

The Stories We Tell Ourselves:
Joan Didion on the Romantic Fantasies of Reality

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Abstract

This dissertation attempts to showcase the ways in which Joan Didion employs metaphoric prose to expose the “romantic fantasies” in the creative nonfiction works of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005). I propose that a reading of these romantic fantasies is dependent on the distinction between “romantic” (lower case) and “Romantic” (capitalized). While Didion explores “romantic” fantasies of contemporary American existence that consist of society’s idealized notions of reality, happiness and morality, I simultaneously argue the extent to which she borrows sentiments from the Romantic period in her writing, further strengthening her thematic content that deals with the notion of disorder. I showcase her use of literary techniques as well as popular ideologies essential to Romanticism, such as the emphasis on introspection and the imagination.

This dissertation departs from J.R.R. Tolkien’s (1947) theories on fantasy which portrays the imagination of an individual as a reflection of one’s desires. This serves to offer some justification underlying the basis of romantic fantasies, illustrated by Didion’s own personal account of her subjection to magical thinking — a type of thinking rooted in James George Frazer’s theoretical framework of Sympathetic Magic (1911). The significance of this is to demonstrate what Sara Ahmed (2010) rationalizes as society’s estrangement from happiness in the pursuit of an idealized version of happiness that is only accessible through one’s imaginative capacities.

Through a literary analysis of Didion’s metaphoric prose, I employ Mark Muggli’s (1987) analysis of Didion’s use of emblem as extreme in its power to transcend the confines of her narratives in a process that demands a cognitive interpretation from her reader. I argue that her metaphoric prose, embedded in emblematic imagery, affords the reader a sense of agency in contributing their own perspectives in the decoding of her language that she leaves, at times, quite ambiguous, allowing for the reader to form their own deductions. Through this, I offer an

alternative perspective to reading *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*, arguing that Didion's writing is inherently "Romantic" in its quest to make sense of the world and of the human condition. I suggest that readers of Didion should dissect her sentences, question her meanings and contribute towards her narrative with their own opinions, while using her emblems as a reference to relate, contrast and compare their own life experiences.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Eighteenth century psychology defined introspection as the alignment with one's inner senses (Lyon 246). This process required individuals to undergo a process of self-reflection that was believed to be necessary in gaining a greater awareness of themselves and their relationship to the world around them. This then granted them the ability to perceive the world through their inner senses that were said to allow one to perceive things not only for their physical exterior, but for their significance in providing one with wisdom and connections to a higher sense of truth (Lyon 247). This helped to create the foundation of the psychology used to understand Romanticism. While Romanticism was a period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it can be argued that it still continues to dominate popular culture. It began partly as a reaction to neoclassicism and to the Enlightenment era and was instead concerned with focusing on emotion, spirituality, individualism, the significance of nature and the power of the imagination. These attributes manifested themselves in popular art, music and literature which in turn affected much of the culture, politics and philosophies during this period — just as the violence that occurred during the French Revolution propelled new impressions of humans as beings reactive to natural urges.

For this paper, I draw from Morse Peckham's definition of Romanticism which he defines as "the revolution in the European mind" that redirected the vision of the world as a

static machine, to that of a “dynamic organicism” based on values such as “change, imperfection, growth, diversity, the creative imagination [and] the unconscious” (14). This new system of thought encouraged the Romantics to turn more towards properties like intuition and imagination (Peckham 10). Additionally, the Romantics often advocated for an idealized version of society where they rejected their present systems of order in lieu of finding “higher truths” gained from internal reflection. These higher truths were believed to provide individuals with a greater sense of purpose in the context of their own society and in the universe (Peckham 10). Romantic writers therefore used the idea of one’s inner sense of introspection to understand complexities surrounding reason, morality, imagination and fantasy (Lyon 247).

Dominant contemporary Romantic theorist, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is famously recognized for his distinction between imagination and fancy which he outlines in *Biographia Literaria* (1917). His theory of the imagination sees it divided between the primary and the secondary, arguing that the primary imagination generates creation while the secondary imagination can overcome worldly limitations in the endeavor to reach clarity from a higher truth (Hume, *Kant and Coleridge* 489). Coleridge differentiates fancy as an aggregative power that is made up of materials received through the law of association, “a belief that ideas, regarded as sensations, develop through association with other ideas” (Hess 471). According to Coleridge, fancy is incapable of finding higher truth, rendering it unable to resolve the apparent complexities in the world (Hume, *Kant and Coleridge* 489).

In his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” J.R.R. Tolkien presents his own theories related to Coleridge’s belief of the secondary imagination, insisting it should rather be fantasy that replaces “the Romantic faculty of the creative imagination” (Seeman 76). Tolkien agrees with the image-making ability of the imagination but argues that the “perception of the image, the grasp of its implications, and the control” ... “commands or induces Secondary belief” which

is responsible for the creation of fantasy (Tolkien 138-139). He uses fairy-tales to illustrate how this form of sub-creation is a non-visual type of Art (Tolkien). Because of their universality, fairy-stories, having been passed down and adapted throughout generations and in different cultures, illustrate the stages of “independent invention, inheritance, and diffusion” (Tolkien 119) that occurs in the creative process of a single text (Tolkien 122). He states how, through the Secondary Belief, the story-maker creates a “Secondary World” for the reader’s mind to enter (Tolkien 132). In order to properly “exist” in this world, one must suspend disbelief or be returned to the Primary World of their own reality (Tolkien 132). This is not a physical journey, but rather a mental one.

Although Tolkien’s above analysis of non-visual art is specifically related to fiction, I aim to demonstrate how it can still be applied to the nonfiction discussed in this research paper. I argue that Tolkien’s theories on the Secondary Belief of the imagination and the idea of creating a Second World to foster one’s fantasies can be used to understand the romantic fantasies Didion explores. These romantic fantasies are fostered in the minds of individuals who desire to escape from their Primary World and to enter into a Secondary World where they act as the story-maker of their lives, granting them power to alter their perceived reality. Tolkien’s ideas on fantasy form the dominant contemporary sense in which the concept of “imagination” is used. He also proposes that fantastical association is linked to human desire where fantasy represents an imaginary world harbored by one’s desires not experienced in reality (Seeman 73).

These prominent views surrounding the imagination in Romanticism placed a large emphasis on an individual’s consciousness in granting one the ability to create a desired state of reality. This is where one might confuse the difference between Romanticism (capitalized) and romanticism (in the lower case), where the latter is linked closely to the modern definition of the term “romantic.” Originating from the definition of romance used in seventeenth

century literature to show the intimate connection of love between individuals, “romantic,” in the modern sense, still carries this definition when used to describe human relationships to one another. While the word “romance” is commonly used to reflect love and courtship in a positive light, the term “romantic” claims a similar definition, connoting a picture of affection that is often associated with perfection. However, it is common knowledge that the idea of perfection is unrealistic. The term “romantic” therefore also claims this understanding, adding another layer to its interpretation, one that enforces the idea that is suggestive of an idealized view.

The term “romantic” is now used to represent an idealized way of thinking, where it suggests an unrealistic interpretation of reality, more commonly referred to as a “romanticized” way of thinking. Thus, when one is said to *romanticize* a way of life, the word suggests a glamorized depiction where such a life is made to appear better than it actually is. This is the interpretation I use to define the concept of “romantic fantasies.” When referring to these romantic fantasies, I do so in the context of this last definition of “romantic” as an idealized perspective. However, by terming these fantasies (including Didion’s own form of magical thinking) as “romantic” fantasies, I also inherit in its meaning the Romantic ideology that one’s imagination offers the power to alter their reality in the form of providing individuals with another way of seeing. This allowed the Romantics a psychological alternative to reality, which is the very basis of what I explore in Didion’s narrative as she works to expose these alternative realities.

I argue then that Didion documents a society that perpetuates this perspective, causing them to create and live through the fantasies generated by such a romantic perspective. While Didion focuses specifically on the American society, her narratives appeal to all readers as she describes experiences that many individuals can relate to. Thus, I adopt a rather general-

ized inclusion when referring to “society,” as I refer to the American society depicted by Didion in the Sixties (and then in the early two-thousands), as well as the contemporary society of the 21st century that is still plagued with much of the concerns highlighted in her narratives. Didion illustrates how individuals faced with unbearable realities often embrace a romantic fantasy in order to allow them to imagine an alternative “reality” to their present. She highlights the consequences of adopting this type of perspective in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) where Didion herself falls victim to a romanticized perception of reality. However, in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), Didion demonstrates how institutions of power have forcefully encouraged citizens to employ a romanticized vision of society through the fantasies conveyed in Hollywood and the mainstream media, as well as techniques such as the propaganda used to sell the myth of the American Dream. These techniques are employed in an attempt to further order and control society where they are misled into thinking that, by involving themselves in such systems, society (both the collective and its individual entities) will be granted the happiness that is promised to them.

In “The Culture Industry” (1947) Adorno Theodor and Max Horkheimer detail how the mass media put forth idealised narratives in an attempt to persuade the general public into believing a particular ideology. This is achieved mostly through advertising and the entertainment industry that manipulates narratives (Adorno and Horkheimer). “The stronger the positions of the culture industry become, the more summarily it can deal with consumers’ needs, producing them, controlling them, disciplining them, and even withdrawing amusement” (Adorno and Horkheimer 13). This technique of withdrawing amusement is seen in the illusory promises made to consumers in an attempt to buy their support. These promises will never be fulfilled, yet they draw on focal desires of its consumers, the desire to attain success, happiness and belonging (Adorno and Horkheimer). Thus, the “triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though

they see through them” (Adorno and Horkheimer 25). To become disillusioned to these romantic fantasies is to accept the idea that, contrary to what is advertised, not everything has a happy ending. Didion details how the realization of this fact often causes individuals to rather continue living in a romantic fantasy where they adopt a perspective that allows them to view their lives as ideal in the failed pursuit of happiness.

The aim of this paper is to explore how Didion exposes these romantic fantasies through a literary analysis of her prose rooted in metaphor and emblematic imagery. The significance of Didion’s use of metaphor is that it reinforces her narrative that I argue to be characterized by sentiments common to Romanticism. Metaphor in itself is a linguistic tool that exemplifies the imagination in action. This literary device is known for asking the reader to imagine other possible scenarios to the reality of what the writer has put forth, associating the metaphor with the creation of romantic fantasies as it demonstrates the ease with which the imagination can substitute reality with an ideal perception of one’s subjective or desired interpretation. The metaphor has therefore been acknowledged as a rhetorical tool and asks for a type of thinking rooted in associationism as the reader is challenged with decoding its possible implied meaning. Thus, the metaphor is a device that causes one to adopt a thinking similar to the Romantics as the imagination is employed for creative interpretation.

In the analysis of Didion’s use of metaphor, I focus on what Mark Muggli argues to be her “dependence on an extreme form of metaphor that moves along a spectrum beyond symbol to what we might call ‘emblem’” (407). I refer to this technique as *metaphoric prose*. This thesis explores the notion of these romantic fantasies in the context of Didion’s metaphoric prose through three different lenses. The first lens is related to the surface level definition of romantic ideals that are associated with the unrealistic fantasies sold by Hollywood, the culture industry and the media. When referring to the media, I identify the widespread manufacturing and consumption of information, advertising and social platforms that are

made available to most people who have access to the internet. While the media is constantly changing in the form of its content, message and technology, I intend to focus on the certain ideals that have been put forth for decades that harbor a fascination with perfection — a message which continues to be reinforced today. This can be understood in relation to mass culture and the theory of manipulation which, when examined in conjunction with Sigmund Freud’s notion of repression, promises consumers a fantasy to fulfil their desires (Jameson 140-141). Only, it is just that, a fantasy. Messages in the media tend to play on society’s repressed desires in order to present them with a vision of a reality that *seems* to be able to fulfil these desires, thus coaxing society into performing certain roles in which they believe will grant them fulfilment (Jameson 141). “[M]ass culture represses them by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony” (Jameson 141). One of the most common and universal desires shared by all people is the attainment of happiness. Didion focuses on this by illustrating how this desire is often exploited in an attempt to control the beliefs and value systems of society. The essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* focus largely on this theme.

The second lens focuses on the modern definition of the term “romantic” which is used to describe an unrealistic and idealized perception of reality — causing one to romanticize their present situations as a coping method. This can be employed as a form of escapism or an attempt to fabricate one’s desired sense of happiness. This lens includes Didion’s own descent into romantic fantasies in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Didion “exposes” these romantic fantasies, in the context of these first two lenses, through her metaphoric prose and the nonfiction genre. By expose, I mean that she uncovers the falsity behind these fantasies in an attempt to awaken the reader to the consequential disillusionment that comes with believing such fantasies, as well as exploring the meaning and reasoning behind this romanticized way of thinking. In doing so, Didion persuades the reader to question their own ideas on society,

happiness, values and morality. This is in direct contrast with the theory of manipulation as Didion allows her reader an opinion.

The third and most important lens through which I consider the term romantic in relation to Didion's writing is Romanticism (capitalized). According to Peckham, there has been much contestation in finding a "generally accepted theory of [R]omanticism" (6). I do not wish to find a "generally accepted" theory for Romanticism, but rather to outline some of its main qualities and characteristics that became common sentiments in Romantic literature. Some of these include: a focus on emotions and nature, a sense of alienation from society, liberating the unconscious mind, rebelling against order, accepting change, a heightened spirituality, idealism, and, a journey towards understanding the meaning of human existence (Peckham 14).

When comparing the notion of Romanticism to the term "romantic" (in the lower case), they are seen to share a common quality in representing a definition that refers to the visualization of an ideal society. While romantic fantasies are employed as a coping method necessary to escape one's unendurable present, Romanticism's concern with visualizing an ideal version of society is in the interest of moving away from human concepts relating only to reason and order, in an effort to move towards a higher truth gained through individualism and an appreciation for one's emotional connection to natural elements. I argue that Didion's writing reflects the underlying qualities shared by both terms (romantic and Romantic). Moreover, this paper demonstrates how Didion, in exposing these romantic fantasies, borrows sentiments from Romanticism in her literary narrative. Such sentiments include ideologies from the Romantic period, as well as similar linguistic devices employed by the Romantic writers of the eighteenth century. Didion alludes to this in the preface for *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Here, she expresses her reasoning for including William Butler Yeats' poem as his words reverberated in her "inner ear" (Didion xi), referencing the Romantic idea

of introspection (Lyon 246). By creating a narrative emblematic of Romanticism's inherent ideologies, I argue that Didion's writing could suggest a Romantic way of thinking when reflecting on what it means to be human in contemporary times.

