

The White Album Study Guide

The White Album by Joan Didion

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Plot Summary

In this collection of essays by Joan Didion entitled "The White Album", the reader is taken on a crash tour of the late Sixties and early Seventies, as seen through the eyes of the reporter Didion. The book is composed of selected pieces of her essays and articles published at that time, and examines the themes of the American Dream, Celebrity, and the chaos of the Sixties in general. "The White Album" studies American culture obliquely, through her essays on various places, events and personalities that she meets.

It is divided into five Parts, the first self-titled "The White Album" ranging through 'The Californian Republic', the 'Women's Movement', 'Sojourns' and finally 'The Morning After The Sixties.' Each of these sections contains a number of essays relevant to the theme, and we see emerging the prevalence for Didion to understand the nature of California (also her home state) and its impact of Hollywood on the American psyche and in turn, the rest of the world. Also, Didion discusses the early Women's Movement and how, facets of it in her mind too became a part of the American dream during those years, before finally turning her attentions to great American past times; that of traveling, the 'road trip' or going to the Mall, the dream of the holiday on a private beach in Honolulu as well as the dream of Celebrity and fame.

All of these essays, directly or indirectly, ask the question 'What is Wrong With Society?' Although she finds no concrete answers to her questions, Didion finds interesting clues; her study of the Getty Museum and the Governor of California's Mansion reveals in one part a sensibility that ennobles the Wild West, the free and the Working Class, whilst another desire tends to the fantasy land of Hollywood, of getting everything that one wants. Didion also sees that overlaying everything during these years is rhetoric. As in her very first essay she reveals her opinion that the whole world is made up of stories, and that we must pick the appropriate facts to make sense out of the confusion of life, she sees everywhere about her different narrative stories which are sometimes completely contradictory with each other; the Marxist revolutionary rhetoric of the Black Panthers, the 50's 'Nuclear' sensibilities of the Jaycee club, the apocalyptic nihilism of Jim Morrison, to the religious fervor of James Pike, first Bishop of California.

These essays do not provide answers to the questions raised by the Sixties, but they do paint a picture of those times, and of the sorts of people who lived there. Particularly in Didion's analysis of Hollywood and the Mall we can see clearly the foundations of our own contemporary western culture, with its own predominant consumerism.

Through all of these essays Didion also presents herself up for the examination of the reader in a uniquely post-modern style of her times. She is at one and the same time a vulnerable figure and a cynic, who talks about her own afflictions, emotional troubles and reconciliation's as a microcosm of her own times.



The White Album

The White Album Summary and Analysis

The first essay in the book of the same name by reporter and writer Joan Didion acts as a frontispiece, introduction and also a summary of her works here; all centred around the main theme of American social life during the Sixties and Seventies. This essay serves as an introduction to Joan Didion the person and her interior, mental life during the time as well as featuring some of the incidences that she was heavily involved in reporting (the prosecution of the Charles Manson Murders, the interviews with Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panthers, the student campus uprisings).

The essay begins with Didion reflecting on what 'stories' are; whether we are talking about 'the News' or the personal stories of someone's life, or indeed fiction. Didion makes the assertion that;

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live."

Page 11.

And that also, it is the job of the writer to select a narrative, a 'meaning' from those stories and tell them in such a way that they reveal something about ourselves, our culture and how we choose to live in the world today.

However, having established this modus operandi Didion immediately feels intensely unhappy with it, as the writer understands that the narrative selection is at best a compromise between many different strands of story and that the meaning of any story can itself be paradoxical, conflicted or merely complicated. This is a strange premise for Didion to start her book, knowing as we do that she is a reporter and that Didion made a living out of exactly this facility to find and select the important stories and their inner meanings of the time. The reason for Didion's confusion over the role of the writer becomes clear as Didion moves on to discuss life during the Sixties in America, and her own personal circumstances.

During the years that Didion was named 'Woman of the Year' for her reportage and for her iconic pieces (becoming one of the chroniclers of the 'love revolution'), the writer also reveals that she was suffering from something similar to a nervous breakdown, at least according to the psychiatrists of that time. In her copied account of her personality test she reveals that she was summarized as being intensely cynical, detached, even obsessive and withdrawn. This personal reveal makes the essay immediately emotional and impacting for the reader, and Didion uses it to assert the truth of the rest of this book: that the Sixties themselves were a 'crazy' time. Not merely in the sense of the events that were happening or the many beliefs that were surfacing, but that the very fabric of American society was disintegrating, chaotic and paradoxical; and it is this fact that leads the writer to the conclusion that, in the face of an active revolutionary rhetoric



from the Left and an overbearing security conscious rhetoric from the Right, amidst drugs, cults and serial murders the likes of which not seen for decades, her 'obsessive and withdrawn' personality was really a rational reaction.

The essay of "The White Album" then moves on to feature, as a means of exposition some of these crazy occurrences of events; random phone calls from long lost school colleagues about financing a revolution, or of joining the cult of Scientology or of being given a 'friendly visit' by an information gathering police officer. Amidst this all Didion had a house in North Hollywood, a region because of its dilapidated status home to many musicians, actresses, junkies and artists. It is here that her and her family are scared of the constant disappearances of young women (later discovered to be murders).

The narrative moves episodically, as the writer switches to some of her reports of the times; to meeting with the incarcerated Huey Newton (Defense Minister for the Black Panthers) and Eldridge Cleaver (Information Minister for the Black Panthers) and then on to her report of the San Francisco College 'uprising'. Revolutionary rhetoric is seen to be everywhere that Didion turns, from the young students to the militant Panthers, and from the pronouncements of Jim Morrison as Didion sits in their recording room on invitation to write a piece on the music band The Doors.

But Didion highlights how all of these political statements and combative politics are met equally by ridiculousness. The Black Panthers spokespeople that she speaks to are one-track minded and Huey Newton seems impossible of talking about his own emotional life whereas the students at San Francisco appear to Didion to be earnest play actors, not understanding what they are really attempting. Even the alluring Jim Morrison appears as less than prophetic, but human and bored in a sea of mystique and celebrity.

This juxtaposition of the rhetoric, politics and celebrity of the day with Didion's recollections and perceptions of the real humans underneath it all characterizes Didion's essay and her encapsulates, in part, her message: that all of America was suffering was some kind of collective madness which held some tender moments, some righteous causes, but also a lot of 'detachment' and 'obsessive behaviour'.

The last, interesting note to make on this essay is Joan Didion's association with Linda Kasabian, a key witness for the prosecution of the Charles Manson murder trials. Linda Kasabian appears to be a very likeable woman, and the writer becomes a close personal friend, even becoming a godparent to one of her children. The fact that the writer herself is so close to a historical event - and finds that the characters involved are real, human people and yet have great significance are a paradox for the writer. We can see from her closing remarks about her friendship with Linda and her work during the Sixties as expressing her real passion in this book entire: that underneath 'the stories' there are other, human stories, and quite often they do not match up with the historical narrative and also, indeed it is this grey area between the personal and the social that interests her so savagely.



James Pike, American

James Pike, American Summary and Analysis

In the second essay of the book "The White Album", Joan Didion studies the account of the life and death of James Albert Pike, Bishop of California during the Sixties and Seventies. This essay is the first of Part Two of the book, entitled aptly 'The Californian Republic'.

The title of this Part in which the majority of the essays of the novel are contained gives us an immediate clue of what this essay is about and hints at a theme of the entire book. 'The Californian Republic' conjures the image of a place that is similar to paradise, a heaven on Earth that Joan Didion is dissecting. Her choice of James Pike as its first representative is important to note as well: that whilst she studies California and America, she does so through the lives of figures and the history of places which seems to reveal some inner truth about the sunshine state and the American Dream.

Her essay then moves on to recount her research into the biographical life of the Bishop of California, the two salient facts being that he famously 'completed' the Episcopal Grace Cathedral, and that he dies while with his young bride on a pilgrimage to the Mojave Desert in his latter years. These facts, when first presented gave for Didion (she recounts) the impression that James Albert Pike was as her mother once said;

"Just a damn old fool." Page 52.

However her appreciation of the man deepens as she considers what kind of a figure this Bishop of California was, and what led him to drive out into the Mojave Desert and announce that he had 'completed' one of the modern architectural wonders of the Californian State

James Albert Pike was, in every sense a successful young man through his early life, a winner of competitions and awards, and fervently religious. He and his mother were strong Catholics who grew up in near poverty; they were hard working and sincere. James Pike himself decided to head East to Los Angeles after a Catholic School upbringing where he was destined to become a priest. This dream of Pike's is presented by the writer as a rite of acceptance, as a young frontier man similar to some of the great literary characters of America heading East to the 'civilized' and 'cultured' East to gain social recognition and status. The West, in the sense that it meant California and the 'Wild West' of American folklore also held connotations of the country bumpkin, and uncultured and the savage.

