Democracy Study Guide

Democracy by Joan Didion

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Democracy, Joan Didion's fourth novel, published in 1984, takes a sardonic look at the relationship between politics and personal life. The tension between the public and private persona of the novel's main character, Inez Victor, is examined in the context of a life led in the glare of mass media. As the wife of an ambitious congressman, senator, and aspirant to the Presidency, Inez has been groomed in playing to the public. She is not at all comfortable in this role.

The novel is at its most biting when Inez and Billy Dillon, her husband's political adviser and public relations operator, are goading one another. Although she appreciates Dillon's ironic abrasiveness rather more than her husband's woolly political jargon, Inez resents, for example, interviewers deciding in advance the angle of their profile on the basis of library cuttings. It is as if she has lost all personal claim to her past. Her own memory, and hence her history, have been fictionalized. The main events of the novel occur in 1975, the year of the United States's withdrawal from Vietnam. It is therefore impossible to read the story of Inez's marriage, and her affair with the elusive Jack Lovett, as pure personal drama.

Democracy, as the title implies, is also the story of the way in which a nation has lost touch with its own past and with the principles that once guided it. Many of those who commented on the novel when it was first publication greeted it as Didion's best novel to date. It was seen as a book that combined the barbed observational precision of her journalism with the broader scope of the novelist. Others were put off by the tentative nature of its composition, and in particular by the intrusive voice of the narrator, who regularly informs the reader of directions previous versions of the book might have taken.

Author Biography

Joan Didion was born in Sacramento, California, on December 5, 1934, into a family that had put down roots in the region during the mid-nineteenth century. Her great-great-great-grandmother, Nancy Hardin Cornwall, had traveled part of the way west with the members of the ill-fated Donner-Reed wagon train, most of whom died while trapped in the Rocky Mountains during the winter of 1846-47. Sensibly, as it proved, Didion's ancestor parted company with the main group and took the northern trail through Oregon. Critics often refer to this ancestral heritage, arguing that Didion has the frontier in her blood and the confidence to take her own course. Both thematically and stylistically, these are observations which are relevant to a study of the novel *Democracy.*

Didion's childhood became nomadic during World War II. Her father was moved from one Air Corps base to another, and the family had spells in Washington, North Carolina, and Colorado. By the time they were re-settled in Sacramento, Didion was already developing a serious interest in writing. As a young teenager she spent hours typing out entire chapters from the novels of Ernest Hemingway, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad. She enrolled at the University of California in February. 1953, and it was there, at Berkeley, that she had the first of her own works published-a short story entitled "Sunset," which appeared in the student magazine *Occident.*

In her senior year Didion won *Vogue* magazine's Prix de Paris Award, and, after her graduation in 1956, she went to work in the magazine's New York office. She was quickly made an associate editor. In addition to her work for *Vogue,* she contributed articles to *National Review* and *Mademoiselle.* In 1958 she met John Gregory Dunne, a graduate of Princeton and staff writer at *Time.* They married in January, 1964. Didion's first novel, *Run River.* had been published (and hardly noticed) the previous year. The newly-married couple both resigned from their magazine positions and moved to California.

Working as freelancers, they earned only seven thousand dollars between them in their first year. However, Didion's reputation as a columnist with an individual voice grew steadily. and her essay collection, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem,* published in 1968, brought her fully into the public eye. Her second novel, *Play It As It Lays,* became a bestseller two years later. Didion spent much of the seventies collaborating with her husband on screenplays, including a version of her second novel and the much-more successful *A Star is Born.* This was a lucrative decade, but not a satisfying one for Didion, who preferred working on her own as a novelist.

The novel which Didion published in 1977, *A Book of Common Prayer,* concerned a detached narrator trying, and failing, to find some coherence in the life of the book's protagonist Didion's second essay collection, *The White Album,* reflected a mood of personal and clinical depression. *Democracy.* Didion's fourth novel did not appear until 1984. The difficulties and false starts encountered in its composition form an essential part of the book's texture.

Both Didion's fiction and nonfiction are characterized by self-consciously stylish prose and attention to circumstantial detail.

Plot Summary

Part I

Joan Didion's *Democracy* chronicles a woman's search for identity during America's turbulent 1960s and 1970s. It is a quest that is completed in 1975, soon after the final evacuation of American troops from Vietnam and Cambodia

Didion, who identifies herself as the narrator of the story, compiles fragments of Inez Christian's life in an effort to help order Inez's experiences, and thus provide meaning to her life.

The novel focuses on Inez's marriage to Harry Victor, a prominent politician, and her long love affair with Jack Lovett, a CIA freelancer. She first meets Jack in Hawaii on her seventeenth birthday and begins a brief affair. A few years later, she marries Harry Victor and adopts the role of a politician's wife. Though Inez finds little fulfillment in her private or public life, she dutifully supports her husband, who eventually wins a seat in the U.S. Senate. She and Jack see each other intermittently during the next twenty years, until the death of her sister, Janet. When her sister dies, Inez finally leaves her husband for Jack and a new life in the Malaysian city of Kuala Lumpur, where she helps resettle Vietnam war refugees.

The novel opens in the spring of 1975 in a bar outside Honolulu, where Jack and Inez watch the evacuation of South Vietnam on television. Jack describes the colors of the sunrise and the scent of the air during nuclear tests in the Pacific in 1952 and 1953. Then, commenting on her situation, he exclaims, "Oh shit Inez ... Harry Victor's wife."

Didion introduces herself as the author of this account of Inez's life and jumps forward to the present, when she is struggling to arrange the bits and pieces of what she knows and what she has heard about Inez Christian. She explains that she abandoned the "novel" she had intended to write about Hawaii and Inez's family history there, deciding instead to focus on Inez's life from the time she met Jack Lovett in 1952 to her relocation to Kuala Lumpur in 1975.

After explaining Inez's reason for staying in Kuala Lumpur-"colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air"-Didion relates brief but significant details of Inez's childhood and her family gained from Inez's memory, from photographs, and from her own knowledge of the family. She introduces Inez as the daughter of a prosperous Hawaiian family: her mother, who abandoned Inez and her sister when they were teenagers; Inez's sister, Janet, and her husband, Dick Ziegler, who "made a modest fortune in Hong Kong housing and lost it"; her uncle Dwight, who caused Dick's financial ruin; and her father, Paul, who was arrested in the spring of 1975 after fatally shooting Janet and her suspected lover, Hawaiian congressman Wendell Omura. She then introduces Jack Lovett, who has "waited for twenty years for Inez."

During the 1960s Harry Victor, Inez's husband, plotted his political career, participating in protest marches and sit-ins. He successfully campaigned for Congress in 1964, 1966, and 1968. In 1969 he won an appointment to the Senate, and in 1972 lost a bid for the presidency. During those years, Inez fulfilled the duties of a politician's wife. She expressed a desire to help refugees, but her husband and his aides considered this work "an often controversial and therefore inappropriate special interest." Inez tells Didion that she has a difficult time recalling all the details of her past, admitting that her memory has faded.

Didion next introduces Inez's two children: her son, Adlai, who has crashed two cars and seriously injured his passenger, and her daughter Jessie, a heroin addict who has attempted suicide.

Didion returns to 1975 and to a class she taught in Berkeley, California, on the theme of democracy in literature. She relates her students' views on Vietnam and her own scouring of the papers for news of the evacuation, when she comes across the details of the murder of Janet Christian and Wendell Omura

Part II

Didion describes Jack meeting Inez at the Honolulu airport in March, 1975, as Janet clings to life in the hospital after being shot by her father. She then flashes back to Inez's seventeenth birthday in 1952, the first time Jack and Inez met. Although Jack was married, the two began a short affair soon after. Inez married Harry Victor in the spring of her sophomore year at Sarah Lawrence College; she was two months pregnant with his child. She lost the baby, but was quickly swept up in the responsibilities of being a politician's wife.

Inez meets Jack on several occasions over the years, including once in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1969 on a trip with Victor, her children, Victor's campaign manager Billy Dillon, and Frances Landau, Victor's aide. During that trip a grenade exploded at the American embassy, and Jack moved the family to a safer location.

Returning to 1975, Didion reveals specific details of the shootings and of Paul Christian's confinement to a mental hospital in Honolulu soon after. Inez's family and Billy Dillon try to downplay both incidents to the press. Inez visits her father in jail and her comatose sister in the hospital, and afterwards she begins to remember bits and pieces of her childhood, especially memories of her mother.

Jessie refuses to come to Honolulu after hearing about the shootings. She walks out of a drug treatment clinic in Seattle and, with the help of a fake press card, boards a transport to Saigon, Vietnam, where she hopes to find a job. Didion then returns to the scene that opens the novel-Inez and Jack at a bar outside Honolulu trying to find information about Jessie. Later that night, the two take a flight to Hong Kong.

Part III

Inez waits in Hong Kong while Jack tries to find Jessie in Saigon. While she Waits, she takes long walks in the rain, reads American newspaper reports about the evacuation, and spends time watching Chinese children playing outside a nursery. Jack finds Jessie waiting tables at the American Legion outside of Saigon.

Part IV

Eight months later, Didion interviews Inez in Kuala Lumpur. During that time, Paul Christian is found mentally unfit to stand trial and Jessie is sent back to the United States. Didion had previously spoken to Harry, Billy Dillon, Dick Ziegler, Jessie, and Adlai about Inez and the events that spring. Inez tells Didion that Jack died of a heart attack in her arms after swimming in a hotel pool in Jakarta. She buried him in Honolulu and then flew immediately by herself to Kuala Lumpur. Jack's presence in Vietnam had been questioned, but his death quieted the rumors. Didion repeats Inez's reason for staying in Kuala Lumpur-"colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air"-and her insistence that she will remain there "until the last refugee was dispatched."

Part 1: Chapter 1

Part 1: Chapter 1 Summary

It is 1952, and Jack Lovett is telling Inez Victor about atom bomb tests, first in the islands of the Pacific, then in Nevada, and last of all in the Aleutians; Jack had witnessed all of them. Inez is a high-school student, and the two are seeing each other without her family's knowledge. Later, they will see each other in Jakarta in 1969 and in Honolulu in 1975. The last chapters of the story take place in 1975, when Vietnam is being evacuated.

Part 1: Chapter 1 Analysis

This novel begins at the end and then fills in the beginning and the middle. The chronological flashing back and forth throughout the book sometimes makes it difficult to know exactly where the action is taking place, though the use of dates throughout helps the reader to keep track and to understand the story. In this first chapter, Didion draws a mini-map of the story with dates attached; it can be helpful to go back and refer to it while reading if the narrative seems confusing.

This device of moving back and forth chronologically reflects cinematic techniques. It also enhances the feeling of disorientation that the protagonist, Inez, feels. The past is presented as a viable factor in the action of the story, but the events are presented in such a chaotic way that they sometimes fail to hold together.

Lovett's lack of emotion as he tells of the atomic bomb tests sets the tone for the point Didion wants to make regarding the work of the intelligence/security arm of the government, which sacrifices democracy on behalf of security. Jack protects this work from meddling politicians like Inez's husband, Harry Victor. Inez is placed in the difficult position of being married to an elected representative, while her lover and true soul mate is an agent of the secretive network that has much more power in determining how decisions are made by the government than do media-created politicians like Harry Victor.

Part 1: Chapter 2

Part 1: Chapter 2 Summary

The narrator in this novel is Joan Didion, the author herself. She has an interest in physical atmosphere, especially when it has to do with color. For example, the statement "I have: 'Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air,' is Inez Victor's fullest explanation of why she stayed on in Kuala Lumpur. Jack Lovett also speaks of color, making note of the pink dawns that were brought about by the atom bomb tests. Didion herself has a dream of a vision filled with rainbow and a growth of tropical green.

This story will be about Inez Victor and Jack Lovett. Didion writes that she had considered writing the novel about Inez's ancestors but had discarded that idea to focus on Inez instead.

Part 1: Chapter 2 Analysis

In explaining the work of a writer, Didion once used an example of a picture of a cat drawn by a schizophrenic patient, in which the cat had a shimmer around it. She said that the purpose of writing is to figure out what's going on in the shimmer. Inez can only explain in aesthetic terms why she stays on in Kuala Lumpur, yet she seems, in the end, to be the only character who is truly practicing democratic principles. These "shimmers" are important to Didion.

This story demonstrates an extraordinary way to handle point of view. In the first place, the book is being written by an author who has distinguished herself as a reporter/columnist/essayist, and she is deliberately holding on to that persona as the narrator of the book. We know what is going on in the story through Joan Didion's eyes, which are, at best, far-removed from the actions. She only knows what the other characters tell her, as she is not on the scene except on those occasions when she is interviewing one or the other of the characters.

This approach certainly works to make the story seem real, but sometimes it is difficult to know whether the story is a factual one that is being reported or whether it is a fiction created by a writer who is more at home as a newsperson than as a novelist. It is, of course, fiction. Didion set out to write a novel, and Democracy is the result. She shares with us her indecision about what the book should be about. We know that she considered and rejected a story about Inez's family in an earlier generation. Do we need to know that? It does help to lay the background for the story about the family in this generation, but it is not essential to an understanding of this story.

Didion was at Berkeley teaching a course on the idea of democracy in the work of certain post-industrial writers when the idea for this book came to her. She was concerned with the anti-democratic forces at work in America at the time, including the Iran-Contra scandal, which presented to Americans with the dilemma of whether

democracy should be jettisoned in favor of foreign policy goals. The essence of the Iran-Contra situation was that, in the name of curtailing and containing communism, those in positions of power demanded the freedom to act quickly and without restraint. In order to do that, they bypassed public accountability, on which democracy depends. The Reagan administration made the decision to fund the Contra rebels (in the name of national security) even though Congress had voted to halt such assistance. Questions about the survival of democracy in the wake of a cold war that was not fought openly but in the dark secrecy of "intelligence" maneuvers were very much on Didion's mind as she developed this story.

With the advent of television, genuine debate between political candidates was eventually wiped out, and image supplanted issues as the driving force in elections. Image as a deciding force was not new, of course; it had always been a factor, but television threw the whole process out of kilter. Victor is almost a caricature of this new, image-centered politician, though the caricature is based upon actual persons. There are several ways in which Didion makes this clear, including the fact that Victor names his son Adlai, obviously after Adlai Stevenson, who quit the Justice Department in 1957 and opened a storefront legal aid office in Harlem. He wrote an article, "Justice for Whom? A Young Lawyer Wants Out."

