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Abstract

In this thesis I focus on analyzing the book *The Year of Magical Thinking* in terms of how Didion uses language to express grief and how she explains it to the reader. Didion was an important author in the United States of America and had a huge impact in her writing. She was accurate and precise with her words. In 2003 she lost her husband in a sudden event and wrote the book *The Year of Magical Thinking*. This was a book she wrote dealing with her grief in the first year after the incident. While going through grief, she helps the reader better understand the grieving-process. By looking at the work of other authors, Didion finds words to make it more understandable. Although grief is an individual experience, she generalizes it to an understandable experience that the reader can relate to. She clearly demonstrates her vulnerability in how she goes through the grief, while at the same time trying to make sense of it. As an author, writing a memoir, she shares an unfamiliar process of grief with the reader to put words to grief.

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Grief in the eyes of a sudden widow

Introduction

Grief is described as an agonising set of emotions after a significant loss.¹ Grief is often associated with the loss of a loved one, or someone you have an emotional connection to. Bennett and Royle write about how one can get emotional and psychological wounds by experiencing grief.² Grief is a complex term which can include sorrow, emptiness, despair, but also love, hope and faith.³ Grief can break up our reality and can open for impressions from different aspects of life.⁴

In the book *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion investigates grief after the death of her husband. She soon entered an unknown period where she would learn new things about herself. The book is a grief memoir where she walks us through her grieving process while helping herself and the reader to better understand grief. Didion tried to navigate herself through the first year after the incident:

This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself.⁵

While putting words to what grief is, Didion used flashbacks, allegory, imagery, and metaphors. Many tools to help the readers better understand her trauma. She also used inner monologues to put the readers in her shoes.⁶ Her grieving process contains a lot of switching between the rational and the irrational as well as reality and magic. By allowing the reader to

¹ «Grief», <https://www.apa.org>, opened 4th May 2023, <https://www.apa.org/topics/grief>.

² Andrew Bennett og Nicholas Royle, *An introduction to literature, criticism and theory*, Fifth edition (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 129.

³ Janne Stigen Drangsholt og forfatter og førsteamanuensis ved UiS, «En sorg som min. | Aftenposten Innsikt», opened 27th of April 2023, <https://www.aftenposteninnsikt.no/kulturtrender/en-sorg-som-min>.

⁴ Drangsholt og UiS.

⁵ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 7.

⁶ «Reflecting on the Year of Magical Thinking | by Aadit Vyas | Curious | Medium», opened 11th of May 2023, <https://medium.com/curious/reflecting-on-a-year-of-magical-thinking-b906d943c72a>.

witness her grief, Didion's book became an important book regarding camaraderie.⁷ In this thesis I will analyze Didion's use of language, through close readings and how this conveys the theme of grief in her memoir.

Theory, method, and material

The main source in this bachelor thesis is Didion's book *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Joan Didion, 2005). The book is a memoir about when her husband suddenly died, and she was left all alone with their daughter, who at the time was in a coma at the hospital. The book is about Didion's grieving process and how she struggled to grasp reality in the first year, therefore the name of the title, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Since the book is mostly her own experience, I wanted to add something to the concept of grief. I have added some articles, as well as some additional facts about Didion from online encyclopedias. Philippe Ariès wrote a book in 1981 called *The Hour of Our Death* which contains a long history on Western attitude towards death. It is a book with many takes on different types of death, our perception of it and how it has changed societies throughout the years. I wanted to especially look at chapter 12 called *Death Denied*, where I could incorporate it in Didion's own story.⁸ I also used *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory*, and *How to Read Literature* to achieve a deeper understanding of words such as *wounds*, and *narrative*.

Discussion

Didion was an American writer and author, who wrote many important works. For several years, between the 60's and the 70's she made a huge impact on how community, culture and politics were viewed in the US. Before writing the memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* she had mostly written non-fiction, but also some novels and some manuscripts. An important detail about Didion is that after 1967 she was one of the most important commentator and

⁷ Jacqueline Dooley, «A Griever's Review of "The Year of Magical Thinking"», *Grief Book Club* (blog), 6th of March 2022, <https://medium.com/grief-book-club/a-griever-s-review-of-the-year-of-magical-thinking-1beb3fd0528f>.

