

Loss and Grief in Selected Works by Joan Didion

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tématy ztráty a smutku v memoárech *Víc než další den* (2005) a *Blue Nights* (2011) americké spisovatelky Joan Didion, představitelky směru Nový žurnalismus. Cílem práce je vyobrazit autorčino vyrovnání se se ztrátami a analyzovat proces truchlení v obou případech. K dosažení tohoto cíle představují hlavní část práce tematické analýzy memoárů. Práce dochází k závěru, že autorčin proces truchlení a jeho popis je v každém z případů jiný. Tento závěr je založen především na krocích, které autorka po smrtích učinila, na době, ve které byly memoáry psány, a také na myšlenkách, které autorku během truchlení provázely.

Klíčová slova: Joan Didion, Nový žurnalismus, žal, identita, nemoc, ztráta, smrt, stárnutí, truchlení

ABSTRACT

This bachelor thesis deals with the themes of loss and grief in memoirs *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011) by American author and New Journalism representative Joan Didion. The aim of the thesis is to depict author's coping with the losses and to analyze the grieving process in both cases. To achieve this objective, the main part of the thesis consists of thematic analysis of the memoirs. The thesis concludes that Didion's grieving process and description of it was different with each loss. This conclusion is based mainly on the steps the author took after the deaths, the time of writing the memoirs, and the thoughts she had during the grieving process.

Keywords: Joan Didion, New Journalism, grief, identity, illness, loss, death, aging, grieving

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I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

Joan Didion was a prominent figure in American literature of the 20th and 21st century, one of the pioneers of New Journalism, an essayist, a journalist, and a novelist. There are a lot of ways to describe Didion and her career. However, she reached a new kind of audience of readers and touched many hearts with her reporting on her journey. She reported on the pain of losing and grieving the closest people in one's life. The grief and sadness experienced by the affected person becomes twice as hard to deal with when grieving not only one loved person, but two, which was Joan Didion's case. Her husband John died from a heart attack while they were having dinner together. Her daughter died due to health complications as an adult. Furthermore, both of them died within eighteen months and so Didion became a widow and a mother without a child in a short period of time.

The first part of the thesis focuses on the literary contextualization of Joan Didion in relation to the New Journalism movement. The thesis continues with Didion's work and summary of her personal life, as it is crucial for the consequent analysis. The essential part of the thesis consists of thematic analyses which are conducted based on the method of close reading of both memoirs. The analyses examine how the author handles the complexities of grieving. Additionally, minor themes such as identity, health, and aging, which are all closely tied to the main themes of loss and grief, are examined. Finally, a comparison between the two memoirs is conducted with regard to the themes of loss and grief to present similarities and differences in the grieving processes.

Grieving is a peculiar process and experienced differently by each individual. Therefore, the main objective of this thesis is to explore the ways in which Didion coped with the loss of her closest family members and to portray her grieving process in each case. In order to achieve this goal, this thesis focuses on an analysis of the themes of loss and grief in Didion's two memoirs: *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011). Joan Didion approaches grief and experiences the process of grieving differently in each memoir. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, where she describes the loss of her husband, she struggles to let him go. She goes through five stages of grief until she comes to terms with the fact her husband is gone. In *Blue Nights*, where she loses her daughter, she accepts her death more easily since she was aware of her poor health condition. In this case Didion tries to let go and to continue with her life which is the opposite to behavior described in *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

1 NEW JOURNALISM

New Journalism refers to a term of literary movement which is mainly connected to an American journalist and writer, Tom Wolfe, as he was the one who started using the techniques that later came to define it. However, the term itself was not coined by Wolfe, as he explains in his book *The New Journalism* (1973). In 1966 people started using the term and it was heard in conversations.¹ According to T. Wolfe, the movement consisted of the realization that literary devices can be implemented into non-fiction texts and journalism in order to entertain people on both intellectual and emotional levels.²

Furthermore, he lists the essential features of New Journalism. The crucial was to get to the place where an event was held, or a situation was happening, indeed anything the journalist was able to report on and write a journalistic piece about it. The journalist's writing reflected the conversations of the participants of the event or a drama scene, the look on their faces when it happened, the atmosphere, and all these other, at first look, insignificant characteristics that would eventually make the writing unique.³

In common journalism, the journalists would describe the situation, the people, circumstances, and other features concerned. In New Journalism, the authors attempted to make the piece read like a novel.⁴ Therefore, New Journalism mixes features of journalism and fiction, so the readers can read about the stories in a way that stimulates their imagination and additionally shows them how the journalist feels about the situation or the event.

1.1 Representatives of Literary Journalism

The term and practice of literary journalism is used as a synonym of the new journalism. When analyzing and talking about literary journalism, researchers and experts in the field use a lot of synonyms for the sake of talking about the same movement. Among others, it is talked about already mentioned "new journalism," but also "artistic nonfiction," "fact as fiction," or even "novelistic journalism."⁵

Literary journalism has been addressed and discussed by authors and critics in different kinds of ways. For instance, John Hellmann provides a thought-provoking discussion in his

¹ Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1990), 37.

² Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 28.

³ Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 35.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jan Witt, *Settling the Borderland: Other Voices in Literary Journalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 2.

book *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* (1981). He thinks of the new journalism as a duty of the journalist to present an individual analysis of the events instead of a collective one.⁶ Among the male representatives of this movement belong for instance: Gay Talese, known for his publications such as *Honor Thy Father* (1971), *Unto the Sons* (1992), and a collection of his articles *Fame and Obscurity* (1970),⁷ or Truman Capote, the author of the book *In Cold Blood* (1965). The book is about the murder in Kansas during which a whole family was killed. He called this work paradoxically a ‘nonfiction novel.’⁸

Another representative is Norman Mailer with *The Naked and the Dead* about World War II, and *The Armies of the Night*, which comprises the features of the new journalism, as he combines fiction and non-fiction narrative.⁹ Not only these male journalists and authors, but also the female representatives such as Sara Davidson, Susan Orlean, and Joan Didion¹⁰ were an essential part of the movement and they have incorporated the techniques of the new journalism into their work.¹¹

1.2 Criticism and Techniques of the New Journalism

When new ideas or techniques emerge, it is natural for criticism or scepticism to arise. People who are exposed to the innovations usually need time to adapt and accept them. It was not different with New Journalism, as it has received a lot of criticism. The main problem the new journalists have been dealing with ever since they started using the techniques of the new journalism, is mixing facts and fiction. For instance, Gay Talese experienced an unpleasant situation. He was keeping notes on the way Gerald Foos, an owner of a hotel, lived with the purpose of his new book *The Voyeur’s Motel* (2016). A few of Talese’s sources and information he treated as facts were incorrect.¹²

Another case in which doubts about new journalism arose was Capote’s publishing *In Cold Blood* (1965). Capote himself called it a “nonfiction novel” which itself is an oxymoron. The literary analysts implied that he abused the authenticity of the news by incorporating for

⁶ Witt, *Settling the Borderland*, Preface.

⁷ “About Gay Talese,” Gay Talese, accessed December 29, 2023, <https://www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/talese/about.html>.

⁸ George Steiner, “A cold-blooded happening,” *The Guardian*, December 2, 1965, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/1965/dec/02/classics>.

⁹ “Norman Mailer,” New York State Institute, accessed December 29, 2023, <https://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/webpages4/archives/mailler.html>.

¹⁰ Whitt, *Settling the Borderland*, Preface.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jeet Heer, “Gay Talese and the Problem With New Journalism,” *The New Republic*, July 1, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/134807/gay-talese-problem-new-journalism>.

instance stream of consciousness, and according to their claims, he misinterpreted the purpose of fiction.¹³ In fact, his attempt to write about the authentic event which took place in Kansas in 1959, while using the techniques of literary journalism, failed mainly due to the errors in factuality. Precisely, one of the biggest errors noted by Gerald Clarke, who wrote about the life and work of T. Capote, is the ending of *In Cold Blood*. According to Clarke, the closing scene in the book was made up. Capote was also accused of rewriting and recreating the scenes and narrative in order to tell his story the way he wanted it to be and not the way it truly happened.¹⁴

The question which scholars, researchers, and other journalists ask, is whether to treat new journalism more as fiction or non-fiction. The foundation of the story is true, the event took place, however, some of the additions are only added to make the narrative more intriguing. The characters described and events taking place are real, although it depends on the author and how far he goes in describing the reality and inserting the elements which are no longer facts. Thus, it cannot be considered strictly either fiction neither non-fiction. New journalism is special for incorporating the understanding of the event as viewed by the author, the journalist himself.¹⁵

Among the techniques used by new journalists, compared to common journalism, is looking under the surface of reported facts.¹⁶ This means finding out what led to the situation, and in some cases the effect it will have on the future. In other words, new journalism offers a background of the story more than only a description of what happened to whom.¹⁷ John Hollowell in his book *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (1977) talks about the main techniques used by new journalists. He lists six categories with closer look at each of them: the dramatic scene, recording dialogue in full, status details, point of view, interior monologue, and composite characterization.¹⁸ New journalists also use flashbacks, reverse chronology, and other techniques in their work.¹⁹ He also reveals that some of the techniques were already used in the past, however not in this cultivated, well researched way.²⁰

¹³ Witt, *Settling the Borderland*, 13.

