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The Education of Joan Didion: Her Uncollected Works and What They Tell Us

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The Education of Joan Didion: The Berkeley and Vogue Years (1953-1965)  
*By Elizabeth Rainey*

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**Abstract**

Joan Didion was an ambivalent participant in a robust women's culture at UC Berkeley as a student in the early 1950s, but she continued to work from within the confines of this feminine world in her time writing for the fashion magazines *Mademoiselle* and *Vogue* after college. Incongruous though it may seem to imagine Didion socializing at a sorority luncheon or writing copy for fashion magazines, these early years make up the education of the writer and persona that Didion is today. She manipulated feminine channels to rise above her sex and break into mainstream, male-dominated writing. This project tracks that progression.

**Acknowledgements:**

This project would not have been possible without my thesis advisor Professor Scott Saul, who helped guide me through each step of my research with enthusiasm and patience. His critical eye often showed me the way when my own thinking had stalled or lost a sense of direction. I am similarly indebted to my advisor Professor Georgina Kleege, who welcomed my ideas with excitement and helped me tease a cohesive narrative out of a large, unwieldy body of sources.

I would also like to thank Professor Elizabeth Abel, who inspired in me a lifelong interest in Virginia Woolf and women writers like her, who fought and continue to fight to actualize their experiences using pen and paper. Jocelyn Rodal has also vigorously supported my studies in the department. She taught my first English course at UC Berkeley, and in the process revealed the study of literature to be both a vital engagement with public discourse and a deeply personal pursuit. I was hooked.

Many thanks to the wonderful individuals I interviewed in my research – the Berkeley women of the '50s, Rosemary Mein, Dorothy Mills and Peggy LaViolette, and also Hugh Richmond, professor emeritus of the UC Berkeley English Department, and his wife Velma.

I am deeply indebted to my friend Alastair Boone, who has been in the trenches with me since day one of this undertaking. It has been a pleasure and a privilege. I look forward to many more projects, and to drinking many more cups of 7/11 coffee at 3 a.m. with you.

And finally, endless thanks to Joan Didion, whose brilliant prose fueled my research and sustained my passion over the course of many months. This marks the beginning of what I hope will be an enduring relationship with her writing and her legacy.

## Introduction

It was a late afternoon in 1953, and Joan Didion was sitting in a fraternity house in Berkeley, reading. Her date to an alumni lunch had run off to a Cal football game, but she stayed behind, curled up with her book on a leather couch. As the minutes ticked by, she listened to a middle-aged man play the song “Blue Room” on the piano over and over again. She would later recall “All that afternoon, he sat at the piano, and all that afternoon he played ‘Blue Room’ and he never got it right.”<sup>1</sup>

Such was the life of the young Didion, who arrived at UC Berkeley in the spring of 1953 as a spring admit and entered an insular world defined by campus traditions, and hemmed in by the limits of sorority and fraternity culture. But something was just slightly “off” for her. “Blue Room” — the song she heard over and over again — is a love ditty from 1926, one revived by Perry Como in 1948. It offers a portrait of domestic tranquility: “We’ll have a blue room / A new room for two room / Where ev’ry day’s a holiday / Because you’re married to me.”<sup>2</sup> But this tune would never sound right to Didion: the lifestyle it promoted was not for her, much as she played the part. On that seemingly average Berkeley afternoon, Didion reflected from the distance of two decades, she felt she learned “something [she] had not known before about bad marriages and wasted time and looking backward.”<sup>3</sup>

This lesson worked its way into Didion’s undergraduate years as she strove for self-definition. The older man Didion observed at the piano played a broken song of perfect union, and the domestic narrative that bolstered it was cracking too as Didion became an adult. Most of Didion’s peers were getting married by the age of 20, but as historian Wini

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Didion, “On the Morning After the Sixties,” from *The White Album* (New York: Farrar, Straus and

<sup>2</sup> “Blue Room,” *AZ Lyrics*, AZ Lyrics, N.d., Web; “Words and Music: Soundtracks,” *IMDb*, IMDb, N.d., Web.

<sup>3</sup> Didion, “On the Morning After the Sixties,” p. 330.

Breines writes of the time, “For young, white, middle class women, the 1950s were a time when liberating possibilities were masked by restrictive norms.”<sup>4</sup>

These norms tended to come in the expectation promoted by popular culture that women be poised mothers with perfect shapes, who dominated a domestic space without making much of a fuss.<sup>5</sup> But this image was not Didion’s reality, just as the courtship song she heard played again and again that sunny afternoon seemed to fit her experience of the fifties only in its wrong notes. She would later reflect:

That such an afternoon would now seem implausible in every detail—the idea of having had a “date” for a football lunch now seems to me so exotic as to be almost czarist—suggests the extent to which the narrative in which many of us grew up no longer applies.<sup>6</sup>

When Joan Didion looked back on the ’50s from the vantage point of the ’70s, she described a huge break between her life then and her life after. Indeed, the world of hyper-domesticity felt as antique as Tsarist Russia for Didion by the time she published her first collection of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, in 1968, in which she cast her piercing gaze on some of the country’s most pressing social issues and most intimate spaces. The Didion that readers now recognize is one who speaks with clarity, vivid detail, commanding use of first person, and skepticism about prevailing political winds. But the seeds of this voice were planted at Berkeley in exactly the contained space of female life in the 1950s. As historian Ruth Rosen writes of the time, “Liberal middle-class families expected that their daughters would attend college. But many girls felt confused about the purpose of their education.”<sup>7</sup> Didion was educated within this world of contradictions. She left the gendered social and academic spheres of Berkeley, and started a career in fashion writing immediately after. These were not

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<sup>4</sup> Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Didion, “On the Morning After the Sixties,” p. 330.

<sup>7</sup> Rosen, p. 40.

experiences Didion left behind as she became a journalist and author of note. Rather, her early years mark a time of germination and are integral to understanding the writer we know today.

The following three chapters chronicle the arc of Didion's life from her time at UC Berkeley through her early years as a journalist at *Mademoiselle* and *Vogue*. The first two chapters trace how Didion navigated the currents of UC Berkeley: she both found herself out of place in a flurry of sorority events and yet right at home meeting due dates for campus publications, in which she often considered the lives of the women who surrounded her. The third chapter examines how her detachment from the women of her generation continued even as she landed her first jobs and assignments through the world of women's magazines, writing for *Vogue* and *Mademoiselle* in New York City. Didion, who consistently felt removed from the world of women, curiously found herself comfortable in the magazine's pages. This double role – as both an insider within female culture and an outsider to its norms – would shape Didion's writing for years to come.



## Chapter One:

### It's a Woman's World: Early years at Berkeley

Joan Didion arrived at UC Berkeley in the spring of 1953, where she joined an influx of students, both female and male, contributing to the massive and rapid growth of the campus.<sup>8</sup> Berkeley's enrollment had more than doubled in the late forties, and was still on the rise. Administrators implemented rapid construction projects to accommodate for this growth – expanding the campus south and into Telegraph Avenue in order to make more room.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Dwinelle Hall, a massive building with a maze-like layout, opened just before Didion began her college career.<sup>10</sup>

The campus appeared bustling and traditional to a young Didion, who had just missed a loyalty oath scandal that led thirty-one faculty members and dozens of employees to their dismissal.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps due to this deliberate silencing of insubordinate voices, Didion remembers most Berkeley students as politically quiet.<sup>12</sup> Two decades after her college years, she reflected:

We were all very personal then, sometimes relentlessly so, and, at that point where we either act or do not act, most of us are still. I suppose I am talking about just that: the ambiguity of belonging to a generation distrustful of political highs, the historical irrelevancy of growing up convinced that the heart of darkness lay not in some error of social organization but in man's own blood.<sup>13</sup>

The civil stillness on campus lent itself remarkably to school spirit and a lively student life. Didion's peers confined their engagement for the most part to the campus, which

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Wollenberg, *Berkeley: A City in History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> "Dwinelle opens this fall" *The Daily Californian*, 16 Sep. 1952, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Wollenberg, p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Barret and Peter S. Van Houten, *Berkeley and its Students: Days of Conflict, Years of Change, 1945-1970* (Berkeley: Berkeley Public Policy Press, 2003), pp. 6-8.

<sup>13</sup> Joan Didion, "On the Morning After the Sixties," p. 330.

was populated by some 11,000 undergraduates.<sup>14</sup> Student organizations were bustling and collegiate fun was serious business; sophomores were intent on hazing the freshmen, and fraternity and sorority life dominated the social scene.<sup>15</sup>



*Didion, middle row, far right, poses for her sophomore yearbook photo with her sorority, Tri Delt (footnote 16).*

Outnumbered two to one by male undergraduates at Berkeley, Didion did what was only natural for a girl from upper class Sacramento with no housing plans to do: when she arrived at Berkeley she rushed a sorority.<sup>16</sup> At the time, the university offered no high-rise dormitories, so the fraternities and sororities offered prime real estate for new students looking for a place to live.<sup>17</sup> Of the twenty-two organizations available to her, she joined Delta

Delta Delta, and soon moved in with the 62 other girls who lived at the house on 2300 Warring Street.<sup>18</sup> She is barely recognizable in her sophomore yearbook photo, her short hair curling to nestle around her ears and a strand of pearls framing her crewneck sweater. She's practically indistinguishable from her newfound sorority sisters, excepting the fact that her smile seems more reserved, her lips closed.

For the many Berkeley women who joined sororities, daily life entailed a flurry of dates and socials and football games — prerequisites to impending domestic life. Similarly,

<sup>14</sup> "Registration begins today with enrollment expected 1000 below last semester," *The Daily Californian*, 10 Feb. 1953, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> "Shiver, shake, little frosh – Sophomores will fix it," *The Daily Californian*, 18 Sep. 1952, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Eloise Phelps, ed. *Blue and Gold, 1953* (Berkeley: Associated Students of the University of California at Berkeley, 1953), pp. 322-323; "Registration begins today with enrollment expected 1000 below last semester," *The Daily Californian*, 10 Feb. 1953, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> W.J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War: The 1960s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Phelps, pp. 322-323.

*The Daily Californian*'s regular "Woman's Page" announced recent engagements and offered tips on dress design.<sup>19,20</sup> Peggy LaViolette, a good friend and classmate of Didion's, remembers spending many weekends at weddings. In those days, she said, everyone was looking for a "steady" — after four dates, it could be guaranteed that most people assumed a couple was dating seriously.<sup>21</sup> "For a great majority of women, some married while they were in college and most married immediately following," La Violette observed.

As young woman of the 50s, Didion engaged in this world of courtship as much as the next girl — for a time. She had a "steady" — a boyfriend named Bob, whom she dated before and after a stint as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* in the summer of 1955.<sup>22</sup> Far from smitten, she considered him "boring."<sup>23</sup>

Didion began to detach from this narrative even as she was living it. She became more involved with her own writing and student publications, including the *Daily Californian* and the literary magazine, *The Occident*, her participation in the sorority waned.<sup>24</sup> By her sophomore year, she moved out of the sorority house and into an apartment at 2520 Ridge Road.<sup>25</sup> In her junior and senior years, she was not among the women photographed for the yearbook's pages featuring the Tri Delts.<sup>26,27</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Brides-to-be will receive marriage tips," *The Daily Californian*, 10 Oct. 1952, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> "Dress designing instruction offered in Home economics." *The Daily Californian*, 13 Feb. 1953.

<sup>21</sup> Peggy LaViolette Powell, personal interview, 9 Dec. 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Joan Didion, letter to Peggy LaViolette, 6 Aug. 1960, Joan Didion Letters, BANC MSS 84/180 c v. 1, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Subsequently cited as JDL. Dates are occasionally incomplete (missing the year, for example) as they are dated as Didion herself dated them.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Carlos Cortes, ed. *Blue and Gold, 1956* (Berkeley: The Associated Students of the University of California at Berkeley, 1956), pp. 47, 121.

<sup>25</sup> Tracy Daugherty, *The Last Love Song: A Biography of Joan Didion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), p. 65.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy Bracker, ed. *Blue and Gold, 1955* (Berkeley: The Associated Students of the University of California at Berkeley, 1955).

<sup>27</sup> Cortes, *passim*.

But despite Didion's hesitance about sorority life and her seemingly deliberate separation from her domestic peers, it was her attention to the world of collegiate women — their styles and desires — that catapulted her writing career at Berkeley. She began working in her very first semester for *The Daily Californian*, where she co-edited a special spring fashion issue alongside Peggy LaViolette.<sup>28</sup> Immersed in a world of impending weddings and social events dominated by courtship and custom, perhaps Didion found fashion writing to be her most immediately available creative outlet — a space where she could observe the feminine world around her from both inside and out. The spring 1953 fashion issue – her first writerly project at Berkeley – is a portrait of the complex female life Didion strove not only to describe, but also to influence.



The twelve-page edition's front page displays a woman's silhouette standing on top of the world.<sup>29</sup> The figure's heels touch delicately as she poses, holding an umbrella lightly in her gloved hands. Hoop earrings adorn her ears and her tiny waist is cinched. Her eyeless face looks straight at the reader from under a large hat. Beneath this image, cursive text declares: "It's a Woman's World." The cover declares ownership of the world and its vast offerings, and yet the female figure standing on top of the globe is not the untethered woman, but rather a fashionable

*The front page of The Daily Californian's 1953 spring fashion issue, edited by Didion and LaViolette (footnote 29).*

<sup>28</sup> Personal interview with Powell.

<sup>29</sup> "It's a Woman's World," *The Daily Californian*, 13 May 1953, p. S-1.

and controlled one. Her posed body suggests a woman's power comes from appearance — the silhouette's face is nothing but a shadow, a blank canvas dressed up by accessories. As it claims female autonomy, the cover also restricts it — the woman's world, the illustration suggests, is a domain of fashion and appearances rather than interiority. In kind, the contents of the issue expand on how to perfect that appearance.

“We had great fun with it,” said La Violette of the issue, which came out May 13, 1953, at the end of Didion's freshman year. “We did some fashion shoots, we did some promotion stuff, we both wrote captions.” Many of the articles within the edition are exactly what one might expect of an early-'50s fashion supplement: they delve into fashion trends and share tips in a conversational, woman-to-woman tone. “Slim figure will be required for this season's styles,” one caption advises.<sup>30</sup> Another observes that “Accessories, separates [help] vary costume.”<sup>31</sup> Oversized ads for Roos Bros feature smiling women in umbrella skirts.

Yet one article, buried at the very end of the supplement, points toward a different version of the “woman's world” on Cal's campus. The unattributed article, titled “Women students hold top posts in ASUC, greater than total enrollment justifies,” chronicles the many women in leadership positions across the campus. Specifically, it mentions in the Associated Students of University of California, the Women's Athletic Association, Mortar Board, the Daily Californian, and the Blue and Gold student yearbook, and even goes so far as to suggest that “The truth of the matter is that women are almost running this school....Whether

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<sup>30</sup> Ann Le Roy, “Slim figure will be required for this season's styles,” *The Daily Californian*, 13 May 1953, p. S-3.

