

# **Slouching Toward Bethlehem Study Guide**

**Slouching Toward Bethlehem by Joan Didion**

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## Plot Summary

*Slouching Toward Bethlehem* is a collection of essays by the writer Joan Didion. The essays range in topic from murder to hippies, and from the meaning of self-respect to the existence of morality in the modern world. Each essay is personal, full of insights and opinions. Each essay is a self-contained commentary on life, on lifestyles, and on life's expectations based on the time they were written, the 1960s. It is a collection that will cause the reader to think, whether the reader agrees with Didion's opinions or not.

*Slouching Toward Bethlehem* begins with essays on life in southern California. The essays are all set in the time in which they were written, the nineteen sixties, and provide commentary on life as seen through Didion's eyes. The first essay is about a woman, Lucille Miller, who was put on trial in 1965 for the murder of her husband. Mrs. Miller claimed that her car accidentally caught on fire after a nail in her tire caused her to hit the curb. However, prosecutors claimed that Mrs. Miller intentionally poured gas on her unconscious husband and then attempted to drive the car over an embankment. When the car would not navigate the embankment, Mrs. Miller was accused of lighting her husband on fire and watching him burn. Didion presents the case with the opinion that it was the expectations of grandeur prevalent in San Bernardino that put Mrs. Miller in a position to believe it was reasonable for her to kill her husband in order to achieve her heart's desire, another man.

Then Didion turns her attention to movie idol John Wayne. The author writes her essay in the aftermath of Wayne's first bout with cancer. As a fan and a personal friend, Didion is devastated by Wayne's illness and writes as an ode to his strength. Then, she writes about Joan Baez and her school of non-violence. From here, the author chooses to include an essay on a Communist she once interviewed and an essay on the public's obsession with the rumors swirling around recluse billionaire Howard Hughes. After this, Didion writes an observation on politics in California and the absurdity of young couples getting married in Las Vegas.

Didion's essay, "Slouching Toward Bethlehem," focuses on the hippie movement in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. Didion's essay is a grouping of her observations of the people in the area as she spent time attempting to interview key people involved in the movement. Didion presents her observations with a tone that is an attempt at objectivity; however, the reader can infer the author's disapproval of some of the situations she encounters, such as the teenagers who ran away from home because their parents did not approve of their style of dress and their choice of friendships.

The collection then changes to a more personal tone. Didion begins this section with an essay about her habit of keeping notebooks. She uses the essay to try to figure out why she would have a habit of this kind when she cannot always remember what the notes mean. The next essay is about self-respect, another on Hollywood, and another on morality. Finally, Didion includes an essay on going home to her family in Sacramento and the impact it has on her husband.

The last section of the book covers many things, including the impact of war on Hawaii, the uniqueness of Alcatraz, and the beauty of Sonora. Didion ends her book with an essay on her reasons for leaving New York. She moved to New York as a young woman looking for adventure, and she enjoyed her time in New York despite abject poverty, but with time and maturity discovers that a lack of naivety takes the fun out of living so far from everyone she knows and loves. Finally, Didion gives in to homesickness and returns to California to make a new life with her new husband.



# Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream

## Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream Summary and Analysis

*Slouching Toward Bethlehem* is a collection of essays by Joan Didion. The essays range in topic from murder to hippies, and from the meaning of self-respect to the existence of morality in the modern world. Each essay is personal, full of insights and opinions. Each essay is a self-contained commentary on life, on lifestyles, and on life's expectations based on the time they were written, the 1960s. It is a collection that will cause the reader to think, whether the reader agrees with Didion's opinions or not.

San Bernardino was part of the California dream, a place where a person could achieve every dream they ever desired. In this small community, on a street called Banyan, a woman was on her way home from the store when her whole world changed. This woman, Lucille Miller, had come to California from the structured life as the daughter of two school teachers. Married to a dentist, Lucille Miller lived the life of the socialite, chairing the Heart Fund and raising the couple's three children. On the outside, Lucille and Cork Miller appeared to have the perfect life. However, Cork was overwhelmed with the debt that the couple had accumulated since moving to California and was unhappy with his career choice. Cork wanted to go to medical school when they first moved to San Bernardino but for some reason chose to open a private dental practice instead.

Lucille and Cork struggled within their marriage, separating for a time in the months before that fateful trip to the market. However, they got back together and appeared to be as happy as ever. Cork and Lucille were even considering having a fourth child, hoping this child would bring them even closer. Then, on October 7, 1964, Cork came home from work with a migraine, a common occurrence in the Miller household. Late that evening, Cork suggested he and Lucille run to the store to get some milk so that he could have a cup of cocoa. On the way home, Lucille would later tell police, the car began to drag to the right. Then the car jumped onto the embankment and caught fire. Lucille claimed she immediately began running up and down the street, searching for help, coming back to the car once to break the window to try to get her unconscious husband out and again to grab a stick and try to pry him free. Finally Lucille made her way to a nearby house and called for help. A total of an hour and twenty minutes passed between the beginning of the fire and when Lucille made the phone call.

As police began to investigate, Lucille hid out with her lawyer, whom she called at the same time she called the police. Police quickly began to find inconsistencies in Lucille's story. The inside of the car did not support the theory that Lucille hit the embankment at a high speed. Instead, the police began to think that Lucille had attempted to drive the car over the embankment after dousing her husband in gas, hoping he would burn in the crash. Lucille was arrested. Soon afterward, it became public knowledge that Lucille



had been having an affair with a local lawyer, a situation that looked like motive to the police. Not only was Lucille having an affair with this man, but his wife had recently died and Lucille was the last person seen with her.

The first trial for Lucille Miller ended in a mistrial due to a prosecutor's mistake in talking to a reporter. The second trial began the following January, just weeks after it was revealed that Lucille Miller was pregnant. It was a sensational trial that hundreds of people attended. After weeks of testimony, Lucille was found guilty of killing her husband and sentenced to life. Lucille was sent to the California Institute for Women at Frontera to serve out her term. Appeals began immediately, but faced several setbacks. Later that year, Lucille gave birth to a healthy baby girl who went to live with her other children at the home of a family friend. Lucille's lover married his nanny that October.