Part 1: Chapter 3

Part 1: Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter fills in the family background of Inez Victor, née Christian. She has a sister, Janet; their mother, Carol, had abandoned them when they were young, largely because she had never felt truly accepted in her husband's family's social circle. The Christian family lived in Hawaii, where they were prosperous and socially prominent. Paul was the girls' father and was away on business much of the time; his brother, Dwight, was a successful businessman. Janet married Dick Ziegler, who was squeezed out of the container business by Dwight. That occurrence eventually led to tragedy when Paul shot and killed Wendell Omura, who was Janet's lover as well as a confidant of Dwight.

Lastly, Didion writes of Jack Lovett, Inez's lover when she was 17 in 1952. It is 1975 now, and Jack is 60.

Part 1: Chapter 3 Analysis

Again, Didion is summarizing the story before she tells the story. In other words, she tells us what she's going to tell us before she tells us; all of these matters will be developed at greater length as the story progresses. We must shift back and forth in order to grasp the plot, but she has managed to lay the background in this chapter, showing us the wealthy Christian family, the abandonment of Inez and Janet by their mother, the shenanigans of Dwight, and a killing-to-come within the family. She also shows us the coming conclusion of the liaison between Inez and Jack that is introduced in Chapter 1.

Part 1: Chapter 4

Part 1: Chapter 4 Summary

Joan Didion works with Inez at Vogue briefly and meets Jack Lovett there when he drops in to see Inez. Jack travels the world and is in the information business. He is concerned with arms shipments and speaks of countries as "actors" and "state actors," with "non-state actors" being the real wild cards.

Part 1: Chapter 4 Analysis

Didion actually did work for Vogue at one time, but we know that Inez and Jack are her imaginative creations. In this chapter, she is connecting the three major characters: Inez, Jack, and herself. Jack is a mysterious character but an obviously powerful and effective one. He steps out of the shadows or emerges from the universe whenever Inez needs him.

Chapter 4 also clarifies again that is a love story. Jack and Inez fell in love when she was 17 and he was in his early 40s. They continue to hold onto those feelings even though there is no consummation of them for most of their lives, until the very end, when Jack is 60 and Inez is 40. Even so, their feelings for each other stay alive in their minds, and they occasionally meet, usually not just by chance. We will find that Jack keeps track of her movements and appears when he feels that she needs his help.

Part 1: Chapters 5 and 6

Part 1: Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Jack's wife from 1945 until 1952 described his occupation as "army officer." Betty Bennett, to whom he was married from 1962 until 1964, described it as "aircraft executive." Joan Didion interviewed Jack from time to time, but he never gave her any useful information, talking instead about Inez, whom he once described as "one of the most noble women he had ever met." It seems, in fact, that no one can actually say what it is that Jack Lovett does. In this chapter we are also reminded that Inez is married to Congressman Harry Victor.

Inez was born in Hawaii on January 1, 1935. Now that the background is laid, the story begins. It is 1975, and she and Jack are watching the evacuation from Vietnam on television in a bar outside Honolulu.

Part 1: Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

Didion supplies us with bits and pieces of Jack's life as we proceed. His marriage to Carla was coming to an end at the time that he met Inez. We now know that his feelings for Inez are not just the visceral ones that a 40+-year-old man might be expected to feel for a 17-year-old girl. He is a paradox; he is exciting, powerful, and mysterious, and he holds on to his love for Inez until the end of his life, stepping in and looking after her at crucial points when she needs him, whether she acknowledges that he is needed or not. In this story, Inez is the protagonist and heroine, but Jack is heroic as well.

Part 1: Chapter 7

Part 1: Chapter 7 Summary

Inez has been married to Harry Victor for 20 years in 1975, and she has seen him through every stage of his career, beginning with the Justice Department and continuing with his appointment to finish out the term of a congressman who had died in office. Harry's career history also includes a failed bid for the presidential nomination in 1972; he sacrificed an ambassadorship to run for the presidency. The Victors have twins: Jessie, a daughter, and Adlai, a son.

After his unsuccessful try at the presidency, Harry returns to private life, lecturing at Berkeley for a semester and taking on public speaking engagements. He is also involved in the development of the Alliance for Democratic Institutions.

Inez feels that her history of being always in the limelight, of always having to be "on," has caused a delete to occur in her memory. She has had to play a role so much that she no longer remembers who she is. Billy Dillon "manages" their public lives and images and serves as her director in the role she plays.

Part 1: Chapter 7 Analysis

The conflicts in this story are internal, taking place in the mind of the protagonist, Inez; through her, we are able to examine an important theme in the story: truth. Inez, a "noble" person, is a dutiful and faithful wife. She campaigns for her husband and allows herself to be managed by Billy Dillon for the sake of her husband's career. She has given up any life or preferences of her own in order to fulfill this role. In order to succeed in his political life, Harry ceases to have any integrity as a human being. His personality is subsumed by the need to make the right moves, put forth the right image, and say the right things so he can hold on to power as a politician.

There is no longer any question about who Harry is, but the process of attaining this end causes Inez to lose track of herself. We don't find her objecting to this fabricated life and personality, but she does have regrets that she no longer remembers who she really is. Just as a delete erases the memory in a computer, so life as the wife of an American politician has deleted her memory, and to some extent herself.

During the time that Didion began to think about this novel, the Watergate scandal was heating up, and this undoubtedly formed a background to her thoughts as she wrote. President Nixon was defending the use of espionage and condemning those who were trying to learn the truth about the situation; he is a prime example of the politician who manipulates the system for his own purposes and who is complacent about denying a role for the citizenry in the decision-making process.

Part 1: Chapter 8

Part 1: Chapter 8 Summary

The picture that Didion paints of Inez's life as the wife of Harry Victor is that of a person who is sleepwalking. Her homes do not reflect her in any way, and they are professionally kept. She takes jobs from time to time, but they do not engage her. When asked what special interest she wanted to focus on in her role as congressman's wife, Inez expressed the only strong interest she had shown during those years; she wanted to work with refugees, she said. However, this was considered too controversial for the wife of a congressman, so she was named the consultant for the paintings that hang in American embassies and residences around the world instead, a job which required very little effort from her. "She had the protective instincts of a successful refugee. She never looked back," writes Didion.

Part 1: Chapter 8 Analysis

When she writes that Inez had the protective instincts of a refugee, Didion is foreshadowing the outcome of the story, in which Inez devotes her life to refugees in Kuala Lumpur.

Part 1: Chapter 9

Part 1: Chapter 9 Summary

Following a quarrel with Harry, Inez tries to think of times when she has been happy. There are few, but a time comes to mind in which she and Jessie had been staying in a guest house in Hong Kong; there had been danger of baby cobras in the gardens, so Inez had carried Jessie everywhere and had felt useful. Other memories involving her children are not so happy, though; in 1973, Adlai had been in a car accident that had crippled a 15-year-old girl, and that same year, Jessie had been found overdosed in her bedroom. In the present, Adlai has found a school that will enable him to avoid the draft, and Jessie has gone through a series of treatment institutions, although she is not even 18 years old.

Part 1: Chapter 9 Analysis

This chapter deals with motivations. Inez tries to be useful to Harry, but her own needs are ignored and neglected. It is significant that the one time she can remember being happy is when her little girl needed her personal attention in order to be safe. The children of this political family are not doing well. Adlai is irresponsible, and Jessie has become a drug addict. Interestingly, Inez maintains her loving connections to Jessie into her daughter's adulthood.

Part 1: Chapter 10

Part 1: Chapter 10 Summary

Inez tries to eliminate any public reference to herself or the children, including the Who's Who entry on Harry. She even scrapes the labels off of prescription bottles. Her father tries to use her position to gain advantage for people who are important to him, but she does not cooperate. Her Uncle Dwight sends her clippings of all mentions of her or Harry in the Honolulu newspaper. In spite of maintaining connections with her family, though, Inez feels that she can no longer remember definitely anything about her life in Hawaii.

During the 1972 campaign, Inez's sister Janet had been interviewed about the family and their background; in the interview, she calls Inez "Nezzie," which had never been Inez's nickname in real life. She also tells a story of a French governess, which is equally untrue. As Inez watches the interview, she writes on a pad, trying to remember the names of all ten ferry boats that crossed between Hong Kong and Kowloon. The one she can't remember, the Lurline, is the one her mother left on. Janet had cried over her departure until she was sedated by their pediatrician; Inez never did cry. She had believed that everything would be all right if she could just remember the names of all ten ferry boats.

Didion portrays Inez's capacity for passive detachment as a means of survival. Inez herself speaks of it as "Drop fuel. Jettison cargo. Eject crew."

Part 1: Chapter 10 Analysis

Janet's reaction to her mother's abandonment had been a kind of neurosis. Ironically, she does the same things to survive what Harry is doing; she creates a fantasy past that never existed. On the other hand, Inez's way of dealing with these situations is to detach herself, let go of all memory. She didn't cry when her mother left; she dug in and survived, but she has paid a price. In a way, the experience was good preparation for being the wife of a politician, but personally, it was a costly one.

Part 1: Chapter 11

Part 1: Chapter 11 Summary

Didion was a student at Berkeley in the 1950s and is back teaching there in 1975 when she reads about Paul Christian shooting his daughter, Janet, and Congressman Wendell Omura. Janet survives; Omura does not. One headline reads: Victor Family Touched by Island Tragedy.

Part 1: Chapter 11 Analysis

In this chapter, we encounter the effects of the strange point-of-view technique that Didion uses in this story. It seems real that the narrator did, in fact, read about the shooting in Honolulu, but in reality, the shooting never happened. It takes some effort to distinguish fact from fiction, and this is precisely what Didion intended. The part about Didion's being a student at Berkeley in the 1950s and going back and teaching in 1975 is true; the part about the Christian family is fiction.

Part 1: Chapter 12

Part 1: Chapter 12 Summary

Inez flies to Honolulu, accompanied by Billy Dillon, to be with her sister in the hospital. She is met at the airport by Jack Lovett.

Part 1: Chapter 12 Analysis

Dependable Jack is back when he is needed. This chapter also makes clear that Billy Dillon has been a large part of Inez's life and that he too sometimes plays an important supportive role, in spite of the fact that he is also the agent of her discontent. He is the classic public relations pro, who refashions everything and everyone to match a desired image. Even so, he is with Inez in Hawaii to make sure that she doesn't have to be alone during a difficult time. He is also there to be sure that she doesn't do anything to tarnish the carefully created image.

Part 2: Chapter 1

Part 2: Chapter 1 Summary

Inez and Jack Lovett had met on Inez's seventeenth birthday during the intermission of a ballet performance in Honolulu. He was still married to Carla at the time, but the marriage was on its last legs. Later, he encountered Inez on a cane road with a boy who was in the cane field vomiting; Jack gives them a ride back to town. He and Inez begin to meet, and when he is ready to leave the island, she says, "I suppose we'll run into each other here or there."

Also in this chapter is a completely different scene, in which Inez marries Harry Victor in an informal service at City Hall, with Billy Dillon as witness. She is two months pregnant. Two months after the wedding, she miscarries. She sends Jack a wedding announcement, which doesn't catch up with him until several months later.

Part 2: Chapter 1 Analysis

In the beginning of Part 2, we get the rest of the story from the first chapter of the book. Someone has said that this story is like a jigsaw puzzle with the pieces lying around. Now we get some more pieces and can begin to fill out the story of Inez and Jack. We also get some fragments of her other life as politician's wife.

Part 2: Chapter 2

Part 2: Chapter 2 Summary

Over the next twenty years, Inez and Jack run into each occasionally but do not really spend time together, although they keep their feelings for each other alive. On one of these occasions, in 1969, Inez is traveling with her husband, who has just been elected to Congress, and upon arriving in "one tropic capital or another," she is met by Jack, who is temporarily attached to the embassy and on special assignment to the military, performing in an advisory function to the private sector.

Jack is not impressed with Harry. The children are along, as well as Janet, Billy Dillon, and Harry's mistress of the moment, his aide, Frances Landau. Harry has foolishly brought his family into a very dangerous situation. He and Billy are careful to make the point, important for publicity purposes, that Harry is not representing the embassy; they believe that this will make them safer in case they should be targeted by rebels. Jack is the one who knows the real situation, and he takes action to protect them.

Harry and Billy are preoccupied with the public relations aspects of the visit, which seem to be their only reason for being there. Jack is disgusted, which is untypical of him; he does not normally show dislike or irritation. "You people really interest me," he says to Harry and Billy. "You don't actually see what's happening in front of you. You don't see it unless you read it. You have to read it in the New York Times, then you start talking about it. Give a speech. Call for an investigation. Maybe you can come down here in a year or two, investigate what's happening tonight."

A grenade is lobbed into the embassy, and Jack Lovett tries to get them out. The "experts" don't have a clue. When Harry protests that Jack is being unduly alarmed, Jack asks him whether he knows what it would cost to get a congressman's child back. He is trying to avoid such an eventuality, so he's moving them to a mountain retreat. Inez defends her husband to Jack. "You don't understand him," she says.

"Oh yes I do," he replies. "He's a congressman, which means he's a radio actor, a civilian."

She sees Jack only twice again between 1969 and 1975, but after the 1969 encounter, she considers separating from her husband and taking a studio apartment. She does not do this, however, and continues to be the ideal congressman's wife.

Part 2: Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter illustrates the entire point of the story: Politicians in Washington, who are running the country, are not only out of touch with reality, but they are also not interested in the real. Maintaining their own images and positions is the entire focus of their careers, and they are not capable of human feelings, reactions, or even reasoning. Jack

Lovett plays an important role for Didion, in that he provides the contrast necessary to make clear her point about the politicians. Didion sees three threats to democracy in the United States of America: an intelligence/security dominated by self-serving practitioners who, in the name of maintaining America's global dominance, have lost the ability to make rational choices; politicians who base decisions not on what is right for the country, but on what will promote their own careers; and an abandonment of the country's history. She also raises an alarm over the increasing limitations being placed on public participation in government process.

