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“Man’s Country. Out Where the West Begins”: Women, the American Dream,
and the West in Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in
English

by

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B.A. English Louisiana State University, 2010

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Abstract

This paper examines the feminist perspective in Didion's collection of essays *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Throughout the text, Didion looks closely at the West and the changing social climate which surrounds her. Her essays chronicle women struggling to find a balance between the domestic and independence promised by myth the West. I analyze how women are granted only limited participation within the American Dream because of the masculine power structures which dominate our society. As the values of the American Dream shift, the women that Didion depicts attempt to find identity and independence despite the restrictive forces around them.

Joan Didion, Feminism, American Dream, Myth of the West, Women

In her book *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins examines women's interaction with myth of the West through the Western genre in films and concludes that their experience is more complicated and less fulfilling than it is for men. Her reasoning is that women have no direct representation – no on-screen icon who reflects them or their experience directly. She notes that Westerns as a genre is rather exclusionary of female experience in particular, as even men from different ethnicities have figures to look up to, such as Tonto, while women must be more creative. Tompkins asserts that the female experience of watching Westerns is more challenging because women must adapt their own self-image to identify with someone on the screen. Women are often “split into two camps: those who identified with the hero and those who didn't or couldn't” (16). Women either imagined what it would be like to be a part of the scene as a companion to the masculine hero, or they found qualities within the masculine hero that they could identify with, despite their physical differences. These options hardly seem ideal – either accept the limitations of the myth and identify with traditionally masculine traits, or don't participate in the myth at all. Tompkins explains that one woman went so far as to “invent a female character” for her favourite Westerns, “so that she could participate as a woman” by pretending “to be the fourth wife or one of the Cartwright children” (16). Instead of participating in the adventures which helped build the myth of the West, this woman feels she has to carve a place for herself by taking on a predetermined female role within in the domestic sphere. This make-believe domesticity is hardly as glamorous as pretending to be the male hero, and it demonstrates how firmly engrained the role of the domestic is in the female experience. Instead of visualizing greatness for herself, this female viewer writes herself firmly into the margins of the narrative of the West, participating instead in the domestic dream rather than the American Dream.

For the most part, the female presence in the myth of the West is largely behind the scenes. Since entire families, not just men, migrated westward, we know that women were present on the frontier; however, their participation in the creation of the myth is limited largely to homemaking. The stories passed on about the West are of men conquering the land, gaining riches, and securing prospects. This omission is not lost on the females who struggle with the weight of the West. Indeed, Joan Didion's collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* thoroughly explores the impact of the Western myth on the female experience. In her essay "The Seacoast of Despair," she questions the blatant exclusion of women's participation in the figuration of the West by asking, "who could think that the building of a railroad could guarantee salvation, when there on the lawns of the men who built the railroad nothing is left but the shadows of migrainous women, and the pony carts waiting for the long-dead children" (213). Here, Didion brings into focus the marginalization of female experience and their limited participation within the culture created by the myth of the West – she questions the validity of the Dream by challenging the blatant exclusion of the struggling women in the background. Although this essay deals primarily with Newport, Didion notes an explicit connection, as she stresses that "Newport is curiously Western, closer in spirit to Virginia City than to New York, to Denver than to Boston" (211). The problem with this connection is that Newport "has the stridency usually credited to the frontier. And, like the frontier, it was not much of a game for women" (211). Didion believes that women were never truly a part of the frontier and the ethics of the West, and thus cannot figure into the myth and all its promises. Just like the Western film, Newport's Western allure is nothing more than an illusion: "They could be cajoled, flattered, indulged, given pretty rooms and Worth dresses, allowed to imagine that they ran their own houses and their own lives, but when it came time to negotiate, their freedom proved *trompe l'oeil*" (212).

The American West looms large in our collective imagination – it promises a chance for rebirth, prosperity, freedom, and mobility. It is the epitome of possibility. Its landscape has acted as a blank canvas for generations, beckoning people to take a chance. The cowboys, the Hollywood actors, the pioneers, the self-made men all come together to create a portrait of this lush land of opportunity, this supposed Promised Land. The images that accompany these ideas have developed into abstractions over time, where the West stands for constant promise and a symbol for the American Dream. But the frontier mentality is limited, and the popular myth is full of holes. In *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Joan Didion examines the gap between the myth of the West as a paradise and the reality of the West as a wasteland. Instead of a lush paradise full of promise and possibility, the West she portrays is a hostile landscape, especially for women. The landscape is dry, brittle, and replete with menacing elements – “snakes, coyotes, ominous dogs, dust, weeds, hot winds” plague the landscape while “hangovers and migraine headaches” afflict the inhabitants (Mosley 55). Indeed, the myth of the West as a lush and promising landscape is very much a masculine fantasy. Rachel Borup notes that “in the national imagination, the West [is] closely tied to these lone white males’ conquests of stock enemies such as mountain lions, bears, and Indians” (229). Annette Kolodny expands on this idea by explaining how the masculine concept of the West has created a hostile space for women and their experiences. She explains that “adhering to the underlying fantasy components, the myth of the woodland hero necessarily involves a man ... ‘form’d for the wildness’ and a quintessentially feminine terrain apparently designed to gratify his desires. The myth, thereby – like the fantasy – excludes women” (5). The popular portrayal of the West drives this, as the landscape is often seen as either a feminine and virgin land waiting to be explored and conquered, or a wild and untamed environment which must be tamed. Either way, the solitary masculine

hero conquers the land, and the women rely on him to provide security from the unknown and wild landscape. Ganser furthers this point by explaining that “in masculinist representations of this liminal terrain, nature and wilderness are *feminized* – as a space that has to be subjugated, ordered and ‘civilized’ by (male) pioneers – as well as *masculinized* – a manly wilderness set in opposition to a domesticating, feminine cultural force” (161). This gendering of the landscape excludes the female figure by confining her to the domestic sphere, where she is nothing more than a shadow of a “migrainous” woman. The exclusion of women from the creation of the myth of the West also excludes them from the American Dream, which is so heavily reliant on the promises which spring out of western migration.