Furthermore, as she uses these Romantic sentiments to explore complex notions like morality and mortality, her narratives darken in tone. Didion creates morally ambiguous narratives which allows her to explore the darker side of human nature — a trope common in gothic literature where the presence of “villain-heroes” are used to question themes surrounding the concept of morality (Hume, *Gothic Versus Romantic* 285). I aim to showcase how Didion achieves this morally ambiguous narrative through Romantic irony. Edward F Kravitt describes “Romantic irony” as a technique used to deliberately destroy an illusion (101-102). A specific image is created in the narrative only to have the illusion of it shattered in the final sentence, where the true nature of this image is finally reflected (Kravitt 101-102). The purpose of this is to first entice the reader into believing the illusion, only to disillusion them with the truth of the subject matter (Kravitt 101-102). Didion makes use of Romantic irony to set up her emblematic conclusions which force her reader to actively engage in the romantic fantasy. The effect of doing so reinforces the idea that employing a perspective rooted in romantic fantasies can often lead one to adopt a thought process similar to the ideologies present in Romanticism, namely, envisioning a world that does not actually exist. While this is a controversial sentiment, my intent is not to condemn a *romanticized* perspective that emanated from the period of Romanticism, but rather to analyze the societal fantasies this type of perception creates. The Romantics may be criticized for an idealized way of thinking, but, their utopian outlook was in direct response to the oppression they felt in their realities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Methodology

Nonfiction as a Genre

The nonfiction genre covers a wide spectrum of forms such as biographies, memoirs, essays, diaries and life writing (Neilsen 133). The popularity of this genre dates back to the Romantic period where writers were focused on introspection. Nonfiction (specifically memoirs, essays and life writing) allowed them a physical platform to interrogate their internal and external reflections based off their personal experiences. Thus, nonfiction is favorable for its form that enables writers to confront the world around them, by analyzing their thoughts and feelings. In the context of modernity, readers of the 21st century have become more interested in reading literature that reflects the complexities of their own realities which nonfiction is able to deliver. Moreover, nonfiction is a genre inclusive of an array of styles and acts as an umbrella term for more specific sub-categories such the “contemporary memoir,” “creative nonfiction,” the “personal essay” and “documentary narrative” (Kirby and Kirby 22). These all share a fundamental characteristic: the content consists of a factual narrative that often mimic’s the stylistic devices used in fiction, such as descriptive writing. In this way, it differs from Journalistic writing that is strictly fact based and is intended to inform rather than entertain or to personally connect with the reader. However, Didion’s style of writing can be seen to encompass literary styles from both nonfiction and a type of journalistic writing called New Journalism. Tom Wolfe describes this New Journalism, which originated in the Sixties, as a form of journalism that reads like a novel (Kramer 6). This new form of journalism received a great deal of controversy as the lines between fiction and fact can easily blur. Yet, it serves a community of readers that want to engage with stories about current

events in a way that is enjoyable to read, as opposed to simply being presented with a list of facts.

With regard to the two nonfiction works analyzed in this paper, her writing falls under the classification of creative nonfiction where she uses the personal essay form for *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and the form of the contemporary memoir in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. The personal essay derives from the long essay tradition seen in classical literature that consisted of a narrative longer than a poem but shorter than a novel. The word “essay” is recognized from Michel de Montaigne’s contribution, outlining the essay as a literary form in the 1500 and 1600s (MacDonald 548), where writers detailed their reflections on certain subjects usually linked to their personal observations of the world. Similarly, the contemporary memoir genre, gaining popularity in the last twenty years, not only documents the writer’s personal experiences, but creates a connection with the reader by including them in the narrative, presenting questions and riddles for the reader themselves to solve (Kirby and Kirby 23). In order to do so, the contemporary memoir places importance on symbolism and metaphor used to engage with the reader’s analytical abilities.

The main difference seen between the two styles (essay and memoir) is Didion’s commentary as an observer versus her commentary as a participant. As an observer, her metaphoric prose is complex, she wants the reader to investigate her words, whereas as a participant, she more thoroughly guides the reader in her process of magical thinking. Her personal narrative set in the memoir raises the question about the reliability of her as a narrator in casting judgement on magical thinking. However, her narrative includes this concern and is followed by extensive research on the matter. In both the essays and the memoir, Didion makes use of literary realism to create the familiarity of real life in her setting and dialogue to further contrast the mundane features of real life with the romanticized beliefs. In this way, Didion’s long essays and contemporary memoir are an example of life writing. Philip Neilsen

states how all life writing is concerned with questions of memory, truth and the self. While the nonfiction writer must be cautious when it comes to memory and truth telling, they must also embrace the creative aspect of the genre (Neilsen 134). Hedley Twidle argues the need for nonfictions to navigate between the storytelling narrative, the aim of granting social information and the imparting of their own reflections. It is this hybridized narrative that most critically aware readers find so captivating in the nonfiction genre (Twidle xi).

According to Mark Kramer, the definitive mark of nonfiction is the author's "intimate voice," acting as a clear indication of their personality expressed through specific poetic devices (6). I argue that Didion's voice and personality is presented through her reliance on metaphoric prose. In "The Poetics of Joan Didion's Journalism," Muggli argues that Didion designs an "extreme form of metaphor" which serves to create emblematic images in the reader's mind (407). These images that Muggli refers to as emblems "reverberate with an intensity that suggests a large world of meaning beyond the confines of the particular story" (408). Peter M Daly suggests that emblems are more precise than symbols as they reflect a visual image which the reader can intellectually interpret. Thus, the emblem does not serve to illustrate or represent but to evoke (Muggli 407). "Very often the emblem ends a section of a story and is therefore given a white space in which to echo" (Muggli 408). This "echo" is achieved in the literal blank spaces that follow Didion's emblems, either a paragraph break or a blank page at the end of an essay. When referring to her emblems, I do not necessarily mean specific words or sentences used for representation, but rather the image that is created as a whole from her use of metaphors, symbolism, poetic devices and reader participation. An example of her metaphoric prose is seen in the essay "On Going Home" where she writes about her daughter's birthday and what she would like to promise her. First to consider is the most obvious interpretation. Her wishes for her daughter to grow up with her cousins in order to gain a better sense of the word home can be contextualised with the extended metaphor

used throughout *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* about the current American population in the Sixties who felt alienated from society, where “home” symbolizes the return to one’s heritage and finding a better sense of belonging.

Emblem, which compares closely in its definition to symbolism for its allegorical interpretation, alludes to a greater meaning. What Muggli terms “an extreme form of metaphor” (407) is actualised in the way Didion sets up her prose, creating an emblematic reading that leaves an impression on the reader as she paints intricate literary pictures. She writes that, for her daughter, she would like to “pledge her a picnic on a river with fried chicken and her hair uncombed” (Didion 168). In contrast to this wish, the final line of this essay reads; “I give her a xylophone and a sundress from Madeira, and promise to tell her a funny story” (Didion 168). Where the narrative moves into an emblematic reading is through the image of her daughter sitting on a riverbank with her hair unkept, contrasting to the gifts of a xylophone and a sundress that are symbolic of American consumerism. Her descriptive writing, along with her use of the above extended metaphor of a disconnected society and the symbolism of consumerism all contribute towards the creation of the text’s emblematic meaning. The image of Didion’s daughter translates to society in a larger sense as having lost themselves to ideologies prevalent in the culture industry (Adorno and Horkheimer) where pleasure and amusement are favoured over core values, such as the return to nature (the river) and a foregoing of restrictive societal conformities (her uncombed hair left in its natural state) — conformities that leave the public in search of an unattainable sense of happiness advertised through ideologies such as the American Dream.

The literal blank space that follows this paragraph contributes towards the final process of interpretation inflicted when reading Didion’s metaphoric prose, as the reader is left with the idyllic image of Didion’s daughter on the riverbank, knowing that she will in fact not

experience this hopeful vision. The defeated tone of the final sentence works to evoke an empathetic reading that coaxes the reader towards comparing their own involvement in society. Have they too missed out on the experiences encapsulated at the riverbank? Will future generations continue to exchange this experience for false promises disguised as a xylophone or a dress, superficial beliefs that only offer immediate gratification? With this emblematic image, the reader considers their own moral allegiances.

The emblem therefore presents more of a rhetorical style (Daly), which Didion pairs with Romantic irony. During the Renaissance period, the emblem — a term derived etymologically from Greek — became a “didactic genre, intended to reveal religious and moral truths” (Hill 261). Emblems first originated in a physical form, rather than a figurative image, and were commonly used in conjunction with poetry or essays that acted as guides for their interpretation (Hill 261-262). Therefore, the emblematic image, together with prose, would produce a greater meaning through both verbal and visual components (Hill 262). The term then came to represent a symbolic image in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hill 261), which it still carries today. In the case of this thesis and in accordance with Muggli’s definition, I refer to emblem in the verbal and literary sense only. Similar to the original purpose of emblems in the Renaissance period, I argue that Didion uses her writing to construct a narrative intended to explore moral truths where she often concludes her stories with emblematic diagnoses that leave an impression on the reader. While metaphors are often used to symbolize the representation of something else, emblems are used to question and impart a deeper meaning in the discovery of certain truths used to connect with the reader’s own experience and understanding. My analysis will demonstrate Didion’s ability as a literary emblematicist to consider these ideas surrounding morality and spirituality in the context of history, society and the imaginative capabilities of the mind.

Contextualizing *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*

This thesis focuses mainly on *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* as its content foregrounds the American public, exploring the impact of romantic fantasies on a larger scale rather than *The Year of Magical Thinking* which focuses mainly on Didion's own experience with romanticizing. While there is a significant time gap between the two — the former set within the social upheavals of the cultural revolution in 1968 and the second set within the context of the early 2000s which saw growing technological advancements that escalated pop-culture and advertising in the culture industry — the inclusion of the latter in this research paper is to contrast the content in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* with a more personal look at an individual's mentality when undergoing magical thinking. This is to allow for an improved understanding of the consequential disillusionment to illusionary ideologies promoted by the culture industry in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. The brief analysis of *The Year of Magical Thinking* allows for a deeper comprehension of romantic fantasies, exploring the functioning of this state of mind beyond the negative connotations associated with an idealised way of thinking which can be seen *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.

Slouching Towards Bethlehem is a collection of essays that explore the chaos of human existence in America during the Sixties. Its contents are divided into three sections: "Lifestyles in the Golden Land," "Personals" and "Seven Places in the Mind." Didion introduces the main theme for these essays in her preface which is the idea that "things fall apart" (xi). This details the breakdown of society caused by historical, societal or psychological disorder (Talese) — a disorder that threatens to disrupt the illusion of an idealized society living out the American Dream. As she documents the eventual disillusionment of individuals to these unattainable ideals, Didion borrows techniques used in Romantic literature to explore

this disappointment of one's reality, where the imagination is used as a method of escapism into romantic fantasies.

These romantic fantasies also include fantasies inflicted onto society, such as the propaganda used after World War II to sell the idea of America as a moral arbitrator capable of promising its people a utopian dream in exchange for their cooperation, such as, abiding by the rules and dominant political beliefs carried out by their leaders. This is one of the main fantasies Didion critiques in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. She does this by creating an ironic narrative around the notion of this utopian dream of peace and happiness — a “national promise” that might have been but was not kept (Didion 85). She details the apprehension that followed the awareness of these promises used for propaganda in an effort to persuade American citizens to think and feel a certain way, resulting in the American society to either reject or interrogate the core values that established the maintenance of their society. According to Edward P. Morgan, this disillusionment experienced by youth in the Sixties led to a counterculture that lacked a sense of belonging (xi). Didion uses her narrative to mimic this feeling of meaninglessness embodied by the young middle-class by creating a dream-like atmosphere, as well as including the theme of a return to innocence where her subjects revert to a childlike state of mind to avoid the problems of adulthood (Homans 239).

Didion's focus on entropic forces is foregrounded in her title — borrowed from “The Second Coming” which was published by Yeats in 1920 (see appendix). The poem's apocalyptic theme resonates with Didion's image of society falling apart. She uses Yeats' depiction of a “rough beast” (207) approaching to signal the impending need for change. Whether or not that change will be for better or for worse is what she asks her reader to decide. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Didion's inclusion of Yeats' poem also strengthens her metaphoric prose in highlighting these romantic fantasies, as poetry can be used to reveal “invisible mysteries” (Nemerov 636). Didion therefore uses the poem's apocalyptic imagery as an

emblem for morality and the duality of human nature. Another literary device used by Didion to highlight the presence of disorder is the repetition of the notion of promises — seen in both of her creative nonfiction works. These promises are emblematic of the hard reality that unjust things happen beyond one's control. Didion's characters face internal battles as they attempt to gain an understanding of morality in their trajectory towards happiness, while searching for control over their lived realities. This is similar to the Romantics' journey of introspection.

The romantics turn to 'imagination,' which, according to Coleridge, re-casts the objects of the exterior world into a new and more profoundly 'true' reality, giving the materials with which it chooses to work a unity and meaning which they do not possess in their original form. It is the imagination which serves the romantics as their vehicle of escape from the limitations of the human condition (Hume, *Gothic Versus Romantic* 289).