It is Jack Lovett's voice that makes this point for Didion, and for the most part, Jack is a sympathetic character. He is able to act effectively, and he does care about the lives of the people he is responsible for. We certainly believe that he loves and respects Inez and that she has played a real and personal role in his life, albeit from a distance. However, Jack also represents that force in American politics which Didion considers at least as dangerous as the hollow shells that parade as political leaders: he is part of the powerful security network that answers to no one and that, in the long run, is the greatest threat to democracy. It takes the welfare of the country completely out of the hands of the people. Perhaps more importantly, as a representative of the security/intelligence community, Jack is answerable to no one. In the very last chapter, he is subpoenaed by Congress, but he has already been dead for eight months.

When Jack warns about the cost of recovering the kidnapped child of a congressman in this chapter, it is a foreshadowing of his later rescue of Jessie, at the cost of a million piastres for her flight out.

Part 2: Chapter 3

Part 2: Chapter 3 Summary

It is 1975; Inez has left Honolulu and has met Jack Lovett in Hong Kong. She is in Kuala Lampur working with refugees. She talks to Joan Didion about the breakdown of The Alliance for Democratic Institutions, which had been founded to serve a particular ideology. There has been an ideological rift among members, which is threatening the survival of the alliance. Inez refuses to talk about anything else, particularly Jack Lovett.

Part 2: Chapter 3 Analysis

The Alliance for Democratic Institutions is never defined in the story, and its purpose remains ambiguous. What we know is that it exists to preserve a particular ideology-that is, a political party's agenda-which is just one more aspect of the current political milieu. Didion points out that institutions and ideologies are often created without regard to what is good for the country or what is ethically right or sound; the preservation of a particular party is what politicians spend their careers on.

Part 2: Chapter 4

Part 2: Chapter 4 Summary

Janet is found by the police barely alive and Congressman Wendell Justice Omura, dead with a gunshot wound in the chest, is with her. Paul Christian is committed to a state facility for the care and treatment of the insane.

Part 2: Chapter 5

Part 2: Chapter 5 Summary

This chapter deals with the follow-up to the killing and murder. Billy Dillon goes to the vacation house in Amagansett to tell Inez what has happened. Harry has a speech to make, and Billy is unable to contact him; typically, he is thinking only of damage control. He travels with Inez to Honolulu, and their discussion reveals that Inez's father has been mentally unbalanced for some time. Janet's husband, Dick Ziegler, is in Guam and is trying to get a flight out.

Part 2: Chapter 5 Analysis

The situation within the Christian family gives Didion the opportunity to make another statement about life in America. The Christian family has realized the American Dream in spades. They are wealthy, powerful, and live like Croesus. They are also dysfunctional in the most extreme sense of that term. Paul Christian's wife has left him because he is always absent taking care of his many business interests and because she feels that the family does not accept her. The two daughters do not appear to have had any help dealing with her departure, so both are fractured and twisted by it. Paul Christian, himself, has become insane. Dwight's insensitivity, as well as that of the other members of the family following the shooting, provides clues as to what extreme wealth (which makes the great American Dream possible) can do to human beings.

Part 2: Chapter 6

Part 2: Chapter 6 Summary

Didion tells us that she got the information for this chapter from Billy Dillon. Following the tragedy, Billy is with Dwight and Ruthie Christian in their living room in Honolulu, along with Inez. All except Inez are eating and drinking as if nothing has happened. Instead of discussing the shooting, they discuss business. Inez doesn't understand, and she is trying, to no avail, to get some answers. They assure her they will send food and condolences to the Omura family, as if that small act of charity would fix everything. Billy doesn't mention Jack Lovett.

Part 2: Chapter 6 Analysis

Once again, in this chapter, we have Didion, a real reporter, functioning for purposes of this story as a fictional reporter. It is Billy Dillon who ironically reports on the insensitivity of the family in this desperate situation, although he himself has been the desensitizing force in Inez and Harry's life up until this time.

Inez's struggle to find meaning in her life and even to hang on to her memories, such as they are, underscores the fissure in American life. That the only stable force in her life is Jack Lovett, a shadowy character who leads his own clandestine existence, indicates just how desperate life in America is in the 1970s. It's a very dark picture.

Part 2: Chapter 7

Part 2: Chapter 7 Summary

This chapter is written as the account of the tragedy that Inez gives to Didion. Paul Christian seemed to have come back from a trip to Tunis changed, she says. He began to object to the way the business was being run, took a room at the Y, and lived as if he were impoverished. He and Janet quarreled about his behavior and stopped talking to each other. He refused to take part in the company or in family-related social activities, and he asked the newspaper to retract a picture of Janet and Omura at a charity event.

At the same time, Dwight had been squeezing Dick Ziegler out of the business; Paul had known about this and commiserated with Dwight. Even so, Dick had told Inez that the calls disturbed him. "I think your dad went off the deep end," he informed her. He also told Inez that Janet loved her.

Part 2: Chapter 7 Analysis

In this chapter, our "reporter" is filling in the background information on the shooting through Inez, including Paul's slide into mental illness. It is also Inez, apparently, who provides the information about the motive for the catastrophe-an unethical business deal that destroyed a member of the family, who happened to be Janet's husband, Paul's son-in-law.

The other important point in this chapter concerns Janet, who had lost the ability to love anyone with the loss of her mother. When Dick tells Inez that Janet loves her, it has no meaning. Dick is as out of touch with reality as everyone else in the family.

Part 2: Chapter 8

Part 2: Chapter 8 Summary

In this chapter, we learn that before Billy and Inez had gone to Dwight's home, they had stopped at the prison. Paul is clearly deranged, and Inez is trying to detach herself from the whole thing. She thinks that her father needs to be put away, but Billy is directing her response to meet the requirements of her public relations position as the congressman's wife; she is told to say that he needs treatment.

Part 2: Chapter 8 Analysis

Billy never quits. He is wholly, solely, and completely a public-relations animal, who lives, breathes, and spews image creation. Every successful politician has one, and they are portrayed as the most evil and despicable of all the characters in this story. On the other hand, Didion tells us at the end of the story that Billy Dillon was in love with Inez and admired her.

Part 2: Chapter 9

Part 2: Chapter 9 Summary

Harry and Inez meet with Frank Tawagata, a relative of Omura's, to solicit his cooperation in the handling of the case. They don't want it to go to trial; they want her father to get treatment. The facts of the case are clarified via Dillon's research. Congressman Wendell Omura had introduced legislation hindering Dick Ziegler's real estate development, which would have worked to benefit Dwight Christian and possibly Wendell Omura's brother, who had an interest in Chriscorp. This is the deal that led Paul Christian to kill Omura.

Part 2: Chapter 9 Analysis

The plot thickens. It's even dirtier than we first thought, and manipulation of national legislation is implicated. Didion, here, is portraying another aspect of modern-day United States politics by showing how such manipulations interfere with the ethical decision-making that preserves a democracy. A citizen is involved in this particular deal, but the result is to serve the ends of another powerful citizen, not to make the country better for all of the people who live in it.

Part 2: Chapter 10

Part 2: Chapter 10 Summary

Inez and Billy visit Janet in the hospital and find that she is essentially brain-dead and will not survive. Inez recalls that Janet had called her a week before and asked if she remembered their mother's presence at her (Janet's) wedding. Inez had told her she didn't remember, but she did. She also remembers that Janet worked very hard at being like her absent mother during their growing-up years, trying to emulate her everything from her hair style to her penmanship. Inez has not seen Jack yet, but he had been at the airport when she arrived.

Part 2: Chapter 10 Analysis

In this chapter, we see that Inez hasn't forgotten everything; she simply reports that she does not remember things which she can, in fact, recall. This also tells us that her loss of memory is a protective device. She didn't cry when her mother left; she developed a protective shell that made it possible for her to live with the situation. Likewise, she doesn't take steps to avoid the desensitizing that is essential to being a successful political wife but instead develops a shell that makes it possible for her to survive.

Inez's loss of memory is a symbol for the nation's loss of its own memory. When a nation forgets its history, it is doomed to repeat its mistakes, and this is one of the points that Didion wants to make with this story. She believes that the intelligence/security component of government coupled with media-driven politics does just that: It obliterates the history that should be informing the decision-making of the present.

Ironically, Janet is the only character in the story who seems determined to hang onto her memories. She combs the beach searching for her mother's cigarette butts with her telltale scarlet lipstick on them so she can remember her mother. She copies her mother's handwriting in an attempt to establish some connection with her. She makes middle-of-the-night calls to Inez asking her if she remembers certain things.

In order to manipulate media scrutiny, the Billy Dillons of the world fabricate a past that will be compatible with the chosen image. Inez doesn't know who she is, because she has been recreated to meet the purposes of someone other than herself.

Part 2: Chapters 11 and 12

Part 2: Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

Jack walks into the Christians' dining room and asks Inez, in front of the family and Billy Dillon, "Do you want to go somewhere?" Harry and Adlai arrive on a private jet, but Jessie does not come to the funeral.

Jack and Inez go to the hospital to wait out the hours until Janet can be legally declared dead. The official statement worked out by Dillon for her behavior is that she is overwrought.

Part 2: Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

Leading up to this scene, the issue has not been that the family and Dillon were unaware of Jack's role in Inez's life; they simply had never had to confront it before. Now, though, Jack steps out from the shadows and takes on an actively protective and supportive role for Inez, and she has never needed it more. This is also a signal that the plot is moving toward conclusion. Make no mistake-Jack is Inez's salvation. If she is to survive and win this struggle, it will be with Jack's support. That her father has become mentally deranged is a wake-up call; the same thing could happen to her. Over the years, she has steadily denied more and more of her own persona, and now, she will either go under or she will find a way to survive. Jack is the agent that will make survival possible. Ironically, his strength, built upon his dangerous career, which represents for Didion a deadly force in the government, is what makes it possible for him to save her.

Part 2: Chapters 13 and 14

Part 2: Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

Harry and Adlai fly to Seattle on the private jet to pick up Jessie for the funeral, but she refuses to come with them. Instead, she talks her way onto a C-5A transport that is on its way to Saigon.

Harry and Inez argue and take potshots at each other regarding their history together. Inez tries to talk about what has been good about the marriage, but Harry is not interested. Inez and Jack go to meet a radar specialist who reports seeing Jessie in Saigon. They end up in a bar and in each other's arms, and they fly to Hong Kong together.

Part 2: Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

Jessie is going to Saigon when massive efforts have been mounted to bring all of the Americans and as many of their supporters as possible out of that region. Jessie's decision to leave the country echoes her mother's ultimate decision to escape. It is another statement about the failure of the government to provide an acceptable life for its citizens.

Jessie's trip to Vietnam may symbolize the lack of attention to history that had led to the American intervention in the first place. The decision to intervene in Vietnam was made by leaders who clearly did not comprehend the likely outcomes of that decision.

Jessie is doing the same thing her father had done years before when he had foolishly put his family at risk by taking them with him to Indonesia. It seems to be a tendency of Americans to forget the past when it might restrict them from doing whatever it is they want to do at the moment.

This chapter is the climax of the story. It is, first of all, the climax of the disintegration of a bad marriage. Jessie, the result of that seriously flawed marriage, is tragically, yet tranquilly flawed. She hasn't rebelled and given her parents a lot of trouble; she has simply sedated herself so she can deal with an environment that has not nurtured her sufficiently. She has not been able to develop a personality that would enable her to function in the world her parents want for her, and she views being a waitress as an adequate way to make a living. She is not belligerent; there are no shouting matches. For her, heroin serves the purpose that coffee serves for others.

This chapter is also the climax of the internal conflict within Inez and of her lifelong distant love-affair with Jack. They are together at last, and he is the means by which she will resolve the battle within herself for wholeness. Janet's death brings Inez home to face her past and seems to provide the shock she needs to take control of her own life and to discard the passive role she has been playing for so many years.

Part 3: Chapter 1

Part 3: Chapter 1 Summary

Inez is staying in an apartment in Hong Kong, and Jack is shuttling back and forth to Saigon. He is playing a role in the evacuation but is frustrated at the ineffectiveness of its management. He is also looking for Jessie. "You might not find her," says Inez.

"I always found you," Jack says. "I guess I can find your daughter."

Part 3: Chapter 1 Analysis

Here, we see not only Jack's effectiveness at doing what he does, but also the extent of his devotion to Inez. Ironically, he is the only person in Inez's life who has ever been devoted to her in a significant way; neither her father nor her mother nor her husband ever had been. On the other hand, Inez clearly has an emotional bond to Jessie, her daughter, but not to her son.

Part 3: Chapter 2

Part 3: Chapter 2 Summary

Partly by luck and partly by using connections and reasoning, Jack finds Jessie working as a waitress at the American Legion Club. She doesn't want to come with him, but he uses her father's name with the bartender and takes her away by force.

Part 3: Chapter 2 Analysis

Jack uses whatever means he needs to accomplish his ends. In this case, he uses Harry's position to gain control of Jessie so he can get her home, just as he has always used the impotent and ineffective governmental apparatus of the country to achieve his ends.

Part 3: Chapter 3

Part 3: Chapter 3 Summary

Jack lets Inez know that Jessie has been found and arranges for her to stay with B.J., an intelligence analyst, until a flight can be arranged for her. Inez gets the word to Harry and finds that Adlai has gone back to school to organize an event to make a statement about the evacuation.

Part 3: Chapter 3 Analysis

In this chapter we find ourselves asking about the future. Does the beat go on with Adlai? Another generation of politician? He, too, has flaws resulting from the dysfunction at home. He hadn't been able to get into Harvard, but he attends another institution in Cambridge so he can imply that he is, in fact, enrolled at Harvard. He is certainly trying to follow in his father's footsteps in his efforts to organize this event.

Part 4: Chapter 1

Part 4: Chapter 1 Summary

Jack tricks Jessie in order to get her on a flight to Los Angeles, where Harry meets her. Paul Christian is found incompetent to stand trial. Adlai's vigil for the liberation of Saigon is edited by Billy Dillon into a vigil for peace in Asia. The Khmer Rouge are about to enter Saigon, and Jack alerts Inez to meet him in Manila.

Part 4: Chapter 1 Analysis

Good old Billy is still on the job, making sure that Adlai's event is politically correct. The saga of Jack and Inez is about to reach its climax.

