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The Absence of a Coherent Narrative

Silence, Invisibility and Repetition in the Work of Joan Didion

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Abstract

This thesis explores American author Joan Didion's conceptualization of narrative and life as seen in her non-fictional works, and applies this to two of her fictional narratives, *Play It as It Lays* (1970) and *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1996) respectively. I suggest that what constitutes Didion's own reflections on "narrativity" is formed by a distinct sense of an absent coherent narrative line. I argue that this can be seen represented in the two novels as two literary tropes that denote absence, namely "silence" and "invisibility." I find that the way these tropes are carried is in the repetitive patterns that moreover emphasize a need to go back to their origins and repeat in order to make sense. Overall, this thesis hopes to contribute to the larger conversation on narrative and life as well as providing an alternative reading of two of Didion's novels and selected works in her non-fiction.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Silence in <i>Play It as It Lays</i>	15
Meaning and Silence	16
<i>Play It as It Lays</i>	19
Meaninglessness and the “Unsettled Stories”	23
Maria’s Silence and the Act of Saying “Nothing”	29
Chapter 2: Invisibility in <i>The Last Thing He Wanted</i>	37
Invisibility	38
<i>The Last Thing He Wanted</i>	41
Invisibility of the Story	45
Elena’s Invisibility	52
Chapter 3: Repeating and Retelling	56
Repetition	57
The Memoirs	61
Repetition in <i>Last Thing</i>	67
Repetition in <i>Play It</i>	71
Conclusion	77
Works Cited.....	81

Introduction

The need to tell stories in order to make sense of our lives has by now become such an ingrained part of our thinking that it has become a near accepted fact. Across multiple disciplines and in the realm of popular culture, “storytelling” and “narrative” are often seen connected to “life” and its experiences. In recent years, however, a conversation has emerged that questions the very premise that we need to apply a narrative to our lives in order to make sense of it. American author Joan Didion is a loud voice in this conversation. Both in her non-fiction and her fiction, Didion has repeatedly cast doubt upon her own ability to live “narratively,” experiencing an absence of a coherent narrative in her own life. The overall purpose of this thesis is to explore that very part of Didion’s writing and consider how this experience is presented and reflected in her fictional works.

In several of her non-fiction pieces Didion has questioned the very premise of narrative and its capacity to reflect life. As she writes in her essay fittingly originally titled “A Problem of Making Connections” (1965),¹ “I came into adult life equipped with an essentially romantic ethic” (WA2, 279). In walking into life and holding before her the narratives of “Axel Heyst in *Victory* and Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* and Charlotte Rittenmayer in *The Wild Palms* and a few dozen other,” she believed that life was meant to hold the same narrative structure as her trusted books did, including the novels by Joseph Conrad, Henry James and William Faulkner mentioned here (279). She used to believe that “salvation lay in extreme and doomed commitments, promises made and somehow kept outside the range of normal social experience” but now, she explains “I have trouble reconciling salvation with those ignorant armies incessantly jostling in my mind” (Ibid., 279). With this allusion to the last line of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (1867), “where ignorant armies clash by night,” Didion shares her growing disbelief in a coherent narrative order to her experience of life. Just as faith could no longer hold the stability of certitude and peace for the speaker of Arnold’s poem, the stability of a coherent narrative is beginning to falter for Didion.

¹ This essay originally appeared in *Life Magazine* in 1965 under the title “A Problem of Making Connections,” but was later reprinted in her essay collection *The White Album* (1979) under the title “On the Islands.”

² Abbreviation for *The White Album*

This is especially evident in the opening to her essay collection, *The White Album* (1979). Here Didion writes:

We tell ourselves stories in order to live ... we look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social and moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.

... or at least we do for a while. (11)

As Didion explains in the above passage, she has always acknowledged that in telling stories we can make sense of our experiences, even of the most inexplicable ones. Yet it is this exact premise that Didion begins to doubt. As she explains, life and its experiences are no longer applicable to coherent narrative, but rather form an assembly of “disparate images.” For Didion sees the “narrative line” – a line with certain connections that link experiences together, thus forming a cohesive narrative stretched out so one can see it clearly both in the past, the present and the future – as an imposition.

Exploring how Didion’s perception of narrative is presented and reflected in her fictional works, this thesis will focus on her two novels *Play It as It Lays* (1970) and *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1996).³ Linking these fictional texts to her non-fiction, I will claim that Didion formulates what can be conceived as her own view and “philosophy” of narrative⁴ and narrativity⁵ and I will discuss how this view is reflected in the two fictional works. In both *Play It* and *Last Thing* Didion is testing the ideas she works on in her non-fiction and I suggest that in her fiction the absence of a narrative line takes the form of the tropes of silence and invisibility. As a third constituent part of this thesis statement, I further suggest that these two tropes are carried out aesthetically by Didion’s use of repetitive

³ From this point forward I will refer to the novels as *Play It* and *Last Thing*.

⁴ “Narrative” in this sense is understood as “a spoken or written account or connected events; a story” (“Narrative”).

⁵ I will go into more detail on this later, but simply put, “narrativity”, as used here, denotes the idea that we live our lives as a narrative with a specific plot that we follow. The narrative form of our lives tends to create some kind of meaning and coherence both in the past, present and future.

patterns and rhythms – variants of repetition that convey the need to go back to the origin in order to find meaning. “Repetition” is in this sense more than a trope since it functions both as the “vehicle” in which the tropes are carried and plays a key role in Didion’s understanding of narrativity.

In the following, I will elaborate further on how I understand and read this concept of narrativity in Didion’s non-fiction. The remainder of this introduction will then consist of a presentation of my theoretical approach and methodology as well as a specification of my thesis statement. However, I find it necessary to state already here that although I will refer to “narrativity,” “narrative” and “narrator” in this thesis, I do not use structuralist narratology in my approach to Didion’s writing. My focus instead treats Didion’s non-fiction as the theoretical framework for, and around, her fiction. This means that, with some qualifications, I will be referring to Didion’s non-fiction as I would to any other theory. In this sense, I view Didion’s understanding of narrativity as a “theory” that I apply to her fiction.

The most important qualification, or perhaps rather specification, to make here is that Didion’s non-fiction is not a theory she has deliberately designed as a comment on her fiction. Rather, as indicated already, I find that ideas, concerns and areas of exploration presented in her non-fiction are linked to, and, as this thesis will aim to show, can improve our understanding of key notions in her fiction. A second qualification is that my view of Didion’s understanding of narrativity as a kind of theory does not imply that there is a sharp distinction between her non-fiction and her fiction. Yet although this distinction can be blurred, it does not follow that it is critically unproductive. I consider the non-fiction /fiction distinction pragmatically: while in her non-fiction Didion refers relatively directly to her own life and while she for example in an essay can express her opinion bluntly and unambiguously, in her fiction she activates her literary imagination in a different (yet related) way. This means that makes use of a range of literary devices and techniques and thus generalizing her observations and experiences in a way that makes them more relevant to readers whose lives are different from hers.

Some background relevant to Didion’s life and work is necessary in order to understand where her thinking about the narrative line emerges from – not least in relation to its absences. As already mentioned, Didion is an exceptionally versatile writer. As an essayist, novelist, journalist, playwright and memoirist, she has attended to an array of subjects ranging from the inner depths of her personal life to the larger issues of political, societal and cultural nature. In the early years of her career Didion wrote essays for

acclaimed magazines such as *Life Magazine*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*. In addition to *The White Album* that I referred to above, Didion is best known for one of her most famous non-fiction collection, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968). This collection attends to the fading youth of California and the demise of its cultural memory. The essays collected here moreover display the tact and precision of journalistic writing as well as literary techniques and would render her as a prominent part of the New Journalism movement – a style of writing that employed literary techniques and devices to the conventional journalistic discourse.

In this respect, many regard Didion first and foremost as a non-fiction writer. However, her bibliography includes several novels as well. Her first novel, *Run, River* (1963) launched her career as a novelist, and she later went on to write *Play It as It Lays* (1970), *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977), *Democracy* (1984) and finally *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1996). Yet most contemporary readers of Didion will recognize her for her most recent works, her two memoirs, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011). The latter was written and published only a year after her husband, John Gregory Dunne, suffered a sudden and fatal heart attack. In the memoir she writes about the year she spent in a state of “magical thinking” where she tries to come to terms with his death. The second memoir was written after their adopted daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne, passed away after being hospitalized for years with a neurological disorder. Didion once again writes through her grief – grieves by writing and writes while grieving – addressing larger issues of motherhood, aging, and the horror of outliving one’s own child. These two memoirs gave Didion’s authorship an upsurge and *The Year of Magical Thinking* was even adapted to Broadway. Additionally, in recent years a documentary on Didion’s life titled “The Center Will Not Hold” (2017) premiered on Netflix, as did a film adaptation of *The Last Thing He Wanted* in January 2020.

Despite the many genres to which Didion contributed and her attentive focus on several different topics, I find that there is almost always one theme that runs through her writing. This is the theme of absence. When Didion wrote about California’s history in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, she wrote about the loss of a cultural memory and the past of her ancestors. When she wrote about its culture, she wrote about its absence or demise. When she wrote about her own life, she wrote about the loss of the two most important people in it. There is in other words always a sense of loss in Didion’s non-fiction and to this extent she has addressed and explored absence in every sense of the word. The one

consistent red line that runs through her exploration, however, is the absence of a coherent narrative.

This is especially evident in her works written after the summer of 1968 when Didion experienced a nervous breakdown and was temporarily admitted to a psychiatric hospital. The experience that life could suddenly change, that her own narrative could take such sudden turns, marks a shift in her writing as she keeps an attentive eye to the meaninglessness of life and, in effect, the meaninglessness of holding a narrative line. In her non-fiction, this shift is observable in the opening lines to *The White Album* as cited above, and it is even more noticeable in the paragraph that follows it: in reflecting back to her experience in the institution, she says that the way she had previously been living was an “adequate enough performance, as improvisations go.” She goes on:

The only problem was that my entire education, everything I had ever been told or had told myself, insisted that the production was never meant to be improvised: I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw. Flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no “meaning” beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie, but a cutting-room experience. In what would probably be the middle of my life I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative’s intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical. (11-12)

What I call Didion’s “concept” or “philosophy” of narrativity is largely based on the above quote. An important scholar on Didion, Sandra K. Hinchman (1985), has similarly defined the author’s perception of narrativity as the “‘shifting phantasmagoria’ upon which we normally impose a coherent narrative structure complete with a plot and a message” (457). In developing this perception, Hinchman suggests Didion’s understanding of narrativity (an understanding which underlies my use of the word as a concept) is the lack of logical connections between experiences and events that somehow are expected to link together to a cohesive narrative. Instead of seeing life as a plot dictated by the progression of a narrative, Didion experiences rather an assembly of an array of “disparate images.”

The doubt Didion has in the premise of narrativity goes against a fundamental and inherent idea. Her reflections on narrative and its meaning to life in this sense belong to a

current conversation on narrativity. While the idea that we think of life and narrative as interconnected concepts is not necessarily new in itself, the extensive and interdisciplinary discourse around it is. In the early 1980s, a shift in how we reflect on and conceptualize “narrative” emerged and was fittingly termed the “narrative turn.” For a long time, scholars and thinkers thought of “narrative” and its formal manifestations primarily in terms of textuality within the realm of literary studies. When the “narrative turn” occurred, however, one began to apply the narrative form to how human beings reflect over and makes sense of their lives. Narrative, as a concept and idea, was no longer limited to literary studies but expanded into and across multiple disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, social sciences, literary, communication and film theory to name a few (Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001, 1). The focus was first and foremost placed on the necessity of narrating our lives and, as Jens Brockmeier and Rom Harré note in the edited volume to *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography Self and Culture* (2001), scholars now tended to assume that storytelling and narrative “are forms inherent in our ways of getting knowledge that structure experience about the world and ourselves” (50). However, to think of narrative as such an important part of our lives and the way we live would inevitably open it up to debate and soon a countertrend emerged.

While not necessarily taking a stance on the either-or of what she calls a now “polarized debate,” in her *The Ethics of Storytelling* (2018) Hanna Meretoja approaches the conversation with a much-needed “theoretical-analytical framework that allows us to explore the ethical complexity of roles that play in our lives” (2). Meretoja’s notion and understanding of storytelling and narrative in life is particularly helpful because she manages to clearly show the nuances of the debate. As she explains, while the idea that we need stories in order to live a fully coherent life became popular, “this strong narrativist position has provoked a fierce counterreaction” (2). Although Meretoja focuses primarily on the ethical aspect of “storytelling,” she convincingly argues that the ethics of storytelling is closely related to aesthetics, including narrative form. Her understanding of “storytelling” therefore carries the same connotations as “narrative” in that it is something we tend to apply to how we live our lives. She takes heed of the previous firm stances on storytelling as a fundamental truth drawing on words from Paul Ricoeur, who stated that “‘a life narrated can be a life examined’ and hence worth living” (1), but she cautions and explains that we need to be aware of not only the ethical potential of storytelling, but also the risks (2). Meretoja contends that “when we go through meaningful experiences, weave them into stories, and

remember them in a certain light and from a certain perspective, we engage in interpretative processes of sense-making” (3). Conducting a variant of literary criticism that she calls “narrative hermeneutics,” Meretoja explores narrative as an activity of organizing experiences that has “bearing on our sense of who we are and who we could be” (7). She thus observes that narrative “easily appears as a projection of false order, or as a distortion of the original experiences or events” (8).

This approach to narrativity aligns with Didion’s in that it can potentially project a false order on our experiences. But it also differs in that Didion does not think we can weave the experiences into stories. In her perception of narrativity, we cannot weave the experiences into coherent stories because, in her view of life, there are no logical connections that can make this possible. She views her experiences not as something that follows a coherent plot, but rather as an arbitrary construction of unrelated images. There always seem to be imperative elements and pieces missing; there is, seen from Didion’s perspective, a lack of connections that would otherwise hold her experiences together. In other words, there is a distinct absence of a coherent narrative.

Several scholars have previously attentively addressed this concept of absence in Didion’s non-fiction, but few have explored how it emerges in her fiction.⁶ As stated, I suggest that we can identify and discuss this absence through the tropes of “silence” and “invisibility” and that these tropes are further carried through patterns of “repetition.” Although I will develop my understanding of each of these concepts in more detail in the following chapters, I will give my working definitions of both “silence” and “invisibility” as well as “repetition” already here. My understanding of “working definition” is inspired by Mieke Bal, who in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2012) claims that “While groping to define, provisionally and partly, what a concept may *mean*, we gain insight into what it can *do*” (Bal 11).

Both silence and invisibility speak to the gaps, the blanks and the empty spaces and in many ways relate to how Wolfgang Iser defines “gap” in *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach* (1974). I have, however, chosen to use “silence” and “invisibility” because while the above-mentioned concepts are interesting and to some extent helpful, they do not capture what I suggest silence and invisibility do. In exploring “silence” as a trope I am primarily looking at instances in the text where we are forced to look for

⁶ I will elaborate further on previous Didion criticism in my analysis of the two novels.

meaning, but where we do not arrive at any satisfactory point of closure. I base this understanding mostly on how Didion herself sees “meaning” and “silence” as two connected concepts: she finds that silence is a space where we are forced to confront our own existence and, as she experiences it, its meaninglessness. Imperative to my understanding is further that even though silence essentially means “absence,” it is by no means “nothing.” This perception of silence is moreover inspired both by Thomas Clifton’s study of silences in musical composition (1976) and Ernestine Schlant’s understanding of silence in text (1999), which I will consider in more detail in Chapter One.

Though closely related, invisibility differs from silence in that it has more of a looming presence to the overall narratives. While silence is something we can detect and point to in Didion’s non-fiction as well as her fiction, the invisible forms rather a sensation of what is not there. Invisibility as a concept invokes what is “not there,” but we do not experience it as absent because we can sense that something is present. Reminiscent of the feelings described by people who believe they have seen a ghost or a phantom, invisibility invokes the distinct sensation that something is present, but you cannot detect it visually or physically. Invisibility therefore has a vague presence to the overall narrative: It is ungraspable and intangible, yet very much there. My understanding of “invisibility” as a trope has furthermore been aided by observations made by Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes in their edited volume, *Invisibility in Visual and Material Culture* (2019). I will, as mentioned, go into more detail in each chapter, but it should be noted here that imperative to my thinking about of both invisibility and silence, is that although they denote something that is absent, it does not follow that they are “nothing.” On the contrary, the “something” that the novel denotes, or circles around, can be particularly important precisely because it is absent and apparently untellable.

As we will see, one of the reasons why these two tropes have such a strong effect on the reader is that they are carried out by consistent repetitive patterns and rhythms. They force the reader to reread, reinterpret and reassess the meaning of what we have read. This interpretative task, which I consider as indistinguishable from the act of reading, approximates a sense-making activity that blends into, and becomes a constituent element of, our life experience. In Meretoja’s phrase, in “meaningful experiences ... we remember them ... and engage in interpretative processes of sense-making” (8). This fundamental activity of meaning-making in life becomes the foundation for how meaning – or in some instances, the lack thereof – is transposed to Didion’s two novels. Along the lines of “silence” and

“invisibility,” she uses repetition as a literary technique. But repetition is complicated and has the dual function of carrying these two tropes as well as, being a trope in its own right, conveying the need to go back to the origin in order to find meaning. In discussing repetition, I will refer to it both as a literary technique employed to make us reread and reassess certain elements of the narrative as well as a way of making sense of certain experiences for Didion. Here I will be basing my understanding primarily on Edward Casey’s “Imagination and Repetition in Literature: A Reassessment” (1975) as well as J. Hillis Miller’s *Fiction and Repetition* (1982).

Absence and what is seemingly “not there” are, in my reading, imperative elements to Didion’s conceptualization of narrativity. I have chosen the novels *Play It* and *Last Thing* out of Didion’s five, to be most relevant for this study precisely because of their thematization of absence and their repetitive patterns. *Play It* follows Maria Wyeth, an out-of-work actress in Hollywood who tries to the best of her efforts to maneuver the dark corners of showbusiness. The essence of the novel is, in many ways, Maria’s view of life which basically is that “nothing” matters. She believes that to look for meaning is pointless unless it leads to a satisfactory answer, which, as she explains, “nothing” does (6). I will suggest that the narrative structure mirrors Maria’s “nothingness” in the many moments of gaps and “silences” where crucial information is omitted, and the reader is forced to look for meaning where there essentially is none, or at the very least, there is no satisfactory place of resolution. Previous scholarship on *Play It* has often attended to the characterization of Maria as either a direct reflection of Didion’s own mental psyche, or as a representation of a victim of male oppression. According to one critic’s reading that I intend to challenge in Chapter One, Maria’s characterization “reveals an undercurrent of violence against women” and the female characters are systematically being oppressed by the men they surround themselves with (Stout, 7-8). While this is a fair and certainly valid reading, I suggest that by removing ourselves from the lens of feminism and critique of American Society it becomes possible to approach *Play It* as a portrayal of Didion’s own ideas about narrative. As we will see, the emphasis placed on Maria’s as a victim tends to overshadow what I think is Didion’s overall project of examining narrative and its importance and necessity to life.

I have chosen *Last Thing* primarily for its demanding narrative structure and partly because it is quite different from *Play It* as it is Didion’s only political thriller novel. The story centers on Elena McMahon, whom we meet after she has recently quit her job as a reporter and abandoned a career in politics in order to take care of her father after the death

of her mother. In a remarkable turn of events, she finds herself in the footsteps of her father's occupation as an arms-dealer in South America. Along the way, she engages in a romantic relationship with a DIA (Defense Intelligence Agent), Treat Morrison, who later kills her. It is a fairly simple plot, but deceptively so, for while it tells the story of Elena it also exemplifies the sensation of never being able to reach the center, but of always circling the story. In my reading, this is due to an unusually present and visible narrator who is constantly creating awareness of the fact that she cannot, or is not able to, tell the story which renders the story itself in a sense invisible to us. This particular aspect of the novel has been criticized, and several readers have pointed out how its uncommon structure and plot render the narrative impenetrable. However, I will suggest that it is precisely this impenetrableness that creates the sensations of absence, of what is not there, in a word, of the invisible. Interestingly, few scholars have addressed *Last Thing* and it is often left out of critical collections of Didion's works. A common consensus, however, seems to be that readers find it difficult and confusing. As I will discuss in more detail later in Chapter Two such readings of the novel only highlights my suggestion that the novel's impenetrableness is caused by the awareness of never being able to reach the story.