<sup>31</sup> Ann Hall, “Accessories, separates vary costume,” *The Daily Californian*, 13 May 1953, p. S-5.

because they are better suited to it, or because they have more interest, is an unanswerable question.”<sup>32</sup>

As a sub-headline in this story, “More Women Rulers,” suggests, the article provides a notable contrast to the hyper-domestic world that the rest of the fashion issue evokes. It suggests a certain tension in the internal lives of UC Berkeley’s women, who were exercising leadership and initiative on the campus but simultaneously expected to enter an outside world where they would be taking a backseat to their husbands. The fashion issue suggests that despite these successes, the women of UC Berkeley would be concentrating on perfecting their appearances to be more desirable under the male gaze and more suitable for their future husbands.

Still, Didion became one of these “women rulers” herself within the Berkeley publishing scene, again editing a spring fashion issue alongside *LaViolette* in 1954, this time writing stories as well. The 1954 special issue — themed “Campus Fashion is High Fashion” — is littered with posed photos, ads, and fashion advice much like the year prior.<sup>33</sup> An advertisement for “JayVee sun ‘n fun



*The front page of The Daily Californian's 1954 spring fashion issue, edited by Didion and LaViolette (footnote 33).*

<sup>32</sup> “Women students hold top posts in ASUC, greater than total enrollment justifies,” *The Daily Californian*, 13 May 1953, p. S-11.

<sup>33</sup> “Campus Fashion is High Fashion,” *The Daily Californian*, 19 May 1954, p. S-1.

wear!” accompanies sketches of women in sundresses, swimsuits, pajamas and coats. “Tan creates problems,” one article reads forebodingly. In the lower lefthand corner of the seventh page, a small square advertisement announces: “Diamonds: Engagement and Wedding Rings, Liberal Discounts to Students, Faculty, Employees”

Didion authored the lead article, a gloss of the campus’s Women’s Day, which coincided with the release date of the fashion issue, May 19.<sup>34</sup> She writes with a brisk sense of authority and just a hint of irony, opening the piece, “Today is Women’s Day — the one day of the year on the University campus dedicated entirely to women, by women, for women.”<sup>35</sup> She reviews the campus plans for the day ahead, including an orchid sale and fashion show. She writes that “anyone” can attend the Stephens Union for coffee and doughnuts before correcting herself: “Any woman, that is. All men must be accompanied by something female.” The piece is breezy and informative, but the phrase “something female” suggests a hint of subversion beneath Didion’s review of the day’s events. Her chiding humor insinuates that women’s day, with its fashion-focus and flowers and all, may truly be a commodification of women rather than a celebration. The femininity Didion chronicles and the femininity the fashion issue presents are a superficial female world rather than one populated by ideas. A sly sense of irony is also on display in Didion’s second article for the issue, which discusses summer conferences for young writers across the country.<sup>36</sup> “Summer is the time when writers and publishers confer. Apparently under some mystic compulsion, potential Katherine Anne Porters and Henry Luces rise from typewriters all over America at the sound of the first Midwestern locust,” she writes before summarizing some 40 different

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<sup>34</sup> Joan Didion, “Today is Women’s Day! All eyes are on the ladies,” *The Daily Californian*, 19 May 1954, p. S-3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Joan Didion, “Summer conferences lure writers to sessions held throughout U.S.,” *The Daily Californian*, 19 May 1954, p. S-8.

conferences. She concludes by encouraging her readers to apply: “Information on any or all of these special conferences may be obtained by writing the sponsoring college or university.” The article is, in some sense, nothing special — just a straightforward account of opportunities outside of Berkeley. But it stands out among the headlines that surround it — “Summer look for 1954 is sweater look,” “Mules, pancakes; New trends in shoes” — and offers up a hope that the women of Berkeley might apply to continue their professional progress elsewhere.

Though Didion didn’t attend these summer sessions herself, she was intent on furthering her own writing career beyond the small reach of Berkeley’s student publications. She was a “campus correspondent” for the *Sacramento Union*.<sup>37</sup> Aiming for publication in the most prestigious magazines of the time, she sent pieces to *Harper’s Magazine* and *The Atlantic*, and then pinned up her rejection letters in her room at home in Sacramento when they came. She also continued to pursue a path in which she had already found success: fashion writing. In the fall of her sophomore year, she was one of fourteen University of California female students appointed to *Mademoiselle* magazine’s college board. In the position, she kept the magazine updated on campus happenings and served as an ambassador of sorts for the fashion publication.<sup>38</sup> In her junior year, she applied for one of twenty summer guest editorship spots with the magazine.<sup>39</sup> The application was poised as a competition: girls from around the country submitted writing assignments to the magazine in the hopes of scoring a position working with the magazine’s editors for a month to produce an August college issue.<sup>40</sup> Didion applied to help oversee *Mademoiselle*’s fiction section. Her dear

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<sup>37</sup> Ellen Adams, “Meet Mille’s Winning Team! College Guest Editors for ’55,” *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, pp. 248-249

<sup>38</sup> “Mademoiselle has fourteen U.C. girls serving on board,” *The Daily Californian*, 10 Feb. 1954, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Personal interview with Powell.

<sup>40</sup> Daugherty, p. 66.



friend Peggy La Violette also applied, but for a marketing position. At the end of a lengthy application process, both girls were awarded positions — the first time in the contest’s history that two women from the same college were chosen.<sup>41</sup> In May of 1955, Didion and La Violette caught the same flight to New York City, with stops in Dallas and Washington, D.C. along the way.<sup>42</sup> Didion was terrified of flying — she shivered in her seat before they took off for the long journey east.<sup>43</sup>

After the flight, she caught a bus into the city. Her new dress, purchased in Sacramento, suddenly seemed drab in contrast with the landscape – even the least glamorous bits of New York.<sup>44</sup> “That first night I opened my window on the bus into town and watched for the skyline, but all I could see were the wastes of Queens and the big signs that said MIDTOWN TUNNEL THIS LANE,” she later wrote.<sup>45</sup> Summer rain made her feel even farther from the dry California summers she was accustomed to. Her first three days in the city, she fought back a fever from an overly air-conditioned hotel room, calling her boyfriend Bob periodically.<sup>46</sup>

She eventually moved into the Barbizon Hotel for Women on the Upper East Side, alongside eighteen co-editors who came from schools across the country, from the University of Arizona to the University of Chicago and Mount Holyoke College.<sup>47</sup> They had a daunting task ahead of them: producing *Mademoiselle*’s August issue. The 20 interns followed a grand tradition in this undertaking, and one that helped groom young celebrities in the world of

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<sup>41</sup> Personal interview with Powell.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Joan Didion, “Goodbye To All That,” from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), p. 226.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 227.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.; Adams, pp. 248-249.

publishing – Sylvia Plath served as a guest editor in 1953, just two years before Didion joined the ranks. Connie Kirk, Plath’s biographer, wrote of the program:

In four short weeks, the women had much work to do on a steep learning curve... The professional editors seemed intent on making sure the young women felt the responsibility of the task; they mentored them, but there is little sign that they were prepared to cover for them if any of the college students failed in her duties. The pressure the young women felt, many of them visiting the large city of New York for the first time, was enormous.<sup>48</sup>

Didion was faced with not only professional pressures, but the burden of financial independence for the first time – a challenge she took on alone. She would later write, “I had to charge food at Bloomingdale’s gourmet shop in order to eat, a fact which went unmentioned in the letters I wrote to California. I never told my father that I needed money because then he would have sent it, and I would never know if I could do it by myself.”<sup>49</sup> She made ends meet on a meager salary, all the while balancing an ever-growing to-do list as dictated by *Mademoiselle*.

With this pressure came great opportunity. This working world was a far cry from the sorority life that so often encouraged domesticity — the guest editors were instead introduced to the glitz of what a career could offer. Jane Truslow, the “Guest Editor-in-Chief,” wrote in the magazine,

“Sesame,” said the hero in Arabian Nights’ Entertainments and a door opened for him upon a treasure that was incredibly dazzling. The magic words for twenty very excited Guest Eds. were less exotic but just as effective: ‘Sixth floor please...the MLLE offices!’ As the elevator door slid open on that most anticipated of days, our first for four fantastic weeks.<sup>50</sup>

Fantastic, and packed to the brim — Didion and her cohorts spent their days in a flurry of activity. They toured the *New York Times* offices, met with designers in the Empire

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<sup>48</sup> Connie Ann Kirk, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), p. 46.

<sup>49</sup> Joan Didion, “Goodbye To All That,” p. 229.

<sup>50</sup> Jane Truslow, “Memo From the Guest Editor,” *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, pp. 238-240.

State Building, and ate lunch at Saks Fifth Avenue.<sup>51</sup> Didion was always running late for the day's activities, rushing out of her dorm at the Barbizon each morning with her hair wet from the shower.<sup>52</sup> La Violette, whose dorm room neighbored Didion's, called the women they worked with a "traveling focus group" — always on call to speak to collegiate styles, preferences, thoughts and culture.<sup>53</sup> While they served as advisors to ad clients and pupils to *Mademoiselle* editors, the girls were primed themselves for their future careers. The magazine offered training and counseling so the guest editors could find work once the summer was over — or, as Truslow wrote, "so our coaches wouldn't turn back into pumpkins at the stroke of midnight."<sup>54</sup> All the while, the women were expected to be polished and professional. As Elizabeth Winder writes:

The *Mademoiselle* girl was cultivated, career-minded, and just worldly enough. She was still fresh — she could enjoy an Arthur Miller play and a Yale football game in the same weekend. She shopped, danced, volunteered, and still made the honor roll. She was (in *Mademoiselle*'s own words) 'perfectly turned out for college, career or cocktails.' She probably planned on getting married a little later than her peers — no high school sweethearts for her.<sup>55</sup>

The *Mademoiselle* interns walked a fine line between femininity and professionalism — expected to be both serious and attractive, well-versed in the exact lifestyle that their participation in the magazine's inner workings freed them from. As Didion and her peers balanced busy schedules, meet-and-greets, and countless hours of work, they also balanced these often clashing identities.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

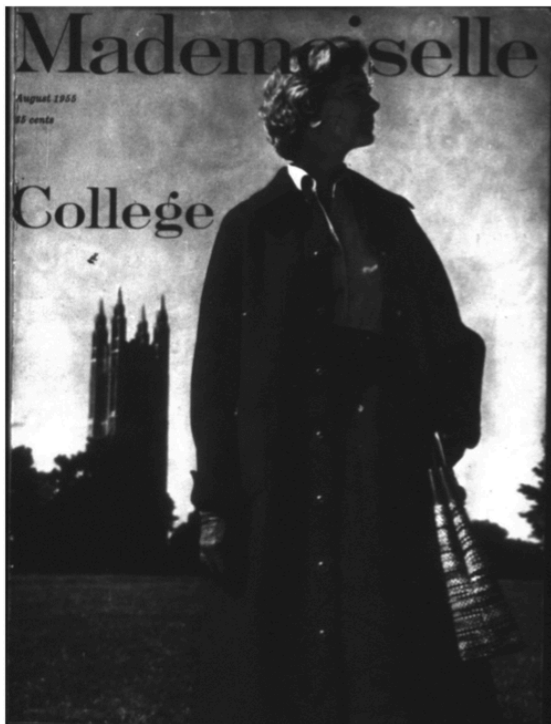
<sup>52</sup> Personal interview with Powell.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Truslow.

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Winder, *Pain Parties Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), p.8.

The final product of this frenzy was a nearly 400-page chronicle of style and culture.<sup>56</sup> The 1955 August *Mademoiselle* features page after page of ads reminiscent of Didion's Daily Cal issues: a Chevrolet ad with a page-length photo of a co-ed, screaming "You're Going to a Football Game," and smaller solicitations boasting cures to "heavy legs" and being "flat-chested."<sup>57</sup> Interspersed between the ads are the fruits of the guest editors' labor — a list of fourteen collegiate styles, a "Fashion IQ" quiz, reviews of current sweater and hairstyles.<sup>58</sup>



*Mademoiselle's college issue, August 1955 (footnote 56).*

Some of the content offers a hint of what a college woman's experience might look like outside of her choice in sweater style. An article featuring student opinions on Chinese-U.S. relations is wedged between an extensive feature on current fashion trends, including jumpers, blazers, and "man-tailored shirts."<sup>59</sup> An essay titled "College is not a tender world" offers its readers advice about how to navigate university education. "If you are bitterly disappointed in

some courses, you will find the way open for you to rise up and fight for illumination along paths that truly invite you," wrote a fellow guest editor, Esther Dunn.<sup>60</sup> Dunn suggested that a rich academic life awaited those women willing to "rise up and fight for illumination," and suggested that the paths for women her age were

<sup>56</sup> *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955.

<sup>57</sup> "You're Going to a Football Game," *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, p. 273; "What's your fashion IQ?" *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, p. 185; "Heavy Legs," *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, p. 232; "Don't be flat-chested," *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, p. 233.

<sup>58</sup> Peggy La Violette, "Counter Spy," *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, pp. 228-233; "What's your fashion IQ?" *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, p. 250.

<sup>59</sup> "You're Going to a Football Game," p. 273.

<sup>60</sup> Esther Dunn, "College is not a tender world," *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, p. 260.

many, should they choose to look for them. Pieces like Dunn's suggested that the guest editors could use fashion writing to leverage themselves into discussions of larger intellectual and political issues, but it should be noted that they were counterbalanced by pieces such as "It ought to be taught," a short pitch urging colleges to offer courses for women on personal appearance.<sup>61</sup> "It seems purely practical to study, along with political science and principles of economics, that lively lighter science – personal appearance," the author Bernice Peck, a college woman herself, suggested un-ironically. "Some sweet day, special departments in good appearance will be general – when all colleges recognize that these are not frivol and fluff but a soundly sensible way to help graduates introduce their gifts of higher learning to a competitive postcollege world."<sup>62</sup> While Peck's impassioned plea for antiquated ideals seems to run counter to the more serious work of some of her peers, it also gives a sense of the time in which she and Didion were attempting to make it in publishing. She insists that a class on hairstyles and skincare will help females gain a place in the work place. Indeed, she argues, a neat appearance is actually necessary for female success. Peck seems antifeminist at best, but in another light, her argument is a practical solution to help the women of her day and age. In this way, Peck's piece gives a sense of the restraints the twenty guest editors were up against as they entered the working world, and why society writing may have seemed a safe and suitable start to that end.

In her role as the guest fiction editor, Didion was allowed the opportunity to publish even more collegiate women in the pages of *Mademoiselle* – those who won the magazine's fiction and art contest.<sup>63</sup> Didion helped select two stories for publication: "Car'line," a story by a Bryn Mawr student about three siblings taking a bottle of soda pop to their grandmother

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<sup>61</sup> Bernice Peck, "It ought to be taught," *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, p. 276.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Joan Didion, "Contest winners," *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, p. 287.

on a hot day, and “My sister’s marriage,” about a controlling father and his two daughters, one of whom leaves the family to marry.<sup>64</sup> The former is in third person and the latter is in first, but both feature unabashed female characters who drive the narratives forward. Sarah Ann, the narrator of “My sister’s marriage,” bemoans the stupidity of marrying quickly, declaring, “The magazines are full of stories about people meeting in the moonlight and marrying the next morning, but if you read those stories you know that they are not the sort of people you would want to be like.”<sup>65</sup> Placed within a fashion magazine itself, the story becomes a narrative of resistance. Its physical place among fashion ads profiting from traditions of mass marriage and packaged romance for women creates an alternate narrative for readers: a path defying the narrative that readers were trained to expect. Didion herself didn’t write the short story, but her role in its selection may indicate a desire for the issue’s fiction to paint an alternate story to the content surrounding it. The art that Didion selected to



The art accompanying “Car’line” is distinctly unlike the poised figures in the ads of *Mademoiselle* (footnote 64).

accompany each story bolsters this counter narrative.