Part 4: Chapter 2

Part 4: Chapter 2 Summary

Didion says that she has tried to contact Inez and get her side of the story many times but has been rebuffed; now, though, Inez is inviting her to come to Kuala Lumpur, and she goes. Jack's name is being mentioned in many investigations, including one regarding shipment of leftover American arms out of Vietnam. Didion says that he was neither loyal nor disloyal; he simply considered his own country an abstraction, "a state actor" that was only one of the factors to be taken into account in any particular project he was working on. Didion thinks she is going to Kuala Lumpur so Jack can use her for his own political purposes. She writes later, though, that this turned out not to be true; she had underestimated Inez.

Part 4: Chapter 2 Analysis

The intelligence/security forces use the ineffective governmental structure to their own ends, and Jack is no exception. This is a statement about the serious threat that the security agencies pose to the welfare and even safety of the country, and Didion makes it clear that this is something she sees as alarming.

Part 4: Chapter 3

Part 4: Chapter 3 Summary

Inez tells Didion about Jack's death and burial in a military cemetery in Hong Kong. He had died while swimming in the hotel pool where they were staying, and she had called a number he had given her in case anything happened to him. A Mr. Soebadio had arranged for a private Learjet to take her and the body to Honolulu, where he was buried.

Part 4: Chapter 3 Analysis

Inez has come into her own. She may have suffered loss of memory, and she may have been manipulated by Billy Dillon, her own husband, and the other forces that keep the political machinery going for most of her life, but she is in charge now. From beyond the grave, Jack gives her the tools to close the final chapter of their life together, and she uses those tools to quietly, clandestinely, place his body where she chooses. Except for those agents whom Jack trusted to maintain confidentiality, only she knows that he is dead and where he has been buried.

Part 4: Chapter 4

Part 4: Chapter 4 Summary

We learn that Jack and Inez's first rendezvous in 1952 had been in the graveyard where she took him to be buried, and then we learn about the events that followed Jack's burial. Jack was subpoenaed by Congress after his death, and over and over, television news channels are running a clip of him and Inez dancing on the St. Regis roof. Billy Dillon corresponds with Inez from time to time, though he is now working for a new candidate, a congressman out of NASA. Didion hears from him from time to time as well. She writes, "In some ways I have replaced Inez as the woman Billy Dillon imagines he wishes he had married."

Inez rarely communicates with Harry. Adlai is clerking for a federal judge in San Francisco; and Jessie is in Mexico City, is writing a novel, and is living with a Newsweek stringer. Inez is working in the administration of the refugee program in Kuala Lumpur and teaching American literature at the University of Malaysia. She plans to spend the rest of her life there.

Part 4: Chapter 4 Analysis

So the story comes full-circle. Jack is buried in the cemetery where he met with Inez in the first chapter. This chapter is denouement, the unraveling of the strands of the story. Jack is beyond the reach of the investigations into his activities. Everyone has moved on. We learn about Billy, Harry, Adlai, and Jessie. Inez has come out victorious. She is now living an authentic life based on who she really is and what to do. She had been a spiritual refugee for the many years when she was a devoted congressman's wife, so she now identifies with the refugees who are physically separated from their past. Ironically, although Kuala Lumpur is formally a place of transition, Inez finds a home there and puts down roots, no matter that it gets no publicity. She is Didion's true democrat and is working to change the world at the local level.

Didion's stylistic peculiarities echo some of the writers she most admired. For example, the strange repetitions that Ernest Hemingway employed can be seen in her diction. A good example is in the first chapter, when Jack Lovett is telling 17-year-old Inez about the atomic bomb tests:

"'Something that could almost make you think you saw God,' he said.
He said to her.
Jack Lovett said to Inez Victor."

Didion also felt a bond with F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose works were concerned with wealth and illusion. He wrote about the destructive lifestyle of the upper-class in his famous *The Great Gatsby,* and Didion addresses this theme as well. She also seems to

follow Fitzgerald's advice to tear your tragic love story out of your heart and put it on pages for people to see.

While Didion's concerns in this novel are the threats to democracy from 1950 to 1970, she is also concerned with morality. There is a tendency in American culture to define morality purely in sexual terms; she is not concerned here with that definition. Harry's affairs are not the major consideration in Inez's struggle for wholeness, except as reflections of all the other shams that pass for reality in their lives. Inez's brief affair with Jack when he is 40 and she is only 17 is not condemned; rather, it is treated as a reflection of the authenticity of the two characters as well as their feeling for each other. Billy Dillon seems not to have a sex life, but he is the most immoral of all. His focus on image to the exclusion of everything else destroys the people around him. Ironically, an illicit sexual liaison, called a scandal when it is dragged into the public eye, can be and is used from time to time to bring a public figure down.

This story is a very pessimistic statement about the state of democracy in modern times. It is certainly not a picture of a country ruled by an informed and independent citizenry, which Thomas Jefferson envisioned.

Characters

Betty Bennett

Betty Bennett, introduced as a "Honolulu divorcee," was a close neighbor of Janet and Dick Ziegler. For eighteen months, between 1962 and 1964, Betty is Jack Lovett's second wife, an experience which "left little impression on either of them."

Carol Christian

Carol Christian, who is married to Paul Christian, is the mother of Inez and Janet. Although it is Inez and Janet who become the two main female characters, Didion admits early on in the novel that she "was interested more in Carol Christian than in her daughters." Having arrived in Honolulu as a bride in 1934, Carol Christian is always an outsider on the islands, and stubbornly lonely in her marriage. She leaves dark red lipstick marks on her cigarettes, which she stubs out after barely smoking them, and spends hours at her dressing table, which is strewn with paper parasols from cocktails. She dies in a Piper Apache plane crash near Reno, Nevada, soon after her daughter Janet's marriage to Dick Ziegler.

Dwight Christian

The brother of Paul Christian, and therefore uncle to Inez and Janet, Dwight has a moral saying ready for every occasion, a characteristic which Didion treats mockingly. The quotations come from extracts torn from a weekly column, "Thoughts on the Business Life," subsequently typed up on index cards by Paul's secretary to form a file. Paul is described as having more significance in the early life of Inez and Janet than their father, but the sympathetic qualities of his character are never properly explored.

Paul Christian

Paul Christian, husband of Carol Christian and father of Inez and Janet, kills Wendell Omura with a .357 magnum and fatally injures his own daughter Janet. The shooting is motivated by business, family, and racial jealousies, but it is described in terms of a cold assassination Having developed an eccentric objection to his family's financial dealings in Honolulu, Paul Christian has taken to living off canned tuna. The description of his actions immediately before and following the murder (living in a single YMCA room, going for a swim in the YMCA pool) gives the impression of a man turned clinically insane, a fact that Billy Dillon is keen to make the most of in his efforts to contain the situation.

Ruthie Christian

Ruthie Christian, Dwight's wife and aunt to Inez and Janet, is rarely mentioned in the novel.

Sybil Christian

Known in the family as "Cissy," Sybil is Inez and Janet's grandmother.

Billy Dillon

Billy Dillon is a major character, but one whose exact role is shadowy and only gradually discerned. On a first encounter with the novel, a reader will only gradually identify the full and politically sinister part that Dillon plays in the narrative. Initially, Billy appears as a mere business assistant and personal friend of Harry Victor. He is a witness at the wedding of Harry and Inez in 1955. The key events of the novel take place twenty years later, but Billy Dillon is still there, the archetypal, political backroom-boy, image-controller, and manipulator. His concern is for appearances and surface-gloss. His advice to Inez, after she has listened to her father confessing to two shootings and showing no remorse, is typical: " ... trot out the smile and move easily through the cabin, babe, O.K.?"

Frances Landau

Frances makes only brief appearances in the novel-at a dinner at Jakarta airport with Harry Victor-but she is representative of a type of woman who will hang on to public figures, "deprecating their own claims to be heard."

Carla Lovett

Carla Lovett, a druggist's daughter from San Jose, California, was Jack Lovett's first wife. They were married from 1945 to 1952.

Jack Lovett

Jack Lovett is an undercover operator with a finger in many pies. An opportunist, he makes the best of a given situation. The exact nature of his operations is kept vague, but the reader is given the strong impression that he makes his living by arms dealing and similar activities. In particular, towards the end of the novel he is implicated in profiting from events surrounding the American withdrawal from Vietnam. However, Didion is at pains to exempt him from accusations of treason: "It would be accurate only to say that he regarded the country on whose passport he traveled as an abstraction, a state actor, one of several to be factored into any given play."

For Jack, Inez is certainly not an abstraction. He falls for her on their first meeting, which is on her seventeenth birthday, during the intermission of a ballet. They have a brief affair. His marriage to Carla Lovett ends in the same year. But Jack is much older than Inez. She has her young life to lead, and the two of them meet only sporadically across a span of more than twenty years. At each encounter it is apparent that the old spark is still alive. However, Inez, despite the shallowness of her life with Harry, will not leave her husband for Jack. His entreaties are always charmingly understated. Finally, in the melodramatic closing of the book, Jack is able to seize the initiative, and Inez surrenders to his man-of-action prowess.

The renewal of intimacy between Jack and Inez is short-lived. Jack dies in a swimming pool in Jakarta. The timing and circumstance of his death are suspicious, but not belabored by Didion. However, the reader is clearly intended to note the fact that Jack's name had been increasingly mentioned in government investigations into wrongdoing during the American withdrawal from Vietnam. After Jack dies, a certain Mr. Soebadio takes over (from Inez) all matters pertaining to the death.

Narrator

It is tempting to identify the first-person-voice narrator as Joan Didion herself. She mentions her time at *Vogue* in the early 1960s, and ventures several opinions about the art and complexities of narrative construction that are known to be representative of Didion's own views as a novelist. However, if Janet, Inez, and the other characters are accepted as fictional, it is perfectly possible to accept the first-person voice as a fictional construct, too. The construct serves two purposes: It allows Didion to speak directly to the reader, and it suggests that she is passing on information that has been intimately communicated to her by certain characters in the novel.

Wendell Omura

Wendell Omura is a black political activist. He is shot by a deranged Paul Christian, who has become unhinged by Omura's apparent involvement with his daughter Janet.

Mr. Soebadio

Mr. Soebadio is a mysterious gentleman who appears at poolside following Jack Lovett's death and takes over (from Inez) all responsibility for dealing with the removal and transportation of the body.

Frank Tawagata

Frank Tawagata is a lawyer. He is married to a cousin of Wendell Omura, and represents the Omura family during the period following the arrest of Paul Christian. In Part Two, section 9, pressure is put on Frank to lobby for Mr. Christian to be committed

to an asylum. Although Inez's father is certainly mentally incapacitated, she and Billy Dillon's apparent motive is to avoid the embarrassment of the case going to trial.

Adlai Victor

Adlai Victor is the twin brother of Jessie Victor. Both were born February 23,1957. Adlai is involved in a serious accident in June, 1973, in which a "fifteen-year-old from Denver lost her left eye and the function of one kidney"-an example of carefully-placed, circumstantial detail not later developed by Didion. Adlai is less important to the novel than his sister, Jessie.

Harry Victor

Harry Victor, Inez's husband, is a creature consumed by political life and personal ambition. After successful campaigns for Congress in 1964, 1966, and 1968, he is made a senator in 1969, following the death of the incumbent. After his attempt to become the 1972 presidential nominee of his party fails, his life revolves around public dinners and public speaking. He lectures at Berkeley during the spring of 1973; and, estranged from his wife, he dines in London in the company of a glamorous woman. At the end of the book, his political ambition and personal life are in tatters. Harry Victor is seen as a pathetic figure who is powerless to prevent ills wife from taking off with another man.

Inez Victor

Inez Victor, Harry Victor's wife, was born Inez Christian on January 1, 1935. She is the mother of twins: Adlai, a boy, and Jessie, a girl. She is the strongest character in the novel, and the one whose point of view the reader most frequently shares. Indeed, the author testifies that Inez was to have been the first-person narrator of an abandoned version of the book. As the wife of an ambitious politician, Inez has to develop mannerisms peculiar to people in the public eye. She is the primary focus for one of the book's most insistent themes: the insidiously destructive nature of public life. Inez, like others in her position, has "lost track." In playing a part for so long, in so diligently ensuring that her every gesture is tailored for general scrutiny, she has lost all memory of what being herself means.

Inez met and fell in love with Jack Lovett in 1952, before leaving Honolulu to start an art course at Sarah Lawrence College. But she marries Harry Victor in 1955. The private story told by the novel concerns Inez's repeated encounters with Jack, and her apparent resistance to his entreaties, up until the climax of the novel in which she finally walks out on her husband

Jessie Victor

Jessie Victor, born Jessica Christian Victor on February 23, 1957, is the twin sister of Adlai and daughter of Inez and Harry Victor. Another victim of her father's immersion in public life, Jessie becomes a heroin addict. In June, 1973, she is found in a state of collapse, and the following year is placed in a clinic. Quite bizarrely, at Just the point when American troops and civilians are pulling out of Vietnam, she decides to go and work in its capital city, Saigon. She flies out the night before her aunt Janet's funeral. Significantly, it is not her father who goes to fetch her back, but Jack Lovett (accompanied by Inez), using his clandestine connections. Jessie is found working as a bar girl at the Legion club.

Kiki Watt

A fading beauty who is interviewed by *Vogue* in the early part of the novel, Kiki is Just a walk-on player. The single interlude in which she is featured is a significant one, however. Kiki rattles away in an amusingly well-captured banter, communicating nothing. The other characters present Inez, Jack Lovett, and the novelist-say little but communicate a great deal. Kiki is a colorful, minor character used as an effective foil, or contrast, for the more important players.

Janet Ziegler

Janet Ziegler, born Janet Christian, is Inez's younger sister. Janet is a less significant character than Inez, although she figures in many of the flashbacks to the two sisters' childhood and early adolescence. This is especially so at the end of the novel, when Janet has been shot and is in hospital on a life support machine

Themes

Truth and Falsehood

Didion's self-conscious intrusion of herself, the author, into the novel's narrative is fundamental to one of the book's major themes: the degree to which meaning can be ascribed to events by telling a story. Linked to this theme is consideration of its mirror image: the degree to which meaning can be eroded by telling a story falsely. Didion is not simply experimenting with the narrative method, though she acknowledges that the reader has certain expectations, some of which may not be satisfied by her own peculiar narrative approach. Declaring that she understands traditional techniques, Didion writes in Book Two, Chapter 11, "I know the conventions and how to observe them, how to fill the canvas I have already stretched; know how to tell you what he said and she said and know above all, since the heart of narrative is a certain calculated ellipsis, a tacit contract between writer and reader to surprise, how not to tell you what you do not yet want to know."