So far in this introduction I have presented Didion's authorship and explained how I read her concept of narrativity in her fiction in relation to absence. I have also explained why I find the two novels I have chosen to be relevant for this study. In the final part of this introduction, I will present my theoretical framework in further detail and include the working definitions of key concepts central to this thesis, as well as my method of reading. Finally, I will give an outline of my chapters and a summary of my thesis statement.

As I stated initially, my theoretical framework in regard to narrativity is derived and developed from Didion's own non-fictional works. This means that, as indicated already, I will be treating her non-fiction as a theoretical basis and reference point for my discussion of the two novels in question. This also entails that I am distancing myself from the author's intention as I am not reading the novels as a direct mirror to Didion's life and inner thoughts. Rather, I am using her reflections on narrative and life in her non-fiction as the foundation for my analyses of the two novels. Although this means that I am dissociating myself from other potentially relevant theories, the focus on Didion that emphasizes her conceptualization and reflections on narrativity has the additional critical advantage that it enables me to improve our understanding of some of her non-fictional works as well. Throughout this thesis I will consequently be referring to a selected number of

Didion's non-fiction, ranging from short essays to her longer memoirs, and offer a reading of them that creates the foundation for my literary analysis of her fiction.

It is moreover from Didion's non-fiction that my reading of the two tropes originally occurred. My understanding of silence and invisibility in particular is grounded in the overall sense of absence that is conveyed through her "philosophy" of life. Thus, when I go on to define and elaborate on these two tropes it is first and foremost her non-fiction that forms the basis for how I read them in her novels. As I have stated above, this approach will be supported by other theories of how "silence" and "invisibility" may be read in fictional narratives. My appropriation of these concepts is furthermore based on, and have benefitted from, theories both within and outside of the realm of literary studies. This is also how I approach repetition, but as I have mentioned, "repetition" takes on a larger role. Here I will consider *how* Didion tries to find meaning. I will look at repetition not only as a literary concept used in her novels but also as a device employed in her life as a tool to search for and find meaning.

In addition to "silence", "invisibility" and "repetition" as discussed above, some other key terms need to be briefly defined here. I understand "narrative" simply as "a spoken or written account or connected events; a story" ("Narrative"). Another important concept connected to this is "narrativity". "Narrativity" denotes the connection between life and narrative and the idea that we apply a narrative structure to our lives. Marie Laure-Ryan's explanation of the difference between narration and narrativity is of help in understanding both concepts. She writes in her essay "The Modes of Narrativity and Their visual Metaphors" (1992), that "whereas the modes of narration are the different ways of telling the same story, the modes of narrativity are the various textual realizations of plots, the various ways in which a text relies on a narrative structure (or plot, or story) and suggests this structure as a model of coherence" (369). Applying Laure-Ryan's view to how we tend to think about our life as a story, "narrativity" denotes how we structure our lives as a plot (or a story) and that this structure implies some sense of coherency and meaning. The way Didion conceptualizes "narrativity" goes against this notion as she does not believe that her life's "story" is applicable to a narrative structure. Related to "narrative" and "narrativity" is the concept of the narrator. This concept is especially relevant to my analysis of *Last Thing* that employs an unusual, and highly effective, variant of third-person narrator. In contrast to a first-person narrator, whose perception is limited to one character at a time and who often combines the functions of narrator and character, a third-person narrator usually does not

participate as a character in the plot and “knows everything that needs to be known about the agents, actions, and events, and has privileged access to the characters thoughts, feelings, and motives” (Abrams 1999, 232).

Finally, I use the phrase “affective dissonance” to conceptualize the feeling that the silences in the text leave us with. “Affective dissonance” is a phrase coined by Jennifer Ladino in her *Memorials Matter: Emotion, Environment, and Public Memory at American Historical Sites* (2019). She explains that “affective dissonance” is “a counterpart to what psychologists’ term cognitive dissonance and is the unsettled state in which we experience more than one *feeling* at the same time, often with a sense of conflictedness ... but not necessarily with a consciously ‘storied’ understanding of what we’re feeling” (22). Similar to the sensation cognitive dissonance invokes, affective dissonance conjures feelings of irritation and marks our “embodied situatedness in space; it also has an ‘intensity belied by its subtlety’” (Ibid.). Unlike cognitive dissonance, which is often thought to be a singular affect, affective dissonance is “characterized by an ironic doubleness, or even multiplicity; it’s an affective state of being rather than an emotion itself” (Ibid.) and denotes the simultaneous sensation of multiple and conflicting feelings that have no distinct place to inhabit. This will be particularly important in my analysis of *Play It* where in encountering silences in the text our response renders us in this space of affective dissonance.

My method rests on close reading specific examples and passages from Didion’s non-fiction and fiction that convey silence and invisibility as well as the repetitive patterns of her prose and mode of telling her life. This means that I have chosen specific passages that illustrate and support my claims and suggestions. In Robert Dale Parker’s words, through close reading I pay “detailed careful attention to evidence from the text itself, to the words on the page” (2008, 16). Moreover, although I am not basing my readings on any historical contextualization, the passages I choose to analyze have significant relevance outside of Didion’s fiction and non-fiction in that they speak to a larger conversation of narrative and life. It should also be noted that I am working from the principle that reading is a dynamic activity between the text and reader. As Marielle Mace puts it, “reading appears, indeed, to be a dynamic of attraction and response: books bring singular configurations, each implying potential ‘paths’ to our attention, our perception, and our capacities for action” (2013, 216). In other words, my discussion of how Didion’s understanding of narrativity affects how we read her novels is based on the principle that we form responses in our meeting with the text.

As a final point to this introduction, I will give an outline of the following chapter. This thesis consists of three main chapters excluding the Introduction and Conclusion. As each novel speaks to its own trope, I have organized the thesis in relation to the three elements of my title: “silence,” “invisibility,” and finally “repetition.” In Chapter One I will primarily attend to the trope of silence and *Play It*. However, since part of this thesis’ focus is on Didion’s non-fiction, the first chapter will also have a transition character from this introduction to Chapter’s Two and Three. This order is motivated by my wish to establish further and more concretely what I view as Didion’s “theory”. The first part of Chapter One therefore contributes to the following chapters while at the same time forming the basis for my analyses of both novels and the chapter on “repetition.” The elaboration on Didion’s concept of narrativity will then move into my understanding of silence which is partly based on how she herself reflects upon what being silent means. This will, in turn, create the foundation of how I suggest we can read the silences in her fiction. In the analysis of the novel I will explore two functions of silence. I will further claim that by forcing the reader to attend to these silences in the plot of the narrative as well as to Maria’s literal silence and act of saying “nothing” in dialogue with others, Didion creates a space of meaninglessness and a space of affective dissonance. We are left with unresolved and unsettled feelings that have no distinct place to inhabit. My analysis will moreover be based on the critical reading of the novel by Janice P. Stout that I intend to challenge, as mentioned above.

In Chapter Two I will focus on *Last Thing*. As I have mentioned, *Last Thing* conveys the sense of a narrative that is present but not found neither by the narrator nor the reader. My claim in this chapter is that due to the narrator’s central and visible position the text as well as the interplay between discourse (by which I mean Didion’s text as presented on the page) and story, we become aware of the lack of a story. Overall, this chapter aims to show that Didion’s reflections on the inability to tell a story are transposed to *Last Thing* through the trope of the invisible.

The final chapter will combine both *Play It* and *Last Thing*, exploring how the technique of repetition carries the two tropes in the novels. I have chosen to devote a separate chapter to “repetition” because I find it so fundamental to the way Didion experiences narrativity as well as to how that experience is transposed in her two novels that it needs to be fully explored. I will therefore spend time on Didion’s non-fiction and explore how repetition is a fundamental activity employed to make sense. In this chapter I will use Didion’s two memoirs, *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*, as my theoretical

framework. In the final part of the chapter I will attend to the two novels and see how repetition functions as a literary device that makes us conduct the same activity. In *Last Thing* it is the repetition of italicized lines as well as the narrator's repetition of the story that is not told that conveys the trope of invisibility. In *Play It*, the repetition of Maria's silence as well as the aesthetics of the text convey the silences discussed in Chapter One. The Conclusion will build on the main points made in the chapters, conclude my finding and also give some indications of future and larger conversations of potential research.

To summarize my thesis statement, I claim Didion's concept of narrativity can most clearly be detected and, once identified, discussed through attending to the absences that manifest in the two novels under consideration. I further suggest that the repetitive patterns in both novels play a crucial role to how this absence is conveyed. In addition to this, repetition is fundamental to how Didion copes with, and manages, her lack of narrative because she insists on going back to the past in order to find meaning, or at least some meaning, in the present. In her two novels she reassesses and reevaluates by repeating tropes and lines, thus forcing the reader to do so herself. Succinctly put, the two linked questions I attempt to answer are: how does silence and invisibly reflect Didion's concept or "philosophy" of narrative? How does this affect her fiction and what is the effect on her readers? I hope that by focusing on the interplay between her non-fiction and fiction, this thesis can give an alternative reading of two of Didion's novels that take particular heed of her own understanding of, and approach to, narrativity as well as positioning her in the current debate on narrative and life.

Chapter 1: Silence in *Play It as It Lays*

A crucial element in Didion's conceptualization of narrativity is the search for meaning. As she explains, we tell ourselves stories and we do so to make sense of our experiences. We do so to find meaning and to locate certain logical connections that create a coherent narrative which we can live by. And yet, this is not really the case for Didion. As I have explained in the Introduction, what I view as Didion's concept or "philosophy" of life is that, in her experience, she does not see life as a coherent narrative but rather as an array of images and flash pictures that are isolated from each other and do not have a logical connection between them. Although she has not necessarily come to believe that her life has no meaning, it is evident that the claim that we tell stories in order to *find* meaning is problematic for her. Didion consistently questions what many see as a fundamental fact and time and time again she tries to see how she can locate meaning where there essentially is none. While this is a pervasive theme in several of Didion's non-fiction, there are specifically two essays I want to focus on in the following. Primarily, these two essays speak to the notion of meaning and meaninglessness, but the second, "One Morning After the Sixties", also directly addresses what it means to be silent.

In this chapter I will therefore first explain and elaborate on how I read Didion's concept of narrativity with reference to the above-mentioned essays. Following my reading of Didion's own understanding of the importance and significance of silence, I will explore further and develop my understanding of silence as defined in the Introduction. Here, I will be referring to Thomas Clifton's (1976) essay on the intricacies of musical composition. The remainder of the chapter is then dedicated to the analysis of *Play It* where I will attend to the trope of silence. My central claim is that the silences, both implicit and explicit ones, force us to look for meaning in parts of the story where there essentially is none. I suggest that this creates a state of "affective dissonance" as our emotional response to the text will not end up at a satisfactory place. In structuring this analysis, I will begin by giving an overview of the plot and its critical reception. I will specifically pay attention to one central critic, Janis P. Stout, who has addressed this very notion of silence in *Play It* and use her discussion as a critical backdrop for analyzing the function of silence.

Meaning and Silence

When Didion observes that “we look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social and moral lesson in the murder of five” (WA, 11), she is essentially saying that in even the most meaningless of situations human beings are inclined to look for some kind of meaning. To “tell stories in order to live” means that we narrate and story even the most inexplicable of situations and events so that we can find meaning and come to some kind of satisfactory closure. As I have mentioned, this human inclination or need is a prevalent theme in Didion’s non-fiction. While this can be found in several of her essays, I find that the following is one of more prominent examples of this. In the final essay in *The White Album*, she relates an anecdote about the convicted murderer Paul Furgeson. She explains that while Paul Furgeson was “serving a life sentence for the murder of Roman Navorro” he had entered and won “first prize in a PEN fiction contest” (48). When he was later interviewed about this contest, he had announced that he intended to keep writing because “writing had helped him, he had said, to ‘reflect on experience and see what it means’” (Ibid.). It is this last sentence that strikes a chord with Didion, and she explains that she quite often reflects on these very words. When she thinks about the idea of writing experience to see what it means, she comes to find every time that in her case, “writing has not yet helped me to see what it means” (Ibid). What “it” is in this sense is life with all its experiences. As she explains, telling and writing through her own experiences has not helped her locate their meaning. It is a loaded sentence and it reverberates with the opening line to the collection, that “we tell ourselves stories in order to live ... or, at least we do for a while.” For while some of us do tell stories in order to find meaning, in order to live, Didion came to a point in her life where she did not.

In another essay, Didion specifically connects the sense of meaninglessness to the act of being silent. In her essay titled “On the Morning After the Sixties” (1970), she opens by recalling a memory of one particular afternoon where she was lying on a couch in a fraternity home at UC Berkeley. For reasons she cannot remember, she had stayed behind while her date went to a football game (328). She recalls lying on this couch reading and listening to a man playing the piano next to her. She explains that as he was playing, he was telling her, without saying one single word, “something I had not known before about bad marriage and wasted time and looking backward” (329). As Didion reflects and looks back on this memory she realizes that even the idea of such an afternoon seems “implausible in every detail ... so exotic as to be almost czarist,” and it suggested to her “the extent to which

the narrative on which many of us grew up on no longer applies” (Ibid.). According to her, this narrative was based on the particularities of the sixties. Being a part of the sixties meant to be “distrustful of political highs, the historical irrelevancy of growing up convinced that the heart of darkness lay not in some error of social organization, but in man’s own blood” (329-330). This is further supported by being a part of what she calls the “silent generation” (330). She claims her generation was silent, not “as some thought, because we shared the period’s official optimism nor, as others thought, because we feared its official repression” (Ibid.). They were silent because “the exhilaration of social action seemed to many of [them] just one more way of escaping the personal, of masking for a while that dread of the meaningless which was man’s fate” (Ibid.). In Didion’s view, then, to be silent is to face the meaninglessness of our own existence. In quite literally sitting in silence we are, according to Didion, confronted with our own inherent sense and lack of meaning. Silence consequently becomes much more than just the absence of sound and noise; rather, it becomes an intense space, and rather loud space, of thought and contemplation.

That silence and meaninglessness are related to one another can moreover be derived from Didion’s reflections as she ends the essay. She tells us that “what I have made for myself is personal, but [it] is not exactly peace” (331). We saw above that the consequence of not taking action is to escape the personal dread of meaninglessness, but as she chose to confront and directly face it, she explains that she never quite arrived at peace with the dread. She goes on to tell us that she had only known one person who seemed to have found closure in the meaningless: this was a boy who had found foothold in an ideology and had therefore managed to “cut himself loose from both his own dread and his own time” (Ibid.). The contrast shows that the only way to find closure and sense of peace is by anchoring one’s search in a firm belief or the like. Didion further explains that some of the other people who had stayed in a space of silence had committed suicide. The ones who had survived now “live theatrically” (Ibid.). In this rather unforgiving image of silence, Didion essentially contends that in facing the “dread of meaningless which was man’s fate” one can either turn to ideology, commit suicide or keep on living in a state of a constant performance. Didion chose to live in the performance of a theatrical state where she could mask over this very dread. In a way, then, to be silent seems to be almost a heroic act as it is much easier to speak to mask over one’s dread than to stay quiet and confront it.

Didion’s ideas of silence and meaning are connected, then, in that to be quiet forces one to confront meaning, or rather, the lack thereof. Some of us, she believes, can look for

meaning through telling stories, but others, such as herself, are not able to do this. She is therefore silent and forced to confront a sense of meaninglessness. As the main purpose of this chapter is to explore how we can detect this in her fiction, I pose the following questions: How can we read this complicated notion of silence as meaninglessness in Didion's fictional narratives? Moreover, how does it affect our reading of it? In light of her own conceptualization of narrativity and meaning, I now move on to quite briefly explore how we can read the trope of silence in her novel *Play It* and I will begin by elaborating on my understanding of how I understand and thus detect the trope.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, an essential part of my understanding of silence in this novel is that silence is not "nothing." Although "silence" may be defined as the act of being quiet, the lack of any other sound and as the "absence of sound or noise" ("Silence"), it does not necessarily follow that it is simply "nothing." As we see in Didion's reflections on "the silent generation," silence can be equally, if not more, significant than sound. Thomas Clifton's study on musical silences in his essay "The Poetics of Musical Silence" is helpful to developing this notion. Although Clifton's study on silences relates to the intricacies of musical composition, his conceptualization is of help in illustrating just how imperative instances of silence can be. He compares silences in music to how we can interpret the "spaces amongst trees" and explains that

to focus on the phenomenon of musical silence is analogous to deliberately studying the spaces between trees in a forest: somewhat perverse at first, until one realizes that these spaces contribute to the perceived character of the forest itself, and enable us to speak coherently of 'dense' growth or 'sparse' vegetation (163).

In other words, he goes on, "silence is not nothing" (Ibid.), and this is the crucial element of his understanding. Silence, for Clifton, is not "nothing" in the same way that the spaces between the trees are not "nothing." Without the vacant spaces in between, the trees themselves would not be visible to us. In order to make out the contours of the forest, we are completely dependent on the empty spaces. In this sense, the forest does not exist without the "silence" between its trees. Clifton accordingly contends that silence is just as significant as sound, and that its significance is "contingent upon on a sounding environment" (Ibid.). Silences that occur in music are therefore not "nothingness" and is an "experienced musical quality which can be pulsed and unpulsed in musical time" (181). By exploring the silences

in the narrative of *Play It* just like Clifton traces them in musical compositions we find that they are equally as important than its counterpart, namely sound.

A similar view, but addressing the realm of language and text, is Ernestine Schlant who emphasizes that “silence is not a semantic void; like any language, it is infused with narrative strategies that carry ideologies and reveal unstated assumptions. Silence is constituted by the absence of words but is therefore and simultaneously the presence of their absence” (6). “Literature,” she goes on “[may use] words to strategize silence, to contour avoidances, to reveal unstated assumptions, to disclose what it wants to hide or deny” (10). When we encounter several and repetitive silences the reader will take specific notice of them and it follows, then, that where silences reveal themselves is where one should pay particular attention. As we will see, the narrative of *Play It* is subsumed with silences and I find that they have a very specific set of functions which could not be realized had it not been for their surroundings. These two functions are both based on the insistent on finding meaning and inferring our own conclusions as to arrive at a satisfactory point of closure.

Play It as It Lays

Set in Hollywood in the 1960s, *Play It* depicts the difficulties and struggles of the movie industry, capturing the essence of Hollywood show business. We follow Maria Wyeth, an out-of-work actress who struggles to find a coherent meaning in her life. She suffers a nervous breakdown and beginning with the how her story ends, we meet her after she has been admitted to a mental institution. She is initially presented as a direct and pragmatic person who does not care to dwell on matters that do not lead to satisfactory answers. This impression of Maria is conveyed already in the opening pages of the novel. She is insistent on the fact that “nothing” applies to anything and that “nothing” matters which is moreover based on her perception of her existence as inherently meaningless. She explains that “I was raised to believe that what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went on the last. I no longer believe that, but I am telling you how it was” (5). Maria is in other words having trouble making sense of her life as she never “had any plans, none of it makes any sense, none of it adds up” (7). The only thing that actually matters to Maria is her four-year-old daughter Kate who is hospitalized for some kind of neurological disorder that remains undisclosed to the reader. Her only goal is to get Kate out of the hospital so she can be with her again (4). We quickly become aware that Maria does not lead a simple or easy life. She married the physically and verbally abusive moviemaker Carter Lang, with whom

she had Kate, but later divorced. Her friend, and sometimes lover, BZ, represents the underbelly of show business, constantly going to parties and consuming drugs. BZ is married to Helene, Maria's friend, whom he is systematically abusive towards. The novel opens with three monologues: the first is Maria's, then Carter and finally Helene, but the rest of the story revolves around Maria and is told by a third-person narrator. As the story progresses our perception of her changes. Parallel to the gradual move towards her nervous breakdown, the events portrayed in the novel become darker and more disturbing. Maria reacts with more and more apathy to these disturbing events, to the point where she decides that nothing in her life matters. The breaking point of Maria's psyche is when BZ overdoses on pills and dies next to her.