¹⁴ Matthew Ricketson, "Another Look at Truman Capote and *In Cold Blood*," *Literary Journalism Studies* 11, no. 2 (December 2019): 186–188.

¹⁵ Witt, *Settling the Borderland*, 3.

¹⁶ John Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1977), 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction*, 25.

¹⁹ Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction*, 26.

²⁰ Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction*, 31.

According to Hollowell, one of the most important elements which makes the new journalistic pieces read as fiction is the first technique mentioned – the dramatic scene. New journalists present the story by using “dramatic scenes”²¹ to progress with the story, oppositely to journalism in which the events are only summarized.²² Considering all of the features which make the new journalists successful, there is so-called “saturation reporting.”²³ The meaning behind this term is the journalist’s obligation to saturate himself in the area or environment of his reporting.²⁴ In other words, the new journalists conduct deeper and profound research in order to write about the events.²⁵

²¹ Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction*, 26.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction*, 32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

2 JOAN DIDION

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. – Joan Didion

Joan Didion was one of the female writers known for being a significant part of New Journalism. However, she did not immediately embark on the path of the movement. Didion's story began in the 1950s on the occasion of an essay contest she won which was sponsored by Vogue, "Prix de Paris." She started working in Vogue as a copywriter in 1961.²⁶ Soon after, her first novel *Run, River* (1963) was published, depicting the history of a Californian ranch, murder, pioneer's families, power, and privilege of the white race over others. Didion tried to portray the racial problem of Sacramento in the novel, as some of the characters of the novel belong to various minorities.²⁷ Much later she confessed she thought of the novel as a failure,²⁸ claiming that she did not know how to do anything at all and was not accomplished enough.²⁹ Indeed, this was not the piece that established Didion as a well-known writer.

It was the essay collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) due to which she was named one of the Women of The Year in *Los Angeles Times* and also the point in her life that initiated her success.³⁰ The title of this essay collection stemmed from one of the essays included in the book, but the phrase also has its own origin, as "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" comes from a poem "The Second Coming" by W. B. Yeats. The last line of this poem reads: "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" In fact, Didion was also writing about a social disaster which explains her choice of the poem for her own essay. Yeats wrote the poem in 1919, after World War I. In the poem, he expressed his rather pessimistic views on the future, the unfolding apocalypse, but also the state in which society was at the time. Didion took the same stance as Yeats, as in portraying the societal calamity, however in a different time period.³¹ The essays provide themes such as the counterculture of the 1960s,

²⁶ Hebert Arden, "Joan Didion and the legacy of New Journalism," *The Brandon Sun*, December 23, 2023, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/joan-didion-legacy-new-journalism/docview/2902871049/se-2?accountid=15518>.

²⁷ "Didionesque Sacramento: Race, Urban Renewal And Loss In Joan Didion's "Run River," *The Metropole*, accessed March 3, 2024, <https://themetropole.blog/2018/04/18/didionesque-sacramento-race-urban-renewal-and-loss-in-joan-didions-run-river/>.

²⁸ Tracy Daugherty, *The Last Love Song: A Biography of Joan Didion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 173.

²⁹ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 171.

³⁰ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 315.

³¹ Nick Tabor, "No Slouch," *The Paris Review*, April 7, 2015, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/04/07/no-slouch/>.

life in San Francisco, family and loss, changing of traditional values and societal norms. “San Francisco was where the social hemorrhaging was showing up. San Francisco was where the missing children were gathering and calling themselves hippies.”³² These two lines from the essay summarize well its content.

The essay “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” was first published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1967, and if it was not for Henry Robbins, it would have stayed solely an essay. Robbins, who became Didion’s editor and friend in 1966, tried to convince her to put the whole book of essays out to the world, not to leave it only as one essay, as he observed the potential of her nonfiction.³³ Consequently, the collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) became a highly perceived and well-reviewed book, which included the essays that later became famous, some of them already published in magazines and newspapers before. For instance, the essay “On Self-Respect” was first published in *Vogue* in 1961,³⁴ or “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” which came out initially in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1966.³⁵ It is important to state that *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* is one of the first works which connected Didion to New Journalism and she was later considered a new journalist. Her main contributions to the New Journalism will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Didion established herself in the Hollywood scene by being a reporter, journalist, and a fiction writer, although she thought of Hollywood as a symbol of a lack of moral principles and decadence.³⁶ However, she was strongly influenced by spending time with people from Hollywood, whether they were actors, singers, directors, or producers. Therefore, she was constantly surrounded by their ways of living and handling life. The fact she used to attend parties, dinners, and a variety of events with them and lived in America in the 1960s is reflected in most of her work, as she continually incorporated the observations into her writing. Thus, this way of life inspired her next novel *Play It As It Lays* (1970). The novel consists of descriptions of Hollywood life with complex main characters such as Maria Wyeth, an actress who ends up in a psychiatric facility, her husband Carter who is a director, her lover Les Goodwin, and others who deal with their daily lives and attempt to fix everything and nothing at the same time. Furthermore, Maria deals with her mother’s death,

³² Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 64.

³³ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 279.

³⁴ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 143.

³⁵ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 257.

³⁶ Bruce L. Chipman, *Into America’s Dream-Dump: A Postmodern Study of the Hollywood Novel* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 180.

an abortion, and her only daughter being permanently hospitalized due to her brain damage. The novel is a representation of the idea according to which people obtain fame, success, and pleasure by exploiting each other.³⁷ It also discusses alienation and anxiety formed in a hostile environment.³⁸

2.1 Contribution to the New Journalism

Didion's journalism was not solely about informing about news. Through her writing and reporting, she structured the facts in order to shed light on moral concerns. Additionally, she was not afraid to be vocal about the issues occurring. Her exceptionality can be ascribed mostly to her individualism and her original way of thinking, dialogic proficiency, and sharp eye for which no detail was too small to analyze.³⁹ Didion's journalism was based mainly on the dialogues and her skill of being attentive to detail. In contrast, her personal essays tend to comprise a variety of metaphorical and figurative expressions.⁴⁰

As has been stated, her first collection of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), was the reason for which she was later viewed as one of the pioneers of New Journalism. The collection of essays contained the essential literary techniques which the movement is recognized for, such as description of the setting, conversations, perspective, and status, therefore the position in the society.⁴¹ Indeed, Didion was questioning objectivity in journalism, as she did not quite believe in such a thing.⁴²

The second collection of essays Didion wrote was titled *The White Album* (1979). The essays report on several historical events of the 1960s in America such as Charles Manson and the murders, President Nixon, the Vietnam War, and the hippie era. It got its title from the Beatles album released in 1968 for several reasons. Didion found the Beatles' album disturbing, and additionally, it was mentioned by Charles Manson, the leader of the Manson Family, a cult who killed among others Sharon Tate. Above all, the essays portray Didion's own paranoia and restlessness.⁴³ The psychiatric report from the facilitation in Santa Monica, in which Didion was hospitalized due to her "attack of vertigo and nausea,"⁴⁴ is incorporated in the book as well. In the context of the new journalism, one can observe that

³⁷ Katherine Usher Henderson, *Joan Didion* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), 24.

³⁸ Chipman, *Into America's Dream-Dump*, 178.

³⁹ Henderson, *Joan Didion*, 91.

⁴⁰ Henderson, *Joan Didion*, 92.

⁴¹ Arden, "Joan Didion and the legacy of New Journalism."

⁴² Witt, *Settling the Borderland*, 130.

⁴³ Graham Peacock, Topical Focus: "The White Album by Joan Didion," *The Glasgow Guardian*, October 5, 2019, <https://glasgowguardian.co.uk/2019/10/05/topical-focus-the-white-album-by-joan-didion/>.

⁴⁴ Joan Didion, *The White Album* (London: 4th Estate, 2017), 15.