⁸ Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).

observer of the American society. The National Medal of Art was given to her by Barack Obama in 2013, which indicates how her role as an author and writer mattered.⁹

Narrative is the “semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way”.¹⁰ Narrative was an important aspect for Didion in everything she wrote. By being aware of the narrative Didion always knew the end of the story. She used to be the omniscient author, but while writing this book she wasn’t aware of the ending herself. This time it was a story she went through herself, while writing it. Many authors are omniscient and as a reader one is expected to not ask questions and to trust that the author have all the answers. In Didion’s case one might dare to say that the reader might know more than Didion herself in this book.¹¹ An example is when Didion reflects on one of her physical reactions to her husband’s death and talks about how one might not want food while in grief.

Those who are in great distress want no food, but if it is handed to them, they will mechanically take it, and something warm to start digestion and stimulate impaired circulation is what they most need.¹²

In her book, Didion often wrote as a person looking in from the outside. In the quote above she talked about food for grievers in a more general sense. She used the word *those* as if she’s not one of them, but previously she mentioned that she struggled to eat herself. The lack of eating is a common response to grief, and even though she mentioned that she struggled herself, she continued to write as if it didn’t apply to her. Throughout the book she often wrote of responses that she might experience but that it is mostly something that everyone else experiences.

Didion referred to several books and tried to reflect on what they say. As a writer herself, it might seem like she tried to find answers that confirm what she believed and was already familiar with. She might find it easier to put words to it if she could look at other people’s words. When writing the book, she was still in her grieving process and probably tried to find the right words to express her feelings and emotions. She once said, “We tell

⁹ Janne Stigen Drangsholt, «Joan Didion», i *Store norske leksikon*, 16th of December 2022, https://snl.no/Joan_Didion.

¹⁰ Paul Goring, Jeremy Hawthorn, og Domhnall Mitchell, *Studying Literature: The Essential Companion*, 2. ed (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 396.

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature*, First published in paperback (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 2014), 80.

¹² Didion Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 59.

ourselves stories in order to live”, which she did in this book as well. By writing this book, she told herself a story. She was used to have a story, an answer, and an ending to a story. Even though she had experienced the loss before, it was a new experience of losing her husband. This became an experience she didn’t have the answers to, an experience she lacked the words to. To look in other works and texts she might help herself and the reader to utter the grief in words.

Expectations

Grief can provide certain expectations, but it might be experienced in different ways. Didion commented in her book that one doesn’t know grief until it reaches you.¹³ One has perhaps witnessed others dealing with grief and may make assumptions based on that. Even though one might think one knows the common reactions to grief, one still might be baffled to what one might meet. One might have an expectation of shock, and sorrow, but it is hard to imagine the depths the shock and sorrow can cause. Grief is hard to utter in words and it is difficult for others to get a full understanding of the grief process. Didion mentions in her book that is not until you have experienced grief that you can recognize others who have experienced it. You meet people with a look of vulnerability and nakedness.¹⁴

There are five stages of grief, and all five stages contain multiple different emotions. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance can all look different, and can be individually experienced. Denial can for example be experienced as procrastination, forgetting, mindless behavior and can feel like shock, or numbness. Anger can look like sarcasm, irritability, and pessimism, while it might feel like frustration and impatience.¹⁵ There are a lot of feelings and experiences that have been collected in a common designation. For Didion it seems like all it took was time to reach the final stage, acceptance.

Ariès elaborates on how death is handled in the West throughout his book *The Hour of Our Death*, and in chapter 12 he elaborates on “death denied”. In one of the sub-titles in the chapter he talks about how the mourning process has evolved. The way of mourning in the West today is that one is expected to hide the grief inside when the funeral is done. While in earlier days it was mandatory to show grief in public, it is now expected to hide it and keep it

¹³ Didion, 188.

¹⁴ Didion, 74.

¹⁵ «Five Stages Of Grief - Understanding the Kubler-Ross Model», 7th of June 2022, <https://www.psycom.net/stages-of-grief>.

to oneself. The funeral is the final step, but the survivor remains with the grief all alone¹⁶. While most people might get some sort of closure at the funeral it might still be too soon for the survivor to be done grieving.