Maria's character is complex and because she believes that nothing matters and seemingly leads a "meaningless" life, she comes across as self-absorbed, hopeless and even defenseless. Time and time again, we see that her character is faced with close scrutiny by the other characters as well as by critics and scholars. In reviews and critical essays on the novel, Maria's lack of agency is often the main point of interest. She is characterized as a "broken-down," victimized woman with little or no agency and control over her own life. At the time of its publication, *The Atlantic Monthly* (1960), for instance, called the novel "lucid, vivid, and fast paced" and reduced Maria to a woman "endowed by the author with the spunk of a jellyfish and the brain of a flea [who] snivels her way into a mental hospital via a string of disasters that outsuds any soap opera" (65). In a more extensive critical review of the novel, Rodney Simard (1986) considers *Play It* as "a study of the modern malaise and an exploration of the futility of existence," and Maria as "a victim of absurdity ... and a type of human being who is quickly aware of the complexities and metaphysics of ordinary existence" (69). Simard moreover diagnoses Maria with a narcissistic behavioral disorder. This diagnosis is based on how she interacts with the other characters, leading him to claim that she lacks empathy and has a "grandiose" attitude to life as she has figured out that "nothing" matters while everyone around her blindly looks for meaning. He further claims that because Maria "offers nothing of herself to people, Maria receives nothing, cultivating emptiness as a defense" (72).

Similarly, in "Making Sense and Telling Stories: Problems of Cognition and Narration in Joan Didion's *Play it As it Lays*" (1985), Sandra K. Hinchman, whom I referred to the Introduction, reads the novel as a replica of "the quality of both Didion's and Maria's experience," drawing a line between Didion's mental breakdown in 1968 and Maria's (84).

Hinchman's reading is somewhat similar to mine, first of all because she uses Didion's own conceptualization of narrativity as a backdrop to her analysis. In addition to this, she too acknowledges that "the strictly existential dimension of Didion's vision, so immediately apparent on the language of nothingness, nausea and absurdity that saturates her works, is already well-documented in the growing critical literature about her," and seeks to explore how this "language of nothingness" bears on her fictional works (83). Hinchman reads Maria as a displacement of Didion's own psyche, drawing parallels between Maria's mental health and Didion's (Ibid.). However, even though both Hinchman and Simard's essays address Didion's perception of narrative, neither of the studies focuses on exactly *how* this perception comes aesthetically through. There is an intense focus on Maria's character as a mirror of Didion's mental psyche, which I believe overshadows Didion's project of exploring the complications of the absence of a coherent narrative line.

As mentioned initially, there is particularly one critic who has attended to similar aspects of *Play It* and Maria's character as I do here. In her *Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter and Joan Didion* (1990), Janice P. Stout also focuses on the silence of the text and of Maria but contends that the silences function to convey male oppression. She argues that because Maria is systematically oppressed by men, she gradually loses her voice as women thus claiming that the novel is a representation of the silencing of women. Writing from a feminist perspective, Stout does however give Maria more agency than the other scholars since she considers Maria as a product of the patriarchal oppressions of Hollywood in the 70s. She emphasizes that the "weakness" others find in Maria is a result of the oppression by the men around her, making her a victim of male dominance.

Stout especially recognizes *Play It* for its compression and economical language, and notes that beyond "this general moral impetus to Didion's caustic fictive voice . . . , what has not been sufficiently recognized is the extent to which Didion's silences and curtailments speak out of a specifically female quality of experience and with particular reference to femaleness" (149). She perceptively and accurately claims that previous scholarship has consistently focused on "non-gendered philosophical or journalistic import" to the extent that it denies "the focused strength of her concern with women's being-in-the-world" (Ibid.). With an attentive eye to the physical gaps and spaces in the text, Stout essentially argues that we read these as an echo of Didion's women's submissiveness and limitations. Since the

following passage is a large part of Stout's argument, including the aspect of her approach to the novel that I here intend to challenge, I quote it at length:

Didion's women are oppressed by their sexual identity. Indeed, they are oppressed by their sexuality. Raised on a myth of woman as romantic flame, a myth stressing allure and danger, but also on a set of conflicting myths emphasizing chastity and idealization of marriage and mothering, they find themselves without any satisfying role that can unify these conflicting presumptions and provide an outlet for their sense of autonomy. Denied authenticity by the shallow stereotypes that constrain their socialization – the beauty queen, the society belle – they resort to sex, often promiscuous sex, as a means of filling the emptiness of their lives. Yet in pursuing sex they not only destroy the possibility of achieving stable love relationships as to satisfy their inbred ideal of wifely love, but bring on themselves an overwhelming guilt, even self-hate. (150)

Because of these restrictions and limitations, the women in Didion's novels are silenced by the ones who uphold them, in this case the men they surround themselves with. I am inclined to agree with Stout to a certain extent, for in reading *Play it* we see that not only Maria, but the other female characters, as well, are consistently exposed to male dominance and oppression. However, I disagree with Stout's point that Maria's silence, and by extension the aesthetic representation of silence in the novel overall, is a sign of reticence and submissiveness. Maria is not silent because she is oppressed by the men around her, nor is she silent because she has nothing to say. I want to make clear that I do not dismiss Stout's reading of Maria's silence as a consequence of male oppression, but I will suggest that her silence has another alternative function. In my reading, Maria's silence is a mode of forcing not just the readers but the other characters as well into a space of meaninglessness as the characters consistently have to interpret Maria's silence and act of saying nothing only to find that there is no satisfactory conclusion. We wonder what the meaning of the silence are and we essentially end up finding that the answer is "nothing."

Using Stout's argument as a critical backdrop, I will first demonstrate how we instinctively insert meaning where there perhaps none, or rather, where we are not meant to. I will then use this as the foundation in exploring the silences in the text and suggest that they automatically make us insert meaning to certain events and scenes that I claim

essentially have no meaning, at least not a satisfactory one. I have chosen to call these scenes and aspects of the novel “unsettled stories.” This is because they never truly resolve as well as leaving the reader with an “unsettled” feeling in the sense that the scenes portray particularly disturbing and distressing events. I will then attend to how silence functions in dialogue between Maria and the other characters and challenge Stout’s reading that her silence is a mode of reticence. I will rather suggest that it is a way of forcing her reader to confront the silence where we are faced with meaninglessness which produces the emotional response of “affective dissonance.”

Meaninglessness and the “Unsettled Stories”

As I have mentioned, my interpretation of meaning in the novel is that there essentially is none. By this I do not mean that there is no “point” to novel as a whole, but rather that its objective is to show that in some situations, and according to some views of life, there is no final goal of finding meaning. This is illustrated in the very first sentence of the novel where Maria presents her own notions of meaning and how she believes that nothing matters as stated above. We also see this in her opening monologue as she asks: “What makes Iago evil?” (3), but Maria does not answer, she states simply that this is a question “some people ask. I never ask” (Ibid.). She continues to give examples of other questions she never asks: “why should a coral snake need two glands of neurotoxic poison to survive while a king snake, *so similarly marked*, needs none. Where is the Darwinian logic there. You might ask that. I never would, not anymore” (Ibid.). The reason Maria never asks such questions is, through her own reasoning, quite simple: “there is no satisfactory ‘answer’ to such questions” (Ibid.). For Maria, it thus seems that to not ask any questions is another way of saying that one does not look for reason or meaning where there is none. To not be curious about, for instance, the many possible reasons why Iago killed Othello and Desdemona, including his blind jealousy and rage. There is no cause-effect aspect, and hence, there is no one meaning. Similarly, when Maria wonders why the “two honeymooners were found dead in their Scout camper near Boca Raton, a coral snake still coiled in the thermal blanket” (Ibid.), she tells us that “Unless you are prepared to take the long view, there is no satisfactory answer to such questions” (Ibid.).

The opening of the novel both explains Maria’s view of life and illustrates our inherent need to make sense. To open the novel with the question “what makes Iago evil?” is in this sense an excellent move on Didion’s part, for it immediately makes the reader look

for answers and interpretations. It is not that it is wrong to look for meaning, but Didion brings forth the complications of not being able to do so. Stout's reading of the above lines provides evidence of the fact that we automatically try to insert meaning for Stout's reading of the first question about Iago is that it "distills the whole of Maria's life-meaning into her awareness of evil and compresses the concept of evil to a single example, one which evokes insoluble mystery" (157). Stout also wants us to note the connection to Desdemona which is associated with the victimization of women (Ibid.). When Stout claims that the opening line "what makes Iago evil?" holds not just one, but two different meanings she does exactly what Maria attempts *not* to do. This is not to say that Stout's reading is faulty, but it illustrates the extent to which we automatically and instinctively insert meaning where there might not be one and the difficulties in resisting to do so.

The most evident places where we are inclined and compelled to interpret and insert meaning, is in what I call the unsettled stories of the novel. The most immediately recognizable unsettled story is that of Maria's daughter, Kate. Kate is, as mentioned, hospitalized with an unknown diagnose but one can assume that it is a neurological disorder since we are told that they "put electrodes on her head and needles in her spine and try to figure what went wrong" (4) and that she has "soft down on her spine and an aberrant chemical in her brain" (5). In the early part of the novel, Maria narrates from the institution and she tells us the only reason she even bothers trying to get better is so she can get Kate back. We never find out exactly what has happened to her or why she has been separated from Maria, but we are given small fragments of information throughout the novel, either in Maria's opening monologue, through the narrator, or in dialogues between Maria and Carter. We know, for instance, that it was Carter who made the final decision to send Kate away and that this decision is taking a larger toll on Maria than on him, for, as Maria tells us, Carter "could not remember the soft down on her spine or he would not let them put needles there" (Ibid.). Maria dreams about Kate, thinks about her and every decision made is in one way or another based on Kate. We know that when Maria tries to calm down, she imagines "Kate's hair, brushing Kate's hair" and she remembers that "the last time she went to the hospital Kate's hair was tangled and she had sat in the lawn and brushed it, worked out the tangles into fine golden strands" (43). But even in the memories of Kate that should provide Maria with comfort, pain emerges. Following the above memory of Kate, for instance, Maria recalls the last time she visited her at the hospital. She remembers the nurses "had told her not come so often but how could she help it, they never brushed Kate's hair" (Ibid). We

moreover learn that Maria was forced by Carter to have an abortion because if she did not, he would take Kate away from her, forcing her to choose between Kate and her unborn child (55). Kate's story will remain unsettled as her faith remains undisclosed throughout the entire novel.

Even more illustrative is the fact that when Kate actually is present in the novel, she never says anything but only screams or makes other inarticulate sounds. In these few scenes where Kate actually appears, we moreover get an impression of her mental state and of Maria's turmoil. An example of this can be seen during one of Maria's visits to the hospital Kate is admitted to. We are told that when Maria sees Kate, she clings to the nurse's legs and the nurse tells Maria that she should always call before she comes and not come unannounced because, for reasons we are never told, Kate reacts badly to her new medication. Kate starts to scream, and Maria leaves abruptly, but quickly returns under the pretense that she has forgotten to tell the nurses something: "One thing. You know when she wakes up at night and says 'oise, oise,' it means she's ..." (73, original ellipsis). Maria stops and the narrator explains that she hesitates and has trouble finding the words but finally says, "it means she's having a nightmare" (Ibid). This illustrates Maria's turmoil and we get a slight impression of the state Kate is in.

Another example that demonstrated the unsettled nature of Kate's story in the narrative is when Maria has Kate for three days over Christmas. This visit is summarized by the narrator in a swift and heartbreaking outline of

the mother apologizing, the child screaming the polished floor covered with shards of broken mirror and flesh-colored ceramic ... all that night the two of them held each other with a dumb protective ferocity but the next day at the hospital, parting, only Maria cried. (99)

The few fragmented pieces of information the reader can gather are painful and isolated images of a mother in turmoil and the peril of a daughter who only screams. We are left to fill in these blanks ourselves and never truly arrive at any conclusion. One can only be certain that Kate's story will never be resolved, neither for the reader nor for Maria. Even though she clings to the idea that she will be reunited with her daughter, the brutal truth of the matter may be that they most likely never will. Neither the reader nor Maria will ever arrive at any conclusive state in finding out what happened to Kate.

In Kate's story, then, Didion uses the silence that surrounds her, force us into the same turmoil as Maria endures, thus creating a space of non-closure. The lack of information impels us to explore the same questions as Maria: What do they do to Kate at the hospital? Why do they never brush her hair? Will she ever be released and returned to her mother? The lack of words creates a silence in this particular story and the reader is led to want to fill in those silent gaps. In this way, we as readers experience frustration and our emotional response will most likely have no distinct place to settle. We feel a sense of disharmony, a clash between several emotions at once. When confronted with situations that are meaningless – that seemingly have no point – our emotional reaction has no distinct place to inhabit.

Such feeling of multiple and conflicted emotions renders us in the state of affective dissonance. As mentioned, affective dissonance, as formulated by Ladino, denotes the unsettled state in which we experience “more than one *feeling* at the same time, often with a sense of conflictedness ... but not necessarily with a consciously ‘storied’ understanding of what we’re feeling” (2019, 22). Some experiences have no template or scheme into which we can place certain emotional responses. In such situations we do not know how to respond to our feelings, and they become disharmonized thus a tension arises between the multiple conflicting feelings. As Ladino says, this is not an emotion in itself, such as the emotion of anger, joy or sadness, but rather a “state of being” (Ibid.). I will suggest that through Didion's particular use of silence in her fiction, then, she manages to conjure the state affective dissonance for her readers. Just like the unresolved story of Kate which essentially leaves a silent space in the overall narrative, we respond to the silent spaces with a sense of frustration, even irritation, because there is no sense of resolution. Didion thus guides us into corners where we are left to our own devices and where we can merely speculate on the meaning of the passage, the scene, the metaphor or the dialogue. Just like Didion explains in the examples from the essays discussed initially, we are confronted silence that left her not at peace, she forces us into a similar experience in her fictional works.

I want to bring up two other examples of unsettled stories where we encounter the same sense of non-closure. These are two scenes that occur towards the end of the novel and they differ from Kate's unsettled story in that they are more compact and direct. Where there would normally be a narration that discloses the necessary information, we encounter silences and textual gaps instead. There is an aggressiveness to them that the reader directly responds to, and the silences they contain quite violently force us into a state of affective

dissonance. Similarly, to the lack of information about Kate, these gaps compel the reader to fill in the blanks and interpret the scenes herself. Towards the end of the narrative, Maria is in a constant sedative state both from injecting physical substances and from slowly giving up on trying to find meaning with her life. In addition to consuming drugs, she drinks every day and finds herself in a haze. It is as if the narrative itself is in a sedative state as we are following Maria's perspective and in effect also share her cognitive abilities, or rather lack thereof. When she is too drunk to remember something, this is left out of the narrative. When something is too traumatic to put into words, it is omitted.

In the first of these scenes that I will focus on, Maria has lost consciousness while drinking with her friends BZ and Helene. We are told that while driving home she was sick on Helene's lap and had been hassling and aggressive towards BZ, telling him, for instance, that "he was a degenerate" (162). From here, the scene abruptly cuts to the subsequent scene and the narrator explains that Maria woke up in Helene's bedroom and "saw that someone had undressed and bathed and creamed her body" (Ibid.). This "cut" occurs with a substantial white space on the page in between the scenes. As it goes from the one instance where Maria is drunk in a cab to the next where she is naked, having obviously been undressed, we sense that something unpleasant has occurred. This is moreover supported by the next instance where the narrator explains that while Maria had initially thought she was alone in the bedroom, she momentarily saw that both Helene and BZ were with her. The chapter ends with Maria falling asleep again, and the subsequent chapter opens with her awake saying to Helen that she probably had too much to drink last night. To this, Helene quickly responds: "don't talk about it" (164). Up until this point the reader has little information beyond the fact that Maria has been unconscious, undressed and bathed, waking up to find Helen in the bedroom with her. However, as the narrator explains that when Maria looked at Helene, who was standing by the window, she saw "a bruise on her left cheekbone" (Ibid.). Maria starts to recall the previous night, and, in her memory, she sees a "flash image of BZ holding a belt and Helene laughing" (Ibid.). Suddenly BZ walks in and says: "what have we here ... a little hangover terror? A few second thoughts?" (Ibid.). He goes on, "if you can't deal with the morning, get out of the game. You've been around a long time, you know what it is, its play-or-pay" (Ibid.). This is the only information provided that offers at least a partial explanation of what had happened after Maria passed out.

What is not told in the above scene is what might or might not have occurred between the drive home and when Maria woke up. The only thing we know is that she woke

up undressed and that Helene has a bruise on her face. We are led to conclude that there has been a fight, most likely between BZ and Helene as she is the one with the bruised face. The combination of Helene's bruised face and Maria's specific memory of the belt invokes images of violence and we begin to speculate whether BZ used it to hit Helene across the face. Moreover, we know that Maria wakes up naked and bathed, meaning that she has been undressed while she was unconscious, which therefore leads the reader to believe that there has perhaps been some form of sexual activity involved, but against her will as she was not in a state to consent. As BZ's only response to this disturbing situation is "its pay-or-play ladies," we furthermore infer that some kind of violent or aggressive event has happened as the phrase implies how someone can either participate in the "game" or take the consequences.

We are, however, only left guessing. It is the silence that resides in between that cut and those "flash images" that is disturbing because we are only left with a *sense* of what has happened. Because we cannot know what has occurred our sensation of the scene remains unsettled, and our feelings as well, because the emotions we are left with have no specific reason, thus creating what Ladino calls affective dissonance – an "unsettled state in which we experience more than one *feeling* at the same time, often with a sense of conflictedness ... but not necessarily with a consciously 'storied' understanding of what we're feeling" (22). Even though we do not necessarily experience conflicting emotions towards this incident, our feelings have no distinct place to inhabit.

The second example of an "unsettled story" is taken from later in the narrative where a similar event evoking a sense of violence occurs. In this scene, Maria enters her house one night and finds Ivan Costello, her former boyfriend, sitting in her living room. While not explicitly stated, one senses that Maria is afraid and wants him to leave. He refuses and tells her to come over to him; Maria tells him no and tries to leave. Ivan tells her, "you aren't going anywhere. Don't tell me no" (181). She responds by saying "no" once more, and he finally says: "All right ... Fight me. You'll like it better that way anyway" (Ibid.). Although it is once again not explicitly stated, there is some indication of what will follow. In the text, there is a blank space between Ivan's last words and the following scene. The utter silence between his words and the next paragraph that opens after the fact leads us to speculate that Ivan most likely raped Maria. Moreover, the fact that he wants Maria to fight him indicates that any attempt she makes at struggling will be read by Ivan as a sign of "consent." This reading is, however, speculative, and we are once again left with an unsettled, displaced

emotion thus we experience affective dissonance. We are rendered in this state because the scene remains unresolved. Being such a significant and not least troubling scene, we long for some sense of closure but we do not get one. This is further emphasized by the scene the next morning where Maria asks Ivan: “what did you come here for” and he responds that he came for what he got. She spends the next day with her arms wrapped “around her bare shoulders” lying on the couch with “her eyes fixed on a bowl of dead roses” (183).

The silences in the narrative are, as I have shown, certainly not “nothing”. In many ways, they are louder than what actually transpires. In the moments where we are left without any answers, such as in the case of the story of Kate, the drunken and violent night or the assumed rape, we can only speculate but never arrive at any satisfactory point of closure. As Stout’s reading of the opening lines illustrates, and as we often do, we want to insert and infer meaning. However, as Maria and, by extension, Didion show us, there is not always any point in doing so. In the silences we are forced to confront meaninglessness and the dread that it entails. Perhaps the answer is not to look for multiple meanings or to identify one that fits our own conceptions, but rather sit in the silence, facing the fact that there is no satisfactory meaning. Such a reading strategy would go against the grain of our inherent and instinctively programmed intuitions, but it would impel us to recognize that in some experiences, some views of life, there is no point in doing so. As the above scenes and passages, as well as how the story of Kate is left unsettled throughout the novel, the reader, too, is left with an unsettled feeling. It is not necessarily that we are left with a sense of uneasiness or anxiousness, but we experience a feeling of not having settled a certain emotion. As we have seen, the text does not give its reader much to work with and, as will be shown, neither does Maria. Proceeding to discuss the more literal and explicit silences in the narrative, I will in the following attend to Maria’s character and her act of saying “nothing.”