The reader has already been told that an earlier version of the novel was modeled on nineteenth-century family sagas. There was to be a great deal of family background and provincial Honolulu detail. The early focus of the book was to have been on the older generation, or so the "author" would have the reader believe. In fact, the final structure of the novel is so perfectly wedded to its themes that it is difficult to believe this other version of the book ever existed. The author's presence in the narrative, referring as it does to known details from Didion's own biography-her time at *Vogue,* her teaching at Berkeley-is intended to prompt the reader to ask: "Does that mean the other characters are real too?" The issue of the border between reality and fiction is also raised by Didion's specific references to media coverage of the political events in the novel, and the increasing impossibility of separating truth from falsehood. Nearly every character in the book is adept at projecting a phony veneer. Billy Dillon makes an art of it. Harry Victor is an impassively deceiving political animal. Jack Lovett is direct but secretive. Young Adlai pompously puts on airs. Perhaps the only character "true" to an inner self is Jessie, who has utterly rejected the values of her environment to become a waitress and heroin addict. At the end of the novel, she is declared to be well, living in Mexico City, and Writing a novel.

American Dream

At the end of the 1970s, Didion was in a depressed mood Her sour look at the 1960s-the essay collection *The White Album-was* published in 1979. *Democracy,* published five years later, was created out of the same feelings of pessimism. Thomas R. Edwards said in his *New York Review of Books* review of the novel, "The devastating personal and public consequences of the loss of history are Didion's theme." The scramble to get out of Saigon is implicitly seen as the deeply humiliating consequence of a political system that has become riddled with humbug and secrecy. Inez, in her

private life, has lost the thread of her existence and only barely clings to a sense of self by remembering simple moments from her childhood. The nation is in a similar state. Clinging to simplistic notions of manifest destiny and freedom of the individual, and led by politicians who mouth jargonized platitudes, the country has had to come to terms with defeat. The novel is not about the rights and wrongs of being in Vietnam. Its theme is the difficulty of holding on to the thread of history, the problem of constructing a continuous story in which the present is linked to the past. Its depiction of the unravelling of the American Dream makes it a resignedly philosophical book, rather than a fierce diatribe. Indeed, in its happy, epilogue-type ending, it is almost forgiving.

Search for Self

Having lost touch with her inner self for so much of the novel, Inez appears to have found fulfillment at the end by ministering to refugees ill Kuala Lumpur. She has been through the mill, and only an act of selflessness such as she has undertaken can bring her satisfaction (for the rest of her days, it would appear, for "Kuala Lumpur is not likely to dispatch its last refugee in Inez's or my lifetime"). Inez's nun-like change of life is peculiar to her. The other survivors of the novel go on in ways that suggest that, for them, the search for self-fulfillment means simply carrying on. Billy Dillon has a new congressman to groom for the Presidency. Harry Victor has become a special envoy to the Common Market (what is now called the European Union). Adlai has a lowly clerical position, working for a federal judge. Jessie ("her weakness is for troubled capitals") is in Mexico City, living with a *Newsweek* reporter, and writing, of all things, a historical romance. In other words, the difficulties of modem life, of existence as an American citizen, have touched them all. The conclusion of the novel would therefore appear to be saying that only by consciously removing oneself from the structures of contemporary life can true self-discovery be made.

Betrayal

Most characters in the novel prefer to play the system-to stay within the structures and gain whatever personal advantage they can. If this means cheating, they cheat. If this means being secretive and underhanded, they are secretive and underhanded. If it means betraying those who are close to them, they betray them. Most of all they betray themselves, but only the thin-skinned, such as Inez, are aware of their self-betrayal. Political candidacy has so hardened Inez's husband that he can cheat on his wife and on his principles without the slightest sign of remorse As far as politics are concerned, he has probably forgotten he ever had principles. Billy Dillon relishes the game so much-he is so slick a public relations man-that for him conventional morality is turned on its head. It would be a betrayal of the game to give the honest answer; it would be a betrayal to act naturally.

The wealth of the Christian family makes them paranoid about business betrayals. The important subplot concerning Wendell Omura and Inez's sister, Janet, adds further to the pervasiveness of the betrayal theme. In addition, the reader is never sure whether

Jack Lovett is a secret agent, a loose cannon, or a mixture of the two. The appearance at the poolside, immediately following Lovett's fatal collapse, of the significantly-named Mr. Soebadio ("So-bad"), and the things that Mr. Soebadio just "happened to know" about getting a body out of Indonesia, suggest that Lovett belonged to a network of covert intelligence operators that made possible the breaching of protocol. The questions being asked about him at the end of his life, regarding possible profiteering from the American withdrawal from Vietnam, amount to a treasonous and undemocratic betrayal of his country.

Style

Narrative/Point of View

"This is a very hard story to tell," the narrator declares at the end of Chapter 1. Immediately after this, Chapter 2 begins, "Call me the author," an echo of the famous opening line "Call me Ishmael" from *Moby-Dick.* This is immediately undermined by a playful pastiche, or imitation, on the intrusive voice of nineteenth-century British novelist Anthony Trollope. On the same page, there is a quotation from a Wallace Stevens poem: "A gold feathered bird/Sings in the palm, without human meaning,/Without human feeling, a foreign song." Didion is at pains to establish that the narrator of *Democracy* is not a fictional character, but the author herself. Although the rest of Chapter 2 is largely about problems she, as author, has supposedly encountered with the structure of her story, the reader is also asked to accept her as a character in her own book, playing an Important role as witness and reporter (the passer-on of direct evidence).

This dual presence of Didion the novelist and Didion the character-the artist constructing her fiction vs. the reporter recording true-life events has a disconcerting effect upon the reader. The strongest presence is of Didion the novelist, so that although the reader is made vividly aware of several of the characters, there is never any serious attempt to tell events from their point of view. The unbroken awareness of the novel as artifice-of something being self-consciously manufactured by the writer-is compounded by Didion's stylistic quirks, which again draw the reader's attention to the author. The reader is kept at a cool distance from the characters and events by the narrative voice, an effect which (if the quotation from Wallace Stevens is kept in mind) would appear to be intentional, rather than a failure of engagement.

Structure

The book is divided into four sections. Section 1 has twelve chapters; Section 2 has fourteen; Section 3 has three; and Section 4 has four. Chapters are usually short, focusing on one key scene, or on the musings of the author. The main narrative action takes place during 1975-before, during, and after the American withdrawal from Saigon, Vietnam. But Didion's narrative method, especially in the first two sections of the novel (which together comprise eighty per cent of the whole book), is not a consecutive one. She visits and revisits, in no particular chronological order, other important years in the lives of her characters: 1934, the year in which Carol Christian, Inez's mother, arrives in Honolulu as a bride; 1952, the first meeting between Inez and Jack Lovett; 1955, Inez's marriage to Harry Victor; 1960, the year in which Inez and the author worked together at *Vogue;* 1972, the year of Harry's failed attempt to win his party's presidential nomination; and 1973, when Adlai has a serious accident and Jessie's heroin addiction is revealed.

Didion's circling around this narrative material evoke in the reader thoughts of the investigative journalist. The book is not a mystery or a thriller. Told conventionally it would be a family saga with a political edge Indeed, it is easy to imagine a popular novelist using the same material to work up a fat, five-hundred-page, episodic bestseller. The structure Didion chooses suits her own purpose, which is to explore connections and continuities between the past and the present. She wishes to make the reader aware that life experiences are often connected with events fairly distant in time, rather than those immediately preceding. To this end, the narrative structure works well, and it is something of a surprise when the two short, final sections of the novel deliver a conventional episodic conclusion.

Style

The use of repetition which occurs in the opening lines of *Democracy-recurring* from time to time throughout the novel-is one of the novelist's stylistic trademarks. She takes the words from the end of one sentence and uses them to begin the next. Cadenced repetition is not a new technique. One of Didion's early influences was Ernest Hemingway. As a teenager she copied out whole sections from his novels. The opening paragraph of *A Farewell to Arms* is a famously effective example of the use of repetition. But Didion's use of repetition has prompted criticism more than praise. Commentators find it over-formulaic. Her habit of separating repeated phrases so that each is on a separate line, in a paragraph of its own, has been called "padding."

Dialogue

Critics do not always consider Didion's use of poetic repetition effective. However, the consensus is that she is excellent at writing dialogue, although she chooses to transcribe it idiosyncratically; sometimes with quotation marks, sometimes without. In *Democracy* her use of dialogue is highly edited. She uses only those exchanges between characters that illuminate the themes she is developing. Snatched conversations are Didion's most effective means of characterization. The reader understands Inez through her conversations with Billy Dillon and Jack Lovett, rather than through any direct comment from the novelist. Didion makes use of two types of dialogue. One (the kind presented without quotation marks) is overtly impressionistic and not intended to be literal. The other, and the kind in which Didion excels, is presented conventionally, and purports to be the direct transcription of words actually spoken.

Historical Context

The Legacy of the 1970s

Democracy was published in 1984, but the major part of the narrative focuses on the previous decade. An important political theme-the existence of individual wheeler-dealers brokering deals WIth the connivance of government, and sometimes at the government's bequest-touches upon one of the major political stories of the 1980s: the Iran Contra crisis. The scandal was first revealed in 1986, when a secret CIA operative was shot down over Nicaragua His cargo was a load of weapons intended for the Contras, a group of anticommunist rebels. Further investigation into the matter revealed that this illegal shipment had been funded by secret sales of arms to Iran -a country under an arms embargo since hostages were seized at the U.S. embassy in Iran in 1979. High-ranking members of President Ronald Reagan's administration were later implicated in the scandal, but most received pardons or were granted immunity for their testimony.

When Didion chose to write explicitly about this story in her 1996 novel, *The Last Thing He Wanted,* she set the events in 1984. *Democracy's* first readers were able to read the book with detail and background to the Iran-Contra events unfolding in real-time. Inevitably, early reviewers and commentators on the book drew attention to this. However, the primary political and social focus of the novel is still the 1970s and, to a lesser extent, the 1960s.

From many points of view the 1970s was a featureless or transitional decade. One commentator, Peter Carroll, named his 1984 survey of the decade *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened.* During the first half of the 1970s, the cultural and political trends of the 1960s remained dominant. In the second half, many of the trends that were to characterize the 1980s began to manifest themselves However, deeper analysis reveals it to be possibly the most important decade in the postwar history of the United States. Two ideological positions were challenged at the time. The first of these-the belief in the expansion of American influence overseas had before been taken for granted by both Democrats and Republicans. The second-support for liberal civil rights programs-had been more rigorously debated But the legacy of the Lyndon Johnson administration, and the cultural climate of the closing years in the 1960s, seemed to protect such programs from attack. These basic principles of national self-belief were given a severe jolt by defeat in Vietnam. It was not so much the fact America lost the war as the ignominious and chaotic nature of civilian withdrawal that dented national pride most profoundly.

Vietnam

The concept of "Manifest Destiny"-that Americans had been divinely chosen to spread their influence and belief in freedom of the individual to all parts of the globe-had been axiomatic in American political affairs since the 1840s. In the nineteenth century, this

belief had mainly fed the frontier spirit during the period of westward expansion. In the twentieth century, and particularly after World War II, America had extended its influence overseas, such as to the Philippines in Asia. In the 1960s a further frontier had been confronted, with manned flights to outer space and the Moon.

In conquering this latter frontier, America was in direct competition with the Soviet Union, its Cold War enemy. Initially, involvement in Vietnam had been explicitly explained as a stand against communism and a defense of the free world. It had become complicated by America's importation of corporate capitalism into South Vietnam (so that business interests jockeyed for position with political and ethical factors) and, during the Richard Nixon administration, by increasing signs of detente (an easing of political conflict) between the two superpowers. At home presidential and national attention on the war was diverted by the Watergate affair, in which Nixon tried to cover up the illegal break-in at the Democratic National Committee office in Washington, D.C. The incident eventually led to Nixon's resignation.

Didion refers repeatedly in her novel to the exact circumstances of the American withdrawal from Vietnam in April 1975. The hectic and frantic helicopter flights out of Saigon are vividly described in a firsthand account by Stephen Klinkhammer, published in Al Santoli's *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War.* In this account Klinkhammer repeatedly describes the withdrawal as "total chaos" and "really a mess." Further details from this and other firsthand accounts are also used by Didion. In the novel, there are several references to money changing hands, and to certain people profiting out of the situation. Klinkhammer describes the Vice President of South Vietnam escaping with "an immense amount of gold bars."

Didion implies that some American civilians also profited from the situation.

Watergate and Secrecy

As reported in the June 4, 1973, edition of *Time* magazine, President Nixon issued a four thousand word statement attempting to explain his actions with regard to Watergate. This statement explicitly attempted to defend political espionage because of a climate in which sensitive political matters were brought into the open for the sake of openness. "I think it is time in this country to quit making national heroes out of those who steal secrets and publish them in newspapers," Nixon is reported (in the same article) to have said to a rapturous audience of ex-P.O.W.s. And in the statement itself: "By mid-1969, my Administration had begun a number of highly sensitive foreign policy initiatives aimed at ending the war in Vietnam, achieving a settlement in the Middle East, limiting nuclear arms, and establishing new relationships among the great powers. These involved highly secret diplomacy. They were closely interrelated. Leaks of secret information about anyone could endanger all. Exactly that happened News accounts appeared in 1969 which were obviously based on leaks-some of them extensive and detailed-by people having access to the most highly classified security materials. There was no way to carry forward these diplomatic initiatives unless further leaks could be prevented."

In such a way did those at the helm in public life defend secret, undemocratic methods- in the name of the democracy that those methods and "diplomatic initiatives" so flagrantly flouted. There is not a polemical point running through Didion's novel relating to its title. Rather, she takes for granted her audience's experience of contemporary political life and allows readers to draw their own conclusions from the focus of the narrative. Didion was writing the novel from the perspective of a disenchanted Republican.