The call of the West grows louder every time American culture teeters on the precipice of great change. Whenever the illusion of the American Dream has been destabilized by forces, such as the economy or war, the West has provided solace, at least for a time. Society seeks validation and possibilities which are evident in the stories coming out of this region. California in particular has been the setting for incredibly tempting success stories which offer hope in the face of adversity and reinforce the American Dream. When things get rough, people move West. This story is evident throughout history in both the gold rush migration of the 1850s and the dust bowl migration of the 1930s. People were seeking a way out of the poverty and destitution found in the cities in the East. They were drawn by the stories of success and sudden riches coming out of the West, and this became an ongoing theme for American culture. The frontier may have closed the frontier in the late nineteenth century, but it once again became alluring in the 1950s and 1960s, as the younger generation, like so many before them, migrated westward in search of a better life. Many of the familiar myths of the West recapture the imagination, and people began to migrate westward toward California in the hopes of being reborn; however, just like the

original frontier, the new West was not an inviting or promising place for females. Alexandra Ganser explains for women the same rules did not apply:

The 'open road' appears as a dangerous frontier – in which women's physical and emotional well-being is always at perilous stake – rather than as an adventurous playground. In women's road stories¹, the American highway does not maintain its mythical, iconic status, signifying freedom and the heroic quest for identity, which has been ascribed to it at least since the legendary accounts of the flight from domesticity by Jack Kerouac and his fellow (anti-)heroes of the Beat generation. (153)

Ganser raises an excellent point about the movement westward; since the landscape of the mythic West has always been framed through masculine experience, women struggle to feel the same liberation and freedom experienced by men as they head out of the domestic space. The ethos of the frontier myth is problematic for women because they are unable to truly free themselves from the constricting nature of their status in society, or of the domestic sphere. Indeed, Ganser observes that “normative models of femininity in the West are continually constructed as tied to home and hearth” (156). Outside of the home and family, there was no real place for women. While there were endless possibilities for men, there was little in the way of jobs, education, or opportunities for women outside of the domestic sphere that provided the same chances to build an independent female identity. Between their sexuality and their roles in societal institutions, such as marriage, motherhood, and the home, women were unable to

¹ In her article “On the Asphalt Frontier,” Ganser argues that the genre of female road narratives have been grossly overlooked by scholars. She notes that “in many analyses of the road genre at large, women's road texts are treated as a mere matter of tokenism,” despite the fact “that from the 1970s onwards, road adventures have become a major theme in cultural articulations by US-American women of various social and ethnic backgrounds” (156). Some of the text she mentions in her article are: Anne Roiphe's *Long Division*, Hilma Wolitzer's *Hearts*, Mona Simpson's *Anywhere but Here*, Barbara Kingslover's *The Bean Trees*, Cynthia Kadohata's *The Floating World*, Diane Glance's *Claiming Breath*, Erika Lopez' *Flamingo Iguanas*, Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, Doris Bett's *Heading West*, Sharlene Baker's *Finding Signs*, and Elinor Naunen's anthology *Ladies, Start Your Engines*.

liberate themselves from cultural mores and standards expected of them. Their forced participation in these institutions limited their ability to experience independence and rebirth in the West, as the myth provides for males, despite the fact that the West and its potential remain alluring. This is evident in Didion's text as she introduces us to characters like Lucille Miller and the women of the Haight-Ashbury who try to balance their domestic duties with their aspirations for a more fulfilling life. Through these examples, Didion continually struggles with the typically female concerns of home, domesticity, and parenthood. As a native Californian, Didion acknowledges the allure of the West. She recognizes the power of the myth at work, and challenges it throughout her collection. She inverts the mythological representation of a lush, Edenic California and western landscape with a reality which she sees as barren and hostile. In her portrayal of the West, Didion sees a waste land – a landscape which offers little promise or hope for success. She describes the West as an “alien place” – an unwelcoming environment much different from our expectations (3). In this collection, the landscape is a force to be reckoned with. The landscape represented here creates a binary between the feminine reality of the West over and against the masculine myth.

Didion's approach to the topic of the female interaction with the myth of the West and the American Dream starts out broad and impersonal, where she is merely a messenger, a journalist presenting the facts. While her text may seem disjointed at first, the theme of female experience is developed in a rather sophisticated manner. She introduces themes close to the female experience, such as marriage and parenthood, and juxtaposes them against the modern woman's desires, such as education, independence, and worldly experience. In this juxtaposition we see the two realities – masculine myth against female reality – come up against each other. She relates the stories of women – both infamous and unknown – who face the opportunities and

setbacks of the American Dream. She is a fly on the wall to the Haight-Ashbury scene, where she scrutinizes moments of hippie domesticity, is disquieted by a young female's future prospects, and appalled by the stories of sexual abuse. She opines on the particularly grim future of a pregnant girl freshly wed in a shotgun Vegas wedding, and she recounts the story of Lucille Miller, a woman who comes to California in search of the Dream, a better life of success and comfort, but who instead finds herself in jail for murdering her husband because she felt that she could build a better future with someone else. As the text moves into the second and third sections, Didion's opinions regarding the female's experience with the American Dream become more personal and subjective. The personal and the impersonal collide, as the experiences are ones which have not only affected her, but also which she has been witness to in others. Her motives for writing about the hippies, Miller, and the pregnant girl become more obvious, as their stories collide with men who ultimately hold more power when it comes to making money and achieving the promises which drive people across the continent to the West. They are juxtaposed against the successful and iconic masculine figures of their time – men, such as John Wayne and Howard Hughes, who have moved into the West and created an image that threatens, in various ways, female autonomy.

This thesis is separated into five parts, with each part dealing with a particular essay from Didion's text: Lucille Miller, the Haight-Ashbury, Howard Hughes and Las Vegas, and finally John Wayne. I start my thesis in the same place as Didion, with Lucille Miller. Lucille Miller is a natural place to start, not only because the text starts here, but also because she comes first chronologically. Lucille's story starts in the 1940s when there was no hint of a woman's movement. She started on her journey westward toward the American Dream when it was particularly unusual for women to do so. Her story sets a precedent for the plight of the other

women in the text. I follow Lucille's story by looking at the women in the Haight-Ashbury. By pairing these two essays together, we see that the more things change, the more things stay the same.

Didion thoroughly examines Lucille's story and her motives, and chronicles how she is limited by the society around her. By contrast, the women in the Haight are a part of a culture that advocates liberation, freedom, independence, peace, and love. The movement in the 1960s stood up against the strict and oppressive culture which had taken over American society; however, Didion's text makes it clear that this was not the case for everyone, especially for females. Although Lucille's story starts in the 1940s and 1950s, it ends with her trial and sentencing in the mid 1960s. By looking at these stories next to each other, it's easy to see how deeply the predetermined domestic roles are engrained in our society.

Didion's essay about the Haight not only emphasizes the influence of the domestic, it also demonstrates how little opportunity women have outside of it. With each woman Didion portrays, we see that instead of striving for independence, they have simply settled within a domestic role in a more progressive environment. Instead of being barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen alone, they're barefoot and pregnant in a communal kitchen. The scene has changed but the roles are the same. This lack of opportunity is further evident in the story of Deb, a young girl who has accepted that her only options are in gendered careers, such as a cosmetology or modelling. She confesses that what she really wanted to do is be a veterinarian, but she has learned that women are not suited for such careers. Didion's observation concerning the lack of opportunity for women to become earners is especially troubling in the face of an increasingly materialistic culture.

Part III and IV focus on Howard Hughes and Las Vegas, and examine how the values of the American Dream have shifted toward materialism. Howard Hughes is the epitome of greed and materialism, and becomes a symbol for the unachievable in this text. As we saw in the Haight neighbourhood, women are extremely limited in their ability to make money, and if the American Dream is all about wealth, then women are left with only one option: marriage. To achieve the American Dream women must piggy back on their husbands, much like Lucille Miller did. The problem with this, as Didion makes clear, is that it only grants women part of the Dream, and excludes them from the less tangible benefits, such as independence, fulfilment, and self-betterment.