Maria’s Silence and the Act of Saying “Nothing”

Maria is a particularly silent character. Her silence in the novel is often conveyed through the narrator’s comment that, “Maria said nothing,” except for some instances where her voice is completely left out. These silences occur multiple times throughout the narrative and as they recur, they establish a repetitive pattern that not only makes them especially noticeable but also semantically charged – though we can never be sure what meaning they are possibly charged with. Stout’s reading of Maria’s silence is once again helpful as a

critical backdrop to my analysis. As the reader will recall, Stout essentially claims that the silence of Maria is due to male oppression and a way of avoiding her unhappiness with her own life (165). In her reading, Stout also argues “that Maria’s conversation ... [is] minimal because full expression of her experience would lay it before her in unavoidable and overwhelming specificity” and that “silence becomes a defense against the void as well as a narrative representation of it” (164). Again, it is not that I fully disagree with Stout’s claim, it is rather that I find it too simple. There is more to Maria’s silences than simply a defense against her unhappiness. When Maria is silent in dialogue with others, she effectively forces them into a space where *they* have to *interpret* her silence. In a way, the silences that occur in her dialogue thus have two functions: one is where the readers have to make sense of her silence and the second where both the reader *and* the other characters are forced to read her silences. Through Maria’s acts of saying nothing, either explicitly or implicitly, Didion aesthetically demonstrates the frustration of incoherence and the disturbance of not being able to find meaning in meaningless situations. This aesthetic demonstration is possessed of a distinctly ethical dimension which approximates to an ethical and existential question: what does it mean to experience a situation as meaningless? And as a corollary to this question: how to I respond to this kind of experience?

The following example is especially significant in this respect as it also conveys Didion’s most intricate and blatant use of silence. In this instance it is only the reader who is forced to interpret her silence since it is given to us in ellipsis. Not far into the story, we learn that Maria is pregnant, and she is forced to get an abortion. As the novel is set in the 1960s, there were not a lot of options for safe procedures of this kind and Maria contacts a doctor who agrees to meet her at a hotel to uphold discretion. Once there, she is told to lie down on a bedroom floor covered with newspapers. As the doctor begins the procedure a long sequence of what is outwardly a dialogue between the two occurs, yet Maria’s voice is never heard:

‘Hear that scraping Maria?’ the doctor said. ‘That should be the sound of music to you ... don’t scream, Maria, there are people next door, almost done, almost over, better get it all now than do it again in a month from now ... I said don’t make any noise, Maria, now I’ll tell you what’s going to happen, you’ll bleed a day or so, not heavily, just spotting, and then a month, six weeks from now you’ll have a normal period.’ (Original ellipsis, 83)

In this scene, it is the doctor who gives Maria a voice. It is only through his response that Maria's screams are supposedly there. But they are only given as ellipsis, as quite literal blanks in the communication. With ellipsis in general, and particularly with the ellipsis in this specific case, the reader is urged to fill them in. In her study of Woolf's silences, Patricia Ondek Laurence (1991) offers a reading of ellipsis that is especially relevant to the above example. She finds that "some silences offer possibility and infinite room for the reader's feelings and interpretation. Through the use of punctuation, particularly the ellipsis ... Woolf expresses this incompleteness and, perhaps, suspension" (107). In rhetorical terms, "ellipsis" originally means "leaving the full form to be understood or completed by the reader or hearer" ("ellipsis"). In the abortion scene as given above, we are led to infer that Maria screams and makes noises of pain, given that this is what the doctor responds to. However, there is no textual evidence to support that inference as Maria's voice is omitted; only through the doctor's responses to the ellipsis and our automatic interpretation that we come to that conclusion. Her voice and her screams are there, but not to be seen or heard. Stout's claim that Maria's silence is to avoid "her sense of doom" and her unhappiness with her life, which is moreover rooted in her "being-as-woman" (165), is too simple for the intricacies of Didion's philosophy. Didion rather invites her reader to take part in the feeling of meaninglessness by using an ellipsis that forces us to interpret and to engage with our own feelings. Just as Virginia Woolf does in a novel such as *To the Lighthouse*, Didion uses the ellipsis to express a feeling of incompleteness.

It is significant that the above example is the only place where Didion employs ellipsis to cover Maria's voice. This implies that there is something in that silence that Didion cannot find the words to express. The narrator does not comment that "Maria screamed," for instance, but rather substitutes her screams with three dots. In every other instance where we encounter Maria's silence, it is signaled by the narrator's comment that "Maria said nothing." I will argue that the word "nothing" holds an immense gravity in that it gradually becomes synonymous with "meaning." As we have seen, this is particularly evident in Maria's opening monologue where she insists that "nothing" matters. Maria tells us that in the hospital she is constantly being asked questions by the psychiatrists. She is asked to make sense of why she is there and how certain things apply to her. Maria tells us that she has written the words "NOTHING APPLIES" in her journal (4). When the psychiatrists ask her what it is that applies, she replies with frustration to their question, "as

if the word ‘nothing’ were ambiguous, open to interpretation, a questionable fragment of an Icelandic rune” (Ibid.). “Meaning” itself is what forms an absence in Maria’s life and by implication the entire narrative. “Nothing” thus takes on a paradoxical meaning where it both denotes everything and anything Maria believes is worth trying to make sense of, yet there is nothing to make sense of. As I will show in the following, the word nothing appears several times in when the narrator comments that Maria “said nothing” in dialogue.

The kind of silence where the narrator comments that Maria said “nothing” usually occurs in dialogue between her and other characters. This interaction produces a second function in Didion’s use of silence in dialogue. In conversation with other characters where Maria “says nothing,” she forces not just the reader to fill in that silence, but the one whom she talks to as well. One could think that the other character’s response to her silence would be of help in interpreting why she does not respond, but often they complicate the reader’s understanding even further. In extension of this, the reader becomes as frustrated as the other characters since we are never able to fully understand why Maria does not respond. We (the readers and the characters) feel certain emotions of irritation and frustrations but we do not know where to place them. The emotions arise subtly, and we feel a sense of “conflictedness,” and once more it ultimately creates affective dissonance as our emotional response to the scene and dialogue remains unresolved.

A conversation between Maria, Carter and BZ provides an illustrative example of this effect. In this particular passage, BZ makes a rather unwarranted comment directed at Maria tells her: “it’s uphill work making you laugh, Maria. Anyway, Larry Kulik’s a great admirer of yours. You know what he said to Carter? He said, ‘What I like about your wife, Carter, is she’s not a cunt’” (27). The narrator comments: “Maria said nothing.” BZ responds to this silence and defensively exclaims “that’s very funny, Maria, Kulik saying that to Carter, you lost your sense of humor?” (Ibid.). BZ interprets Maria’s silence as a sign that she not only found the comment unfunny, but that the reason is because she has no sense of humor. There is something in that particular dialogue that makes us believe that Maria declines to respond not because she does not find the joke humorous, nor that she is just sick of their crudeness. Had the narrator perhaps said, “To this, Maria did not respond” or simply, “Maria did not respond,” we would perhaps not think more of it. But because the word “nothing” holds such significance, it sticks out and we take notice of it. The silences disrupt the natural flow of the conversation as we instinctively begin to interpret her silence. BZ’s interpretation of her silence is somehow wrong, or at least, his response to it is not

warranted. It is as if when Maria says nothing, she is having a different conversation altogether, one neither us nor the other characters are a part of. When she “says nothing” to being called a cunt instead of laughing, she is not being silent because it is a crude comment but seems to be responding to something else entirely. There is no one answer to why Maria is silent, but once again, that is the entire point of her silence: to make us wonder and to make us rather aimlessly interpret her silence.

The above example of the conversation between BZ and Maria is furthermore reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s conceptualization of “hidden dialogue.” Although I cannot here go into depth in Bakhtin’s study, his view on the dialogical as I understand it is fitting to the analysis of Maria’s participation in dialogues. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1973), Bakhtin asks us to “imagine a dialog of two people in which the speeches of the second are omitted, but in such a way that the sense is in no way done violence” (164). He explains that in such a dialogue:

the second interlocuter is invisibly present, his words are absent, but the profound traces of those words determine all the first interlocuter’s words. Although only one person is speaking, we feel that this is a conversation, and a most intense one at that, since every word that is present answers and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible interlocuter beyond its borders to the other person’s unspoken word. (163)

When Maria is silent in conversation with others, it is she who becomes the second “interlocuter” who “is invisibly present.” Her words are absent, but the traces and gestures of these absent words determine our response to it. For when Maria “says nothing” the reader and BZ react to Maria’s silence with our “every fiber.” Because of the unwarranted response her silence produces both from the other character and the reader, it is as if Maria is speaking to someone else or, rather, to *something* else entirely. Her silence seems to never directly address what has been said in the conversation, but it reads as a response that resides outside of the dialogue itself. What it is that her silence responds to is, however, unknown. Once again, we are confronted with a sense of lack of meaning. We feel perhaps that her silence is so much more than just an absence of words because she is not silent because she has nothing to say. Her silence is instead a response to and produced by something else. Maria’s quietness and acts of saying nothing is difficult to interpret in itself, but when we begin to

notice that her silence is directed at something else it becomes even harder to reach what might be an adequate and even satisfactory interpretation.

As a final support to this effect, I will give one more illustrative example. In another conversation between Maria and BZ, BZ asks her if they can meet at seven-thirty at a restaurant called Anita Garson's. To this, she hesitatingly responds:

'I don't know about Anita Garson's, I don't –'

'I meant of course unless you've got *plans*'

Maria said nothing.

'You still sulking in there?'

'I'll see you at seven-thirty.' (original emphasis 35)

Maria's silence is in this case interpreted as "sulking." Feeling an immediate urge to fill in the gap that her silence creates in the conversation, BZ assumes that this is due to her anger. He does not and cannot know what Maria's silence means, but his initial reaction is to provide it meaning. The consequence of Maria's silence is that she opens up an empty space in the dialogue and her lack of response creates a ground in which BZ's rather unjustified response is made. Her act of simply saying nothing agitates BZ and it consequently produces the same effect in the readers. We never know why Maria is not speaking or responding so we infer meaning into the silences just so we can make some sense of it. We are, thus, forced into a space of silence and of meaninglessness.

This all moreover complicated by other instances where Maria herself is confronted with silence in her own imagined conversations. As a final point to the analysis of Maria's silence in dialogue, I wish to focus on one last example that illustrates this. We see that sometimes, the silence between the characters in their dialogues may even force Maria herself into a space of non-closure where she seems to be rendered in a state of affective dissonance. An illustrative example can be seen when Maria's at one point in the novel has an imagined conversation with BZ. Here, she imagines calling BZ to meet him and pictures how the conversation would go. She thinks that she could call him and tell her she was in the area and could say: "so you just happen to be in Baker ... get on up here." Or, he could say: "Listen. Get up here quick" (31). The narrator explains that "those were the things he could say but because she did not know if he would say them or even if she wanted to hear them. She just sat in the car ... and studied the pay phone" (Ibid.). And "whatever he began by

saying he would end by saying nothing” (Ibid.) He would be silent, Maria thinks, and while she was waiting for him to talk, he would just say nothing and the narrator explains that Maria “would feel first guilty, resigned to misery, then furious, trapped, white with anger” (Ibid.). Maria’s feelings towards BZ’s imagined silence illustrate the feeling she leaves *us* with. There is an array of emotions of first guilt, then misery, and ending with feeling furious. The feeling of being trapped “white with anger” creates an image of confusion and frustration misdirected at something else. The array of emotions mirror’s the experiencing affective dissonance. Just like Maria, when we encounter silence, we do not know what to do with it because it is not concrete, it gives us absolutely nothing, so we get aggressive and frustrated. In the imagined scenario, Maria would feel these emotions because she does not know how to interpret BZ’s silence.

The manner in which Maria’s silence in dialogue and her act of saying nothing frustrates us and the unsettled stories trap us into corners of non-closure suggests how Didion experiences the narrative line of her life. In reading Maria’s silence, we feel caught because as we automatically try to insert meaning into these gaps. Indeed, this inclination seems to be the overall issue with the existing scholarship on the novel. Time and time again, scholars, critics and readers attempt to read meaning into Maria’s character when the truth of the matter is that there is no meaning to be found. Her insistence that there is no meaning, that the only thing that applies is “nothing,” is ignored. If this demonstrates our inherent need to insert meaning where there is none it also illustrates a failure, or at least a limitation, of interpretation. Didion manages to aesthetically represent this need by creating moments of silence that disrupt the narrative progression, thus forcing us into a narrative space of non-closure.

In this chapter I have claimed that we can see Didion’s own conceptualization of narrativity in the silences of *Play It*. I have suggested that by attending to the trope of silence we see the inconclusive process of trying to find meaning in certain experiences, correlating to the experience Didion relates to us in some of her essays. In the novel, this trope emerges through the unsettled stories in the narrative. In these stories and scenes in the novel, we are only given details and fragments of information. This omission of significant information leaves the stories unsettled and, as an effect, it also leaves us to interpret and conclude aimlessly. There is no satisfactory point of closure or answer to, for example, Kate’s situation in the hospital. We are left without answers as to what happened to Maria in the room with BZ and Helene, and it is never revealed to us what happened when she was with

Ivan Castello. In a similar way, I have shown that Maria's silence and act of saying nothing in dialogue with others force the readers and the other characters she interacts with to interpret and try to insert meaning where there perhaps is none and, at times, come with unwarranted responses. Complicating and distorting this further, is that it even seems like her silences is directed at something else entirely. One significant effect of these moments and instances of silence is that they render us in a state of "affective dissonance" where we experience multiple and conflicting emotions that have no distinct place to inhabit.

I want to make clear that it does not mean that there *should* be a certain meaning with every passage or event that transpires in the novel, but I have tried to show that the narrative itself makes a point out of the fact that there not always is meaning to be found. In creating these inexplicable situations, inherently meaningless and often terrible events, Didion shows us that everything does not have a narrative structure which we can and should interpret. Sometimes, we simply cannot tell stories in order to live and we do not find the "sermon in the suicide." As we will see in the following chapter, another important aspect to how Didion perceives narrative and life in her non-fiction is the distinct sensation of having a story but not being able to fully grasp or reach it. Just like silence conveyed a sense of absence of meaning, the invisible invokes an experience of meaning that is there, but not fully discernible.

Chapter 2: Invisibility in *The Last Thing He Wanted*

In his biography of Didion, Tracy Daugherty (2011) explains that “the emphasis ... in both [Didion’s] non-fiction and fiction rests not on the longed-for story – which can never be told fully – but on the longing itself” (xix). I agree with this observation, for there is a distinct awareness, especially in Didion’s non-fiction, of a story that just cannot be told. Yet, as Daugherty says, we sense that there is still a *desire* to tell it. This echoes what John Leonard observes in his introduction to Didion’s collected non-fiction *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live* (2006): “all these years, Didion has been writing about loss. All these years, she has been rehearsing death” (x). For Didion has written about loss in every sense of the word and in my reading of her non-fiction it is, as I have stated earlier, the loss and the absence of a coherent narrative structure that attracts my attention. When Didion tackles issues that are difficult and sometimes even painful in her non-fiction, she almost always returns to, and thus turns on, how she is unable to fully express them as logical and coherent stories. This lack of coherence and facts that never materializes for her ultimately forms a very present absence. In this chapter I will explore how this strange paradox is reflected in the fictional narrative of *Last Thing* as the trope of invisibility and I suggest that it is through the narrator’s visible and present position to the text.

In the previous chapter I suggested that we can see Didion’s concept of narrativity in the silences of *Play It*. We are forced into spaces that have no distinct meaning and we were forced to infer rather aimlessly. This illustrates the sense of not being able to find meaning through telling stories, as Didion believes we are supposed to do. In this chapter I will suggest that we can see another related aspect of Didion’s concept of narrativity reflected in the insistent impenetrability of the story and that this is manifested as the trope of invisibility in *Last Thing*. I suggest that it is not that the story of Elena’s life opposes meaning, but it resists a narrative structure through which it can be interpreted and made sense of and we begin to *long* for the story. In the following, I will briefly elaborate further on how “invisibility” as absence is an important element to Didion’s conceptualization of narrativity. Here, I will refer to examples from her essays that I find convey her perception as described above. I will then define and elaborate on “invisibility” as a literary trope and explain how I suggest it can be read in *Last Thing*. As stated in the Introduction, my understanding of the

trope is aided by definitions provided by Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes in their edited volume, *Invisibility in Visual and Material Culture* (2019). With this theoretical backdrop I will, for the remainder of the chapter, attend to *Last Thing* where my primary focus is on the narrator whom I claim is the medium through which the invisible is produced, and as an effect of that, produces the lack of a story. Here, I will start by first giving an overview of the plot and the novel's critical reception. Its critical reception is especially relevant as it conveys the overall difficulty other readers and critics have experienced in reading the novel. The main purpose of the analysis is to show how the narrator's discourse (presentation of events) directs our attention to the impenetrability of the actual story (narrated events). I will suggest that one significant effect of this is to make the reader crucially aware of a story that exists, but one that is never fully told. The final part of the analysis focuses on the narrator's characterization of Elena as remote and absent, further emphasizing our impression of the invisible in the narrative as a whole. In discussing Elena's invisibility, I will moreover refer to Andrew Sofer's understanding of the invisible as "dark matter" in his *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theatre and Performance* (2013).

Invisibility

It is the counterintuitive opening lines of *The White Album*: "we tell ourselves stories in order to live ... or, at least we do for a while" that marks the most evident example of invisibility as a sense of absence, as these lines denote Didion's doubt in the premise of telling stories to make sense of experiences. Additionally, this sense of absence becomes apparent in the "shifting phantasmagoria" and the "narrative line" that never emerges and proves an "imposition" rather than an advantage. We also see that throughout her non-fiction, small fragments and lines that speak to this notion appear frequently. In several of her non-fictional pieces, Didion often comments that certain experiences and events do not "fit" into narratives or "resist" being told. An illustrative example is, as noted in the previous chapter, her reflections on the sixties where she says that her memory of the afternoon in the fraternity house was now "implausible in every detail ... so exotic as to be almost czarist – suggests the extent to which the narrative on which many of us grew up on no longer applies" (328). We see that Didion is always drawn to the idea that we are supposed to have a certain narrative, but this narrative never seems to correspond to her own experiences in life.

Even in discussing or reflecting upon relatively arbitrary topics, Didion somehow manages to link her reflections to narrativity. Or perhaps rather, it seems as if she cannot avoid doing so. This can for instance be seen in her essay on California's water infrastructure, titled "Holy Water" (1977). Didion begins this essay by exploring and meditating on the importance of water in her home state. In opening her essay, she says that "some of us who live in arid parts of the world think about water with a reverence others might find excessive" (WA, 59). She contemplates where her water might come from when she drinks it. She explains that "I like to think about exactly where the water is. The water I will drink tonight in a restaurant in Hollywood is by now well down the Los Angeles Aqueduct from the Owens river ..." (Ibid.). As she continues on this "meditation upon where the water is" (Ibid.), it becomes more and more personal and develops into musings on her own relationship to California. She recites Bernard Devoto's definition of the West: "the West begins ... where the average annual rainfall drops below twenty inches" (Ibid., 65). Didion explains that she has a passion for the water in California and while others "persist in looking for psychoanalytical implications in this passion", Didion believes in exploring "the more obvious of these implications, and [comes] up with nothing interesting" (Ibid.). Then she says: "A certain external reality remains, and resists interpretation" (Ibid.). For Didion, there is no point in psychologically interpreting this "external reality" that is her passion for water, because it does not hold that kind of meaning. There is not necessarily any deeper logical sense to it, no cohesive narrative order from which we can find meaning so it resists, and it thus it opposes a reading.

Another example is found as she recalls the time she was diagnosed with a neurological disorder. She was told by the doctors that the symptoms of this disorder "might or might not appear ... they might or might not involve my arms or legs, they might or might not be disabling" (WA, 45). She explains that the name of her disorder was in fact "multiple sclerosis, but the name had no meaning" (Ibid.). However, the "startling fact" was not the diagnosis in itself, but that her "body was offering a precise psychological equivalent to what had been going on in [her] mind ... in other words it was another story without a narrative" (ibid., 46). It is the small comments like these that continue to reflect Didion's view of her own life as something which lacked a narrative. Even in the repetition of the phrase above, "might or might not", lies a sense of something not truly present or something in between. It is never that the "story" is not there, but it lacks a narrative structure through which it can be told and therefore made sense of.