This essay is based on a true murder case that took place in California in 1964. Didion reports on the facts of the case while interspersing the narration with her own impressions. Didion begins with a description of San Bernardino as an area of excess and the mentality that it's alright to do whatever it takes to get what one wants. The reader gets the impression through Didion's narration that this is a possible motive for Lucille Miller's act of murder.

Most of Didion's report on Lucille Miller's crime is factual. Lucille Miller did claim to have crashed the car on accident and to have attempted to find help for her husband in the hour and twenty minutes before she called the police from a nearby home. However, Lucille's version of events could not be substantiated by the police, who believed that Lucille intentionally attempted to kill her husband by driving her car over an embankment. When the car would not go over the embankment due to the soft mud under the tires, the police believed that Lucille lit her husband on fire and waited for him to die before going for help.

Lucille Miller killed her husband, as theorized by both the police and Didion, in order to achieve the dream of the perfect life. Lucille was having an affair with a local lawyer and was apparently hoping they would get married even though the affair had ended months before Cork died. It came out in court testimony that Lucille's lover was a Casanova who had many affairs throughout the years and never told Lucille he loved her, let alone that he wanted to marry her. Lucille believed differently and was even accused of killing her lover's wife, though that possibility was never fully investigated or pursued.



# Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: John Wayne: A Love Song

## Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: John Wayne: A Love Song Summary and Analysis

John Wayne was more than a movie star. John Wayne was a force of nature, a fantasy for women and the kind of man other men aspired to be, and Joan Didion is a fan. Didion can remember going to see a movie of John Wayne's when she was a child. In this movie, Wayne promised to build his woman a house with a white picket fence. Didion always remembered this and even though the men she was attracted to were not the kind to build white picket fences, she always expected them to make the offer just the same. To her, John Wayne was her definition of romance. When he was diagnosed with cancer, Didion, along with his other fans, was shocked that something like that could weaken a man as strong as Wayne. So it was no surprise to these fans when he announced that he had beaten the disease.

Wayne went back to work immediately. *The Sons of Katie Elder* had been delayed three months because of Wayne's illness, but the filming had been uneventful. Now they were in the final weeks of filming, bored with the location in Mexico and ready to return to the excitement of Los Angeles. Dean Martin in particular was ready to return home and wipe the dust of Mexico off his shoes. Martin complained endlessly on the set, provoking testosterone-driven discussion among the cast. Everyone made their opinions known, except Wayne. He was silent in his discomfort, commenting only when asked.

The final day of filming was filled with excitement and nostalgia, with everyone ready for it to end but reluctant to end the camaraderie that was a film set. The director shot the final scene many times from different angles until there was no possible shot left. Finally, it was time to call it finished. It was that night that Didion and her husband had dinner with John and Pilar Wayne. For Didion it is an eye-opening experience because as a child she was a fan of John Wayne's and as an adult, she sees him as a human being with the same frailties as everyone else.

This essay is about a child's adoration of a movie star and an adult's understanding of that movie star's mortality. Didion watched John Wayne movies as a child and came to expect certain attributes in her adult lovers based on characters Wayne played. In this way, the theme of memories plays a big role in this essay as Didion's affections toward John Wayne are based on her memories of the movies she saw of him when she was a child. These movies made such an impression on Didion that it affected several aspects of her adult life, most importantly her ideas of what romance is all about.

When John Wayne proved to be mortal during a public fight with cancer, Didion was among the fans shocked at the frailty of a star that appeared to be above the ailments





that afflict common people. Therefore it was no surprise to Didion and other fans when Wayne announced he had beaten the illness. Shortly after that, he returned to work in film, and this latest set was as mundane as it had always been before, with everyone complaining about the conditions, but enjoying the camaraderie of working with such great talent. Through the discussions Didion reported in her essay, the reader understands that others deferred to John Wayne; his word had more weight than everyone else's. It was a sign of respect that most men do not earn, but John Wayne had.

Didion met John Wayne on the last day of filming the movie, *The Sons of Katie Elder*. Those last moments on the set and the dinner they shared later that night underscored to Didion the humanity with which John Wayne lived, just like the rest of the world. However, to her he still appeared larger than life, a man who was a force of nature, a man who could beat cancer and return to his life as if nothing had happened. John Wayne, although mortal, continued to be her movie star hero.



# Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: Where the Kissing Never Stops

## Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: Where the Kissing Never Stops Summary and Analysis

Joan Baez stood before the Monterrey County Board of Supervisors in order to fight for her right to continue running her Institute for the Study of Non-Violence. The neighbors believed that Baez's school brought down property values because of its nature and because of Baez's controversial politics. Baez was a lady in every definition of the word throughout the hearing, suggesting that she had just as much to lose if the property values fell as her neighbors. Baez made this point at the hearing, saying her piece quietly and with respect, despite the anger that must surely have boiled beneath the surface. The vote took several days to be reached, but ended in Baez's favor by a three to two count.

Baez was a singer who did not like the work that came with her career. Baez did not like to make records, did not like to sing. What drew her to her career was the spiritual connection she had with her audience during a concert. Due to her choice of music and her political beliefs, which she admitted were naive, Baez was known in the sixties as the voice of the protest movements. As a part of her political beliefs, Baez was also a familiar face at the early civil rights protests of the sixties until she began to tire of hypocrisy of other celebrities who also attended these events. Baez became frustrated with the world around her due to this hypocrisy, until she met Ira Sandperl, a bookstore employee, and he began to coach her on the value of the pacifist movement. Sandperl became a good friend and valuable associate for Baez, helping her run her school in order to spread his word to others.

Didion interviews Baez after having secured a meeting through a maze of telephone calls and strange meetings. Didion must call several phone numbers, one of which belongs to a book store, and speak to Baez's secretary before she is finally granted an audience. The interview progresses like a casual conversation with an old friend. Didion is impressed with Baez's class, describing her as a lady in the true sense of the word. However, Didion is more impressed with Baez's writings than she is with the woman in person.