While documenting her own reflection of the human condition, Didion writes with an attitude of romantic nostalgia where she romanticizes a vision of the past, one that promised a more hopeful reality to that of her present. This is seen in her admiration of the connection held between past generations as opposed to the disconnect she feels has eroded her current society. William Hazlitt theorizes that, when thinking of the past and future, the problem with the idea of the future is that it is imaginary and fantastic. In his essay "On the Past and Future," he argues that the future is laced with feelings of desire, "aiding our resolutions and stimulating our exertions" (Hazlitt). Whereas the past has already existed and has therefore "received the stamp of truth," giving Hazlitt the "most assurance of reality" (*On the Past and Future*). For Didion, her nostalgia originates from a longing for the past, as well as the past's

ideas about its future which were never carried out. Didion carries this tone of nostalgia in her descriptions of her present, the one marked by the unkept promises of its past. Didion also writes with a nostalgia that romanticizes childhood, a state of one's life that is free from adult responsibilities and hardships, where it is believed that anything is possible. She contrasts this idea of childhood with the perception of adulthood — a condition that extinguishes the “flush of illusion” (Hazlitt, *On the Feeling of Immortality* 6). When one becomes an adult, one can no longer pretend in the fantasies believed as a child. When confronted with the reality of adulthood, the reality that it contains tribulations, it causes one's mind to carry a “load of cares” (Hazlitt, *Table Talk*). I argue these cares to be similar to Didion's realization that not all promises would be kept. Thus, Didion highlights how nostalgia, a common technique employed by Romantic writers, can be both beneficial and problematic, depending on its use. Romantic nostalgia can either act as a vessel for self-discovery, or, to reveal how nostalgia itself can be used in the construction of romantic fantasies that perpetuate an illusory opinion.

As shown, both the past and the future provide alternative escapes from the present state of reality which Didion herself becomes vulnerable to in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, finding her own sense of assurance in reliving her past memories. Didion illustrates how memory becomes a coping mechanism for not dealing with the present. Unable to accept the death of her husband and the declining health of her only daughter, Didion resorts to an intensified way of romanticized thinking, one that allows her to exist in a former state of her life. This type of romanticizing is called magical thinking and can be understood in relation to the natural law of Sympathetic Magic. This is based on the Law of Similarity and the Law of Contagion, as described by James George Frazer, where the “magician” assumes that they can cause or create any desired result by simply imitating it (19b-20a). It is for this reason

that the Law of Similarity is more commonly known as imitative or homeopathic magic (Frazer 19b-20a). Both types of magic assume that things are influenced by “a secret sympathy” that is transmitted by an invisible ether causing things to physically affect one another without any physical contact (Frazer 20b). Thus, people apply this type of magic through symbolic rituals that work within a system of charms and taboos which are believed by the individual to “regulate the course of nature quite independently of human will” (Frazer 26b-27a). These beliefs are then used to alter one’s version of the present where the individual attempts to use their imagination to create their preferred reality — often causing a romanticized perspective. *The Year of Magical Thinking* details a personal account of Didion’s experience with magical thinking, as well as the conclusions she deduces from this experience. These conclusions have a universal interpretation and speak to the reader, commenting on the realities of mortality, spirituality and purpose.

A Romantic Perspective

The importance of including a discussion on the effects of Romanticism is because the period’s underlying beliefs and principles are still prevalent in modern society. The Romantic movement provided its time period with ideas about the imagination and perspective that highlighted the connections between one’s imagination, fantasies and desires. Didion’s references to these functions of the mind demonstrates, in a literary sense, the extent to which Romanticism has helped individuals gain a greater understanding of themselves and their relation to society. For example, Wordsworth outlines the mutual compatibility of the mind in relation to its environment: “The external world is fitted to mind; And the creation (by no lower name can it be called) which they with blended might accomplish” (qtd. in Owen 214).

This “creation” refers to the discoveries, connections, interpretations and any imaginative inventions that one may conjure as a result of combing inferences gained from one’s external environment along with their internal reflection.

Likewise, Didion uses her environment to mirror internal reflections about her psyche. In this way, her literary focus on place resembles Charles Lamb’s “The South-Sea House” (1917). Lamb personifies his surroundings, placing reverence on the empty rooms in the South-Sea house. “They spoke of the past:—the shade of some dead accountant, with visionary pen in ear, would flit by me, stiff as in life” (Lamb). This essay itself is an example of magical thinking, indicated in the conclusion when Lamb addresses the reader directly. “Reader, what if I have been playing with thee all this while — peradventure the very *names*, which I have summoned up before thee, are fantastic-insubstantial” (Lamb). However, he reinforces their importance, despite their fantasy, as being significant of the past, thus showcasing how examples of romantic fantasies can act as revealing metaphors of reality. Didion, Like Lamb, uses place, nature and atmosphere as a point of entry into her mind, as well as the mind of her subject matter.

The use of nature and one’s surroundings is a common theme in Romantic writing used to reflect ideas about reason and morality. This can be seen in the poetry of Charlotte Smith. In “Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening” (1993), Smith employs imagery of the ocean to present the image of ship-lights that “faintly shine Like wandering fairy fires.” Smith uses the ship lights to reflect one’s “wavering reason” as light was often linked to the idea of sight, and sight linked to the inner senses that govern one’s perception (Lyon 274). This is further indicated in a comparison of the ship lights to wandering “fairy fires,” connoting to the temptation of being led astray. The reason for the Romantic’s use of nature in reflecting on such complex ideas was due to the perception of nature as a force more powerful than man. The belief of this power gained nature the reputation for being a source through

which to access greater knowledge and spirituality. Smith alludes to this power as she describes the “repercussive roar” of the ocean. This belief that nature holds spiritual powers is an example of the law of association where external environments and situations are seen to be connected to other objects or ideas, binding “all things in its mystic chain” (Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* 50). In his essay titled “Mr Wordsworth,” Hazlitt praises Wordsworth for his reliance on this principle of association:

He has dwelt among pastoral scenes, till each object has become connected with a thousand feelings, a link in the chain of thought, a fibre of his own heart. Every one is by habit and familiarity strongly attached to the place of his birth, or to objects that recall the most pleasing and eventful circumstances of his life (*The Spirit of the Age* 155).

Like Wordsworth, Didion uses the principle of association in her life writing where she describes places such as California and New York as Wordsworth does nature, using her imagination to associate the place with her experiences living in it — personifying the city to have “a life and being in [her] thoughts” (Coleridge 155). She writes that she “was in love with the city [New York], the way you love the first person who ever touches you and you never love anyone quite that way again” (Didion 228). New York becomes an association with Didion’s younger self. She was in love with the person she first was when she was there, the person who was young and able to make mistakes without consequences. But, as she eventually grew older, she realized that she had to move on from this perception of herself as seen through New York’s “eyes” in order to mature. According to Hazlitt, this quality of association, as seen in Wordsworth’s writing, has two effects on its reader: either it makes no impression, or, it leaves “a mark behind them that never wears out” (*The Spirit of the Age*

157). I argue that through the use of emblems, Didion exercises the principle of association in a way that achieves the latter effect in the form of what Muggli describes to be an echo effect on her reader. Her narratives focusing on place, like California or New York, are emblematic of the natural life cycle of humans where an individual goes through many phases of themselves as they gain knowledge and experience about the world, where spaces like cities show one's evolution as individuals either evolve with or outgrow these spaces that represent their former selves. For this reason, her emblems never "wear out" as her readers are able to build connections with her content surrounding familiar themes about the individual, society and dominant philosophies.

The Pursuit of Happiness

Sara Ahmed argues that the problem with the notion of happiness is that it often leads to the romanticizing of its very concept (572). Similarly, in Hazlitt's "On the Love of Life," he declares that the strength of our attachment to the value of human life "is a very fallacious test of its happiness." This "fallacious" idea of happiness guides one's expectations in visualizing a certain version of the future that is most often not correct. When an individual is unable to attain happiness, as expected by the wishful politics of what is considered a social good, Ahmed describes these situations as the "unhappy archives" which are the archives "assembled around the struggle against happiness" (573). In such instances, one becomes estranged from happiness — an example of this is the killjoy figure (Ahmed). To become a killjoy, one inherits the knowledge that not all of society's "ideal" expectations will be met with happiness. Killjoys are therefore seen to "disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places" (Ahmed 582). This is because the killjoy figure points out issues in society

such as gender and sexual inequality, racism and classism in an attempt to disrupt the idea that their present society is ideal.

On the contrary, Ahmed argues that those who are either unaware or who deny these realities of injustice, inequality or suffering have a false consciousness of the world: “It is not that an individual person suffers from false consciousness but that we inherit a certain false consciousness when we learn to see and not to see things in a certain way” (590). In most recent decades, society, influenced by technology, grew to promote this illusionary idea of a picture-perfect world in the culture industry where any deviation, difference or unhappiness is ignored. This offers a deeper understanding in justifying a romanticized way of thinking, seeing it more as a coping mechanism for someone who is unable to face their reality. A further understanding of how an individual’s imagination and memory contribute towards their conscious thinking, as well as their behavior, is also necessary:

We write the story of our lives as we go, but we constantly re-edit it, depending on our reevaluations of past events, current relationships, and future dreams. These re-edits are significantly impacted by memory laced with fantasy—imagination if you will (Person 656).

Consequently, memory and imagination are largely influenced by one’s emotions (Person 662). This means that negative emotions such as fear or denial could impact an individual’s imaginative fantasies. For example, the idea of death is a fearful concept to most. Using imagination, individuals may create fantasies that serve to “deny unpleasant realities” (Person 667). This becomes problematic when the individual is unable to identify reality from their fantasy, resulting in this illusionary perspective to influence their actual behavior (Person 666). Freud compares this type of fantasizing with that of creative writing, assigning

the imaginative abilities of the creative writer as the vehicle to connect with and to move the reader emotionally. Freud states that the creative imagination is most noticeable in childhood play where children often create their own worlds with made-up narratives and rules. Similar to Tolkien's theory about fantasy and wish fulfilment, Freud argues that wish-fulfilment is often linked to childhood desires (*Creative Writers and Daydreaming* 27). Thus, myths or romantic fantasies represent "distorted vestiges of the wishful fantasies of whole nations, the *secular dreams* of youthful humanity" (Freud, *Creative Writers and Daydreaming* 28).

While I agree that fantasies are vessels for reaching one's unrecognized desires, I also think they allow for another type of fulfilment, the one rooted in storytelling. The act of creating a fantasy is also the act of telling a story. Before written literature, humans relied on oral traditions to pass down their knowledge about history and their beliefs. "To ask what is the origin of stories (however qualified) is to ask what is the origin of language of the mind" (Tolkien 119). In "Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind" (2014), Yuval Noah Harari states that the network of storytelling created "imagined realities" which survived as long as everyone believed in its existence (32). These imagined realities were created to give meaning to society and included corporations, spirituality and wishful fantasies (Harari 32). Thus, storytelling and fantasizing are indebted to the motive of finding happiness, whether that be through fulfilling one's desires or finding a greater sense of purpose. When people feel unfulfilled in their present, they construct stories that will satisfy their needs. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" (Didion, *The White Album* 1979). The stories we as individuals tell ourselves keep us motivated in life as they allow us to believe in things. They keep us hopeful that our futures will be bright, that we will experience all of our dreams, that we will fulfil our purpose (whatever that may be is subjective). When one is faced with a disorderly reality, fantasizing allows one to keep optimistic. As Didion wades through the romantic fantasies

used for manipulation or escapism, she also draws attention to this need for storytelling in keeping one hopeful of something greater.

Methodology

I conduct a close literary analysis of Joan Didion's metaphoric prose in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*. In doing so, I use Mark Muggli's theoretical framework on emblems to showcase Didion's attempt to enlighten the reader of the romantic fantasies of society which she achieves through Romantic irony. The purpose of this is to showcase how Didion exposes modernity's problematic "happily-ever-after" convention so often sold in the culture industry. I base this on Sara Ahmed's concept of "unhappy archives" and argue that Didion produces her own version of these in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. I therefore analyze Didion's inclusion of Romantic irony used to set up her emblems that are themselves an example of the law of association.

I examine these romantic fantasies through three lenses, the first two are related to fantasizing as a coping method or an attempted wish-fulfilment technique, while the second lens is related to the ways in which Didion's writing exhibits an underlying tone of Romanticism. I argue that Didion mimics sentiments common to Romantic literature and the ideologies of Romanticism such as the idea of introspection and the complex themes surrounding spirituality and morality. I achieve this by comparing examples in her prose to that of Romantic literature, such as the prose of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Through this, I highlight Didion's focus on nature and place to act as metaphors that provide greater insight into society. I also demonstrate some of her literary devices that are similar to gothic literature, such as the creation of morally ambiguous narratives.

Furthermore, I analyze the effect of Didion's emblems in the encouragement of reader participation. This is based on J.R.R. Tolkien's theory of fantasy as a non-visual art form which relies on both writer and reader participation in the creative narrative process which I also use to showcase the synthesizing act of Didion's own imagination throughout her texts. From this analysis, I assess Didion's use of the creative non fiction genre (focusing on the form of the essay and the contemporary memoir) in producing the "reality effect" while still engaging with the reader in an entertaining and insightful manner (Twidle 7). I deduce that through this approach, Didion explores the meaning of what it is to be human.

Limitations of the Study

Although I discuss the importance of creative nonfiction as a genre, I only do so through the lens of Didion's work as opposed to comparing it with other nonfiction works published in the same time period as Didion's. My analysis also only covers two of Didion's works and would be beneficial for future research in comparing Didion's other nonfiction narratives to the ones in this paper. With regard to my discussion on human nature, while I include literature on this, my prime example is from Didion's perspective and from a literary lens rather than a fully scientific or biological one. Lastly, a limitation with the study of any nonfiction work is the extent of its accuracy. I therefore frame my discussion of Didion's nonfiction works in terms that consider its ability to deliver a "model of reality" as well as an "aesthetically pleasing verbal pattern of human meanings" (Heyne 489).

Chapter 3: Broken Promises

This chapter examines Didion's use of the creative nonfiction genre to explore the notion of romantic fantasies in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. As discussed in the literature review, Didion reveals these romantic fantasies — which stem from Romantic theories on the imagination and fantasy — through her metaphoric prose rooted in emblems. These emblems are significant in the representation of things that extend outside of her writing, granting meaning to a variety of interpretations that could correlate with the reader's own affairs. In this way her emblems transcend the comparable trait of a metaphor that is often used to explain one thing by comparing it to another. Instead, her emblems symbolize a deeper meaning and produce “echoed” moments to represent a sense of despair, a world “without sense,” and are symbolic within the context of either society, history or psychology (Muggli 410). Much of this world without sense is attributed to the confusion between the antagonistic forces of illusion and disillusion. Didion foregrounds this relationship through Romantic irony, a technique borrowed from Romanticism that allows her to describe a situation in detail, elevating its worth, only to shatter its validity in the finally sentence, revealing it as the illusion rather than reality. Her emblems are used in this process of disillusionment where they signal a greater meaning in the construction of these illusions. “This technique enables Didion to offer an ironic narrative that calls into question the grand narrative of American democracy” (Beauvais 16). By doing so, Didion presents her own version of Ahmed's “unhappy archives.”

