion writes, her spouse's death "cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself."<sup>27</sup>

Didion begins to elucidate the pain she was experiencing, but very shortly distances herself from that by delving into various theories of grief, and how the so-called experts such as Freud, etc., would think grievors "should" act. This circuitously direction of thinking away from her own personal pain into the research helps keep her sanity, and helps her understand why it is that she has this craziness floating in and out of her thinking during this time. When I look at the way Didion writes, the reason why I think of it as in the shape of a chambered nautilus, is that I see her thinking as a point that she starts with it, encircles it, and ever widens that point into finely researched detail in what seems to be far from her original point. However, however far the widening thoughts go, they are related in the circle, and the point is made. For example, when she discusses her own grief, she encircles it with discussion of various views on grief, starting with Freud and the more "traditional" or "positivist" science where grief is something that is "associated with 'growth' and 'development,' was 'uncomplicated grief' or 'normal bereavement'"<sup>28</sup> Didion then quotes from the Merck Manual, following that line of reasoning where "the second kind of grief was 'complicated grief,' which was also known in the literature as 'pathological bereavement...'.<sup>29</sup> As Didion compares these explanations, to her own experience, and widens even more into an old memory of Quintana when she was a child, and when Dunne had written one of his own novels. As she quoted Dunne's work extensively, she is also considering what grief is, whether grief and faith are the same

thing, whether the scientists' theories matched her own experience, Didion is exploring in her "attempts" in the classic Montaigne way.

As her thought processes about grief meandered from the science into her oldest memories of her wedding to Dunne, the vortex hits; she abruptly writes, "No. The way you got sideswiped was by going back." The paroxysm hit her, though just that acerbic line speaks it. She shows the deepest grief in her own process: the vortex. To keep from the irrational, she finds distraction. She attempts to keep her thoughts on a "narrow track" by focusing only on a classroom memory. "I believed it as an undergraduate to offer a lesson for survival."<sup>30</sup>

In this ever-widening process of induction, Didion eventually quotes Emily Post's (1922) etiquette regarding death and mourning, which makes eminent sense to her (and to me). "[Post] wrote in a world in which mourning was still recognized, allowed, not hidden from view."<sup>31</sup> Today death is "now occurs largely offstage. [In Post's time] the act of dying had not yet been professionalized. It did not typically involve hospitals. Women died in childbirth... Death was up close, at home. Post... turned out to be as acute in its apprehension of this other way of death, and as prescriptive in its treatment of grief, as anything else I read." Thus in her nearly 30 pages of an essay on grief, Didion switched her direction as well, and she pretty much said "stick this, doctors... Emily Post said it much better, and is related much more to my experience than your theories." Only after her exposition of the theories, and her winding into a chambered theoretical world apart from her pain, her writing helped her ease her own personal pain, and in the process learned more about her grief.

Not only does the grief of widowhood bring an enormous emptiness, cognitive dissonance, but it also brings what I myself have called a "tsunami" of waves; it is what Didion calls a "vortex." She writes, "I had first noticed what I came to know as 'the vortex

effect' in January."<sup>32</sup> In this paper I myself can just barely express the nature of Didion's grieving experience, and Didion can express this irony much better than I. I am speaking of the moment that changes everything, changes every aspect of one's life, that moment of death, not one's own, but the one of the (shadow of my shadow) most intimate partner of one's life: one's spouse. Joan Didion lost her spouse in an instant, just as I did mine. I went through my own disbelief, even in the face of evidence. But beyond that instant of change, it does not end, that void. When one is sick, one expects to be better; similarly, for a widow, the thinking is that this event will finish, this widowhood will end. And as days, weeks, months, nay the years, go by... the very slow realization that this does not end—is not acceptable. I *know* of what she speaks:

We have no way of knowing that the funeral itself will be anodyne, a kind of narcotic regression in which we are wrapped in the care of others and the gravity and meaning of the occasion. Nor can we know ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.<sup>33</sup>