Didion reported on these events and positioned herself in the story at the same time. She describes her life and her family living on Franklin Avenue as a part of Hollywood, her interest in The Doors, the Black Panthers Party, being friends with Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate⁴⁵, but she is not only stating what happened as the news would present, she subjectively reported on these events.

An important part of Didion's identity and her writing is the fact she was Californian. Thus, a variety of her essays and non-fiction books tend to be "both regional and autobiographical in focus."⁴⁶ Her first memoir *Where I Was From* (2003) which also includes political matters and discussions on the image of California and the real California, focuses on her ancestors coming to the West, and Didion's moving back and forth between New York and California.⁴⁷

2.2 Politics

Didion covered political topics several times in her essays, non-fiction books, nonetheless her novels, too. She was interested in politics in general and she had opinions and views she was not afraid to voice. Her work surrounding politics will be shortly summarized in this thesis, as it was a significant part of Didion's work, however, it is not the main objective of the thesis.

Notwithstanding Didion's third novel *Book Of Common Prayer* (1977) is fiction, it portrays the commotion and politics of the 1960s. Every fictional character of the story is in a way affected by the political unrest.⁴⁸ In the essays published in her book *After Henry* (1992) Didion wrote and reported on politics, political change, and the world events several times. Joan and her husband John Dunne went to El Salvador in 1982, which was the year the Salvadoran Civil War was still in motion. The trip led to Didion's non-fiction book comprised of essays called *Salvador* (1983), presenting Didion's reporting on the situation in El Salvador and the horrible scenes she has seen.⁴⁹ Another Didion's novel *Democracy* (1984) was published only a year after *Salvador*. The novel introduces Inez Victor and her husband Henry Victor running a political campaign.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Didion, *The White Album*, 48.

⁴⁶ Cristina Scatamacchia, "Horizontal and Vertical Themes in Joan Didion's Memoir *Where I Was From*," *RSA Journal* 15 (September 2005): 69. <https://doi.org/10.13135/1592-4467/8804>.

⁴⁷ Scatamacchia, "Horizontal and Vertical Themes," 70.

⁴⁸ Henderson, *Joan Didion*, 65.

⁴⁹ Daniel Worden and Alex Trimble Young, "On Joan Didion: An Introduction," *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 31, no. 3 (2016): 607, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2016.1199627>.

⁵⁰ Joel Alden Schlosser, "Joan Didion and the American Dream," *Raritan* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 15, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/joan-didion-american-dream/docview/2047358162/se-2>.

In *Political Fictions* (2001) Didion deals with “the nature of the American political system with intensity and profound concern.”⁵¹ The book starts with the 1988 presidential campaign, continues with George Bush and the way he handled the aftermath of 9/11, the description of the 1992 election, and other political turns she has witnessed and reported on.⁵² *Miami* (1987) is a non-fiction book which discusses mostly the exiles from Cuba living in Miami and the assassination of John F. Kennedy.⁵³ *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1966) is Didion’s novel in which the heroine Elena McMahon, a journalist in *The Washington Post* covering U.S. politics and events, happens to be later entangled into Latin America’s shady business.⁵⁴ As the title suggests, Didion’s book *Fixed Ideas: America Since 9.11* (2003) explores how the United States functioned after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001.⁵⁵ “Decades into her career, she remains one of our sharpest and most respected observers of American politics and culture,”⁵⁶ claimed Barack Obama when he forwarded the National Humanities Medal to Joan Didion. This event took place at the White House on July 10, 2013.⁵⁷

2.3 Personal Life

Joan Didion was born on December 5, 1934 in Sacramento, California. The fact her ancestors came to Sacramento in the 1800s influenced her early years, and also her debut novel *Run, River*. Her father Frank Didion worked as an army finance officer and her mother was a stay-at-home wife. The writer who influenced her in the early years and her writing according to her claims was Ernest Hemingway. She used to study the syntax of his sentences, how the paragraphs work, and other elements of writing a future author needs to know and handle.⁵⁸

Didion went to McClatchy High School where her writing skills were already showing.⁵⁹ In her teenage years Didion longed to become an actress. She desperately wanted to go to

⁵¹ Witt, *Settling the Borderland*, 123.

⁵² J. Hale Russell, “Joan Didion Takes on the Political Establishment,” *The Harvard Crimson*, October 9, 2001, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2001/10/19/joan-didion-takes-on-the-political/>.

⁵³ Anne Zussy, “Betrayals and Obsessions,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 1987, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/01/24/nnp/miami.html>.

⁵⁴ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 580.

⁵⁵ Joan Didion, *Fixed Ideas: America Since 9.11* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2003), Preface.

⁵⁶ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 669.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Veronica Horwell, “Joan Didion obituary,” *The Guardian*, December 23, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/dec/23/joan-didion-obituary>.

⁵⁹ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 74.

American National Theater Academy in New York, however her career did not go in such direction. She tried to join the Pasadena Playhouse and she auditioned with Blanche DuBois's speech from *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). In the end, it was her height that stopped her from entering an acting career. She was told she was too short to play on the stage.⁶⁰ After high school, Didion got rejected from Stanford, and in between this rejection and studying at the University of California, Berkeley, she attended a few courses at Sacramento Junior College. In the end, she was studying English literature at Berkeley.⁶¹

She met her future husband John Gregory Dunne in 1958. At that time, she was working for *Vogue*, and he was working for *Time*. Their mutual friend, Noel Parmentel, who was Didion's lover at that time, introduced them.⁶² Didion and Dunne got married in 1964 and they moved to Los Angeles for a while. As a married couple, they worked on screenplays for films such as *The Panic In Needle Park* (1971), *Star Is Born* (1976), and others.⁶³ Moreover, as they were both writers and journalists, they supported each other's work, edited it, and read it to each other. In 1966 they adopted a baby girl who they named after a Mexican state Quintana Roo. She was born on March 3, 1966.⁶⁴ As a family, they would often travel together, whether it was Paris, Honolulu, Jakarta, London, or any other city or country. They kept themselves busy writing and travelling.⁶⁵

It has been already stated that Didion had numerous friends in Hollywood. In fact, she and her husband were part of the upper class. They were in contact with influential people such as Steven Spielberg, Janis Joplin or Harrison Ford, and that is just a few of the many.⁶⁶ As her book *The White Album* (1979) includes stories about Hollywood life in the 1960s, in the line at the end of her essay she writes: "Quite often I reflect on the big house in Hollywood, on "Midnight Confessions" and on Ramon Novarro and the fact that Roman Polanski and I are godparents to the same child, but writing has not yet helped me to see what it means."⁶⁷ The fact she knew Mr. Polanski and Sharon Tate in person made her writing about the era of hippies and 1960s even more personal, as she also wrote about the dark times after the murder of Sharon Tate by the Manson Family.

⁶⁰ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 651.

⁶¹ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 83.

⁶² Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 133.

⁶³ "Where To Start With Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne," New York Public Library, January 26, 2023, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2023/01/26/where-start-joan-didion-and-john-gregory-dunne>.

⁶⁴ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 237.

⁶⁵ Daugherty, *The Last Love Song*, 477.

⁶⁶ Kathy Willens, "Joan Didion, revered author and essayist, dies at 87," *CBS News*, December 23, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/joan-didion-dies-87-parkinsons-disease/>.

⁶⁷ Didion, *The White Album*, 48.

Didion's husband John Gregory Dunne died from a heart attack on December 30, 2003 in their apartment in New York. He was 71 years old.⁶⁸ Their daughter Quintana died in 2005, therefore very shortly after John's death. These facts are important for the consequent analysis of the themes of loss and grief in her memoirs. *The Year Of Magical Thinking* (2005) deals with her husband's death, and *Blue Nights* (2011) with her daughter's death.

Didion spent the rest of her life in New York apartment in Manhattan. In her last years, she did not write much anymore, and she kept her privacy. In fact, she was not opened to interviews due to avoiding talking about her life. This changed when John's nephew, director Griffin Dunne discussed the possibility of creating a documentary about her life. She agreed to this, and so the documentary called *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold* was released on Netflix in October 2017.⁶⁹ Joan died on December 21, 2021. She was 87 years old, and she died from complications of Parkinson's disease.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ William Grimes, "Joan Didion, 'New Journalist' Who Explored Culture and Chaos, Dies at 87" *The New York Times*, December 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/23/books/joan-didion-dead.html>.

⁶⁹ Horwell, "Joan Didion obituary."

⁷⁰ Grimes, "Joan Didion, 'New Journalist' Who Explored Culture and Chaos, Dies at 87."