Here in the East, Pike discovers the Anglican Communion in the form of the Episcopalian Church, and also discovers that it is the most powerful religious body at the time. He converts to the Protestant faith and returns to California, with the dream of becoming the first Bishop of California. Notably during this time he also annulled his first



marriage to his Roman Catholic wife, and wrote a clause into the Episcopalian ordinances that to marry outside of one's faith did not in fact count as an actual marriage at all.

Now ensconced in California, he announces that the Grace Cathedral, a work that had been under continual revision for many decades, and itself becoming a symbol of the development of faith and progress he announced 'completed'. A few years later, James Pike took two bottles of Cola and his young wife on a mission to the desert to experience the wilderness just as Jesus had.

This whole narrative holds deep significance for the writer, as Didion considers the frontier spirit of 'The West' and the entwined belief in a Manifest Destiny; the American Dream. James Pike himself becomes a perfect cautionary tale for the writer as his intense ambition and 'progressive spirit' seems to know no bounds. Eventually, James Pike's own belief in progress, in his ability to become similar to Jesus is deeply disturbing both to the writer and the reader.

In this mini essay, Joan Didion can be seen to be using the life of James Albert Pike as a means to study the notions of California, the American Dream and Manifest Destiny. She reveals that she holds a deep suspicion of these ideologies, and that the dream of America itself might in fact become a delusion for some poor souls like James Pike. The irony that James and Diane Pike took with them into their wilderness experience two bottles of a branded Cola only highlights Didion's beliefs about the Californian Dream.



Holy Water

Holy Water Summary and Analysis

In one of her more personal pieces, the essay entitled 'Holy Water' is a study, nominally, of the water systems that keep the arid and parched landscape of California alive, and her own feelings towards it.

The third essay of the book and the second that discusses the State of California particularly, the writer Joan Didion reveals to the reader that she has an almost obsessive knowledge of the water systems of California and the Western Seaboard. She can reveal that the water that is within her taps comes from a particular reservoir that is held in check by a particular dam, that yesterday that very water probably sat in another reservoir further up the chain of systems, until such a time as it disappeared into the granite mountains, managed by the Operations Control Center of the California State Water Project. Joan Didion is captivated by water, as she states how that;

"Some of us who live in arid parts of the world think about water with a reverence others might find excessive."

Page 59.

Water, for Joan Didion is a balm for the spirit and also a blessing. She reveals how she understands that California is made habitable by the water project, and how vast resources and manpower has gone into the effect of there being fresh water in every tap in the sunshine state. On a deeper level, this short essay also infers that the 'idea' of California is only a thin dream upon a much wilder and harsher climate, one which the citizens of California are battling constantly, whether they know of it or not.

The essay moves on to follow the reporter as she visits the operations Control Center and watches how they 'pull water down' from the reservoirs at the top of the chain by opening sluice gates for precise periods and times, and 'push it over the hill' by which they mean the mountains by pumping it down into the reservoirs that serve California central itself. The writer feels an instinctive affinity for this vocation as she reads log books about people who drain reservoirs, wrestle titanic forces with ease, no thanks, and humility. For Joan Didion, the idea of working in this machine appears to be life-affirming and eternally satisfying, as it serves to keep California alive, green and fresh.

The business of the flows of water, Joan discovers is itself governed by the same forces that govern every other aspect of social life: supply and demand. The water contractors and companies ask the California State Water Project for a percentage share of water each day for the next day, and the State Water Project agrees, based on calculations of rainfall, consumption, season and demand. This elegant system appears to Didion to be so simple that it almost takes on the appearance of miracle; and in her reactions we can read that this simple system is the opposite of all the other machines of society that she



regularly reports (which are complicated, have hidden stories, paradoxes and contradictions).

At the end of this small essay, the writer considers Bernard DeVoto's assertion that 'The West' (as in the Wild West, or the last frontier of human exploration and the edge of the American Dream) can be defined as the place where the average annual rainfall falls below the line of twenty inches. This is, to Didion's mind the best description of the mythical 'West' of the human and cultural imagination that she has ever heard, and explains her love for the California State Water Project. What Didion is actually examining, as a subtext to this entire essay is 'what the West' really is, and what 'California' really is: her answer is one that she implies in this essay; as a hostile place, which can sometimes fulfil the dreams of its inhabitants graciously (as in the sudden delivery of life-giving water).



Many Mansions

Many Mansions Summary and Analysis

The third essay of Part Two 'California Republic' is an essay by the reporter Joan Didion on the new Governor's Mansion built by Nancy and Ronald Reagan for their governorship of California, before he was elected President. In this short essay, Joan Didion again uses the subject matter of the article to examine the American Dream, and that of the idea of California in particular, finding clues as to the national psychology in the eventual fate of this building and its history.

The Governor's mansion cost millions and sits on a bluff overlooking a river (but not, in actual fact with a view of the river, merely of its hidden contours, a fact that Didion finds symbolic as we shall see later). It is a ground floor mansion, with large rooms, tennis courts, bedrooms that open out into an adjacent swimming pool and small added features such as a 'wet bar' (or an enlarged drinks cabinet with a full sink) in one of the lounges; an 'entertainment area' filled with small architectural features. One of the main reasons why the writer finds this establishment fascinating is that it is empty, and has been for some time. The current Governor of the time, Jerry Brown proclaims that the Governor's mansion built by the Reagan's is 'not his style' and chooses instead to sleep on a futon mattress on the floor of a rented apartment in the city.

Joan Didion discovers that the Governor's palatial mansion is now going to seed. That guards are employed to patrol it as are groundsmen and women to keep it tidy, but that no one is using it at all. Various small oddities feature in its construction that the writer notes as clues to the Californian Dream: the fact that the mansion has no direct view of the river itself is because the river often runs dry and silts up; an unacceptable sight. The mansion itself has too few bookshelves for her tastes and shows in its style, although 'open' and 'full of flow' a lack of any real homely welcome. It is, as the writer points out;

"...designed exclusively for defrosting by microwave and compacting trash. It is a house built for a family of snackers."

Page 69.

Within the Governor's Mansion the writer finds no real sense of belonging or of family, merely of show and of convenience; of 'passing through' and no real stability. She compares it to the old Governor's House in Sacramento which she knew as a child because she grew up near there and used to play within its rooms with the daughter of Earl Warren. Although the old Governor's House was itself grand, it has been criticized for having 'too many stairs' and too much 'wasted space' (which Didion remembers fondly as the areas where children could run around and play games and not annoy the Governor and politicians of the day).



It is the contradictions and the contrast between these two buildings which eventually drives the writer to the consideration that the House that the Reagans built on the river is in fact not anyone's style, and not the style of the Californian Dream itself. It becomes, paradoxically, the essence of the Californian Dream for 'Middle America' - the easy life, the convenient and the grand, but also has connotations of opulence and pride. In a sense, the Governor's House on the hill is at one and the same time the goal that California can never allow itself to achieve: it represents the idea that in California all things are possible and attainable (vast wealth, grandiosity and riches), but also that these things betray the spirit of the 'Wild West', the working class ethic of the tough and rugged frontiers people.

Finally, we can see in this essay that the writer is trying to understand what constitutes California and the greater American psyche, but is subtly alarmed by what she finds there; that there are contradictions at the heart of the American Dream (the same contradictions that, we could say lead to the crisis and revolution in American culture at the end of the Sixties).



The Getty, Bureaucrats

The Getty, Bureaucrats Summary and Analysis

The next two essays in Part Two continue Didion's obsession with the contradictions at the heart of California, as she discusses the art museum of the Getty, and the Caltrans Californian department of Transportation for Los Angeles. Both of these sections examines the apparent absurdities of state politics and mass opinion alike.

The first essay in this duo, that of 'The Getty' considers the art museum built from private finances by J. Paul Getty, originally an oil businessman, who built this place as a symbol of his wealth and celebration of the history of Art and Culture. Joan Didion finds that the place is intensely disliked by critics, reviewers, but not by the average viewer whom she talks to upon her visits, Didion recounts how even to talk of the Getty in polite society:

"...is to invite a kind of nervous derision, as if the place were a local hoax, a perverse and deliberate affront to the understated good taste and general class of everyone at the table."

Page 74.

The Getty museum, at the time of writing, became known as a home for the ancient, the antiquities and even the paintings of the Renaissance and the Impressionists. The Getty was derided for not being modern and for being an overt show of wealth and power, whereas the writer of the article found out that it was actually greatly admired by the public who visited it.