The term 'widow' is derived from its Latin root *viduus*, meaning 'void' or 'empty.' The void of widowhood is an understatement. Not only is widowhood a void, it is also a confrontation with meaninglessness. Joan Didion writes of her immediate loss of life controls, her prior supports and her security. She is left suddenly and irrevocably alone to tend to a very ill daughter. As widowhood disorganizes one's life, it necessitates complete change: The offhand remarks, "where did I put"... please pass the keys," "what do you want for dinner," "turn the channel, I want to watch..." "I'll be late tonight..." "good morning" "let's go see a movie..." don't work anymore. Habits must be broken, though the cognitive dissonance is strong. Widows do not like to use that word in the beginning. Didion says, "I have trouble thinking of myself as a widow. I remember hesitating the first

time I had to check that box on the ‘marital status’ part of a form.”<sup>34</sup> Widows do not know when exactly to take off the rings, if they take them off, even. Widows do not want to hear about the limited choices of status: there is married, single, divorced... but very seldom widowed. Widows do not easily give up that marital status from which it was so quickly wrenched.<sup>35</sup>

Various researchers, and these researchers work from many types of perspectives<sup>36</sup>, have posed more than one theory of grief. The more traditional, positivist theory (Freud, et al), the theories to which doctors aspire, would argue that grief is a *condition* that one must pass through, and pass over, and the sooner the grief is worked through and is over, then one can “move on,” shed the thought of the “other,” and have a “healthy” life again. Didion talks about the “two kinds of grief” that the (positivist) doctors inform her in her search for meaning.

The postmodern theorist, on the other hand,<sup>37</sup> rethink this theory into the truth that we have a narrative of our lives... we define ourselves by our stories, and we find that some of the most fundamental parts of our identity are surrounded by safety and security (Maslow et al). We find our sense of security in a select few: our family and our close friends; these notions of safety and security revolve tightly around our closest loved ones, and in adult cases, in the relationship of our partners. “The empirical reality is that people do not relinquish their ties to the deceased, withdraw their cathexis or ‘let them go.’”<sup>38</sup> In grief, this very personal process is ongoing, and we grieverers are continually “constructing and maintaining our most basic sense of self.”<sup>39</sup> This sense of grief goes far beyond “what it feels like’ but more “what it is.” And trying to understand what we are after the death of our spouse takes years to reconstruct. Didion attempts to reconstruct her *self* in this her latest memoir. Perhaps her musings on the historical Emily Post might today be construed as a postmodern perspective.

Didion recalls that “I had first noticed what I came to know as “the vortex effect” in January” [the first month of her widowhood] when she is trying to characterize the wrenching pain of the void, and the way it comes in “waves.” She had not only the unavoidable pain of her widowhood, but at the same time, the excruciating pain of her daughter who was critically ill. In chapter 10, Didion tries to avoid the current pain and recalls with minute detail, of times when they were a young family, but she writes more about what she wanted to what she did and what she and couldn’t write about. After a lengthy quote from *Play It As It Lays*, Didion says “This seemed to be working.” She avoids the vortex. But of course when she writes about her work, she cannot avoid writing about her husband, since he is so intricately intertwined in that. She recalls that Dunne tells her of a particularly frustrating experience Didion’s having with an editor, and he says to her, ‘Didn’t I tell you? It would be like being nibbled to death by ducks?’<sup>40</sup> At this memory, she is in her vortex. “The way you got sideswiped was by going back.”

Mine, I’ve called my tsunamis. Grief comes in waves, and comes when we least expect it, from the smallest item that reminds us of something we did together, something he did for me... my tsunamis are Didion’s vortexes. Her center that she searches for is a spinning turbulent flow. As a granddaughter of a geologist, Didion knows the center of the ocean are plate tectonics that are not solid, but ever-changing. “Oahu, an emergent post-erosional land mass along the Hawaiian Ridge—is a temporary--feature, and every rainfall or tremor along the Pacific plates alters its shape and shortens its tenure as Crossroads of the Pacific.”<sup>41</sup> Didion’s center will not hold, as she spoke of that metaphor in her first book of essays, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*. In her latest, she ends with the same sort of metaphor. She does not want to end this account, as she does not want to end that first year of widowhood. Yet, as she ends the essay, she ends with words from her husband:

“You had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change. He told me that. No eye is on the sparrow, but he did tell me that.”

