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Reading Response 1: Character, Narrator and Psychic Space in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*

"They are letting George Montgomery fly the plane," said Joan Didion in a vignette from her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*. "Beats Cartagena," responded her late husband John while falling asleep. *The Year of Magical Thinking* depicts Didion's thoughts and inner dialogue while dealing with the sudden death of her husband John, in the midst of her daughter Quintana's illness. There Didion uses the literary techniques of character, narrator and psychic space to explore grief, mourning and death.

In literature, the psychic space defines the distance that the reader feel between themselves and the narrative development. What is said, implied, or left for the reader to interpret. This definition exemplifies the difference between Didion as a narrator and as a character. As a narrator, Didion aims for objectivity, meta-analysis and painful self-awareness. At the beginning of the book, while failing to find the words to comprehend her experience, Didion resolves to "read, learn, work it up, go to the literature," arguing that "information is control."

The novel begins when Didion, the 'cool costumer,' allows for an autopsy, and ends when she receives and reviews the autopsy's results eleven months later. The results are definite: John died in the living room the moment his sentence froze after coming back from the Beth Israel North hospital. He could have not been revived unless he was connected to a hospital machine within three seconds of the accident. He was dead in the living room, in the ambulance and in the

hospital room. The forty minutes between the time Didion called the ambulance and the nurses declared time of death were just bureaucracy. That objective information renders the rest of Didion's allusions –to geology, medicine, cardiovascular diseases, past novels, and philosophy– useless. Still, Joan Didion as a character explores these subjects with frankness and poise to understand the moment in which “a single person is missing for you and the whole world is empty.”

When Didion is not ‘going to the literature,’ she permeates the rest of the narratives with motifs alluding to the main characters: her husband John, their daughter Quintana, and herself. She constantly repeats “*I tell you I shall not live two days, Gawain said*” when John predicted his own death by insisting to go to Paris for one last time, and the words “*you’re safe, I’m here*” when seeing Quintana at various hospital facilities. To herself, she constantly wonders about the “*question of self pity,*” in relation to how her whole life changed in an instant; “*the ordinary instant.*” She never says she is sad or that she misses John, instead drowning the writing in memories, allusions and the details that surround her mourning, hence allowing the reader into her intimate, self-aware and semi objective psychic space.

Reading Response 2: Repetition and the Mundane in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Leaving shoes by the door so that your beloved can return. A string of Honolulu leis within a Christmas dinner. Eating souffles in Malibu in a cliffside side full of peacocks. Rereading *Sophie's Choice* at the poolside's steps of a Brentwood Park's townhouse. The scenes that paint Joan Didion's grief in *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

Joan Didion drives forth reflections of her grief through repetition. She mourns the mundane; the everyday. The night her husband that she described *needing* to spend time alone, so that her husband could return. She names the mentality she adopts as a result of grief: *magical thinking*. "Grief," Didion says, "comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailyness of life." By replacing rational thinking with corrective thinking, Didion expresses the delusion that she will bring John back by holding onto his shoes, or the delusion that she can think him back into existence.

Through the motif of magical thinking, Didion also explores the difference between grief and mourning. Even though she feels naked and invisible, she cannot clear her mind and even feels entrapped by her own dreams, the same ones she used to share with John so she could remain remote to herself: "*Elena's dreams were about dying. Elena's dreams were about getting old. Nobody here has not had (will not have) Elena's dreams. We all know that. The point is that Elena didn't.*" For Didion, mourning means to deal with grief. Only when her daughter Quintana exited the hospital did her grief transform to mourning.

Didion says grief is passive, something that just happens, while mourning "the act of dealing with grief" requires attention. The act of mourning leads to the vortex effect, in which

Didion avoids approaching certain physical spaces that trigger painful memories. These include a phrase John and Quintana used to share, "*I love you more than one more day.*"

I would like to explore the routines of grief and mourning in my own book. One day you sit down to dinner and your husband John dies. One day, your daughter Quintana collapses down in the airport. In my case, one day you lean down in the shower and, suddenly, you cannot stand back up. I agree when Didion when she says grief comes in waves while mourning is constant. Both are devastating. I also agree when she says, "*life changes in an instant, the ordinary instant.*"

Reading Response 3: Medical Retellings

A Year of Magical Thinking has many dimensions: It acts both as a portrait of a woman in grief, the reconstruction of a year, the remembrance of a marriage and a heartbreaking memoir of illness and death. It also acts as a medical retelling, in which author Joan Didion attempts to reconstruct the sudden episode that caused her husband's John death and to understand the symptoms suffered by her daughter Quintana.

"I began carrying identification (...) in case it happened to me," said Didion after consulting studies about the cognitive deficits, dizziness, physical decline and even death that widows may experience following the passing away of their spouses. To understand her grief, she consults the 16th edition of the *Merck Manual*, which describes grief as either "uncomplicated" and associated to positive personal growth, or as "complicated," functioning as a pathological bereavement.

Didion further develops a medical retelling when attempting to reconstruct the cardiac incident that killed her husband. That summer, John endured an operation to cure a condition that his doctor said they call "the windowmaker, pal." The results of the angiogram showed "a 90 percent occlusion of the left anterior descending artery, or LAD. It also showed a long 90 percent narrowing in the circumflex marginal artery, which was considered significant mainly because the circumflex marginal artery fed the same area of the heart as the occluded LAD."