Part V focuses on John Wayne, another iconic masculine figure in the text, and how his image has influenced Didion's own expectations and experiences about marriage, female identity, and the American Dream. John Wayne was the catalyst for many of Didion's beliefs about a woman's role and the domestic sphere. He set a standard for her, but as she got older she began to realize how her expectations never met her experiences. In this section, I look at how Didion analyzes and deals with her own experiences with marriage and predetermined roles for women. Although she's been critical about American marriages, her personal essays illustrate how she grapples with these beliefs in the face of her own life, and her own marriage. While she acknowledges that the system is not perfect, she is willing to experience, challenge, and question these expectations for herself.

Part I: A Domestic Tragedy

One of the most troubling depictions of the domestic dream and its detrimental effect on women is Didion's story of Lucille Miller, a woman who moves West in the hopes of realizing

that dream. She journeys West to better herself, her prospects, and to surpass the modest lives of her parents. Didion makes a point of connecting Lucille's story with the landscape that surrounds her, and distinguishes it from the Edenic version of California. We're told that "this is a story about love and death in the golden land" (3), indicating perhaps that this story is uniquely western; however, Didion quickly warns the reader that she will not provide the happy ending typically associated with the golden land. This story does not take place in "the coastal California of the subtropical twilights and the soft westerlies off the pacific but [in] a harsher California" (3). Didion wants the reader to know that this does not take place in front of the usual backdrop of the rags to riches tale, nor is it the setting for a masculine hero, and as such it will not have the same happy ending. This isn't a story informed by myth, but one based in a grim reality. It is a story that takes place in a landscape that is "haunted by the Mojave just beyond the mountains, devastated by the hot dry Santa Ana wind that comes down through the passes at 100 miles an hour and whines through the eucalyptus windbreaks and works on the nerves" (3). This is the reality of the Californian landscape which so many pioneers are unaware of until they arrive. It is not the California we see represented by Hollywood or by television. The Edenic garden landscape we expect on the golden coast is dark and corrupted and "suggests something curious and unnatural" (5). Didion explains that "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" (5). This dark inversion of a paradise challenges, from the beginning, the mythic representation of the West as a place where dreams come true, and prepares us for Lucille's story.

Lucille Miller came to California in pursuit of all the benefits the myth has to offer. She "came off the prairie in search of something she had seen in a movie or heard on the radio" (7).

She came to California “to find a new lifestyle” and “to find it in the only places [she] knew where to look: the movies and the newspapers” (4). These sources promised Lucille a certain outcome when she took on her westward migration. She rejected her past and the conservative path of her parents. She had dreams of a more contemporary life, and bigger ambitions than the Seventh-Day Adventists allowed. She “wanted to see the world” and experience everything it has to offer (7). So, she went West. But this movement never provided her with much more than she would have experienced at home; indeed, the path she ended up taking was fairly traditional. After a failed attempt at college, she “met and married Gordon (‘Cork’) Miller” and moved into the suburbs to settle down (7-8). Her aspirations were noble – she wanted to travel and see the world, wanted to have experiences of her own, and perhaps to find her own identity separate from that of her parents and family. Instead, she got married and settled for a middle class life.

Lucille Miller never would have dreamed that she would find herself in prison for the murder of her husband. However, her path was inevitable. Although she headed West, it is very clear that in the 1940s there is little opportunity for a woman to gain independence and stability by herself. By all accounts, Lucille headed West in search of the American Dream. She wanted the independence and freedom provided by education. She did not want to settle into the traditional female role, where she would be uneducated in anything other than etiquette and cooking, but instead of discovering her own identity and enjoying her own autonomy, all she found was marriage.

The problem with Lucille Miller’s story is that it doesn’t fit a pattern, and society feels that they must create a pattern or a motive to help it all make sense. As a young woman, she wanted to see the world, but what does that mean for a young woman in the late 40s or even 50s? What options does she realistically have? She can’t set out on the open road, as liberated young

men would do in a couple years time, and college for women at the time was hardly more than finishing school. The prosecution in Lucille's case, and the society it represents, "set out to determine what might move a woman who believed in all the promises of the middle class ... 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 problem which Lucille Miller creates is that by rejecting the domestic dream she goes outside of the normal parameters for women at the time. She's an anomaly. Although she "had been a chairman of the Heart Fund and ... always knew a reasonable little dressmaker and ... had come out of the bleak wild of prairie fundamentalism to find what she imagined to be the good life," she ends up a murderer (15). Her actions, or at least her presumed guilt, challenge the promise of the West and the American Dream, and bring into focus the exclusion which women face. Lucille is not content standing next to the man who "achieved the bigger house on the better street ... the \$30,000 a year, the three children for the Christmas card, the picture window, [or] the family room" (8). Instead of being content with the comfy domesticity the West and her marriage had afforded her, she turned to the "conventional clandestine affair" that so often happened "in a place like San Bernardino, a place where little is bright or graceful, where it is routine to misplace the future and easy to start looking for it in bed" (16). She breaks the unspoken code of women at the time which asserts that with comfortable domesticity comes complacency, and the responsibility of hiding the unhappiness, boredom, and bitterness

At first glance, the story of Lucille Miller demonstrates that there is a problem with the American Dream and the promises of the West as far as women are concerned. It demonstrates that on the surface the Dream seems to work, and that with prosperity and material gain come comfort and happiness. But when we look more closely at Lucille's story, we notice that the

tables are unfairly stacked against her. I have already mentioned a couple times Lucille's desire to break free from her prescribed path. She lit out for the territories, if you will, in the hopes of seeing the world. She pursued the American Dream by leaving home in search of a better life and more opportunity, but it was not until she married that she was able, along with her husband, to achieve the familiar milestones which we associate with the Dream. Yet, it is when she wants to further pursue the Dream outside of her marriage that she finds herself in trouble. Didion explains that "unhappy marriages so resemble one another that we do not need to know too much about the course of this one" (8), and after some ups and downs, "it seemed that the marriage had reached the traditional truce, the point at which so many resign themselves to cutting both their losses and their hopes" (9). The critique of marriage here assumes that the institution is flawed, that although people continually marry, they find neither happiness nor fulfillment. The problem with this scenario is that Lucille does not count her losses, and she had the audacity to pursue her own interests, to break free from the domestic dream. In a very un-ladylike way, she forges her own sexual frontier by following a more promising future with "Arthur Hayton, a well-known San Bernardino Attorney," who "seemed to have the gift for people and money and the good life that Cork Miller so noticeably lacked" (15). This breach of the female social code is what Lucille is being persecuted for. Society expects that people stay married, and that women not be sexual creatures. Lucille continually challenges this view, both by filing for divorce or by pursuing an affair. If it weren't for these noticeable transgressions, it is likely that the whole scene would've blown over, and the police never would've grown suspicious after the accident, just as it did for Arthur when his own wife died, suddenly, a couple months earlier.