It was hard for Didion to finish the book *A Year of Magical Thinking* because she felt she still had a connection to John, her husband, while writing it. She thought that if she finished the book she would close of a chapter with her husband and would lose her connection and memories with him. Didion still mentions that writing the book was a way of dealing with the loss.¹⁷ The dead will not come back, and the cure against sorrow doesn't exist.¹⁸ Why did Didion choose to write a memoir? Prior to her husbands' death she had as mentioned mostly written non-fiction and novels, so why was it important for her to write in the style of a memoir regarding his death? First, we can look at what a memoir is. One could say that a memoir is a sub-category of an autobiography.¹⁹ Memoir should not be confused with a diary, because it is not written simultaneous with the events. Memoir closely relates to autobiography but is not quite the same. The genre of memoir gives the witness an opportunity to give its first impression of something that has happened in the past.²⁰ Some writers choose to write memoirs in a hope to process something, or maybe understand something better. Some might look at memoir as a way of healing or the process of healing. This is not the only right way to write a memoir, but a memoir can be a tool for healing. By writing a memoir you are still writing your own story, your own point of view, to look back at what happened.²¹ By writing a memoir about her husbands' death, Didion got the chance to work through the event, at her own pace, in her own space and mind.

Forgetting

¹⁶ Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 578.

¹⁷ Griffin Dunne, «Netflix», opened 27th of April 2023, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80117454?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C1521c0ef-3651-4d1f-91a5-90c4122b42a5-194413715_titles%2F1%2F%2Fjoan%2F0%2F0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C1521c0ef-3651-4d1f-91a5-90c4122b42a5-194413715_titles%2F1%2F%2Fjoan%2F0%2F0%2Cunknown%2C%2C1521c0ef-3651-4d1f-91a5-90c4122b42a5-194413715%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80117454%2CVideo%3A80117454%2CdetailsPagePlayButton.

¹⁸ Drangsholt og UiS, «En sorg som min. | Aftenposten Innsikt».

¹⁹ «Memoar», i *Wikipedia*, 6th of April 2021, <https://no.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Memoar&oldid=21409482>.

²⁰ «memoarer», i *Store norske leksikon*, 23rd of January 2023, <https://snl.no/memoarer>.

²¹ «Why Should You Write Memoir? - PsychAlive», opened 4th of May 2023, <https://www.psychalive.org/why-write-memoir/>.

The first night after his death, Didion had woken up with a bad feeling, as if she and her husband had been in a fight. It was a moment of forgetting what had happened before realizing.²² When looking back at the incident now, a few years later, Didion couldn't tell what they were meant to eat before he died. She also wanted to reconstruct the timeline of what happened, but often failed so.²³ About a year after John died, Didion finally received the autopsy in the mail. Why did it take 11 months for her to receive the autopsy? Yes, because Didion had written the wrong address.²⁴

The book is called *The Year of Magical Thinking* which reflects how she reacted to the death. It was a sudden death, where she suddenly found herself alone, in a space between reality and wishful thinking. It was a year that was affected by being caught in another space and time. A year without acceptance, a year without reasonable thinking. Didion wrote it as a memoir to reflect on what happened and how she coped with it, or at least tried to cope with it. When losing a loved one, one might experience a feeling of displacement, which is something we will look closer at in the text.

Grief

Didion lost both her husband and her daughter in the span of a couple of years.²⁵ In the book *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion writes about how her husband suddenly died by the table. She tried to write how she experienced the different aspects of grief and how it affected her. When her husband, John, died their daughter had been sick and lied at the time in a coma.

Grief comes in many shapes and sizes and can be hard to utter in words.²⁶ Grief can make it hard to find the language and hard to collect our thoughts.²⁷ Didion mentioned in her book about two types of grief. The first type of grief is the “preferred” one, where it is associated with “growth”, “development”, which is the “normal bereavement”.²⁸ The second one is called “complicated grief”, often called “pathological bereavement”. An example of “pathological bereavement” is when the deceased and the survivor were especially dependent

²² Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 31.

²³ Didion, 63.

²⁴ Didion, 199.

²⁵ «Joan Didion», i *Wikipedia*, 21. april 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Joan_Didion&oldid=1150996611.

²⁶ Bennett og Royle, *An introduction to literature, criticism and theory*, 131.

²⁷ Drangsholt og UiS, «En sorg som min. | Aftenposten Innsikt».

²⁸ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 48.

on each other.²⁹ American Psychology Association defines the “normal” or “preferred” grief to last from six months to up to two years. The “complicated grief” can be defined as many things; absent grief, delayed grief, complicated grief, and distorted grief as well as some more.³⁰ The second type of grief is harder to explain, it is more complex and are quite nuanced.