3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

As the focus of this thesis is thematic analysis of Joan Didion's memoirs, it is necessary to introduce the crucial literary terms, such as theme and motif. According to M. H. Abrams, theme is defined as a "general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader."⁷¹ In other words, theme is the main broad concept that is present throughout the whole work and unites all of the elements together. Literary works do not usually have only one theme, rather they contain several themes, from which some of them are considered the major and the other minor themes.⁷² On the other hand, M. H. Abrams defines motif as a "conspicuous element, such as a type of incident, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature."⁷³

The thesis is focused primarily on the themes of loss and grief in Joan Didion's selected work, which in this case will be the two memoirs. However, as has been stated, literary works usually contain several themes and they intertwine, and this statement applies to Didion's memoirs as well. Thus, to fully comprehend the complexity of the texts, the minor themes will be also briefly discussed in the analyses to connect them to the major themes. In the two memoirs, *The Year of Magical Thinking*⁷⁴ and *Blue Nights*, the minor themes include motherhood and parenthood, mental illness, self-identity, aging, and death, all of them strongly connected.

Firstly, both of the memoirs will be analyzed separately in order to examine the ways in which the themes of grief and loss are presented and utilized in the text, moreover to comprehend the progress of grief of the author. Secondly, the objective is to depict similarities and differences in the memoirs for a full comprehension of how Joan Didion dealt with the loss of her husband and daughter.

⁷¹ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 170.

⁷² Grace Fleming, "How to Find the Theme of a Book or Short Story," last modified July 19, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/finding-a-theme-of-a-book-1857646#toc-examples-of-themes-in-literature>.

⁷³ Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 169.

⁷⁴ In the following text the memoir will be referred to as "*The Year*."

4 THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING

The memoir Didion wrote mainly about the loss of her husband John Gregory Dunne and how she processed his death, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, is one of the books that lets the reader glimpse into the writer's head while attempting to grasp all the feelings the author processes. The major themes of the book are the loss and grief Didion feels when her husband dies. At the beginning of the book, the reader finds out about Joan's intention of writing the book but struggling to open up to the subject that causes her pain. Dunne died on December 30, 2003. Consequently, in January 2004 Didion wrote her first words since he died. She reports she has not made any changes in the document, although she opened the file in May of the same year. She closed the document without editing the text or adding anything more to it.⁷⁵ Therefore, it is implied that she was postponing writing about the loss to escape the pain of going through it. Her husband experienced a coronary event while they were sitting at the table and eating dinner. One of the motifs encountered in the memoir is the uncertainty of life – “Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant.”⁷⁶ The word “ordinary” is used to portray how Didion feels about changes — before a big change happens, everything seems normal, as common as any other day. These words are repeated throughout the memoir several times, which is the typical characteristic of a motif as defined earlier.

Didion mentions tragedies such as the attack on Pearl Harbor and the September 11 attacks. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary to people on the days the tragic events took place. It was just another day, and the disasters were not foreseen.⁷⁷ To clarify, she did not attempt to compare the loss of her husband and the disasters mentioned, but rather to depict the fact people do not get a chance to prepare for these kinds of changes and situations, just as she was not prepared for the events that took place on December 30, 2003. Didion later extended her quote about the sudden changes in people's lives. “You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends. The question of self-pity.”⁷⁸ By sitting down to dinner she references to the day her husband died while they were having dinner. Her life changed in an instant while doing an ordinary activity.

In connection to what has been stated about Didion's postponing writing about such a loss, the same was true for speaking about it. She claims she was unable to talk about some of

⁷⁵ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: 4th Estate, 2005), 3.

⁷⁶ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 3.

⁷⁷ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 4.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

the details of her husband's death to her family and friends in the first weeks after his death.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, Didion talks about the reason for which she started writing the book. According to her, the goal was to rationalize the period after John's death. While she explains her need to write to understand her thoughts and to find meaning in them, she feels like the death of her husband needed more than words.⁸⁰ However, she decided to write the book about his death and how she processed the loss.

One of the first coping mechanisms she chose to overcome John's death is going through the day step by step to remind herself if there were any signs whatsoever. The reason for doing this was her attempt to think rationally. Specifically, she talks about John and her paying a visit to their daughter Quintana in the hospital on the same day John died. However, once she starts to talk about the evening, particularly about the few hours before he had passed, she goes into the details and lists everything step by step what they were doing. At this point, Didion creates simple sentences that indicate her attempt to remind herself exactly how the evening went on and not leave anything out. For instance: "We had come home. We had discussed whether to go out for dinner or eat in. I said I would build a fire, we could eat in."⁸¹ The description of the evening continues with Joan thinking her husband was choking when he stopped talking and moving. She even tried to save him by giving him the Heimlich maneuver.⁸² While she was still paralyzed by shock, she called an ambulance. The paramedics attempted to save John right away in the living room which was followed by transferring him to the hospital by the ambulance. Didion was in the other ambulance behind them. Unfortunately, before they arrived at the hospital, John had died.

4.1 Five Stages of Grief

In order to thoroughly analyze the ways in which Didion coped with the loss of her husband, the next part of the thesis will be aimed at examining her grief by applying the five stages of grief according to Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and her book *On Death and Dying* (1969). Dr Kübler-Ross was a psychiatrist who wrote the book mainly about the dying patients.⁸³ For the purpose of the thesis, the five stages of grief in the memoir will be examined with the help of an article published by Harvard Health Publishing, written by Jennifer Fisher,

⁷⁹ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 6.

⁸⁰ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 8.

⁸¹ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 9.

⁸² Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 11.

⁸³ Jennifer Fisher, MMSc, PA-C, "5 stages of grief: Coping with the loss of a loved one," December 12, 2023, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/5-stages-of-grief-coping-with-the-loss-of-a-loved-one>.

which is aimed specifically at the five stages of grief in case of losing a loved person.⁸⁴ The stages of grief are portrayed in the same way as the original source. However, Fisher depicts the stages in connection to the loss. The stages of grief are listed as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.⁸⁵

Firstly, denial is the stage in which the affected person rejects the reality not because he does not understand, rather because he is in a huge shock and denies what happened in order to protect himself.⁸⁶ In Joan Didion's case, the stage of denial has shown itself in a way she calls "magical thinking,"⁸⁷ which is also the title of the memoir. The first night after John died, she needed to be alone. "I needed to be alone so that he could come back. This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking."⁸⁸ The reason for "magical thinking"⁸⁹ is Didion's irrational thinking she experiences after her husband's death. She draws a comparison between her and children who make wishes they believe to come true. Her wish was to change the narrative and bring her husband back.⁹⁰

One of the main reasons for which the denial stage is discussed is Didion's inability to put John's clothes and shoes away. Specifically, she clings to his shoes believing he might still need them if he comes back.⁹¹ Nonetheless, Didion is aware of her husband's death. She does not attempt to deny his death per se since her denial stage consists of the irrational, "magical thinking"⁹² with which she could bring him back. The inability to put away his shoes is one of those irrational thoughts. Didion's wish is evident also in connection to John's funeral. They held his funeral almost three months after his death on account of Quintana's coma and her stay in the hospital. Therefore, they held the service once she was strong enough to leave the hospital and say a proper goodbye to her father. Around the time of the funeral, Didion describes how she seemed on the surface. She seemed collected and rational, considering the fact people did not know about her "magical thinking," the euphemism for her irrational thoughts.

Anger is the second stage of grieving. Despite the name of the stage, it entails more than feeling solely anger towards oneself or people connected to the death of the person. As

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 33.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 37.

⁹² Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 33.

a part of the grieving process, at this stage the affected person tends to look for someone to blame, whether the doctors who could have done more or himself who could have been there more for the person.⁹³ In Didion's grieving process, this stage is presented by searching for signs and situations according to which she should have anticipated his death. The fact she is looking for these signs contradicts one of the motifs of the memoir – "Life changes fast. Life changes in the ordinary instant."⁹⁴

Didion states that people are not able to foresee life-changing events, however, she looks for the signs in her life with John. To explain this contradiction, Joan writes the words she believes about how life changes. Instantly. However, it is important to state that John's heart was already in a bad condition, and he underwent angioplasty years ago. Therefore, she feels like she should have seen the signs, and she should have saved him. Another situation connected to her anger stage is during her recall of a memory of John's father cardiac death in his fifties. She claims she should have known and taken that as a sign.⁹⁵

However, Joan explores her feelings of anger while dealing with the loss. She asks herself whether she feels anger towards John for leaving her, moreover, whether it is possible to be angry at someone for doing something and blaming oneself at the same time. Moreover, she questions whether John, consciously or subconsciously, knew his life was going to end soon. To demonstrate, Didion has a memory of them in a restaurant about a week or two before he died. John asked her to write down a note for him, his thoughts for his new book. The next day Joan gave him the note she wrote down for him and he offered her to use it instead of him, for instance for her book or the next piece she will write. Reliving this memory, Didion asks herself questions such as: "Did he know he would not write the book? Did he have some apprehension, a shadow? Was something telling him that night that the time for being able to write was running out?"⁹⁶

Another moment in which Didion's anger stage is expressed is connected to John's autopsy. Soon after his death, she gets a call from the hospital whether she would like to donate John's organs. In her mind, she gets angry at the caller for not being straightforward with her. She knows John was not on life support and his organs are useless. The only organ they could take away from him was his blue eyes. She then quotes a poem written by E. E. Cummings about the blue-eyed boy. In fact, the reason why she was mad at the caller is part

⁹³ Fisher, "Coping with the loss of a loved one."