This contradiction puzzled Didion, as the writer tries to understand the reactions of the art world to the Getty and the reactions of the critics. She summarizes that the Getty is too 'European' in its style and content for the modern American 'elite' and as such is out of date, baroque and decadent. The Getty's works, coming as the majority of them did from antiquity speak not of the Now, the modern, the Immediate and the Moment but rather of centuries and millennia of tradition. As such it was an anathema to the American Dream of 'onwards and upwards' and of progressing forwards into the future.

Didion finishes this first article by her discovery that it is strange that the 'elites' of the critiques object to the Getty but the public do not. The public, she assumes, actually appreciate what great wealth can offer and themselves are cynical of the modern ethic that 'everything is possible if you believe in it.' Herein Didion finds another aspect of the contradictory nature of the American Dream: that she believes that it tells its adherents that they can have everything, but in actual fact they cannot.

The second article in this group is that of 'Bureaucrats'. It reads as an impassioned study (almost an attack) on the Caltrans Californian Department of Transport which implemented traffic control systems around the city of Los Angeles. The control systems



were linked up to a central computer where they measured and monitored all of the motorways and imposed arbitrary speed restrictions to ease the flow of the whole system. These came in the shape of LED screens (now seen commonly in many parts of the Western World) which advises the car driver to slow down, be aware of a certain fact etc.

Didion finds this interference by local state politics alarming and somewhat indicative of a deeper problem at the heart of politics in general: that people must be managed. This message can be joined with her earlier discovery that 'the public' actually felt very differently towards the Getty and valued it, in the same way that 'the public' hate traffic controls and actually have more accidents per year on the roads where these flashing LED screen exist.

This last essay in this couplet reads somewhat strangely to our modern ears, growing up as we are in an age where traffic control is commonplace. This essay can perhaps be read as revealing more about that time in American Society when key values and contradictions were challenged and coming into question: Does the car owner also have an equal right to freedom? Should things like traffic be organized and controlled by the powers that be? The problems with the answers to both of these questions are ongoing, and this essay in particular provides an interesting insight into the mind of Joan Didion, who saw Caltrans as being inherently 'meddling' with allusions to the 'Big Brother' of Orwellian nightmare.



Good Citizens, Notes Towards A Dreampolitik

Good Citizens, Notes Towards A Dreampolitik Summary and Analysis

These two short essays which make up the conclusion to Part Two, 'The Californian Republic' considers broadly the state of American political life and the media; and the part these two play in the creation of California.

The first essay, 'Good Citizens', concentrates its initial passages on the intelligensia of Hollywood and California; the writers, artists, authors and screenwriters who together form a part of the 'liberal Left'. The essay recounts Didion's many experiences of meals and meetings, of social evenings discussing films and the presidency and book launches. In these circles the writer examines the appearance of 'the good citizen' and the 'elite' as she compares these meetings to a press interview with Nancy Reagan and a meeting with the Jaycee club of America. All three groups are, in effect the 'ideal' sort of citizens in the eyes of the mainstream: these different groups and individuals are intelligent, involved in the issues of their day, interested in social change and progress and pay their taxes.

However, Didion discovers that she finds a certain kind of blinkered vanity amongst these groups; a sense of unreality as if they are all more removed from society rather than a part of it. In the first group, the 'liberal Leftwing' of screenwriters and authors Didion sees a simplification of issues;

"...where the borrowed rhetoric between the good (equality is good) and the bad (genocide is bad) tends to make even the most casual political small talk resemble a rally." Page 86.

This simplification is carried over to their arts: that any film involving social change always ends up in a positive outcome for liberty, that the lead actor fights injustice and gets the new reform in the law. This, the writer suggests, is another piece of the fantasy of the Californian Republic: a belief in the redemptive power of the law (and of the media itself). Didion notes wryly how the screenwriters cell of the Communist Party seemed to have no direct influence on the mainstream media, even though their politics were the most impassioned.

In subsequent parts, the writer takes us to view Nancy Reagan as she is being interviewed 'naturally' and we see how the event was anything but natural. Her activities (the cutting of flowers) was suggested by a cameraman, who then had to ask the wife of the Governor of California to 'fake' cutting flowers so they could perform a dry run, a rehearsal before the actual shot. Joan Didion here in this account seems to be attacking



the very principles of the media itself - that it does not (and cannot) report the truth, but make an illusory reality which it then presents to the world.

The last section in the article 'Good Citizens' considers the Jaycee's club of America, whose grand meal and talks seems rooted in a 1950's era set of beliefs and ideology. Joan Didion reflects how the Jaycees in many ways are the ideal citizen group and yet somehow appear to be vastly out of place in the modern age.

The second essay 'Notes Towards A Dream Politic' is interesting in the way that it continues this theme of the media and the 'fantasy land' that it creates in the national psyche. The very first section of this essay concerns itself with Brother Theobald of the Pentecostal church, and the mysterious sudden uprooting of Brother Theobald, himself and his extended family, and finally his entire congregation to the town of Murfreesboro. Upon interviewing the Brother, Didion finds his view of life intensely religious and clashing with the mainstream view of the world. His sudden decision to move and his view of society are, the writer suggests, another piece of the puzzle that is America and California in particular - where dreams can be as powerful as political reality.

This idea she considers as she talks about Biker Movies (in particular the controversial Roger Corman's 'The Wild Angels'). These movies had a huge run of success during the seventies after the film of 'Easy Rider' and depicted an lawless group of anti-heroes who were vile and violent, aggressive and abusive towards women and religion and the 'Good Citizen' of mainstream America. However, at the end of the movie there is always a redemptive note as the 'leader' or the protagonist of the gang faces their death and is revealed as an existential hero: or someone who looks squarely into the gritty confusion and chaos of their existence and realizes that there is no answer to the confusion. The fact that Biker Movies are so celebrated, and the idea of 'the Wild West' is so glorified Didion finds telling about the National psyche.

The final section in 'Notes Towards A Dream Politic' the writer's narrative becomes immediate and personal as she interviews a few up and coming actors and actresses who have arrived in Hollywood in the glow of their naïve innocence. They all dream of becoming famous and rich, even if their chances are very slim, or that it is obvious that they are being used by their agents. This obsession with fame and glory is another part of the fantasy-land of the American Dream, one which Didion returns to throughout her book and best encapsulates the contradictions and shared corruption at the heart of American cultural identity during the Sixties and Seventies.



The Women's Movement

The Women's Movement Summary and Analysis

The Third selection of essays from Joan Didion in "The White Album" is headed by the article entitled 'The Woman's Movement'. They cover the writers thoughts on the formation of feminism and key feminist figures of her times.

What follows is the writers appreciation of the woman's movement, one which she critiques for not having truly brought forward its revolutionary beginnings. The writer notes how the Women's Movement began with the application of the Marxist critique to gender studies, and that if we look at the roles of women and men in society we can see vast inequalities in their respective access to the means of production, liberty and wealth. Didion notes how that a gender is now presented as a 'class' (as in the common Marxist and Communist understanding of 'working class' and 'upper class' as well as the 'middle class': the bourgeoisie). In the following critique Didion sees how some feminist writers, after creating the 'class' of women, then move on to discover that the environment available to this class - their jobs, livelihoods, social status and even their education is all subject to the whims of the Patriarchy. The writer is suspicious of any easy answers to social problems, and discusses how the feminist re-interpretation of literature or history itself would put a 'spin' or a rhetoric on the past, and fails to accept that great works of Art often point toward shared ambiguities and contradictions; not to the views of a male patriarchy or that of an oppressed majority.

Joan Didion attacks the progress of the Woman's Movement as not becoming truly revolutionary in their dreams. As she agrees that the division of labor (all housework to be completed by the woman, all paid trade work to be performed by the man) is unfair, she sees that there will always be problems in dividing the world and its tasks into 'gender neutrality'. The obsession to detail of how a woman should live still 'within' society seems to Didion one of the true betrayals of woman by the feminist movement.

In the latter half of this essay, Didion asks whether the feminist movement has merely empowered repressed and oppressed women to speak up for their dreams, but also that those dreams are still dreams that anyone might have in a capitalist society. The liberated woman, in Didion's mind, wants to have sexual fulfillment, fun and romance and a fair wage; but does not seek to overturn the very society that she lives in so it is entirely ordered along egalitarian lines: in other words these are still Capitalist dreams and consumerist desires.

Finally, the writer thinks sadly that a great opportunity has been missed by the woman's movement to really inflict a change on the body and psyche of the nation's identity, instead trading their liberty and autonomy for more of the same American Dream.