Critical Overview

A tendency for critics of Didion's fiction to draw upon knowledge of her public and private character was taken to the limit in 1980 by Barbara Grizutti Harrison. In a witheringly unsympathetic essay included in her 1980 book *Off Center,* Harrison accused the author of being self-consciously neurotic, a reactionary, and a stylistic trickster. Reviewers of *Democracy* were not disposed to receiving Didion's intrusions of herself into the narrative with much sympathy. Many of them were convinced that these intrusions weakened the novel. But a number of early reviewers were more positive about Didion's style than Harrison. Phoebe-Lou Adams, reviewing the novel in the *Atlantic,* described it as being "striking, provocative, and brilliantly written." Janet Wieth, despite thinking that the book had the "immediacy of journalism" rather than the emotional depth of a great novel, nevertheless summarized it in *Library Journal* as "sophisticated political fiction, written with skill and wit."

One of the book's staunchest early supporters (and one of the few defenders of Didion's intrusive narrative device) was Thomas R. Edwards, who reviewed the novel at length in the *New York Review of Books.* Treating it as serious fiction, and drawing on its echoes with the book of the same name by Henry Adams, he wrote: *"Democracy* is absorbing, immensely intelligent, and witty, and it finally earns its complexity of form. It is indeed a 'hard story to tell,' and the presence in It of 'Joan Didion' trying to tell it is an essential part of its subject." A different point of view was expressed by Thomas Mallon in *The American Spectator.* In this review Mallon complained about a lack of range in Didion's female characterisation. "Inez Victor has in the past gone by the names of Lily Knight McClellan, Maria Wyeth, and Charlotte Douglas. They were the heroines of Didion's first three novels, and they're still the heroine of this one. All four women have the same frayed psychic wiring." About Didion's entry as a character in certain scenes of her story-for example, a conversation she has with Inez in the office of *Vogue*- Mallon writes, "There's a sort of desperation to the device." And about Didon's characteristic short sentences and repetitions, he observes, "One can sit down with the same syntax too many times, just as one can bump into the same heroine once too often."

The novel has been the subject of several critical essays. In "A Hard Story to Tell-The Vietnam War in Joan Didion's *Democracy,"* Smart Ching analyses both the fragmentary nature of the novel and its factual correspondences: "Jessie's flight to Vietnam illustrates the confusion in Southeast Asia during the last few weeks before the final evacuation of Saigon. For example, between April is and April 28, 277 whites and blacks without identification or passports who spoke English and presented themselves as Americans at evacuation sites were evacuated without question." The cumulative conclusion of Ching's analysis is that "the fragmentation of the fictive world-Inez's flight to Hong Kong-concurs with the collapse of the external world-the fall of Saigon"

The novel's political themes were considered by Michael Tager in his 1990 essay "The Political Vision of Joan Didion's *Democracy."* The concluding paragraph of this essay states: "Didion's novel portrays a democracy vitiated by a secretive national security apparatus and image-conscious national politicians. Both use euphemisms and vague

phrases to disguise or justify their questionable activities to the public. ... The plot of *Democracy* illustrates [George] Orwell's claim from his essay 'Politics and the English Language' that the misuse of language contributes to sloppy thought and misconceived action, and that indefensible acts require misleading language for justification." In "Postwar America and the Story of Democracy," an essay concentrating on the novel's structure, another critic, Alan Nadel, explores how the language of justification affects the tone of the novel as a whole. "By foregrounding her roles as author and as character and by mixing the levels of fact, Didion denies the reader the same distance she has denied herself."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is an Assistant Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland. In the following essay she examines how the form of Democracy *illustrates the problematic search for identity.*

Some critics read Joan Didion's *Democracy* as a romance novel that centers on Inez Christian's love affair with Jack Lovett. Others consider it a political novel, finding a relationship between Inez's internal and external worlds. Didion's innovative construction, in fact, highlights both of these aspects as it reinforces and helps develop the novel's main theme: the problem of identity, especially in gaining a clear view of self and others in a society that encourages concealment and deception. The novel's fragmented form and shifting point of view illustrate on three levels the difficulties inherent in separating fact from fiction: Inez, the narrator, and the reader all struggle to understand Inez and her world.

Mary McCarthy, writing in her *New York Times Book Review* article, "Love and Death in the Pacific," suggests that the "construction of *Democracy* feels like the working out of a jigsaw puzzle that is slowly being put together with a continual shuffling and re-examination of pieces still on the edges or heaped in the middle of the design." Didion creates this "jigsaw puzzle" by replacing traditional chronological order with flashbacks and flash forwards of fragmented scenes that allow us only glimpses of her characters. Our view is further complicated by Didion as narrator. She identifies herself as a journalist but insists she is writing a "novel" about Inez. As she begins the story, she admits she lacks "certainty... conviction... patience with the past and interest in memory" and feels she has "lost her authority as a novelist." Her confessions reveal the tension between fact and fiction, truth and imagination-a tension that the characters and the readers also feel.

Didion is not a traditionally omniscient narrator in the novel. She continually questions her ability to present an accurate portrait of Inez, acknowledging that she gains much of her information from unreliable sources: her own memory, interviews with Inez's friends (Jack, Billy Dillon) and family members (Harry, Adlai, Jessie), press clippings, and Inez's memory. Didion's and Inez's memories have faded, press clippings have provided only distorted images of her, and she doubts the truthfulness of other people.

The narrator begins Inez's story with a fragment of the scene where Jack and Inez stop at the bar outside Honolulu. They are trying to gather information about Jessie's flight to Vietnam. The narrator finds it difficult to continue, however, insisting that she has "no memory of anyone moment in which either Inez Victor or Jack Lovett seemed to spring out, defined They were equally evanescent, in some way emotionally invisible, unattached, wary to the point of opacity, and finally elusive." For several pages the narrator explains how hard it is to even begin to tell Inez's story. At one point she had intended to write a history of Inez's family in Hawaii, but decides instead to shift her focus to Inez's life in the United States. Ultimately, the narrator takes on the task of

telling Inez's story, piecing together the collage of images and "fitful glimpses" in an attempt to provide shape and order to Inez's life and thus to help establish her identity.

As the narrator assembles the parts of Inez's story, she weaves in glimpses of other characters that impact Inez's life. However, the contradictory images we gain cloud our vision of these characters. We cannot fault the narrator entirely for this ambiguity, however, since the characters themselves invent fictions to cope with the realities of their lives.

Carol Christian, Inez's mother, explains her husband's frequent absences from their home in Hawaii by insisting "When a man stays away from a woman, it means he wants to keep their love alive." The narrator later suggests that infidelities kept her husband away. Inez's grandmother considers Carol's abandonment of her teenage daughters "a sudden but compelling opportunity to make the first postwar crossing on the reconditioned *Lurline."* Elsewhere the narrator hints that Carol's "stubborn loneliness" while living as an "outsider" in the islands triggered her departure. Inez's married sister Janet, who maintains a "defensive veneer of provincial gentility" is suspected of having an affair with a Hawaiian. Paul Christian, who had "reinvented himself as a romantic outcast" after his wife left him, murders his daughter and her suspected lover. The shadowy Jack Lovett has been identified as an "army officer" by his first wife, an "aircraft executive" by his second, a "businessman" on his Visa application, and a "consultant in international development" on his business cards. The narrator leads us to suspect he is a CIA agent but never actually confirms this.

Harry Victor also invents fictions about himself, but the narrator provides us with a clearer vision of him and his contribution to his wile's loss of self. This self-seeking, ambitious politician creates an image of himself as a moral crusader, while in his private life he commits adultery and thwarts his wife's search for identity. On a family trip to Jakarta that includes his mistress, he appears more concerned about his press conference than the safety of his family. As a result, Jack Lovett tells him, "You don't actually see what's happening in front of you. You don't see it unless you read it. You have to read it in the *New York Times,* then you start talking about it."

The narrator complicates our view of Inez by revealing only fragmented scenes of her life. Inez and others also contribute to our confusion, as well as her own, as personal and public pressures help strip her of her identity. During her marriage, Inez is defined by the press as the ideal politician's wife. Yet this role confines her. For twenty years, she acts solely in her husband's political interests, not in her own. Her husband and advisors suppress her desire to work with refugees, since that special interest was "often controversial and therefore inappropriate" to the political image they had created for her.

The press helps reinforce this image as it reports her "very special feeling for the arts" and "very special interest in education"-interests manufactured for her by her husband's political machine. As a result of fabricating appropriate stories for the press and viewing her life as a series of "photo opportunities," Inez's memory fades to the point where she loses a true sense of herself. She admits that during this process "you drop fuel. You

jettison cargo. Eject the crew. You lose track." While being interviewed, she tells a reporter "Things that might or might not be true get repeated in the clips until you can't tell the difference. .. You might as well write from the clips... because I've lost track"

Inez's memory also fades because she suppresses painful facts like her abandonment by her mother, her son's two car crashes (one of which left his passenger seriously injured), her daughter's heroin addiction, and her husband's frequent infidelities with the ever-present political groupies.

Inez's apparent indifference to these past events often makes her appear cold.

Inez's family and Billy Dillon also suppress the truth at times, but for a different reason. They conceal details of "uncomfortable" events to avoid hurting Harry's public image and thus his career. Michael Tager, in "The Political Vision of Joan Didion's *Democracy,"* notes that "media scrutiny requires that one establish a pleasant past for public consumption while concealing or eliminating those elements that clash with the desired image." An example of this process occurs after the shootings, when the family rallies to downplay the incident to the press, to "manage" the situation for Harry and to "contain [it] to an accident"

The deception and lack of clarity in Inez's private and public life become comparable to and intertwine with larger political issues The novel begins with a focus on this link as Jack describes to Inez the breathtaking sunrises and sweet-smelling air during nuclear testing in the Pacific in the mid-1950s, without commenting on the devastation that soon followed. The narrator offers contrasting views of the fall of Saigon in 1975, when the main action of the story takes place. While many in the United States considered the evacuation disastrous for the South V Vietnamese, the narrator's students interpreted it as their "liberation from imperialism."

Tager argues that "democracy" is the "name we have given to a narrative of American global politics... [that] placed Americans in the roles of reader and viewer of a series of adventures, in which the heroes and villains were clear, the desirable outcomes known, and the undesirable outcomes contextualized as episodes in a larger narrative that promised a happy ending." The Vietnam War, however, had no such happy ending. Both the novel's political and personal narratives fall apart during the evacuation of Saigon. The idealistic vision of America as defender of world democracy, and of the Victors as a model American family, crumbles.

This process begins when Inez's father shoots Janet, an incident that jolts Inez's memories to the surface and prompts her to begin to sort out truth from fabrication. After she leaves with Jack to find Jessie, she breaks from her family, deciding "she was not particularly interested in any of them." While she waits in Hong Kong for Jack to ship Jessie home, she begins to separate herself not only from her family, but her country as well: "The world that night was full of people flying from place to place and fading; in and out and there was no reason why she or Harry or Jessie or Adlai or for that matter Jack Lovett ... should be exempted from the general movement Just because they

were Americans." When Inez decides to stay in Kuala Lumpur to work with the war refugees, ironically, she becomes a refugee herself, from her family, her country, and her past.

This separation allows Inez to begin to find freedom and a sense of identity. She permits her love for Jack to surface, and they find happiness for a short time, until his accidental death. At the end of the novel, Inez seems content with her new life, noting the "colors, moisture, heat, [and] enough blue in the air" to keep her in Kuala Lumpur "until the last refugee was dispatched." Yet, the narrator tells us she learned of Inez's intention of staying on from an article in the newspaper-not, as she has proven, a reliable source.

While Inez seems to gain a clearer vision of herself by the end of the novel, the narrator leaves the reader with only a partial view of her, attained through the fragmented narrative. We have only gained glimpses of Inez, and thus are not sure whether or not Inez has completed her search for identity and meaning in her life. The narrator voices her uncertainty as well, when she concludes: "Perhaps because nothing in this situation encourages the basic narrative assumption, which is that the past is prologue to the present, the options remain open here. Anything could happen."

Source: Wendy Perkins, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Stout examines the narrative technique that the author employs in Democracy. *The critic contends that the narrator, named "Joan Didion," includes hesitations, blanks, gaps, and other "silences" in her narration as a means of both implying more than what is said and emphasizing the ways in which a male-dominated American society inhibits the expression of women.*

[In] *Democracy,* Didion Writes in the terse, elliptical style [her] novels had taught us to expect of her, but With a somewhat different and more highly politicized import. As in *A Book of Common Prayer,* the narrative strategy involves a first person narrator only slightly distanced from the author herself. Indeed, the distance is even less here. The narrator of the earlier book is particularized with a name, Grace Strasser-Mendana, and a personal background clearly distinct from Didion's own. The narrator of *Democracy* is a thinly fictionalized Joan Didion; we might call her "Joan Didion": a persona in only the most circumstantial of ways. This persona advances and retreats. At those points when she is at the narrative fore, she addresses the reader directly, calling our attention to the difficulties entailed by getting and presenting the story. Several chapters open abruptly with terse one-line "paragraphs" focusing on the act of telling-imperatives:

"Call me the author," "See It this way," "Let me establish Inez Victor"; personal declarations: "I also have Inez's account," "I am resisting narrative here." The directly accostive narrative voice that such openings establish creates the sense of urgency avowed in the narrator's "warning" to the reader,

like Jack Lovett and (as it turned out) Inez Victor, I no longer have time for the playing out
Call that a travel advisory
A narrative alert.

The issuance of a "narrative alert," an overt tactic for gaining reader involvement, is a part of the entire strategy by which "Joan Didion" is placed within the novel. The narrator's struggle to understand her characters' story becomes part of the fiction, which is a fiction of reporting rather than creating. "Joan Didion" is here, like Joan Didion in fact, an interpretive journalist, trying to get at the truth and communicate it before the failure of the social situation, represented in the fall of South Vietnam, makes investigation and interpretation impossible. When she says that she does not have tune for a fully elaborated narrative, we feel not only the wildly accelerating events of the evacuation of Hanoi and the family tragedy being played out against it but also the impending breakup of the social order and the brevity of human life. The urgency "Didion" asserts is communicated to us, in part, by the rapid succession of terse, often fragmentary phrases... .

In all Didion's work, the breaking into brief stand-alone sentences or phrases, or often strings of such sentences or phrases, is a device for emphasis, usually an ironic twist of emphasis. But in *Democracy,* the device gains a faster pace and a more hard-bitten,

slangy tone. The rapidity is largely a matter of achievement of a sense of fast-breaking events, even of events being out of control. This is true both of family events and of events on the large scale. Social structures collapse more rapidly than politicians, generals, and weapons dealers can shore them up. The fast verbal pace is achieved also through associative listing of items.. ..