The distinction between Arthur's and Lucille's situations reflects their position in society and in the West. Judith Gardiner examines the difference in *bildungsromane* of men and women

and finds that women are at a specific disadvantage while coming of age in the West. She notes that “in the standard male bildungsroman the family romance takes the oedipal form of youthful knowledge,” but in Didion’s portraits, “knowledge comes to women late and impotently” (79). As Gardiner sees it, the problem is that “women in these novels are powerless, repeatedly victims, innocent, yet blameable. They are never effective actors in the public world, though their lives are affected and sometimes lost in public struggles” (79). The distinction between the outcomes of men and women is evident in the story of Arthur and Lucille, where Arthur’s reputation survives the scene relatively unscathed and Lucille lands in prison. There are inconsistencies in the death of Elaine, Arthur’s wife, just as there were inconsistencies in Cork’s death. Didion explains that the suspicion did not arise, however, until Lucille’s own trial; we’re told that “it seemed there had been barbiturates in Elaine Hayton’s blood, and there had seemed some irregularity about the way she was dressed on that morning when she was found under the covers, dead” (20). But these facts are glossed over. It looked like an accident. Not only is Elaine Hayton denied a proper investigation into her death, she is further demeaned by not being assigned a valid cause of death – an hairspray allergy is suggested. She dies in the home, in bed, faithfully maintaining the prescribed feminine role of beautiful and devoted wife and mother. Lucille, on the other hand, was not prepared to sit quietly and passively in the confines of her home and her domestic role. Instead, she was a woman who wanted more than freedom and a reasonable alimony; she “wanted everything” (22). She wanted what the West so boldly offers to so many men in society – she wanted the ability to strive for more and to claw her way to the top without having to rely on a man. She explains that “basically [she’s] always kind of just lived [her] life the way [she] wanted to, and if you don’t like it you can take off” (23). She is not willing to answer to anybody but herself, and that was what society found threatening. For her

inability to abide by the confines of one institution (marriage), she is placed in another, more rigid institution (jail), where it is expected that she has “to learn humility” and she’s going to have to turn on her stereotypically feminine characteristics, “her ability to charm, to manipulate,” in order to survive (26). Arthur, on the other hand, is left to continue pursuing the American Dream because “time past is not believed to have any bearing upon time present or future, out in the golden land where every day the world is born anew” (28). Arthur remarries another young girl, “his children’s pretty governess,” and we are left with the tableau of the bride who “wore a long white *peau de soie* dress and carried a shower bouquet of sweetheart roses” (28). This tableau leaves us with a sense of dread in the face of the unknown – where will this couple end up? What are we to make of the young governess? The fact that we know nothing about this girl outside of whom she married reinforces the omission of female presence in the West and on the frontier. She was nobody until she married Arthur.

Part II: Women in the Haight

As definitions of the American Dream shifted in the twentieth century, women were unable to escape society’s expectation that they remain within the domestic sphere. Unfortunately, this duty to maintain the domestic space often comes at the cost of a tangible sense of self and sense of autonomy. Gardner notes that “women’s novels² show the loss of one’s self as a basic fear, and they call evil those public or private forces that dominate or destroy the wills, egos, or consciences of their characters” (79). This fear is evident in Didion’s representation of women, as she often shows women attempting to maintain a sense of self in a world which challenges their autonomy. Where women might want their self identity and image

² Gardner’s article “Evil, Apocalypse, and Feminist Fiction” discusses several novels written by women, including: Marge Piercy’s *Women on the Edge of Time*, Doris Lessing’s *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, Margaret Drabble’s *The Ice Age*, and Joan Didion’s *A Book of Common Prayer*.

based on one thing, they continually face society insisting it should be placed on a predetermined and accepted roles, such as mother or wife. These roles serve a particular purpose to the men in society, and therefore are not as threatening as the women who take to the open road in an attempt to explore the mobility and independence offered by the American Dream. Women are continually marked by society, and it seems impossible for them to avoid the categorization as pure or impure, mother or whore. Their role as domestic figures and sexual objects follows them even into an environment like the West, that is supposed to cleanse them of their past. Ganser explains that women are bound by the domestic, which hinders their movement through the West, even in a time that preached liberation:

Postmodernist discourses have had to acknowledge that the disposal of essentialisms does not preclude the persistence of power structures which regulate the spatial realm in such a way that normative models of femininity in the West are continually constructed as tied to home and hearth. If this ideal is disregarded, women get punished for their transgressions, materially and symbolically. By leaving home and hearth, many traveling women exemplify such a transgression and consequently are met by obstacles generated by the gendered construction of space on patriarchal terms. (158)

In short, society continues to frown on women who engage in the same liberating activities as men. Such women are looked down upon when they feel the need to escape the confinements of the domestic and are continually reminded of their marginalized status as they confront the power structures still maintained by society. Didion portrays numerous women engaged in a delicate balancing act, as they juggle duties assigned them by their society and their own personal desire for the Dream. The pattern of punishment is repeated throughout the collection,

but is especially noticeable in Didion's depiction of the hippie culture in the Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood of San Francisco. Although she remarks that America was "not a country in open revolution" at the time, there was definitely some "social hemorrhaging" (85). While this statement refers to the social changes and concerns of the time, it takes on new meaning in the face of women's struggle for freedom from the domestic dream. Didion is particularly concerned for the young females who have fled home in the hopes of finding the West. These women look outside of their domestic space, outside of their homes, for new possibilities which the West might offer them, but instead of finding the same possibilities as their male counterparts, they're met with a painful reality of boundaries and limitations. Women end up paying physically and publicly for going against what tradition has dictated. The chance for fulfillment, of which these girls once dreamed, is instantly taken from them by reality. They are trapped by their actions, whether these be sex or murder, and have no hope of being reborn in the West. Fulfilling a rags-to-riches quest is not something that can be accomplished by women independently.

Didion's portraits of the people in the Haight-Ashbury are definitely gender driven. Despite having left the home, the women Didion portrays are unable to escape the duties and roles associated with the domestic. We are introduced to Sue-Ann who "is a sweet wan girl who is always in the kitchen cooking seaweed or baking macrobiotic bread while" her son "amuses himself with joss sticks or an old tambourine or a rocking horse with the paint worn off" (95). Then we meet Sharon, a young woman of "probably seventeen," whose boyfriend can't help but mention "what a beautiful thing it is the way [she] washes dishes" (96). Finally, we're introduced to Barbara, who after "bak[ing] a macrobiotic apple pie," explains to Didion that "she [had] learned to find happiness in 'the woman's thing'" (112). All of these women left their homes and their families and came to the West because of the excitement surrounding the Haight-Ashbury.