As stated, I suggest that this sense of having a story but not being able to tell it as articulated by Didion in her non-fiction can be seen manifested as the trope of invisibility in her fiction. In the Introduction, I explained that even though both silence and invisibility denote absence, they differ in that I find that silence is experienced as more insistent while invisibility is experienced as a vague sensation. It has a phantom-like presence to the text in that we can sense that it is there, but not fully detect its presence. As we saw in the analysis of *Play It*, the trope of silence emerges in a more direct sense in that we can practically point to the places in the text that read either implicitly or explicitly as silent. The invisible, on the other hand, has more of a looming presence to the overall narrative and we experience it as a feeling of something that is unstated.

We hear of invisibility in literature most often in terms of the science fiction or fantasy genre. Magic cloaks in the Harry Potter universe, or H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897) are only some examples of that particular kind of literal invisibility we are most used to. As the invisibility I am speaking of here goes far beyond anything physical and resides in the realms of the abstract and the intangible of the text, I am basing my understanding on its aesthetics. There are many ways to read and study invisibility and as Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes observe in *Invisibility in Visual and Material Culture* "the question of invisibility cannot be fully articulated from any specific discourse or field" (2). They explain further that the concept extends into all kinds of areas and "the invisible suggests intricate entanglements with concepts that are in themselves multi-faceted and malleable, such as representation, aesthetics, technology, identity and politics" (Ibid.). As their title indicates, Grønstad and Vågnes' volume studies invisibility in visual and material culture and their definition of "invisibility" may be translated into literary studies. They define "invisibility" as "the absence of visibility" (Ibid.) and moreover explain that "absence, in turn, is tied to experience rather than objects. The experience of absence is real and is in no way diminished by the fact that the thing that generated the feeling of absence in the first place is gone" (Ibid.). In this understanding of invisibility, the feeling that resides when encountering the invisible is just as "legitimate" or "real" as it was when that object was physically present. This means that, in a certain sense, invisibility can rest solely on our sensation. Furthermore, an important element to this understanding depends on the idea that the invisible is produced by the visible. Grønstad and Vågnes moreover contend that "the visible produces the invisible, in the sense that for something to be optically discernible to us within any given temporal frame, something else has to recede from observability" (Ibid.). Similar to how

silence is created by its other, namely sound, the invisible is produced by its counterpart, namely the visible.

To summarize, Grønstad and Vågnes understand invisibility “both as a fact and as a trope that constitutes how we see, or do not see ...” (Ibid.). They define this trope in both literary and media studies as follows:

In aesthetic terms, the invisible can appear to linger at the threshold of utterance, as what is said not explicitly, but perhaps implicitly; hence the expression ‘to read between the lines’, which point to the existence of something the reader feels inclined to express linguistically upon reading, without being able to point to it with the reference to the words on the page (4).

Again, reading invisibility in narrative texts is here described as a sensation and feeling rather than something physically discernable. It is something in between the implicit and the explicit. It is reminiscent of the image of the phantom, which is often described as not absent, but not present either. It is simultaneously there and not there, not to be detected but not to be ignored either. In terms of Didion’s reflections on narrative that tell us that she does not have a coherent narrative, it does not mean that the feeling of a narrative is gone. As we have seen in the above, she is certain that she has a story, but she cannot tell it. It is still there, even though she cannot express it. In developing my own understanding of the invisible based on the above, I suggest that invisibility used as an aesthetic literary device in *Last Thing* does not necessarily have to be a character, or a physical entity of some sort. It may be, as is the main thematic concern of *Last Thing*, the lack of story.

The Last Thing He Wanted

Last Thing primarily revolves around the story of Elena McMahon’s life, but the story of Elena’s life cannot be fully grasped. The narrator has trouble conveying the story, not because it is a particularly difficult or traumatic story to tell, nor because she⁷ does not know the facts of it, but because she struggles to find a way into its center. In the opening of the novel, the narrator states that in telling us the story of Elena she wants to have all the facts. She wants to “come at this straight” she explains and tell us: “I wanted to bring my own

⁷ From here on out I will refer to the narrator as “she.”

baggage and unpack it in front of you” (5). In these few opening lines the narrator directly addresses the reader thus creating an immediate awareness of her own position to the text. The narrator continues and explains:

When I first heard this story there were elements that seemed to me questionable, details I did not trust. The facts of Elena McMahon’s life did not quite hang together. They lacked coherence. Logical connections were missing, cause and effect. I wanted the connections to materialize for you as they eventually did for me. The best story I ever told was a reef dream. This is something different. (5)

In the above passage, the narrator admits that the story we are about to be told is a demanding one. However, she promises her readers that as this story has materialized for her, it will do so for us. Nevertheless, as the narrative proceeds, the narrator’s own comments on the intricacies, the pitfalls and the difficulties of telling Elena’s story undermines and distorts the progression of the narrative. By the end of the novel, the initial promise made by the narrator of a story that would materialize remains unfulfilled. As the narrator concludes the story of Elena, she admits that when she looks “back now on what happened I see mainly fragments, flashes, a momentary phantasmagoria in which everyone focused on some different aspect and nobody saw the whole” (203). As I will show in the following, there is always a sense of something missing, certain pieces or elements that never quite appear throughout the novel. Yet we are constantly aware of their existence. This awareness manifests itself in the novel as something that is present but invisible and this invisibility accompanies the story from the beginning to the end.

On first glance, *Last Thing* seems like a rather uncomplicated political thriller novel, but on a closer reading it is much more intricate than it appears. The plot of *Last Thing* is fairly “undemanding” in the sense that the actual events that transpire are pretty straightforward, especially in comparison to Didion’s other novels. Set in 1984 the novel covers the Iran-Contra conflict and we meet reporter Elena McMahon who has previously been covering the conflict for the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*. As a curious and driven journalist, Elena has always been travelling and writing about and staying true to what she believed was important. However, Elena is eventually “forced” to work in political journalism and has to cover Ronald Reagan’s political campaign. To her disliking she is sent to several political events and at one event in Washington in 1984, she finally quits and

walks off. Elena presumably leaves to take care of her father who is suffering from a memory disorder and struggling with the death of Elena's mother, his ex-wife, but we are led to believe that she left because she was discontented with her job. We find out that Elena has never known her father's occupation, but in a turn of events it is revealed that he worked as an arms dealer in South America. More or less unintentionally, she falls into the footsteps of her father and travels to South America to conduct a "deal" on his behalf. When this deal goes awry, Elena ends up staying behind in Costa Rica to take care of the ensuing problems. With DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) agent Treat Morrison following her, she takes on a new identity and quickly falls into a life that is not hers. She becomes romantically involved with Treat who, in a sudden plot twist, kills her. Along the way she encounters numerous other characters such as her father's partners and contacts in both Florida, Costa Rica and San José where trouble arises. Elena herself has a daughter, Catherine, who is rarely mentioned. This plot more or less follows the conventions of the thriller genre as it includes murder, death, love and several sudden plot twists. In this sense, the events that transpire are quite simple and relatively uncomplicated. However, the narrator's way of telling the story distorts these straightforward expectations of the plot. *Last Thing* therefore becomes an illustrative example of a novel where it is not *what* we are told that is important, but rather *how* it is told.

In the sparse scholarship on *Last Thing* there is a consensus that the novel's discourse is unusually demanding. As far as I have been able to establish, there are only a few scholarly articles that attend to *Last Thing*. The ones that do, tend to focus on its commentary on American politics and gender (Colin Loughran, 2013). The one notable exception is Josh Privett's "Fragments of Literary Modernism in Joan Didion's *The Last Thing He Wanted*" (2019). Privett looks specifically at two lines of poetry that recur in the novel and argues that the poem "has more than an ornamental role in Didion's novel" and "functions within the text as an aesthetic resource for the book's narrator, who is having difficulty telling her story" (57). Privett links Didion's non-fictional works to the novel and believes that she uses the narrator to show the difficulties of telling a life as a mirror of the difficulties of telling stories about society, culture and politics. He reads Didion's opening lines in *The White Album* ("we tell ourselves stories in order to live") as a realization from her part that "all the stories we tell ourselves – stories about society, about history, about politics, about culture – are just that: stories, fictions, constructed narrative" (60). Similar to

my reading, Privett acknowledges the narrator's difficulty in telling the story, but interprets the novel's overall impenetrability as a reflection of the time it was written in (57).

This conspicuous lack of scholarship poses some difficulties, but moreover it begs the question as to why this lack exists. Didion's other novels have received much more attention than *Last Thing*, so what is it about this particular novel that makes critics shy away from it? One possible explanation could be that since it was published much later in her career, it went under the radar. For example, Privett's recently published article could be linked to the interest in Didion's authorship as well the novel's film adaptation. One can also speculate that Didion's uncharacteristic choice of genre and not least the intricate structure of *Last Thing* has prompted critics to focus on the novels that represent Didion's voice more clearly such as *Play It*.

Nevertheless, the novel was generally received with enthusiasm, but it has been negatively criticized more extensively than most of Didion's other works. This is, as indicated already, partly due to Didion's unconventional choice of genre, which did not meet the expectations of the familiar reader of Didion's other works. However, in looking at both contemporary reviews and reviews from the novel's time of publication, we find that several readers found it to be one of Didion's most complicated novels and therefore regarded it as a hit-and-miss. At its time of publication, one critic stated that even though the novel is "compulsively readable ... the book ultimately feels like a misfire. It spends all its energy cranking out hazy atmosphere, and almost none attending to plot, character or actuality" (Salon, 1996). The review goes on to say that Didion has "plumped up her narrative with so much woozily artificial drama that it isn't until the fog machine quits that you realize that there never was any there there" (Ibid.). In a similar review, *The Los Angeles Times* (1996) writes: "the confusions do not put us off ... they pull us in. Didion has created a menacing work where the reader is held hostage by shadows and is led, in a kind of literary Stockholm Syndrome, to depend helplessly on the author" (Eder, 256). Although this review is similar to the one by *Salon*, I include it because the use of the word "shadow" signals that there is something in the story that remains hidden and out of sight. Thus, even as the reviewer's touch on the "confusions" or what I interpret as the essence of the novel, they deem it merely as an experiment gone wrong. In light of these reviews, my reading of the novel as a representation of Didion's perception of narrativity may help illuminate and untangle its complicated nature. In confronting and directly addressing its impenetrability, I suggest

that we detect Didion's concept of narrativity as the absence of a narrative and of a story that cannot and will not be reached.

The Invisibility of the Story

Considering my understanding of "invisibility," including my references to Grønstad and Vågnes, it is clear that in order for something to be invisible, it must be produced by its counterpart, namely visibility. As I have mentioned, I suggest that in *Last Thing* the story is not invisible on its own, but it is manifested as something invisible due to *how* it is narrated. The narrator's position to the text is therefore crucial to our perception of the story that never truly reveals itself or materializes.

As my primary point of interest is the narrator and its function, as well as the dynamic interplay between discourse and story, some terms are necessary to briefly clarify before I move on. I comment briefly on these ideas here since the combination of them – or rather, the combination of the narrative choices and techniques to which they refer – is strikingly effective in *Last Thing*, which is told by an exceptionally visible and present narrator. "Discourse" is, as Jakob Lothe (2000) defines it, "the spoken or written presentation of the events" (6). "Narration" moreover contributes to discourse as it "refers how a text is written and communicated" (Ibid.). "Story" is described as "the narrated events and conflicts in narrative fiction, abstracted from their disposition in the discourse and arranged chronologically together with the fictional character" (ibid.). An additional important term is "narrative distance." Essentially, "narrative distance" refers to the proximity of the narrator to the story (Andringa, 1996, 433). A narrator can be removed from the story and only tell the basic events with little or no external commenting. Conversely, a narrator can be greatly involved and will then most likely function as a first-person narrator, thus combining the functions of narrator and character. All of these elements contribute to our perception and interpretation of the story as Shlomith Rimmon-Keenan (1989) explains: "the narrative level to which the narrator belongs, the extent of his participation in the story, the degree of perceptibility of his role, and finally his reliability are *crucial factors in the reader's understanding of and attitude to the story*" (84, added emphasis).

As we saw in the opening quote to the novel, the presence of the narrator is immediately established. Moreover, as the narrator begins the story of Elena's life, she does so by introducing herself to her readers: "for the record this is me talking. You know me, or think you do. The not quite omniscient narrator" (5). Although it is not necessarily

problematical in itself that the narrator does this, the comment is complicated by the fact that the narrator seems to know too much about Elena to be “not quite omniscient” as she often refers to Elena’s innermost thoughts, recites conversations where the narrator could not have been present and comments on memories that Elena recalls. For instance, the narrator will remark on things Elena would “leave out” of certain conversations (24) and moreover comment on what Elena thought in conversations with others (20). Again, this would not necessarily be an issue nor would a reader even notice it if it had not been for the narrator’s explicit statement that she is “not quite omniscient,” as shown above. It is further highlighted as the narrator, early on, seems to want to justify how she knows as many things that she does. An example is seen in the very opening pages of the novel where the narrator tells us about the first time the DIA agent, Treat Morrison, saw Elena. She explains that “she was sitting alone in the coffee shop at the Intercon ... eating, very slowly and methodically, first a bit of one and then a bite of the other, a chocolate parfait bacon” (6). When the narrator later accounts for the available information about the Iran-Contra conflict and, in effect, about Elena she says: “There are FBI interviews, none what I would call illuminating but each offering the occasional moment (the chocolate parfait and bacon is one such moment ...), the leading detail” that would reveal how Elena eventually got caught (10). In that parenthetical comment on the chocolate parfait and bacon it is as if the narrator defends her own claim to be not quite omniscient by rationalizing how she could have known about it. This is the only moment where this happens which is significant because it can almost seem as if the narrator eventually forgets her own self-described position as the not quite omniscient narrator.

The complex category of the narrator as simultaneously and contradictorily omniscient and not omniscient is problematized even further by her unclear role as either a close friend or colleague of Elena’s. Although never really explicitly stated it is implied that she has previously worked with or along-side of Elena as a journalist and has now taken it upon herself to write and tell the story of Elena’s life. We know this, for instance, because she keeps mentioning certain documents, notes and transcripts that record specific events. She explains that “a comprehensive database search on *McMahon, Elena* will yield, for the year in question, upwards of six hundred references in almost as many newspapers” (11, original emphasis). The narrator also tells us that because she knew Elena, other reporters often wanted to interview to her (*Ibid.*). However, she refused these requests because “I did not want to be drawn into a discussion of whatever elements seemed questionable ...

whatever logical connections seemed to be missing between the Elena Janklow I had known in California ... and the Elena McMahon in the AP stories” (Ibid.), indicating that she has been acquainted with Elena before she married and therefore a longer period of time.

Didion’s use of this complex, and highly effective, variant of a third-person narrator mirrors Didion’s perception of narrativity in that in the same way that her life or “story” of her life resists a narrative, her narrator resists being linked to, and thus limited to, a fixed category. In being omniscient and yet “not so” omniscient and having the role as a character yet still standing on the outside of the story, the narrator distills the entire narration. It is as if the narrator wants authority over Elena’s story and yet actively opposes it. The narrator’s visibility and insistent discourse moreover function to undermine the progression of the entire narrative. This can be seen, for instance, when the narrator opens the story and consistently comments on where to begin. From this, it is clear that she has difficulty in choosing which beginning to start from which moreover indicates the story’s inherent impenetrableness. Early in the novel, the narrator explains that she might as well begin in “say, 1964 when Elena McMahon lost her scholarship to the University of Nevada and within a week invented herself as a reporter” (14). However, she goes on, one might also “begin four years later, in 1968, the year during which in the course of researching a backgrounder on the development of the oil business ... Elena McMahon met Wynn Janklow ... and, with such single-minded efficiency that she never bothered to write the piece, reinvented herself as his wife” (Ibid.). The narrator then appears to land on a final decision on where to begin which is where she believes Elena herself would begin, namely: “the night [Elena] walked off the 1984 campaign” (15). After what seems to be the final decision, the narrator directs herself to her reader and explains: “you will notice that participants in disasters typically locate the beginning of the disaster at a point suggesting their own control over the events” (Ibid.). She gives an example referring to how “a plane crash retold will begin not with the pressure system over the Central Pacific that caused the instability over the Gulf ... but at some manageable human intersect, with for example the ‘funny feeling’ ignored at breakfast” (Ibid.). Because, as she says: “we all prefer the magical explanation” and “so it was with Elena McMahon.” (Ibid.). Thus, the narrator begins the story where Elena would begin because, as she explains, most disasters begin at the point of control.

However, in the following scene, the narrator says that as Elena was sitting on the plane after she had left the campaign, she had experienced a “brief panic” (26). She tells us

that this was probably just due to the “downtime ... this was just an overdue break. She had been pushing too hard ... so immersed in the story she was blind to the story” (Ibid.). On a new paragraph the narrator then comments: this could even be an alternate way into the story” (Ibid.). Moments after, Elena arrives at her father’s house. The narrator goes into the depths discussing Elena’s relationship to her father and after a while says: “that would be one place to begin this story. Elena McMahon’s father getting involved with the people who wanted to make the deal with Fidel to take back Sans Souci would have been another” (31). However, as this is much earlier than 1984, she decides that we can just call it “back story” (Ibid.). Or perhaps not, she goes on, explaining “this would have been another place to begin, also back story, just an image: a single-engine Cessna flying low ...” (Ibid.). The narrator tries these different entrances only to find dead ends and simply ends up continuing the story as she originally thought, “the day when Elena McMahon walked off the campaign.” However, by emphasizing so comprehensively the difficulties on where to start the story, the narrator has, in merely a few pages of the novel, effectively managed to produce a story that gradually becomes more and more distant. Recall the opening paragraph by the narrator once more for it is at this point that we begin to slowly realize that the “events and logical connections” will probably never materialize for us, as they seemingly did for her. The story becomes distant, but it is not lost or gone; it is invisible.

Another important technique employed by the narrator that moreover illuminates this opacity of the story is her tendency to draw the reader into details of this absent story. Making us an active part in everything that cannot and will not be told, moreover, produces an intense awareness of that very fact. As may have been noticed in some of the examples given above, the narrator often directly addresses the reader, the “you” in the audience. An evident example can be seen in the following passage, where the narrator pauses the story to defend her choice of not disclosing specific information about Elena. She explains that “Elena McMahon left San José for the island where the incident occurred that should not have occurred” (88). Uninformed as to what this particular incident is, the next chapter opens with “you will have noticed that I am not giving you the name of this Island” (89). The narrator states that this choice not to disclose its name is “deliberate, a decision on my part, and not a decision (other writers have in fact named the island) based on classification” (Ibid.). She does not reveal it, she goes on, because “if you knew the name you might recall days or nights spent on this island en route to in lieu of more desirable islands” (Ibid.). It is not the island or the reason why she does not tell us its name that I find interesting in my

reading of this example. On the contrary, in speaking with the reader like this she draws us into the story, and an effect of this is to include us in the difficulties of telling. At another instance, the narrator directly involves us, not referring to a “you” but including us in a “we.” She explains that she has gained access to Elena’s diary and the narrator finds notes about dreams she had had: “Elena’s dreams were about dying. Elena’s dreams were about getting old. Nobody here has not had (will not have) Elena’s dreams” (152). She draws us in and places us in the same position as a narrator, claiming that “nobody” has not had her dreams, including her readers.

These different techniques of both directing herself to us as well as consistently commenting on her own difficulties in telling, creates a strange relationship between the discourse and the story. Gradually throughout the novel, the narrator is in a constant dynamic activity between being both very close to the story but distant at the same time. These confusing levels of narration create a distance between *what* is told and *how* it is told, between the story and the discourse ultimately creating a distinct narrative distance. In her article “Effects of Narrative Distance on Reader’s Emotional Involvement and Response” (1996), Els Andringa explains that “the relationship between the narrator’s discourse and the story discourse is a highly complicated issue, because it implies an interplay of different levels of meaning” (433). In encountering a narrator whose narrative discourse, or mode of telling, is highly available and present, the reader “will have to handle several options simultaneously and build double representations of what is presented as the basic string of events” (Ibid.). I find that this supports my claim that the way the narrator tells the story of Elena’s life has a distinct effect on how we interpret and read it. For in dealing with a present and visible narrator who is constantly commenting on and noting the difficulty of narration, it distorts the reading process and functions to make us aware not of the story itself, but rather the lack thereof. In her study, Andringa moreover found that in encountering this kind of narrator, the reader’s “stream of imagery is interrupted, and they are forced to reflect on what happens and how it is presented rather than just imagining the events” (437). In other words, the narrative is disrupted as we see that it is, and we become acutely aware of *how* it is presented.