In this beginning essay we can see the writer's most partisan writing as she considers and critiques the Women's Movement. The role of the writer we have to be aware is of a



woman who 'saw' the birth of the movement, but whom also saw the birth of radical communist groups in America, revolutionary ethics and revisionist propaganda. It is interesting that we can now, in our own position look back at the words of Didion and see how the Women's Movement had progressed and changed over the years to become a much more diverse movement than perhaps it was at the time of Didion's writing. While Didion seem to insightfully pinpoint some of the failings of the feminist rhetoric (its failure to be truly revolutionary), we can criticize her account as not really taking into account the full history of women's suffrage and tackling such a large subject merely through the focus of Seventies feminist activism, and not studying the issue of women's equality dating back to the Seventeen Hundreds, or around the world particularly in India and South America.



Doris Lessing, Georgia O'Keefe

Doris Lessing, Georgia O'Keefe Summary and Analysis

In these next two essays in part 3 'The Women's Movement' of Joan Didion's book "The White Album" we see the writer comparing and contrasting two famed and favoured women figures; each of whom are deemed to have change the cultural landscape for women. In her study of these two figures, their lives and their works the writer Joan Didion finds few similarities but rather telling differences about the role of women and also 'what makes an Artist'.

The first article of the two concerns the life of Doris Lessing, writer, poet and librettist. Doris Lessing was the author of a few seminal works of gender fiction, post-modernist fiction as well as speculative science fiction, and has been awarded the Nobel prize for Literature for her impact on the world of modern women's fiction.

Didion reveals how Doris Lessing has a vast natural talent for writing, and a voice which commands the page and one that strives to impart 'ideas' rather than the inner nuances of character motivation and emotional depth. As an example Didion uses Lessing's book 'Briefing for a Descent into Hell' where the protagonist is an Oxford Don who goes seemingly mad. The Oxford don is taken into a mental hospital, where his ramblings seem far more lucid, poignant and real then that of the doctors and nurses around him. The professor then goes on to suggest that he remembers great mystical things; the Oneness of all things, the Birth of The Universe, and also the fact that he and many others are actually reincarnated. Doris Lessing's story then goes on to imagine the case that superior enlightened intelligences reincarnated themselves onto Earth because they saw how self-destructive humans were, and they planned to use their lives there to educate and change the ways of the deluded humans.

These ideas (whilst being very similar to a number of mystical schools, organizations and cults) are explored for their own sake and as a means to seemingly educate the reader; and this is a fact that apparently Joan Didion finds distasteful.

"To read a great deal of Doris Lessing over a short span of time is to feel the original hound of heaven has commandeered the attic. She holds the minds other guests in ardent contempt." Page 119.

In her final summation of Doris Lessing's works (as of 1971, when Didion write this review), Didion believes that Doris Lessing was a women who was driven to find answers to societies problems. This drive led her to the creation of her 'commandeering' voice, and to the apparent assumption of a number of literary styles; of feminist, post-modernism, and even an early period of classical rhetoric. In considering her whole life, the writer is finally touched by the fact that Doris Lessing has never stopped searching for answers, but is concerned that her search for answers always suggests that there is



'one answer' or a cause upon which all problems can be hanged. This obsession is, for Didion at least, one of the problems of her times and of the Seventies in general.

The next essay (that stands as a companion piece to this one) is the writers reception of the Artist Georgia O'Keeffe. Didion starts this essay by revealing how she took her daughter to the O'Keeffe exhibition where they were both surprised at the impact that the artists works had on them.

Georgia O'Keeffe was, in Didion's eyes, a 'hard' woman. She was apparently resolutely independent, whom at first struggled to make it into the world of male-dominated art and artists. O'Keeffe was opposed almost at every turn by the male artists and critics, who disliked her vibrant colors, her choice of subject (the desert hills), and the fact that she chose to strong, almost aggressive paintings and nothing like the 'plastic' of 'floaty' qualities of Cezanne.

In this essay Joan Didion's writing fairly glows with admiration for the artist O'Keeffe, as someone who always represented herself, not a particular movement or social cause, and in so doing might have done more to further women's liberation than Doris Lessing who was 'overtly' feminist.



In The Islands, In Hollywood

In The Islands, In Hollywood Summary and Analysis

'In the Islands' is the first essay in Part 4 of "The White Album" called Sojourns. This Part continues to explore the American Dream, but as we shall see does it in a more removed way through its effects in different environments that make up the essays and articles of Part Four. The first two can be grouped together in the way that they discuss the 'elite' social circles of America (the jet set that holiday in the Royal Hotel of Honolulu and the film giants of Hollywood). Both of these social groups are seen to be living out the fantasy of the great American Dream, but are doing so apparently oblivious to the darker underbelly of that dream (in Honolulu we have the massive graves being reserved for the Vietnam dead, and in Hollywood the collapsing Industry and the crushed dreams of the young aspirants who try to make a fortune there). Both places can be idealized as 'perfect images' of what the American Dream can offer, and yet both are seen by Didion as somewhat parasitical.

The essay of 'In The Islands' starts with a startling personal statement, that Didion herself is recovering from an emotional breakdown which threatened to tear her family apart, and her family is visiting Honolulu in an attempt to avoid an imminent divorce. This emotional reveal works in a number of ways for the narrative; it serves us to reach deeper into the emotional state of the writer as she is traveling about the island (endearing us to her perspective), but also casts the whole of the 'Honolulu dream' into an unreal, slightly depressing light. As in her own personal holiday she is trying to avoid the problems of her psychology, she sees this tendency in the rich set who travel to Honolulu as they resolutely avoid the fact that the island is becoming a mass graveyard, or the fact that Schofield Barracks, nearby, was the setting for one of the most heartbreaking and harshest critics of wartime America.

Her first analysis is of the Royal Hotel itself, a place which has a carefully fenced off beach and where connections amongst the rich, powerful and the up-and-coming elites have been forged for a few decades;

"Of course great hotels have always been social ideas, flawless mirrors to the particular societies they service." Page 138

Didion finds that the Royal Hawaiian Hotel has not changed much since the thirties, and feels an odd sense of dislocation in the fact that it can seemingly surf the tides of history that are changing around it; as she and her family themselves do not even hear of President Kennedy's assassination until a day later in their closeted holiday.

Another feature of the strangeness of this paradise is the massive cemetery grave site of Puowaina volcano; which is slowly filling up with Vietnam dead. Didion travels there on her holidays to Honolulu to see the changes in society and finds it strange that so many people are electing to be buried there (many not native Hawaiian's). The idea of



Hawaii as a paradise on Earth has become naturally linked with the idea that it can somehow lead to heaven. This idea is brought into sharp contrast as Didion reflects upon Schofield Barracks, the place where the famous book (and subsequent film) of 'From Here To Eternity' was set. The book was the story of re-enlistment of James Jones, the shocking treatment of himself and his friends at Schofield Barracks and the contrast between their military discipline amidst the paradisaical Honolulu. Just as if the event had been airbrushed out of history, the writer can find no direct connections with the writer there at Schofield Barracks.

The next essay however in Part Four, that of 'In Hollywood' is a discussion of that particular American dream, neighborhood, and population. Didion reveals that she is staying in Hollywood whilst she and her husband 'have an interest' in a picture, and she later describes exactly what this means. 'Having an interest' means, in some part having a role to play in the creative process (whether as a writer, editor, director, or continuity manager), and Didion uses this activity to examine the culture of Hollywood.

She discovers that the idea of the independent film is still a lie, even in the seventies. That the major studios and distribution networks are still in charge, as they control a high return for the use of their time and their markets, so much so that most independent pictures have to ally themselves with a bigger financier such as Goldwyn-Meyer, Fox, Universal or Paramount Pictures. Didion bemoans the fact that the business of making a picture is essentially the art of compromise, as every scene, script and acting decision gets edited and reviewed by numerous people involved from the studio, so much so that the resultant film is often an example of the lowest common denominator of the original artistic vision.

What surprises Didion is the fact that the culture of Hollywood itself is not about the creation of pictures. Rather it is about 'the action' - or of having an 'asset' (an idea, a cute actor, knowing a director) and then working those assets into a film and moving onto the next collection of assets. The process is over as soon as the film is released into the public arena, and the action continues with the search for more 'assets'.

Didion finds comparisons here with the activity of gambling, and the blinkered 'quest' for upward mobility that characterizes so much of the elite circles in Western Society. On the whole, the writer seems to be suggesting that even at these pinnacles of the American Dream (the Royal Honolulu Hotel Holiday and the Life in Hollywood) she can see no real satisfaction or resolution for the people involved (including herself).

In Bed

In Bed Summary and Analysis

In the essay entitled 'In Bed' in Part Four, 'Sojourns' the author is playfully teasing her audience with the title in the same breath as she reveals herself at one of her most vulnerable moments.