This essay shares Didion's impressions of Baez. Didion meets Baez for an interview and finds her to be quiet and unassuming, facing the world with an innocence that is at once inspiring and surprising. Didion feels that Baez is a woman of class and sophistication, a force in her own world, who looks at the world through rose colored glasses in order to keep her inner peace. Baez runs a school that has little meaning to anyone other than herself and her students, and she is not attempting to hurt anyone despite the protest of her neighbors. The neighbors are scandalized more by what Baez stands for than her school, since the school is conducted in silence a great deal of the



time. However, when Baez faces the prejudices of her neighbors she does so with intelligence and respect.

This essay is clearly colored with Didion's own impressions of the woman she obviously admires. Didion finds Baez's writings to be insightful and intelligent, and her conversation with Baez reveals a woman of quiet intelligence who is not afraid to speak her mind when she feels it will accomplish something beneficial. This essay also touches on the theme of Southern California lifestyles in that Didion gives the impression that she believes the free thinking of California in the 60s helps create a situation in which a person like Baez can thrive..



# Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: Comrade Laski, C.P.U.S.A (M.-L.)

## Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: Comrade Laski, C.P.U.S.A (M.-L.) Summary and Analysis

Michael Laski is a serious young man who devotes his life to the Communist Party in Los Angeles. Didion spends some time with Michael at the Workers' International Bookstore in Watts that serves as the C.P.U.S.A. (M.-L.) headquarters in Los Angeles. Didion is interested in learning more about Michael, a young man she believes to be so filled with dread that he has chosen to live on the outside of society rather than inside, but all Michael wants to talk about is the revolution his group hopes to create. However, Michael refuses to give details of this revolution, afraid of compromising their strategies. Michael allows Didion to look around the bookstore, hoping that if she reads some of their materials she might be converted to his beliefs. Michael is careful not to talk about himself as an individual.

Instead, Didion is given insight into Michael's daily life as she watches him debrief a group of young men who have been sent to sell copies of their self-published magazine. Michael drills these men like a sergeant in the army, demanding to know every detail of their work selling these magazines, from their approach to the possible customers, to the amount of money donated. It is an experience that Didion finds somewhat amusing, if not frightening due to Michael's intensity.

Didion writes this essay with an eye toward the kind of person who would chose to live a life of desperation outside the norms of civilization. Didion's subject attempts to keep his personal life and his identity as an individual hidden from her, but the more Michael Laski hides behind his role in the Communist Party, the more of his dread and desperation Didion believes she can see. Michael Laski is a young man with warped ideals who hides in a group of radicals rather than take a chance to be who he is and be hated for that. Didion finds Michael an interesting specimen of human nature.



# **Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: 7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38,**

## **Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: 7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38, Summary and Analysis**

Seven thousand Romaine is the address of the building where Howard Hughes lived. From the outside, one might assume the building was abandoned because of the boarded-up windows and overall feel of abandonment. Didion lived near the building and had many occasions to drive past it, so naturally she felt some curiosity about the man who lived inside. However, her curiosity could not match that of the general population. People often lived on stories about how Howard Hughes was buying up Las Vegas, or how he called his business associates adversaries. During this time period, Didion hears these rumors about Howard Hughes almost on a daily basis and finds herself wondering why people are so curious about this man. Howard Hughes was a private man, a man from a generation when it was expected for men to be private, and she did not understand why this had changed.

This essay focuses on the curiosity the general population feels about famous people. Didion picked Howard Hughes as her subject because at the time of the writing, he was almost a hermit, rarely seen outside of his home, a home that Didion passes often on her way to her own home. People would believe almost anything about Hughes; the more outrageous the rumor, the more people seemed to believe it. Didion did not understand why this should be and asked that question many times in her essay, ending with the thought that Mr. Hughes was simply a private man, a relic from a time when privacy was expected and desired.



# **Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: California Dreaming,**

## **Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: California Dreaming, Summary and Analysis**

The Center of Study of Democratic Institutions was founded in the late fifties when a large villa was built in order to provide a place for people to gather and discuss important issues. People were invited to come to the center and were given an office and a salary. Papers were written and occasionally published here. Didion had long been interested in the rhetoric produced at the Center, so she arranged to attend a few sessions. Didion was warned the talk there was high-powered. She attends several discussions over such subjects as education; Didion can never get a handle on the Center's true purpose except as a meeting place for many high powered people in both politics and entertainment.

This essay details a place California with a reputation as being a place of gathered intelligence and deep thought. Didion arranges to visit the Center in order to get a feel of the place's true purpose. Although told by many of its members that the Center has a large impact on the overall political climate of the country and the direction in which the country would go in the near future, Didion finds it to be a country club of sorts for rich and powerful people. Touching on the theme of Southern California lifestyles, Didion gives the reader the impression that she believes it is because of the entertainment industry and the lifestyle in California that such a place could exist and have such a reputation of intellectualism, when in reality its members are not any more well-educated than the general public.



# **Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land, Marrying Absurd:**

## **Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land, Marrying Absurd: Summary and Analysis**

Las Vegas is a place where a couple of kids can go and get married for only a few dollars, as long as they have their parent's permission or are of a legal age. Marriage is a big business in Las Vegas, with many chapels specifically advertising cheap weddings. Despite this cheap and quick attitude toward the institution of marriage, many people still appear to take care in their wedding planning, wearing lace and inviting friends to stand up as bridesmaids. Once, while in Vegas, Didion overheard a girl who could hardly be sixteen and was clearly pregnant announce that her quick Vegas wedding had been everything she had ever imagined it would be.

Didion writes this essay with a clear opinion that Las Vegas weddings are absurd and cheap, making a mockery of an institution that is supposed to be sacred. Didion describes the types of weddings that take place on the strip in Vegas, with their neon signs and their brides dressed in white satin. The chapels and the ability to marry on the spur of the moment seem to cheapen marriage, but somehow there is a generation of children who believe Vegas is the best they can do for themselves. The overall impression the author leaves the reader with is sadness.



# Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: Slouching Toward Bethlehem,

## Part 1, Life Styles in the Golden Land: Slouching Toward Bethlehem, Summary and Analysis

Didion feels the country is falling apart, so she goes to San Francisco to see where the missing children are congregating and calling themselves hippies. Didion begins making acquaintances among the people there and is told to speak to a man named Deadeye. Didion tries to find Deadeye, but keeps missing him at the places she is told he will be. Didion befriends Don and Max; Max tells Didion how he moved out of the conventional way of living, that his woman would not mind if he spent time with another woman and did not come home for days at a time. Max feels that he has removed all the 'don'ts' from his life and lives any way he feels like living. This causes Max some trouble and he has been arrested; in fact, he is due to appear in court in a few days.