Rapid exchanges of smart dialogue, often in brief, slangy phrases tossed off sarcastically, also contribute to the fast pace of the dramatized scenes and to the harsh tone The narrative voice, as well, often employs bitten-off slang to convey a mocking commentary or a sense of world-weariness....

The narrator's hard-bitten phrases, not quite hiding a fullness of emotions sensed behind them, often, though not consistently, emulate the glibness of sarcasm of this campaigning, image-building circle in which Inez moves as Harry Victor's wife. Mulling her story, she comments mockingly: "Cards on the table"; "Water under the bridge" "The Alliance *qua* Alliance"; "His famous single room at the Y." At other times, it is the laconic, tough yet nostalgic voice of Jack Lovett that we hear in the narrator's brief phrases. The beautifully taut opening of the novel, for instance, starts in Lovett's voice, then elides into Didion's own terse identification of the character, emphasizing (significantly) Inez's marital state, then returns to Lovett's distinctive blend of nostalgia and hardboiled realism....

In part, Didion adopts Lovett's savvy understatement as a way of conveying, through its own cadences, some sense of an elusive personality, as if, though the mystery cannot be analyzed, it can be glimpsed....

In part, however, she adopts this tone, with its characteristic curtailments, as a protection from the pressure of emotion-just as, we suspect, Lovett himself adopts It. Indeed, all the people we respect in this book-Lovett, Inez, and the narrator-are "wary to the point of opacity." They adopt a tough exterior-such as Lovett's exclamation, conveying a lifelong caring and a lifelong frustration, "Oh shit, Inez, Harry Victor's wife" (repeated or echoed [several times])-to cover their vulnerability, knowing full well even as they do it that toughness "never stopped any plane from crashing." Disaster happens despite the surface toughness that they nevertheless maintain because, like the Hemingway hero's style, that is the way to do it, or at any rate their way to do it

The narrator tells things in a compressed shorthand, sometimes imagistic but sometimes carefully abstract, both for impact and for control, for protection from the disorder. Inez's mother, Carol Christian, she tells us, clung to an assortment of romantic notions "in the face of considerable contrary evidence." It is not necessary to specify what that evidence was; we get the idea well enough, and she would rather not go into it Just as the device of curtailed references is a means of refraining from specification, Implying that that specification would be too unpleasant, so silences in the text, blanks or gaps, serve the same purpose, conveying ideas without spelling them out. In this novel, many blanks are structural, signaling shifts in the action. Many [blanks], however, .. tacitly invite the reader's particularized understanding even as they imply the

narrator's brooding. After a long, wordy sentence conveying, in its cadences, the jumbled, densely populated quality of Harry Victor's politicizing, the narrator sums up,

These people had taken their toll.
[space]
By which I mean to suggest that Inez Victor had come to view most occasions as photo opportunities.

After an account of Inez's conference with her daughter Jessie's first therapist, ending in "'What I don't do is shoot heroin,' Inez said," there appears a gap on the page, then, "The second therapist believed". In the gap occurs the whole messy

process of breaking off with one and finding the second, a process the narrator spares us all. Indeed, the gap says something that a full account could not say, that that messy process is not worth repeating and that it is so obviously unavoidable at this point that it goes without saying.

Inez Victor herself, in this way a typical Didion heroine, is equally reticent. In part her silences and the oddity of her speech when she does express herself are a result of being squelched. As the daughter of a son of a powerful family in a relatively closed society (Hawaii) and the wife of a powerful man with presidential ambitions, she has had to preserve appearances throughout her life. Her expression of self is subordinated to the building of her husband's political image. She has had to calculate every word, every facial expression, to ensure that that Image is not damaged, playing a role in a planned script, repeating empty enthusiastic phrases-" 'Marvelous day "You look marvelous. "Marvelous to be here' "-and "fixing her gaze in the middle distance." When traveling she always has to go through a routine of phony accessibility, to" 'trot out the smile'" and, as her husband's public relations aide puts it, "'move easily through the cabin.'" So well trained is she in playing the "tennis" game of public relations that Billy Dillon, the aide, has only to "mim[e] a backhand volley" to get her back on track if she slips into real communication. What she says gets smoothed over and reinterpreted, polished for press release beyond all recognition. Even the personal interests she is allowed to pursue are selected for their political appeal: a trumped up "special interest" in selecting the paintings to be hung in American embassies is safe; her real interest in "work with refugees" is off limits because it is controversial and therefore "inappropriate." This is why it is so significant at the end that after Jack Lovett's death she devotes herself, in an almost saintly way, to the administration of refugee relief in Kuala Lumpur: it is the most emphatic possible way to express her independence from her husband's control.

Inez's public self has been an "impenetrable performance" protecting the mystery and the vulnerability of her private self. At times she uses silence, as she uses diversionary performances, to protect her self from manipulation and from the intrusion of a curious public, largely the intrusion of journalists. Within that protection, she has developed a "capacity for passive detachment," avoiding verbal acknowledgment of unacceptable things.

But she also uses silence more aggressively. After a party at which her husband passes off empty, stale rhetoric she has heard him use "a number of times before" to cover lack of knowledge, she drives fast and says nothing until he finally notices and gets the point. Defensively, he taunts her for her "quite palpable unhappiness." They go to bed in silence. On another occasion, seeing her husband condoning what she regarded as specious activities by their son, she again spoke tersely and then "said nothing " Again Harry gets the point: "'Very eloquent. Your silence,' he says."

Inez Victor, like other women in Didion's novels, and like Didion as narrator, manages to say more than she says and to speak by not speaking. This, of course, is a time-honored way with women-women writers and women generally. Inez Victor speaks out of the frustration of feminine roles that inhibit her self-realization and interfere with her freedom of action. When she tries to assert her own judgment, as a free and intelligent adult, she is muffled and manipulated and her sexual relations with her husband deteriorate: they "had gone to bed in silence, and, the next morning, ... Harry left... without speaking"; they had "slept in the same room but not in the same bed." The marital relation hinges on her being constrained in her self-assertion, on her foregoing a lifelong love relation with another man even though she had repressed her own reactions to her husband's succession of affairs because "girls like that come with the life." Her achievement of communication with "Joan Didion," the narrative persona, despite all the negative constraints of a lifetime of resisting honest personal communication and honest public statements, has to be regarded as a victory-like her victory ill asserting her right to pursue the social service work to which she feels drawn. The end of the book, with Inez still in Kuala Lumpur, speaking to whomever she wants to when she wants to, stating her reasons in her own terms and with an edge of mockery (asked by Billy Dillon for "one fucking reason" why she is there, she writes back tersely, *"Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air. Four fucking reasons."),* is thus, in a limited way, a happy ending, despite its solemnity.

As in the other novels, the frustrating and repressed nature of the central character's life is not hers alone, but a condition she shares with other women.. ..

The narrator, too, "Joan Didion," shares the frustrations of being a woman in what continues to be a man's world, and a disordered world as well. Because of the unusual narrative strategy, with the author's real self represented in a fictive world that includes events, people, and places we also recognize from the daily newspaper, the figure of "Joan Didion" ("call me the author,"_ the narrator says, but particularizes herself by quoting textbook comments on Didion) becomes a bridge between fiction and fact. Naturally, by the creation of verisimilitude in her fictive world, the author invites (as do authors generally in realistic fiction) a sense of identification which generalizes the import of the story. To the extent that we recognize aspects of the characters' lives as resembling our own, we say that the story represents general experience. Accordingly, women readers will recognize the silences in the marriage bed, the conversational slightings: and other experiences of the fictional Inez and will validate the representational character of her story. But the bridging effect of "Joan Didion" accomplishes such generalizing in a much more direct way.

Clearly, the narrator objects to aspects of her world that are not gender-related. Her difficulty in telling her story does not stem simply from the fact that she is a woman, writing about a woman. The main burden of the story is a stringent objection to the ebbing of traditional values, family values, and a moral horror at the spectacle of America's role in Vietnam. It is an objection to dishonesty. Didion affirms the importance of what we must consider traditional values and traditional sources of satisfaction for women as well-stable relationships with men and With extended family, motherhood. Whether there has ever been a time when these roles alone did in fact provide adequate sources of fulfillment is a question she does not address. At the same time, Didion does not ignore the need for other satisfactions as well, means of achieving personal autonomy and self-definition. At any rate, the uncentered state of American society that undermines public and private honor also makes traditional role-fulfillment impossible. Gender problems are implicated in Didion's broad social criticism, even when they are not specified.

Within the novel, "Joan Didion" is drawn to the story of Inez Victor largely by her own need. Obviously it is, in a journalistic sense, a good story, with interesting social trappings and an odor of scandal. But it is not those aspects that keep the novelist working to find the right narrative approach to what is "a hard story to tell." Those externals are aspects of the story that she has "abandoned,'" "scuttled," 'jettisoned" in favor of a focus on Inez's feelings and on her achievement of a personal value perspective on a world falling apart. That "Joan Didion" shares the need for such a perspective is clear from her account of the genesis of the novel: "I began thinking about Inez Victor and Jack Lovett at a point in my life when I lacked certainty, lacked even that minimum level of ego which all writers recognize as essential to the writing of novels, lacked conviction, lacked patience with the past and interest in memory; lacked faith even in my own technique." She focuses, in the early part of the novel, on the powerful emotional pull of a daughter's feelings toward a mother who has abandoned her and on the liminal position of looking with regret at a disappearing world, giving the "last look through more than one door." If she finds it a "hard story to tell" because of its complexity, occupying as it does the intersection of many issues, she also finds it hard to tell because its emotional impact evokes her own shared feelings.

The narrator's feelings are apparent in her hovering, circling style, with its tone of stiff-upper-lip compression. Her own experience of the breakup of American pretenses and the revelation of the hollowness at the core, epitomized in the fall of Vietnam, leads her to reinterpret the behavior of Inez Victor, also experiencing that breakup in a very direct way, so as to see it as a coping mechanism. "After the events which occurred in the spring and summer of 1975 I thought of it differently. I thought of it as the essential mechanism for living a life in which the major cost was memory. Drop fuel. Jettison cargo. Eject crew." In the same way as Inez jettisons the troubling cargo of memory, "Joan-Didion" jettisons the cargo of superficial approaches to the story and Didion jettisons the cargo of excess verbiage. She retains only the words that epitomize emotional states and qualities of experience, not elaborated descriptions of those states and qualities, and the terse sarcasms that pronounce her judgment in the shortest possible fashion. The quickness of her verbal step shows her distaste for the moral muck These few summary phrases she sets off as significant units ("drop fuel" and the

parallel phrases quoted above) and repeats in meditative litanies. Her sense of the preciousness of Inez's long love for Jack Lovett, for instance, is conveyed in the sequence,

to keep the idea of it quick.
Quick, alive.
Something to think about late at night. Something private
She always looked for him

The reader's sense of such a sequence encompasses not only its realization of Inez's emotion but Its evidence of the narrator's involvement. The selection of the few emphasized phrases conveys a correspondence of feeling which goes far to explain the powerful emotional hold of the story of "Joan Didion," evidenced by her "examining this picture for some years now" to understand Inez's motivation, Including Inez's motivation for first concealing and then revealing her memories to the writer "Joan Didion."

We may conjecture that the answer to that puzzle, the puzzle of why Inez finally shares her memories after long concealment, lies in her final achievement of an autonomous personal space. Released from the confusions and trivialization imposed on her by others, notably by both her natal family and her husband, she can at last achieve emotional balance and pursue work that she herself finds important. Only the sense of security gained by achieving that space allows her to communicate freely with "the author." "Didion," too, needs to find such a space, and does find it vicariously in her relationship to Inez-thus becoming enabled to Write her novel. "Didion's" relation to Inez, then, becomes a kind of daughter-to-mother relation, a version of the relation that had first drawn her into the story. Inez, through her suffering and her eventual achievement, gives birth to and nurtures the eventual achievement of "the author"

Joan Didion represents a very different achievement in using strategies of reticence than the achievement we see In Austen, Porter, or Cather. Her strategy is more directly aggressive than theirs, employing sarcastic barbs to undermine the dishonesty and specious values that are her target. Conversational sarcasm, too, is often, of course, conveyed in brief phrases and monosyllables. Didion's interrupted style lends itself to our "hearing" a voice of sarcastic stringency, with anger and grief seething In the interstices. At the same time, sarcasm does not attack its object directly, but obliquely. It is another means of saying without saying, of speaking-virulently-by indirection or by not speaking. Didion's acerbic voice is a radical transformation of the traditional female reticence we see brought to fullness In Austen. It is also a continuation of that female strategy.

Source: Jams P. Stout, "Joan Didion and the Presence of Absence," in *The Critical Response to Joan Didion,* edited by Sharon Felton, Greenwood Press, 1994, pp. 147-87.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Edwards favorably assesses Democracy *and how Didion articulates its theme of "the devastating personal and public consequences of the loss of history.* "

Joan Didion is one of those writers-Norman Mailer, Mary McCarthy, and Gore Vidal are others-who are so good at the higher journalism that their status as novelists may sometimes seem insecure. Do they, we may wonder, keep writing fiction out of professional pride, as if only the novel could truly certify their literary talent and seriousness? Are not their novels, however fine, shadowed by a suspicion, however baseless, that the form is not quite the best form for such powers?

Certainly *Democracy,* Didion's new novel, opens with an ominously awkward display of self-consciousness about the basic moves of fictional narrative:

The light at dawn during those Pacific tests was something to see
Something to behold
Something that could almost make you think you saw God, he said
He said to her
Jack Lovett said to Inez Victor.
Inez Victor who was born Inez Christian.

This self-revising fumbling With the identity cards that novels are supposed to slip quietly under the door seems a little like having a magician confess that the rabbit came not from the empty hat but from inside his vest. "This is a hard story to tell," complains the last sentence of this first chapter, and the manner of this opening makes one wonder if for Didion the old game is still good enough to play.

But what we have here is clearly a "chapter", it began with a "1," and after some blank space and the turn of a page we find a new block of text headed "2." Despite the authorial shufflings, a story begins to get told, as if impelled by the stubborn conventions of narrative itself, the odd necessity of continuing once you have, for whatever reason, started. The devices of anti-fiction don't disappear. "Call me the author," the second chapter begins, followed by a glimpse of a writer named "Joan Didion" (done in the manner not of Melville but, of all people, Trollope) who is struggling to get her story started: "Consider any of these things long enough and you will see that they tend to deny the relevance not only of personality but of narrative, which makes them less than ideal images with which to begin a novel, but we go with what we have."