How grief and death are connected is quite complex. Death is final, but for mourners that are left behind gets a sense of surrealness. Didion found herself in a space between the living and the dead. She mentioned that she felt that the life she was used to was suddenly obliterated.³¹ Grief changes everything, in an instant, grief changes everything that makes sense. In the five stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, there are a lot of different emotions involved. The five stages of grief were first introduced in 1969, by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, and is called the Kübler-Ross model. She described the model in a book she wrote called *On Death and Dying*, where she describes the work she had done with terminally ill patients. There has been some debate and criticism regarding this subject, mostly because it is often mistaken to be an absolute “recipe” for the experience of grief. She comments that the model is not linear, and can be experienced differently, or not at all.³²

In Didion’s case one can argue that she experienced all 5 stages. In the beginning after John’s death, Didion was in denial of it happening. She knew it had happened, but she had a small hope inside that she could get him back. In the second stage it is anger. Didion felt anger, especially when dreaming about John and how he left her stranded on the tarmac. She felt abandoned and reacted in anger. Then it is bargaining. She wanted to alter the present and wanted him back into her future. Didion experienced a kind of depression. She got a feeling of meaninglessness during her grief process, as well as she felt lonely. On a trip to Boston, she experienced a feeling of panic, but eventually she arrived at the final destination, acceptance. It was hard, and it took some time, but she could finally let go of the thought that he might return, and rather start to adapt to her new life, alone. She got the confirmation that there was nothing she could do to save him.³³ She accepted that he was dead, but after a year,

²⁹ Didion, 48.

³⁰ «12 Types of Grief You May Not Know About», opened 11th of May 2023, <https://www.betterup.com/blog/types-of-grief>.

³¹ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 27.

³² «Five Stages Of Grief - Understanding the Kubler-Ross Model».

³³ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 206.

she had become more fragile. She was afraid that she might forget him and would try her best to keep his memory alive.³⁴

I could not give away the rest of his shoes. I stood there for a moment, then realized why: he would need shoes if he was to return.³⁵

The first stage of grief is denial and lasted for an amount of time after his death. She never defined it as denial, but it was magical thinking, hoping for him to return. She wrote as if she wanted the readers to sympathize, that the readers should agree with her, even though she was aware that it was a wishful thought. Didion never mentioned the five stages of grief in the book, but as a reader one can recognize the different elements she went through in relation to the five stages. She focused more on what expectations one might have regarding death and grief. Her book is mainly about the first year after the incident, when the five stages are key. Time is an important factor in grief, how time helps to process thoughts, and to help work through different things. While you have time to work through grief, there is also the concept of being out of space and time. One might often feel like being on the outside of the world while grieving. Time has no timeline, and there is no conclusion to how long a grieving period should or could last. Time can be your friend as well as your enemy. While loss can become easier over time, the memories you once shared can fade away. Death is final, and time can't change that.

Someone else

“I had taped the numbers by the telephone in case someone in the building needed an ambulance. Someone else”.³⁶ Didion had the number to the ambulance in arms reach if anything would ever happen. She had it in case she needed to call on behalf of someone in the building. Calling for their own need was never realistic, or as she thought. We all live in a world where death is inevitable, but no one can quite grasp the possibility to how death can happen to you.³⁷

After Didion's parents' death she got a letter from friend, formerly a priest who wrote:

³⁴ Didion, 225.

³⁵ Didion, 37.

³⁶ Didion, 11.

³⁷ Didion, 11.

Despite our preparation, indeed, despite our age, dislodges things deep in us, sets off reactions that surprise us and that may cut free memories and feelings that we had thought gone to ground long ago. We might, in that indeterminate period they call mourning, be in a submarine, silents on the ocean's bed, aware of the depth charges, now near and now far, buffeting us with recollections.³⁸

Despite this wasn't written to Didion when her husband John died, it still represents how grief sometimes feels. The priest mentions how forgotten emotions and feelings can resurface. There might be some emotions or feelings that had been locked away, or that were hidden in the back of our heads without us knowing. Resurfacing feelings and memories can be a regular reaction to grief. One starts to reminisce and start to cherish the moments that are long gone. When you live side by side with someone for a long time, one starts to be comfortable, and you get co-dependent on each other. So, when a sudden death occurs it disrupts the normal routine you have created together. When your significant other suddenly disappears one can feel incredibly alone. Like a submarine as the priest mentions in his letter. A submarine alone in the deep ocean. While in the ocean one may get hit by waves, which could shift us in different directions.