Didion goes to see where the Grateful Dead rehearse and finds three girls who do nothing but hang around the band. Later, Didion meets with two teen runaways and asks why they left home. They tell her they left because their mothers did not like the way they dressed or who their friends were. Didion tries to speak to a cop about the children living as hippies in the city and is informed that she cannot speak to him because it might compromise some upcoming trials. Didion begins to spend time at a place called The Warehouse that a group of hippies call home. Among them is a little boy named Michael who appears to be unsupervised a great deal of the time. In fact, at one point Michael starts a fire in the building; everyone is more concerned with a lost joint than the damage done to the building. One night while visiting The Warehouse, Didion sits in on a discussion about the use of acid that makes little sense to her.

Didion has heard about a group, the Malakoff Diggers, whose sole purpose is to do nothing but offer a helping hand to people. Didion attempts to have a conversation with the leader of this group, but is unsuccessful because he is too busy to carry on a conversation and the people around him are all too high on drugs to speak. Didion hears about another man, Chester Anderson, who is supposed to be the voice of the hippie movement. Didion tries to get a meeting with Mr. Anderson, but is told it would be dangerous to her and to those who gave her his address if she met with him, so Didion puts Mr. Anderson on the back burner.

The author watches a group of young people take acid because she has heard so much about the trip they go on with the drug and she wants to witness it. However, nothing happens beyond the group silently sitting for most of the afternoon. Didion then runs into Deadeye on the street and learns that he intends to buy a house to help people. When asked how he will finance this operation, Deadeye tells Didion he is going to sell drugs.





Didion spends an afternoon with a group of friends and learns that one of the ladies, Barbara, is on what she called a woman's trip. A woman's trip, in her definition, is much like an acid trip, only instead of drugs, it consists of taking care of a house and a family rather than finding traditional work. Didion finds this to be against the hippies' core beliefs of changing the way society views traditional roles, but decides not to say anything.

Didion finally finds someone within the police department who will speak to her. This cop tells Didion how the police department has many officers working undercover among the hippies. Then he tells Didion how one of these undercover cops had become too immersed in the culture, so he was removed and transferred to the drug squad. By accident, this cop was returned to the streets and the hippies were so oblivious that they did not realize he was a cop; as a result, he was able to clear more than forty cases that first week.

Didion hears about a man who runs a Mime group in order to spread his political beliefs. She sits in a park and watches this group accost a black man because they think that society is oppressing the black people and they want him to stand up with them against this hypocrisy. Later, Didion speaks to a three year old girl who routinely gets high on marijuana. Everyone Didion meets tells her the purpose behind the hippie movement is not drugs, but an attempt to encourage change in society. However, Didion sees the movement as a generation's attempt to define who they are among a shift in moral values from those held by earlier generations.

In an honest look at the hippie movement of the 1960s, Didion shows that the country is falling apart amidst the political upheaval of the Vietnam War. Didion makes friends with many of the hippies in the movement, including leaders and followers, as she is curious to see what makes them come to the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco and what they hope their gathering there will do for society. Unfortunately, she finds a group of people more interested in drugs than anything else.

The hippie lifestyle consists of drugs and free sex, resulting in arrests and near starvation for many of the children gathered there. Didion, several times in her narration, compares the society that develops among these children with the innocent people of Vietnam. Didion feels that the hippie movement has created a war of sorts right there in San Francisco. Children were dying, getting raped, and starving to death in order to live free and without the restrictions their parents attempted to place on them. Not only that, but their children were growing up in an atmosphere that was dangerous and unhealthy, creating another generation of lost and immoral children.

The theme of Southern California lifestyles is illustrated in this essay not only because the hippies have congregated in California, but because in their own way these children gather here in order to find their own American Dream. These children think they are attempting to create a change in society, moving away from their parents' values and creating a world that is freer, more accepting of their beliefs and changing moral compasses. Didion agrees with this idea to a certain degree, believing that the American family has changed in the past few decades and these children are



attempting to create their own society to replace what their parents lost. This essay also illustrates the theme of self as it is about a group of people attempting to find themselves and be true to the people that they believe themselves to be, even if they are going about it the wrong way.

## Part 2, Personals: On Keeping a Notebook

### Part 2, Personals: On Keeping a Notebook Summary and Analysis

Didion kept a notebook since she was five years old. She has a habit of writing down notes in order to remember certain situations. However, whenever she looks back on these notes, Didion often cannot remember to what the note is referring. The author reads one note about a woman in a dirty wrapper in a hotel bar and wonders why this was important to her at the time; as she ponders this, she recollects the morning she wrote the note and comes to the conclusion that she wrote the note not to remember the woman, but to remember the way she felt at the time. Here she explains to the reader that keeping a notebook is not to keep a factual record or even a diary, but to remember how she feels in certain circumstances.

Didion writes this essay as a sort of self-analysis. She reviews many notes she made in a notebook and asks the reader why she would write down such nonsense. It takes Didion several pages of self-analysis to finally realize that what she was writing was not about the specific event or the people she referenced, but an attempt to remember how she feels and what it is like to be her in those specific moments in time. Didion was raised to believe that other people were more interesting than herself, but these notebooks help her to remember that she is just as interesting to others as they are to her.



## Part 2, Personals: On Self-Respect

### Part 2, Personals: On Self-Respect Summary and Analysis

When Didion was not elected to Phi Beta Kappa in college, she took it as a personal affront, even though she knew her grades were in no way good enough. Didion feels that is the moment she lost some of her innocence and began to see herself the way others did instead of through the rose colored glasses of self-confidence. Didion now believes that this loss of innocence is the beginning of self-respect, as the loss of innocence is also the loss of the ability to deceive herself. Self-respect is an important thing to develop because without it, a person will live in a world where only their failings matter. A person with self-respect still fails, but these people will use their failing to succeed rather than to hide in shame. Self-respect is a discipline, but it is worth the work because only a person who truly knows himself can have self-respect, and with self-respect comes happiness and success.