So indeed we do, but counter-illusion has begun to generate its own, second-order kind of credence-if this narrator is the Joan Didion who went to Berkeley, worked for *Vogue* in 1960, now lives in Los Angeles but travels to far-off places as a reporter, and so on, then Inez Christian Victor and Jack Lovett and the other people in this book may be real after all, Since Joan Didion says she knew them. Maybe she does have nothing up her sleeve.

For a critic this is good material, but most readers of novels want the puppets to come to life, and in *Democracy* they blessedly do so before long, despite the continuing maneuverings of the author. Inez Christian, we learn, is a child of privilege. She was born in 1935, in Hawaii, to a mainland girl from Stockton who, while modeling at Magnin's in San Francisco, was swept off her feet and over the seas by Paul Christian, the footloose and increasingly odd son of one of those rich old families whose economic conquest of the Islands was an early, if relatively benign, instance of Yankee colonialism. As Didion pieces together Inez's story, we learn that she went to Sarah Lawrence, married (two months' pregnant) an ambitious young lawyer named Harry Victor, had twins, worked in New York with Joan Didion, and then settled, uncomfortably, into the quasi-public role of political wife.

Harry Victor, who has a keen eye for the main chance, became an activist lawyer in the 1960s, got elected to Congress and then the Senate, came close to winning a presidential nomination in 1972, and now devotes himself to something called the Alliance for Democratic Institutions. He is an odious man, full of a liberal self-importance that views the world and himself in it as "incorporeal extensions of policy," over-responsive to the young women who swarm around him and his causes (one of them, a pop singer, is winningly modest about her talents-"I just do two lines of coke and scream"), deeply attracted to his own untested slogans and the joys of radical chic. He is, in fact, almost a cartoon, but Didion allows him just enough semblance of humanity to suggest, in case we hadn't noticed, how really cartoon-like are the politics manufactured by television and the press.

Harry is less successful as paterfamilias than as public image. His son, the marvelously named Adlai, is a pompous lunkhead who barely gets into an obscure college near Boston but likes to talk grandly about what's what in "Cambridge." Adlai's twin, Jessie, equally dumb but somewhat sweeter, becomes a heroin addict in prep school, not out of rebellion against her parents or society but simply as a "consumer decision." Sent off to Seattle for methadone and work-therapy, she, perhaps too neatly, makes her way to Saigon just as the last Americans are being evacuated, because someone told her you could find interesting jobs there.

Inez herself deals with her marriage by becoming more and more numb to what happens to her. She comes to consider "most occasions as photo opportunities"; she works dutifully for good causes and is rumored to have a drinking problem; she reflects that she has been "most happy in borrowed houses, and at lunch." Asked by an AP reporter what the greatest cost of public life is, she answers "memory, mainly," and when urged to explain, she simply says, "you lose track." This seems an acute comment on the plight of politicians and others in public life-having to say and do so much just to hold your audience, you cease to care about, and then even to remember, what really happened. That may be why presidential advisers and others close to power seem so genuinely surprised that discrepancies in the record bother other people.

The devastating personal and public consequences of the loss of history are Didion's theme. The significant relations of events wash away in a flood of facts, those equally

circumstantial details that news reporting democratically represents as being about equal in import:

I would skim the stories on policy and fix instead on details' the cost of a visa to leave Cambodia m the weeks before Phnom Penh closed was five hundred dollars American, The colors of the landing lights for the helicopters on the roof of the American embassy in Saigon were red, white, and blue, The code names for the American evacuations of Cambodia and Vietnam respectively were EAGLE PULL and FREQUENT WIND, The amount of cash burned in the courtyard of the DAO in Saigon before the last helicopter left was three-and-a-half-million dollars American and eighty-five million piastres The code name for this operation was MONEY BURN, The number of Vietnamese soldiers who managed to get aboard the last American 727 to leave Da Nang was three hundred and thirty, The number of Vietnamese soldiers to drop from the wheel wells of the 727 was one The 727 was operated by World Airways The name of the pilot was Ken Healy,

The voice heard here is Joan Didion's, not Inez Victor's, but the malady it reflects is also Inez's and of course our own. Vietnam is the most dramatic recent evidence of where an appetite for imperium can lead democracy; but the larger subject must be the evanescence of thought and moral judgment in a world of ceaselessly unsortable information.

It is the reading of this particular news story, on March 26, 1975, that leads Joan Didion to another story, a report of what becomes the crucial event of Inez's life, This is the murder in Honolulu, by Inez's now-insane father, of her sister Janet and Wendell Omura, a local anti-war congressman who may have been Janet's lover. This violent mixing of domestic self-destruction and racial chauvinism leads Inez toward something like moral freedom; and it gives the novel some justification of its intricate method in what seems to me its most daring and impressive stroke of political imagination,

The temporal circlings of Didion's narrative began, if just barely, with the conversation between Inez and Jack Lovett about the H-bomb tests in the Pacific in the early 1950s, That conversation, we later learn, took place in 1975, after the murders. Jack Lovett, a considerably older man, met Inez in Honolulu in 1952, before she left for college; they then had a brief affair which both remember fondly but do not continue when they occasionally meet in later years. Lovett is the antitype of Harry Victor, not a theorist and rhetorician but a sometime army officer and nominal diplomat who works in the demimonde where the CIA, private corporations, and plain criminals consort together for obscure purposes of profit and national policy. He has "access to airplanes"; when Joan Didion meets him in New York in 1960, he is "running a little coup somewhere"; wherever he goes (and he goes everywhere) he strikes up conversations and asks questions, treating "information as an end in itself."

According to one version-a cartoon version, no doubt-of the world of power, Jack Lovett ought to be a bad man. He is certainly a tough man, whose arms deals and insurrections Joan Didion rather gently sees as expressing an interesting and almost admirable "emotional solitude, a detachment that extended to questions of national or political loyalty." Compared to the ungrounded ideological sparking of loose wires like

Harry Victor, Lovett's illusionless concern for how to do things, what combinations of people and materials will have the needed result, is in a way refreshing. Though Lovett isn't made immune to the obvious objections, Didion breathtakingly elects him to be the one who cares and remembers, the one in whom information becomes knowledge, understanding, and even love.

Lovett remembers those bomb tests, not as horrifying displays of technique but as occasions of beauty:

He said: the sky was tins pink no painter could approximate, one of the detonation theorists used to try, a pretty fair Sunday painter, he never got it Just never captured It, never came close, The sky was tins pink and the air was wet from the night rain, soft and wet and smelling like flowers, smelling like those flowers you used to pin in your hair when you drove out to Schofield, gardenias never mind there were not too many flowers around those shot Islands

His memory of the tests gets entangled with his memories of loving Inez at about the same time, but he does remember her; and when her life goes fully to pieces after the murders in 1975, Lovett is there to help her escape the obligations to her corrupt husband and family that-or so we are to gather from Didion's cool observation-have been visibly destroying her,

I doubt that Didion means to suggest some comprehensive typology of character in making the otherwise rather sinister Jack Lovett a man of genuine sentiment in a political world where nominal good guys like Harry Victor have trouble feeling anything. She seems to have a weakness for male realists, however-Lovett has in effect a double in Billy Dillon, Victor's tough and amusingly cynical advisor, who understands Inez's feelings, takes care of her when her family flounders, and has secretly loved her all along, If there is a point to Lovett's combination of qualities, it may simply be that public performances don't reliably fit the contours of the private self inside. Lovett's self comes to an abrupt end before *Democracy* is over, but only after he has led Inez to about as much freedom as she can hope to manage. She remains in Asia, quietly looking after Vietnamese refugees, a choice people like Harry Victor would have difficulty understanding.

Democracy is absorbing, immensely intelligent, and witty, and it finally earns its complexity of form. It is indeed "a hard story to tell," and the presence in it of "Joan Didion" trying to tell it is an essential part of its subject. Throughout one senses the author struggling with the moral difficulty that makes the story hard to tell-how to stop claiming what Inez finally relinquishes, "the American exemption" from having to recognize that history records not the victory of personal wills over reality (as people like Harry Victor want to suppose), but the "undertow of having and not having, the convulsions of a world largely unaffected by the individual efforts of anyone in it."

This grim message supports the assumption that a novel by another American pessimist, Henry Adams's *Democracy,* is somewhere in Didion's mind. (She in fact quotes from the *Education,* and Adams's ambitious, venal, magnetic, and illusionless

Senator Silas P. Ratcliffe may vaguely foreshadow both Harry Victor and Jack Lovett.) Both novels deal with the perilous maturing of a political culture which the national rhetoric ceaselessly represents as vigorous and young. Adams put a slightly different formulation of "the American exemption" into the mouth of a European diplomat unable to tolerate that rhetoric any longer:

"You Americans believe yourselves to be excepted from the operation of general laws. You care not for experience I have lived seventy-five years, and all that time m the midst of corruption I am corrupt myself, only I do have the courage to proclaim it.... Well, I declare to you that in all my experience I have found no society which has had elements of corruption like the United States. . I do much regret that I have not yet one hundred years to live. If I then could come back to this city, I should find myself very much content.. *ma parole d'honneur!"* broke out the old man with fire and gesture, "the United States will then be more corrupt than Rome under Caligula; more corrupt than the Church under Leo X; more corrupt than France under the Regent!"

Now, 104 years later, this seems a fairly chilling forecast, and the America of Joan Didion's *Democracy* seems amply to confirm it. Our decline has reached the Pacific-a name of consummate irony-and across it Inez Victor's businessmen relatives are still making big money in construction around the Persian Gulf, but back home in the Islands their real-estate developments are going bankrupt, and it is Wendell Omura's relatives who run things in Honolulu. And of course farther west, past the test-blast atolls, Southeast Asia produces its refugees. Like Henry Adams, we gave up on Washington long ago.

With due allowance for the distances between Quincy and Sacramento, Henry Adams and Joan Didion may have something in common. In both of them, irony and subtlety confront a chaotic new reality that shatters the orderings of simpler, older ways. Both face such a world With an essentially aristocratic weapon, the power to dispose language and thought, at least, against those empowered to dispose just about everything else. And both, I suppose, understand that such a weapon is only defensive, and that it may not suffice.

Source: Thomas R. Edwards, "An American Education," in *The New York Review of Books,* Vol XXXI, No 8,May 10, 1984, pp 23-24.

Topics for Further Study

"' Read some of the firsthand accounts of the American withdrawal from Saigon and identify details which Didion has used in her novel.

Didion's novel was originally going to be "a study in provincial manners" centered on one particular family in Honolulu. Investigate the business and social history of Honolulu during the 1940s and 1950s.

Didion's essay collection *The White Album* contains a piece about Honolulu-"In The Islands"-in which she writes at length about Schofield barracks and *From Here To Eternity* by James Jones. Reading extracts from Jones's novel and watching the 1953 Columbia movie version of the book, identify parallels and contrasts in Didion and Jones's portrayals of life in Honolulu.

The opening sentence of the novel refers to the testing of nuclear devices in the Pacific. Research the history of nuclear testing, and on a map of the Pacific area mark and date all places used for such tests.

Inez Victor is a study of the effect that being in the public eye has on a character. Researching the lives of Jacqueline Kennedy, Diana Princess of Wales, and other women subjected to public scrutiny through association with their husbands, attempt to analyze what Didion means when she suggests that the "major cost" of public life is "loss of memory."

Carry out a statistical analysis of Didion's one line or very short paragraphs (do not include dialogue). You will need to set your own parameters for this study-will you look at paragraphs of ten words or less? Eight words or less? Carry out a sentence analysis on each paragraph in your sample and attempt to show the results graphically, using computer software.

What Do I Read Next?

The Last Thing He Wanted, Joan Didion's 1996 novel, was her first work of fiction after *Democracy.* It develops several of the same political themes.

Didion is admired as an essayist as well as a novelist, and the work In *The White Album,* her 1979 essay collection, evolved from state of mind similar to the one which created *Democracy*

From Here to Eternity (1951) by James Jones is a popular wartime novel set in Honolulu in the period leading up to the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

A reading of *Democracy,* the 1880 novel by the nineteenth-century historian Henry Brooks Adams, helps to throw into sharper relief some of the cultural and political concerns which Didion's later novel of the same name explores.

Further Study

Peter Carroll, in *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened The Tragedy and Promise of America in the I970s,* Holt, 1984.

A full-length social and historica1 study of the 1970s.

Martha Duffy, review of *Democracy,* in *Time,* May 7, 1984, p.114.

This review Criticizes Didion's placement of herself in the novel. Overall, Duffy considers the novel "flawed" yet "very fast and shrewd," especially in the depiction of the minor characters.

Sharon Felton, editor, *The Critical Response to Joan Didion* , (Critical Responses in Arts and Letters, No 8), Greenwood, 1993.

A very useful compilation of reviews and other Critical responses to Didion's work.

Ellen G Friedman, "The Didion Sensibility: An Analysis," in *Joan Didion: Essays and Conversations,* Ontario Review Press, 1984

Friedman argues that while Didion's characters are often unable to find meaning 10 their lives, they do have an "immense capacity for commitment and love," even when that love is doomed.

Katherine Usher Henderson, "Joan Didion The Bond between Narrator and Heroine in 'Democracy,'" in *American Women Writing Fiction. Memory, Identity, Family, Space,* edited by Mickey Pearlman, University Press of Kentucky, 1989, pp 69-86.

Henderson compares the character of the narrator and Inez Christian and argues that both search for meaning "in a world where society and politics are defined by artifice and self-seeking"

Al Santoli, editor, *Everything* We *Had'* An *Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-three American Soldiers Who Fought It,* Random House, 1981

Santoli's book was almost certainly used by Didion as source material for her portrayal of the chaos surrounding American withdrawal from Saigon.

Susan Stamberg, "Cautionary Tales," in *Joan Didion' Essays and Conversations,* edited by Ellen G Friedman, Ontario Review Press, 1984.

In this interview, Didion discusses her belief that "experience is largely meaningless" and talks about how that view has affected her novels

Janis P Stout, *Strategies of Reticence Silence and Mean* ing *in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter and Joan Didion,* University Press of Virginia, 1990.

An example of an academic title placing Didion in the continuum of American female novelists.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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