This is especially apparent in one instance where the narrator quite suddenly directs herself to us and contends:

the personae of 'the writer' does not attract me. As a way of being it has its flat sides. Nor am I comfortable around the literary life: its traditional dramatic line ... came to seem early on a trying conceit. I had lost patience somewhat later with the conventions of the craft, with exposition, with transitions, with the development and revelation of 'character'. (73)

With this confession, the distance between the narrator and the story has suddenly become vast. The narrator is essentially telling us that she is not interested in providing descriptions or making logical connections between the events or even the development of the character in her story. The connections of Elena's story will not be made, and the story will not materialize for us. The narrator then brings up an example to support her point and recalls a memory of her own daughter who had "shown resistance when she was asked, in the eighth grade ..., to write an 'autobiographical' essay (73). She remembers explaining to her daughter "while it was true that the telling of a life tended to falsify it, gave it a form it did not intrinsically possess, this was just a fact of writing things down, something we all accepted" (74). However, the narrator comments: "I realized as I was saying this that I no longer did" accept it (Ibid.). In essence, she is here admitting to us that she is not interested in the discourse, she is only interested in the story – the succession of events. She no longer accepts that in telling stories we need to give it a form as this is something it does not inherently possess.

We see that by the end of the novel this distance has become so vast and the story so invisible that when the narrator suddenly states: "the rhythm common to plots dictates a lull, a period of suspension, a time of lying in wait, a certain number of hours or days or weeks so common-place as to suggest that the thing might not play out, the ball might not drop" (186), we assume that she is speaking of the plot of a narrative while in fact she is speaking of the plot of an arms deal. When she follows up by saying that "the weeks between the day Elena McMahon learned her father was dead and the day Treat Morrison arrived on the island seemed ... so commonplace that only a certain rigidity in her schedule might have suggest [she] was waiting for anything at all" (Ibid.), it comes almost as a surprise to the reader that she is in fact not talking about the story she is trying to tell. It shows how *our* awareness of the narrator's awareness of the story has become almost sidelined with the plot of the novel itself. We have become so aware of the story we are not told that we almost instinctively

believe that she is speaking of the rhythm of a narrative, that holds lulls and periods of suspension as it does in the novel.

It is in this way that I suggest that the story is rendered invisible to us. Due to the narrator's visibility to the text as shown in her direct reference to herself as the narrator and her consistent commenting on her inabilities or, even, disinterest in letting the story materialize for us, the story itself becomes distant to the point where it is absent. However, an important point to make clear here is that this does not mean that the story is not there. Just like the silences are not "nothing" because there is an absence of noise, the story is still there, even though it is absent. The narrator is not lying to us or deceiving us in any way. For there is, apparently and as indicated by the narrator's own comment, a story there but is not fully grasped or told. As Grønstad and Vågnes explain, the "visible produces the invisible" and the invisible is controlled by the visible. What the reader can "visually" detect and be aware of is the discourse, but what we cannot see, what is not there, is the story. This is controlled by the narrator who, as we see, is exceptionally visible. The connections and coherent facts that were supposed to materialize become more and more absent and distance to the point where it is only the sensation and a vague impression of a story that is left.

In connecting this to Didion's own conceptualization of narrativity then, we can recall Daugherty's astute observation that the emphasis sensed in Didion's non-fiction and fiction "rests not on the longed-for story – which can never be told fully – but on the longing itself." As the reader becomes so aware of the story that "can never be told fully" we begin to long for it and it is here that we can detect Didion's concept of narrativity. It is seen through the inability to reach the story, to follow through and to find logical connections. The story becomes gradually so impenetrable due to the narrator's own reflections on it that eventually there is no way in. Didion saw the narrative in her own life as an "imposition" and her experiences did not add up to a logical or cohesive narrative structure, as she expected. The narrator of *Last Thing* initially promises us coherent connections but as we have seen, she gives us a scattered narrative line that holds very little coherency. The narrative structure as given by the narrator, then, reflects Didion's own concept of narrativity in that the story is presently absent.

So far, I have attended to the narrator's place in the story, her difficulties in telling it suggesting that because the narrator distinguishes herself so clearly in the narrative it heightens our sense of her presence. The narrator's visibility, in turn, heightens our awareness of the invisible which I have proposed is the actual story itself. It can also be

noted here that in contrast to *Play It*, where there essentially is no meaning, *Last Thing* has a distinct meaning and narrative form, but the reader will never reach its center. I will now turn to the characterization of Elena as a remote and invisible entity which I suggest further emphasizes our impression of the invisible.

The Invisibility of Elena

I suggest that the second function to which the narrator's presence contributes to the sense of the invisible, concerns Elena. As a final part to this analysis, I will attend to the narrator's focalization of Elena which further speaks to the trope of the invisible. An important element to why we experience and sense the invisible lies therefore not only in the production of an absent and distant story. The narrator's characterization of Elena adds to this as well. Even though this builds and echoes the above analysis, I find that the characterization of Elena purposes to emphasize our overall impression of something neither the narrator, nor the reader, can fully reach or see. However, I will not spend too much time on this and rather draw forth a few examples that illustrate this function which will moreover be aided by Andrew Sofer's conceptualization of "dark matter" in performance studies. In his *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theatre, and Performance* (2013). In his study, Sofer translates "dark matter" as a concept in physics to theatre studies and essentially suggests that like "dark matter" in the universe, "dark matter" in theatre "refers to a nonluminous mass that cannot be directly detected by observation" (3). He explains that in theatre, it "refers to the invisible dimension ... that escapes visual detection even though its effects are felt everywhere in performance" (Ibid.). Just like the absences in a performance, or in a narrative text, dark matter "compromises *whatever is materially unrepresented onstage but un-ignorable.*" (4, original emphasis). His idea supports the notion that the invisible is produced by the visible. In many ways, Elena is the "dark matter" of the narrator's story. Her character, the way she conducts herself and, most importantly, the way she is described, arrange whatever it is that is not there "onstage." Similar to how the story is materially unrepresented in the text, the narrator's characterization of Elena arranges this sense of an invisible story.

This is seen, amongst other, in how the narrator reveals little information about Elena, and we are often made aware of everything around her, but rarely exposed to details about Elena as a person. However, early in the narrative, we are given some descriptions of Elena and her ability to "reinvent herself" that are quite telling, and the narrator seems

fixated on this particular character trait throughout. As was mentioned above, the narrator's decision regarding where to begin the story revolved around the times Elena had to recreate her own life. When she lost her scholarship to the university of Nevada, she had "reinvented herself as a reporter for the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*", and when she met her husband she had simply "reinvented herself as his wife" (14). Elena's ability to recreate a new life tells us that her identity is either very fluctuating or perhaps even non-existent. She becomes a remote figure as we can never really grasp her true identity, and this is as mentioned something the narrator finds the most difficult about Elena.

An illustrative example of this is seen in particularly one scene where the narrator directly questions Elena's ability to "walk into a life not her own and [live] it" (93). As mentioned in the synopsis of the novel given above, the main events in the novel revolve around Elena's unwitting participation in her father's occupation as an arms dealer. Because her father is too sick to conduct any deals, Elena agrees to go in his place and travel to Costa Rica to oversee his final arranged arms deal. Initially, the plan is straightforward as she "merely" has to supervise a shipment of weapons to a small airport in Costa Rica where she would receive the payment and promptly return to America. However, the deal does not go as planned and Elena has the choice to either go back to her father without the payment or stay and try to retrieve it. Having no background or knowledge of the business her father was in, a logical response to this particular decision would be to go back. However, this is not what Elena does. Elena stays and from there on takes on another life and with that another identity. In an effort to return to America she is given a passport, but she finds that it does not have her name on it, but rather an "Elise Meyer". Accepting the passport, Elena also accepts her new identity. She lives the life of this other person and stays behind somewhere in South America.

In an attempt to understand how Elena McMahon could have "assimilated with no perceptible beat of logic of traveling on a passport not her own to a place she had no previous intention of going, could have accepted so readily that radical revision of who she was, could have walked into a life not her own and lived it" the narrator recalls a memory of the last time she saw her (93). It was Academy Award night 1982 and the narrator explicitly remembers Elena "sitting in front of a plate of untouched cassoulet at the party ... absently twining a Mylar ribbon torn from a balloon into the rhinestone strap of her dress" (Ibid.). The narrator tells us that she never once saw her look up at the large screens covering the room. Nor did she see Elena "observe the other core tribal custom of the evening, which was

to spring up and move toward the bar as soon as the awards ended, allowing the tables to be cleared while applauding both the triumphant arrivals of the winners” (94-95). Elena did not look up or get up from seat at all. She “stayed seated, idly picking apart at the table decoration to remove the miniature Oscar at its center ... oblivious even to the busboys changing the tablecloth in front of her” (Ibid.). It was only when the narrator sat down at her table that she looked up (95). When the narrator had sat down, Elena said something that at the time did not strike the narrator as having the importance it would eventually come to have. The narrator tells us that she was at the time wrong about what Elena had said. Just as she would be wrong later “to wonder how she could so readily assimilate the logic of walking into a life not her own and living it” (Ibid.). Apparently, Elena had said: “I can’t fake this anymore,” a sentence that now suggested to the narrator that “she had assimilated that logic a long time before” (Ibid.). Elena is absent in this particular moment at the awards show, not just because she had other things on her mind, but because she is tired of her own life and tired of “faking” it. What the above passage tells us, is that the performance Elena has been forced to uphold is slowly falling apart which is why it was so easy for her to fall into a new life. The life she had as Elena McMahon was fake and when this façade could no longer hold, she would reinvent herself as someone else just as she had done earlier. In this way, Elena’s character remains remote and lacking a set identity which heightens our sense of something that is there, but not fully visible or present.

Again, the narrator’s role is important to this point. Because it through her perspective that we are given an impression of Elena’s character. The description of Elena’s tendency to recreate and reinvent herself says, then, perhaps more about the narrator than it does about Elena. For as shown above, the narrator has “lost patience with the craft of writing ... with the development and revelation of the ‘character’” it is significant that character trait she focuses most on is Elena’s compulsion to reinvent herself. It is considerably similar to the narrator’s compulsion to start the story over again and tell it from different angles, different “in’s” in order to reach its impenetrable center. Elena’s reinvention is just another way for the narrator to locate the core, not necessarily of the story, but of Elena. Just as there is little coherency to the narrative there is little coherency to Elena, and it is through the visibility and presence of the narrator that we are made crucially aware of this.

I want to draw forth one final description in regard to Elena’s characterization as absent. At one point the narrator comments that “Elena remained remote most of all to

herself, a clandestine agent who had so successfully compartmentalized her operation as to have lost access to her own cut-outs” (152). On a later occasion the narrator explains that “Elena’s apparently impenetrable performances in the various roles assigned her were achieved (I see now) only with considerable effort and at considerable cost” (154). The way the narrator describes both Elena and her relationship to her contributes to the overall sensation of something that is not there. Again, the narrator’s consistent guiding towards to this particular trait of Elena makes the reader aware that there is something we are not told, something that is there, but not present. Just like the narrator cannot get to the center of the story she wants to tell; she cannot get to Elena. She describes Elena’s performances as impenetrable which correlates with the overall narrative as impenetrable. We begin to long for a grasp of Elena just like we long for a comprehension of her story.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show that through the trope of invisibility we can detect a particular trait of Didion’s own conceptualization of narrative in her non-fiction, namely the sense of having a story that cannot be told. As shown in the above examples from the novel, it is not the plot or the events of *Last Thing* that render the novel an example of the invisibility, but rather the way it is told. In addition to the dynamic interplay between the discourse and the story, the complexity and visibility of the narrator creates an awareness of a story that exists and is present but resists telling. Moreover, in presenting and describing Elena as a remote and absent character, our perception of the overall theme of invisibility in the text is further emphasized. Elena’s character becomes one more element to the text that simply cannot be fully reached or discerned. Whereas reviewers and critics condemned the novel as a “misfire”, I hope to have shown that by attending to the particularities and intricacies of the novel’s discourse one can begin to untangle this impenetrableness.

As I have briefly alluded to throughout this thesis so far, the reason we notice these elements that contribute to our perception of silence and invisibility, is because of their frequent recurrence. In both novels, the repetitive patterns increase our awareness of what is untellable. We try to find meaning where there perhaps is none and we do this because we are consistently and steadily confronted with instances where we are asked, or forced, to look. In the following chapter, I will attend to this aspect of Didion’s conceptualization of narrativity.

Chapter 3: Repeating and Retelling

In the two previous chapters I explored how Didion's concept of narrativity can be detected in *Play It* and *Last Thing* in their own separate ways. In the Chapter One, I claimed that Didion is testing her own conceptualization of narrative through an explicit and implicit use of silence, which forces her readers into a space lacking any satisfactory sense of closure. This can be seen in *Play It* in Maria's dialogue and in the instances where she says "nothing." Non-closure is also demonstrated in the "unsettled stories," where we are asked to fill in the narrative's blanks and gaps which ultimately lead us into a space where there is no meaning, consequently invoking a state of affective dissonance. In Chapter Two, I explored how Didion demonstrates the inability to tell her story through the trope of invisibility. In *Last Thing*, this is conveyed through the narrator's conspicuous presence and her overt comments on her own difficulties of telling a story that illuminates a narrative that cannot and will not be told as well as the characterization of Elena.

We see, then, that I so far have focused on how Didion's concept of narrativity takes the form of the tropes of silence and invisibility. Now it is time to attend to *how* this concept is conveyed. In this chapter I will consequently take a step back from the novels for a little while longer than I have in the two previous chapters. For I will not be conducting an analysis of them in the same way I have earlier. That is to say, I am not focusing on repetition as a trope in each novel, but instead emphasizing how repetition is the fundament, the "vehicle," for which the two tropes – and thus, Didion's concept of narrativity – is carried through. Overall, this chapter aims to show that Didion uses repetition in order to "reread" her own life and that, when she employs and utilizes repetition as a literary technique, her readers are invited to follow the same rhythm as the text; we are asked to reread, reevaluate and reassess along with the narrative of her two novels.

In this sense, repetition has a dual function. It is both a way for Didion to tell her story again in order to find meaning as well as a literary device employed to force her readers into the same activity. In a similar way to how I have used Didion's non-fiction as my theoretical framework in Chapter One and Two, I will use Didion's two memoirs, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005)⁸ and *Blue Nights* (2011) here as well as a reference to her essay collection *Where I Was From* (2003). This is because in my reading of these works,

⁸ Referred to as *Magical Thinking* from here on out.

Didion clearly uses repetition as a way to attempt to make sense of the past in order to find meaning in the present. Both memoirs thus illustrate her act of remembering as a way to reread her life, a particular aspect of which is echoed in the way she uses repetition in her two novels. Although, as I will argue, to repeat and insist on finding meaning does not necessarily entail that one finds it, it shows that Didion believes that she has no other alternative than to strive for and seek out coherent narrative structures to her life.

As with “silence” and “invisibility,” how I understand “repetition” is similarly originally derived from Didion’s own reflections in her non-fiction. I will therefore begin this chapter by elaborating further on my understanding of “repetition” in relation to Didion’s non-fiction and how this conveys her concept of narrativity. As will be shown, what Didion repeats in her non-fiction are absences – experiences and events in her life that she cannot make sense of; that resists a narrative structure. Accordingly, we encounter the same kind of repetitive patterns in her novels, namely the repetition of invisibility and of silence. Thus, in further developing my understanding of the function of repeating absences I will be referring to Edward Casey’s “Imagination and Repetition in Literature: A Reassessment” (1975). I will attend to her memoirs, where I want to show how repetition is used as a way to go back to the past in order to cope with the death, and in extent of that, the absence of her husband and daughter and ultimately try to find meaning in these inexplicable events. Then, in the remaining part of the chapter, I will return to the two novels, discussing how the tropes of silence and invisibility are repeated and how their patterns of repetition function to make us conduct an act of repeating meaning and making sense ourselves. My analysis of the novels and the use of repetition as a literary device will in part be aided by J. Hillis Miller’s understanding of repetition in his *Fiction and Repetition* (1982).

Repetition

Although I will mostly use Didion’s memoirs as my reference to her non-fiction, I want to first give an example from another essay collection that clearly illustrates, in Didion’s own words, the function and need to go back to the origin and repeat certain voids to try to locate meaning. The following example is from Didion’s essay collection *Where I Was From* – a collection of essays that revolve around the history of California and Didion’s own ancestry. In their comprehensive study, Lynn Marie Huston and William V Lombardi (2009) summarize the essays as stories told “with a combination of emotion and intellect of a narrative daughter of California, attempting to reconcile myth with reality” (102). They

explain further that the different sections in the book moreover speak to a “larger structure” and “act as a chapter of development that push in different ways on Didion’s thesis of place influencing person and the production of self” (Ibid.). In some of these essays, she returns to the places she spent her childhood and retells, amongst other, the “crossing stories” she had heard growing up (Didion, 2003, 17). In opening the collection, she reveals her intentions of the project, and I quote her at length:

... I began trying to find the point of California, to locate some message in its history. ... You will have perhaps realized by now (a good deal earlier than I myself realized) that this book represents an exploration into my own confusions about the place and the way in which I grew up, confusions as much about America as about California, misapprehensions and misunderstandings so much a part of who I became that I can still to this day confront them only obliquely. (17-18)

In the above quote Didion tells us in her familiar personal and confessional voice that she intends to look back at certain events to locate the “point” and the meaning of her past. She is here quite literally tracing her origins, going back to where her story began, to find what she believes to be the meaning of California and, by extension, of her own life. In this tracing of the past of her ancestors she focuses and explores certain absences. We see this as she goes on and explains how she understands the so-called “crossing stories” that were told by her “great-great-great-great-great grandmother” and grandfather (Didion, 2003, 953). Crossing stories, as Didion explains, are the stories told by her ancestors of their journey across California. She has found notes and diaries and recites certain passages from them. In her reading of these notes she finds that the most important part of the crossing stories that are retold is seen in the “very decision to set forth on the journey” (Ibid., 969). For to make the decision to leave their family and home, she tells us, “had been a kind of death, involving the total abandonment of all previous life, mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters who would never again be seen, all sentiment banished, the most elementary comforts necessarily relinquished” (Ibid.). In a way, the “crossing stories” in themselves are a kind of absence for they convey a definitive break in the history of her forefathers. Didion tells us that “such stories are artlessly told” and that “there survives in their repetition a problematic elision or inflation, a narrative flaw, a problem with point of view: the actual observer, or camera eye, is often hard to locate” (970). She wonders, “who witnessed this moment of departure?” was

the camera on [the mother], following her son with the last look? Or on the son himself, glancing back as he vanishes from out of sight?" (Ibid.). She tells us that "the gravity of the decisive break demands narrative. Conflicting details must be resolved, reworked into a plausible whole" (Ibid). The actual decision to leave created such a large void that it "demanded a narrative" and in repeating it she believes we can perhaps reread the story of the departure, untangle its inconsistencies and, in essence, make sense of the decision. We see, then, that Didion quite literally goes back to the origin and attempts to locate certain connections that may give a coherent meaning to otherwise incoherent events. As Didion implies, by repeating the absences and the voids, we can possibly make sense of them.