They were drawn by the promises of the West, and the idea of freedom and mobility. All they found, however, is a disguised version of the home and hearth from which they ran away. They are still fulfilling the same duties society dictates they fulfil – they must watch over the children, clean the dishes, and prepare baked goods in the kitchen. While they’re performing these actions in a presumably more liberated and liberal environment, these duties could not have been assigned to the men. Although Barbara had initially desired more, and at “first found it hard to be shunted off with the women and never to enter into any of the men’s talk,” she eventually convinced herself that that was the goal, that that ‘was where the *trip* was’” (113). Much like the female experience with the Westerns, these women came harbouring the dream of the West but had to instead accept a typically feminine role. Didion scoffs at the thinly veiled attempt to justify the re-domestication of the women she meets, lamenting: “Whenever I hear about the woman’s trip, which is often, I think a lot about nothin’-says-lovin’-like-something-from-the-oven and the Feminine Mystique and how it is possible for people to be the unconscious instruments of values they would strenuously reject on a conscious level” (113). All of these women believe they’ve navigated through this masculine environment and come out with their own values and accomplishments, but it becomes plain that they’ve settled into the same domestic traditions from which they were running, without the stability of conventional middle class life. Their power and autonomy are slight in their current situation, and their participation in the culture is tenuous at best, especially if they haven’t found a domestic niche yet.

While the domestic role these women play seems relatively benign, the report of the sexual objectification of lone women in the West is not. Because of the massive migration westward and all the media attention it received, younger and younger individuals took to the streets. This situation was particularly dangerous for young girls who had little protection from

the massive numbers of young people concentrating in one area. It was a time which embraced sexual liberation, but the inherent inequality amongst the people Didion interviews complicates this picture. At the beginning of “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” one male character, Max, articulates a view of sexual liberation that means not only being able to enjoy sex free of the chance of pregnancy, but also free of any sort of responsibility or regard for the other person. Max defines his concept of fidelity like this: “I’ve had this old lady for a couple of months now, maybe she makes something special for my dinner and I come in three days late and tell her I’ve been balling some other chick, well maybe she shouts a little but then I say ‘That’s me baby,’ and she laughs and says ‘That’s you’” (88). Max’s abuse of women goes well beyond his insistence on his sexual freedom. He expresses a basic disrespect and disregard for a woman’s efforts and feelings here. Through his tone and language, he reveals himself to be self-serving. Max’s crude perspective is off-putting, but his inability to extend the same liberty to his partner is particularly troubling. He explains that “if she comes in and tells me she wants to ball Don, maybe, I say ‘O.K.’” (88). In Max’s amendment to his scenario, he assumes his girl will ask *before* she decides to “ball” someone else, and that he is allowed to give her permission, an assumption he clearly doesn’t apply to his own actions. While the Haight culture proposes free love and sexual liberty for everyone, both female and male, Max’s skewed perspective of how these new rules apply demonstrates how the masculine power structure can stack the odds against women. The double standard in his logic demonstrates the reality of the cultural power structure, and Didion wants us to be aware of the struggle women are still up against as far as sexual liberation is concerned. This loosely defined relationship is tellingly lopsided in its distribution of power, and this is a situation where the woman at least has the possibility to control her own body. Some females in the text are denied even that.

Two instances of sexual violence against young females, ages 14 and 16, demonstrate the limitations females experience due to physical objectification. Didion briefly refers to an infamous gang rape that occurred on Ken Kesey's compound. She quotes a communiqué put out by the District which explains that a "pretty little 16-year-old middle-class chick comes to the Haight to see what it's all about & gets picked up by a 17 year-old street dealer who" fills her full of drugs until she's incapacitated and then "raffles off her temporarily unemployed body for the biggest Haight Street gangbang since the night before last" (101). This horrific incident is communicated in a matter of fact tone and suggests its occurrence isn't unusual. The girl comes to the Haight to experience the liberation that everyone was talking about but instead she is treated as a commodity, and her body is as easily obtainable as the drugs which fill it. Her body is expendable, as are her dreams and desires. These young girls who assume they have the same right to freedom and mobility in the West have no recourse against the violence that they experience, and the repeated occurrence of these attacks reinforces this. Didion retells a story told to her about a fourteen year old girl who is arrested, "booked," and "[given] a pelvic" just because she was "walking through the Park ... minding her own, carrying her schoolbooks" (89). Didion attempts to make contact with the young woman, but finds out that "she is tied up with the rehearsals for her junior-high-school play, *The Wizard of Oz*" (90). Otto, the man who tells her where the girl is, remarks that it's "yellow-brick-road time" (90). The reference to the *Wizard of Oz* and the yellow-brick-road here is significant, since it demonstrates that the female dream and the female experience in the West are illusory. Like Dorothy, who left home and wandered around a big and unfamiliar world, the girls in the Haight-Ashbury in particular, and in the West in general, want more. They leave home in search of the West, but again like Dorothy, all they find is a world at odds with what they know and what they want. The yellow-brick-road is the

way home, which suggests girls must realize that they have to wake up and return to the sphere they belong in. The American Dream, then, is something which is attainable for men; however, for women it can only be fantasy, something which the masculine West will continually deny them.

The commodification of the American Dream has resulted in further marginalization of women in the West through the gendering of jobs. Since women have always been considered a part of the home, their attempt to achieve a more financially driven Dream presents problems. The rejection of the domestic has resulted in women looking for another place of entry, but the culture continually dissuades them. Didion provides several examples of women trying to navigate through the West, its emphasis on money, and the problems this creates. One girl, who “look[s] like she came up off a ranch about two weeks” before, is trying to make friends with another “city girl who is snubbing her” (103). One girl, who “look[s] like she came up off a ranch about two weeks” before, is trying to make friends with a “city girl who is snubbing her” (103). In an attempt to impress the city girl, the girl off the ranch explains that she “knows a thing about dollar bills” (104). She explains to the city girl that if she collects a dollar with a particular marking in the top corner, she can bring it “down to Dallas, Texas, [and] they’ll give you \$15 dollars for it” (104). The city girl questions the logic of this statement and exposes how little the other girl knows. The exchange reveals the desperation of a lone girl trying to understand the new rules of the frontier. She understands that money is important, but doesn’t fully understand how to get it. The problem, it would seem, is that this girl understands that she cannot use her body to make money. She must negotiate a particularly hostile environment knowing that “she is homely and awkward,” and must find some another way of making money if she ever wants to fulfill her dreams.

The problem of money and the lack of opportunities for women to make it are a definite trend that Didion encounters among the women in the Haight. The first runaways Didion meets are two young children who have come to Haight-Ashbury to flee the perceived tyranny of the chores and rules handed down by their parents. Debbie, who ran away primarily because her parents disliked her boyfriend and wanted her to go to church, doesn't have many options. When asked about what her and her boyfriend planned on doing, she explains that maybe she "could get a job baby-sitting ... or in a dime store" (92). Her answer echoes the theme of the domestic, as she assumes her main option is in childcare. This plan is significantly less promising than the options available to her equally under-qualified male companion. Because Jeff has "always kinda dug metal shop, welding [and] stuff like that," Didion suggests he become a mechanic. This a perfectly viable possibility he disregards as too much trouble. When asked "what they wanted to be when they were grown up," the two kids have markedly different and telling answers. Jeff, apparently, "can't remember he ever thought about it," whereas Debbie admits that initially she "wanted to be a veterinarian ... but now [she] is more or less working in the vein of being an artist or a model or a cosmetologist" (92). The two vastly different examples demonstrate the different gendered worlds these two kids grew up in. Jeff hasn't really thought about it because he hasn't had to yet. As a male, he can basically step up and become whatever he wants – he can embrace the Dream. He can base his choice on his interests, and once he gets tired of the vagabond lifestyle he can go to school and make something of himself. Debbie, on the other hand, has had to downgrade her aspirations. At first, she wanted to take on a technical and educated job, but clearly this was before she was old enough to know better. As a young woman, she now sees that she must pick something more suited to her role. Debbie's second string of potential vocations is clearly more gendered, but they also deny her the entry into the

significantly more materialistic dream. As a model, an artist, or a cosmetologist, she has little chance of becoming Howard Hughes – the 1950s epitome of the American Dream.