Waves

Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life.³⁹

Grief can often be experienced as waves. The waves can come from any direction, and with force, it can be overwhelming while experiencing them. Didion used waves as a word to explain how she felt. Every emotion she felt, could show up like a wave. It could come unexpected, and it could knock you over. She used waves to explain the experience, a word and language that anyone can relate to. Waves and the ocean are familiar to most people, which can make it easier to relate to. It becomes a metaphor that can help people relate to how grief is perceived.

³⁸ Didion, 27.

³⁹ Didion, 27.

Waves are described in Didion's book as "sensations of somatic distress occurring in waves." The sensations of distress can be experienced as tightness in the throat, shortness of breath, an empty feeling in the abdomen, lack of muscular power while it can also be experienced as tension or mental pain.⁴⁰ These are all common symptoms of grief, while the way waves are a symbol for grief is how these feelings can come and go. Looking at the ocean it can sometimes be calm, and sometimes it can be big waves, but if you learn how to swim it can make it manageable.⁴¹ They can come suddenly and then leave just as fast. Didion wrote in her book that she also started to feel those types of waves the next morning after her husband's death.⁴²

Irrational thinking

Didion wrote in her book how she didn't want to get rid of her husband's clothes just in case he came back. "Yet I was myself in no way prepared to accept this news as final: there was a level on which I believed that what had happened remained reversible".⁴³ Didion used a simple language to help anyone understand what she meant. She knew in her heart that it was final, but she couldn't quite grasp that it was over. Throughout the first mourning period she was hopeful that he might come back. That there were still hope that he would make it. This was even still the case after she had seen him dead.⁴⁴ To hope for the safe return of a loved one is not uncommon, which makes it relevant to other mourners. Didion wrote about how grief deranged her mind into thinking that he might come back.⁴⁵ She knew that it was a common thing to do after someone's death, to get rid of their clothes, but she had resisted. Still, she knew it was some part of a ritual that people did, which is why she felt she needed to do it, but she still couldn't get rid of his shoes. The reason why she couldn't do it was because she thought he would need his shoes if he came back.

While thinking back on how she acted she argued that she didn't think rationally. Didion wrote that she had the thoughts of a child, as if she could change and reverse the narrative.⁴⁶ The day after his death Didion got a call from the hospital and was asked if she

⁴⁰ Didion, 28.

⁴¹ Kimberly Hollister LMHC, «Grief Is Like The Ocean», *Elevate Counseling Services, Inc.* (blog), 7th of July 2018, <https://www.elevate-counseling.com/grief-is-like-the-ocean/>.

⁴² Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 28.

⁴³ Didion, 32.

⁴⁴ Didion, 13.

⁴⁵ Didion, 34.

⁴⁶ Didion, 35.

would donate her husband's organs. She instantly felt the answer to be no, but then she answered that she would have to discuss it with her daughter, who at the time was in a coma. She also mentioned that both her daughter and her husband was unconscious at that moment. She immediately recognized her respond as unreasonable.⁴⁷

“How could he come back if they took his organs, how could he come back if he had no shoes?”⁴⁸ While writing this, she tried to rationalize her thoughts, as if he was coming back. It seems like she tries to make the reader agree that she couldn't possibly donate his organs, because he could return. The reader will get a feeling of sympathy because everyone would like him to return. The reader has some sort of knowledge that he won't return, even though the author, Didion, was still in a mindset of wishful thinking.

About three months after John's death they finally had a funeral and service, where also their daughter could attend, well and healthy. They had a cremation, they had a service, and they had witnessed him being placed in the wall with a marble plate.⁴⁹ Didion had finally done the ritual, and it didn't bring him back.⁵⁰ Didion learned that the most common responses to death were shock, numbness, and a sense of disbelief, which she could recognize in herself. First after a while she realized the incident has happened. That her mind had recognized and accepted it.⁵¹

Dreams, Anger and Responsibility

Even though it took some time before Didion could recognize that the death was real, she felt a huge amount of guilt towards it. She wanted so bad to fix what she “broke” and bring him back.⁵² She couldn't, so why did she feel this way? While reflecting on her relationship with John, she looked back at many happy, shared moments. She also had a lot of dreams, one where she saw John get onboard a plane and travelled, while Didion was left behind at the airport. She felt abandoned, and alone.⁵³ As a result of this dream, she was filled with anger. She became angry because he had left her on the tarmac. How does this play a role regarding

⁴⁷ Didion, 39.

⁴⁸ Didion, 41.

⁴⁹ Didion, 42.

⁵⁰ Didion, 43.

⁵¹ Didion, 46.

⁵² Didion, 160.