The Essence of Storytelling

Didion's focus on romantic fantasies is centered around the fact that, in the battle between real and imagined, the latter often appears to be more appealing. She uses her subject matter in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* to explore the reasoning and consequences of this. This is Didion's world without sense — a world that breeds a society so unsatisfied with their reality, that they feign another. The backdrop to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* sees a society disillusioned by the unfulfilled promises of the American Dream. Didion's narrative therefore challenges the romanticized version of happiness that is often traded as a prize for certain ways of behavior in society — where happiness is promised to those who perform what is expected of them (Ahmed 582). Didion exposes these romanticized versions of reality that seek to enforce a certain way of thinking in society, from the ideals about marriage to the propaganda intended to romanticize the American dream. The disorder Didion describes can then be directly linked to the “perfect” version of society that is promoted as the ideal. Therefore, her constant reference to the idea that “things fall apart” (Didion xi) is directed towards the facade of an idealized society built on the unstable foundation of lies and deceit. This becomes the basis for her writing about the Sixties and the counterculture that emerged as a result.

Through exposing these romantic fantasies, Didion creates an ironic narrative of American society. She does this by using Romantic irony to build up an idealized illusion to the reader, only to then break it down. This technique creates a shock effect as the reader is coaxed into believing the fantasy that is later exposed. I argue that Didion does this in order to demonstrate the ease and consequences that comes with romanticizing the notion of happiness. Many of her essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* follow this trajectory where Didion describes individuals in society so desperate to attain their idealized version of happiness that they often misinterpret what it really means to be happy. This misunderstanding of happiness can be linked directly to a disconnect from the past. As seen in “Some Dreamers of the

Golden Dream,” Didion uses Romantic nostalgia to describe society in the Sixties as having dissociated themselves from past generations:

The future always looks good in the golden land, because no one remembers the past. Here is where the hot wind blows and the old ways do not seem relevant, where the divorce rate is double the national average and where one person in every thirty-eight lives in a trailer. Here is the last stop for all those who come from somewhere else, for all those who drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways. Here is where they are trying to find a new life style, trying to find it in the only places they know to look: the movies and the newspapers (4).

In this paragraph, she uses Romantic nostalgia in each sentence which copies the next, where a comma is used to separate two distinct visuals of the golden land. In the first sentence, the golden land has a future that is always good. She disrupts this in the second part of this sentence explaining the reason for this being the lack of remembrance for the past. The future only appears to look good as they cannot remember what they hoped for in the past. Didion’s nostalgia is for these hopes that promised a future of real happiness as opposed to an illusion of it. By portraying these ideas as one thing, only to contradict them in the second half of the sentence, Didion showcases her use of Romantic irony in reinforcing the illusion of the golden land as a misconception of reality. In this instance, nostalgia is used beneficially for reflection. This back-and-forth sentence structure also imitates a lyrical tone in her syntax as the repetition of the comma creates a slow melody that induces a drowsy effect on the reader. Yet, this slow melody present in her syntax is at odds with the paragraph’s criticisms about American society. This ironic imbalance between her syntax and her content is what highlights her nostalgic tone which is despondent rather than overtly critical.

Thus, Didion uses California as a focal place in her essays to represent the illusion of American society. She leans on the idea of California exceptionalism to portray it as a desired place full of promises often made in the media, such as movies and newspapers — the promise of a life that is revealed to be only a fantasy. This is referred to in the aspiration people have to lead lives seen in movies. These desires are based on an imaginary spectacle. In “I Can’t Get That Monster Out of My Mind,” Didion compares Hollywood’s motion picture industry to that of a monster — an illusionary beast — contrasting the idea that Hollywood is nothing but glamorous. Hollywood’s monster reigns when the world of fantasy spills out from the movie screens and into the real world — blurring the line between one’s reality and one’s perceived reality.

In the popular imagination, the American motion-picture industry still represents a kind of mechanical monster, programmed to stifle and destroy all that is interesting and worthwhile and ‘creative’ in the human spirit as an adjective, the very word ‘Hollywood’ has long been pejorative and suggestive of something referred to as ‘the System,’ a phrase delivered with the same sinister emphasis that James Cagney once lent to ‘the Syndicate.’ The System not only strangles talent but poisons the soul, a fact supported by rich webs of lore (Didion 150).

However, I argue that there needs to be a distinction between the fantasy of Hollywood and the fantasy showcased in the movies it produces. In the case of the latter, it is a less harmful fantasy to want to base one’s life on the illusion portrayed onscreen. The real monster is what Didion identifies as the system of Hollywood, an industry used to control consumers of pop-culture by perpetuating superficial values that poison the soul. Hollywood, once viewed as a realm of enjoyable entertainment until a rot began to grow beneath its shiny

exterior, is emblematic of American society, lured in with promises based on corrupt morals that align happiness with a false idea of success. In the above paragraph, the common expression “work hard and you will be rewarded,” translates to: you can only be rewarded if you sell your soul (values and morals). Only, the reward is an illusion entangled in the “rich webs of lore” (Didion 150). The decay of Hollywood is the decay of American society, having failed to reject the temptation of this seemingly romantic fantasy. “[T]he corruption and venality and restrictiveness of Hollywood have become such firm tenets of American social faith” (Didion 151).

This perception of Hollywood is further referenced in “7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38.” The title serves as an address of a house in the underside of Hollywood which is described as a “faded movie exterior” (Didion 67), signaling its distance from reality. The house belongs to Howard Hughes — a paradoxical figure who works in the film industry. Didion refers to his character and his life as folklore because of the anomalous style of reporting covering his affairs, incorporating phrases like “appear to be” or “might not be” (69). Here, Didion makes a direct comment about journalism and the power it holds in the hand of language to reinforce certain myths or ideas. In this way, journalism and the media can become a contributor in building certain romantic fantasies. Didion challenges this type of reporting by exposing some of the codes used when discussing Hughes, such as referring to the stories about him as “apocryphal” (69). Society’s obsession with Hughes also highlights the desire to fabricate reality, a desire that is often employed in journalism or the culture industry, relying on shock factor to excite rather than fact checking. “Of course we do not admit that. The instinct is socially suicidal, and because we recognize that this is so we have developed workable ways of saying one thing and believing quite another” (Didion 72). The “we” Didion calls attention to here refers to herself, the reader and any other person of the public

who fabricates the truth in an attempt to change their perception of reality either to excite, entice or distract themselves away from whatever truth they do not want to confront in their present.

Why do people do this? Didion's inclusion of this essay on Hughes reinforces her inquiry on why individuals actually like and repeat these stories — stories known to be fallacious. With this generalizing question, she assumes that the reader submits to these myths that Hollywood continues to perpetuate through generations, while also admitting she does the same. Again, I refer to Didion's quote "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" (*The White Album*), which the above question evokes. This quote directly justifies the need for storytelling. Whether it be romantic fantasies of the imagination or those fueled by the media outlets. They help certain individuals live as they encourage them to make sense of their lives. While the stories we tell ourselves do not only refer to romantic myths, the reliance on this type of storytelling is important as these romantic myths can offer individuals a sense of comfort and can be used to identify underlying hopes and desires. When referring to the "we" of society, I adopt the same reference as Didion's "we," calling attention to all individuals worldwide, from past generations to the contemporary, who identify with creating or perpetuating romanticized perspectives. "Our favorite people and our favorite stories become so not by any inherent virtue, but because they illustrate something deep in the grain, something unadmitted" (Didion 71). Thus, the law of association can become a useful tool in deciphering why people feel this connection with romantic fantasies. As humans, our connection to stories like those about Hughes could symbolize our need to believe that a person is greater than a mere mortal being. Just like the stories of mythologized Hughes live on in the media, so do humans want to believe that they too will live forever, that they are more than just human. I do not mean this in the supernatural sense, but in the sense that one is able to find purpose

greater than his ordinary life consisting of mundane activities. When individuals feel unfulfilled in their realities, romantic myths offer a fantasy perpetuating this idea of “greater than,” allowing individuals to imagine that there is more to their lives. Similar to imaginative play in childhood (which Freud links to wish fulfilment in adulthood), Didion sets up the idea that to have freedom requires the invention of our own stories so that one may live a life like Hughes: “to be a free agent, live by one’s own rules” (71). This refers back to a childlike way of thinking in wanting to create one’s own rules rather than living in a system that dictates one’s every behavior and thought. This is emphasized in the essay’s final paragraph:

It is impossible to think of Howard Hughes without seeing the apparently bottomless gulf between what we say we want and what we do want, between what we officially admire and secretly desire, between, in the largest sense, the people we marry and the people we love. In a nation which increasingly appears to prize social virtues, Howard Hughes remains not merely antisocial but grandly, brilliantly, surpassingly, asocial. He is the last private man, the dream we no longer admit (Didion 72).

In the above paragraph, Didion continues to make use of the personal determiner “our” to connect herself with the reader, persuading them to question whether or not the statements which she is assuming of them are true. In the last line, Didion implies that the secret dream of individuals in society (an entity that is guided by certain structures and rules) is to be free, suggesting then that we (the people who make up society) are not yet free. We are not free as we refuse to either accept, voice or fight for our true desires, and instead follow what we think is expected of us, causing us to create more romantic fantasies in an attempt to find happiness. These expectations stem from propaganda put forth on how people should

constitute their way of being with regard to belief systems, financial practices and appearances. Hughes is therefore emblematic of the illusion captivating individuals who choose to run from the truth and away from reality.

Didion includes personal anecdotes to further exemplify the act of romanticizing something for wish fulfilment purposes in “John Wayne: A Love Song,” where she remembers back to her childhood to when she was first introduced to the onscreen John Wayne. In this essay, there exists the contrast between the movie character that Didion saves in her memory and the real person whom she meets when she is an adult. The former is revealed to be the romanticized version of a man who persuades Didion’s child self to believe that anything is possible. This romantic fantasy is highlighted in another memory from her childhood:

There was an Officers’ Club, but no swimming pool; all the Officers’ Club had of interest was artificial blue rain behind the bar. The rain interested me a good deal, but I could not spend the summer watching it, and so we went, my brother and I, to the movies (Didion 29).

Later in the essay, Didion refers back to the artificial rain: “Deep in that part of my heart where the artificial rain forever falls” (30). Didion sections off a part of herself, the part where this artificial rain falls, as the part capable of believing in illusions that are made easy through the optimistic eyes of a child. Through these eyes, it is easier to imagine the artificial rain as real, the reality of marrying John Wayne a possibility, and the idea of creating a life akin to what is shown in movies as achievable. Again, Didion focuses on the escape into one’s past through a tone of Romantic nostalgia in the effort to revisit one’s youth and the innocence that brings. Thus, the love song highlighted in the title is not meant solely for

Wayne, but for her childhood and the beliefs she was able to carry with her before facing certain truths in adulthood. In this way, Didion highlights the contrast between the romantic fantasies often propelled by the reporting of unrealistic narratives about mythologized Hollywood that creates impossible scenarios and expectations, with the reality that bad things can happen — with the reality that John Wayne could fall ill.

And in a world we understood early to be characterized by venality and doubt and paralyzing ambiguities, he suggested another world, one which may or may not have existed ever but in any case existed no more: a place where a man could move free, could make his own code and live by it; a world in which, if a man did what he had to do, he could one day take the girl and go riding through the draw and find himself home free, not in a hospital with something going wrong inside (Didion 30-31).

Didion again reflects on the idea of fighting for freedom in a world characterized by mirages masked as artificial rain, emblematic of the “venality and doubt” (30-31) present in a society where its citizens distrust the systems and ideals that govern them. This is similar to when she refers to Howard Hughes as “the dream we no longer admit” (Didion 72), where both Hughes and Wayne represent an unattainable idea of freedom that both Didion and America long for.

Didion portrays this facade of freedom through place, rather than people, in “Marrying Absurd.” In this essay, she exposes the often-romanticized notion of marriage, arguing it to be a charade sold to the youth as the ultimate happy ending. The distinction between marriage and love is made very clear. In the opening paragraph, Didion contrasts the idea of marriage with the Las Vegas’ surroundings: “one sees signs way out on the desert, looming up from that moonscape of rattlesnakes and mesquite, even before the Las Vegas lights appear

like a mirage on the horizon: ‘Getting married? Free License Information First Strip Exit’”

(79). The reader is immediately presented with a warning epitomized by the rattlesnakes.

This is followed by a description of the Las Vegas lights as a mirage — an optical illusion of something that does not actually exist. After all, Vegas is known for its reputation as a place that pretends to be anything but one’s current reality in order to deliver “immediate gratification” (Didion 80). This immediately sets up the idea of marriage (the concept) as a misleading illusion.

Didion uses Las Vegas as a direct representation of what happens when people live in a world of romantic fantasies. Similar to Didion’s description of California, Las Vegas embodies the deviation one takes from reality. She writes that there is “no night and no day no past and no future” ... “neither is there any logical sense of where one is” (Didion 80). Hazlitt explains how the present can be avoided by escaping (imaginatively) into one’s future which has connotations to feelings of hope and desire (*On the Past and Future*). This is an attempt to distract one from the outside world, to keep them “safe” in places like “Stardust” or “Caesar’s Palace” (Didion 81). Yet, none of this is real. “This geographical implausibility reinforces the sense that what happens there has no connection with ‘real life’” (Didion 81). Why then would one want to marry in such a place? The reason, Didion proposes, is that it offers the merchandising of “‘niceness,’ the facsimile of proper ritual, to children who do not know how else to find it, how to make the arrangements, how to do it ‘right’” (82). Didion’s tone here is ironic as she uses quotation marks around “niceness” and “right,” suggesting the exact opposite. By calling the married couples “children,” Didion’s condescending tone insinuates that these couples are not of an age to make adult decisions which they do not yet understand. By insinuating that they are not ready to enter into marriage, she insinuates simultaneously that they are not yet ready to enter into the real world. Here, she reinstates the image of innocence lost — that children are led astray to believe certain illusions about morals

and happiness, only when entering into them, they lose their innocence as they are forced into a reality different from what they had been told or imagined.