Part III: The Mysterious Millionaire

Howard Hughes personifies a shift in values in American culture and the American Dream, firmly embodying an emphasis on money, wealth, and accumulation. Hughes, an eccentric millionaire, epitomizes materialistic fancies which fall far outside of what we once considered to be the norm for American values. His story does not highlight the values of the bootstrap mentality, nor does it allow for the more feminine and domestic aspects of the dream, such as a home, wife, children, and family. He desires privacy and independence above all else. Hughes' accumulation of wealth and eccentricities demonstrate how the Dream has changed, and values are shifting to venerate a Las Vegas mentality. One no longer has to dominate the landscape and all those who inhabit it, like the cowboys and the pioneers; rather, one simply needs to get rich quick. Materialism and monetary wealth aren't just a convenient by-product of the Dream; they have become the dream. Hughes epitomizes the flashy promises of the myth, and the stories that surround him "are endless, infinitely familiar, traded by the faithful like baseball cards, fondled until they fray around the edges and blur into the apocryphal" (69). The allure of Hughes and his story shows that the myth of the West is changing, and its values are becoming more corrupt and selfish, with more emphasis on personal wealth and success. Even the mention of baseball cards – America's pastime – in contrast with an eccentric business man conjures images of innocence corrupted. With this transformation of values, we have "made a folk hero of a man who is the antithesis of all our official heroes" (71). He is not a pioneer out of the East who has struggled in some way and re-created himself through hard work. He is not of

the West and bred from the hardworking stock of the pioneers; rather, he built his fortune through the materialism and fancy of Hollywood. He is a billionaire created by the myth of the West itself – an embodiment of what the American Dream has become. Here, Didion envisions a gap between what we want to believe our dreams are based on, and what we actually base them on. Instead of the pioneer-ethic and bootstrap mentality, we're fascinated by "a haunted millionaire out of the West" who is "trailing a legend of desperation and power and white sneakers" (71).

Our obsession with Hughes and Las Vegas and the values they represent implies a fundamental discrepancy between the ideal and the reality of the myth, and this discrepancy introduces a troubling paradox at the heart of the myth of the West. Didion explains that our veneration of Howard Hughes exposes this engrained paradox, even if society doesn't want to admit it:

That we have made a hero of Howard Hughes tells us something interesting about ourselves, ... tells us that the secret point of money and power in America is neither the things that money can buy nor power for power's sake ..., but absolute personal freedom, mobility, privacy. It is the instinct which drove America to the Pacific, all through the nineteenth century, the desire to be able to find a restaurant open in case you want a sandwich, to be a free agent, live by one's own rules.

Although we hold up the image of the pioneer who conquered the West in the name of morals, work ethic, and the chance for stability, the real motivation to go West was a less wholesome and more anarchic concept: "to live by one's own rules" (72). This desire for absolute independence and mobility complicates the West which Didion is witness to. The myth which Hughes

exemplifies does not provide an avenue for women – it lacks even a sense of domesticity. Time and again we see that women who decide to live by their own rules end up confined by masculine institutions. This can clearly be seen in Lucille’s story, as she sought to attain a more fulfilling life with Arthur, but found herself instead jailed for the murder of her husband. Howard Hughes, then, represents the unattainable for women. He is the adventure and complete independence of the Dream that women were starting to desire, but are unable to attain. He represents not the man your mother tells you to marry, but rather the rebel you want to experience life and love with. He is the unknown, the wildcard. And in this profile we see a gulf being created between what the West promises women (marriage), and what women hope to find in the West (love, excitement, independence). As Didion puts it: “there has always been [a] divergence between our official and our unofficial heroes” and that “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” (72). Here, Didion sees the same gap between myth and reality in American marriages, and questions their function within our society. To her, American marriages are contracts not of love but of opportunity. They, like most things around her, are not sacred.

Part IV: Vegas

Las Vegas’ exploitation of marriage exposes the absurdity and limitations provided to women by this sacred tradition. In the essay “Marrying Absurd,” the landscape once again becomes an ominous reminder of the boundaries placed on women and their potential for freedom and mobility in the West. Didion notes that “driving in across the Mojave from Los

Angeles, one sees the 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” (79); yet, Las Vegas, despite the mirages it tries to create, is very much a desert location. In essence, “one is standing on a highway in the middle of a vast hostile desert looking at an eighty-foot sign which blinks ‘STARDUST’ and ‘CAESAR’S PALACE’” (80-81). Didion’s portrayal of Las Vegas here is ominous, to be sure. Las Vegas is synonymous with only two things: gambling and quick marriage. No one would look at Las Vegas as a beacon of hope for our culture, and this reputation as the dark underbelly of society makes it the perfect setting for Didion’s piece. Like her other representations of the West, she focuses on the landscape as a wasteland, an antithesis of the Promised Land so often ascribed to it. She recognizes Vegas as “the most extreme and allegorical of American settlements, bizarre and beautiful in its venality and in its devotion to immediate gratification, a place the tone of which is set by mobsters and call girls and ladies’ room attendants with amyl nitrite poppers in their pockets” (80). This landscape represents the feats of the self-made man, the success of the migration westward, because we have made a liveable space of a hostile and dangerous environment, while at the same time venerating the people and the morals that are at odds with mainstream society. Las Vegas symbolizes freedom and wildness which people associate with the West. It is a place where the past has no bearing on the future, and – as their popular marketing slogan proudly declares – a place where whatever happens there, stays there. It does not exist on the same continuum of reality as the rest of our lives and our values. And this disregard for fundamental American values, on which the American Dream is supposed to be founded, is particularly confusing. How can a place be synonymous with our dreams and ideals, while systematically shunning the values and traditions on which America was built?