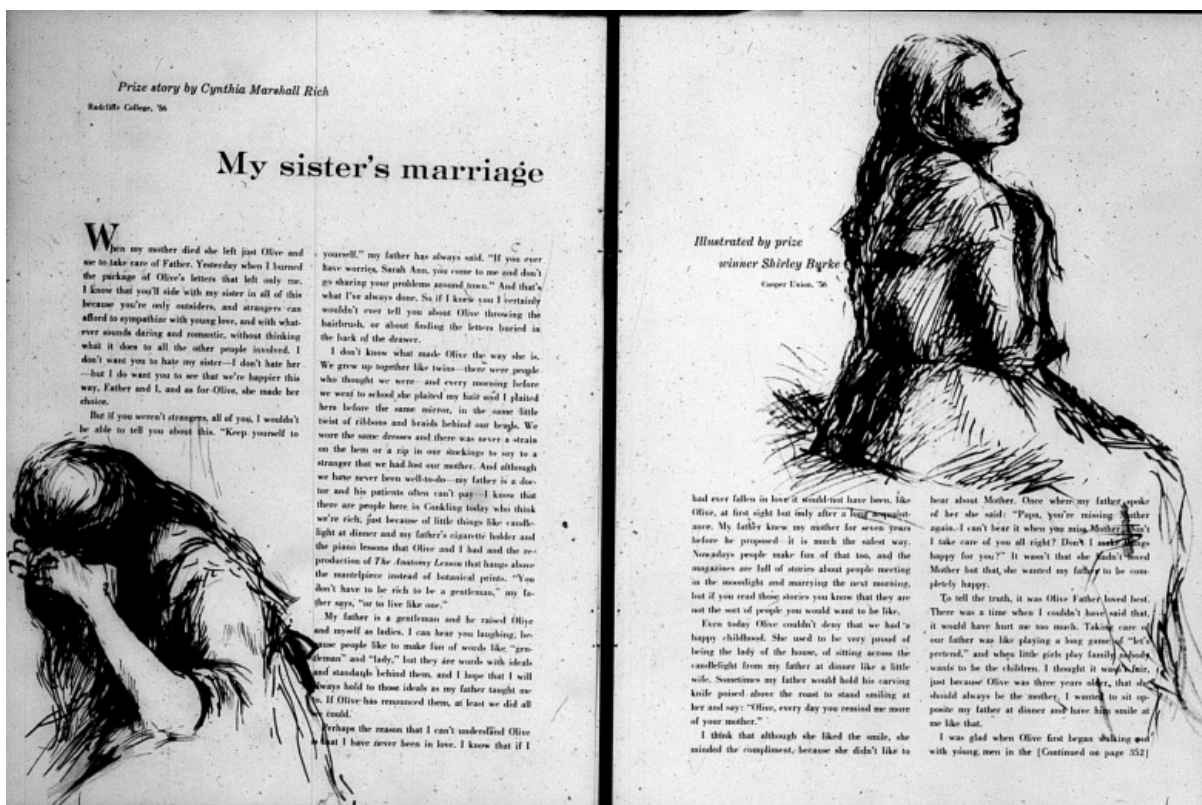
As opposed to the tall, slim models of the advertisements, the female figures alongside the story “Car’line” are messily sketched, their

<sup>64</sup> D. MacNab Brown, “Car’line,” *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, p. 288-289; Cynthia Rich, “My sister’s marriage,” *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, pp. 290-291.

<sup>65</sup> Rich, p. 291.

forms left unfinished and their faces black. Wispy, distinctly unfashionable dresses hang off of their taut bodies as they stare at a younger male figure, seated on the floor.

“My sister’s marriage” features two female figures in its illustration as well: one sitting erect and looking into the distance morosely, the other crumpled on the floor, face in the shadows. They are juxtaposed on a spread of two pages – the shadowy figure huddles in the lower lefthand corner of the page, while the first girl poses in the upper right. The two figures contain the text between them, suggesting that it is turbulent female energy that holds the story intact.



“My sister’s marriage” is contained by two dark female figures, whose forms bleed into the text (footnote 64).

The stories offer insight into the creative aesthetic that may have been attractive to Didion at the time — female characters and narratives that did not fit the mold of the tidy images of dolled up women in the pages of *Mademoiselle*. Her choice in authors also indicates an interest in the writing of women who were not typical of her generation. “My

sister's marriage" was written by Cynthia Rich, the daughter of a Hollywood radical who would become a lifelong advocate for women's and LGBT rights.<sup>66</sup> Her story, handpicked by Didion, seems to be one of her first steps down a path to activism. Didion showcased women who, like herself, did not fit the typical female '50s narrative.

Each guest editor was paired with a famous person to interview and profile for the magazine. Didion interviewed the writer Jean Stafford, a controlled and emotionally potent author who, like Didion, had a contentious relationship with her own identity as a female writer. Ann Hulbert, Stafford's biographer, writes of Stafford, "Though she resisted conceiving of herself as a 'woman writer' and made little effort to cement ties with other women writers or with anything that might be described as a feminine literary tradition (and though she was acerbic about the feminist movement late in her life), Stafford was intimately conscious of the pressures that male influence and expectation exerted on her."<sup>67</sup> Despite Stafford's reluctance to take on the post of female champion, many of her central characters are women, "all of them precariously poised, hungry for hope and a sense of belonging, and almost always disappointed in both."<sup>68</sup> She embodied this role in her own life as well – recognizing the full burden of womanhood as too much for her to balance. She once wrote in a letter to her sister, "I've now decided...that writers shouldn't be married and certainly woman writers shouldn't be unless they are married to rich responsible husbands who fill their houses with servants."<sup>69</sup>

This conflicted relationship with female identity may have been part of the reason Didion chose to interview Stafford, although, true to character, both women kept their

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<sup>66</sup> "Cynthia Rich and Barbara Macdonald Papers, 1893-2004: A Finding Aid," *Oasis*, Harvard University Library, May 2005, Web.

<sup>67</sup> Ann Hulbert, *The Interior Castle*, (New York: Farrar, Random House, 1992), p. xiii.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p. xiv.

<sup>69</sup> William Pritchard, "Writers Shouldn't Be Married," *The New York Times*, 21 June 1992, Web.



discussion strictly about writing during their short meeting. Stafford professed her affinity for the short story over the novel and offered the young writer some advice on rejection.<sup>70</sup> “It’s such an exposure and you’re always convinced that the thing is terrible,” Stafford told Didion. “Only the thrill of knowing you’re writing as well as you possibly can makes it worthwhile.”

This advice was well timed for Didion, who continued her own fiction writing during her stint at the magazine. She learned she had won two University of California short story contests while she was working for the magazine.<sup>71</sup> These awards may have been for the three short stories she wrote for Professor Mark Schorer’s short fiction class, which she took in the fall of her junior year.<sup>72</sup> Jane Truslow would later recall “Joan’s expression” when she won both awards as one of the defining moments of their four weeks in New York. Her bio for *Mademoiselle* read: “Joan Didion (Guest Fiction Ed.) is interested in [a] little theatre, ‘almost any book published’ and ‘publishing a book of my own.’”<sup>73</sup> This drive to fully realize her dreams complicated her own idea of her future self. Didion journeyed back to Berkeley with high aspirations and a newly invigorated worldview – but also a still more antagonistic relationship to her old life and the 1950s expectations that surrounded it.

Didion grappled with these two potential lifestyles as she journeyed between them: her time at *Mademoiselle* finished, she caught a cross-country train from New York City to California. The first stop on this grand tour was Boston – a town she hated both because it marked her departure from New York City and because it was “so quiet and dull and

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<sup>70</sup> “We hitch our wagons,” *Mademoiselle*, Aug. 1955, p. 305.

<sup>71</sup> Truslow, p. 240.

<sup>72</sup> Joan Didion, *Telling Stories*, (Berkeley: The Friends of the Bancroft Library, 1978), p.3.

<sup>73</sup> Adams, p. 249.

academic that I could SCREAM.”<sup>74</sup> She then went to Quebec, meeting an endless cast of characters along the way, including a Dartmouth alumni, a man with a thick French-Canadian accent and a Spanish teacher. It was hard to get even a moment of peace. She wrote to La Violette, “I didn’t want to leave New York, but I certainly want to get home now.”<sup>75</sup>

Yet although the trip grew to be increasingly tiresome, she was hardly looking forward to rejoining her old life in California. In Chicago, she received a note from her boyfriend Bob. She wrote to Peggy LaViolette:

Most peculiar letter, full of a kind of unstated PATHOS, which makes me feel vaguely guilty all over again... [B]y Sunday I’ll be crawling in guilt for only-God-knows-what, all ready for the Big Reunion Scene. It makes me furious. I keep telling myself that I’m not GUILTY OF ANYTHING, but the old apprehension keeps creeping on the scene as I get back within a 2000-mile radius of home. Christ!<sup>76</sup>

Her letters to LaViolette from her seemingly endless train trip are filled with anxious rambling and a hesitant resistance to the social pressures that pushed her towards Bob. Didion’s melodramatic capitalization – “GUILTY OF ANYTHING” – reveals a humorous but sincere attempt to relieve herself of a responsibility to a man and a lifestyle that she simply couldn’t abide by for herself.

Didion wanted to be back in New York, away from Bob, Sacramento, and the burden of obligation she felt toward both of them. “Sacramento is killing me. I’ve never been in a place where everything moved so slowly and so aimlessly,” she wrote to La Violette soon after arriving home. “Everyone seems to be frozen in exactly the same spot I left them in, six

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<sup>74</sup> Joan Didion Letter to Peggy LaViolette, N.d., JDL, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> Joan Didion, Letter to Peggy LaViolette, Jul. 5, JDL, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Joan Didion, Letter to Peggy LaViolette, N.d., JDL, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, p. 1.

weeks ago. Talk about static.”<sup>77</sup> In this static world, she worried her future would be put permanently on hold. Things with Bob only made this anxiety worse – the more she pushed him away, the tighter he held on to the idea of their future together.<sup>78</sup>

In August, just before Didion was set to return to Berkeley for her final year, Bob’s uncle in Bakersfield died. His aunt asked him to take over the family’s Lincoln-Mercury agency, and Bob desperately hoped that Joan would join him. Her fears of a domestic future, far from the New York City life she had left behind and even farther from her plans to be a successful writer, were suddenly right in front of her. She wrote to La Violette, “In the farthest stretches of my imagination, I can’t conceive of anything worse than quitting school to go to Kern County with Bob to sell Lincolns.”<sup>79</sup>

While her mother advised her not to count Bob or Bakersfield out, she began planning her great escape. Longing for the freedom she had experienced in her summer with *Mademoiselle*, Didion found a job opportunity at *Vogue* that would return her to New York City – far from Bob, far from everything. The *Vogue* Prix de Paris competition started in the August before her senior year, with its first assignment released in the August 1 issue of the magazine. She got to work on the first part of the somewhat elaborate application for the prize – “2 fashion things, one profile of yourself, and one editorial-type thing” – and headed back to Berkeley.<sup>80</sup> Everything was weighing on this final year: a chance to leave California, to build off of her education and return to the fashion world, and to leave Bob behind. It weighed heavily on her as she started the fall semester. She lamented to Peggy, “Bob still

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<sup>77</sup> Joan Didion, Letter to Peggy LaViolette, July, 1955, JDL, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Joan Didion, Letter to Peggy LaViolette, Aug 9, JDL, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, pp. 2-3.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

doesn't believe me when I say that I'm leaving Sacramento next June. hell hell hell hell hell. ”<sup>81</sup>

Didion wasn't simply up against romantic troubles – she was facing a working world that didn't welcome female writers. In 1956, *Mademoiselle* published an article titled “What's Wrong With Ambition?” that noted “the influx of young single women settling in New York City – a number that had been on the rise since 1949.”<sup>82</sup> The article suggests that *Mademoiselle* was not simply promoting conventional women's roles in its pages; instead, in moments (some of them actualized by Didion herself) the magazine was using its platform to push a feminist agenda. But the responses were filled with vitriol, according to Elizabeth Winder's book on Sylvia Plath's time spent in *Mademoiselle*'s guest editor program. One reader replied “I could shoot the first woman who went to work in a man's job” and another asserted, “I'd be content to liquidate this army of competitors who have forgotten the true functions, duties, and gracious living pleasures of the mature woman – creating for others not for herself.”<sup>83</sup> Public and private pressures both told Didion to marry Bob, move to Sacramento, and leave her lofty New York plans behind. She began her lengthy application to *Vogue* anyway.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid,

<sup>82</sup> Winder, p. 169.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 169.

## Chapter Two: Admiring the professional: Senior year in the English Department

After her crash course in New York publishing over the summer, Didion returned to Berkeley and immersed herself in her coursework for the English major. Here the evidence from Didion's time in Berkeley is somewhat in tension with her own recollections of the time. She has often suggested, in retrospect, that she was a poor student. She once wrote,

I had not been elected to Phi Beta Kappa. This failure could scarcely have been more predictable or less ambiguous (I simply did not have the grades), but I was unnerved by it; I had somehow thought myself kind of an academic Raskolnikov, curiously exempt from the cause-effect relationships which hampered others. Although even the humorless nineteen-year-old that I was must have recognized that the situation lacked real tragic stature, the day that I did not make Phi Beta Kappa nonetheless marked the end of something, and innocence may well be the word for it.<sup>84</sup>

Had Didion truly been a subpar student, she would still have navigated Berkeley just fine. Alongside a regular stream of weddings, wedding announcements, and fraternity pinnings — a ritual Rosemary Mein, class of 1955, called getting “engaged to be engaged” — was a restricted



*Senior Joan Didion, top left, is featured in the 1956 Blue and Gold yearbook among her classmates (footnote 24).*

academic life for women that did not require them to be outstanding.<sup>85</sup> “In those days, if you were a girl, you became a teacher or a nurse or you did something like that,” said Dorothy Mills, class of 1955.<sup>86</sup> When Rosemary Mein went to a campus representative for advice as

<sup>84</sup> Joan Didion, “On Self Respect,” from *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 329-331.

<sup>85</sup> Rosemary Mein, personal interview, 27 Jan. 2016.

<sup>86</sup> Dorothy Mills, personal interview, 18 Jan. 2016.

she neared graduation, she was told she should probably just focus on finding a husband and getting married instead.

But Didion was not the academic failure she would later declare herself to be. She was a rising star in the English department. By her second time editing the Daily Cal fashion issue with Peggy La Violette, she was receiving so many accolades and scholarships from the English Department that La Violette joked to her friend that she would have to start investing her money in AT&T stock.<sup>87</sup> As she advanced as a young fashion writer, she also sharpened her skills as a critic and serious student of literature.