The essay concerns itself with the suffering of migraines, and the fact that Joan Didion, along with her husband both suffers from this malediction. These attacks of crippling pain then send the author to bed for a number of days, before mysteriously disappearing just as they appear. The use of the title of the story 'In Bed' is a game upon the reader as it reveals that it is a 'Sojourn' (a break away from her routine life) and yet at the same time is an affliction. We can draw some interesting comparisons here with the other 'Sojourns;' the royal Hotel, traveling On the Road and to the Mall: they are all considered 'breaks' away from ones real, working life, but they are all common activities and in fact become the routine for the author and for many other citizens around the world

The subject of the essay; the migraine itself is seen as an enemy at first, a debilitating illness as the author reveals that there are in fact no known cures or even no known causes of the illness. In actual fact, it is regarded almost as an anomaly only present in the work-shy, or as afflicting only the over-workers and the perfectionist. What Joan Didion then reveals is that it is considered a serious medical illness which even perplexes medical professionals, and yet is not recognised by most employers in the workplace.

The migraine is used by Didion here as a metaphor as well as an actual study of working health in America. In the mysterious way that it arrives from nowhere, induces confusion and anxiety, and then breaks into suffering before finally abating (and leaving a euphoric sense of ease) the migraine can be seen as a symbol of the anxieties and the strange, collective confusion of the times that Didion is writing about.



On The Road, On The Mall

On The Road, On The Mall Summary and Analysis

These two essays of 'On the Road' and 'On the Mall' fit together both as examples of two of the most important examples of the collective experience of modern Americans; that of traveling, and going shopping in the Malls (otherwise known as the 'super-shopping' centers).

What follows for Didion are two very different accounts of common American activities, and by studying them a wish to understand the commonalities of the American psyche. The first essay of 'On the Road' is a literary allusion to the great American travel novel, a formula which has been repeated again and again (and the very title of this essay is a homage to Kerouac's seminal work of post-modern traveling, a book of the same name).

The essay itself, paradoxically features more heavily the element of air than it does that of tarmac or road surfaces, as the experiences that Didion recounts are for her Simon Schuster book tour, where she flew with her daughter from city to city promoting her book and talking about her works. The essay has a few unique elements; the study of traveling as a way of life for America, the study of the notion of 'the East' as the home academic and intellectual hubris, and also the much larger historical notion of traveling and destination for herself and the American nation as a whole.

Joan Didion is amused that she is constantly asked throughout her travels 'Where Are We Heading..?' The author is bemused that she should have the answer, and optimistically replies 'home' when she is about to return to her house in California. The idea of traveling as being a part of the American Dream is one which is well-ingrained, but even in this dream (with its two poles of 'the free West' and 'the intellectual East') has a darker side. The author feels a joy at the sensation of traveling and of freedom, but realizes that it creates a consumerist, ready-meal type culture of travelers who are never really invested in their surroundings.

The second essay of a great American pastime; On The Mall, is about these places and how they appeared in America. They were the invention of two architects who wanted to design a 'complete shopping experience' for their visitors, and whom also wrote a handbook for how to manage one, and how to utilize parking spaces, zoning areas, distribution of shops and centers in which areas to best maximize the retail profit. The author reveals that, for a short time she tried to design and make a Mall, which she would have financed from her work with the Vogue magazine and other entrepreneurial endeavors before finally realizing that it would have been too much work. In her own obsession with Malls and in her presentation of them as a place, we see the shopping precinct transformed into that of a modern religious site; where all dreams can be answered. Joan Didion announces that she now believes their sole purpose is for the

sedation of the ego, of lulling anxieties; perhaps another important component to the American Dream.



In Bogota, At The Dam

In Bogota, At The Dam Summary and Analysis

In the final two essays of Part Four; 'Sojourn's of The White Album, we find the writer Joan Didion reminiscing about two journeys, one to Bogota in Colombia and the other to the Hoover Dam. Although both appear to be completely apposite to each other, both essays are really discussing the idea of memory and legacy. Whilst examining these essays we can think about the question that they pose; 'What Will Be Remembered After We Are Gone?'

For Joan Didion, what will be remembered in Bogota is its clash of cultures. She finds the city high up in the Andes a haven for American tourists and playboys, where a rich elite set rub shoulders with undercover CIA officials and tourists and an impoverished indigenous population. She becomes truly an outsider, and finally a member of a group 'the American abroad' a feeling of joint culpability which she has never before experienced, as it curiously offers no feelings of warmth or kinship, but merely a kind of shared guilt-by-association.

A subtext of the Colombian Bogota that Didion visits is the haunting of atrocity, which we can appreciate as readers to the text (knowing as we do the vicious crackdown of governmental forces in that region), but this subtext is never brought to light by the reporter, but merely hangs under the surface of her travel here. Instead, Didion finds Bogota a curious sort of dream for the Americans; a fairytale place where emeralds spill out of the ground and all the lakes are supposed to be brimming with gold. This reality is actually far from the truth, and the writer finds it subtly disturbing that the young boys, dressed in top hat and tails similar to a Victorian European tradition wait upon the affluent Americans. We cannot help but wonder as we finish reading this essay if the shadow of colonialism has ever really, fully gone away?

"It seemed to me that I had never before seen and would perhaps never see again the residuum of European custom so movingly and pointlessly observed." Page 197.

In the next essay in Sojourns Didion travels to visit the Hoover Dam; the monumental structure which siphons water from Lake Mead and generates electricity in so doing. She finds the place majestic and terrifying at the same time, a curious testament to a nation which is capable of so much. Her narrative switches to mention the ninety-six workers who died here, all in the pursuit of 'progress.'

The writer views the workings of the Hoover Dam and is urged to place her hands on the turbine housing by one of the guides, almost as if the dam itself were a religious artifact. This notion of legacy, and the spiritual significance of humanity making its own future continues as Didion discovers a star map etched into marble on the dam, dedicating the time when the Hoover Dam was first built. Didion finds this, at last, a strangely inspirational thought; that the Hoover Dam will continue to exist, pumping

water and generating electricity for many hundreds if not thousands of years as a feature of the landscape long after humanity has finally gone.



Characters

Joan Didion

The author and narrator of "The White Album" emerges as the central character of the entire collection of essays and articles, as they are a collection of her works previously published during the late Sixties and the early Seventies. The alarming events of the decade, alongside the seemingly insignificant, the quirky and the mundane are presented through Didion's eyes in her role as a reporter-commentator as she navigates the years that the 'Love Revolution' started.

As a character, Joan Didion is startlingly honest about aspects of her life; frank about a threatened divorce, about emotional instability, flights of fancy or sudden intimate feelings of belonging as she reports on people and places that exist around her. What emerges through the essay is a picture of a well-educated, intelligent and independent woman who is taking in an Outsider role in order to study the events that she sees happening around her. These events (such as the Charles Manson killings, the distant Vietnam War) are having shattering effects on her society and herself, but only in hidden and unseen ways. Joan Didion becomes, in a sense, a microcosm of the world that she is describing, as she often draws parallels between places and events in the outside world and her own inner life. In one of her most telling examples, she visits the Californian State Water Project which (quite literally) keeps California alive through the pumping of water to the state. This process and action has inferences for both Joan Didion (that she is living in a hostile environment, that she can find no sustenance) and for her home state as well (that California can be refreshed and renewed).

During the course of the essays at various times Didion discusses the instability and the apparent collapse of 'moral authority' in America; almost juxtaposing this with the idea of the American Dream and the pursuit of prestige. For herself we can see similarly that she is prone to sudden fears and anxieties (strong enough for her to have a psychiatric evaluation at the start of the collection). However, we come to realize that in these strange and unsettling times, where the writer interviews many individuals and groups with far different notions of reality than hers she really is exhibiting symptoms of her times.

Joan Didion attempts to straddle the line between objectivity and engagement throughout these essays, with surprising elan and grace. What we can see in her words is a highly independent minded figure (she critiques the Women's Movement and one of the primary Women writers of the day, Doris Lessing) as well as equally critiquing the revolutionary politics of the young and the conservative blindness of Middle America. In this way Didion aligns herself with no one and everyone at the same time. She aligns herself with no one in the sense that no one person or group is beyond reproach (just as all the people and places she discusses here are involved in the American Dream to some extent or another), and in so doing perhaps finds herself talking for the 'silent



majority' of America. Broadly her leanings can be described as Liberal and sympathetic to the Democratic 'Left' but she veers away from any particular political positions.