Didion once again highlights the gap between reality and myth, in particular emphasizing the male-centric values of the West and the values instilled by Westerns. This idea is the crux of the problem with Las Vegas and what it represents: “This geographical implausibility reinforces the sense that what happens there has no connection with ‘real’ life; Nevada cities like Reno and Carson are ranch towns, Western towns, places behind which there is some historical imperative. But Las Vegas seems to exist only in the eye of the beholder” (81). The idea here is clear: Unlike other Western towns, Las Vegas is new and divorced from reality. It has no history. This illusory aspect of Vegas aligns it with the shift in values of the American Dream, and its elusive, mythic quality. With this in mind, Vegas becomes a strange backdrop against which to address traditions which seem so natural in American culture, such as marriage. This pairing of tradition and Las Vegas suggests that something is amiss. The contrast between a landscape devoid of values and the traditions our culture holds dear calls into question the value of marriage in our culture. For Didion, marriage appears, at best, a dubious option for women. She acknowledges that Las Vegas is “an extraordinarily stimulating and interesting place,” but at the same time observes that it is “an odd one in which to want to wear a candlelight satin Priscilla of Boston wedding dress with Chantilly lace insets, tapered sleeves and a detachable modified train” (81). This observation suggests that Las Vegas is a new frontier and therefore has no place for the traditional. It demonstrates that even the most important day in a girl’s life has been trivialized, despite our best efforts to keep it “sincere and dignified” (82). Indeed, this facsimile of tradition undermines the values marriage supposedly embodies because “all day and evening long on the Strip, one sees actual wedding parties ... standing uneasily in the parking lot of the Frontier while the photographer hired by The Little Church of the West ... certifies the occasion, takes

the pictures” (82). The scene embodies perfectly the evisceration of the frontier myth; we are left with asphalt parking lots in the middle of the desert.

While this scene of sad and vapid materialism seems relatively benign, Didion complicates it by leaving her reader with another troubling tableau. The problem with the Las Vegas marriage is that it is “by no means a matter of simple convenience, of late-night liaisons between show girls and baby Crosbys” (82), but part of a larger social problem of girls who have attempted life in the West, and have failed to achieve freedom from the institutions and domesticity that bind them:

A bored waiter poured out a few swallows of pink champagne ... for everyone but the bride, who was too young to be served. “You’ll need something with more kick than that,” the bride’s father said with heavy jocularly to his new son-in-law; the ritual jokes about the wedding night had a certain Panglossian character, since the bride was clearly several months pregnant. Another round of pink champagne ... and the bride began to cry. “It was just as nice,” she sobbed, “as I hoped and dreamed it would be. (83)

This scene illustrates the inversion and corruption of the values and customs typically associated with a wedding. Didion’s bride expresses no feelings of liberation or security. This tableau, for Didion, is the reality of American marriage and the domestic dream. The happy couple, the toasts, and the general well-wishes are all undermined here by the vapidly, vulgarity, and aridity of the Las Vegas setting. The implications of this are huge, especially considering this is *the* day for this poor girl. This is the happiest day of her life, and she couldn’t even dream or aspire for something more than a seedy wedding in a revolving door chapel on the Strip. The girl’s choked sobs of joy illustrate that somewhere we have gone wrong – “at some point between 1945 and

1967 we had somehow neglected to tell these children the rules of the game we happened to be playing” (123). Didion opines that society has lost its way, and its blind wandering is emblemized in Las Vegas. It has embraced materialism and used it as a marketing ploy. Didion notes that Las Vegas “seems to offer something more than ‘convenience’; it is merchandising ‘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). The dreams of weddings and domesticity were once based on tradition and values which stressed rigid rules and decorum, but in the 1950s and 1960s, these rules started to collapse as people embraced the false liberation of the Western myth. The younger generation, in particular, has fallen between the cracks of tradition and the new values, and young women are particularly vulnerable.

Part V: The Tall Man

The vulnerability of the younger generation is an aspect that Didion continually comes back to. She yearns for a time when values were clearer, and this yearning is often manifested in her reflections on the West of her childhood. John Wayne is very much a character of that West. He is not someone who came out of the East looking for a better life, a bigger dream, nor was he escaping some unnamed past. Rather, “even his history seemed right, for it was no history at all” (31). He was born Iowa and “moved as a child to Lancaster,” California (31). He came from the hostile landscape which Didion associates with reality, rather than the lush paradise. She explains that he came from “a town on the Mojave where the dust blew through,” but eventually moved into the lush landscape of myth, “where desolation had a different flavor: antimacassars among the orange groves, a middle-class prelude to Forest Lawn” (31). As he gained stardom, Wayne entered mythic territory, and began to symbolize the masculine ideal of the West through

his persona on the silver screen, the same ideal which Tompkins claims is exclusionary. For Didion, he represented an ideal and tradition where women were hardly central. He represented a fictional world where the masculine hero conquers enemies and bestows himself onto one particularly lucky heroine. He symbolized the best a woman could hope for: a strong man who would provide them with a safe home. This promise of domesticity was the Dream which women were encouraged to embrace, as opposed to the dream of mobility, independence, success, and self-betterment. For women at the time, marriage was the only viable way to achieve the Western dream. Didion saw this represented in the old Westerns, where the male hero secures and protects the female on the frontier. She remembers the first time she “saw the walk, [and] heard the talk” of John Wayne. Significantly, this memory is associated with a movie where she “heard him tell the girl ... that he would build her a house, ‘at the bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow’” (30). This indelible image was appealing to her because it represented the natural order of things in the West. The man promises to conquer the wilderness and to provide sanctuary for the helpless female. It became an ideal by which Didion measures all her own experiences. In this scenario, it is assumed that woman wants nothing more from the myth of the West than security and that if she wins the love of a strong man she will surely acquire the other comforts of the Dream. This is why so many girls claim they grow up dreaming about their wedding day. It’s the day of days; weddings and marriages have become so central to the female experience that some still claim it’s the most important day of a girl’s life.

Although this image of John Wayne is planted in Didion’s brain, it doesn’t seem attainable. Just as Jane Tompkins noted in her introduction, Didion struggles to find something with which to identify in the Western movies from her childhood. In this instance, Didion did not have to imagine a female character. She naturally latched onto the role of the helpless female in

the movie. She allowed Wayne, the representation of the manly man who provides security and shelter and promise to his female heroine, to “determin[e] forever the shape of certain of [her] dreams” (30). Indeed, this reaction seems natural for a little girl in the 40s – marriage was the ultimate goal and expected path for women. She explains that although this image and ideal still informed her expectations, it did not at all match her experience:

As it happened, I did not grow up to be the kind of woman who is the heroine in a Western, and although the men I have known have had many virtues and have taken me to live in many places I have come to love, they have never been John Wayne and they have never taken me to that bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow. (30)

The gulf between the reality and the ideal of the West is evident here. The traditional path for women no longer seems fulfilling, and more importantly, it no longer offers security. Women are not allowed to pursue the success, independence, and mobility that the Western myth offers to men; women are merely along for the ride. They can participate in the myth, but only within strict limits, and such participation is just as empty as many of the other promises represented in the American Dream.

By acknowledging her expectations, Didion reveals her dissatisfaction with the domestic dream. Yet that dream is propagated by the culture of the West and is evident in its icons and imagery. Didion explains that “when John Wayne rode through [her] childhood ... he determined forever the shape of certain of [her] dreams” (30). For women, the dream of security and comfort in a happy home, a good marriage, and a strong husband was shaped by Wayne, the gallant man of the wilderness. As Didion looked up to the silver screen, she wrote herself into that storyline. Wayne suggested a more innocent and simple West – “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 free” (31).