⁹⁴ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 3.

⁹⁵ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 41.

⁹⁶ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 23.

of her irrational thinking of bringing John back. “How could he come back if they took his organs, how could he come back if he had no shoes?”⁹⁷ Apart from these thoughts, Didion knows that if she lets the doctors take John’s eyes and donate them, all that was left of John will be irreversibly gone. Depending on the situation, grieving stages can be connected and the grieving person does not necessarily experience one stage at a time, as the previous example unites denial and anger.

An important information to report on the memoir and Didion herself is her belief in the power of information. The way she has always dealt with her issues was by learning and reading about them as much as possible. She describes how she turned to literature when anything in her life went wrong, or she did not know enough about the topic. She was a journalist after all. The information and data together with texts written by professionals in the various fields she was researching comforted her and gave her a sense of power and control. Didion studies and reads books together with Internet pages and talks about them widely throughout the memoir. She studies the literature about grief, psychology, however medicine too. Additionally, she puts the information together, and she makes conclusions about her feelings that she goes through during the grieving process. She often quotes from the books and the texts written by the professionals to put her feelings and thoughts into perspective.

The stage of bargaining is characterised by statements and thoughts as “what if” and “if only.” The grieving person feels as if something has been done differently, the outcome would be different, moreover if he does something now, he will be able to reverse the result.⁹⁸ One of the situations in which Didion’s attempt to reverse the outcome and do whatever she can to bring her husband back is evident, takes place a few weeks after the service. Didion gets a chance to meet a theologian. He talks about having faith and doing the ritual which itself is a sign of faith. Since they had a Gregorian chant in Latin at the funeral and priests as John would want, she feels like the ritual was done. Her thoughts about this are connected to her wish for John to come back, therefore closely connected to her denial stage. Thus, Didion believed that if she did all of the necessary procedures, the ritual and all, John would come back.

The depression stage as a part of the grieving process is painful for the affected person or people, however necessary as the other stages. The feelings of sadness, emptiness, and

⁹⁷ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 41.

⁹⁸ Fisher, “Coping with the loss of a loved one.”

abandonment occur as the symptoms. The stage can also bring some physical changes, for instance weight changes, whether weight gain or loss.⁹⁹ Indeed, when a person experiences psychological pain, mental health problems, and distress, the physical body might be affected as well, and this is usually the case. The physical and mental health are always connected, one cannot function properly without the other.

The sadness connected to the depression stage is present throughout the whole memoir. Didion reveals how she feels about recognizing someone who has recently experienced a loss. She explains how she saw her face change due to the feeling of becoming invisible, which is how she felt for a while.¹⁰⁰ To clarify, Didion views herself as one of them. One of the people who have experienced loss therefore she looks differently compared to those who have not. This might suggest she felt closer to people who were able to understand her feelings and the life-changing event she was going through, as it seems to be harder to explain to those who do not know the feeling.

Connected to looking different to people who have lost someone and those who have not, there is Didion's rational and collected self. At least that is what she looked like on the surface. Her close friends and the rest of the family knew she was processing her husband's death, yet she did not talk about her grieving and "magical thinking" with any of them in depth. In an interview for *The Seattle Times* originally published a month after the memoir was published in 2005, she talks about how she seemed to people. She claims her closest people were there for her, supported her, and tried to take her out and help her.¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, she admits it was hard to talk about her grief with them since they kept telling her how courageous she was for handling everything. She also goes further in talking about nowadays culture and how death and grieving are viewed, moreover she claims we do not want to be seen grieving.¹⁰² Conceivably, the fact she did not discuss her grief with anyone was an additional factor in why she wrote the book. In the interview she explains her desire to help herself understand what she was going through, moreover help others who are going through the same as her to know it is okay to feel whatever they are feeling, no matter how crazy or irrational it may be.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 75.

¹⁰¹ Mary Ann Gwinn, "Joan Didion shares what she's learned about grief, mourning – and growing," *The Seattle Times*, November 18, 2005, <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/joan-didion-shares-what-shes-learned-about-grief-mourning-8212-and-growing/>.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

One of the last grieving stages the person goes through is known as the acceptance stage. Going through this stage, the affected no longer denies the reality or the grief itself, they slowly start to accept the way things are and life needs to go on.¹⁰⁴ It does not mean they are healed or the loss does not hurt anymore, however, it gets easier to deal with the pain step by step.

Possibly the biggest breakthrough in the memoir takes place once Didion realizes she could not have done anything to stop John from dying and leaving her. Moreover, neither John nor the doctors could have stopped his death. At that moment, she enters her acceptance stage. Reading the autopsy report, Didion finally accepts John had a bad heart and he would have died soon inevitably, considering his health state. John underwent an angioplasty of his left anterior descending artery in 1987. Didion claims they both remembered the situation differently after the angiogram was done. She felt relieved it was solved and they did not have to worry about it anymore. On the other hand, ever since the angioplasty John kept saying he knew how he was going to die – “As he saw it, he now had a death sentence, temporarily suspended.”¹⁰⁵

After John’s death, therefore 16 years after his angioplasty, Didion is haunted by the words she told him back in the time. “You no more know how you’re going to die than I do or anyone else does, I remember saying.”¹⁰⁶ In fact, there is a connection to the anger stage, in which Joan blames herself and tries to find out whether John knew his life would end soon. In the anger stage, she thought she should have seen the signs and saved him. In contrast, after having seen John’s autopsy report, she knows nothing could have saved him. Joan accepts it was inevitable and she stops blaming others and herself for his death. Towards the end of the memoir, Didion suggests how the incapability of letting people go projects into keeping dead people alive. Nonetheless, she knows that in order to continue with one’s life, it is necessary to let people go. In other words, she slowly comes to terms with her husband’s death. What makes accepting his death and letting him go harder, is her fear of John fading into a memory. “My image of John at the instant of his death will become less immediate, less raw. [...] My sense of John himself, John alive, will become more remote.”¹⁰⁷ Didion expresses her fear of forgetting John as her husband, a human being. She

¹⁰⁴ Fisher, “Coping with the loss of a loved one.”

¹⁰⁵ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 157.

¹⁰⁶ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 158.

¹⁰⁷ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 225.

is scared he might become only a blurry memory in her mind, and it is hard for her to accept they will not make any more memories together.

4.2 Self-identity

One of the minor themes of the memoir is Joan's self-identity and her exploration of it. She questions who she is without her husband of almost 40 years and how his death changed the way she views herself. Since John was one of the most important people in her life, she was also naturally dependant on him. The theme of self-identity in the memoir is portrayed in a way which shows the sudden change from being a wife, a lifelong partner, who shares everything with the other, to becoming a widow who must be strong and resilient to support her daughter. In fact, her exploration of self-identity is closely related to the theme of grief, as how she views herself after the loss of her husband is different compared to the image of herself after losing her daughter. The differences will be discussed in the comparison in the last chapter of the thesis.

The fact John was a writer and a journalist too, and they had written a few screenplays together, affected their marriage in various ways. They both worked at home together, therefore they saw each other all day long and spent a lot of time together. "[...] during the average day when something would come up that I needed to tell him. This impulse did not end with his death. What ended was the possibility of response."¹⁰⁸ In these lines, Didion illustrates how attached she was to John, and whether she had a thought about her work, idea, or news from the neighbourhood, John was first to know. Their marriage was not perfect as there were discussions about divorce a few times, however they handled it, and they were partners for life. Joan admits she saw herself differently after John's death. "For forty years I saw myself through John's eyes. I did not age. This year for the first time since I was twenty-nine I saw myself through the eyes of others. [...] I realized that my image of myself was of someone significantly younger."¹⁰⁹ Through her writing about the loss she experienced, Joan Didion portrays not only how shocking, painful, and numbing at the same time losing a loved one can be, but also how can one's self-identity be so tied to another human being to the point of not knowing who he is without the other's existence. She remembers how John would often talk about what she should do if something happened to him. Although Joan never liked to hear about it, nor did she want to think about it, John

¹⁰⁸ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 194.