Didion's essay on self-respect is an analysis of what it means to believe in one's self and to truly know one's self well enough that one could take his own failings and grow from them rather than become overwhelmed by failure. This essay illustrates the theme of self in that it explores what it means for a person to truly know himself rather than to hide beneath the burden of self deception, as Didion found herself doing in college when she was not elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Self-respect means growing from failure, which is her ultimate message here.



## Part 2, Personals: I Can't Get That Monster Out of My Mind

### Part 2, Personals: I Can't Get That Monster Out of My Mind Summary and Analysis

Didion watches a movie in which a monster steals a child in order to befriend it, and the mother tells her brother that she cannot get the monster out of her mind. Didion thinks about this line whenever she thinks about Hollywood. Didion thinks that Hollywood has been taken over by a monster that has taken away all its originality. She reflects with some nostalgia on the days when Hollywood was a place where movies were made, not the monster that killed all the great studios and movies from years past. Now Didion feels that Hollywood has no clear voices, no originality. Didion feels that the system that runs Hollywood has such a tight reign on its directors that they no longer feel free to touch new subjects or to concentrate as much on style as story.

This essay could have been written in the 60s as it was, or today since it still applies. Hollywood became stale and creativity went out the window. Didion talks about movies in the past, touching on the theme of memories, in which style was as important as story. Now, Didion remarks, Hollywood is run by a system that no longer encourages directors to use a free hand and attack a movie with true original vision. Hollywood is in the grip of a monster and is no longer original, much to the detriment of American entertainment.

## Part 2, Personals: On Morality

### Part 2, Personals: On Morality Summary and Analysis

Didion is asked to write an essay on morality, and while she is working on it she hears about an accident in the mountains in which a young man was killed and his girlfriend injured. While a nurse who had happened upon the accident took the young woman to a hospital, her husband remained with the young man's body until the police could arrive. To Didion, this defines morality, because if they had left the young man's body unattended, it would have been ravaged by wildlife before the police could arrive. Didion then poses a question to the reader: is the Donner party immoral because of what they have done to survive. Society teaches that the Donner party was immoral, but Didion suggests they merely reverted to a more primitive state of moral thought. Society tells us what is right and wrong, but Didion suggests that no one truly knows what might be right or wrong; therefore, no one can truly define what it might be to be moral.

Didion comes to the conclusion that morality cannot be defined without the outlines presented by society. While leaving a body to the wolves seems immoral by society's guidelines, there are those who would leave it anyway. When the Donner party did what they had to do to survive, society saw them as immoral. However, Didion feels there is nothing shameful in reverting to a primitive instinct to survive. All these theories touch on the theme of self. Morality, as Didion writes it, is a personal definition that is defined by the way a person sees it himself.



## Part 2, Personals: On Going Home

### Part 2, Personals: On Going Home Summary and Analysis

Didion goes home to celebrate her daughter's first birthday with her family. Didion's husband does not like it when she goes home because she reverts to her family's ways rather than his. Didion's family does not accept her husband, either, referring to him as 'Joan's husband' instead of his name. During these visits, Didion feels trapped between her family and her husband, wanting to please both but unable to find neutral ground. However, Didion does not want to stop these visits home because she feels it is important to have extended family around her daughter.

The theme of this essay appears to be about the importance of extended family when raising a child. Didion goes home because she is close to her family and enjoys being near them. However, Didion's husband does not like it when she goes home because her behavior changes. This puts Didion between her husband and her family, but she chooses to continue going home because to her it is important to give her child the same sense of home that she felt when she was around her extended family.



## **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Notes from a Native Daughter**

### **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Notes from a Native Daughter Summary and Analysis**

Didion grew up in the Sacramento Valley. The Sacramento Valley has a varied history, beginning with the discovery of gold at Sutter's Fort, causing the mass immigration of settlers from all over the country. This mass immigration changed the nature of the valley, creating the world Didion grew up in. The area was a mass of farms when Didion grew up there, spending her days swimming in the rivers and chasing dogs through the fields. The Sacramento Valley of Didion's youth was a place rich in history and family.

In later years, an aerospace company settled in the area and once again things began to change. The sense of history and family began to disappear. Didion returns to the area after living in New York and she finds an area that is vastly different from where she grew up. The children no longer knew the history of the area, nor did they appreciate it. There is no extended family for the children living there, only the aerospace company.

This essay is much like the previous one in that it is about the importance of family and history. Didion shares a detailed history of the Sacramento Valley and her memories of growing up there among her extended family. Didion clearly has a great deal of affection for the area despite the things people say about it in later years, mostly that the area is not as friendly as others. Didion feels the people in the area are very friendly, to those who belong. When the aerospace company settled in the area it was overrun with strangers who changed the area, taking away its feel of history and family. Didion returns after spending time in New York and feels sad that the children growing up there will never appreciate the stories that made the valley what it was when she was a child, a place rich in history and family.





## **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Letter from Paradise, 21' 19' N., 157' 52' W.**

### **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Letter from Paradise, 21' 19' N., 157' 52' W. Summary and Analysis**

Didion visits Hawaii; she knows it as the place that caused her father to have to leave the family during the war, then as a place of fun in the sun, and later as the place where a great-great-grandfather was laid to rest after working as a teacher there. While visiting the island, Didion goes to visit the memorial at Pearl Harbor, curious to see how people react when faced with the deaths of so many brave soldiers. On the way to the memorial the people laugh and joke, but later Didion loses track of their reactions because she becomes so overwhelmed with her own grief. Even sadder to Didion are the visits she makes to the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. While visiting this cemetery she makes note of the ages of the young men buried there, and is saddened that many never reached maturity.

In the cities, Didion often sees soldiers on leave, drinking and enjoying the businesses designed for their pleasure. These soldiers are not much older than their buddies buried on the hill. However, not everything about Hawaii is about war. There is the economy as well. Hawaii has always been run by a small group of elite business men; this 'big five' group of companies ran the islands for the better part of a century, nearly supporting the Hawaiian economy by themselves. However, with war came the influx of new business, changing the atmosphere of the island.