Didion joined an English department in the midst of great change. On a demographic level, its makeup was traditional: the entire English faculty was male, except for Professor Josephine Miles, a poet and the first female to be tenured in the department.<sup>88,89</sup> But its focus was shifting, as younger professors clashed with the old guard about teaching methods and literary criticism. Professor Mark Schorer, a mentor and role model for Didion, was a leader in advocating for New Criticism — a method that put a premium on the close analysis of the mechanics of a literary text and downplayed the need to recover its historical context. Hugh Richmond, who joined the department's faculty in 1957 just after Didion graduated, recalls faculty meetings devolving into shouting matches, roiled by intense debate about the future of Berkeley's English program. "It was very confrontational," he said. "Rather older people were very embittered by this idea that context was not significant... The whole design of the major shifted towards close reading from that first year. So it was already latent while [Didion] was there. This was the climax of what had been building."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Powell.

<sup>88</sup> Hugh Richmond, personal interview, 30 Nov. 2015.

<sup>89</sup> "Josephine Miles, English: Berkeley," (Calisphere, University of California).

<sup>90</sup> Richmond.

According to literary historian K.M. Newton, the technique of New Criticism “advocated ‘intrinsic’ criticism – an impersonal concern for the literary work as an independent object – and opposed ‘extrinsic’ critical approaches, which concerned themselves with such matters as author intention, historical, moral or political considerations, and audience response.”<sup>91</sup>

She gained this attention to the text in part from Schorer, a campus celebrity and East Coast-schooled intellectual whose talks would pack lecture halls with eager students.<sup>92</sup> Despite his campus popularity, Schorer cared deeply about his individual students, and struck up a mentoring relationship with Didion, recognizing her talent.<sup>93</sup> Didion has said Schorer did not sit around fixing her sentences and adjusting her paragraphs. Instead, she said, “He gave me a sense of what writing was about, what it was for.”<sup>94</sup> Schorer’s beliefs on what makes for good writing were intimately tied to New Criticism ideals. As he wrote in his essay “The Techniques of Discovery”:

Modern criticism, through its exacting scrutiny of literary texts, has demonstrated with finality that in art beauty and truth are indivisible and one... Modern criticism has shown us that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; and that it is only when we speak of the achieved content, the form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics.<sup>95</sup>

Didion was exposed to Schorer’s technique in a short story writer’s workshop in the fall of her junior year.<sup>96</sup> The class met each Monday, Wednesday and Friday in Dwinelle Hall at noon, and by the end of a semester’s worth of workshops, each of Schorer’s dozen or so students were expected to have written five short stories. Didion would later describe the

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<sup>91</sup> K.M. Newton, ed. *Twentieth Century Literary Theory*, (London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1988).

<sup>92</sup> Sandra Littlewood, “Mark Schorer tells of role of novelist today,” *The Daily Californian*. 17 Mar. 1954, p.1.

<sup>93</sup> Personal interview with Richmond.

<sup>94</sup> Linda Kuehl, “Joan Didion, The Art of Fiction No. 71,” *The Paris Review* 20, no. 74 (Fall-Winter 1978).

<sup>95</sup> Mark Schorer, “Techniques of Discovery,” *Forms of Modern Fiction* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1948), pp. 9-29.

<sup>96</sup> Joan Didion, *Telling Stories*, p. 3.

class: “English 106A was widely regarded in the fall of 1954 as a kind of sacramental experience, an initiation into the grave world of real writers.”<sup>97</sup> She was the youngest in the class, and surrounded by such wayward characters as a forty-year-old “Trotskyist” and a “young woman who lived, with a barefoot man and a large white dog, in an attic lit only by candles.”<sup>98</sup> Intimidated by her classmates’ greater fund of experience, she never spoke a word in class. By the end of the semester, she had only completed three stories. Despite this, Schorer awarded her a “B” in the class – a miracle (and a significantly high grade in an era before grade inflation) that Didion ascribed to the fact that her mentor “divined intuitively that my failing performance was a function of adolescent paralysis, of a yearning to be good and a fright that I never would be, of terror that any sentence would expose me as *not good enough*.”<sup>99</sup>

As she continued her education, Didion felt herself in limbo – she was aware of her budding talent but remained deeply insecure about it too. Didion took a course with Schorer again in the spring of 1955 — not a workshop but a literature course — and again failed to complete the class. She felt so guilty about not finishing a D.H. Lawrence paper she was supposed to write that, she confessed to LaViolette, she felt she’d “heave” if she thought about it.<sup>100</sup>

She had planned to take another course with Schorer in her senior year, but the English department cut her off: she had apparently maxed out her units within the major and so could only finish up a Chaucer course in which she was enrolled. She had to forget plans to study Joseph Conrad and the short story, and instead sign up for courses on anthropology

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Joan Didion, Letter to Peggy LaViolette, Aug 9, JDL, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



and psychology.<sup>101</sup> Her social psych class had “the most boring lecturer I have never heard” and she declared all her courses “terrible.” In another struggle with the department, she was late to take her finals from the year prior. This included a course on Henry James, in which she was the pupil of another Berkeley eminence — Henry Nash Smith, a pioneer of American Studies whose persona was far subtler than Schorer’s. According to his colleague Richard Bridgman, “In his lecture courses, [Smith] invariably developed his ideas and the evidence for them in a step-by-step sequence that gained the respect but not the enthusiasm of his undergraduate students. He was not a performer. Listening to him lay out an argument afforded pleasures comparable to those derived from following a strong, solid chess game.”<sup>102</sup>

Echoes of both scholars can be heard in a series of timed essays Didion wrote for the class on James. Her final exam for the course, English 151E, is scrawled into three small blue books and dated January 3, 1956 — an entire semester after she took the course.<sup>103</sup> Despite her tardiness, her writing shows an adept absorption of New Critical methods and a precocious sense of literary judgment. The exam had three portions. In the first and most substantial section, she considers James’s progression in style and technique from his early to late works. She opens with a statement reminiscent of Schorer’s assertions about the importance of technique in understanding the art of writing and beauty itself:

One can hardly discuss the writing of Henry James without pivoting, so to speak, upon his style – so central is it to all his philosophical views. For James was ultimately interested in beauty, in the perception and organization of beauty, in art – and this seems to me the end toward which all his writing is directed. No wonder, then, that his technique has philosophical implications.<sup>104</sup>

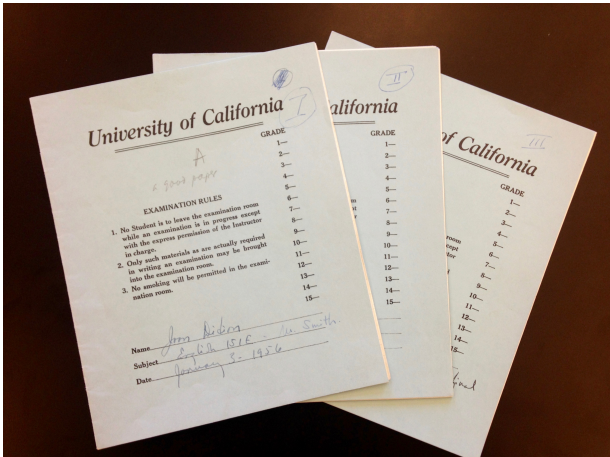
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<sup>101</sup> Joan Didion, Letter to Peggy LaViolette, 6 Oct. 1955, JDL, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>102</sup> “In Memoriam: The American Studies of Henry Nash Smith,” *American Studies at the University of Virginia*, 12 Feb. 2016.

<sup>103</sup> Joan Didion, *Bluebooks for English 151 E exam*, 3 Jan. 1956, Book One-Book 3.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*



*Didion's blue book exam for the course English 151E, taught by Professor Henry Nash Smith (footnote 103).*

Didion declares that content and form need each other, in James but also in writing in general. Technique informs her analysis of his writing's meaning. She sticks closely to James's language, and is most intrigued with how the author's style became subtler over time. She writes about James's use of "author intrusion" and exposition, a technique she posits that the author phases out as his style matures. "We see a transition from early carelessness (for James!) and exuberance to the tightest and most organic structures imaginable – with James moving ever away from author intrusion," she writes.<sup>105</sup> This analysis not only tracks James's progress as a writer of high-level fiction; it also reveals Didion's own definition of "tight...organic structures," which she describes as the "complete dramatization of situation, toward the smaller focus, toward a balance of extremely organic imagery."<sup>106</sup> Even in an exam setting, without access to the texts she discusses, Didion focuses intently on James's words — analyzing both the experience of reading the text and James's attempt to inhabit human experience.

Within the exam, Didion asserts herself as an authority uniquely capable of picking through dense material. She acknowledges a multitude of meanings and ambiguities in James's work, but rather than choose one interpretation, she attempts to define and explain the root of James's many meanings. "Much of this ambiguity stems from the fact that, for James, each man lives his own ethic," she writes.<sup>107</sup> Didion acknowledges a multiplicity of

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, Book Two.

potential interpretations within James, but by no means positions herself as someone tricked or swayed by these challenges. She moves away from discussion of technique to consider not how James achieves ambiguity, but instead the motivating force behind its construction. In fact, she makes what some who practice New Criticism would criticize, a claim about the author's own opinion and intention — in this case, the claim that James believes that “each man lives his own ethic.” But she uses this claim to authorize her ability to apply close analysis of James's work on a larger scale. She offers a thematic review of James's career, writing:

“The same values [can be seen] through all of James' work – the primary Locke doctrines of empiricism, the love of and yet criticism of Emersonian transcendentalism, the emphasis on individual morality, responsibility – renunciation – and as he progresses, the delineation of these themes becomes more fine, and the probing into and criticism of these ethics becomes more deep.”<sup>108</sup>

These general claims are grounded in significant attention to the text, and her insights are notable.

For the second essay of her exam, Didion was asked to respond to an unnamed critic who had argued that James's writings were “the fruits of an irresponsible imagination, of a deranged sense of values, of a mind working in the void, uncorrected by only clear consciousness of human cause and effect.”<sup>109</sup> Henry Nash Smith had selected, in fact, a passage from Van Wyck Brooks's *The Pilgrimage of Henry James*, which whittled down James's reputation by suggesting he lost his writing flair after leaving the United States.<sup>110</sup>

Didion rebutted Brooks's criticism of the late James. “*The Ambassadors* and *The Wings of the Dove*,” she wrote, “are nothing if they are not precisely the fruits of a meticulously responsible imagination. Both are, in a very real sense, inquiries into human

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, Book Three.

<sup>110</sup> Leo Robson, “The Master's Servants: On Henry James,” *The Nation*, 23 Oct. 2012.

responsibility and ethics.”<sup>111</sup> Her conception of a “meticulous” imagination suggests an attention to detail both in James and in her own treatment of the text – an intimate approach to her reading that further illustrates her engagement with New Critical techniques.

This detail-oriented scholarship leads her, in her third essay, to determine that “the principle [sic] trait ascribed by James to the artist is that of a finer perception.”<sup>112</sup> In a response to James’s “The Lesson of the Master” and other short works, Didion contemplates James’s opinion of the role of the artist — specifically, the figure of the writer within his stories. She argues that for James, “The artist – more specifically, in these pieces, the writer – is capable of perceiving the form of things – of organizing his perception into art.”<sup>113</sup> This analysis of the Jamesian conception of a writer serves not only as analysis, but also as a modeling for the sort of writing Didion herself wanted to pursue at the time, but often found out of reach.

Indeed, she would later say, “Henry James was very daunting to me and so was Flaubert. When you're writing something, one of the discouraging things is that every word you put down limits the possibilities of what you have in your mind. He [James] somehow got all the possibilities into every sentence, and I really did not think I could do that.”<sup>114</sup> But despite feeling intimidated, Didion was writing, and applying her intense awareness of the technique and expertise of the writers she studied to write well.

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<sup>111</sup> Didion, *Bluebooks for English 151 Exam*, Book Three.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Susanna Rustin, “Legends of the Fall,” *The Guardian*, 20 May 2005.

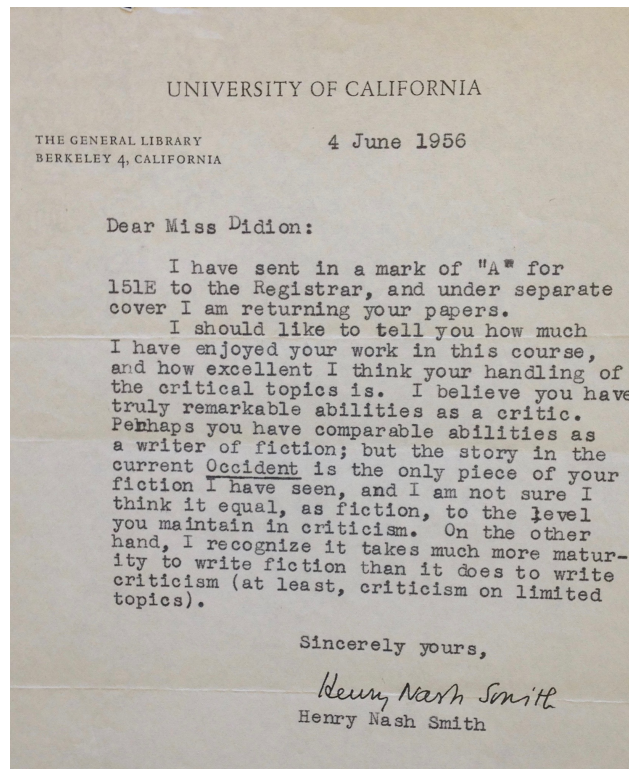
Smith was so impressed with her work that he wrote to her: “I should like to tell you how much I have enjoyed your work in this course, and how excellent I think your handling of the critical topics is...I believe you have truly remarkable abilities as a critic.”<sup>115</sup> Didion did not follow Smith’s suggestion, but she did adopt critical skills that she would use for a lifetime. In a later interview she

declared:

The whole way I deal with politics came out of the English department. They taught a form of literary criticism which was based on analyzing texts in a very close way. If you start analyzing the text of a newspaper or a political commentator on CNN using this same approach of close textual analysis, you come to understand it in a different way. It's not any different from reading Henry James.<sup>116</sup>

Didion found comfort and power in analyzing James, whose female protagonists and attentive writing style motivated her work beyond academia. But as she began her own pursuit of writing, she was fully aware of the many male literary powerhouses that did not offer this inspiration. As she later told the *Paris Review*,

When I was starting to write—in the late fifties, early sixties—there was a kind of social tradition in which male novelists could operate. Hard drinkers, bad livers. Wives, wars, big fish, Africa, Paris, no second acts. A man who wrote novels had a role in the world, and he could play that role and do whatever he wanted behind it. A woman who wrote novels had no particular role...I didn't much like it. I dealt with it



*Professor Smith's letter to Didion, responding to her blue books with high praise (footnote 115).*

<sup>115</sup> Henry Nash Smith, Letter to Joan Didion, 4 Jun. 1956, BANC MSS 72/191 z: 72, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>116</sup> Rebecca Meyer, "Berkeley Alumna Discusses Politics After 'Fictions,'" *The Daily Californian*, 19 Oct. 2001.

the same way I deal with everything. I just tended my own garden, didn't pay much attention, behaved—I suppose—deviously. I mean I didn't actually let too many people know what I was doing.<sup>117</sup>

Despite participating in many female social traditions — sorority life, fashion writing, etc. — when it came to her creative writing, Didion had no clear path ahead of her, and no particular social function. However, Didion did not restrict her own writing to criticism and journalism. She “tended [her] own garden,” making sure to write two hours every day, even if it meant waking up at 5 am.<sup>118</sup> She planned her entry into serious writing with skill and conviction, unwilling to share her work widely before her craft was developed. This “devious” behavior was necessary – Didion was fully aware that the bar for her, a woman writer, would be higher and more critical than for her male counterparts.