¹⁰⁹ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 197.

always wanted the best for her. “[...] we were equally incapable of imagining the reality of life without the other.”¹¹⁰

Furthermore, Didion needed to talk about her night dreams with John to clear her head and she used to tell him about them all the time. Correlated or not, she claims she stopped dreaming after John’s death¹¹¹. In fact, there are a lot of situations taking place after John died in which Didion realises how dependent they were on each other and used to be together all the time. She also admits not having any letters from John, since they spent almost no time separated from each other.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 159.

¹¹² Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 164.

5 BLUE NIGHTS

The memoir *Blue Nights* (2011) is Didion's other literary work discussing mostly the themes of loss and grief, however, it also extensively discusses the themes of aging, mortality, and parenthood as well. The book is dedicated to the description of memories of Didion's life with her adopted daughter Quintana Roo and her husband John Dunne. In the first chapter, which is only two pages long, Didion explains how the book gained its title and the thoughts behind it. She talks about a French collocation "l'heure bleue" for which one of the English translations is the word "gloaming". The expression stands for the time of the day when it is getting dark, however it is not fully dark. Didion ascribes the metaphor she used for the title in the way that sets the tone for the whole memoir. "During the blue nights you think the end of day will never come. As the blue nights draw to a close (and they will, and they do), you experience an actual chill [...]"¹¹³ At this point of writing the memoir, Didion had already lost her daughter and her husband. Therefore, a commonly used idiom "to feel blue" is another way of explaining Didion's choice of words for the title. It expresses a feeling of sadness, depression, and melancholy. With this in mind, the title can be depicted as the period of sadness and melancholy the author feels after her daughter's death. When she wrote "you think the end of day will never come,"¹¹⁴ she might be addressing the worries one feels about the sadness not going away, of never coming to an end. The melancholy is always present. In the next line "As the blue nights draw to a close (and they will, and they do),"¹¹⁵ she expresses hope for the sadness and hard periods in life to fade away and eventually, they always do. Moreover, later in the memoir, the author admits the blue nights reflect the "inevitable approach of darker days."¹¹⁶ She mentions these words when in connection to aging which is inevitable.

Blue Nights could be possibly viewed as a sequel to *The Year*. It has been stated that the latter intertwined Didion's coping with her husband's death but at the same time Quintana's state of health. In *Blue Nights* she goes back to the times of grieving her husband, however it was the same period, in which she needed to be strong for her daughter, who was in a coma at that time. Didion wrote the memoir again in a first-person retrospective narration, she describes the past and the memories. In fact, her attempt to explain and reflect on her thoughts refer back to the fact she writes in order to know what she thinks and feels.

¹¹³ Joan Didion, *Blue Nights* (New York: Vintage International, 2012), 4.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 134.

“Was it only by dreaming or writing that I could find out what I thought?”¹¹⁷ In other words, to recollect her thoughts, she needed to put pen to paper and write about them.

To take a closer look at the ways the author processed the death of her only child, it is essential to first portray their life as a family and their dynamics. Although she grieves her daughter, Didion makes connections between being a parent, losing a child, and the way such tragedy forces the parent to think about his own mortality. Didion starts the second chapter by bringing back the memories of Quintana’s wedding. Precisely, she mentions the date, July 26, 2010 and remembers that it would be Quintana’s 7th wedding anniversary. In connection to her wedding and the anniversary, Didion thinks of as she calls it “sentimental choices.”¹¹⁸ As one of these choices are the flowers, the stephanotis Quintana wanted to have at her wedding. In fact, by talking about these choices Quintana made for the appeal and atmosphere of the wedding, Didion starts talking about Quintana’s childhood and their life.

As mentioned, Quintana Roo was adopted. She was born on March 3, 1966 in Santa Monica. Didion and her husband John Dunne tried for a baby, as Didion writes in *Blue Nights*. She confessed to her friend Dianna Lynn, who was the one, who introduced Didion and her husband to Blake Watson. He was an obstetrician who, among other babies, delivered Quintana. Didion and John stayed in touch with him until one day he called that he delivered a girl, and she was being placed for adoption. Therefore, they were offered to come to see her and adopt her.¹¹⁹

They adopted the baby girl and named her after a Mexican territory since they went to see this place together and agreed that one day their daughter would be called this way. As for the legal side, Didion feared losing their adopted daughter to her biological parents. Nonetheless, this was not the case, because her biological parents did not want her and in the hospital in which Quintana was born, her card said “No Information.”¹²⁰ Didion never mentions how old Quintana was when they told her she was adopted. Nonetheless, they were open with her about the adoption from her early age. She knew the whole story, even the details of the day she was born and picked up by her adoptive parents. Despite, or perhaps due to the fact she knew about the adoption ever since she was a child, Quintana often experienced a fear of abandonment. “What if you hadn’t answered the phone when

¹¹⁷ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 162.

¹¹⁸ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 6.

¹¹⁹ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 55.

¹²⁰ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 56.

Dr. Watson called, she would suddenly say, [...] what would happen to me then,”¹²¹ Didion recollects her daughter’s worries. Didion herself admits having no answers to these questions, therefore she did not even think about them often. However, knowing their daughter did consider these questions and the fact she was fearful made Didion often contemplate whether she was a good mother to Quintana. Quintana’s fear of abandonment will be more described in the next chapter.

The concern of not being a sufficient parent reappears again when Didion remembers the year 1966, the same year Quintana was born, and the same year Didion and her husband considered going to Saigon to Southeast Asia. She knew it was not a perfect idea to bring a small baby to a bombing area, although she admits she did not consider letting the plan go or adjusting it back then. The reason due to which she talks about this memory is to admit to others and to herself that she had, as she calls them “misconceptions”,¹²² about what it means to have a baby, and therefore she may have endangered Quintana by simply not changing her plans.

When Quintana was five, her tooth was about to fall out. And therefore, Didion tried to do the same as her mother did when she was a child. The trick with the thread and a doorknob and slamming the door. On this situation she portrays the way she had failed Quintana, as the tooth did not move and her daughter cried. Eventually, the tooth fell out on its own and the next time this happened, Quintana pulled her tooth alone. Didion doubts herself several times while thinking back to Quintana’s childhood. “Was I the problem? Was I always the problem?”¹²³ Didion’s raw thoughts and uttering rhetoric questions in this example express how she felt in the role of mother. She felt she did not know how to do things the right way, how to be a good mother. The example with the tooth might seem insignificant, but all of the small incidents and situations combined made Didion feel like she failed in this role.

5.1 Quintana’s Health Issues

Didion’s memories reveal the fact Quintana had mental health issues. Didion goes further in describing her feelings about specialists diagnosing her daughter, and when she talks about all the possible names of disorders the specialists uttered when observing Quintana, she even puts the word “diagnosis” in quotation marks. Her opinion about the person being

¹²¹ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 63.

¹²² Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 71.

¹²³ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 33.

diagnosed with any disorder is blurry. She was not sure whether there would be hope for a cure only because the person was diagnosed. Instead, she thought of the diagnosis as a confirmation of a problem the person is, and she did not want to feel or think about her daughter this way.

At first, Quintana was diagnosed with OCD. Again, Didion does not mention how old Quintana was when diagnosed. However, later she admits Quintana was depressed and anxious and she started drinking more. Due to the mention alcohol drinking, it is assumed Quintana was an adult at this point when dealing with depression and anxiety. Eventually, she was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Once again, Didion turns to literature, and she reads about the condition. She finds out about the way the person behaves or might start behaving like, how the illness demonstrates, and she stops at one, “the frantic efforts to avoid abandonment.”¹²⁴ The fear of abandonment Quintana felt might have been due to her illness or the fact her biological parents gave her up. Didion suggests it might be the main reason their daughter experienced such fear of losing her adoptive parents too.¹²⁵ The other possible explanation for Quintana’s fear is the reflection of the feelings her adoptive parents experienced, mostly mother, as the memoir does not describe John’s points of view. Due to Didion’s fears of failing as a mother or not keeping Quintana safe, she might have unconsciously transferred her fears to Quintana herself.