This essay is about the history of Hawaii as Didion sees it. Didion knows Hawaii as the place that forced the United States into the war and caused her father to leave. In response to this, Didion goes to visit Pearl Harbor in order to see how people react to the memorial. However, Didion is so overwhelmed with her own grief she is not aware of the people around her. Later, Didion goes to the cemetery and is saddened by the ages of the young men buried there. It is a touching piece that illustrates the theme of memories as Didion explores not only her childhood memories, but her feelings of patriotism in regards to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Didion then gives a brief history of the island's economy, discussing the tradition of the five big companies that ran the islands and whose families populated the most elite sections of the islands. When new business came onto the islands, people were not as accepting to the diversity as one would think, objecting to these changes and clinging to the traditions of the past. This brings to mind Didion's essay on her home in the Sacramento Valley, stressing once again her beliefs in history and family.

## **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Rock of Ages**

### **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Rock of Ages Summary and Analysis**

Didion visits Alcatraz Island four years after its closing. The island is occupied only by the caretaker, who was once a guard at the prison, his wife, and a retired merchant marine. The prison has become too expensive to maintain, so major repairs are no longer being done, though the caretaker does occasionally make small repairs to keep busy. Didion explores the prison, thinking of the history of the prisoners who were held there, and finds it to be a peaceful place when one is not forced to stay.

This essay is a curious look at the prison at Alcatraz, a famed prison that once held some of the country's most notorious prisoners. Didion finds the place to be peaceful where it sits in the middle of the San Francisco Bay, enjoying the history of the place and its prisoners. However, Didion does not forget the true purpose of the island and thinks perhaps the reason she finds it so peaceful is because she is not forced to stay.



## **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: The Seacoast of Despair**

### **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: The Seacoast of Despair Summary and Analysis**

Didion visits Newport Beach where many rich Americans make their summer homes. Didion has been told to expect amazing architecture and eclectic homes, but what she finds are the excesses of wealth. To Didion it seems like a place men use to show off their wealth, mainly to the exclusion of the women. The area reminds Didion of the West, where the society is geared more toward men. To Didion the area seems to be a testimony to the old adage that money cannot buy happiness.

This essay is a social commentary on the filthy rich and their habits of building ostentatious homes in order to show off their wealth. Didion finds it to be an unattractive area that, like the West, excludes women. In the end, Didion sees it as a failed attempt of the men to express the depth of their wealth in order to find happiness.



## **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Guaymas, Sonora**

### **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Guaymas, Sonora Summary and Analysis**

Didion is depressed because of a long rainy season in Los Angeles, so she and her husband decide to go to Guaymas to relax. They drive through the desert in order to enjoy the landscape that shifts from desolate desert to the glorious coast. Didion and her husband lose themselves in the quiet lifestyle of the island, enjoying the beach and the hotel amenities until they become restless and know it is time to go home.

This essay is a nice report on a lazy vacation Didion takes to Guaymas, Sonora. Los Angeles has become a depressing place because of the rains and the mundane droll of everyday life. Didion escapes to a seaside resort where she can get away from telephones and television in order to reconnect with her inner peace and with her husband. When she becomes bored, Didion knows it is time to go home, suggesting that one cannot easily outrun the ordinary and mundane.



## **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Los Angeles Notebook**

### **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Los Angeles Notebook Summary and Analysis**

In Los Angeles, the citizens know when the Santa Ana winds are about to blow because people's temperaments become dark. Crime increases during these periods. There have been stories written about this phenomenon. Surgeons refuse to operate during this time as well because patients tend to bleed. There is some thought that the Santa Ana winds change the very atmosphere, causing more positive ions to appear in the air, thereby causing these psychological changes.

In Los Angeles, night time talk shows discuss the merits of a new book written by Helen Gurley Brown. One afternoon when it is very hot, Didion plays in the sprinkler with her daughter and then goes to the store in her bathing suit. A woman follows her around the store, telling her that she is dressed inappropriately. At a party, a movie star's wife announces that her husband is gay.

This chapter is a collection of notes that Didion keeps on Los Angeles. The first part covers the Santa Ana winds which appear to cause darkness in people's moods and behaviors. The second part is a bit from a late night talk show, and the third is Didion's experience walking through a store in a bathing suit. Finally, at a party, a movie star's wife announces her husband is gay. These are all simple snapshots of life in Los Angeles and they illustrate the theme of Southern California lifestyles.



## **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Goodbye to All That**

### **Part 3, Seven Places of the Mind: Goodbye to All That Summary and Analysis**

Didion moves to New York as a young woman. The city seems like a huge adventure to her. Didion struggles in those early years before she finds a good job, often using her charge card at a department store in order to eat. Didion never tells her family about her struggles, however, because she wants to survive on her own without their help. Later Didion gets a good job at a magazine and begins to make good friends, friends with whom she often parties. However, these parties soon become boring because they are always the same people. The adventure of the area has gone away. Soon after Didion marries, she becomes depressed. Didion's husband sees her despair and suggests he take a leave of absence from work so that they can go to California for a time. The leave of absence soon turns into a permanent move.

This essay is Didion's attempt to explain to the reader, and perhaps to herself, why she left New York. New York seemed like a glamorous place to live and to begin a career, and at first it was a great adventure, with parties every night and exciting jobs during the day. The struggle made it even more fun in its own sort of way. However, as Didion grows older, she becomes homesick and misses the West Coast. Didion's growth during her time in New York illustrates the theme of self because she comes to know herself better as her time in New York wanes, and she realizes that it was the excitement of the area, and not the place itself, that she had wanted. Now that she was old enough to not crave the excitement, she became homesick for California and eventually moves back. The author reveals here her sense of finding not only one's self, but the place in which to belong, which is perhaps the most prevalent and unifying aspect of the entire collection.



# **Characters**

**Lucille Miller**

**John Wayne**

**Joan Baez**

**Joan Didion**

**Michael Laski**

**Howard Hughes**

**Barbara**

**Max and Deadeye**

**Family**

**Helen Gurley Brown**



## Objects/Places

### The Sons of Katie Elder

*The Sons of Katie Elder* is a movie starring John Wayne. It was the filming of this movie that Joan Didion writes about in her essay, "John Wayne: A Love Song."