The world which Wayne represents is a simple version of the masculine West; it’s a world where a man with integrity and determination can achieve the milestones needed to prosper.

Unfortunately, this scenario advocates a masculine ideal that assumes that women are objects to be conquered. Curiously, however, Didion speculates that although the objectification of women might be inherently wrong, the social reality might once have been beneficent. She explains that “there was no mistaking his intentions” because Wayne “had a sexual authority so strong even a child could perceive it” (30). He was under the assumption that women were “just standing around on the front porch waiting for somebody to ride up through the tall grass” (30). Didion seems, in other words, to hope that there were once good and noble intentions behind male conquests. In any case, she implies this era of good intentions towards women’s futures has come to an end primarily because women are beginning to actively seek their own version of the Dream. They are no longer content to be objects that can be achieved and secured. This shift is symbolized in Didion’s portrayal of Wayne as sick and deteriorating. He is under attack. He is suffering from “that most inexplicable and ungovernable of diseases” (30). Since Wayne’s disease represents unpredictable and unknown forces, it’s significant that Didion never explicitly names Wayne’s disease; instead, she refers to it as “the Big C” with its “outlaw cells” (32).

Ultimately, Wayne was under attack just as the traditions that governed women’s lives were destabilizing. The ideals and traditions which Wayne represents are no longer satisfying options for women. Women’s desire for the intangible aspects of the dream, the independence, fulfilment, and self-betterment that comes along with the tangible and materialistic gains, are becoming

more immediate. Women were no longer comfortable sitting idly by and experiencing the Dream vicariously through their marriage.

The centrality of marriage to female identity is disconcerting to Didion, but unavoidable. In each case, the women she depicts are tied in some way or another to marriage or domesticity. They are fighting an uphill battle to keep their autonomy and the ability to break free from the domestic dream which has for so long been pushed upon them. With such a critical eye on marriage, it might seem incongruous for Didion to get married herself. While she's aware of the flaws in the system, she recognizes that she is a player in a game that she does not entirely control. In "Goodbye To All That," she muses that "it is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends," and that she "cannot lay [her] finger upon ... the exact place on the page where the heroine is no longer as optimistic as she once was" (225). This confession acknowledges that sacrifices we make along the way, the fact that we lose some of our convictions as we get older. She recognizes that in our society tradition and ritual can not be entirely avoided; between family, our past, and our experiences, we are all subservient to them on some level. Didion analyzes marriage from several vantage points throughout the text, and continually exposes the ways in which it hinders female identity and pushes women into a predetermined role that robs them of their autonomy. With Lucille Miller and the tableau at the end of "Marrying Absurd," we see women who are trapped in marriages of unmet needs, rather than love – we see a dream turned nightmare. For other people from other places, the landscape acts as a constant. She notes that "going back to California is not like going back to Vermont, or Chicago; Vermont and Chicago are relative constants, against which one measures one's own change," but this is not the case for California, since "all that is constant about the California of [her] childhood is the rate at which it disappears" (176). California is the place to which people

move to figure things out and achieve the Dream – to live a better life – but these efforts are fleeting when built on a chimera. The intangible nature of California leads Didion to believe that “it is hard to *find* California now, unsettling to wonder how much of it was merely imagined or improvised; melancholy to realize how much of anyone’s memory is no true memory at all but only the traces of someone else’s memory, stories handed down on the family network” (177). This conclusion leads to total uncertainty - we cannot trust our memories, our histories, or our landscape. We have become completely dislodged from the rituals which have housed us safely for so long. This uncertainty, for Didion, leads to a crisis of identity concerning her place as a woman.

Didion’s struggle with identity, autonomy, and marriage is one that she grapples with throughout her more personal essays. The feminine networks which Didion has relied on have disintegrated along with rituals, and she strives to make sense of her place as a woman in the West. In the essay “On Going Home,” Didion makes a distinction between her old family life and her current life with her husband, and we see that she feels stuck between the two, unable to completely merge the resulting identities which confront her. The term “home” is divisive in this case, as it separates her two identities – the one she has with her husband and her daughter in Los Angeles and the one established with her family “in the Central Valley of California” (164). This division clearly produces anxiety and conflict because it pits her against two strong forces in her life that are at odds with one another. The source of her anxiety over marriage becomes clear as she examines the difference between her generation and the generation of females who were born after World War II. She believes she was “born into the last generation to carry the burden of ‘home’” (165). She concludes that “some nameless anxiety colors the emotional charge between [her] and the place that [she] came from” (165). To her, “the question of whether or not

you could go home again” after marriage, after starting a new life with someone else, “was a very real part of the sentimental and largely literal baggage with which we left home in the fifties” (165). She explains that “marriage is the classic betrayal” for a woman because it forces her to choose sides (165). While at home with her family, she must defend her use of the word “home.” She is expected to separate herself from any old classifications and reprogram herself to believe her new life is the new foundation, the new home. Her need to adapt herself and her personality according to a new set of principles demonstrates that she has had to relinquish an aspect of her self in her marriage. She notes that her “husband likes [her] family but is uneasy in their house, because once there [she] fall[s] into their ways, which are difficult, oblique, deliberately inarticulate, not [her] husband’s ways” (164). She has adopted her personality to a set of rules and values which align with her husband, and when she deviates from that he becomes uncomfortable. The fact that there is a difference between how she is with her family and how she is with her husband illustrates that she is not in control, but has had to sacrifice an aspect of her personality to appease her husband. She is split between the identity she had pre-marriage and the one she embodies as a wife and mother.

Returning home forces Didion to confront the dichotomy created by this split feminine identity - between who she wants to be and who society says she should be. She searches through her old belongings hoping to find a way to merge her two selves. She finds remnants of a previous life, “a bathing suit [she] wore the summer [she] was seventeen ... a letter of rejection from *The Nation*, an aerial photograph of the site for a shopping center [her] father did not build ... three teacups hand-painted with cabbage roses and signed [with her] grandmother’s initials” (166). Dilek Direnç notes that “what is spread on the bed are broken images of her own past, a fragmented genealogy and an incoherent autobiography” (37). These mementos hold

sentimental value on some level, but offer little in the way of meaningful identity. They serve as indications of who she once was, and who she hoped to become, but offer no “final solution” to the problem of merging her present and past (166). She deduces that there is no “answer to snapshots of one’s grandfather as a young man on skis, surveying around Donner Pass in the year 1910” (166). Her attempt to confront her past leaves her just as stuck as she was when she began: “I smooth out the snapshot and look into his face, and do and do not see my own. I close the drawer, and have another cup of coffee with my mother. We get along very well, veterans of a guerrilla war we never understood” (166). Her surrender here is telling; she perceives a problem but is unable to find a solution. In her trinkets she sees a desired life, but she is also confronted with the lives and paths of those who came before her. The men in her family were interacting with the landscape – surveying and conquering, but the women only left behind dainty domestic artefacts. She surrenders to this reality, and understands her place as a “veteran” in a war for equal access to the American Dream.

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