Marriage therefore acts as a metaphor for adult life and the responsibilities that come with it. While Las Vegas is emblematic of the hollow promises made in an attempt to structure a society based on principles that “should” make one happy and rules on how one should live a “fulfilling” life. This is reinforced in Didion’s ironic tone through which she mimics the idea that the expectations of those who get married in Las Vegas is a “self-contradictory business” (80). Didion implements this tone in describing one of the new brides whose words are used to end the essay: “‘It was just as nice,’ she sobbed ‘as I hoped and dreamed it would be’” (83). Instead of using Romantic irony to build up an illusion only to break it down or expose it at the end, Didion structures this essay by applying this technique in the reverse. First, she uses her story to set the scene of Las Vegas and the wedding chapel strip as a gimmick used to sell the illusion of pleasure and happiness, immediately gratified without influence from the past or worry for the future. Once her reader is disillusioned to this faux alternative to real life, she counters this idea by concluding her essay with the image of a happy bride that is still wearing her “illusionary veil” (Didion 28). This technique is almost more powerful as it showcases how strong the illusionary pull that promises an escape from reality can be. Didion’s last line, along with the built-up narrative, is emblematic for a false consciousness that much of society possesses. Moreover, the bride who states that her wedding was just as she dreamed is perhaps still “dreaming” herself, unable to lift her veil to reveal a reality outside of Las Vegas’ hypnotic lights.

The Wealth of Promises

The idea of promises either to be made, already lost, broken or unkept is repeatedly brought up throughout *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. These promises act as an imaginary line between youthful and adult perspectives. There emerges a pattern within Didion's writing where she focuses on the difference between a younger generation compared to an older generation with regard to the different opinions, thoughts, beliefs and goals. The focus is not so much on the age, but on the wisdom one gains from experience that allows them to see the world realistically. This comparison is interesting as although different generations share the same world, it appears vastly different for each. This theme is present in "Goodbye to All That" which recounts Didion's twenties spent in New York City. However, she recounts it from the perspective of her older self and describes the life she led as a twenty-something year old as a game with "arbitrary but quite inflexible rules" (229). Didion admits she felt as if her life there was not real, that she was merely playing pretend for a few months until she would return home — to reality. For Didion, New York becomes an "infinitely romantic notion" (231).

[N]one of it would matter. Nothing was irrevocable; everything was within reach. Just around every corner lay something curious and interesting, something I had never before seen or done or known about" [...] "I could make promises to myself and to other people and there would be all the time in the world to keep them. I could stay up all night and make mistakes, and none of it would count (Didion 229-230).

This is the perception of Didion's younger self, the one wearing an illusionary veil. Yet, this perception also serves to represent most youth in the Sixties. Contrastingly, through the eyes of adulthood, Didion is able to now "understand the lesson in that story, which was that it is distinctly possible to stay too long at the Fair" (236). Didion's "fair" is emblematic

of the illusionary veil that at some point needs to be stripped bare. New York is the place that eventually caused Didion to remove this veil disillusioning her to the “the golden rhythm [that] was [now] broken” (238). Didion therefore demonstrates the outcome of this disillusionment to the reality that not all promises will be kept. In doing so, I argue that she portrays her own version of Ahmed’s unhappy archives which document her personal struggle against an idealized version of happiness. As a result, Didion herself could be viewed as “killjoy” figure (Ahmed 582), as she exposes what is expected of society will not always be met with a happy ending. This works to rectify the above misunderstanding of happiness (seen through an illusory veil) by exposing such romanticized notions to be nothing more than idealized expectations that are safeguarded in promises of false rewards.

“Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” further exemplifies the repercussions that comes from entrapping oneself in a fantastical state of mind. This essay follows the trial of Lucille Marie Maxwell Miller, a “perfect” housewife who is suspected of murdering her husband. Before this tragedy unfolds, Didion paints the family in a positive light, writing that they had “\$30, 000 a year, the three children for the Christmas card, the picture window, the family room, the newspaper photographs” (8-9). However, Didion reveals that “[t]hey were paying the familiar price for it. And they had reached the familiar season of divorce” (9). Here, Didion uses Romantic irony to structure the Miller family as a seemingly idealized notion of a happy life, or, what one believes a happy life to be. After all, most people associate happiness with having a family, a home, a respected public image and financial stability. Didion reveals the romantic fantasy led by the Millers in her description of their “happiness.” Instead of writing that they have a family, Didion writes that the Millers had “three children for the Christmas card” (8-9). Instead of writing that the Millers had a home, she writes that they had a “picture window” (8). This paints a different version, one that aims at reflecting a sense of happiness rather than an actual possession of one. What Didion aims at disclosing in this

unhappy archive, is the meaning behind one's lifestyle. One may possess the above list of things and be either happy or unhappy depending on the reason for which they have chosen to acquire such things. In the case of Lucille Miller, it was for the status.

Didion continuously juxtaposes a romantic illusion with a darker tone as she asks, almost to the reader, "what should drive such a woman to sit on a street called Bella Vista and look out her new picture window into the empty California sun and calculate how to burn her husband alive in a Volkswagen?" (15). The irony here is that nothing bad should ever happen on a street named Bella Vista, especially not to a woman who seems to have the "perfect" life as encouraged by her "perfect" home and family. The irony is that something did happen. This sentence therefore contrasts the image of romanticized happiness, represented by Bella Vista, with the cardinal sin of murder. With this in mind, the question Didion asks becomes almost rhetorical as the reader is now aware that life on Bella Vista is a facade, and, with that now unmasked, anything could be possible — even murder. This is prefaced in the essay's title which labels the inhabitants of California as dreamers, implying that they live lives separate from reality.

When Lucille Miller is eventually sentenced to prison, it is one that contains many California murderesses, "a lot of girls who somehow misunderstood the promise" (Didion 25). Lass argues that the main point in this story is not whether Lucille Miller did in fact murder her husband, but rather, the idea that many other girls have misunderstood this promise of the "California dream" (12). Here, the promise serves as an emblem for happiness, or rather, the deception of such. Lucille Miller misunderstood that the life she thought she wanted was not one that would bring her true happiness. Rather, it was one of lies, deceit and affairs that eventually culminated in death. While Lucille Miller pays the price for her "misunderstanding," the facade continues on Bella Vista. Didion builds on this emblem in her final paragraph of the essay that shows the marriage of Arthwell Hayton, a man who Lucille Miller had

an affair with — an affair that Lucille Miller mistook for love. “The bride wore a long white peau de soie dress and carried a shower bouquet of sweetheart roses with stephanotis streamers. A coronet of seed pearls held her illusion veil” (Didion 28). Hayton’s new wife has now replaced Lucille Miller, borrowing her veil used to disguise the illusion that she will now be happy. The fragility of this illusion is compared to a “coronet of seed pearls,” while beautiful, they own the risk of breaking at any moment.

In spite of this, I argue that Didion differentiates between two types of romanticizing. The type of romanticizing that presents an unrealistic image of what secures one’s happiness (often used for manipulation), and the type of romanticizing that reminds people to look for the beauty in the mundane, to make the ordinary exciting and to visualize a life worth living. In “The Seacoast of Despair,” Didion suggests that happiness comes not from status or monetary wealth but from being spiritually rich. “San Simeon, whatever its peculiarities, is in fact la cuesta encantada, swimming in golden light, sybaritic air, a deeply romantic place” (Didion 210-211). In this line, Didion personifies the place of San Simeon, while describing the air as “sybaritic,” a word that esteems nature with an air of richness. However, she also refers to this place as deeply romantic, presenting the idea that someone would choose nature over wealth and status as a romantic fantasy. Unfortunately, most people choose to adopt the first type of romanticizing, securing their wealth through other measures of superficiality, rather than finding solace in nature. Thus, Didion suggests that humans should mimic the Romantics who romanticized the natural beauty of life, allowing them richness through introspection.

I argue this to be the reason why Didion employs the creative nonfiction genre as it allows her to expose the real disillusionment present in society while still showcasing a way to find happiness through the disorder. In many ways, it is a genre that asks for a brave reader, one who is able to confront the flaws in reality and compare or relate it to their own

story. The significance of exploring these romantic fantasies therefore showcases the power of metaphors and emblems in nonfiction writing, in revealing certain truths about modern society.

Chapter 4: Secrets of the Mind

The Year of Magical Thinking — On Didion

The Year of Magical Thinking details the way in which one's imagination can provide a sense of comfort in pretending. Didion herself admits to using romantic fantasies, in the form of magical thinking, as coping method for escaping her reality when she is unable to deal with the actuality of her husband's death and her daughter's deteriorating health. With relation to the understanding of sympathetic magic, Didion offers a personal reflection surrounding the struggles with refusing to confront the idea of mortality. She does this by using the contemporary memoir to challenge readers' own world views by prompting her reader to decode metaphors and emblems present in the text. Despite this being a memoir piece, Didion utilizes her metaphoric prose in a way that allows universal connection with her readers.

Ethel Spector Person argues that imagination is a major adaptive tool for humans as it allows access to certain mental activities in times of distress, such as magical thinking. According to Thomas H Ogden's psychoanalysis understanding of the term, magical thinking relies on a thinking that "substitutes invented reality for actual external reality" (319). The purpose of this is to avoid the truth of one's reality. However, an extreme version of this type of thinking deludes one into believing that they are able to alter certain laws of nature, including "the inescapability of time, the role of chance, the irreversibility of death" (Ogden 321). Like sympathetic magic, magical thinking allows one to believe that one's thoughts can influence the physical and material world (Ogden 321), by simply imitating one's desired outcome (Frazer 19b-20a). Rather than accepting change, Didion continues to imitate her "previ-

ous” life by pretending that it still exists in her present. An example of this is seen in her attempt to keep John’s shoes waiting for his return home, even though Didion is aware of his death. She is also hesitant to publish his obituary as she feels it would make his death more permanent. Frazer describes these behaviors as symbolic rituals used in an attempt to control the forces of the universe, as Didion desires to reverse the death of her husband. While she is conscious of the fact of his death, she deludes herself into thinking that he may return, unable to accept the finality that mortality brings.

Living in this fantasy of wishful thinking enables Didion the ability to temporarily survive her present state of grief through a form of Romantic nostalgia that produces a longing for the past. Didion fantasizes about when her and John were young and newly married, as well as fantasizing about her daughter’s youth. This type of Romantic nostalgia can be positively used as a mirror for self-discovery (Norman and Welchman 53-65). Yet, Didion’s journey of discovery is not only of herself, but of the human condition’s relationship with mortality and age. I argue that in uncovering the romantic fantasies present in modernity, including her own, Didion explores the substantiality behind this type of escapism. *The Year of Magical Thinking* can itself be considered Didion’s attempt at wish fulfilment as the narrative becomes a way for her to bring to life her husband and daughter in the memories she describes to her readers.

Nevertheless, if Didion’s narrative is an account of magical thinking, there remains, as with any nonfiction work, the question pertaining to its level of accuracy. According to Eric Heyne, when evaluating a nonfiction narrative, one must consider how the “truth-claims” presented “fit into the author’s overall intentions” (488). I argue that Didion’s intentions are to deliver a narrative documenting her personal experience with grief while highlighting to the reader the difference between the somewhat illusionary notions surrounding how one is supposed to handle grief, with the reality of the experience and the effect to which

it plays on the mind, deluding one into a type of magical thinking. Didion does this by detailing the immense research she conducted in an attempt to understand John's cardiac arrest, her daughter's severe health conditions and the proper ways to process grief and mourning. Although the reader is presented with these facts and recommendations on how to handle such traumatic situations, Didion contradicts these with the reality of her own coping methods. Similarly, in an essay in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* titled "Comrade Laski, C.P.U.S.A. (M.-L.)," Didion makes reference to such coping methods that people may turn to:

I know something about dread myself, and appreciate the elaborate systems with which some people manage to fill the void, appreciate all the opiates of the people, whether they are as accessible as alcohol and heroin and promiscuity or as hard to come by as faith in God or History (62-63).

Here, Didion references a significant quote of Karl Marx's: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (1). According to Marx, religion is a means of immediate relief for society just as opium is for addicts — a means to find immediate gratification from an illusory happiness that will not withstand permanency. By referring to this metaphor of religion as opium, Didion equally compares religion to a form of magical thinking, comparing it to a way of coping with dread just as she copes with grief through fantasizing. Nonetheless, she offers an interesting critique on faith as, although she refers to it as opium, she also admits to appreciating its effects in helping people cope with dread (like herself), making her inclusion of Marx's quote quite ironic. Rather than exposing the illusion of faith like Marx does, Didion chooses to acknowledge its need for some people to find a sense of purpose.

This paragraph therefore justifies the use of romantic fantasies. While they may be illusions, they offer people comfort, people who are not yet ready to live in the real world.

Didion uses her journey of magical thinking to demonstrate this through the experience of the “vortex effect.” According to Freud, this vortex effect is an intense occurrence where the subject uses the “medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis” to embrace (imaginatively) their desired object (*Mourning and Melancholia* 244). Didion’s vortex effect produces memories from her past that allow her to imagine them to still be real — bringing John “back to life.” These memories slip between her youth, when her and John were newly married, to when Quintana, her daughter, was little. She uses this effect as a distraction from her reality where she is trapped in hospitals, waiting on the final verdict in deciphering the fate of the two people she loves most. However, these memories ultimately cause her to relive her recent past as she becomes mentally stuck in the days and then minutes leading up to John’s death, ultimately torturing herself with the ambivalence surrounding mortality. Each of these memories and “situations of expectancy” that the individual chooses to take shelter in are eventually met with the reality that the object of their memory’s desire no longer exists (Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia* 255). The reader is employed to take this journey with Didion as she explores the inevitability of death as well as the complexities surrounding spirituality, philosophy and the power of memory.