### C.P.U.S.A (M.-L.)

C.P.U.S.A (M.-L.) stands for the Communist Party U.S.A. (Marxist-Leninist). One of Didion's essays was about the General Secretary of this group.

### Notebooks

Didion kept notes in notebooks since she was five, though she often was not sure to what the notes referred. Didion wrote several essays about this habit.

### Slouching Toward Bethlehem

"Slouching Toward Bethlehem" is a line from a Yeats' poem that Didion chose as the title of one of her essays, and the name of the book, because the imagery of the poem haunted Didion for a long time prior to the publication of the book.

### San Bernardino

San Bernardino is a city an hour east of Los Angeles that was original settled by the Mormons. San Bernardino was where Lucille Miller lived and where her husband died.

### Carmel Valley

Joan Baez had a school in the Carmel Valley and the residence near her school attempted to force her to move the school. It was during this time that Joan Didion wrote her essay about Joan Baez, called "Where the Kissing Never Stops."

### Las Vegas

Las Vegas is a city in Nevada where people can be married without a waiting period, often in the middle of the night. Didion's essay, "Marrying Absurd," is about this strange phenomenon.





## **Hollywood**

Didion discusses Hollywood as a place that has lost its original voice.

## **Sacramento**

Didion grew up in a Sacramento with a strong history and deep sense of family. Didion wrote an essay expressing the sense that this Sacramento no longer exists to the children growing up there now.

## **New York**

Didion moved to New York City as a young woman and found it to be very adventurous. However, when Didion became older, she grew homesick for the West Coast.

## **Pearl Harbor**

One of the essays details two visits to Pearl Harbor in order to see how other people reacted to the memorials there. However, Didion found she could not pay attention to other's reactions when she herself was in tears.

## **Los Angeles**

Los Angeles is a large city in Southern California where many of Hollywood's elite live. This was where Joan Didion made her home when she penned the essays.

# Themes

## Southern California Lifestyles

Didion wrote many essays about life on the West Coast. Some of these essays are derogatory and others are positive, almost nostalgic. The first group deals with death and drugs and a lifestyle that permitted these behaviors. In one essay, Didion wrote about a young woman accused of killing her husband in order to be with her lover. Didion does not blame the young woman for her actions, but instead blames the American Dream that existed in the San Bernardino area, a dream that suggested a young woman could have it all if she only did what it took to get it. The young woman in this essay did just that and ended up serving ten years in prison for the murder of her husband, losing the only man she really loved in the process. Another essay Didion wrote about this darker side of the American Dream dealt with the children who came to live in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. These children ran away from strict parents to a desire to be with other people who understood their thoughts and feelings. Most of these children became addicted to drugs and often starved rather than get a job.

Some of the essays were positive about the Southern California lifestyle. One essay discussed Didion's own childhood in the Sacramento Valley. Didion remembered this childhood with affection. Didion had a large extended family and a sense of history in this area, something she felt was missing from the lives of the children who would be raised there after her. However, Didion continued to be close to her family, visiting them often and taking her daughter home to get to know her large extended family. Didion even moved back to California after living quite a few years in New York, having grown homesick.

Southern California lifestyle is an important theme throughout the compilation because it is this lifestyle that links the first group of essays together. These essays, covering everything from John Wayne to Communists, all have a connection of some sort to Southern California. Essays in the later portion of the collection in particular demonstrate Didion's own affections for Southern California

## Memories

A great deal of the second half of the book has to do with memories. First, Didion discusses memories in the practical sense, as the mechanical effort of remembering things from a notation in a notebook. Didion often kept notes about things that impressed her. These notes were often short and to the point, leaving her questioning what exactly she was trying to remember at the time she wrote them. Much later she would come across these notations and have no idea what they referred to or why she would want to make note of such a thing or event. However, Didion continued to keep her notes out of habit or because it made her feel more secure in her own memory.



Didion also wrote several essays dealing with the nostalgia of memories. She wrote about her home, where her family continued to live, and of her childhood. These memories were happy ones, filling the pages of her essays with longing for a time that no longer existed. Some of these memories also dealt with other people, such as her essay about John Wayne. John Wayne was a personal acquaintance of Didion's, but he was also a part of a childhood filled with an idealistic notion of what it meant to be an adult and to fall in love. Didion's memories of her first experience with a John Wayne movie colored her expectations of love and affected her relationships as an adult. Not only this, but Didion's memories of John Wayne also made the news that he had suffered with cancer a personal affront to her own emotions.

Memories are important to this book because Didion drew strongly on her own experiences and emotions when she wrote these essays. If not for her memories of her childhood, her memories of her meeting with the subjects of her essays, or her memories of certain moralities, Didion's essays would not have the impact on the reader that they have, nor would they have the impact on Didion herself that the reader can sense through her prose.

## Self

Didion offers several essays in this book about the traits that make up a person's character. One of these is self-respect. Didion feels that self respect is an important trait in making up a person's character, but that many people lack this trait in the modern world. Didion wrote that character is something old fashioned that people have shunned in recent years and have therefore lost sight of its meaning. Didion describes what she believes self-respect is and suggests that people have not lost it as they believe, but have simply forgotten its existence. Another trait Didion writes of is morality, another aspect of self that she feels is lost on modern society. However, Didion expresses several episodes from her personal life that prove that morality still exists for a few individuals.

Self is an important theme to this book because numerous essays in this book are about human behavior. Not only do the essays on character traits cover the idea of self and what that means to a person's personality, but other essays that revolve around human behavior suggest self is central to the theme of Didion's work. Didion's essay about the hippie movement in San Francisco, for example, is about a group of people who have collectively lost their self and what it means to be a moral human being. Another essay, the one about John Wayne, discusses self in the admiration of a great man who had a personality that was bigger than he was. Self is important to this book because the essays are essentially about people and self is an important part of the character of these people.

# Style

## Perspective

Didion's perspective is that of an observer of human nature. Many of the essays in this novel are the result of either interviews Didion has conducted with her subjects or simply observations of people in general. One of these essays is about a woman who has been accused of murder and Didion's observation that it was the expectations of being a California wife striving for the American Dream that made her do it. Another is about a famous singer who simply wanted to spread her philosophy of non-violence and was shunned by her neighbors. One covers a group of hippies living in San Francisco during the late sixties. Didion also writes about herself in this book, about her own quirks, her loves, and her desires. Didion writes about her need to keep notes, about morality and self-respect.