Didion admits once they had their daughter, she was always worried about everything. In other words, she was an anxious mother. She names some of the worries she had, for instance swimming pools, rattlesnakes, strangers at the door, fevers, and others.¹²⁶ “The source of the fear was obvious: it was the harm that could come to her.”¹²⁷

To expand on the thought of unconsciously transferring the fear onto their daughter, Didion talks about The Broken Man. This figure was the main character of Quintana’s nightmares, a figment of her imagination. It appeared as a man repeating the same sentence containing threats to Quintana about locking her in the garage. Since Didion was scared about Quintana’s safety and health, Quintana may absorb her mother’s feelings and consider them as something real, something bad might in fact happen to her. These feelings and fears projected themselves in Quintana as The Broken Man.

¹²⁴ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 49.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 54.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

The problems connected to her physical health started in December 2003. Quintana's health and condition are described in both of the memoirs, however in *The Year* Didion describes the issues more, as a lot of them were happening at the same time John died. On December 22, 2003, Quintana needed to go to the hospital on account of high fever. She went to Beth Israel North in New York, Manhattan. She had a flu, however it did not end with it. After a few days back at home, she started having breathing problems, therefore she went back to the hospital, where they diagnosed her with pneumonia, after which more complications appeared, such as a body infection and Quintana had to undergo invasive procedures. On December 25, she was admitted to ICU which stands for intensive care unit.¹²⁸ She spent twenty four days in total in the hospital. Didion describes each day ever since Quintana was admitted to ICU and the information doctors told her and her husband. Quintana also experienced a septic shock. In fact, when her father John died on December 30, she was in coma.

Quintana learned about her father's death in January 2004, once she woke up from coma and her breathing tube was removed. Nonetheless, after being discharged from the hospital in January, she had other complications later the same month. This time it was a case of emboli. Indeed, Quintana went through a lot of health issues, and she was fighting for her life. The events which took place next were not predicted and therefore Didion comes back to her "life changes in the ordinary instant"¹²⁹ in connection to her daughter as well.

Quintana got off the plane in March 2004 with her husband Gerry in California when she suddenly fell on the floor and needed an ambulance. They drove her to UCLA, and she underwent a surgery. The doctors then talked about the possible scenarios of what happened to her. One of them was that her fall caused a bleeding into her brain. The other possibility was that she fell due to the bleeding which had happened before the fall itself. Throughout the period of Quintana's stay in the hospital, Didion turns to the sources of knowledge and information again, specifically, she reads about the issues and researches the information she gets from Quintana's doctors. As mentioned, being informed and knowing everything about the issue made Didion feel like she was in control and aware of the problematics.

¹²⁸ "Intensive care units (ICUs)," Government of Western Australia - Department of Health, accessed April 4, 2024, https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/F_I/Intensive-care-units-ICUs.

¹²⁹ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 3.

5.2 Mortality, Aging, Illness

In *Blue Nights*, Didion connects her feelings and grief surrounding the death of her only daughter to her own mortality and aging. This is apparent especially by using quotes of Bonaparte and Euripides about the grief connected to either seeing one's children die or never having them and how this experience shapes a person. She adds her own line to the two quotes of the men: "When we talk about mortality we are talking about our children."¹³⁰ Later on, she reveals the meaning of the line. She does not talk about the meaning explicitly, rather she mentions the reasons and thoughts that led to it. Once she started writing the book, she thought it would be mainly about children. About children in general, but mainly about her daughter.¹³¹ Nevertheless, with time she realized the book is not solely about them and Quintana, but about the fear of the children getting hurt, fear of not being a good parent, of one's own health worsening. "[...] their actual subject was [...] this failure to confront the certainties of aging, illness, death."¹³² In other words, she was afraid to face the topics mentioned in her quote. However, the fact she felt this way did not stop her from exploring it all and writing about her experience. Didion also claims these subjects are alike.¹³³ According to her, the fact she had a child to take care of could not exist without thinking about the ways the child might get hurt.¹³⁴

Didion talks about her own health issues in the memoir and connects the themes this way. To clarify, she was not afraid to die. She realizes her own mortality due to her and Quintana's health problems. Furthermore, Didion's health issues connected to neuropathy made her frail, which is the way in which Quintana later saw her mother. A frail mum who might not be able to take care of her daughter. Didion talks about this and expands on her worsening health, since she felt as if the issues deepened Quintana's fear of being abandoned and not being taken care of even when she was older.

Among the most frequent techniques used in the memoir belongs the stream of consciousness. Especially when talking about her health issues, Didion writes as thoughts come to her mind. The technique of stream of consciousness is accompanied by the rhetoric questions. She lists a lot of questions without answering them, moreover she does it in a way to show the readers exactly what and how she thinks. For instance, in one of these

¹³⁰ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 13.

¹³¹ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 54.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

situations in which Didion is sitting on a chair and she thinks about the neuropathy, she starts thinking and listing her worries: “What if my feet no longer move? What if my muscles lock? [...] Or what if – What if the problem is now cognitive?”¹³⁵ At this point she gets worried about whether her physical problems might become cognitive, and therefore get in the way of her work, writing and connecting words together.

Moreover, Didion’s mentioned frailty is a topic she explores in the memoir and openly talks about in order to fully comprehend it herself. She is afraid to stand up from the chair due to her fear of falling and not getting up again. However, throughout the memoir she expresses her feelings about her own death. Especially once she learns about the aneurysm at the base of her brain. “[...] I was no longer, if I had ever been, afraid to die: I was now afraid not to die, afraid that I might damage my brain and survive, continue living.”¹³⁶ The quote confirms the way Didion thinks about her own mortality and death. She is not afraid of death per se, she is afraid of what might happen if she falls sick and cannot function, think and write properly anymore. Moreover, Didion’s death would mean the complete loss of her daughter due to both of Quintana’s parents being dead. In other words, it means the traces of Quintana would be gone too.¹³⁷

The theme of aging is also present in the memoir, mostly connected to Didion’s realizing her own mortality and the health issues that come with age. She talks about the change in the mood of women when they are asked about their age. Didion was seventy-five years old when writing the memoir. She admits it, however she thinks about time passing and about her age in connection to Quintana. “[...] there must be a mistake: only yesterday I was in my fifties, my forties, only yesterday I was thirty-one. Quintana was born when I was thirty-one.”¹³⁸

5.3 Loss and Grief

Quintana died on August 26, 2005 at the age of 39. Didion never revealed the specific cause of Quintana’s death. However, the same month Quintana died, she was suffering from pancreatitis. Therefore, her acute pancreatitis has been ever since considered the cause of her death, as the real reason was never made public, and she was generally in a bad condition. Didion thinks back to the afternoon her daughter died. She was by her bed at the

¹³⁵ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 110.

¹³⁶ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 25.

¹³⁷ Matthew R. McLennan, *Philosophy and Vulnerability: Catherine Breillat, Joan Didion, and Audre Lorde* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), 78.

¹³⁸ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 135.

hospital with Quintana's husband Gerry. Didion admits she knew her daughter was dying, and she did not try to avoid or deny the fact her daughter died afterwards.¹³⁹ Although nobody knew exactly when she was going to die, it was clear it would be soon.

Presumably, the expected passing away is the reason for Didion's acceptance and different coping with the loss her daughter. Didion remembers the words Quintana once said on an occasion of giving her mother a book. "Like when someone dies, don't dwell on it."¹⁴⁰ Didion repeats them severely towards the end of the memoir to remind herself to let go and continue with her life, but also as a reminder of Quintana's life and how she would wish for her mother to keep going. Quintana's funeral took place six weeks after she died and Didion describes the funeral procession. She mentions Quintana's friends and the rest of the family showing up. The next day they placed her ashes in St. Ansgar's Chapel in the marble wall next to John's ashes.¹⁴¹

Didion's coping strategy for dealing with the loss of her daughter is working and not slowing down. "I promised myself that I would maintain momentum. [...] In fact I had no idea what would happen if I lost it."¹⁴² She mentions traveling, airports, hotels. Moreover, she was doing the promotion for *The Year* at that time. She then decided to write a one-character play. For her, it was another way of incorporating the things she loved back to her life. What is more, the play was focused on Quintana. "There were "[...] these ninety full minutes, the run time of the play, during which she did not need to be dead."¹⁴³ This suggests Didion fully accepted her daughter is dead, however, she wanted to preserve her memory. Nonetheless, Didion also admits working on the play was a way of keeping herself busy, rather as she calls it "maintaining momentum."¹⁴⁴ She did not want to get stuck, and she tried to keep in mind Quintana's words about not dwelling on someone's death.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁹ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 159.

¹⁴⁰ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 155.

¹⁴¹ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 164.

¹⁴² Didion, *Blue Nights*, 165.

¹⁴³ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 167.