As she was quietly developing her own craft, Didion had risen in the ranks of the campus literary magazine, *The Occident*. She had become a member of the editorial board in the spring of 1955, and then the associate editor.<sup>119</sup> But not without mixed emotions: “The Occident revolts me,” she wrote in the fall of 1955 to her friend Peggy. “Everytime I go in I get in a fight with someone...It’s got a whole bunch of new people mixed up with it and it is threatening to go pseudo-avant garde again. Sandals, beards, etc.”<sup>120</sup>

Just as Didion felt the “pseudo-avant garde” closing in around her writerly world on the Berkeley campus, this same movement was emerging in the Bay Area as the Beat poets gained prominence. Allen Ginsberg read his celebrated experimental poem “Howl” for the

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<sup>117</sup> Linda Kuehl, “Joan Didion, The Art of Fiction No. 71,” *The Paris Review* 20, no. 74 (Fall-Winter 1978).

<sup>118</sup> Powell.

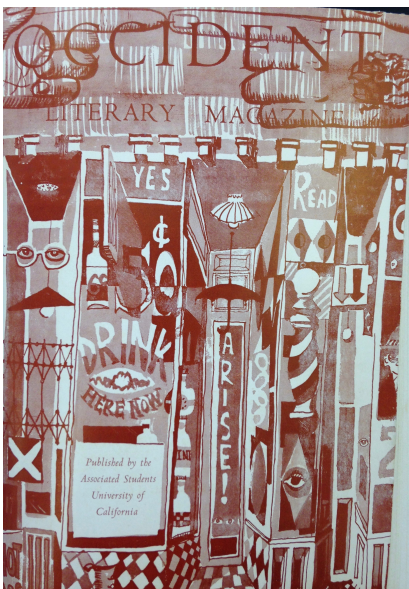
<sup>119</sup> Theodore Kloski, ed, *The Occident, Spring 1955*, (Berkeley: The Associated Students of the University of California at Berkeley), 1955; Wm. P. Barlow, Jr., ed. *The Occident, Fall 1955*, (Berkeley: The Associated Students of the University of California at Berkeley), 1955.

<sup>120</sup> Joan Didion, Letter to Peggy LaViolette, 6 Oct. 1955. JDL, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

first time in Berkeley in the spring of 1956.<sup>121</sup> Didion felt the presence of these more nontraditional types strongly. Reflecting a decade later on time at Berkeley in *Vogue*, she recalled:

When I was in college and longed to live the literary life, I seemed always at a helpless disadvantage with those more liberated spirits who considered my concern with punctuation frivolous and my enthusiasm for Henry James a sellout to the English Department. I can still hear the scorn in one young man's voice... 'The trouble with you, Didion,' he said (it was one of those sets in which people said things like 'the trouble with you, Didion'), 'is that you admire the professional.'<sup>122</sup>

Unlike the Beats, Didion felt no need to push away the values of famous writers she was studying; she felt inspired and humbled by the form and clarity of their writing – the professionalism they displayed, in fact. She would later admit, “I had become convinced in college that there was no reason to write, that no one could balance a sentence the way Henry James did, that no one could ever do intercutting the way Flaubert did, so why bother?”<sup>123</sup>



*The cover of the Spring 1956 Occident, edited by Didion (footnote 124).*

With her deep reverence for the “old masters” of prose, Didion remained ambivalent toward the experimental writing of her peers. This tension between new and old meant that as Didion deepened her commitment to *The Occident*, she also planted her feet more firmly in her own aesthetic: no, she would *not* join her sandaled and bearded cohorts, and yes, she would still create new writing. Her steadfast commitment to her own

<sup>121</sup> Snapp, Martin. “Howl’ reading’s anniversary to be marked.” *East Bay Times*. 15 Mar 2016. Web.

<sup>122</sup> Joan Didion, “Movies,” *Vogue*, 1 May 1964, p. 60.

<sup>123</sup> Christopher Bollen, “Joan Didion,” *V Magazine*, N.d., Web.

sense of literary value eventually helped land her the position of editor in her final semester of college.<sup>124</sup> Her issue's cover displays an array of abstract images in dark burgundy and white, creating what looks like a storefront with checkered floors. The crudely, handwritten words "Yes," "Read," and "Arise!" adorn the store's windows. The name, "Occident Literary Magazine," near the top of the cover, almost blends into its surroundings. Within, the issue contains 15 poems and five short prose pieces, including Didion's own "Sunset," her first published short story. The story, which contains strands of autobiography, follows the main character Laura's trip to her father's gravestone alongside her husband Charlie.<sup>125</sup> The story has little action and instead plays close attention to Laura's internal state. Didion focalizes her narrative through the perspective of her young protagonist, Laura, who like Didion herself, hails from the Sacramento Valley. Laura has married a far older man, and the mental ramifications of her decision to marry reverberate throughout the piece. As the couple drives to the graveyard, the narrator observes through Laura's eyes:

Charlie was always trying to weave the threads of her life without him into the pattern of their life together, as if this could make their union insoluble. (Sometimes Laura thought that he was desperately afraid of losing her, and the thought always filled her with anxiety, for she could not face finding any fear, any weakness, in the man she had married for his strength.)<sup>126</sup>

Laura exists as an entity separate from her husband: the threads are of "her life" not "their life," and Charlie's attempt to engulf her in their domestic bond is presented as a great weakness. Laura scorns the "pattern" Charlie seeks, and in doing so expresses her dissatisfaction with the couple's domestic narrative. The futility of Charlie's hopes reveals itself in his desire that their union be "insoluble," which incongruously means both

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<sup>124</sup> Joan Didion, ed. *The Occident, Spring 1956*.

<sup>125</sup> Joan Didion, "Sunset," *The Occident, Spring 1956*, (Berkeley: The Associated Students of the University of California at Berkeley), 1956, pp. 21-28.

<sup>126</sup> Joan Didion, "Sunset," p. 22.



‘impossible to solve’ and ‘impossible to dissolve.’ This sense of dissatisfaction lends itself to the dark and emotionally dynamic tenor of the story, but also may speak to Didion’s own mental state at the time the story was published. She was poised to leave the cocoon of campus life, as Laura had done, but had decided — unlike Laura — to carve out her own path as a working woman and writer rather than marry and attach herself to a man.

The young, unhappy wife of Laura dissects her marriage with deep retrospective regret. The story follows the couple to the graveyard, where “The feeling which had been growing on her all week...had suddenly crystallized here by the river, and it was as if the rules under which she had lived her entire life had been arbitrarily declared invalid.”<sup>127</sup> Laura reevaluates the way she chose to navigate her life in an overtly symbolic setting – a graveyard. She explores her failed relationship on the site of the ultimate ending, death. Didion’s intense attention to detail and her gifts of physical description are already evident as she evokes the graveyard’s landscape: “The only sounds were the dry leaves beneath their feet, and the crickets, and always, on the edge of everything, the trees in the rising wind... The smaller headstones were hardly visible beneath the dry grass, and the path through the graves to the river’s edge was almost gone.”<sup>128</sup> Didion calls attention to physical destruction as the couple walks through the natural landscape – they crush the leaves beneath them – and also the ominous presence of the world around them, with the “rising wind” suggesting an amplification of emotion and some sort of impending action. Laura and Charlie navigate this setting without a path, the implication being that their relationship has run off course. Laura finally thinks to herself: “They should never have married.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

The story practically screams out its message: beware of marriage, young woman, and preserve your autonomy. This theme was undoubtedly a response to the wedding-centric ethos of the college audience that Didion wrote for and knew well. But the narrative doesn't stop there: the tension between the couple continues to build, until Laura finally exclaims, "Perhaps you should have married my mother."<sup>130</sup> This moment is the climax of subtle hints earlier in the story about time the couple and Laura's mother spent together in New York, but structurally it comes a bit out of the blue – as though the young Didion constructed the emotional drama of a mother-daughter love triangle but never quite fleshed it out in the text. But the jaw-drop of this moment adds another dimension to Didion's narrative on marriage. As Laura tells her older husband he would have been better off with her mother, she also implicitly casts herself as of a different generation than her husband and her parents – one not so domestically limited. She claims her freedom by categorizing her unhappy marriage as one that would have better been left to her mother and the domestically confined women she represents.

In a moment that seems to resonate intensely with Didion's own life, Laura turns to Charlie and says, "I always thought that some day I'd come back to the valley to live. But now I couldn't. Everything seems to be gone."<sup>131</sup> Laura stands in a graveyard, her marriage crumbling in front of her eyes and the landscape of her childhood distorted by a haze of melancholy nostalgia. Didion crafted this image at the moment that she herself was at the precipice of adulthood – faced with the option to return home to Sacramento and pursue a quiet and typical life, and driven by the desire to leave her childhood life behind. She had an offer for an easy job as the society editor at the *Sacramento Union*, the hometown paper

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

where she'd logged time in some previous summers. But Didion saw bigger things ahead, and turned down the offer – rejecting life in the valley just like her main character.

She would later write of leaving Berkeley, “Would I not be a more finished person had I been provided a chart, a map, a design for living? I believe so. I also believe that the world I know, given such a chart, would have been narrowed, constricted, diminished: a more ordered and less risky world but not the world I wanted, not free, not Berkeley, not me.”<sup>132</sup>



*Didion working at The Occident in her final semester at Berkeley (footnote 24).*

This “risky world” was always Didion’s goal. She had written to *La Violette* one summer’s day before her senior year: “Settling down on the Union society desk for a few years would be neurotically easy. Strong-Willed Didion SHALL Work Her Way to Fame,

<sup>132</sup> Irving Stone, ed. *There was light; Autobiography of a University. Berkeley: 1868-1968*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1970), p. 6.

Fortune, and Psychological Integration at \$45 a week. SHE SHALL NOT take the Easy Way Out, and eat 3 meals a day.”<sup>133</sup>

Didion’s “Way to Fame, Fortune, and Psychological Integration” would start at *Vogue Magazine*, a far cry from the *Sacramento Union*. She found out in her senior year that she had won first place in the magazine’s Prix de Paris — a prize that came with a job offer attached. She was hired out of college to return to fashion writing and work for *Vogue* in New York City.<sup>134</sup> She prepared to start her career, leaving Berkeley with a heightened knowledge of new criticism and the masculine literary canon, but more importantly, a resoluteness to forge a path far different from her fellow female students.

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<sup>133</sup> Joan Didion, Letter to Peggy LaViolette, Aug 9, JDL, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>134</sup> “Conversation Between Joan Didion and Meghan Daum,” *Black Book*, 12 Dec. 2004.

**Chapter Three:**  
**Connoisseurs of synonyms, collectors of verbs: Graduating to *Vogue***

While many of her sorority sisters and peers married or moved home, Didion picked up and left for her new job in New York City. But simply choosing a career over immediate domestic life didn't safeguard Didion from the disadvantage of her sex. In joining *Vogue*'s mainly female staff, she picked among the few options for a woman writer of her day.

Women broke into the news industry in the 1940s, as World War II stole many working men from their day jobs, but the industry remained heavily gendered when Didion began her career some 15 years later. Nan Robertson, a female reporter who joined the *New York Times* staff just as Didion arrived at *Vogue*, writes that women were not "welcome" in the masculine newsrooms of the 1950s. "Whenever possible," she writes, "they hired males – those too old or too young for the draft, functional alcoholics, semi-incompetents, or men who (had) been judged not physically fit for the military."<sup>135</sup>

Robertson only managed a position at the *New York Times* when they offered her a temporary job working on a special fashion section for the paper's women's news department.<sup>136</sup> This is simply how things were for women writers – a foot in the door would mean covering hairstyles and high society. Kay Mills writes in *A Place in the News*, "Women asked themselves a question that men never had to ask: 'Will I work on the society page?' 'Yes, it's a foot in the door, a place to show you can write, a supportive environment,' said the side that did work on women's pages. 'No it's not taken seriously, it's a female ghetto, it's a dead end, I'll never cover politics or art if I start there,' said the side that didn't. Both sides were right."<sup>137</sup> Didion chose possibly the most sequestered woman's section of all in

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<sup>135</sup> Nan Robertson, *The Girls In The Balcony* (New York: Random House, 1992), pp. 63-64.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>137</sup> Kay Mills, *A Place in the News* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1988), pp. 81-82.

*Vogue*, which laid no claim to hard news or men's issues. Women such as Anne McCormick of the *New York Times* "tried hard not to act like ladies or to talk as ladies are supposed to talk – meaning too much – but just to sneak toward the city desk and the cable desk, and the editorial sanctum and even the publisher's office with masculine *sang-froid*."<sup>138</sup> Didion instead entered an environment where being a woman was welcome – in fact, it was basically required. This female environment created an entirely different type of intensity within the offices of *Vogue*, but nevertheless the work was deeply serious.

Among the full-page ads and fashion spreads was an opportunity for writing that transcended surface level women's issues. *Vogue's* writing required a methodical and attentive treatment of language that Didion was ready to learn from.

Being a full-time fashion writer did not return Didion to the endless parade of new dresses and fancy parties that made up her guest editorship at *Mademoiselle*. It was rigorous, at times mind-numbing, work on a slim paycheck of \$45 a week.<sup>139</sup> She went from running *The Occident* and excelling in her English classes to spending her workdays writing and rewriting captions and her free time pinching pennies. She later recounted, "I remember asking if someone could get me a discount on a polo coat, because I needed a winter coat, and she said, 'Oh sweetie, a polo coat is all wrong for you, put yourself in Hattie Carnegie's hands, she does wonderful things for small people,' Put yourself in Hattie Carnegie's hands!?' So I kept feeling poorer even than I was."<sup>140</sup>

As she adjusted to a life in New York City that was far more permanent than her stint at *Mademoiselle*, Didion found herself once again in the position of a student, despite the fact she'd left UC Berkeley far behind. Older editors and writers took her on as both a mentee and

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<sup>138</sup> Robertson, p. 42.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

pupil, reminding her to call her mother in one breath and counseling her on the proper use of verbs in the next.<sup>141</sup> Her editor Allene Talmey would bring her into her office each day and work through her writing word by word. “She would sit there and mark it up with a pencil and get very angry about extra words, about verbs not working. Nobody has time to do that except on a magazine like *Vogue*. Nobody, no teacher...” she said of the time. “In an eight-line caption everything had to work, every word, every comma. It would end up being a *Vogue* caption, but on its own terms it had to work perfectly.”<sup>142</sup> An example of the fruits of these labors: “Opposite, above: All through the house, colour, verve, improvised treasures in happy but anomalous coexistence. Here, a Frank Stella, an art nouveau stained-glass panel, a Roy Lichtenstein. Not shown: a table covered with frankly brilliant oilcloth, a Mexican find at fifteen cents a yard.”<sup>143</sup> The caption requires a clear and concise naming of objects – reproducing the image it accompanies in language. For this purpose, each word — “anomalous,” “improvised,” “frankly” — is strategically picked for its potency, its dynamic quality. Each line reads as a sentence distilled to its essence – yet what is exposed isn’t stark or fragmentary; it’s crystal clear.

