Name

Teacher

Class

Date

Joan Didion’s Loss of Security

Among contemporary writers, Joan Didion is widely acknowledged to be one of the best writers of both fiction and non-fiction prose. She has written several full-length novels and a large number of articles and essays, many of which are collected in *The White Album* and *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Her fictional writings include *Democracy*, which won a *Los Angeles Times* Book Award Nomination. She is praised for her precise language and the ability to express complex thoughts in a few words. Didion's writing focuses on themes about which she feels strongly. The belief that American society has lost its sense of stability and purpose haunts Didion. This belief is the source of her suspicion that society is disintegrating, which is a recurrent theme in her work.

Didion’s writing describes American societal disintegration, which she calls "atomization" (*Slouching* 11). She believes that the American people are losing their sense of heritage which she had been taught to cling to and had provided so much security in her life. In an essay in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, written in 1967, Didion states her belief that those "now in [their] thirties were born into the last generation to carry the burden of home, to find in family life the source of all tension and drama" (1967). Didion's novels are in many ways about the despair which she feels—her theme in *Democracy*, for example, being "the devastating personal and public consequences of the loss of history" (Edwards 149). Didion's main characters all have the characteristic, which she shares and considers a tragic flaw, of being "invariably and quintessentially romantic, and thus deluded....[They] are ever looking backward to the simplicity of childhood, finding there the source of the myth they are currently living" (Henderson 143). These characters all have to face a reality in which everything they hold dear fails them and they must constantly adapt or be emotionally destroyed. For example, Inez, the main character of *Democracy*, is a "successful refugee" from her past because she has "never looked back" (*Democracy* 33). In this way, through her writing, "Didion is constantly testing her own illusions against reality" (Henderson 143).

To Didion, her experience shows not only the collapse of her own dreams but also those of generations of Americans. Her childhood was filled with stories of pioneers who had seen California as the fulfillment of their dreams. Yet, judging from the amount she has written about California, it is her "favorite subject...a state that [seems] to supply ample evidence of the disorder in society" (Olendorf 130). The theme connecting many of Didon’s pieces is the collapse of the American dream of the "golden land" (*Slouching* 19). One book which contains this theme is *Democracy*, which is set predominantly in Hawaii among the upper-class Christian family, descendants of early colonizers, in effect "the flotsam and jetsam of a Manifest Destiny no longer so manifest" (Olendorf 133). Throughout the novel, readers are shown their uselessness, unhappiness and silly pretense. Their experience "is paralleled by the fall of Saigon a bit later that year and the effective disintegration of the American expansionist dream" (133). Didion's personal sense of instability is in a large part a result of the national disorder she senses around her.

Didion's experience has affected her by giving her a nostalgic view of the supposedly less complicated past and a fascination with those who seem least aware of it. In Didion's eyes, the moral disintegration of America has led to a loss of "self-respect...something that our grandparents...knew all about" (*Slouching* 148). However, Didion, unlike many her age, did not see the younger generation as the causes of the problem, but rather as the result. In her title essay of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Didion writes of her experiences in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, which was her best "proof that things fall apart" (11). She describes the 'hippies' she met there as "pitiful casualties" (Oates 175), and their lifestyle as "the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum" (*Slouching* 127). She then summed up her perceptions in a statement that epitomizes all her feelings about the loss of stability and tradition:

At some point between 1945 and 1967 we had somehow forgotten to tell these children the rules of the game we happened to be playing. Maybe we had stopped believing in the rules ourselves, maybe we were having a failure of nerves about the game. Maybe there were just too few people around to do the telling. These were children who grew up cut loose from the web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors and lifelong neighbors who had traditionally suggested and enforced the society's values (127).

The lifestyle of those born after World War II, which was so different than her own—more mobile and less controlled by the past—was what, in many ways, convinced Didion that the world she knew was disappearing.

Didion's view of life has affected the method she uses to write. Didion "violates the traditions of traditional journalism whenever it suits her purpose, fusing the public and the personal" (144). For example, she often includes herself in "otherwise objective essays" and made a 'Joan Didion' who shares her history the narrator of *Democracy* (Henderson 144). Although some have criticized this technique, others believe that "the presence in it of 'Joan Didion' trying to tell it is an essential part of its subject...the author struggling with the moral difficulty that makes the story hard to tell" (Olendorf 134). Indeed, the sections in which this narrator speaks are more depressing than anything that happens to the characters. For this reason, "the strongest character in this novel is the narrator herself....[who] casts an aura of loneliness over all she describes" (Tyler 146). In this way, *Democracy* is, like many of Didion's works, more about its author than its subjects.

Didion's works portray an author who is chiefly concerned with what she sees as the collapse of American society, the resultant loss of meaning of her personal actions and the despair she feels. Her writing convey this sense of despair, making her an important figure in giving voice to the angst and meaninglessness often felt by a post-war postmodern generation.

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