In his essay "Imagination and Repetition in Literature" Edward Casey fittingly claims that it is through acts of repetition that "we attempt to reinstate or keep present what is actually or potentially absent" (251). Casey explains that, repetition and imagination, "understood at their most basic level ... have to do with *absence*" (Ibid., original emphasis). He elaborates further on this idea:

We repeat, in the mind or in our behavior, what is not present or what is about to become non-present ... through acts of repetition, we attempt to reinstate or keep present what is actually or potentially absent – absent from present perception or possession, unavailable to action or cognition. If direct presence were continually and unproblematically available, there would be no need for repetition; but human experience knows no such paradisiacal state of permanent *Parousia*. Hence, the act of repetition represents a response to the absence which haunts human being-in-the-world. (253)

If it is, as Didion illustrates in her project of *Where I was From*, that we recall and retell memories to make sense of them, then it follows that what we repeat memoirs that have left us with a certain feeling of absence. We see that what haunts Didion's "being-in-the-world" is the absence of a coherent narrative. Time and time again, she tries to locate meaning and she insists on trying to find it. Even though she cannot find coherence through telling stories or realizes that some stories are perhaps simply just untellable, she still longs for the ability to tell in order to make sense. So, she repeats again and again in the hopes of finding meaning.

We see that the act of repetition for Didion is therefore much more than a device or technique for it summarizes and carries her conceptualization of narrativity which is, as I have stated, the absence of a narrative line. As we saw in the above example from *Where I was From* and as will be seen in her memoirs in a moment, Didion locates places in her past where meaning is absent and repeats them in order to make sense. Repetition is in this way so much more than just the act of doing or saying something two or more times for it holds an immense and fundamental significance to how Didion, and perhaps many of us, live our lives. In fact, we can look at the word itself to find that its etymological origin even implies that there is much more to it. From the old French *repetier*, “repeat” is defined as to “say or do again, get back, demand the return of (“Repeat”). The Latin *repetere* is similarly defined as “to go to; strive after” or to “ask for” (“Repeat”). It appears, then, that the word originally suggests that the act of repeating demands something in return. What I suggest it demands in return is our evaluation of its meaning and its significance. When we repeat an event in the mind it is not just a duplicate of the original event, for its significance has changed and thus demands our (re)interpretation of it. I find that in recalling certain events we are consequently asked to reread the experience with a different, however slightly altered, presupposed notion which will change our perception of whatever is repeated. The act of repeating *demands* that we interpret and, in this sense, demands our participation.

Similarly, in recalling certain memories to find meaning in them, we are essentially repeating the remembered event. In this sense, to look back and repeat situations or experiences are acts of memory and remembering. We remember certain events and (re)interpret them in the light of the present. This could posit the departure point of in-depth study of memory and its functions, but as this is not my main interest here, I will only state that in repeating the past we are engaging in acts of memory. As Mark Freeman puts it in *Hindsight: The Promise and Peril of Looking Backward* (2010), “hindsight is not only about *memory* but about *narrative*” (Freeman 2010: 4, original italics). Embarking on and engaging in acts of memory, we are in a constant process of repeating. When we repeat, we engage in the activity of going back to the origins of the story and we look again for the connections we missed or believe we have missed. When we experience events and incidents that are difficult, painful, or somehow devoid of any logical meaning, we are inclined to retell the story to ourselves, and possibly to others, to validate the significance we found in it and to make sense of why this or that happened. I suggest that in Didion’s non-fiction, we

can detect a distinct pattern of repetition to make sense. For almost every time Didion recalls something to try to make sense of it, she recalls absence.

Didion's Memoirs

Didion's memoirs are illustrative examples of how she uses repetition to make sense of events that have quite literally left a void. In contrast to her exploration in *Where I Was From*, both *Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights* demonstrates, in my reading, perhaps even more clearly the act of repeating absence to make sense. In her two memoirs, Didion fixates on certain voids left behind by the death of her husband and daughter and stories them in order to make sense. She copes with the loss by going back to certain events and retelling them to reinstate a possible meaning. While this is something we have seen in her earlier non-fiction, such as the essay collection *Where I Was From* as referred to above, the genre of the memoir allows for a more comprehensive engagement with the act of remembering. In employing the genre of the memoir - its name deriving from the Latin *memoria* and literally means memory ("Memoir") - allows Didion to conduct the act of repeating in a different way since the entire memoir is an act of repetition that retrospectively gives an account of her own life, or moments in her life.

Both *Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights* are full of different kinds of repetition – both as Didion's act of repeating the past, but also in her use of repetition as a literary device. Although Didion's two memoirs have received much critical attention, I will here briefly refer to one critic who claims that Didion uses repetition as a literary device or technique employed to *avoid* making sense of her loss. In Kathleen M. Vandenberg's (2017) view, the use of repetition in both *Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights* is a way "not to amplify [Didion's] claims but to emphasize her struggles and represent, through form, the circling and turning over details, facts and thoughts that follow the death of her husband and only daughter" (42). Vandenberg's analysis of the syntax of Didion's memoirs is, to my knowledge, the only one that approximates an in-depth study of the function of repetition as a literary device in Didion's works. Significantly, Vandenberg observes that "Didion's potency lies in her ability to direct attention rather than manipulate emotions" (Ibid.). She further interprets the use of fragments, repetitions and parentheses as instruments to communicate "a wish to avoid imposing a narrative line upon a sequence of events she finds incomprehensible" (Ibid.). "Yet", she continues, "it is the same style, this same habit, that ensures the narratives she shares are both clear and coherent, the truths in them insistent and

memorable” (Ibid.). I include Vandenberg’s point here, for I agree with her in that one can identify a connection between the use of these repetitive literary devices and narrativity. However, I will suggest that it is not to *avoid* the imposition. It is rather a way to shape and form the line, not to reject it completely. As I will elaborate on in a moment, I find that Didion uses repetition as a way to come to terms with the death of her husband and daughter and that this takes the aesthetic form of, for instance, the repetition of italicized lines as seen in *Magical Thinking*. This is moreover mirrored in the way she uses repetition in both *Play It* and *Last Thing*. Before I move on to the analysis of the two novels, however, I will first give examples from each memoir that illustrates this point.

In *Magical Thinking* Didion tells the story of how she made sense of the year that followed her husband John’s death while her daughter Quintana suffered through a terminal illness. This year is spent in a state of what she calls “magical thinking,” a state where she is reliving and recalling memories of the good and bad times between her and John, hoping to make sense of his sudden death and to find out if there was anything they could have done to prevent it. It is clear that Didion responds to John’s death and the grief that followed by going back to certain beginnings and retelling them. She looks for clues in her memories of their conversations and searches for signals she might have missed. Thus, she repeats anything that can help her understand John’s death in order to fill the void he has left. In repeating certain memories and events in order to fill the absence she also searches for her own narrative. For the story of John’s death is not a tellable one. It resists a narrative structure and it opposes interpretation. Although Didion seems to realize this, she opens the memoir by revealing her intention with more honesty than we have seen from her before. She says:

This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself. (7)

Just as she wanted to find the “point” of California by going back to its origins in *Where I was From*, she wants to find meaning in things she has otherwise never found meaningful. John’s death dislocates not just how she had previously thought about death but about almost

every aspect of her life. In a sense, Didion is not just trying to fill in the void created by the loss of her husband but by every other “fixed idea” she ever had about every difficult thing her life entails. Engaging in the act of remembering and of repeating, she hopes to find some resolution in the inexplicableness of life.

What happens to the narrative of the memoir itself is, interestingly, that several clusters of repetitions occur. She repeats conversations, she recalls memory upon memory, all consumed by what she calls “the vortex-effect” where one memory becomes associated with and calls forth another (132). She constantly goes through and relives the time before John’s death to see if there were any signs she missed, or if he had known he was going to die. There are many ways to address Didion’s use of memory and retelling in the memoirs, but I have chosen to focus on the repetitive patterns that visually stand out from the text, namely her use of italicized lines. This is a technique Didion has utilized several times before, but not to the extent she does here. Throughout the memoir, Didion introduces a few phrases which she italicizes and some of them continue to appear on regular intervals. As suggested above, these italicized lines are ways that the repetition of memories, events and experiences take aesthetic form. For as I will show, each time some of these lines are repeated it is in connection to a memory which has left an absence that Didion tries to make sense of.

In opening *Magical Thinking* the first lines Didion presents are the first words she wrote after John died, and they read as follows: “*Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends. The question of self-pity*” (3). These lines function as a leitmotif in the text as pieces and parts of them continuously occur. Especially interesting about the repetition of these lines is that they both convey repetition used as a literary device in the text, as well as illustrating how she repeats events to make sense of them. For, as mentioned, each time they appear it is in the context of an event she tries to find meaning in. An example of this is when Didion is wondering, as she often does, whether or not John knew he was going to die. She remembers that two weeks before his death when they were having dinner at a restaurant, John had asked her to write something down for him (23). This was, according to Didion, a common occurrence, for being a writer himself, John often thought of things he wanted to write in his books. He therefore normally carried notecards to write things down on, but on this particular night, he had forgotten them (Ibid.). The day after they had been to the restaurant, Didion remembers that she had asked him if he wanted the notes that she had taken for him. He had not wanted them and said to

her: “you can use it if you want to” (Ibid.). She then seems to direct herself to her readers and asks several questions: “What did he mean? Did he know he would not write a book? Did he have some apprehension, a shadow? Why had he forgotten to bring note cards to dinner that night? Was something telling him that night that the time for being able to write was running out?” (Ibid.). In this specific memory, Didion cannot make sense of why John did not want the cards, so it is an absence that she tries to fill in.

It seems, then, as if the way she tries locating meaning in this absence is to wonder if perhaps he knew he was going to die and therefore did not need the notes. Some pages later she tells us that she once read *The Hour of Our Death* by Philippe Ariés. She recalls and recited a phrase from his book where he states that a death, “even if sudden or accidental, ‘gives advance warning of its arrival’ [...], only the dying man can tell how much time he has left” (26). A reflection on this statement is then prompted and we are given, in italics, the following fragment of the lines above: “*You sit down to dinner*” (Ibid.). This italicized phrase is then followed by a repetition of the memory of the night John told her: “‘you can use it if you want to,’ John had said when I gave him the note, he had dictated a week or two before.” (Ibid.). This memory is then followed by another italicized fragment of the lines: “*And then --- gone.*” (Ibid.). The question that this act of remembering raises for Didion is why he let her use what she had written down for him on the note card, which makes her wonder whether he knew he was going to die or not. The absence Didion tries to make sense of by repeating it is in this sense directly related to why her husband has suddenly passed away. In looking back at this memory and wondering if he knew he was going to die, it is as if she creates a story that makes it easier for her to cope with his death. For perhaps, if John knew he was going to die, the bereavement she has suffered would perhaps make more sense.

The above lines appear yet again in another context. In this example, Didion is reliving the events of the night John passed away. She remembers that earlier in the evening they had “discussed whether to go out for dinner or eat in” (63). She had said they could eat in, but “I have no memory of what we meant to eat” (Ibid.). Then the line “*You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends*” quite suddenly appear. This case is similar to the above in that she tries to fill in a distinct absence and the repetition of the line occurs when Didion is reliving and repeating certain events before John’s death. She explains that she does so because she was trying to “first keep track of, and, when that failed, to reconstruct, the exacts sequence of events that preceded and followed what happened that night” (Ibid.). If

Didion can retell and remember the progression of the events, she can find some kind of comfort. The lines appear because what she could remember was that they had decided to eat in – an insignificant decision perhaps, but it belonged to the normality of their life together. The italicized lines have in this case given shape and form to the absence of the normal life they led, which in the wake of John’s death, is no longer a reality. As she says, you can sit down to dinner like always, and suddenly and without warning that life ends.

Casey, whom I referred to above, explains that similar to how we repeat absence we also imagine. Imagination, he explains, is a “means of coping with the inevitable unfulfillment of human desires and expectations” (252). As we see, one of the ways Didion seems to cope with these losses is by writing through her grief by repeating certain memories. Didion imagines and produces certain stories in order to fill in the absence John has left, such as him knowing he was going to die. Or, in the normality of the day she wonders how such a terrible event could occur. Moreover, Casey states that “when I attempt to repeat something, I must often at the same time imagine what precise form such a repetition will take...” When Didion repeats these memories and the absences they convey, the lines appear and, in that, we see that they take the aesthetic form of a repetition of two distinct and important lines.

Similar acts of repetition are observable in Didion’s second memoir, *Blue Nights*. *Blue Nights* reads like an extension of *Magical Thinking* as it revolves around the death of the daughter Quintana, who died from acute pancreatitis only two years after John. This memoir is, however, far more fragmented, far more scattered and reads as reflections with little or no connection to one another. This was commented on by Didion herself in an interview she did on the memoir. She states that *Blue Nights* was “a very difficult book for [her] to write ... because it has no narrative” (Ulin 2011, 143). She could not find any narrative that fit, she says, explaining that she “simply decided to go without a narrative, so it was a little for tricky for me to write” (Ibid.). The way I understand this statement is not that the memoir itself has no narrative, but that the events she experienced were so difficult that they could not be placed in any *known* narrative. Yet *Blue Nights* has a narrative line, and that narrative lies in Didion’s constant reliving and retelling of memories. Her fragmented reflections revolve around her daughter’s death, but also around questions of mortality, aging, motherhood and life. And they all go back to the beginning.

I will give a brief example of this before I move on and return to my analysis of *Last Thing and Play It*. I find that this particular instance in the memoir illustrate further how

Didion repeats to fill in voids. At one point in the memoir, Didion recalls Quintana's personality and how she was. She explains to us how Quintana's person was complicated, and it seems that she had many layers to her (47). Didion defines her personality as having "depths and shallows" and "quicksilver changes" (Ibid.). These qualities, Didion explains, "were eventually assigned names, 'diagnosis,'" and she tells us that Quintana was later diagnosed with clinical depression and anxiety (Ibid.). Didion then quotes from the psychiatric journal where her daughter's disorder was explained: "Such patients may seem charming, composed, and psychologically intact one day and collapse into suicidal despair the next ... impulsivity, affective liability, frantic efforts to avoid abandonment and identity diffusion are all hallmarks" (48). Didion explains that she had "seen the charm ... seen the composure," but "what I had not seen, or what I had in fact seen but had failed to recognize, were the frantic efforts to avoid abandonment" (Ibid.). She then asks, "how could [Quintana] have ever imagined that we could abandon her? Had she no idea how much we needed her?" (48). Similar to how Didion wondered about the note cards John did not want back and connected it to wondering if he knew he was going to die, she picks up on this detail in Quintana's medical journal and wonders if her daughter did not know how important she was to them. Several times Didion sees something, is reminded of something, learns something about Quintana that she did not know before that sets her into these kinds of spirals. She asks question, wonders how she could not have seen what she sees now. There is a constant reassessing of information and reevaluating of her relationship to Quintana, a constant going back. This echoes the meaning of the word "repeat" as given above: to "say or do again, get back, demand the return of" or "to go to; strive after" or "ask for." With every repeated memory, Didion has to reassess its meaning and perhaps make sense of the absence.

As I hope to have shown, both in the above discussion of Didion memoirs as well as throughout this thesis, the essence of Didion's conceptualization of narrativity lies in the absence she experiences of a coherent narrative line. This concept of narrative as something that is lost can moreover be detected in her non-fiction through the act of repeating. For as we see, what Didion repeats are events that have left a distinct void. Goings back to the origin of certain events to trying to make sense of them, she creates stories, however implausible, that may fill the gap. These absences are not only created by the physical loss of her husband and daughter, but also by the many questions she was forced to confront, such as questions of motherhood as seen in the above example from *Blue Nights*. She repeats the

absence that the death of her husband and daughter has left and she does so to make some kind of sense of them. Although some events are simply not be sense of, such as the loss of the two most important people in her life, she shows us the necessity to tell stories in order to live. How, then, can we read this act of repetition in Didion's fictional narratives? And how does it affect our reading of the novels? I suggest that in the same way Didion uses repetition to reassess and make sense of certain absences, we are asked to do the same thing in the repetitive patterns of in her two novels.

Repetition in *Last Thing*

In the following I will attend first to *Last Thing* and then *Play It*. I will demonstrate how their tropes of silence and invisibility are carried by repetitive patterns and rhythms thus highlighting Didion's concept of narrativity as given above. As seen in Chapter Two, I suggested that one of the ways in which we can confront and detangle the *Last Thing's* impenetrableness is by attending to the trope of invisibility. I claimed that the invisible looms over the narrative and emerges as the story that was never fully told. The overall sense of the invisible is produced by the narrator whose visible and present position to the text creates an awareness of a story she cannot or is incapable of telling. In that sense, there is an overall absence of a story. Another way in which we can detect this is through the narrator's repetition of several lines that runs through the novel. Similar to the *Magical Thinking*, these lines are recited in italics. I will suggest that in their repetition, these lines function to make the reader reassess, reread and reassess what we have been told similar to the way Didion repeats certain memories to make sense of them as seen in her non-fiction.

There are particularly two sets of italicized lines in *Last Thing* that are especially noticeable that I will focus on here. These two lines are sentences Elena had heard from her daughter, Catherine, and her father. With every repetition, it becomes increasingly clear that these lines hold enormous importance, not only to Elena and the narrator but to the entire story as well. These lines read as follows:

We had a real life and now we don't and just because I'm your daughter I'm supposed to like it and I don't. Catherine had said to her.

Pardon my using your time but I've been trying to call your mother and that asshole she lives with refused to put her on the line, her father had said to her machine the second she called. (21)

The first original occurrence of these italicized lines is given early in the narrative as the narrator elaborates on the day Elena walked off the campaign, consequently ending her political career. At one point in the narrative, the narrator goes into detail on the events that occurred ahead of Elena's decision to walk off the campaign, on the cause and effect of why she finally came to the rather extreme decision to abruptly end her career (20). The narrator comments that it would seem to Elena later that "nothing about the day had gone remarkably wrong but it would also seem that nothing about the day had gone remarkably right" (Ibid.). For example, the narrator explains that when Elena was at the airport to take the plane to the campaign event, she had not been allowed to board due to some complications about her press tag (Ibid.). As she is looking for her tag, she tries to explain that she has been in contact with another agent and should therefore be let on the plane, but she is not heard. The narrator then shifts focus and comments that Elena had also talked to Catherine the night before, but she had not talked to her father, but he had left two messages on her machine (21). This attention on her father and Catherine comes rather sudden and is quickly followed by the two lines as given above:

We had a real life and now we don't and just because I'm your daughter I'm supposed to like it and I don't. Catherine had said to her.

Pardon my using your time but I've been trying to call your mother and that asshole she lives with refused to put her on the line, her father had said to her machine the second she called. (21)

As this is in early pages of the novel, the reader will not yet be aware of Elena's relationship to her father and daughter. Thus, when they appear the first time, it is with very little or no context and contains information not previously related to us: namely the fact that Elena has a daughter named Catherine and that she has a turbulent relationship with her mother and father. The narrator does not comment further on these lines and rather continues to elaborate further on Elena's discussion with the airport agents. The lines are left unaddressed and will only linger with the reader. As this is the first occurrence of these lines, the reader will move quickly along. For now, we are merely aware that Elena's familiar relationships are instable.

Only a few pages later the lines are once more repeated as Elena talks to another agent at the Los Angeles airport. She is questioned about where she is going and where she has been and for some reason tells the agents that she has had a family emergency (23). The narrator tells us that at that point, Elena had not eaten in twenty-eight hours and that she would “stress the part about not having eaten in twenty-eight hours” but “she would leave out the part about her father” (24). Then the lines from her father are once more repeated: *Pardon my using your time but I’ve been trying to call your mother and that asshole she lives with refused to put her on the line*” (Ibid.). This sentence is then followed by the narrator’s comment that she would not just leave out the part about her father, but “she would leave out the part about Catherine”, and is instantly followed by reciting Catherine’s words in italics: *“We had a real life and now we don’t and just because I’m your daughter I’m supposed to like it and I don’t”* (Ibid.). The narrator goes on telling us that Elena would “leave out her father and she would leave out Catherine and she would leave out the smell of jasmine and the pool of blue jacaranda petals on the sidewalk outside the celebrity fundraiser” (25). The emphasis and insertion of these lines within that particular discourse is significant, because now they embody everything Elena would consciously leave out in her conversation with the agents. We see that by their second repetition the words have taken on a different meaning than their original occurrence. They are now not only an indication of Elena’s instable family relations, but a part of everything she would refrain from saying conveying that these particular lines holds an immense importance to Elena and consequently the narrative itself.