Didion worked for some five years producing line after line like this one without landing a single byline in the magazine; her main job, as a writer, was to generate merchandising and promotional copy.<sup>144</sup> In this time, Didion’s fear of never measuring up to her literary heroes was broken down by necessity; at *Vogue*, words meant business and could be utilized to achieve an end. They were more a device than an art form, and this shift in thinking allowed the young writer to experiment while benefitting from the magazine’s highly specific linguistic rules and structures. In her words:

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Linda Kuehl, “Joan Didion, The Art of Fiction No. 71,” *The Paris Review* 20, no. 74 (Fall-Winter 1978).

<sup>143</sup> Joan Didion, *Telling Stories* (Berkeley: The Friends of the Bancroft Library, 1978), p. 5.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

We learned as reflex the grammatical tricks we had learned only as marginal corrections in school ('there were two oranges and an apple' read better than 'there were an apple and two oranges,' passive verbs slowed down sentences, 'it' needed a reference within the scan of the eye), and learned to rely on the O.E.D., learned to write and rewrite again. 'Run it through again, sweetie, it's not quite there.' 'Give me a shock verb two lines in.' 'Prune it out, clean it up, make the point.' Less was more, smooth was better, and absolute precision essential to the monthly grand illusion. Going to work for *Vogue* was, in the late nineteen-fifties, not unlike training with the Rockettes.<sup>145</sup>

The magazine's crash course, she said later, taught her to use words "as tools, toys, weapons to be deployed strategically on a page... We were connoisseurs of synonyms. We were collectors of verbs."<sup>146</sup> This focus on crafting every word – and a cultural belief that this method of writing could be learned and enforced – was consonant with the New Critical method that Didion had digested in her days studying literary criticism at Berkeley: at both Berkeley and *Vogue*, she learned to pay an extreme attention to the words on the page and their effect.

She was able to use this newfound technique to start up a healthy career as a freelance writer – determined to get a byline *somewhere* if not yet in the pages of *Vogue* itself. The magazine's promotion department only required an advertisement from Didion every two weeks, allowing her ample time to report other stories, network with editors and writers, and utilize her office and telephone to make it all happen.<sup>147</sup>

Over time, she felt she shouldn't let her newly gained eye for the perfect word or smoothest phrase go to waste on advertising copy. Rosa Rasiel, Didion's roommate from her first year living in New York City, once said, "It was not very long at all before she knew what she wanted to do – which was not writing commercial stuff, in any sense of the

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Joan Didion, Letter to Peggy LaViolette, 27 Sep. 1959, JDL, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, p. 2.



word.”<sup>148</sup> So she applied to be college editor for *Mademoiselle* – a position that would return her to her old work of covering co-ed fashion, and likely require her to facilitate the guest editor program she once participated in. She scored the job, but when she told *Vogue* she’d be leaving, they quickly promoted her to “feature associate” and upped her pay.<sup>149</sup> So she stayed.

She made this jump from promotional to editorial writing in the summer of 1959. The new gig meant longer days and busy nights producing and editing pieces. The gig also meant she was leaving the realm of fashion writing behind: rather than write about hem lines, or fall colors, her new position required her to write most of the magazine’s content that did *not* engage with clothes and style. Instead, she wrote the column “People Are Talking About,” and picked up pieces on the Olympics or museum openings.<sup>150</sup> She still was writing without a byline, but, as she conceded to Peggy LaViolette in a letter, her experience was “a sort of liberal education.”<sup>151</sup> As she immersed herself in this academy of writing, she assured Peggy that she would focus on herself: “I am neither married nor about to be.”<sup>152</sup>

At this moment of transition, Didion published a long, evocative and interestingly critical profile of UC Berkeley for *Mademoiselle*. Her topic was still college life, but this time her name wasn’t couched among a long list of other guest editors: her byline stood alone, in large, clean font. The magazine published the piece despite disappointment that she turned down their college editor post – a testament to *Mademoiselle*’s investment in the writer who got her start in their offices.<sup>153</sup> The article, titled “Berkeley’s Giant: The University of California,” is an 8-page retrospective on the university, four years after Didion’s graduation

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<sup>148</sup> Linda Hall, “The Writer Who Came In from the Cold,” *New York*, 2 Sep. 1996, p. 32.

<sup>149</sup> Joan Didion, Letter to Peggy LaViolette, 27 Sep. 1959, JDL, p. 1.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

and flight east.<sup>154</sup> Her words are accompanied with photos of the campus's landscape and characters that inhabit it – individuals packed into meetings and strolling across campus. UC Berkeley's eucalyptus trees frame one image. Cheering girls obscure the football stadium behind them in another.<sup>155</sup> The article attempts to capture the “emotional climate” of Berkeley in all its enormity.

Written in second person, Didion addresses an unknown “you” to create a visceral dialogue with the reader. She offers a physically vivid description of the campus from the get-go, opening the essay, “If you go to Berkeley tomorrow, it will probably be raining. When the rain clears, toward noon, that relentless California sun will rinse the campus and the air will smell of eucalyptus and salt water and January's first fruit blossoms.” She narrates the view from the campanile, but also the smell and the feel of her former college town. As she peoples the scene of the university, she focuses on its women. She describes “the girls with white buck shoes and pale cashmere sweaters” and “the sun-burned, long-legged girls from around Los Angeles...”<sup>156</sup> Under Didion's piercing gaze, the campus's male population is invisible. The scene set, she claims: “Watch who walks past for an hour, breathe the eucalyptus in the air and ponder upon the course of empire, and you will begin to understand Berkeley.”<sup>157</sup>

She then brings up her central topic – what one professor describes as “a pervasive irresponsibility operating at Berkeley.”<sup>158</sup> The student body at UC Berkeley, Didion insists, is unmotivated and unsure of how to apply the diverse and quality education the campus offers

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<sup>154</sup> Joan Didion, “Berkeley's Giant: The University of California,” *Mademoiselle* January 1960, p. 88.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

them.<sup>159</sup> She offers three reasons that the uninspired population she observes may have ended up this way: first, that the generation is waging a “passive revolt against the drive that makes the Organization Man go”; second, that Berkeley is public and not highly selective, and, that many students can’t rise to the university’s expectation will be self-reliant; and third, that Berkeley is too “Californian” to generate ambition in its students. She writes,

Call it the weather, call it the closing of the frontier, call it the failure of Eden; the fact remains that Californians are cultivating America’s lushest growth of passive nihilism right along with their bougainvillea. Enterprises that seemed important in the East, where the world is scaled to human beings, lose their significance beneath California’s immense, bland sky; transient passions fade in the face of the limitless Pacific. Most of Berkeley’s students grow up under that sky and in sight of that Pacific, spend their childhood in that climate of Eden, and they come to college totally unequipped with what makes Sammy run.<sup>160</sup>

Didion could count herself among the many Berkeley students who “gr[e]w up under that sky and in sight of that Pacific” – and given her later essays, it is evident that she also felt she came to college without the ability to tackle college full-speed ahead (remember her uncompleted classes, her anxieties about not being capable). But it is striking that Didion, soon-to-be queen of the personal essay and master of the anecdote, refuses to acknowledge her own lived experience anywhere in this review of her alma mater. The article is devoid of engagement with first person, and yet the path she lays for her reader is increasingly autobiographical.

The piece seems at once its most autobiographical and most veiled when it turns its attention to Greek life. Didion describes a sorority girl’s life at Berkeley as “organized into fairly inflexible patterns...a girl has difficulty forming even classroom acquaintances outside her own group.” The piece criticizes the way sorority life steals time from campus activities – and to make this case, she cherry-picks students who resemble her former self. She quotes a

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

female student who laments splitting her time between the *Daily Cal*, writing a term paper, and making “two hundred crepe-paper flowers” for a sorority event.<sup>161</sup> She finds a senior English major who, according to her professor, “could probably have a choice of graduate fellowships” but who tells Didion herself, “I don’t think I’m smart enough.” This interaction echoes Didion’s intellectual hesitance from her own time as an undergraduate. Her reporting reveals continuity between her story and that of many undergraduate women she interviewed. She set out to tell the story of UC Berkeley, and that story ended up reading very much like her own personal experience.

The title of the piece — “Berkeley’s Giant” — suggests that it will tackle Cal as a whole, but as the article unfolds, it becomes evident that her topic is far more narrow than she claims, and perhaps than she even chooses to recognize. Her primary focus is the women on Berkeley’s campus – the women on the campus who have no career ambition, to be specific. Of the three quotes Didion chose to place at the opening of her lengthy piece, one comes from an unnamed female undergraduate: “A lot of us don’t admit it, but what we came here for was to meet a husband.”<sup>162</sup> Didion extends her lament about the typical UC Berkeley student’s lack of drive to the sorority girl’s predicament: to marry or not to marry. Her writing seems to imply the greatest force keeping Berkeley women from self-discovery is their inevitable return to the home. Indeed, Didion interviews one young woman – a senior – who is applying for the Foreign Service not out of passion, but because no engagement has presented itself. She writes of another sorority girl she interviewed: “Her entire *modus vivendi* is oriented toward the day when she will be called upon to pour coffee in her own living room. Losing sight of that eminently sensible goal is wandering down the primrose

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

path indeed and is regarded with the same wonder in her circle at Berkeley as it would be in a Jane Austen novel.”<sup>163</sup> Didion adopts an Austen-like irony in this assessment. Painting the sorority girl’s decision to spend her days pouring coffee as “eminently sensible,” she reveals a harsh disaffection with the trivial concerns of many Berkeley women.

Despite never dropping a personal pronoun, this early article turns out to be one of Didion’s most personal. She concludes the piece:

What Berkeley has yet to develop, although the ivy has been growing ninety-some years, is a point of view, a real definition of the university’s function. It is big, rich and, like its students, peculiarly undefined, oddly amoral. Someone has yet to say: ‘This is what we mean.’ . . . Lost souls will not find themselves in those eucalyptus groves of academe. For Berkeley is a great place only for students capable of self-definition. It is a place of great riches, but it gives them up readily only to people of great expectations.<sup>164</sup>

Self-definition, Didion has made clear by the end of the piece, does not include the easy title of “wife,” or “mother.” Instead it is something to be determined only by autonomous and individually inspired students. Writing from the offices of *Vogue*, she implicitly labels herself as someone who has escaped the “eucalyptus groves of academe,” and in fact someone capable of “self-definition.” But she clearly continues to feel the ramifications of an education that forced her to do this on her own, and in the teeth of the cultural restraints on women on the Berkeley campus. Perhaps her reluctance to use personal anecdote in this particular essay was her way of defending herself from the charge that her impression of the campus was simply the single (and female) view of it; instead she speaks for the whole and, in doing so, identifies incongruities in Berkeley’s identity. By addressing the reader as “you,” she asks that her audience not only listen to the message she has to tell, but consider their own engagement with the culture of Berkeley as she describes it. Given that the readers of

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, p. 109.

*Mademoiselle* were often collegiate women themselves, the essay can also be viewed as Didion's attempt to pass her wisdom onto the younger army of women populating American colleges. Through her detailed descriptions of apathy and the testimonials of the disaffected, she insists: do not allow yourself to be swallowed up by a campus life that forces you to subscribe to conventions of femininity. Define yourself instead.

Didion's own journey to self-definition, meanwhile, was still in progress. As she adjusted to her new position at *Vogue*, she worked hard to diversify her writing projects and test the range of her style. She was writing her first novel, *Run River*, at night – writing pieces of it here and there because she was “too traumatized as an English major to imagine I could write something as big as” a novel.<sup>165</sup> Noel Parmentel, a New York literary personality who quickly became her mentor and biggest champion, said of Didion: “I never saw ambition like that...Not ambition as in hanging out at Elaine's. I mean Joan would work twelve hours a day at *Vogue* and twelve hours at night. It was ferocious. Flabbergasting. In the culture she was from, girls didn't go to New York and work like that.”<sup>166</sup> Didion may have been working for a magazine that benefited from promoting a society lifestyle for women, a magazine that luxuriated in the specifics of what they wore and how they lived. But from this platform Didion worked hard to embody her own version of womanhood: she was not the society woman hosting dinners or going out to be seen. She instead was the one at a cocktail party, wearing a scarf, raincoat, and dark glasses, observing her surroundings with scrutiny.<sup>167</sup> For a time, her talent went unnoticed by her male colleagues. Dan Wakefield, a journalist who operated in the same social circles as Didion in her early years in New York, recalls this

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<sup>165</sup> Bollen.

<sup>166</sup> Hall, p. 32.

<sup>167</sup> Dan Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), p. 264.

version of the young reporter, writing, “Since few of us read *Vogue*, we were not yet aware of the original and brilliant essays she was writing amid the fashion pages.”<sup>168</sup>

Her first chance to hazard one of these essays came in the spring of 1961. A writer had been assigned to write about jealousy for the magazine, but pulled out at the last minute. The cover had already been printed advertising the piece – so someone had to step up and write it. That someone was Didion.<sup>169</sup> The essay, titled “Jealousy, Is it a Curable Illness?” is an advice column with a bite – a two-page assessment of the phenomenon of female jealousy and how *Vogue*’s readership might combat it.<sup>170</sup> In the piece, which ran in the June 1 issue of the magazine, Didion opens, authoritatively, by pulling from her arsenal of literary references:

Although one finds it difficult to imagine Cleopatra afflicted with jealousy (the notion is ludicrous, rather like imagining her laid up with migraine on that perfumed barge, equipped with Fiorinal and an ice bag), she wanted to know the height of Antony’s bride, to know the colour of her hair – betraying her vulnerability even as most of us have done.”<sup>171</sup>

Her inclusive use of “us” sets the piece’s tone – Didion is speaking woman-to-woman, and she’s going to set some things straight. First in this mission is to make something clear: no woman, even Cleopatra, is free from the grip of jealousy from time to time. She goes on to reference Emma Bovary, Iseult the Fair, Guinevere and other female characters all in the first paragraph, elevating her readers by the literary comparisons and drawing their attention to the problem of mastering one’s emotions: “What each of them has suffered is not, no matter what the love songs say, jealousy. They have suffered instead the inability to *cope* with jealousy, the incapacity to control an atavistic impulse common to us all.”<sup>172</sup> It is with the support of

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid, p. 264.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, pp. 52-53.

<sup>170</sup> Joan Didion, "Jealousy: Is it a Curable Illness?" *Vogue*, 1 Jun. 1961, pp. 96-97.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

these female literary protagonists that she chooses to introduce herself to the magazine's pages, and with the benefit of their auras that she defines jealousy: "To be jealous is alternately to hate and to adore the object of that jealousy: hate for rejecting me, adore for unavailability, for all too apparent desirability, and finally for consummate good taste in rejecting someone as worthless as me."<sup>173</sup>

With this turn to the first person "me," Didion moves from the general and the inclusive to the specific and personal – turning the eye on her personal experience. She confesses,

When I was eighteen, I mourned because I could not at once be a Rose Bowl princess and a medieval scholar – I was naturally equipped to be neither; because I could not write for *The New Republic* and spend my afternoons tea-dancing at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. No one among my acquaintances in 1953 went tea-dancing at the Palace, but my mother had, in 1927. The jealous make exactly such demands upon themselves: there is simply no pleasing them.