Linda Kasabian

Linda Kasabian was once one of the girls caught under the spell of Charles Manson during his reign of terror in North America at the end of the Sixties and the early Seventies. Linda Kasabian became one of the key witnesses for the prosecution and was herself a figure who divided opinion across the country and the news world. At first vilified and mistrusted, Linda Kasabian emerged from the media furor as a victim figure, who helped in the prosecution of the murderer, and revealed much of what happened 'inside' the cult.

As a character in the book, Linda Kasabian is actually a friend of the author Joan Didion, or becomes so through their meetings. Linda becomes somewhat a symbol of the strange juxtaposition of the mundane and the strange in the American dream as we see her through the writer's eyes as a troubled, but normal woman. Surrounding her, during the trial are a number of high profile people (Gary Fleishman, the Prosecutor, Roman Polanski the film director and of course the specter of the murderer himself). Amidst these figures whom are all larger than life - taking on the role of American myth (or nightmare), Linda and Joan talk and become friends as Joan tries to understand just how a normal person like Linda could be caught up in these bizarre, seemingly unreal events. These contradictions and the sudden tender humanity of Linda present, for Joan, a unique key to 'what is wrong with the American Dream'.

Jim Morrison

Jim Morrison, lead singer of the influential, controversial and famed group The Doors appears as a passing character in one of the essays of the book by Joan Didion. Although he occupies a small piece of the narrative of *The White Album* entire, his presence as a normal human being and the contrast between 'Jim Morrison the Legend' is large enough that it is worth mentioning here.

Joan Didion, in her time as a reporter for the New York Times goes to write an experience of a Door's recording session just when they were about to make their big record and secure their place in Rock and Roll History. Joan's use of Jim Morrison in the text is almost amusing, as it is as much a study of a legend as it is of a young musician.

During the recording session Jim Morrison is late and seems reluctant to get involved in the business of singing. Before he even arrives the whole band talks about his imminent arrival as if he is a force of nature, or already a legend in his own lifetime. When Jim Morrison does eventually arrive he appears despondent, frankly bored and not entirely a Legend, although he still occupies the 'eye of the storm' of everyone's attentions.

Joan's depiction of the late singer could in fact be telling the reader more about the culture of celebrity than the man himself; perhaps that the personality of Jim or of any



celebrity becomes occluded by the fact of his fame, so much so that 'Jim Morrison' the man appears merely as a leit motif, or a symbol of his times, or a metaphor. This strange contradiction of the real and the symbolic, of individuals and celebrity are fascinating to Joan Didion as they reveal something about the corruption at the heart of the Sixties.

James Pike

James Pike, American, is the title for a piece in Part Two (titled 'The Californian Republic') which focuses on the hubris and the useless death of James Pike, first Episcopalian Bishop of California.

Joan Didion studies the man's life in an attempt to tease out some truths about the Californian State, and that particular brand of heady celebrity and the cult of personality that exists there. James Pike started life as 'a winner' in the eyes of the world, heading East to New York to 'become learned' and there switching his faith from that of the Roman Catholic Church to the Anglican Communion (Episcopal Church), and changing the orders of the religious community so that he could annul his previous marriage. He then returns to the West to take his position as the Bishop of California, and 'completes' the Grace Cathedral - an architectural wonder that had stood for generations as a symbol of the never-ending quest for perfection. Sadly, in his later years he tried to re-enact the experience of Jesus going out into the wilderness of the Mojave desert and never returned, passing away through what we can assume was extreme exposure to the heat.

James Pike himself becomes a symbol for the American Dream entire as Didion remarks that his life perfectly follows the 'progress' of attempting something more, of being upwardly mobile in class and always reaching new heights. The ultimate important contradiction is that the life of James Pike also seems to Joan Didion to be an exercise in hubris, as he did not fully achieve the experience that he wanted.

Doris Lessing

Doris Lessing is a personality featured in "The White Album" in her section on 'The Women's Movement' and we must assume this placement is to indicate Lessing's strong association with feminist thought and that this critique of her life and works also reveals the writer's thoughts about the Women's Movement in generality.

Doris Lessing was a South African writer whose series of works together examined society, reality and the role of women which had so much impact on the literary world that she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in her latter years. Her works covered many 'styles' from the classic determinist story of the early century (where great events are narrated as a means to study History itself), to the feminist story and the post-modern. This change and use of a variety of styles Didion sees as indicative of a search for 'an answer' or a cause that will explain the social problems that Lessing sees around her.



However the writer Joan Didion also criticises Doris Lessing for a lack of characterization and a lack of ambiguity in her writing; seeing in her as she does in the Woman's Movement an adherence to black-and-white thinking that ignores the social confusion and contradictions that abound during the Sixties and Seventies.

Georgia O'Keeffe

Georgia O'Keeffe is another artistic figure who warrants her own essay and critique in Part 3 'The Woman's Movement' for Joan Didion.

Georgia O'Keeffe was a painter (primarily of watercolors) who worked mostly after the turn of the century in the early twenties, at the same time as Picasso and Modigliani and many other 'Great Painters'. However, her work was considered almost constantly below that of the other artists of her time, a view which we can now understand as blatant or at least implied sexism. Georgia O'Keeffe received constant instruction on how 'not to paint' and her own development into abstraction brought with it a playfulness as she rebuked and poured scorn on the accepted Artistic establishment.

Through this study of her character and life, the subtext here is that Joan Didion is holding the figure of O'Keeffe up against that of Doris Lessing and the painter as actually a paragon of 'The Women's Movement' and for women in general. In Georgia O'Keeffe Didion finds a woman who is independent, strong willed and is also very good at what she does, by dint of her own willpower. The key difference that Didion highlights is that Georgia O'Keeffe was not 'fighting' for any cause but was trying to be the best that she could be, and did it despite the world of men around her.

Dallas Beardsley, Actress

Dallas Beardsley is an interviewee that Joan Didion studies during her essay, whose simple and apparently inconsequential figure appears to have a deeper significance of the book of essays and for Joan Didion herself.

Dallas Beardsley is a young amateur actress in Hollywood, whom Didion interviews as a means of understanding that region and the cult of celebrity. Dallas becomes a representative of 'the invisible city' a fictional place where American youngsters come from, whom are all ignored and neglected by the society at large, until they 'make it' into the world of fame and Celebrity.

Dallas Beardsley herself is almost a cautionary figure for Joan Didion, who discovers her to be hard working, honest and entirely naïve of the real underbelly of Hollywood and California. She represents, for Didion, just one of the countless thousands (if not all) of the youth in the Western world who want to become famous and have recognition. The writer almost presents this idea as a pathological state, rather than an expression of future goals.



Objects/Places

Hollywood

Hollywood as a location exists in the "The White Album" in a number of essays; most predominantly in the essay 'On Hollywood' but also in a number of other essays as a place that occupies the American imagination.

Hollywood is presented as a bizarre place, a subculture which has its own conventions, rules and cultural conditions. During her time staying there working on a film script, Didion also takes the opportunity to study the neighborhood town of Hollywood and finds it strange in comparison to most of the rest of 'Middle America.' As a fantastical location, Hollywood also emerges as a place inside the American (and the world's imagination) as a place where the American Dream can most become manifest; where dreams can come true and ones' inner talent can reward oneself with Celebrity. What Didion actually finds is that these neighborhood of the imagination is also run, as with everywhere else in the world, according to in-crowds and elite social circles who regulate, 'edit' and review these dreams.

Grace Episcopal Cathedral, San Francisco

The Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco is a real place that acts as a metaphor in Didion's essay 'James Pike, American' as it forms one of the interesting facts about the man's life who famously 'completed it.'

The Grace Cathedral itself was a monument of the Episcopalian faith that was famously 'never completed' and Didion remembers the fact that she, her mother and her grandmother used to collect pennies to go towards the building effort of the Cathedral. The act of supporting its development becomes a metaphor for the never ending pursuit of perfection in the American psyche, (and also of collective community endeavor). The fact that James Pike announced it finished Joan finds disturbing and somehow missing the point.

California

The State of California forms a central undercurrent through most of the essays of the book of "The White Album", as there is one whole part entitled 'The Californian Republic.' Similar to the way that Hollywood has become a place that occupies the landscape of the imagination, California too is held up by Didion as the epitome of the modern American Dream, and that is the implied reason why this Part is titled as it is with 'Republic'. Inside California (where Didion herself lives) the writer finds contradictions, delusions and human immediacies all together which make it a perfect microcosm of America entire. The very question just why California has become one of



the models of American Society in general perplexes Didion as she continues her research into the American psyche.

The Governor's Mansion, California

The Governor's Mansion, built by the Reagen's during their time holding the Governorship of California (and before they later became First Lady and President of the US through the Eighties), is the primary concern of the essay 'Many Mansions' in which Didion discusses the various residences of the Californian Governors.