As a postmodern theorist of grief might think of Didion, she is not finished with the end of this memoir. In her last chapter, she details the memory of the first anniversary of his death, Didion first meditates over geological earthquake events, ones widespread and underground, makes her think “*As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.*” As an Episcopalian, she buried her husband in church. She laces much of her thought with religious metaphors to shore her thinking. After passing the first year’s worth of “milestones” (“last time this year..”) the widow realizes a new type of grief. No longer the pain so fresh and so cutting, but it is the beginning of the long-lasting variety... that the freshness is gradually being replaced with what she says, “my sense of John himself, John alive, will become more remote, even ‘mudgy,’ softened, transmuted into whatever best serves my life without him.” Whatever this sense of time we have, we don’t like.... Now it’s just time that lengthens, that time without him. When the “year of magical thinking” passes, reality becomes more prominent, but we do not want that. “I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account” Didion writes at the end of her memoir. “Nor did I want to finish the year. Her final words seem to me a mix of the old theories of grief conflicting with the more accurate ones... that we do not want to reduce our memories to “photographs on the table” or “let go of them in the water.” But at the same time, I agree with her so reluctantly, “you had to go with the change. He told me that. No eye is on the sparrow, but he did tell me that.” (227). I notice how at the same time she begins to accept the time now without him, he is still with her in her words.

Ms. Didion’s thesis is her attempt to find meaning by virtue of her writing, and her theme is to recognize the “magic” that occurs in her widowhood, and perhaps her attempt not to give it up. I know I do not want to let mine go, even after nearly five years. My

question of self pity is being co-opted by Joan Didion. We are of the same ilk. Life as we know it ends... even if one's spouse is dying for a lengthy period of time, life has a huge divide between it and death. Even when one is dying, one is still alive until he dies. It happens abruptly for a good proportion of us... no, not the ones I've known who've ministered to their partners who've had such horrid and lingering deaths... but some, sit back and not even know what it is, when we look at the death process even in front of us. But no one knows what it is that happens... Death is not something that is fully comprehended... it is something that takes much longer to comprehend. Death is the hardest of all to understand. Yet, Joan Didion explains it so do sparely, so eloquently.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. (from hereafter I use YMT for reference, though numbers in parentheses by themselves are also indicating quotes from YMT) P.
- <sup>2</sup> *YMT* p. 27.
- <sup>3</sup> In her seminal book about Didion's life and writing, *Didion*, Katherine Henderson explains how the pattern of Didion's writing has included essays that cover stories of the angst and meaningless of worlds, such as the hippies of the 60s, Vietnam and rebellion, (in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*) while the essays she covered in *The White Album* dealt with Manson murders and Robert Kennedy's assassination and other social themes that exemplify chaos, led her to illustrate her own psychiatric diagnosis of her angst and identification with the chaos of the world. To me, this was vaguely reminiscent of Kaysan's "My Diagnosis." Didion's intimacy with the chaos of the world she wrote made her herself question her own relationship with the world, her depression, anxiety and general instability. She did recover from that early in the 70s, where her marriage returned to a kind of stability, and her work continued despite her anxieties. However, her themes of searching for a center of meaning have continued throughout all her works, in my opinion.
- <sup>4</sup> I am especially thinking of *The White Album*, a compilation of essays where she focused a good deal on issues of the 60s and 70s, the irrationality of the Vietnam war, of the spaced-out hippies, of the irrationality even, of California's then-"first lady" Nancy Reagan, and other topics that she portrayed.
- <sup>5</sup> *YMT* p. 8
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7
- <sup>7</sup> Joan Didion in an interview with Susan Stamberg on NPR's Morning Edition, 30 September 2005.
- <sup>8</sup> *YMT* p. 16.
- <sup>9</sup> Much of Didion's first year of widowhood was spent in hospitals in New York and California, to be with her daughter Quintana, who ultimately died during publication of Didion's book. She devotes a good deal of the book talking about Quintana's illness and how she dealt with that, but she does not mention the death of her daughter. She focused, rather, on her widowhood.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33

<sup>12</sup> *Malinowski: Odyssey of an Anthropologist, 1884-1920*. By Michael Young. Yale University Press, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> *YMT*, pp. 43-44

<sup>14</sup> Didion, Joan, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. (Hereafter, labeled as STB. At the beginning of her book, Didion quoted the entire Yeats poem, and explained at the beginning of her "Introduction, "This book is called Slouching Towards Bethlehem because for several years now certain lines from the Yeats poem which appears two pages back have reverberated in my inner ear as if they were surgically implanted there." She goes on to explicate several phrases in the Yeats' poem.

**NB:** Throughout the text, the use of numbers in parentheses indicate the page numbers of the primary text that I am analyzing, viz., I.

<sup>15</sup> Didion, Joan,, *Play it as it Lays*. (PAL)..The main character, Maria, alternately approaches and avoids other characters in the novel. For a more explicit analysis of this novel, please see Henderson's Chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, *The White Album*. (WA) She speaks of many contradictory themes in this collection, which as a reflection of the Beatles' album of the same name. This is also a collection of contradictory themes, as so did the Beatles in their work.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, *After Henry*. (AH) At that point, when I found that Didion wrote this, I bought it. My thinking has been for many years, "if it's Didion, I'll buy the book." I read it in 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Henderson, Katherine Usher. *Joan Didion*. P. 91.