Didion not only displays her own psychological and environmental situation through her magical thinking, but she encourages the reader to consider the inevitability of death as well as the complexities surrounding spirituality and memory with regard to their own life experiences. This is a common trope of the contemporary memoir that uses symbolism as a technique to challenge their reader in contributing toward an insightful reading of the narrative (Kirby and Kirby 23-24). Didion actively involves the reader in her narrative through the

technique of synthesizing. In literature, synthesizing is made possible as, according to Tolkien, literature is progenitive, allowing it the ability to work from mind to mind, granting it a universal appeal (Seeman 80). For Tolkien, this makes the writer and reader partners in the narrative creation (Seeman 73). “Tolkien revises the Romantic tradition by asserting the validity of fantasy as a distinct mode of [non-visual] art” that implies “a particular relationship between the artist and the hearer, which demands an active use of the imagination from the latter” (Seeman 73). Similarly, this form of what Tolkien refers to as “non-visual art” can also be achieved by the writer in a visual representation. Coleridge illustrates this in his own writing which incorporates modified extractions from other literature (Hess 483). “Coleridge’s ability to enter into another author’s work and alter its meaning by changing select words is predicated on the special relationship his commonplace books nurtured between published texts and the work of the mind” (Hess 483).

Likewise, Didion produces this technique in *The Year of Magical Thinking* where she takes the phrase “His Eye Is on the Sparrow” and changes it to “No eye is on the sparrow” (227). The original phrase is a proverb from the Gospel of Matthew: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father” (Campbell 412). This was later turned into an American hymn aimed at encouraging one against the temptation of sin where the fallen sparrow represents God’s power over life and death (Campbell 412). By changing the wording of the phrase, Didion alters its intended meaning (Campbell 413). It is interesting that she has chosen to do this with a phrase of religious connotation as Coleridge often uses Biblical references where eyesight or blindness metaphorically represents a sense of spirituality or lack thereof (Lyon 253). This is because the Romans believed that access to one’s inner sense of perception led to greater spiritual enlightenment (Lyon 247). Didion’s reference to there being “no eye” reproduces a cynical opinion in

the sense that she questions the significance or existence of faith after the death of her husband. She uses this altered phrase twice. The first instance is when she writes about how, as a child, she found a higher sense of meaning in geology as it reflects the earth to be constantly changing:

I found earthquakes, even when I was in them, deeply satisfying, abruptly revealed evidence of the scheme in action. That the scheme could destroy the works of man might be a personal regret but remained, in the larger picture I had come to recognize, a matter of abiding indifference. *No eye was on the sparrow. No one was watching me* (Didion 190).

With no watchful eye on the sparrow, Didion instead finds comfort in the greater forces of nature that exert their power over the earth. Although they might threaten to “destroy the works of man,” they offered her solace in their constant evolving nature that she took to guarantee a “*world without end*” (Didion 190). However, Didion’s comfort level measured towards the actuality of change reduces significantly as she comes into adulthood, disillusioned by the disorder and lack of control that certain change may bring, such as mortality. She alludes to this in the second mention of this altered phrase. This is seen in the final line of the book that ends with a memory of Didion and John swimming in the cave at Portuguese Bend:

[T]he swell of clear water, the way it changed, the swiftness and power it gained as it narrowed through the rocks at the base of the point. The tide had to be just right. We had to be in the water at the very moment the tide was right [...] Each time we did it I was afraid of missing the swell, hanging back, timing it wrong. John never was. 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 (227).

Here, the swell is emblematic of Didion's fear for life's unpredictable nature and flux, a Romantic emblem for the central character of universal energy. This is foreshadowed in the beginning of the book as she states that "life changes in the instant" (3), a phrase she constantly repeats throughout her narrative to enforce this inevitable unpredictability. This phrase, along with the one "I love you more than even one more day" (68), is constantly repeated as if to create a sense of regularity in the narrative, combating Didion's reality that is riddled with the complexities of change. "No eye is on the sparrow" (227) she writes as if to allude to the fact that individuals are not safeguarded by the protection from adversity. Bad things happen and we must eventually all face the end. While she closes her book with an inverted religious phrase, the effect of this is not solely focused on faith, but rather on creating a morally ambiguous narrative. In spite of this, I do not intend to portray Didion as a puritanical writer but rather to show how she challenges normative ideas centred around morality in order to question the behaviors, beliefs and ideologies that humans base their actions off. The purpose of this is to urge the reader to undertake their own internal reflection in the contemplation centered around the pursuit of happiness in the context of mortality's inevitable nature.

Furthermore, Didion leaves the reader with advice on how to deal with this through John's words of encouragement, "You had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change. He told me that" (227). Didion infers that in order to make it through the chaos of change, one must grow with it rather than against it in order to comfortably float with the swell. Thus, I argue that Didion, by the end of the book, reaches a point of reconciliation with the idea that her husband, flowing with the tides of change, has followed the natural flux of

the universe — a course she must now follow herself in order to continue living her life with the ability to accept the unpredictable nature of change.

Didion's experience with romantic fantasies is an example of why readers are drawn to genres of fiction or fantasy, to use their Secondary Belief (Tolkien) in an attempt to enter into other "worlds" where they can fulfil their desires. While genres of fantasy and fiction have become part of escapist literature — "producing the desire to escape, not indeed from our life, but from our present time and self-made misery" (Tolkien 151) — these stories can also offer one introspection and insights about the "real world." This is precisely why Tolkien argues against a negative reading of "escapist literature" (148) as it can offer solace in the consideration of complex desires, such as the "oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death" (Tolkien 153). Readers make use of fairy-tales in order to find a sense of comfort in their happy endings. This is what Didion is searching for in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which is why she leans on romantic fantasies in an attempt to create a narrative that offers her consolation.

Slouching Towards Bethlehem — A Moral Dilemma

The presence of morally ambiguous narratives seen in both of her nonfiction works produces a darker tone in her writing. I argue that by doing so, Didion borrows elements from both Romanticism as well as the gothic genre. While I am not suggesting that Didion's non-fiction falls into the categorization of the gothic genre, I do aim to showcase how her narratives in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* use sentiments from this genre in order to provoke an emotional response from the reader. Robert D. Hume details how the gothic novel peaked in popularity between 1764 and 1820 due to "a widespread shift away from neoclassical ideals of order and reason, toward [R]omantic belief in emotion and imagination" (*Gothic Versus*

Romantic 282). As a result of this, literature that attempted to “rouse the reader’s imaginative sympathies” increased in the late eighteenth century (Hume, *Gothic Versus Romantic* 282). Prominent American Romantics Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allan Poe produced literature with darker themes that contributed towards the Gothic genre, relying on the symbolism of nature and spirituality as an entry into one’s psychological landscape in order to explore the darker side of human nature (Bendixen 34). Gothic and Romantic writing therefore both share a psychological concern with one’s imagination, specifically that of the reader’s mental reactions (*Gothic Versus Romantic* 288). This is similar to Tolkien’s theory of non-visual art as it asks for a level of reader participation on a cognitive, yet personal, level. Gothic writers use the supernatural to achieve either terror (dependent on suspense or dread) or horror (dependent on shock and repugnance), triggering an emotional response from their readers (Hume, *Gothic Versus Romantic* 282). Despite this technique gaining criticism, Romantic writers still incorporated the supernatural into their work, such as Coleridge in his “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). The effect of using supernatural elements was also an effort to confront the antagonistic forces of good and evil, a response to the doubt in faith’s ability to rationalize the complexities of the human condition (Hume, *Gothic Versus Romantic* 289).

This ambivalent feeling present in the eighteenth century was reflected in its literature, consisting of morally ambiguous narratives, a tone of unpredictability, the rebellion against order, the focus on introspection, and, the alienation felt in society (Peckham 14). While Didion’s narratives in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* are set in the Sixties, this modern period is seen to share many similarities to the Romantic period — namely, the need for change and the search for a greater meaning in one’s life. By borrowing such literary sentiments, Didion reflects themes common to Romanticism, both negative and positive, in an attempt to explore the darker aspects of society.

“Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” notably showcases Didion’s morally ambiguous narrative that employs gothic sentiments. This essay immediately presents an enigmatic tone as she describes the setting (The San Bernardino Valley) as an “alien” place “haunted by the Mojave just beyond the mountains” (Didion 3). By using the word “haunted,” Didion introduces elements of the supernatural from the beginning and presents the San Bernardino Valley as dissociated from society by describing it as “alien” (3). The effect of this is to unsettle the reader as these descriptions make the environment seem unfamiliar, which is a common technique employed in the gothic novel to remove “the narrative from the realm of the everyday” (Hume, *Gothic Versus Romantic* 284). This is achieved through the atmosphere in an attempt to “arouse and sensitize the reader’s imagination” (Hume, *Gothic Versus Romantic* 284). Didion does this by embodying the wind as a monstrous force threatening society: “Every voice seems a scream. It is the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, wherever the wind blows” (3). As this is a nonfiction essay, Didion plays on the idea of the supernatural in her surroundings and language which suggest that humans are the real monsters. Instead of creating a fictitious environment to disorientate the reader’s senses, Didion does the opposite by placing her readers in real spaces with real people, using the nonfiction genre to document reality. The effect of this is to deliver an air of the supernatural but in a familiar space so that the reader feels uneasy in their own environment, thus prompting them to interrogate the peculiarities in their own surroundings. This premise sets up her description of the street on which the suspected murder of Lucille Miller’s husband occurs. Didion describes the event as “curious and unnatural” (5), suggesting that there is something more sinister at play — this is ironic as death, and especially murder, are both already sinister concepts.

The lemon groves are sunken, down a three-or four-foot retaining wall, so that one looks directly into their dense foliage, too lush, unsettlingly glossy, the greenery of

nightmare; the fallen eucalyptus bark is too dusty, a place for snakes to breed (Didion 5).

What depicts this image as a “nightmare” is the contrast between foliage that is too lush and glossy with bark that is fallen and dusty. This disparity emphasizes the forces of life and death while the image of snakes warns against the living foliage which has already been deemed unsettling. The many commas present in this paragraph creates a jolted reading that, if it were to be read aloud, would almost cause the reader to pant while pausing on each comma, mimicking an external display of panic — as if one is gasping for air. Moreover, this introductory description of the setting foregrounds the essay’s theme that things are not always as they appear. While the people living in this neighborhood feign a life of perfection, Didion draws attention to the fantasy of it. She then reminds the reader that this is not an isolated case: “It might have been anyone’s bad summer, anyone’s siege of heat and nerves and migraine and money worries” (9). With this sentence, Didion pushes the story off the page and onto her reader. *What secrets are you hiding?* She seems to ask, a question foregrounding her underlying theme of morality. This is seen as she describes the murderous event as a “conventional clandestine affair” that occurs in “a place like San Bernardino, a place where little is bright or graceful, where it is routine to misplace the future and easy to start looking for it in bed” (Didion 16). Secrets once guarded by the false smiles of its residents are threatened by the gloomy weather warning to break the illusion. The point of this is to show how ordinary, seemingly perfect places can foster an environment of immorality — where happiness is looked for outside of one’s virtues (such as having an affair).

January n, 1965, was a bright warm day in Southern California, the kind of day when Catalina floats on the Pacific horizon and the air smells of orange blossoms and it is a

long way from the bleak and difficult East, a long way from the cold, a long way from the past (Didion 19).

This is one of the few times in this story that Didion positively describes the atmosphere — the day of the trial — signaling to the reader that the truth overcame the facade. This is significant as, for Didion, honesty and accountability are for her the equivalent of the Romantic's higher truth. In "On Keeping a Notebook" she writes about the importance of owning one's past mistakes, in not forgetting who you once were or the choices you once made. "Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a. m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends" (Didion 139). According to Paul Heilker, Didion rationalizes that in order to define oneself as an adult, an individual must first have the type of self-respect that is found within a "private reconciliation" (144), enabling one the ability to claim responsibility for one's life and to live by one's own social code (32). Didion dedicates a whole essay to this idea in "On Self-Respect":

To live without self-respect is to lie awake some night, beyond the reach of warm milk, phenobarbital, and the sleeping hand on the coverlet, counting up the sins of commission and omission, the trusts betrayed, the promises subtly broken, the gifts irrevocably wasted through sloth or cowardice or carelessness. However long we postpone it, we eventually lie down alone in that notoriously uncomfortable bed, the one we make ourselves. Whether or not we sleep in it depends, of course, on whether or not we respect ourselves (143).

Here, Didion includes the reader in the need to take accountability by using the pronoun “we.” The final sentence in the above paragraph presents the act of being able to sleep in one’s bed as the test for whether or not an individual respects themselves — if not, one would be haunted by guilt ridden dreams. The story of Lucille Miller demonstrates how lies and deception can only hold out for so long before one’s internal world begins to cause one’s external world to crumble. Through this, Didion explains what ultimate happiness means to her:

To have that sense of one’s intrinsic worth which constitutes self-respect is potentially to have everything: the ability to discriminate, to love and to remain indifferent. To lack it is to be locked within oneself, paradoxically incapable of either love or indifference (147).

This intrinsic worth can only materialize rewards once one is free from romantic fantasies, as well as ceasing the need to please others which causes individuals to live out society’s “false notions” of themselves (Didion 147). These false notions of how one “should” behave culminates from the pursuit of happiness with relation to the “rules” of society, dependent on the time period. Didion’s narrative of society in the Sixties reflects a state of disorder owing to the misinterpretation of core values and morals. Individuals are seen to be searching for happiness in the wrong places and following rules that end in broken promises. Didion reveals that not all of these promises can or will be kept as they are based off hollow ideals, such as the American Dream. In doing so, Didion projects “the madness to which the pursuit of ideal moralities leads” (Homans 241). This pursuit is explored in an interview with Comrade Michael Laski, “General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party U. S. A.” (Didion 61). Didion turns this essay about the General Secretary, something

that at first appears to be occupied with the politics of communism, into a more personal look at the way individuals deal with their inner demons in an attempt to navigate through the chaos of their own existence. Thus, she showcases how, instead of struggling with these internally, people like Comrade Laski take on causes in the actual world as a way to rectify the chaos they feel inside.