The vastly expensive mansion is paradoxically not lived in, as the Governor of the time finds it 'not to his taste' - a fact that Didion finds remarkably telling. The Mansion itself seems to Didion to not be within anyone's taste, and that is the point of this essay.

The Californian State Water Project

The Californian State Water Project occupies the essay entitled 'Holy Water, and is, for Didion almost a religious site. Really a collection of dams, control centers, reservoirs and pumping stations; the State water Project supplies the State of California with the water it needs to fight back the desert. It becomes, for Didion an almost religious process in its ability to restore and rejuvenate.

The Royal Honolulu Hawaiian Hotel

The Royal Hawaiian Hotel on the island of Honolulu is a place where Joan Didion returns to again and again and makes up one of the principle themes of her essay 'On Honolulu.'

Although in some sense a restorative place for Joan herself, even here Joan finds signs of a moral decay as it encapsulates the ethics and the views of a former time (the Thirties say, leading up to the Fifties) when elite circles of businessmen and the landed gentry could spend their holidays without interference from outside society. It is, in part a metaphor of paradise on earth and symbolises one extreme of the American Dream, of guilt and favor and sublime ease.

New York

New York is a city which features sporadically throughout the book of essays as representing the 'East' of America and also the tense and high-minded world of literature, media and high society. During her travels in the essay 'On The Road' New York becomes a principle location and Didion describes how fads in behavior and in affection (lapidary apathy, or the politics of joy) control the elite circles of New York Society, and how in many ways New York still represents the principles of Elitism, Culture, and Tradition in the American dream.



The Getty

The Getty is a private museum gallery in California, which is now famed for its collection of art and architecture, and its associated foundations that promote science and the arts. At the time of its construction by an ex oil-tycoon, the Getty was criticized by critics as being somehow out of place and with a hint of 'above it station.' It featured primarily the works of the Old Masters (Painters and Sculptures) as well as Baroque and Renaissance architecture. Didion sees in the Getty a desire for tradition and history and a celebration of mankind in general, even though its critics feel it to be stifled, and celebrating the boring, the elite and the past.

Schofield Army Barracks, Honolulu

Schofield Army Barracks in Honolulu is a location that Didion visits whilst on her holidays to Hawaii, in an attempt to move closer to one of her favorite authors who wrote a memoir of the army about his time at Schofield. Didion finds that little has changed in Schofield, and reflects that it is now sad that very few people in Schofield seem to remember or even grasp the meaning of the novel 'From Here To Eternity.'



Themes

The American Dream

The American Dream is an underlying theme throughout the collection of essays "The White Album" by Joan Didion. It is returned to obliquely and directly several times as the writer studies the lives of great people (James Pike for example) the lives of the famous (Jim Morrison, Linda Kasabian) and the events of her times (the Vietnam War, the Black Panthers, the Student Uprisings).

The American Dream is a necessarily amorphous concept, encapsulating as it does the values of Liberty, of Celebrity, and of upward social mobility). This pursuit of the better and the new seems to occupy the behaviors of most of the normal people that Joan Didion interviews, from Dallas Beardley the actress to the Jaycee club members and even in a sense the revolutionaries. Didion finds clues and symptoms of the American Dream in places, as in Hollywood and California and finds that the American dream is almost a process as well as a psychological state. The 'process' involves the mechanics of Celebrity (discussed below) and offers the promise that everyone can be famous, everyone can become their dreams in modern America. Didion even criticizes the Women's Movement for adding to the American Dream rather than dismantling it, empowering women to take a greater part in the dream rather than actively seeing it as a nightmare, or at least a dangerous delusion.

The allusions to 'the Dream' are telling; the 'Dream' is a fantastical promise, and similarly it can be contrasted with the fantastical promises of the religious sects and the media industry throughout California. Didion discovers that the American Dream almost stands in direct contest to the ugly, the necessary and the fundamental factors of existence. The fact that California and the dream of 'The Wild West' are harsh realities of desert and struggle seems to undermine the Dream (which ignores these harsher realities). This blinkered ignorance of the facts of existence; of poverty and of inhospitable conditions is exemplified in the account of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel; that ignores the vast numbers of Vietnam dead, has a roped off beach only for its patrons and ignores the army base of Schofield nearby.

Celebrity

The theme of Celebrity features sporadically throughout the book, as a part of the theme of the American Dream. Celebrity seems to become an obsession of some of the characters involved in the essay, primarily the actresses and actors in the region of Hollywood.

Throughout the Sixties and the early Seventies Joan Didion finds herself surrounded either by directly media personalities (from Jim Morrison to Nancy Reagan), or those who wish to become celebrities. The celebrities that Joan Didion studies seem to



occupy a strange place in the narrative, as if they are larger than life, living legends or metaphors for their times, and yet at one and the same time also being very real, human people. This fact reveals something deeper about the entire collection of essays, and the fact that the book is titled 'the White Album.' Joan Didion seems to be suggesting that the American psyche is now occupied by characters rather than individuals, and that normal people want to become 'characters' in the 'story' of America. This adds to the strange, dreamlike sensation of *The White Album*, and further adds to the idea that the Sixties and the Seventies were a period of collective fantasy in the minds of American culture.

Disintegration of Society

Throughout the entirety of "*The White Album*", Joan Didion studies the Sixties and the Seventies in an attempt to answer the question that she is constantly being asked; 'Where Are We Heading As A Nation?' In these essays she studies the elements of mass hysteria, the repercussions of great political and cultural events, and the dreams and ideals of historical figures as well as unknown everyday people. What emerges from this analysis is Didion's preoccupation with a disintegrating society; one which is symbolized by a declining moral authority and a preoccupation with fantasy.

To illustrate this idea, Didion studies conservative groups such as the Jaycee club of America (who seem to be continually reliving the nineteen fifties), the Black Panthers (who seem locked in a revolutionary rhetoric), the Women's Movement (who conversely lack the revolutionary rhetoric), and even religious groups such as the Pentecostal and Episcopalian Churches. In her different sojourns to different parts of the nation Didion finds intensely different narratives being constructed (from revolutionary Marxism, to the pursuit of Wealth, to conservative traditionalism), whilst in between them all is the 'invisible city' of Middle America who's trying to figure out what is happening to their society.

Such symbols of the theme of the Disintegration of Society could be the Governor's Mansion that the Reagan's built, now disused; as a folly of the extremely wealthy and totally out of touch with the poorer parts of the population of California.

On the whole, the collection of *The White Album* tries to address the questions raised by the Sixties and the Seventies, and tries to present the mystery of that turbulent time as when many competing social ideologies (revolution, Marxism, celebrity, conservatism) competed with each other for the occupation of the American Dream.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of Joan Didion, the writer of "The White Album", is a personalized record of her reactions and participations to the alarming events that she saw happening around her in the late Sixties and Seventies, America. Joan Didion is and was a freelance reporter whose thought provoking articles appeared in many of the leading magazines of the day (including Esquire, Life Magazine and The Saturday Evening Post), and her reportage, fiction and non-fiction won her the title of Woman of The Year.

As such, Joan Didion is a reporter first and foremost, and it is this background and sense of impartiality that informs her writing. Her day job gave her unprecedented access to the celebrity circles, criminals, the accused and the social movements of her time; the collection of essays which make up the book of The White Album are her personal accounts of what happened plus a few articles culled from those years.

As a reporter, Joan Didion tries to remain in an observing, witnessing role to the events, places and people that she encounters but finds however, that she cannot. Frequently her narrative swerves into the emotive and the personal, and her opinions and assessments make their way into the story to form themselves articles of contemplation. We get the sense that Joan Didion (as she says herself in the very first Chapter, 'The White Album') was struggling to make sense of the things that were happening around her and the social disintegration that she saw, and herself felt strongly about the causes and actions that were shaping Sixties and Seventies America. What emerges from this conflicted state reads more like a highly informed series of meditative monologues about those times, and how they influenced her as a person and changed the way that she viewed the world and herself.

This conflict between the impartial reporter and the impassioned individual flows throughout the book and becomes one of the interesting hallmarks of her writing. As a literary piece, the figure of Joan Didion takes on an 'Outsider' role within her own works as she seems to occupy a unique position within her own narrative. Didion herself cannot 'belong' fully to any of the social groups that she writes about (even when she makes it clear her sympathies or her personal friendship with key members of any tale), as her reporting acts as a wall that separates herself from her subjects. In a very real way Didion becomes an Outsider in the sense that she is forced to travel all across the country (and the world, in fact) in these essays, so the reader is given the sense of a wandering commentator on American Society from the outside, as a whole.