<sup>19</sup> Kakutani, Michiko. *NYT*, online version (no page numbers).

<sup>20</sup> Winchell, p. 9. Winchell writes about a time period of separation while Didion and daughter stays home in Los Angeles, Dunne stays in Vegas while He would home to share notes with her and help her edit.

Walter, Carolyn Ambler. *The Loss of a Life Partner: Narratives of the Bereaved*. NY: Columbia University Press. 2003.

<sup>21</sup> A short description of Montaigne's life and works is written in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*. As well, Lopate, in his *The Art of Personal Essay* explains more about how Montaigne had perfected the art in the 1500s.

<sup>22</sup> Winchell, Mark, Royden. In his analysis of Joan Didion, Winchell started with a short biography of Didion's early California life, where she is a fifth-generation Californian, and came to Berkeley after s short stint in a junior college. I am

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surmising about her studies there, though she did have a difficult time dealing with the abstract cosmology of Milton, and would rather focus on the sensory details of “a flowering pear tree outside my window and the particular way the petals fell on my floor” (as she wrote in “Why I Write”).

<sup>23</sup> Lapote, Phillip. *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. P. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Winchell, *Joan Didion*, Chapter One: p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *YMT*, p. 7

<sup>26</sup> Excerpt from Didion’s “Why I Write” from *New York Times*, file Dec. 5, 1976; ProQuest Historical newspapers, The new York Times. P. 270.

<sup>27</sup> *YMT* p. 7

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208

<sup>35</sup> I use the term ‘widow’ in a general sense, since for the past five years, I have been a part of an online widow/er’s message board membership which includes more than 3,000 men and women of all combinations of “spouse-hood,” and much of the generalizations I make, I speak from the “authority” of experience of reading and responding to their stories, again and again. Many of these people I’ve met, throughout the country in “3-D” “get togethers.” Many of these themes are constantly recurring. This happens in widowhood, gay or straight, man or woman. Go to <http://www.widownet.org/wnbb2> for more information. (My “ID” is athenadocgoddess to see the “history” of my comments these past years.)

<sup>36</sup> I am speaking from a wide, postmodern, and qualitative (vs. quantitative, or positivist) research perspective, in that I’ve got a background in the theories of Platonism, Hegel, Marx, Feminism, Critical Theory, and Foucault, in other words, I have studied philosophy throughout its history. (I am older than I look.) ‘-)

<sup>37</sup> Neimeier and Freud et al are quoted in Walter's *Loss of a Life Partner*, Chapter One, "Theories of Grief: How they inform our understanding of the loss of a partner."

<sup>38</sup> Walter, p, 9

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220

The Year of Magical Thinking (2005), by Joan Didion (b. 1934), is an account of the year following the death of the author's husband John Gregory Dunne (1932–2003). Published by Knopf in October 2005, The Year of Magical Thinking was immediately acclaimed as a classic book about mourning. It won the 2005 National Book Award for Nonfiction and was a finalist for both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Biography/Autobiography. Joan Didion's most known for her essays ("Slouching Towards Bethlehem") but The Year of the Magical Thinking spoke to me the most. Also - Can't wait for the Joan Didion documentary! Upvote. Share 5y. Matt Fairchild Director of Community, TinyCo. @eriktorenberg Completely agree. This was the first book I ever read that dealt with profound grief, while also being my first Didion. It still haunts me a decade later. I found myself thinking about it whenever a loved one passes away, and I recommend it to anyone who is struggling with The Vortex. Upvote. Share 5y. Allison Esposito When Joan Didion's husband died suddenly of a massive heart attack, a partnership of 40 years ended in a second. Just days before, the couple had seen their only daughter fall seriously ill. ALEX CLARK, Daily Telegraph. "The Year of Magical Thinking is in fact a year of lucid and rational thinking, about grief and mourning and feared loss; this account of a husband's death and daughter's grave illness is the more moving for not trying to be." JULIAN BARNES. "Her book, exploring an agonising universal experience, will speak to and maybe comfort anyone who has lost for ever the one they loved." "The book achieves something that Didion herself thought impossible" it gives voice to the most inarticulate of emotions. It is an extraordinarily eloquent cry of pain.