Most of the essays in this book are highly personal and based on Didion's own experiences, making her perspective a unique one. The perspective works for this book because it is so personal that it creates an intimacy between writer and reader that is unique in a book of non-fiction. There is no other way Didion could have presented this book because the nature of the essay is a personal endeavor.

## Tone

The tone of this book tends to be subjective. Many of the essays are highly personal which makes it impossible for the writer to approach it with an objective tone. Even when Didion attempts to be objective, as in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," the essay about the children living in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, her personal thoughts and opinions somehow manage to come out. Didion also shares her own opinions quite openly in many of the other essays, such as the one about Pearl Harbor, the one dealing with John Wayne, and the more personal essays, such as "On Keeping a Notebook."

## Structure

The book is divided into three parts. Each part is given a specific title that expresses the common thread between the essays contained within each part. Each part contains several essays, each essay separated from the one before by its title and a page break. Within each essay there are paragraph breaks that let the reader know when the subject or the action is about to change. Each essay has its own unique subject, covering anything from murder to homesickness. Each essay had its own unique subject, its own theme, and its own tone.

The essays tend to vary so drastically in subject that the structure of the book helps the reader not get lost from essay to essay. The essays are grouped together in such a way

that the reader has an idea what the next essay will be about even without having read the first sentence, aiding in ease of comprehension. The structure of the book is reader friendly and important to the overall impact of the essays in that it makes them easier to read and more readily comprehensible.



## Quotes

"Here is the last stop for all those who come from somewhere else, for all those who drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways. Here is where they are trying to find a new life style, trying to find it in the only places they know to look: the movies and the newspapers. The case of Lucille Marie Maxwell Miller is a tabloid moment to that new life style."

Part One, Life Styles in the Golden Land, Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream, pg.4

"When John Wayne spoke, there was no mistaking his intentions; he had a sexual authority so strong that even a child could perceive it."

Part One, Life Styles in the Golden Land, John Wayne: A Love Song, pg. 30

"Joan Baez was a personality before she was entirely a person, and, like anyone to whom that happens, she is in a sense a hapless victim of what other have seen in her, written about her, wanted her to be and not to be."

Part One, Life Styles in the Golden Land, Where the Kissing Never Stops, pg. 47

"It is impossible to think of Howard Hughes without seeing the apparently bottomless gulf between what we say we want and what we do want, between what we officially admire and secretly desire, between, in the largest sense, the people we marry and the people we love."

Part One, Life Styles in the Golden Land, 7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38, pg. 72

"It was a country of bankruptcy notices and public-auction announcements and commonplace reports of casual killings and misplaced children and abandoned homes and vandals who misspelled even the four-letter words they scrawled. It was a country in which families routinely disappeared, trailing bad checks and repossession papers. Adolescents drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins, children who were never taught and never now learned the games that had held the society together. People were missing. Children were missing. Parents were missing. Those left behind filed desultory missing-persons reports, then moved on themselves."

Part One, Life Styles in the Golden Land, Slouching Towards Bethlehem, pg. 84

"Remember what it was to be me: that is always the point."

Part Two, Personals, On Keeping a Notebook, pg. 136

"To have that sense of one's intrinsic worth which constitutes self-respect is potentially to have everything: the ability to discriminate, to love, and to remain indifferent."



Part Two, Personals, On Self-Respect, pg. 147

"Because when we start deceiving ourselves into thinking not that we want something or need something, not that it is a pragmatic necessity for us to have it, but that it is a moral imperative that we have it, then is when we join the fashionable madmen, and then is when the thin whine of hysteria is heard in the land, and then is when we are in bad trouble. And I suspect we are already there."

Part Two, Personals, On Morality, pg. 163

"My husband likes my family but is uneasy in their house, because one I fall into their ways, which are difficult, oblique, deliberately inarticulate, not my husband's ways."

Part Two, Personals, On Going Home, pg. 164

"I took that bright pink boat to Pearl Harbor on two afternoons, but I still do not know what I went to find out, which is how other people respond a quarter of a century later. I do not know because there is a point at which I began to cry, and to notice no one else."

Part Three, Seven Places of the Mind, Letter from Paradise, 21, 19' N., 157 52' W., pg. 192

"It is easy to see the beginning of things, and harder to see the ends."

Part Three, Seven Places of the Mind, Goodbye to All That, pg. 225

"All I mean is that I was very young in New York, and that at some point the golden rhythm was broken, and I am not that young any more."

Part Three, Seven Places of the Mind, Goodbye to All That, pg. 238



## Topics for Discussion

Who is Lucille Miller? Why does Didion feel it is important to tell her story? What does Didion think caused Mrs. Miller to find herself on trial for murder? Do you as the reader get the impression that Didion believes Mrs. Miller is guilty? Why or why not?

What is the impact of John Wayne on Didion's life? What is the impact of John Wayne's struggle with cancer on Didion? How do you, as the reader, feel Didion feels about John Wayne when she has dinner with him at the end of the essay? Why?

Discuss the social movement of the Haight-Ashbury district. What is Didion's overall impression of the people living in this area? Why does Didion believe these people have congregated here? Does Didion think their motives are noble? Why or why not?

Discuss the people who live in Haight-Ashbury. Why are many of them there? Why do they do drugs? Are the drugs the main reason these children congregate here? If not, what is the true reason? What do these children expect to accomplish by congregating here?

Discuss Didion's habit of keeping a notebook. Why does she do this? What is her impression of her own notes? Why can she not remember what a great number of her notes are about? Why does she continue to keep these notebooks? What is the purpose of writing an essay about the notebooks?

Discuss morality and self respect. Why does Didion write these essays? What conclusions does she draw in these essays? What do these conclusions say about the people living in the modern world of the sixties? What does it say about people living in today's world?

Why did Didion decide to leave New York? Did she become homesick or was there something deeper to her unhappiness? Do you think this feeling had something to do with Didion's age when she arrived in New York, as she suggests? If not, what do you think is the real reason?