¹⁴⁴ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 166.

¹⁴⁵ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 155.

6 THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING AND BLUE NIGHTS: A COMPARISON

With the analyses of both of the memoirs and the ways in which Didion portrays the themes of loss and grief, the next part of the thesis is dedicated to the comparison of them. Depicting similarities and differences of the themes described in the thesis is a way of presenting how the author coped with the losses and processed the grief in different ways.

To begin with, the style and the form of the memoirs are similar. Didion wrote both memoirs in non-chronological, fragmented narrative, she goes back and forth in time, which also emphasizes the chaotic nature of grief and losing a loved one. Didion unites the themes by memories and flashbacks that she gets. Both memoirs are written in the first-person narrative, and the narrator is Joan Didion herself. The memoirs are introspective, the technique of stream of consciousness is utilized and rhetoric questions as well. Didion utters a few sentences as mantras to keep on reminding them to herself and the reader.

Regarding the content of the memoirs, the most important is to compare how Didion processed her grief in both cases. Firstly, the similarities will be described. In *The Year* Didion looks for the signs, which according to her, she should have seen before John's death. There is a similarity between not seeing the signs before John's death and her feeling of failing as Quintana's mother. In both cases, Didion in the end knows that if she had noticed or if she was a different mother, it would not change the outcome. She does not blame herself for Quintana's death, she only experiences the guilt of failing as a parent. On the other hand, with John she feels guilt for not doing more, not saving him. Although Didion talks about the sudden death of her husband and how hard it was to overcome it, throughout the memoir she reveals his passing away was not unexpected. His heart was in a bad condition, he underwent the angioplasty and often expressed his thoughts about his own death. In the same way, Quintana's poor health also points to the fact her death was not unexpected.

The other similarity is found in the way both losses shook her self-image and self-identity. In *The Year* she attempts to realize the kind of person she is without her husband who she spent so much time with. As has been mentioned, she saw herself "through John's eyes."¹⁴⁶ She talks about seeing herself younger and more vital than she in fact was. Their lives were so connected on several levels that she felt the energy suddenly going more

¹⁴⁶ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 225.

inward after his death. This is also the reason why she tries to find out how to be on her own even though she is not used to it. In *Blue Nights* Didion opens about mortality, her own aging, and death. In connection to self-identity, she goes back to questioning herself as a mother and the exploration of her frailty. Throughout the memoir, it is evident that Didion had started first feeling frail and vulnerable before she had even thought about it and accepted it.¹⁴⁷

One of the significant differences relates to the timing of the memoirs being written. *The Year* was in the process since January 2004, however she started taking it seriously in May 2004, therefore only a few months after John's death. As mentioned, Didion did not write a lot during these first months, due to her visits to Quintana and not being able to write about John's death so soon. She started writing again in October the same year and continued till December. Consequently, the memoir is written within a year from John's death. As Didion wrote the memoir in the period in which she was in pain and grieving, the memoir reflects it. In this regard, the analysis of *The Year* is done according to the five stages of grief since they are strongly present due to Didion's introspectiveness and attempt to pull herself together. She wrote it so closely to her husband's death and that makes the whole work raw and emotional. The image of a wife whose husband of forty years died, and she tries to understand, process and accept it.

On the other hand, the memoir *Blue Nights* Didion started writing in 2010, therefore five years after her daughter's death. The fact she started writing the memoir in 2010 is confirmed in the memoir: "July 26, 2010. Today would be her wedding anniversary."¹⁴⁸ It was then published the next year. In the memoir she goes back to the time of her daughter's death five years ago, she goes back to Quintana's childhood, and the time of them being a family. Next, she moves to the year 2009 when she started having health issues herself and started to realize her frailty. With this in mind, it is assumed the time gap between her daughter's death and working on the memoir made writing it different compared to *The Year*.

It goes without saying that the loss of a child will always be difficult, and the pain never really goes away. However, in the sense of writing, *Blue Nights* is not written with the shock and denial of losing a loved person as the memoir about the loss of Didion's husband. When writing *Blue Nights*, Didion thinks back to the situations and tragedies, she reflects on how

¹⁴⁷ McLennan, *Philosophy and Vulnerability*, 72.

¹⁴⁸ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 5.

the time passes and the way things eventually come to an end. She remembers the grief from back then. In *The Year*, she is still experiencing it. Consequently, the memoir about the loss of her daughter is not analyzed according to the five stages of grief as the first memoir, as the stages are not present. Although Didion could have experienced these stages and not written about them, they cannot be analyzed in regard to the memoir.

The difference also lies in the actions Didion took and how she thought about it all after both losses. *Blue Nights* does not contain the magical thinking anymore. In *The Year*, Didion thinks irrationally about her husband coming back as a part of the denial stage. Nobody knew about this way of thinking, nor the fact she did not want to put his shoes away just in case. On the contrary, in *Blue Nights* she expresses her attempts to let things go. "I no longer want reminders of what was, what got broken, what got lost, what got wasted."¹⁴⁹ In this case, she talks about Quintana's baby teeth which Didion used to keep in a box. The next line shows the opposite of keeping her husband's shoes and clothes in *The Year*. "[...] I believed that I could keep people fully present, keep them with me, by preserving their mementos, their "things," their totems."¹⁵⁰ This shows the difference in her way of thinking in each case of the grieving process. Having lost her husband, Didion clutched to his things to not let go of him. On the other hand, with the death of her daughter, she expresses she did not believe in holding on to the materialistic objects anymore. In the case of Quintana's death, she wanted to let things go even though the pain of losing her was immense. However, Didion preserved Quintana's memory by creating a play about her.

Although the endings of the memoirs are similar, as Didion writes about the fear of losing the memory of John in *The Year* and of Quintana in *Blue Nights*, the reasons for the fear are different. In the case of *The Year*, Didion fears her memory of John will fade with time. On the other hand, in *Blue Nights* the fear hides in a deeper, even philosophical idea. "I know what the frailty is, I know what the fear is. [...] The fear is for what is still to be lost."¹⁵¹ By the fact there is still something to lose, she references to her frailty, her illness and upcoming death. In other words, this time she would not have power to stop the memories from fading. The memories would fade due to her age, her own mortality.¹⁵²

To sum up, Didion's coping with the losses and grieving her loved ones was portrayed differently in both cases. The question is not which loss hurt her more or which of them she

¹⁴⁹ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 44.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 188.

¹⁵² McLennan, *Philosophy and Vulnerability*, 78.

processed in a better way. In the end, the importance is in her acceptance of losing both of her husband and daughter, and the strength she needed to arrive to this final stage of grief.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the thesis was to analyze the themes of loss and grief in Joan Didion's memoirs *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011). Moreover, a part of the objective was to depict differences in the grieving processes, as Didion coped with both differently.

To conduct thematic analyses of the memoirs, the thesis examined also the minor themes such as aging, mortality, self-identity, and parenthood in connection to the themes of loss and grief. This resulted in portraying Didion and her exploration of self-identity tied to her marriage of forty years and who she is without her husband by her side. In case of grieving her daughter Quintana, she questioned herself as a mother. Aging and mortality were portrayed mainly in *Blue Nights* in connection to Didion's daughter's passing away.

The analysis of *The Year of Magical Thinking* was based mostly on the five stages of grief, which showed how Didion handled the loss, and how these stages were projected in the memoir. However, the stages of grief are not portrayed in *Blue Nights* at all, due to which the analysis is based mainly on close reading of the memoir and presenting the themes mentioned.

To examine the divergent paths of the grieving processes, a comparison was conducted focusing on both memoirs and their depictions of the themes of loss and grief. The similarities are mainly in the style and the form of memoirs. Didion also utilizes techniques such as flashbacks and stream of consciousness in both. The main difference in the portrayal of the main themes, and the way Didion coped with the loss of her husband and daughter, is in the timing of writing the memoirs. *The Year of Magical Thinking* was written within a year from her husband's death which implies that writing about the loss was raw and the experience recent. On the other hand, memoir *Blue Nights* was written five years after her daughter's death. This fact suggests the time gap of five years between the death and writing about the loss gave Didion more space to heal the pain she experienced and then write about it while remembering the times her daughter died. Didion had irrational thoughts as a part of the denial stage about her husband returning after he died. These irrational thoughts led to the decision to not putting away his belongings in case he returns. On the contrary, after the loss of her daughter Didion tried to continue with her life and focused her energy on creating a play about Quintana. She kept herself busy and working.

The thesis comes to the conclusion that each loss is portrayed differently in each memoir and Joan Didion's grieving process is unique in both cases.

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