Our impression of the importance the lines are moreover emphasized as they appear a third time when Elena is in her father’s house. The narrator explains that Elena is struck by the fact that each place her father had lived in had looked exactly the same. Then her father’s words are given: *“pardon my using your time but I’ve been trying to call your mother and that asshole she lives with refuses to put her on the line”* (28). The sentence is followed by the narrator’s significant comment: “she was going to have to tell him again about her mother” which signals for the first time that her father most likely suffers from a memory disorder, giving the lines a whole new meaning (Ibid.). The narrator explains that Elena had explicitly asked to go to Miami “because she was going to have to tell him again about her mother” and the fact that “her mother had died was not going to change the course of his days but it would be a subject, it was something she would need to get through” (30). Here, the narrator provides a repetition of a repetition in which each recurrence emphasizes that

these lines simultaneously function as a constant reminder that Elena repeatedly has to tell her father that her mother has passed away. This creates a repetition *within* a repetition since the lines emphasize that Elena has to explain her mother's death over and over again.

Catherine's voice closely follows as the narrator explains that while Elena would have to talk to her father about her mother, "she would not need to talk about Catherine" (30).

Catherine's words are then repeated: "*we had a real life and now we don't and just because I'm your daughter I'm supposed to like it and I don't*" (30).

At the final repetition Elena directly addresses Catherine's lines. It is revealed that Elena had asked Catherine over the phone what it was exactly that she was missing from their old life (42). Catherine had missed the Jacuzzi, the three cars and the tennis court (Ibid.), a naturally unsatisfactory answer. Elena asked Catherine if "that was [her] idea of a real life?" and Catherine responded by slamming down the phone. When she eventually called back, Catherine told Elena: "*I had my father thank you very much*" (43). Again, the lines shift the meaning of the narrative and we can confidently conclude that Catherine's father, Elena's ex-husband, had been part of the "real life," a life that has been taken away from Catherine and placing a strain on her relationship to her mother.

These examples of italicized lines indicate that each repetition takes on a different significance which, in effect, gives parts of the narrative a new meaning. To summarize the patterns, we see that their first occurrence is more or less minor in importance to the extent that they are the original repetition and therefore new to us. The second time, they are given more emphasis in that they now hold everything that cannot be said, acknowledged or thought of, suggesting that the words are significant to Elena. By their third repetition we have learned that the lines are constant reminders of her mother's death, her father's illness, and an elusive hint to a strained relationship to her daughter. And finally, by their fourth repetition we learn that Elena has left her husband, consequently uprooting her daughter and their relationship. The two quite small lines thus illustrate the immense power and effectiveness of repetition in the novel. In the four instances Catherine and Elena's father's words are recounted they take on a different meaning and relate new and important information. There is repetition of the lines, physically and visually in the text, as well as a repetition of a story and with each repetition, the story seems to escape us even further.

The way the above lines are repeated moreover prompts a second repetition since the reader will have to reevaluate the meaning of them. These repetitions therefore function to also carry the trope of invisibility for they emphasize even further the absence of a story as

we constantly have to reassess what we have read. In ending this analysis of *Last Thing*, then, I will briefly allude to a part of J. Hillis Miller's discussion of repetition in his *Fiction and Repetition* (1982). I will return to Miller in my analysis of *Play It* in a moment, but I want to briefly elaborate on what he calls "repetition within a repetition" (2) for it illustrates the function of the repetitive pattern of the italicized lines as given above. In his study, Miller views the novel as "a complex tissue of repetitions and of repetitions within repetitions, or of repetitions linked in a chain fashion to other repetitions" (2-3). He also explains that even in the work's structure we find repetitions:

... there are repetitions making up the structure of the work within itself, as well as repetitions making up the structure of the work within itself: the author's mind or his life; other works by the same authors; motifs from the mythological or fabulous past; elements from the purported past of the characters or of their ancestors; events which have occurred before the book begins. (3)

In other words, the assembly and everything the novel holds is a repetition in itself as it will always be an echo of, for instance, the author's mind. I suggest that the echo that reverberates in *Last Thing* is Didion's preoccupation with returning to the origin in order to make sense of her life, as we saw in the above discussion of her memoirs. Didion's mind and life is therefore in play in the novel, and the concept of narrativity in her non-fiction is repeated – and extended – in her fiction.

Repetition in *Play It*

In the following I will attend to *Play It* and conduct the same analysis as I have of *Last Thing* above. The repetitions in *Play It* differ in that they do not necessarily only convey a sense of going back and forcing the reader to do so as well, but they also emphasize the insistence on finding meaning where there perhaps is none. To briefly summarize, my overall claim in my analysis of *Play It* in Chapter One, was that in exploring the implicit and explicit silences in the novel we were forced to confront a sense of meaninglessness. This moreover correlated and reflected Didion's own conceptualization of narrativity as we saw in some of her non-fictional works. I also suggested that one of the main differences between the "silence" and "invisible" in relation to the novels is that silence reads more aggressively than invisibility does. I find that this can be further supported by the repetitive patterns in the

aesthetics of *Play It*. For just like the silences are more aggressive, so are their repetitive patterns.

In my analysis, I partly focused on the insistence and essence of “nothing” as a word and I suggested that it eventually becomes synonymous with “meaning.” This is primarily because of Maria and the narrator’s own comments on the meaning of “nothing” and their repetition certainly adds to this. In my research I found that the word “nothing” appears in one context or another 46 times throughout the entire novel. In conversations with the other characters, the narrator comments 23 times that Maria either “said nothing” or that she was silent. I have already specified how the word “nothing” takes on a strong meaning partly because of Maria’s fixation that the only thing that matters is “nothing,” but because we read the word almost fifty times in a rather short novel, we will take notice of it. We can here refer to Miller’s thought-provoking observation that we interpret a novel in part “through the identification of recurrences and of meaning generated through recurrences” (1982, 1). In encountering a novel, he goes on, “what is said two or more times may not be true, but the reader is fairly safe in assuming that it is significant” (Ibid.). The recurrence of the word “nothing” in *Play It*, then, not only catches our attention by how it is discussed and used by the narrator and Maria. More importantly, by being literally faced with the word itself through these many repetitions the reader will inevitably find it more noticeable and thus also more significant.

A different yet related function of the silences is presented in the text’s visual and aesthetic aspects. Stout, whom I referred to in Chapter One, acknowledges *Play It* for its excessive blank spaces. In her comprehensive study of the novel, she finds that “out of the total 213 pages, 142 have significantly more than the usual inch of a bare margin, and 62 of those ... are one-third or more blank” (156). Additionally, “the mean chapter length is under 2 ½ pages, the median chapter length is 2, and mode is one-half” (Ibid.). These blank spaces speak directly to the trope of silence in the text as they visually and aesthetically give the sense of absences. Moreover, they emphasize and further support my claim that Didion brings us into a space of non-closure and affective dissonance as her chapters often end abruptly, leaving the reader with only more literal blank spaces that we are meant to make sense of. I bring this example and aspect of the novel into my discussion here rather than in Chapter One because their recurrence is so significant to the overall repetitive structure. It therefore seems more fitting to include them here as an example of how repetition carries Didion’s life philosophy and conceptualization of narrativity in her fiction.

Miller's analysis in *Fiction and Repetition* as referred to above includes a discussion of how repetition functions in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*. This may improve our understanding of how a repetitive pattern of blank spaces may contribute to a sense of a fragmented narrative that we try to infer certain conclusions to. Miller explains that in a specific scene in the Woolf's novel, a particular narrative is "presented in short blocks of language ... between the blocks there are blank spaces on the page. The text starts then stops, leaves a blank, and the starts again" (221). In combination with some of the thematic elements that convey a sense of failure – instances where the characters forget their lines, or they misplace the musical score – these "blocks of language" produce in Miller's view "a slight feeling of frustration, as if one were being blocked from completing a familiar sequence" (Ibid.). He claims that when the patterns and rhythms we are used to are broken or "blocked" by what he sees as "failures," this creates a sense of frustration. The feeling may arise from us being acclimated to following certain patterns in narrative and when they are broken, it breaks with our *own* familiar patterns. Miller's use of the words "familiar sequence" and "blocks of language" is very interesting in the context of Didion's fiction. Applying Miller's analysis to *Play It* and the repetition of blank spaces between "blocks," as he calls them, it would follow that the reader becomes agitated by the inconsistencies in the narrative rhythm and moreover adds to our emotions rendered in a state of affective dissonance. This kind of readerly engagement, which I share, is also interesting with a view to Didion's own notions on why she included these blank spaces.

In an essay titled "Why I Write" (1976), Didion explains that she began *Play It* "with no notion of 'character' or 'plot' or even 'incident'" (3). She had only one motive when she began writing, she explains, which was to write a novel that was so fast paced "that it would scarcely exist on the page at all" (Ibid.). She saw certain pictures that would eventually form into the narrative. Among these pictures that would eventually develop into the story there was first and foremost a picture of "white space. Empty space" (Ibid.). She goes on to explain:

this was clearly the picture that dictated the narrative intention of the book – a book in which anything that happened would happen off the page, a 'white book' to which the reader would have to bring his or her own bad dreams – and yet, this picture told me no story, suggested no situation. (Ibid.)

The notion that we make our own inferences and insert our own “bad dreams” to the white spaces is significant to their repetitive pattern. Although I have stated that I am not particularly interested in exploring the author’s intentions, I find that Didion’s own words on the narrative intention of the novel are interestingly related to Miller’s analysis of Woolf. As shown, Didion claims that from the white pages from which the narrative developed, she wanted to create a novel that was so fast paced it would “leap off the page,” that it would be elliptical so the reader could infer his or her own thoughts and “bad dreams.” This means, then, that one important function of the many blank spaces in the text is to break with the rhythm and blocking us from completing a “familiar sequence.” It creates a constant play between the fragments of narrative and our own inferences that we insert in the blank spaces. We recall the origin of the word “to repeat,” which tells us that the act of repeating demands something in return: What the repetitive pattern of blank spaces demands of us is to time and time again insert our own thoughts, imaginations and interpretations that interrupt the flow of the narrative. Moreover, these interruptions created by the blank spaces mirror Didion’s perception of the narrative line. It is, to her, never coherent, never continuous and certainly not given in a familiar sequence.

As a final point to this, I will give brief examples of how these fragments and “blocks” are portrayed in the novel. I will focus on the ending of the novel for the seemingly random placement of scenes and fragments in *Play It* reaches its peak by the end. At the end of the novel, some elements are all given in italics and are Maria’s own words in the first person. She is now speaking to us directly from the institution she was committed to after witnessing BZ’s suicide. All of these fragments are given as separate chapters and they are subsumed by the white spaces of the page. The first fragment given is a memory Maria has of her father from when she was ten years old (200). Her father being a gambler, she remembers how he had taught her how to “*assess quite rapidly the shifting probabilities on a craps layout.*” Now, every time she plays this game, she hears her father’s voice telling her that “*it goes as it lays, don’t do it the hard way.*” It is one of the two lessons she learned as a child, the other one “*that overturning a rock was apt to reveal a rattlesnake. As lessons go those to two seem to hold up, but not apply*” (Ibid.). The chapter ends and a new chapter begins where we are suddenly with BZ and Maria in the hotel room. In this scene BZ is harassing Maria and telling her that Carter is sleeping with Helene. He tells her: “You aren’t paying attention, Maria. Carter is fucking Helene. I thought these things made a big difference to you” (202). Seemingly unbothered, Maria walks up to the window and stares

out. BZ then asks her “tell me what matters” (Ibid.). To which she answers: “Nothing” (Ibid.). With this intense repetition of “nothing” the chapter ends, and a second fragment is then given in the next chapter. This is when we learn that Maria has now been admitted to the institution:

Carter and Helene still believe in cause-effect. Carter and Helene also believe that people are either sane or insane. Just once, the week after the desert, when Helen came to see me in Neuropsychiatric, I tried to explain how wrong she had been when she screamed that last night about my carelessness, my selfishness, my insanity ... I told her: there was no carelessness involved.

...

Fuck it, I said to Helene. Fuck it, I said to them all, a radical surgeon of my own life. Never discuss. Cut. ... (203)

Once again, the chapter ends abruptly and Following this chapter, a new one opens with what seems to be the last conversation between Maria and Carter. He tells her that he wants to give her a last chance asking her to tell him what she wants, to this she fittingly responds “nothing.” Carter tells her that he wants to help her and reaches out a hand. Maria only “looked at the hand he held out to her” and repeats once more: “nothing” (205). The narrative ends

Ultimately, the fast-paced book Didion set out to write will prompt the reader to reread the novel in its entirety. The broken rhythm of the narrative sequence not only resembles Didion’s own perception of the narrative line, it impels the readers to experience it themselves. The blank spaces in between the chapters emphasizes the overall search for meaning where there is none and the project Didion is exploring in her own life – namely, how to find meaning in the meaningless– is one that she invites the reader to partake along with her in *Play It*. Through a structure of a broken narrative where we time and time again are confronted with the interruptions of what we normally expect to be an uninterrupted narrative line she manages to mirror her own perception and frustration through her fictional works.

As shown in this chapter, repetition functions as a vehicle which carries not only the trope of silence and invisibility in the two novels but Didion’s concept of narrative and narrativity well. In exploring Didion’s essay collection *Where I was From* as well as her two

memoirs, I have shown that to repeat what is absent, is a way for Didion to make sense and to fill in the voids where meaning is absent. This is a narrative strategy in Didion's non-fiction, especially her memoirs, executed through her actual repeating of events, as well as her using it as a literary device in her fictional works. In *Last Thing* she repeats visually conspicuous italicized sentences that by every repetition alter their original meaning once more and include the reader in the activity of repeating. *Play It* Didion draws our attention to the silence by repeating the word "nothing" several times over and inserting vast blank spaces that leave the reader without any sense of closure. In repeating these elements, she forces the reader to confront the "nothingness" of the novel and asks us to reassess and reread our own interpretation of the story. Didion shows us that repetition is in fact a fundamental activity in the attempt to make sense of our lives.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to show how Didion's concept of narrativity as conveyed in her non-fiction can be seen reflected the two fictional narratives of *Play It* and *Last Thing*. In exploring how Didion reflects upon the large issues of narrative and life I have found that a crucial element in her overall conceptualization of life is her experience of the absence of a coherent narrative line. I have attended to a selected number of her essays and two of her memoirs in which this kind of absence is striking. In formulating what I consider to be Didion's "philosophy" of life I have applied this to the two novels, thus treating her non-fiction as a kind of "theory." In my discussion of the both novels I have further suggested that one can see this conceptualization manifested in her fiction as two tropes that embody absence, namely "silence" and "invisibility." I have moreover claimed what carries these two tropes and Didion's view of life is the consistent and many repetitive patterns.

In Chapter One I explored the trope of silence in *Play It*. In looking at how Didion here herself perceives what silence is and how it functions, silence becomes a space where we are faced with a sense of meaninglessness. A concluding point in my reading of the novel is that, for Didion, life's essence lies in its insistence on "nothingness." Attending to the places where both the text (as the novel's discourse) and Maria (as the novel's protagonist) are silent, I have suggested that we are confronted with the same feeling of a lack of meaning. This silence emerges in two ways in the novel. First, it becomes apparent in the moments and scenes that I have called "unsettled stories" where crucial information is left out. In our meeting and reading of these stories, such as Maria's daughter Kate whose faith is left unresolved and two specific scenes that are particularly violent and disturbing, we experience feelings that were left unsettled and that consequently create what Ladino calls "affective dissonance" – an emotional state in which our emotions are conflicted and have no place to settle, at least not a satisfactory place. Second, as a result of Maria's overall silence and the many and significant times the narrator comments that she says "nothing," the other characters as well as the reader are left to interpret her muteness rather aimlessly. Furthermore, our reading of Maria's silences elicits unwarranted responses. This is further complicated by the fact that her silence seems to be in response to, and directed at, something else entirely, thus invoking Bakhtin's concept of "hidden dialogue." In creating

these inexplicable situations, which seem inherently meaningless and often involve terrible events, Didion shows that everything does not have a narrative structure which we can, or should, find meaningful.

In Chapter Two I similarly explored how Didion's conceptualization of narrative can be detected as another trope conveying absence, namely invisibility. As we have seen, *Last Thing* employs an unusually visible and present narrator who produces and emphasizes our perception and awareness of what is not there. I conclude that what is not there is the story itself. The narrator's own comments on her inability or – or perhaps rather, her incapacity to reach the story about Elena's life – create a significant and dynamic interplay between the discourse and the story. In this interplay, as readers we are consistently reminded of the lack of a story and we experience the sense of longing for and desiring it. This need to tell a story, combined with the inability to structure it into a coherent narrative, mirrors Didion's own reflections on having a story but not being able to tell it. An important concluding point is that this problem does not indicate that there is no story, for as we have seen there is, but we cannot grasp it. While other readers and critics have considered *Last Thing* as a failed experiment on Didion's part, I hope that my analysis has helped detangle its overall impenetrableness.

Chapter Three has concentrated on what I read as the “vehicle” that carries Didion's concept of narrativity, namely repetition. I have found that repetition is a core element to Didion's overall view of life in that it shows how she consistently insists on finding meaning and tries to make sense of absences in her life. As her two memoirs indicate, the need to go back to certain beginnings and the memories of them proves necessary in order to find meaning in the present. In the bereavement of losing her daughter and husband in the span of only a few years, Didion is left with a void that she tries to fill in by creating stories that may help her to come to terms with her losses. She does this, I conclude, because there is no other alternative. Discussing the relationship between imagination and repetition, Casey argues that we repeat absences because we need to reinstate meaning, thus responding to “the absence which haunts human being-in-the-world” (253). Appropriating Casey's point, I want to rephrase it by suggesting that what haunts Didion's “being in-the-world” is precisely the absence of a coherent narrative.

Thus, in discussing how Didion applies repetition in her own life to her fictional narratives, I have found that the tropes of “silence” and “invisibility” becomes significant because of their consistent repetition. These repetitive patterns moreover illustrate the need

to go back to the beginning and (re)interpret what we have read. In my analysis of repetition in *Last Thing* I focused specifically on two italicized lines that recur several times in the novel. With each occurrence, the meaning of these two lines is altered due to the context they appear in. These shifts of meaning prompt us as readers to reassess and reevaluate what we have read, thus making us go back the origin to make sense of them ourselves. A further main point in the analysis of *Play It* is that the patterns of both the word “nothing” and Maria’s literal act of silence insists that we take notice. Moreover, the repetition of blank spaces, as shown in the previous chapter, aesthetically and visually emphasizes the overall “nothingness” of the novel and serves to halt the natural and familiar sequence of the progression of the narrative. This forces us to experience absence and demands our participation in it.

I initially stated that I hoped that this thesis would not only offer an alternative reading of Didion’s fiction but also contribute, however slightly, to the larger conversation of narrative and life. Beyond the scope of this thesis, I hope that my contribution illuminates Didion’s voice on the matter of silence and invisibility in a way that differs from, and thus adds to, other critics’ contributions. Considering silence as a space where we are forced to recognize meaninglessness, Didion demonstrates that sometimes we look for meaning in inexplicable events, thus ultimately finding “nothing.” She also, I conclude, shows that even though the idea of having a story may be a necessity, sometimes we simply cannot reach the story. Yet it does not follow that we cannot or should not attempt to do this – it can be enough to just long for it.

Concluding this thesis and looking back at my reading of Didion’s conceptualization of narrative and life, I find that her use of repetition is more imperative than I initially thought. For to repeat is an incredibly fundamental activity to how most of us live our lives. Didion shows us that in repeating memories of events we may also repeat memories of events where meaning is absent. I believe most of us do this instinctively. The tropes of silence and invisibility that convey the desire to reach coherence are repeated time and time again in the hope of finding an answer or the solution to her experience of not having a narrative. This can make us wonder why Didion keeps insisting on finding a narrative when we see that she ultimately never seems to find one. Why not simply rid herself of the idea? One possible answer to this question is that she cannot live without a narrative because she keeps asking herself: what is the alternative? In the paradox that lies in Didion’s authorship, namely writing about a loss of a coherent narrative while continuing to depend on it, Didion

shows us that to live without a narrative is perhaps an impossible idea. In contributing to the larger conversation on narrativity, then, I hope to have shown that, in some cases at least, there is no alternative to narrative. Thus, while we may experience variants of meaninglessness that in Didion's writing are manifested in, and presented as, repetitive patterns of silence and invisibility, we are always continuing to search for a coherent narrative that may never appear.

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