Didion uses herself as an instrument to make clear the fact that female jealousy is not confined to the romantic: it can be a feeling of inadequacy that accompanies being a woman. Implicit in the fact that this anecdote was published in *Vogue* is the truth that Didion chose to write over tea-dancing, and in this way her self-scrutiny becomes a portal through which she advises her readership to choose their own life, not the life of their mothers. She moves away from her own life and back to the general and the inclusive "us" to close out the story, but this personal admission is one of the piece's most potent moments. It makes the reader feel invested in Didion, and in her suggestion that, "for most of us, jealousy is neither crippler nor escape. It is instead the rare but piercing chill in the night, the waste of emotion better spent on loving. Better spent, for that matter, on cleaning closets."<sup>174</sup> Her advice – and no-nonsense

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.



delivery — played well with *Vogue*'s audience. The magazine decided they would have her continue to write essays in a similar style.<sup>175</sup>

Her next published piece came two months later, this one titled “Self-Respect: Its Source, its Power.”<sup>176</sup> While set up with a similar advice-giving style, and even nearly identical page layout, this second piece opens with Didion’s own experience rather than that of other, more famous faces. She tells the reader candidly about the moment in college when she learned she had not made Phi Beta Kappa. “Once, in a dry season, I wrote in large letters across two pages of a notebook that innocence ends when one is stripped of the delusion that one likes oneself,” she opens the essay. “Although now, some years later, I marvel that a mind on the outs with itself should have nonetheless made painstaking record of its every tremor, I recall with embarrassing clarity the flavor of those particular ashes. It was a matter of misplaced self-respect.”<sup>177</sup>

In this confessional opening, she admits to the “embarrassing clarity” of her memory and also pokes fun at the irony apparent in her actions: even in a moment of painful self-hate, she valued her own thoughts enough to record them. This self-aware admission of failure and the struggle surrounding it becomes Didion’s point of entry and the way she establishes her authority to speak on self-respect. Her camaraderie with her reader established, Didion slips into the use of “we”: “However long we postpone it, we eventually lie down alone in that notoriously uncomfortable bed, the one we make ourselves. Whether or not we sleep in it depends, of course, on whether or not we respect ourselves.”<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Wakefield, pp. 52-53.

<sup>176</sup> Joan Didion, "Self-Respect: Its Source, its Power," *Vogue* 1 Aug. 1961, pp. 62-63.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

Self-respect, in Didion's terms, is an ability to invest oneself in pursuits selectively – neither swayed by the tides of public opinion nor too afraid to ever take a chance.<sup>179</sup> She draws out this point with stories that range from the captivity tale of Indian hostages to the domestic drama of a failing marriage. The greatest downfall of not respecting oneself, she insists is to be “peculiarly in thrall to everyone we see, curiously determined to live out – since our self-image is untenable – their false notions of us.”<sup>180</sup> Her early self-help essays seem to hit again and again on the subject of self-identity and the importance of *knowing oneself* intimately in order to evade the all-too-human trials of jealousy and self-loathing.

This theme is sustained in her third essay, “Take no for an Answer,” which insists that it is a “breakdown of communication with oneself that underlies an incapacity for the straightforward no.”<sup>181</sup> Didion's insistence on the importance of the word “no” seems distinctly to be advice for women. Women — and, especially perhaps, the women who make up *Vogue's* readership — cannot afford the luxury of self-doubt if they want to succeed in the larger world. She writes,

Those who lack that sense of reality about their own present or future are naturally incapable of saying no; they can make, in fact, no decisions at all. Instead, they play roles, the more improbable the better. I recall thinking, one hot California July, that I wanted to marry a golf pro. It was not his charm, although he may even have had some; nor was it that we shared what marriage counselors sometimes call ‘a mutuality of interests.’ It was precisely that we did not... Once these and similar points were established, the spell was broken; the role had ceased to be playable, had threatened to present the same troubling uncertainties and ambiguities that characterized real life.<sup>182</sup>

Didion characterizes her former self as someone unable to say no to her own delusions – delusions that would have kept her from pursuing a true “sense of reality” that allowed her to rise above societal expectations of marrying a golf pro or someone similar. In this essay, as

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Joan Didion, “Take no for an Answer,” *Vogue*, 1 Oct. 1961, p. 132.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p. 133.

with the first two, Didion treats her own experience of this social pressure not only as important enough to share with some 300,000 subscribers, but as integral to constructing her argument.<sup>183</sup> The essay's form – conversational, didactic, and female-centered – allows for this space of self-discovery and use of personal narrative to advance her claims. Accounts of her own experience are intermixed at times with stark declarations of fact and, in other moments, with detached narration of a world she observes with unease.

Through this alchemy of forms and tones, Didion begins to develop her style in these early essays. She may at times admit weakness or confusion, but she is always undoubtedly in the driver's seat, using her own experience to spell out emotional truths for masses of young women like her.

With the momentum of her first three pieces behind her, Didion contributed to *Vogue* at a remarkable piece – a four-page, personal account of appearing as a guest on a television show in New Jersey – in which she crafts herself as the Didion we know today.<sup>184</sup> The young essayist describes herself bluntly: “Blessed with the gift for banter of a Calvin Coolidge and the conviviality of an Increase Mather, I am not what you would call a Television Natural...Nonetheless, I once had my hour, however inadvertent, as a Television Personality.”<sup>185</sup> Didion uses playful self-deprecation to soften the ambitious move of placing herself at the center of the narrative. The incongruity of her presence on television, she suggests, makes her story uniquely worth telling. The essay stays close to the moment. It does not arrive at any grand conclusions, as her advice pieces tend to, but instead focuses on the fleeting and strange nature of a life that brought her to brief TV fame. She recalls a party at which she declared herself to be a crossword puzzle expert – this fleeting comment landing

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<sup>183</sup> “Conversation Between Joan Didion and Meghan Daum.”

<sup>184</sup> Joan Didion, “When it was Magic Time in Jersey,” *Vogue*, 15 Sep. 1962, pp. 33-35, 81.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33

her, only days later, at a television studio in Newark, New Jersey to partake in a game show for crossword fiends. She writes, “At any rate, I assured myself that whatever Some Crossword Show In Newark involved, it could not be as disastrous as the time I had so convinced someone of my craze for dancing that he entered me in a dance contest at Small’s Paradise in Harlem.”<sup>186</sup> The show turned out to be called *Double Cross*, and she tackles the peculiarity of her experience on it with vivid, moment-to-moment detail. She describes Mary Ann, a tragically perky Wellesley graduate who runs the television show with such enthusiasm that she refers to it as “Magic Time.” Observing Mary Ann becomes the focal point of Didion’s piece — she becomes more and more dogged in her efforts to make the show great, while it creeps pitifully towards poor ratings and cancellation. Didion recalls observing her: “Mary Ann was in the office working (quite superfluously, as the situation developed) on the Monday show. Mary Ann became gamer and gamer during this recital.”<sup>187</sup> Didion casts Mary Ann’s efforts as futile – a whole lot of friction with no results. In her eagerness, Mary Ann becomes representative of a minutia and mediocrity that is notably gendered. “All America knows what happened to the fast guns: to the boys who shot it out way out there where the ratings began, to the women who stood beside them,” Didion concludes. “What of Mary Ann? Whither the magic that was in Newark?”<sup>188</sup> The essay’s sense of stagnancy, and Mary Ann’s failed efforts, become representative of the detritus of male success. Her essay chronicles all that is left behind by the “boys who shot it out” and what becomes of the women who did *not* in fact stand by them

The success of the piece suggested that Didion’s personal anecdotes could stand alone, unsupported by a web of advice or the examples of more famous figures. It also proved

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

she could craft a story out of the seemingly insignificant – the creeping failure of a little television show in New Jersey and its female champion could make for compelling copy under Didion’s pen.

In the early years of her *Vogue* career, Didion had another life that she pursued in her hours off the *Vogue* clock: she was crafting a novel with the working title *In the Night Season* (eventually published as *Run River* in 1963).<sup>189</sup> She would string bits of plot and character development together in fits and bursts, writing at night after full days at the magazine.<sup>190</sup> Twelve publishing houses rejected the novel before Noel Parmentel pushed Ivan Obolensky, Inc. to accept it.<sup>191</sup> Parmentel said of Didion in those days: “She was (a) hard to know, (b) very shy, and people, being stupid as they are, underrated her. Practically everybody I knew underrated her. She just didn’t register on the screen.”<sup>192</sup>

But Didion wouldn’t fly under the radar for long. Soon after her first book published, *Vogue* featured her in its “People are Talking About” column, a magazine staple that Didion had written frequently when starting out. But this time, she was the focus of the chatter:

Joan Didion (near left), a small, deceptively sharp, twenty-eight-year-old on the writing staff of *Vogue* (she has had five signed articles in the last two years) whose first novel, *Run River*, just published by Ivan Obolensky, is a bruising one of violence among Sacramento River ranchers. Miss Didion has reddish-blond long hair, an acute sense of cadence, and something to say.<sup>193</sup>

One can see how *Vogue* digested the image of Didion that she was carefully crafting. The phrase “deceptively sharp” says it all – Didion looks unassuming, but has a bite. The magazine casts this sharpness itself as deceptive – suggesting that her edge has a dangerous quality in its obscurity. This characterization is proven in her writing, but was first trumpeted

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<sup>189</sup> Joan Didion, *Run River* (New York: Vintage, 1963).

<sup>190</sup> Bollen.

<sup>191</sup> Hall.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> “People are Talking About,” *Vogue*, 1 Apr. 1963, p. 100.

by the writer herself. In this short bio, it becomes evident that her persona is already mixing with the perception of her work.

The piece's conclusion — that Didion had “something to say” — foreshadowed the career move that she soon made within the pages of *Vogue*: in 1964, Didion took on the job of the magazine's in-house movie critic.<sup>194</sup> Her first movie review was published on the first day of the New Year, and the author was granted not only a byline, but an introduction. An editor's note announced: “Joan Didion is a young writer with a nourishing interest in all movies...Her reviews will appear in the first-of-the-month issues.”<sup>195</sup> Didion kicked off her first column with confidence and a strong sense of self: “Let me lay it on the line: I *like* movies, and approach them with a tolerance so fond that it will possibly strike you as simple-minded...I will even go so far as to admit an uneradicable affection for certain movies which lack even Moments, but have instead an impenetrable gloss of spirit and charm and attractiveness, airily impervious to even the most spurious stabs at reality.”

Didion flexes her rhetorical muscles in this first piece, tossing off mouthy phrases like “impenetrable gloss” and “airily impervious,” and carrying off a self-assured tone that allows for the occasional run-on sentence. Her assertiveness isn't just in structure; it's in tone as well. To play critic was for Didion a chance to integrate the newfound authority of personal writing with the analytical skills that harkened back to her days dissecting Henry James for Henry Nash Smith. Infusing all this, too, was the cultural awareness that her years at *Vogue* had instilled in her. Didion would produce a sharp, dynamic, and uncommonly lucid body of work in her short time as a film critic.

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<sup>194</sup> Joan Didion, “Movies,” *Vogue*, 1 Jan. 1964, p. 24.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

Sometimes, in the pursuit of clarity, she made very simple declarations. For instance, in her first review she wrote frankly, “Carl Foreman’s *The Victors* is a bad movie: its shoddiness runs deep.”<sup>196</sup> More typically, however, the pieces feature a mix of summary, critique and personal response in the form of short, snappy narratives.<sup>197</sup> Just two months into the gig, she was already playing with the typical conventions of a movie review.<sup>198</sup> In her March article on the movie *The Guest*, she only arrives at discussing the actual film in the third and final paragraph. She instead uses the space primarily to discuss the translation of a play into a movie, engaging her now typical use of “we” to write, “Whenever we see a very bad movie made from a good play, we tend to credit the failure, querulously, to the movie’s director... We assume, in other words, some production error; accept as given the notion that a good play *could be* a good movie. I wonder.”<sup>199</sup>

Early on, Didion used the specific assignments *Vogue* threw her way to write the stories she wanted – not necessarily the ones she was assigned. A movie review under Didion’s byline often became a miniature essay that just so happened to mention a movie.<sup>200</sup> All the while, she close-reads certain films almost the way she once analyzed texts at Berkeley. Trying to pin down what she dislikes about the movie *Girl With Green Eyes*, she takes up the question, from her seminar with Henry Nash Smith, about how point-of-view

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Joan Didion, “Movies,” *Vogue*, 1 Feb. 1964, p. 24.

<sup>198</sup> Joan Didion, “Movies: The Guest/Pink Panther,” *Vogue*, 1 Mar. 1964, p. 57.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> This insistence on morphing her criticisms to include her own experience and style allowed the young writer to transcend the limits of assignment before she was allowed to simply write about whatever whim came to her mind. It also allowed her to push outside of the realm of women’s writing from within it. In an essay on silver she published in 1964, for example, Didion uses a symbol of domesticity – silver – to make an existential argument about mortality and love.<sup>200</sup> She writes, “What is silver, after all, but continuity? It is, flatly, worth very little; the ounce of pure silver in a teaspoon costs, on the world market, something under ninety-one cents... Our grandmothers bought it; our mothers bought it. We buy it, and our daughters will buy it. In each case, we buy it not only for ourselves but to pass on, a kind of talisman.”<sup>200</sup> She does not waste space by discussing types of silver or its uses in the home – instead she manipulates an accessible topic to reach an area of far more interest to her as a writer – familial relationships and the symbols that represent them.

defines what's possible in a narrative: "It is a structural problem, having to do with point of view. The picture proceeds entirely from the waif's point of view – we see neither beyond nor through her – and she is not an intelligent character...It does not work."<sup>201</sup> In other moments, she takes a more historical perspective, blasting Hollywood entertainment for whitewashing the painful stuff of real history. In a review of *The Sound of Music*, she writes about musical theater productions turned movies: "They have all been a little embarrassing, but perhaps *The Sound of Music* is more embarrassing than most, if only because of its suggestion that history need not happen to people like Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer. Just whistle a happy tune, and leave the Anschluss behind."<sup>202</sup> Art, she seems to suggest, should engage with the history it emerges from.

By the time Didion's movie reviews had become a staple of *Vogue's* content, she had developed a sense of easy authority with her reader. At her most casual, she could write, of the movie *The Sons of Katie Elder*, "I like the country and I like John Wayne and I like Dean Martin and I like gunfights. If you don't, don't bother."<sup>203</sup> By repeating "I like," Didion lays her own position on the line – she doesn't care much if the reader doesn't agree.

It was at this stage in her career that Didion married her partner John Dunne, who she had met and dated while they both worked as young writers in New York.<sup>204</sup> Despite her earlier misgivings about domesticity and the pitfalls of convenient marriage, at the belated age of 29 years old she finally took the title of wife. This new role would soon work its way into her writing.

As Didion eased into the next phase of her relationship with Dunne, her newly gained sense of writerly authority set her up for her next move within the magazine — to travel

<sup>201</sup> Joan Didion, "Movies," *Vogue* 1 Dec. 1964, p. 150.

<sup>202</sup> Joan Didion, "Movies," *Vogue* 1 May 1965, p. 143.

<sup>203</sup> Joan Didion, "Movies," *Vogue* 15 Sep. 1965, p. 76.