He is in all ways an idealist. As it happens I am comfortable with the Michael Laskis of this world, with those who live outside rather than in, those in whom the sense of dread is so acute that they turn to extreme and doomed commitments (Didion 62).

By fighting for something that he feels is worthy and important, Comrade Laski is inherently fighting for a sense of purpose, a “triumph of being over nothingness” (Didion 66). As she unmasks her subject matter, so does the reader feel a need to justify the things they fight for. Again, Didion’s perception of society promotes the need for internal reflection — she views the ultimate struggle as the one against internal chaos. However, she admits to feeling comfortable with people like Michael Laski as she knows how difficult it is to confront and repair internal damage (Didion 62).

The world Michael Laski had constructed for himself was one of labyrinthine intricacy and immaculate clarity, a world made meaningful not only by high purpose but by external and internal threats, intrigues and apparatus, an immutably ordered world in which things mattered (Didion 65).

Through the narrative of *The Year of Magical Thinking* and the above examples in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Didion demonstrates the grave difficulty in gaining a type of

self-awareness needed to remove the illusions that are presented in the form of romantic fantasies or magical thinking. These perspectives can in turn prevent individuals from taking responsible measures in securing their happiness. Didion's Romantic themes presented in both nonfiction works showcase her ability to transcend time, adopting techniques seen in past literature while still resonating with the readers of the 21st century.

Chapter 5: An Apocalyptic Paradise

This final chapter examines the underlying Romantic symbolism present in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. This is the third lens which I contextualize the romantic fantasies present in Didion's narrative. In *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, the search for the ideal morals is seen in a society perceived to have lost them. Didion builds a narrative that comments on the way American society in the Sixties copes with the notion of disorder, a subject that is emphasized through her inclusion of Yeats' poem to solidify an apocalyptic metaphor in her essays. Didion portrays this through a morally ambiguous narrative, incorporating sentiments of Romantic and gothic literature. In doing so, Didion shows how confronting one's fears and hardships often causes one to reimagine their life which could lead to a romantic gaze of society.

The Duality of Human Nature

The societal beliefs differentiating the boundaries of good and evil waned during Romanticism in response to the growing suspicion of human complexities (Hume, *Gothic Versus Romantic* 285), rooted in the behaviors that brought on revolutions and revolts against systems of power. Such behaviors exposed the natural urges in humans which culminated in acts of violence, changing the perception of human nature as being reactive to urges that could bring about societal harm. Gothic literature reflected the blurring of these boundaries, allowing readers a space to explore themes centered around morality in relation to human nature. An example of this is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) which deals directly with the complexities of human nature where humanity is portrayed as a monstrous force capable of

destruction. The gothic writer presents a morally ambiguous narrative where a moral norm is usually presented for the reader to properly measure its relation to the present evil in a psychological manner familiar to their own (Hume, *Gothic Versus Romantic* 287).

I argue that Didion uses an apocalyptic metaphor to create her version of this morally ambiguous narrative, foreshadowed in her preface which includes Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming" (1920). While Yeats does not outwardly reference morality, Didion makes use of his apocalyptic theme to construct her own version of this metaphor, where her reference to an apocalypse is emblematic for the chaos left in the wake of corruption. The poem outlines a world of chaos and destruction that ends with one of two options: ultimate destruction or the rebirth of something new and hopeful — either choice is inevitably necessary in bringing about change. Change, as a physical and ideological concept, is epochal and transformative which is central to Romanticism, and underwrites so much of Didion's take on place and time.

The title for Didion's collection of essays, taken from the final line in Yeats' poem, foregrounds a similar theme for her own essays: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (207). Yeats leaves the poem's conclusion open to the interpretation of the reader where the beast is emblematic of humanity. Will the beast bring hope or destruction? Didion's play on this final line mimics her narrative's exploration of the descent into an apocalyptic state that is brought on by society. "Taking up Yeats' poem, Didion intones her undercurrent of fear that America is falling apart, and that a beast is waiting to be born" (Zehelein 4-5). Does she predict hope for a new beginning after the chaos or does she perceive the world as lost to a constant perpetuating state of disorder? Like Yeats, Didion leaves this open to the reader's interpretation as she presents examples of both outcomes. She employs this apocalyptic imagery as an extended metaphor for the disorder she feels herself, highlighting how society is a bifurcated species capable of both light and dark

forces. This is used in conjunction with tropes such as nature, weather, unpredictability and religion in her writing.

In “Los Angles Notebook,” an essay that documents the curious effect of the Santa Ana winds that are emblematic for human behavior, she writes: “My only neighbor would not come out of her house for days, and there were no lights at night, and her husband roamed the place with a machete. One day he would tell me that he had heard a trespasser, the next a rattlesnake” (Didion 218). His excuse of a trespasser places blame on an outside intruder, while the rattlesnake suggests a more internal chaos. The word rattlesnake conjures the hissing sound made by the rattlesnake’s tale as a warning sign to the reader. This warning alerts one to the complexities of human nature where people are quick to cast blame on outside forces, avoiding the trouble they feel within. Thus, Los Angeles and its atmosphere are emblematic for the internal chaos felt by its society which Didion reflects in a description of the fires during the “1965 Watts riots”:

For days one could drive the Harbor Freeway and see the city on fire, just as we had always known it would be in the end. Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse [...] [T]he violence and the unpredictability of the Santa Ana affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are (220-221).

Didion uses the wind as an emblem for humanity’s detrimental and destructive possibilities, comparing humanity’s bifurcated nature to that of the apocalypse, constantly threatening change — the question this summons is whether society as a human collective will bring positive change or destruction? The wind which “shows us how close to the edge we are” (Didion 220-221) is a mirror she reflects this ultimate predication through. In the case of

this essay, Didion predicts the path of destruction referenced in her somber tone in describing the image of the city on fire, “just as we had always known it would be in the end” (220-221). This line is phrased like that of a prophecy, a common style used to frame her sentences that offer predictions for either the future or the present, presumed from the “lessons” reflected through history, lessons which the children of today “were never taught” (Didion 84). Her narratives focus on entropic forces that are seen to shape the minds of her characters, wherever her “characters live, their setting reflects images of the disorder that they carry within” (Gelfant 51).

Didion’s narratives therefore showcase a society struggling with choices surrounding good and evil, morality and immorality, reality and fantasy. Similar to the gothic genre’s inability to produce satisfying conclusions, Didion leaves her reader in constant speculation over society’s complexities and over how close we are to the edge. This further stresses the divide between human nature, highlighted in the presence of therianthropic imagery. Didion writes that, for at least some of the time, the “world appears to me as a painting by Hieronymus Bosch” (161). In this statement, Didion uses Bosch’s artwork to describe her world as one where humans double as monstrous beings where the idea of sin constantly tempts one’s virtues. Through this lens, humans reveal themselves as complex beings who struggle to find balance between their reason and their more primal desires and violent urges, demonstrated through past revolutions and war.

In spite of this fundamental duality present in human nature, Didion suggests that the struggle to find balance is made more difficult by certain social codes. An example of this can be seen in the essay “On Morality,” where Didion begins with the sentence: “As it happens I am in Death Valley” ... “and it is hot” (157). This atmosphere almost resembles an image of Hell, directly contrasting the essay’s subject matter on morality which she describes as a word she distrusts. By doing so, Didion admits to distrusting the very social codes of ethical

behavior that modern society is based on. The reason being is that she feels she cannot distinguish what is actually considered to be “good.” Particularly “in this country so ominous and terrible that to live in it is to live with antimatter, it is difficult to believe that ‘the good’ is a knowable quantity” (Didion 159). This metaphor of living with antimatter solidifies her perception of the world’s unstable center, causing things to “fall apart” — resembling Yeats’ poetic depiction of a fallen society.

There is some sinister hysteria in the air out here tonight, some hint of the monstrous perversion to which any human idea can come. ‘I followed my own conscience.’ ‘I did what I thought was right.’ How many madmen have said it and meant it? How many murderers?’ [...] [I]ndebted by those who would say it now, Jesus said it. Maybe we have all said it, and maybe we have been wrong (Didion 161).

Here, Didion conjures the gothic feeling of terror in the disposition of her words. Her description of the air, an element which we need to survive, as inheriting a sinister hysteria produces a fearful image of humanity “surviving” off a lack of reason that comes with a hysterical mind. This sinister air that is inhaled infuses the ideas of society, polluting our opinions on ethics and reason. Didion builds on this idea by grouping together murderers, Jesus, herself and the reader into the same generalized accusation: “Maybe we have all said it” (161). “It” being the justification used for one’s actions on the basis that they are considered “good.” Didion’s tone here is ironic as she compares these justifications to the arguments used by “madmen.” With this generalization that we all, even Jesus, have possibly uttered false justifications, she contradicts the religious belief that Jesus is the epitome of “good,” a figure for humanity to base their ethics and values from. This contradiction causes the reader to doubt their own beliefs on which they base their ideas of morality — have they too been

polluted by this sinister hysteria? Her essay further presents a case study for her argument that morality is a subjective notion as she describes a car accident where a man stayed with the dead body, waiting for the coroner, as he believed it would be immoral otherwise.

[O]ne 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. If we have been taught to keep our promises—if, in the simplest terms, our upbringing is good enough—we stay with the body, or have bad dreams (Didion 158).

Didion's mention of promises here is ironic, as already showcased in the above two chapters, she views the outcome of promises as either unkept or forgotten. This is because she distrusts not only others' loyalty but the loyalty of her younger self that saw life through an "illusionary veil" (Didion 28). This narrative, the one that distrust morality and human nature, presents the idea that something darker looms. While gothic literature uses supernatural beings as a signifier for a human's darker nature, Didion plays with this common trope to portray human nature as the monster in her narrative — the looming darkness, pushing us closer to the edge of potential destruction. She justifies this by arguing that the problem with the aspect of morality is with the frequency that it is employed in almost every context as a justification for why people need or want certain things (Didion 162). Rather than using morality as a belief system, it is used to defend one's actions, turning society into "fashionable madmen," and, when that happens, "then is when we are in bad trouble. And I suspect we are already there" (Didion 163).

Didion further suggests that the problem with the concept of morality stems from an individual's sense of self-respect. In her essay "On Self-Respect," Didion writes that when she was younger, she would place her self-respect on "passive virtues" which she thought

would guarantee her love and happiness (143). “To such doubtful amulets had my self-respect been pinned, and I faced myself that day with the nonplused apprehension of someone who has come across a vampire and has no crucifix at hand” (Didion 143). Here, she assumes her prior beliefs of self-respect are unworthy in guarding her against corruption where the crucifix is emblematic of her inner moral compass. Without a proper sense of self-respect, individuals become easy prey for the romantic fantasies of “ideal” happiness. She continues with this metaphor where self-respect acts as a type of crucifix against temptation:

There is a common superstition that ‘self-respect’ is a kind of charm against snakes, something that keeps those who have it locked in some unblighted Eden, out of strange beds, ambivalent conversations, and trouble in general (Didion 144).

According to Didion, self-respect does not keep one out of trouble, rather, it allows the bravery to own one’s mistakes and to take responsibility. While her narratives are largely focused on society’s romantic fantasies used to create an illusionary world displaced from their reality, Didion’s intent is to disillusion this idea in the face of transparency. People who are capable of such transparency “know the price of things” — the price being the consequence of their actions (Didion 145). Nonetheless, Didion does not condemn the act of making mistakes as that is the very foundation on which humanity is placed, but she believes that people will be rewarded either spiritually, emotionally or mentally for their honesty, accountability and growth from such. Without this sense of self-respect, “one runs away to find oneself, and finds no one at home” (Didion 148). Without it, people lose themselves to the fantasies of the day, to the false notions of happiness and virtue — keeping them locked in an “unblighted Eden” (Didion 144).

The Illusion of Eden

Didion makes constant reference to an idea of Eden in her writing which connotes to the religious story of the Garden of Eden. This reference allows her to foreground the internal conflict of morality, as conveyed in the story of Adam and Eve. In the Garden of Eden, there exists a duality in choices between good and evil. In relation to this reference, she suggests that people also struggle between these choices, harboring an internal apocalypse — “what rough beast?” (Yeats 207). Didion also uses this imagery of Eden to explore the romantic fantasy of California with regard to society’s sense of dissociation. Eva-Sabine Zehelein argues that Didion’s depiction of California tells the failed story of the frontier past that dreamt of the “promised land” (4). The idea that promoted California as a prospective land promising success came to be known as the California Dream — the State symbolizing the inspiration behind the American Dream ideology (Starr). California gained this reputation in part from the California Gold Rush in 1849 which associated California with wealth, perpetuating over time the idea that anyone could find immediate opportunities and success in California (Starr). Through the use of Romantic nostalgia, Didion highlights the problematic nature of nostalgia in perpetually romanticizing California as a romantic fantasy of the past. “It is a world which ‘may or may not have ever existed,’ yet it lived on as an imagined wish, desire or mournful longing, and in comparison to the reality as she perceived it caused her *Weltschmerz*” (Zehelein 9).

In “Notes from a Native Daughter,” she writes that California resembles Eden, along with the perception that to leave California and its “blessings,” one is banished, “exiled by some perversity of heart” (Didion 176). This description is akin to the exile of Eve from the Garden of Eden. However, Didion does not compare this banishment to the fault of temptation, but rather to the disillusionment of Eden as a perfect utopia. “It is hard to find California

now, unsettling to wonder how much of it was merely imagined or improvised” ... “It should be clear by now that the truth about the place is elusive, and must be tracked with caution” (Didion 178). Thus, she warns her reader about the falsities that the image of Eden disguises, asking the reader: “Which is the true California?” (Didion 179). This is her attempt to highlight the repercussions that come with discovering the cracks threatening to break one’s view of paradise, the truth of its flaws hidden in its deluding exterior. While nostalgia can be used to sustain romanticized opinions, it can also aid in the introspection needed to break such habits.