This being said, Didion is obviously as a writer intelligent, sensible and impassioned. Through all of these essays she makes it clear that her own sympathies are towards the personal, the outcast, the accused and the marginalized. In her non-biased appraisal of accused criminals, politicians, musicians and artists Didion takes on the role of offering



groups who do not normally get a voice her honest appraisal. This leaning is brought out especially in the middle of "The White Album" in Part Three 'Women' where she shows her sympathies to the Women's Movement, as well as sharing her conflicted feelings about Society and what ones 'role' should be.

Tone

The tone of the book reflects the authors perspective, at times personal and emotive, whilst at others clinically correct and impartial. There are two important 'tones' that we can differentiate within "The White Album", and these are: When the writer is talking about herself, her home life and her personal history, and when Didion is referring to celebrities, politicians and events. The latter of these tone's is the more impartial (and we can infer reflects her training as a journalist), whilst the former is the most partial and emotional.

Generally throughout, the writer takes on a tone of detached interest, with a shade of cynicism that is supported by her personal comments about her psychology right at the very start of the book. In such a way Didion discusses the Governor's Mansion in California; encapsulating the fact that she went there as a child because she was friends with a daughter of a previous Governor (and all her own fond feelings towards those memories) whilst seeing the vast hubris of the Mansion's creator and the wry irony that it stood (at the time of writing) as an empty landmark because no other Governor could bring themselves to that level of pride.

This Tone of detached cynicism, or fond irony is offered to most of the essays in the book and reflects the book's themes of Unreality and the human minutiae of life being far more chaotic, tender and at once cruel at the same time. When Didion thinks about the uprising at the San Francisco State University she shows real support for the actions of the students, but finds it somewhat absurd that they have to organize a conference for an anti-press conference, and in this way her insights reveal the hidden ironies that she sees in the behaviors of the people that she is writing about.

Because of this fact, the Tone of the writer Joan Didion never becomes superior or academic, in fact placing herself firmly in partisanship with the imaginary 'every-reader' who may be digesting her essays and articles. Joan Didion speaks as though she is on the side of a thoughtful, caring and fairly Left-Wing society, but who sees the failings and the inaccuracies of any attempt to try and define her times ultimately. Instead the Tone of her writing seeks to offer up questions, complications and paradoxes that are at the heart of being human.

As mentioned previously, the only times when Didion becomes totally 'partial' is when she talks about herself: what she feels like living in Hollywood during the times of the Charlie Manson murders, or her own almost obsessive revelations about Water in the essay 'Holy Water'. At these times Didion discards her cynicism and her detached Outsider status and manages to reveal parts of her psyche which are wounded,



vulnerable and just like every other normal person living through strange and troubling times.

Structure

The structure of the book of "The White Album" is that of four 'parts' - each with a number of essays relevant to that topic contained therein. So for example we have Part 2 'The California Republic' discussing life within California during the Sixties and the Seventies; an essay on the collection of Water and the definition of 'The West' and the 'Golden State' or an essay on the major institutions, the Getty and the Governors Mansion and the recent changes in laws and governance of California in 'Good Citizens' and 'Bureaucrats'. In a similar way Part Three 'Women' contains Didion's personal elegies and musings on Doris Lessing, Georgia O'Keefe but also life in Hollywood as a woman, and what it feels like to be a woman in Sixties America ('In Bed' or 'On The Mall').

These different essays we can see and assume were not written towards their Part, but were each written over a number of years and then collated under the major themes of her works during this period. The four Parts entire create a framework through which to study Sixties America, and the writer herself (as 'California Republic' and 'Women' reflect Didion's own background and preoccupations as much as what is happening to her society).

Inside these different articles and essays the structure varies again to that of a monologue in various parts. She uses paragraph and line breaks to differentiate one series of thoughts from another, and together the different sections form a narrative train of thought that leads to her eventual conclusion. The most obvious example of this is of course the very first and the very last few essays which switch from Joan's thoughts about 'recent' news events to an extract from one of her own psychiatric evaluations, to a remembered conversation and the events that surrounded it at the time, and finally the writer attempting to bringing these strands together at the conclusion of the article of essay.

This melding of monologue, narrative and a post-modern structure style encourages the reader to become involved with the writer herself, as we read about how the story either involves her directly or how it affects her emotionally. This encourages our feeling of involvement in the essays and heightens our interest within her topics, but also serves as an elaboration upon her themes. This use of 'disconnected' structure in most of the essays serves as a physical analogy to the theme of disintegration, atomization and confusion of both the writer's emotional state and the state of American Society in the Sixties and the Seventies. As Didion switches from the intensely personal, the memory and the apprehension to the facts of reportage we can see that the structure is asking us to examine the human and the immediate facts of any of her stories, and not merely to focus on 'history', 'culture' or 'News'.



The whole effect of the compilation of *The White Album* in this way is that of delving into a dream (one which ends, quite symbolically with Part 5's 'On The Morning After The Sixties'). Each essay and article highlights a different part of American society during these years, and yet we are never allowed to see the whole or to put the Sixties and Seventies into their proper context. In the end we wake up, just as Didion herself did and wonder what all of these celebrities, events and sometimes alarming events really meant for our own lives and for society as a whole. In this manner the Structure of 'The White Album' (which is named after the Beatles seminal album which itself came to represent the Sixties 'revolution') is used to highlight the themes of the book and the feelings of its author, Joan Didion.



Quotes

"By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968" Part 1, The White Album, page 15

"'The west Begins,' Bernard DeVoto wrote, 'where the average rainfall drops below twenty inches.'" Part 2, Holy Water, Page 65.

"At a time when all our public conventions remain rooted...when the celebration of natural man's capacity for moving onward and upward has become a kind of official tic, the Getty presents with an illustrated lesson in classical doubt. The Getty advises us that not much changes." Part 2, The Getty, Page 76

"In the social conventions by which we now live there is no category for people like Brother Theobald and his congregation... they are neither the possessors nor the dispossessed." Part 2, Notes Toward A Dreampolitik, Page 98.

"As I drove home through the somnolent back streets of Hollywood I had the distinct sense that everyone I knew had some fever which had not yet infected the invisible city... In the invisible city city girls still got discovered...and later met their true loves... still dreamed of big houses by the ocean and carloads of presents by the Christmas tree, still prayed to be known." Part 2, Notes Towards A Dream Politic, 104.

"These are converts who want not a revolution but a 'romance,' who believe not in the oppression of women but in their own chances for a new life in exactly the mould of their old life." Part 3, The Women's Movement, Page 118.

"Some women fight and others do not. Like so many successful guerrillas in the war between the sexes, Georgia O'Keeffe seems to have been equipped early with an immutable sense of who she was and a fairly clear understanding that she would be required to prove it." Part 3, Georgia O'Keefe, Page 129.

"'You can take Hollywood for granted like I did.' Cecilia Brady tells the reader in The Last Tycoon, 'or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don't understand. It can be understood, too, but only dimly and in flashes.'" Part 4, In Hollywood, Page 153.

"I apprehended for the first time those particular illusions of mobility that power American Business. Time was money. Motion was progress." Part 4, On The Road, Page 176.

"These marginal distinctions to one side, Ala Moana, The Esplanade, and Edgewater Plaza [Names of Malls] are the same place, which is precisely their role not only as equalizers but in the sedation of anxiety. In each of them ones moves for a while in....



suspension not only of light but of judgement...of 'personality'." Part 4, On Malls, Page 186.

"We had nothing in common except the eagles on our passports, but those eagles made us, in some way I did not entirely understand, co-conspirators, two strangers heavy with responsibility for seeing that the eagle should not offend." Part Four, In Bogota, Page 191.

"Only one person I knew at Berkeley later discovered an ideology, dealt himself into history, cut himself loose from both his own dread and his own time." Part 5, On The Morning After The Sixties, Page 208.



Topics for Discussion

In what way does Didion defend or argue her own diagnoses of mental illness in the first chapter of "The White Album"?

Consider Joan Didion style of 'personal reporting.' Is it effective? What do you think are its merits and flaws?

Identify one of the central themes that occupy Joan Didion's essays in the collection of "The White Album".

In what way can Bishop James Pike, through Didion's eyes, be called 'a great American?'

What are Didion's criticisms of the proto-Women's Movement of her times?

Why does Dallas Beardsley, the Actress in Joan Didion's essay 'On Hollywood' appear to almost be a tragic figure for Didion? What does she represent?

Why do you think that Didion entitles the second part of her book 'The Californian Republic?'

What do you find the most interesting, moving or thoughtful essay in Joan Didion's "The White Album"? Write your reflections and reasons on your chosen piece.