<sup>204</sup> Daugherty, p. 143.



writing, a space where her experiential prose could take a center stage. These pieces put no burden on her to summarize a movie, or offer pithy advice to the reader. Didion's travel writing is not the type that you might rip out of a magazine and carry with you while wandering around a new city. She provides no road map, nor any restaurant advice. Instead she focuses on the *feel* of a place. Her first piece of this sort, titled "New Museum in Mexico," opens not with the museum itself, but with what brought her there, and what brought her there alone.<sup>205</sup> She writes, "'I have found my way around *plenty of museums* without you, just never you fear,' I informed my husband, and slammed the door, cracking still more plaster in a city where buildings sometimes seem to crack before they are dedicated."<sup>206</sup> Marital tension informs her experience of the museum. This fact is not something Didion wants to obscure; instead she uses it as a platform to describe the museum itself. She writes:

What could I tell you?... To understand you must go alone at twilight, must walk very slowly across the vast approach, listen to as the traffic on the Reforma recedes into some profound stillness. On a knoll among the pepper and eucalyptus trees, among the pines, blowing, closing in, rests a giant stone Olmec head, the long grass grown around it as if it had been there always.<sup>207</sup>

She insists that the museum as a physical space does not exist as a separate entity to the critic or visitor; in her case, it naturally embodies the mood that she, the observer, brings to it. Here Didion foreshadows the body of her nonfiction writing that will follow — as her personal narrative seeps into the way she sees the world, she chooses to trumpet this connection rather than shy from it.

Most often, the personal experience she integrates into her travel writing involves her struggles within her marriage. In a later piece on Mexico, Didion opens her narrative:

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<sup>205</sup> Joan Didion, "Vogue's Notebook: Travel," *Vogue*, 1 Aug. 1965, p. 48.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

It had rained in Los Angeles until the cliff was crumbling into the surf and I did not feel like getting dressed in the morning, so we decided to go to Mexico, to Guaymas, where it was hot. We did not go for marlin. We did not go to skin dive. We went to get away from ourselves, and the way to do that is to drive, down through Nogales some day when the pretty green places pall and all that will move the imagination is some place difficult, some desert.<sup>208</sup>

Didion does not name her husband, Gregory Dunne, and in this way the “we” she employs could refer to any couple searching for a brief respite from their domestic life. In this way, Didion’s accounts of time spent traveling allow space for more than just personal anecdote – they create discourse around issues of female dissatisfaction. Traveling, Didion posits, is not always a honeymoon – it can spring from the struggles of real life. By writing in this way, she insists that women can and should be able to acknowledge household dissatisfaction, even within the pages of a magazine chock-full of tips for how the average woman can appear polished and unruffled by the many demands placed upon her.

In this dissidence, Didion was participating in a movement to complicate the narrative of female life within women’s magazines at the time. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz writes,

On the one hand, all the magazines assumed that women wanted to marry, that women found being wives and mothers rewarding, and that women would and should be the primary parents and housekeepers... On the other hand, throughout the postwar era, numerous articles portrayed domesticity itself as exhausting and isolating... Such articles hardly glorified domesticity.<sup>209</sup>

With each step in Didion’s *Vogue* career, her voice strengthened as did her style – together producing essays with a potent mix of essayistic argument and personal anecdote, laced usually with a tincture of dissent. She managed this from within the pages and constraints of fashion and lifestyle writing, and she took this role seriously. She did not, however, subscribe to the idea that in this trajectory she was advancing women’s writing as a

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<sup>208</sup> Joan Didion, "Vogue's Spotlight: Travel," *Vogue*, 1 Mar. 1968, p. 98.

<sup>209</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique,” *Not June Cleaver*, Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), p. 242.

whole. In a critical review of Doris Lessing from 1965, she reflected, “Except on those occasions when I am indulging in a little free-floating self-pity, I do not think much about the ‘injustice’ of being a woman. Perhaps this inability to perceive sexual inequality as the root fact of the human condition is self-delusion; perhaps self-preservation.”<sup>210</sup> This “inability,” as Didion describes it, indicates a resolve that writing can release her from the restraints of femininity and the inequality of womanhood more generally. Despite its initial harshness, Didion’s claim to be unaffected by gender inequality softens when she considers whether her outlook is due to self-delusion or self-preservation. This pondering reveals that the “‘injustice’ of being a woman” does in fact exist for her, but also that she does not find acknowledging it to be productive. She suggests that focusing on systemic sexual discrimination would trap her in exactly the inequality she wanted to rise above. Accordingly, her time at *Vogue* required a healthy mix of both self-delusion and self-preservation – she kept writing and playing with her style, incubating in the magazine’s offices as she prepared for a writer’s world still restricted for women like herself. When she would eventually leave the magazine’s pages to truly begin her career, she carried a belief in her abilities beyond the confines of her gender. This resolve was fostered at UC Berkeley. It was formed at *Vogue*.

It is from this perch – as a simultaneous participant and observer, and an unwilling voice of the women of her generation – that Didion left *Vogue* for a life of freelancing, fiction writing, and decades of cutting social commentary that would earn her national notoriety. Didion left the women’s magazine with a newfound sense of her voice and herself. This identity is the bedrock of her later works.

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<sup>210</sup> Joan Didion, "Vogue's Notebook: Books," *Vogue*, 1 Oct. 1965, p. 166.

## Conclusion:

Didion began an illustrious freelancing career in her final years at *Vogue* and shortly after she left the magazine, in the pages of *The National Review*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *GQ* and other publications with a scope that exceeded that of women's magazines.<sup>211</sup> Two pieces she wrote for *The National Review* in 1963 and 1965 reveal some of the first instances of her displaying the chops and insights she gained at Berkeley, *Mademoiselle*, and *Vogue* on a new platform. The first, titled "I'll Take Romance," is a notably straightforward and summative piece about courtship, which seems grounded in her reflections on gendered collegiate life and female culture at large. It opens with a quote from an advertisement in *Seventeen Magazine*, framing her one of her first pieces away from *Vogue* as a response to the woman's magazine and its agenda.<sup>212</sup> The ad reads:

So exciting! Planning your marriage with a Lane Sweetheart Chest! Suddenly you both know it's not for laughs – but for real...A man's way of saying he loves you to distraction. Your cue to act downright wifely. Go ahead – air your views on garlic in the roast. Go dutch on a family-sized photo album. Find out if candlelight suppers flip him. Sound married?<sup>213</sup>

The ad is nearly laughable in its sincerity – the riddle of exclamation marks and phrases like "downright wifely" creating a tone of eerie enthusiasm. Didion sets her essay up as a commentary on this aggressive domesticity, but then attacks its roots by discussing high school sex education. She recalls her own sex ed., and a woman named Patti who "was explaining to us one afternoon why it was unwise to go around kissing boys 'indiscriminately.' It was, she reasoned, 'throwing away your capital.'"<sup>214</sup> Didion spends the rest of the piece reacting to this notion of the female as a commodity – she writes, "I had

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<sup>211</sup> Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.

<sup>212</sup> Joan Didion, "I'll Take Romance," *The National Review*, 24 Sep. 1963, pp. 246, 248-249.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

never before thought of myself as a product in need of smart merchandising.”<sup>215</sup> This packaging of femininity to prepare for marriage, Didion suggests, is not the golden ticket magazine ads in *Seventeen* (and, implicitly *Mademoiselle* or *Vogue*) sometimes implied it to be. Instead, Didion writes, “Marriage seemed to me a risk venture, shadowy with shoals, uncharted sinkholes, possibilities for salvation and possibilities for insomnia, in-sickness-and-in-health-and-you-had-better-count-on-sickness.”<sup>216</sup> But when she turns to a *Scholastic* magazine survey of 8,000 high school students and a Gallup poll of unmarried girls, age 16-21, she finds her opinion to be in the minority, much like it was at Berkeley. She summarizes the young girls’ dream houses and perfect husbands as: “*Just sweetie and me, and baby makes three*, near an adequate shopping district. It begins to look as if Patti, and not I... had her finger on the pulse of Young America’s Expectations.”<sup>217</sup> Her simple rhyming gently mocks the young women and men that make up the majority in these surveys – a “Young America” still navigating traditional expectations that she herself eschewed. With some distance both from her past and from the pages of women’s magazines, she spells out her stance on this culture: “What afflicts us is not Romantic Love at all but Marketable Love, the logical end of which is either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the product.”<sup>218</sup> The title for this *National Review* essay, “I’ll Take Romance,” at first suggests that Didion will be promoting an old-fashioned outlook on love, but she spins her preference for romance as distinctly against the grain. In her concluding remarks she expresses an aversion for the commodification of relationships for their apparent profitability – a practice that occurred often in women’s magazines. She wrote this in her last years at *Vogue*, in a time in which she could have continued a tidy progression working for the magazine, producing an utterly

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, p. 248.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

marketable product and continuing to push subtly for a counterculture in the meantime. But she wanted to separate herself fully from the cultural restraints of commercialized femininity. This aim wasn't simply personal – it was professional.

As Didion made her first forays into the larger web of publications at her fingertips, she planned to continue implementing the technical skills and attentiveness she had learned in her early years as a writer. Innovation, in her eyes, would always require incredible restraint and strategy. At this juncture in her career, she was weary of her contemporaries, who she viewed as cutting corners in their attempts to pioneer new writing styles. In another *National Review* article, this one written two years later in 1965, Didion blasted “a certain failure in fiction during the past several years, a failure to maintain the excitements of technical discipline.”<sup>219</sup> She viewed this failure as a largely masculine problem, lambasting male writers such as Thomas Pynchon “who would insist that this erosion of technique in fiction is deliberate, the new note, the only authentic way to convey ‘a vision so contemporary it makes your nose bleed.’”<sup>220</sup>

Call it Didion's admiration for the “professional,” or her Henry James fandom, but in this piece she forcefully and purposefully distances her own work from that of her male contemporaries – casting their writing as sloppy rather than experimental. Her essay contains a reverence for attention to detail and extreme technique learned at *Vogue* and also, it seems, a disdain for a male ego that believes himself above the rules. In unapologetic, measured language, Didion asserts her own opinion on writing of her generation, suggesting that the chaotic, “brave” male narrative of *Catch 22* and other works like it is not the only path for the writers of her day — and all the while poising herself as a pioneer of its alternative. She takes

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<sup>219</sup> Joan Didion, “Questions About New Fiction,” *The National Review*, 30 Nov. 1965, p. 1100.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

Philip Roth to task for claiming that American writers struggle in “trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality.”<sup>221</sup> She counters his claim writing:

This is all very well (and not very remarkable, its embattled tone notwithstanding), except that in point of fact very few of these writers are opening any doors at all, preferring instead to jump up and down outside shrieking imprecations at the locksmith. . . . In fact the hallmark of this kind of fiction is its refusal to follow or think out the consequences, let alone take them; it is content to throw up its hands, cry that outrage surrounds us. This absence of moral toughness seems to me to determine the style and structure of the novels, or rather the lack of it.<sup>222</sup>

Didion makes a claim for the purpose of writing itself – a steadfast moral commitment to truth telling and also technique. She posits form and content cannot be untangled, and that a responsible writer (implicitly, herself) is also a skilled technician. This argument is also distinctly gendered – she remakes “toughness” as a female quality, rather than one that defines her male peers, such as Roth. It is with this commitment to restraint and an aversion for a free-wheeling irresponsible writing style that Didion would begin her career as a new journalist — a realm, like fiction, that was dominated by the male ego.

Didion began her break into freelancing as an unlikely member of the New Journalism movement – a writing style defined by author Robert Boynton as “an avant-garde movement that expanded journalism’s rhetorical and literary scope by placing the author at the center of the story, channeling a character’s thoughts, using nonstandard punctuation, and exploding traditional narrative forms.”<sup>223</sup> Tom Wolfe wrote in a 1972 manifesto on his own role in this movement:

The idea is: Given such-and-such a body of material, what has the artist done with it? The crucial part that reporting plays in all story-telling, whether in novels, films, or

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid, p. 1101.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Robert Boynton, *The New New Journalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), p. xii.

non-fiction, is something that is not so much ignored as simply not comprehended. The modern notion of art is an essentially religious or magical one in which the artist is viewed as a holy beast who in some way, big or small, receives flashes from the godhead, which is known as creativity. The material is merely his clay, his palette.<sup>224</sup>

Wolfe's hubris shows in his style, rambling and spontaneous, and displays a belief in his own "holy beast" of creativity with precisely the lack of technique that Didion so reviled. Unlike Wolfe or some of his peers, Didion did not allow her words to pour out, unrestrained and in note-like form. Instead, her journalistic writing was controlled and direct – a style she developed in her *Vogue* years. Author Marc Weingarten observes this restrained quality in a book on the New Journalism movement, writing, "Didion did place herself into some of her reported pieces, but only as a dispassionate observer; she never recorded her own impressions in a Maileresque fashion, leaving that for her personal essays."<sup>225</sup>

This approach set Didion apart from her male counterparts while also producing avant-garde journalism, and this difference was both inspired and necessitated by her femininity in a masculine space. She strove to move beyond the personal, the uncontrolled and impressionistic, rather than lace it into her journalistic pursuits. The personal, to Didion, seemed to constrain her to a voice of feminine advice-giving, or emotional admission. She wanted to tell stories that resonated, and even as a new journalist, because she was a woman, this meant getting her own emotional impressions out of the way. Indeed, she would later say, "I don't miss writing personal essays... I've sometimes wondered if the kind of piece I once did was a response to a cultural expectation."<sup>226</sup> Personal admission may have been freeing for males writing alongside Didion, but the form could only restrict her without careful calculation. Her version of New Journalism had to be more controlled, more carefully

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<sup>224</sup> Tom Wolfe, "The Birth of 'The New Journalism': Eyewitness Report by Tom Wolfe," *New York Magazine*, 14 Feb. 1972. Web.

<sup>225</sup> Marc Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion and the New Journalism Revolution*, (New York: Crown, 2006), p. 122.

<sup>226</sup> Hall.



constructed. In this sense, Didion's writing was informed and formed by personal reflection and anecdote, but poised with a steadfast seriousness and always with the voice of an outsider. Unlike Norman Mailer or Hunter Thompson, she doesn't present herself as a character central to her stories – she presents herself as the opposite: a writer on the fringe. This self-presentation allows her to bridge the personal and political as a woman.

Didion's college years and time in fashion writing – always on the edges of women's lifestyle and yet inescapably feminine in her writing technique – produced this carefully crafted persona. After these years of development and as a rare female in a sea of male new journalists, she finally introduced herself as the Didion that would become impossible to ignore. In the introduction to her first book of collected essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, which would come to be seen as a hallmark of Didion's piercing style and brilliantly controlled prose, she advises:

I am bad at interviewing people. I avoid situations in which I have to talk to anyone's press agent... I do not like to make telephone calls, and would not like to count the mornings I have sat on some Best Western motel bed somewhere and tried to force myself to put through a call to the assistant district attorney. My only advantage as a reporter is that I am so physically small, so temperamentally unobtrusive, and so neurotically inarticulate that people tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests. And it always does.<sup>227</sup>

Her approach is highly feminized – she emphasizes her smallness, her unobtrusive nature. But latent in this submissive self-image is a warning: ignore me at your own risk. It was with the force of UC Berkeley's influence, and a conflicted but prosperous career as a fashion writer, that Didion could finally stake her claim as a writer and say, "This is who I am." This self-definition behind her, Didion set out upon the world she was determined to understand – not as a woman, or a writer, even, but as herself. The world would be ready to listen.

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<sup>227</sup> Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.

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