This metaphor of Eden is continued in “Rock of Ages,” an essay about Alcatraz Island. Instead of highlighting the perils of Alcatraz prison, Didion writes how it is not an unpleasant place to be, where the tide surges “through the Golden Gate” (205). This reference to the Golden Gate bridge could also act as a religious symbol for the Golden Gates of Heaven. Again, this sets up the notion of morality and choices. According to the religious reference, one can only be accepted through the Golden Gates if they have done what is considered by society as good, if not, they will be denied entry to Heaven. However, it is ironic that these Golden Gates lead to what once was a prison. Perhaps Didion is suggesting that humanity was imprisoned by their former beliefs of morality that have now led them astray, as they instead pursue the path to an illusion of Eden that keeps one free from discovering California’s “unhappy archives” (Ahmed 573). Now rescued by nature, Alcatraz is no longer a prison but “a ruin devoid of human vanities, clean of human illusions, an empty place reclaimed by the weather” (Didion 208). However, in order to like such a place, she writes that “you have to want a moat” (Didion 205). This moat is necessary in keeping one unencumbered from the romantic fantasies which mislead society into thinking that they can find prolonged happiness and meaning in superficialities.

Thus, Didion utilizes nature, place and the weather to portray these ideas and the emotions connected to such choices between “good” and “evil.” This is a sentiment commonly used by the Romantics who used nature as a connection to spirituality and philosophy. Nature and place were often personified to reflect the individual’s emotional state, as seen in the poetry of Charlotte Smith. An example from Didion’s writing can be seen in “Guaymas, Señora.” In this essay, she describes the Gulf of California as water “glassy as a mirage” where the ships in the harbor are “whistling unsettlingly, moaning, ghost schooners, landlocked, lost” (Didion 215). By describing California as a mirage, the idea that it has become a romantic fantasy is reinforced. The ships are emblematic of its residents that are unsettled and lost, unable or unwilling to escape the illusion of the fantasy. This justifies her main reason for escaping with her husband to Guaymas, a place where there is “nothing but mesquite and rattlesnakes” and, similar to Alcatraz Island, “no trace of human endeavor” (Didion 214). Didion constantly teases this idea of sinful temptation with snakes, using it as a precursor for the sin and destruction that humans leave in their wake. Like the snake in the story of Adam and Eve, the snakes in Didion’s narratives alert the reader to the upcoming tests of morality (for both the characters and the reader themselves). They slither in-between her paragraphs, hissing at the reader — *what choices will you make?* Her urgent journey to Guaymas is a result of needing to visit the desert. “The desert, any desert, is indeed the valley of the shadow of death; come back from the desert and you feel like Alcestis, reborn” (Didion 214). To free oneself from the illusion, one must die and become reborn — in other words, awaken themselves to the disillusionment.

On the contrary, in “Letter from Paradise, 21° 19’N., 157° 52’ W,” rather than immediately dispelling the notion of paradise, Didion showcases the conscious effort to build up this illusion, something which she admits to doing herself. She describes Hawaii as a place where “children who have never been told, as I was told, that golden lads and girls all must as

chimney sweepers come to dust” (Didion 187). Similar to California, Hawaii possesses an illusionary veil that keeps its “children” from confronting the harsh realities of the world.

Hawaii figured large in my fantasies. I sat as a child on California beaches and imagined that I saw Hawaii, a certain shimmer in the sunset, a barely perceptible irregularity glimpsed intermittently through squinted eyes (Didion 188).

This paragraph portrays a sense of Didion’s Romantic writing style that consists of long, winding sentences broken up by commas, as well as the placement of sesquipedalian words in a consecutive sequence (“perceptible irregularity glimpsed intermittently”) to slow the reader’s pace (188). Her lengthy sentences often include multiple points separated by commas, mimicking the flow similar to one’s stream of consciousness. This helps her to present a nostalgic tone which asks the reader not to rush ahead, but to slow down and remember with her a vision of Hawaii as a fading “shimmer in the sunset” (Didion 188).

As she does with California, she ultimately unmasks the illusion of Hawaii by the end of this essay. Didion writes how Hawaii manufactures an image of growth and progress, looking always upon its hopeful future as an attempt to appease its recent past of war and discrimination. “And so, in the peculiar and still insular mythology of Hawaii, the dislocations of war became the promises of progress” (Didion 202). Promises which are subjective to the particular individual in determining whether or not they have been fulfilled (Didion 202). These promises are used as incentive in amplifying Hawaii’s image. It is partly due to this fact, this facade created by Hawaii, that Didion writes how she now lacks “all temperament for paradise, real or facsimile” (188).

In “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” the disillusionment caused by the result of a false paradise is portrayed in the hopeless mood exerted by American society where individuals wander aimlessly, unable to reach answers to justify their existence. Didion mimics this in the essay’s structure as the text “splits up into numerous disconnected atomic fragments” to resemble the feeling of disintegration in American society (Zehelein 5). This is foregrounded in the essay’s introduction:

It was a country of bankruptcy notices and public-auction announcements and commonplace reports of casual killings and misplaced children and abandoned homes [...] It was a country in which families routinely disappeared [...] Adolescents drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins, children who were never taught and would never now learn the games that had held the society together (Didion 84).

Here, these “games” are emblematic of the unspoken rules of society, the codes of conduct and social behavior that intend to keep society (and human nature) balanced and orderly. This metaphor can be compared to a line in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*: “[I]n times of tumult they are the men destined to come forth as the shaping spirit of ruin, to destroy the wisdom of ages in order to substitute the fancies of a day” (14-15). Rather than romanticizing the American Dream, Didion sees a broken society disconnected from past generations, where the “wisdom of the ages” has been destroyed, resulting in the younger generation to substitute the prevalent disorder with “the fancies of the day” (Coleridge 14-15). Didion compares this younger generation to snakes that perform a process of “sloughing” and “shedding” — freeing themselves from the defining limitations of their past and future —

where they are seen to have chosen to detach themselves from society, disillusioned by the “broken promises” of the past.

This image reflects the opening line of Yeats’ poem: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer” (207). While the falcon cannot hear the falconer (Yeats), neither can this younger generation hear (or refuses to hear) the lessons whispered to them from the past, resulting in society to undergo a process of “atomization” (Didion xi). Although Yeats reflects on the historical period of the Twenties following the aftermath of World War I, Didion uses his poem to comment on the politically turbulent period of the Sixties in the United States — a period characterized by anti-war campaigns, student protests, civil rights activists, the assassinations of political leaders, hippy culture in Haight-Ashbury and propaganda used to sell the American Dream (Morgan 27). This cultural milieu shows through in Didion’s metaphoric prose (as seen in the above paragraph) and is seen to color her skepticism when writing about the period.

Didion contrasts the above paragraph which describes these “misplaced children” (84) living in a state of despair with the claim that, despite such chaos, it “was not a country under enemy siege” but rather it was the United States of America where “it might have been a spring of brave hopes and national promise, but it was not, and more and more people had the uneasy apprehension that it was not” (84-85). This description suggests that, while the country may not have been under foreign enemy siege, there was still an enemy lurking within, causing chaos. This draws attention to the disillusionment that more people were growing aware of — the fact that society was falling apart without the proper rules to govern: honesty, self-respect and morality. This dawning apocalypse that Didion describes in the Sixties was brought on partly due to the American society having lost touch with their values, so eager to build a future that promised an Eden-like atmosphere advertised by the California Dream, that they are now seen to be disoriented in the pursuit of real happiness.

Owing to this disorientation, Didion argues that these “misplaced children” (84) lack a voice, or rather, they lack a sense of purpose necessary to enable them to use their voice in the fight against this disorder. “The tragedy of an American people who refuse to take on the struggle for articulation is epitomized in Didion’s description of the Haight-Ashbury hippie scene” (Heilker 32), where counterculture emerged in response to this alienation felt from the modern world (Morgan 22). Similar to Ahmed’s image of the killjoy figure (582), Didion reveals a society refusing to admit their unhappiness in order to avoid becoming this “killjoy” figure that would require them to accept that their ways of finding immediate gratification are not real forms of happiness. By evading this awareness, they relinquish their consciousness along with their voice. Thus, this essay tells a story about how individuals fill the void in an attempt to find happiness which they misunderstand for anything that provides them with instant satisfaction, such as amphetamines that grant “the illusions of action and power” (Didion 108). Just as Marx compares religion to opium, Didion uses amphetamines as an emblem for a major problem that she perceives society to struggle with. Amphetamines are emblematic for their romanticized notion of happiness as a means to gratify one’s need for pleasure and power. For Didion, this is not a story about drugs, but about the lack of articulation. Without a proper sense of meaning needed to fill the void, individuals in society are rendered inarticulate (Heilker 34).

Thus, Didion’s essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* focus mainly on human behaviors and reactions in times of turbulence. How we react to these situations that cause us to question our sanity, reason, morals and beliefs is what Didion aims to document — perhaps in an attempt to better understand society, as this in turn can help to understand oneself. I argue this being Didion’s attempt to partly remedy the lack of articulation experienced in the Sixties. Didion’s metaphoric prose, when decoded, aims to resonate with the reader’s most primal feelings of love, pain, grief, fear and despair. At the end of Didion’s narrative, one is

left to ponder over whether or not they inherit the values and morals that allow them to lie down in the beds of their own making (Didion 143). This personal consideration over the defining qualities of our human nature again evokes the final lines from Yeats' poem: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (207).

Conclusion

The above chapters provide a literary analysis attempting to show how Joan Didion uses metaphoric prose to expose the romantic fantasies of society's reality in the creative nonfiction of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*. This thesis relies on the distinction of the term "romantic" from "Romantic" where the former represents an idealized perspective that culminates in imaginative fantasies, and the latter refers more tightly to the philosophy, related but not wholly consistently, of the Romantic movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This distinction is vital to the root of my argument insisting that Didion borrows ideologies and literary sentiments from Romanticism in her narrative, such as Romantic irony and Romantic nostalgia, as well as common Romantic themes centered on introspection, imagination and spirituality — which are broadly associated with the movement in the scholarship that follows it. The intent of this is to illustrate how her narrative seeks to appease Romantic goals: finding a greater sense of purpose, encouraging the need to gain a new perspective of oneself and society in order to better make sense of things, and, questioning the complexities surrounding the ideas of order, morality and one's imaginative faculty.

I explore these romantic fantasies through three different lenses: the lens of romantic fantasies as the ideals used by Hollywood and the media to perpetuate an unrealistic idea of happiness, the lens of romantic fantasies as self-inflicted coping mechanisms (which Didion has personal experience with), and the lens that explores the "Romantic" aspects of Didion's confrontation with these fantasies. My analysis of such is indebted to J.R.R. Tolkien's more amenable theory of fantasy as a way to reveal one's desires, as well as Sara Ahmed's re-

search which explores the problem with pursuing a version of happiness that promises a utopian view of life, rather than a realistic one. My analysis demonstrates Didion's ability to achieve the previously mentioned Romantic goals through reader participation as her metaphorical prose forces the reader to actively engage in the translation of her emblems — challenging her reader to undergo their own version of introspection. Thus, Didion contrasts the theme of disorder with an underlying tone of Romanticism that is optimistic about internally finding answers to external complexities.

This is my main interest in studying Didion's creative nonfiction, a genre that allows her to comment on actual life where the reader is encouraged to make their own personal deductions through the practice of associationism. This can be seen to be a direct representation of what it means to be human. It is our mind's imaginative and cognitive abilities in producing our perceptions that influence our opinions, reactions and behaviors. Through this process, our mind offers us a voice, a way to speak without sound. Instead, we voice our opinions through our imagination's analyses and our fantasies that signify our subjective judgments or wishful desires. Listening to one's internal voice then becomes vital in understanding an individual's relationship to the external world. Thus, Didion's emblems are relevant to the contemporary as a result of their timeless nature in speaking of human nature. Through this, her nonfiction writing, which remains relevant today, carries the ability to grow with the ever-changing ideologies of generations to come as her narratives reflect on the complexities of the human condition — a pertinent theme that will always need reflection. Her narratives offer modern readers a lens through which to explore the idea of humanity, where her ultimate prognosis is that we are a bifurcated species, consisting of a duality in nature divided between both good and bad intentions — intentions that are often confused by a misunderstanding of morality in the pursuit of an artificial promise of happiness.

Didion's morally ambiguous narratives and apocalyptic metaphors foreshadow this inference that a happy ending is not always guaranteed. Although she contrasts morality and immorality in her narratives, her intent is not to ask the reader to choose their side, but to demonstrate the complexity of each side so that they cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive. Her narratives are littered with morality tests in an attempt to persuade her reader to more thoroughly question the dividing forces seen to separate the two terms, foregrounding the intricacy of human nature.

Didion's narratives explore the multitude of world views that contribute towards the understanding of how people choose to fill the void or find a higher sense of meaning. In spite of this, Didion incorporates her own perspective that sees the essence of morality indebted to self-respect in claiming accountability for one's actions. She proposes that this is the only way that one can find real happiness. A Romantic way of thinking is therefore advocated by Didion, one that does not *romanticize* reality in an attempt to escape from it, but one that is rooted in Romanticism's ideals that focus on the imagination for the purpose of introspection. She challenges her reader to consider a form of introspection in deciphering whether or not they are really happy. Do their actions align with their perception of what it means to live a good and moral life? Or, do they resonate with the likes of Lucille Miller, constructing a version of reality that one would expect to see on a postcard? What ever their answer may be, the effect of this reinforces the kaleidoscopic ways in which people perceive the world.

Therefore, in focusing on the many abilities of one's imagination, Didion demonstrates how humans have power over their perception. We can choose to change our "ending" by modifying the way we view things, adopting ideals inherited from past generations and redefining our sense of self-worth and our notions surrounding wealth and happiness. Instead

of perceiving imperfections negatively, we can accept these constant, yet unpredictable, features that make up life, rather than simply suffering through it — surrendering ourselves to the flux of life. This is her notion of survival, a way to make sense of things. Life, while it can feel magical in those sublime moments, is not always what we hope — it is imperfect. But, as we wade through the chaos of these imperfections, we can discover something that is perhaps better, something real. These are the stories we as humans tell ourselves, the ones that remind us of life's true joys, the ones that remind us why life is worth seizing. The stories we tell ourselves transfer meaning onto the world around us. Without these stories, we are unable to fully grasp what it means to be human and to experience what it is to live.

Appendix

The Second Coming

by William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
 The darkness drops again; but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

(*The Classic Hundred Poems: All-time Favorites*, 1998, pp. 207).

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