John told Joan he now knew how he would die. He later said he *needed* to go to Paris; that if not he would die without seeing Paris again. Didion interpreted both phrases as foreshadowing, and in her next medical retellings she tried reconstructing how she could have prepared to avoid John's death: "Survivors look back and see omens, messages they missed."

She learns about the time response to cardiac arrest, plus fixed and dilated pupils. The effectiveness of the medical retelling lies behind her fear. She tells us the information to hold on to control. She relies on information to avoid falling apart in her grief.

Reading Response 4: Diction, symbol's and tone in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Joan Didion develops a distinctive tone in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Characterized by frankness, honesty and musicality, Didion's tone is affecting and honest, vulnerable without overt sentimentality. Didion acts as an example of the writing virtues of directness and economy. She accomplishes a unique writer's voice using details, rhythm and repetition.

When reading *The Year of Magical Thinking*, I wrote down phrases that impacted me, and which I think best portray her writer's voice. The first is the phrase, "You're safe. I'm here." Didion first tells that phrase to her daughter Quintana while she is at the hospital in California, but in its repetition, it becomes motif for their mother-daughter and an excuse for Didion to avoid the mourning process.

A corresponding quote regarding Didion's daughter Quintana is, "I had grown used to watching her brain waves. It was a way of hearing her talk." The quote adds a sense of musicality, comparing talking to a moving brain wave. Didion constantly alludes to natural events such as earthquakes; the shifts in the tectonic plates. Didion finds these kinds of events deeply satisfying, revealing a scheme that destroys the works of men and prompting a tsunami that mirrors her own grieving emotions.

Didion—a practicing Christian who ascribes God as indifferent—attributes a divine quality to geology. In the last scene of the memoir, she recalls swimming with her husband John among the clear swell of her Malibu home into the cave at the Portuguese bend, how they had to time the dive. "No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that," says Didion, referring to a Christian hymn her late husband used to quote.

Didion personifies coping with the phrase "these fragments I have shored against my ruins." By saying that the eye on the sparrow is either indifferent or inexistent, Didion

establishes her disbelief in God and her belief in natural sudden disasters, like the ones her geologist grandfather used to tell her about. She believes in luck, fate or coincidence. She believes in literature and on the power of her own voice.

Reading Response 5: The Question of Self Pity in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Thoughts and ideas, proposes Joan Didion—an alternative to the present or the ‘what could have been’—occur in a sudden instant. When processing her grief over the death of her husband John, Didion explores what she calls the question of self-pity. Even though tragedies occur at random, survivors tend to wonder *why me?* To avoid self-pity, Didion minimizes her own *thoughts and ideas*, while daydreaming of alternative identities she could embody rather than her own.

When her daughter Quintana is interned at Beth Israel Hospital in New York, Didion takes on the role of a medical researcher and encounters resistance when trying to advise the doctors regarding the timing to perform a tracheotomy. “They were doctors, however freshly minted. I was not,” says Didion. “Ergo, any concerns I had must be cosmetic, frivolous.”

A more poignant example refers to Didion's thoughts on John and Gertrude Black, a couple she and John met in Indonesia and whom they eventually wanted to embody. Her husband thought that John and Gertrude Black personified true, unadulterated living, the idea of “doing things not because we were expected to do them or had always done them or should do them but because we wanted to do them.”

By expressing her wish to have had more fun, Didion also inadvertently wishes for more time alongside her husband. She recalls the phrase John and Quintana used to say to express their affection, “I love you more than one more day,” which comes with the implication of an alternative life in which the family, indeed, shares *one more day*.

Didion says survivors often pity themselves over the omens they missed. She expresses how deaths change circumstances with immediacy, leaving a ripple in time, an undeniable before

and after, how “grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it.” During her *year of magical thinking*, Didion contrasts each day to what she and her husband did the year before. When the craziness recedes with no clarity taking its place, Didion says the ending of that comparison gives those days a ‘sharper focus.’

In a constant cacophony of self-pity, Didion mourns her losses and herself, thinking of what could have happened *in another world*. Still, she finds comfort within the words of her daughter Quintana, with how “it all evens out in the end.” Quintana does not refer to how the good balances out the bad, but to how self-pity leaves no room for logical thinking, and to how in each generation all tragedies—in Didion’s case, sickness and death—pervade all humankind.

For one year—her *year of magical thinking*—Didion found herself unable to follow her husband’s John advice given over their forty-year’s marriage: “for once in your life just let it go.” Instead, Didion explores literature and writes her *thoughts and ideas* to avoid dealing with her pity and mourning.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion describes grief as “the unending silence that follow, the void, the very opposite of meaning.” Ironically enough, thousands of readers found meaning behind her reminiscing and reveries of an alternative life, perhaps identifying with her own self-pity. Yet with the book finished, her daughter healthy at last, and John’s ashes spread out across St. John’s cathedral, Joan Didion had no choice but to heed her husband’s advice, and, for the first time in her life, to finally *just let it go*.

References

Didion, J. (2005). *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Vintage International Trade Paperback.