⁵³ Didion, 161.

her guilt? Because anger creates guilt, and guilt creates anger. So, while she felt anger because of her unconscious mind in her dreams, she still felt guilty for what had happened.⁵⁴

John had a pacemaker inserted in June of 2003, only months before his death. Didion knew that his heart was weak, and that he had trouble with it earlier.⁵⁵ She also started to ask herself, how she hadn't been more prepared for his death. His father had died of cardiac death in his fifties.⁵⁶ Then John's death should be expected? Perhaps one could take some precautions, but expect it, no. Time of death can never be expected. This might also be a common reaction when grieving, trying to rationalize it, and make sense of it.

Lonely and sad

Didion reacted first and foremost as a wife would after her husband's death. She became greatly sad and felt extremely lonely.⁵⁷ The special case with Didion and her husband John is that they spent most of their time with each other. They both worked as authors and worked from home. Didion also mentions that John usually edited her pieces.⁵⁸ They were co-dependent, and when you have a person you share almost every single moment with, it will suddenly be very quiet if that person dies.

“A single person is missing for you, and the whole world is empty”.⁵⁹ To lose someone is something many can relate to, and while it can be hard to put words to it, this quote is quite descriptive. For everyone else it is a single person that is gone, while for the person sharing life together will feel like the world is empty. This can add to the loneliness of grief. While you feel like the whole world is over, everyone else moves on faster than you and “forgets” about your loneliness. No one can quite understand how the loneliness feels. Although many can show their support for a long time, you will still be the one who have lost a spouse. You will be alone in an empty house and must start over.

The Vortex

⁵⁴ Didion, 160.

⁵⁵ Didion, 79.

⁵⁶ Didion, 41.

⁵⁷ Didion, 26.

⁵⁸ Didion, 112.

⁵⁹ Didion, 192.

A while after John's funeral, their daughter Quintana and her husband thought it would be nice to travel to Los Angeles and enjoy the warmer weather, Didion even encouraged it. After they landed Quintana fell to the ground and was rushed to the hospital. Didion then traveled to Los Angeles to be with her daughter and her son-in-law at the hospital.

The hotel she stayed at was familiar, a place where Didion and her husband had spent many days at.⁶⁰ It was a safe place for Didion to be while Quintana was at the hospital.⁶¹ Didion was settled in at their "usual" hotel, however, she still tried to avoid the more familiar places. They had lived in Los Angeles for over 20 years and had many shorter visits.⁶² Didion were in Los Angeles for five weeks, but never visited their old home⁶³. Didion was afraid to become triggered and trapped of memories shared with John and Quintana, and the what ifs that might follow.⁶⁴ Didion herself called it "the Vortex effect".⁶⁵

To explain what a vortex is, we can look at an explanation Freud presented:

Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it ... It is remarkable that this painful unpleasure is taken as a matter of course by us.⁶⁶

By this statement Freud tried to explain how he saw grief, and Didion felt it could be explained as a vortex.⁶⁷ Didion experienced the vortex as being pulled back in time, back to a memory when everything was different. The vortexes she experienced were like escaping reality and remembering how life was before everything happened.⁶⁸ Didion experienced several vortexes when she became aware of different memories. A trap to fall in because time isn't reversible, making it harder to process reality. By looking at a familiar location, a building, or think of a memory could trigger the vortex. An example when Didion experienced a vortex was when she looked back at a memory from the time they lived in Los Angeles. Didion had been home alone when she suddenly noticed an ambulance across the

⁶⁰ Didion, 113.

⁶¹ Didion, 114.

⁶² Didion, 113.

⁶³ Didion, 114.

⁶⁴ Didion, 118.

⁶⁵ Didion, 107.

⁶⁶ Didion, 133.

⁶⁷ Didion, 133.

⁶⁸ Didion, 107.

road, and the next day she had realized that her neighbor had become a widow. While looking at the ambulance she had called John who was in New York for work then, and at that time she had started to get used to the idea of moving to New York and do something new.⁶⁹ Thinking back at this memory she now started to think of the what ifs. What if they never moved to New York back then? Would Quintana still have lived in Los Angeles? Would she never get pneumonia and end up in the hospital? Both in New York and Los Angeles? The vortex made her think that every incident could be avoided if they never moved, only based on her one phone call with John.⁷⁰

Freud meant that mourners search for attachment, something that has been lost. Mourners have experienced a detachment, looking for new attachments' other places. Freud also suggests that mourners are in a state of melancholy, making it plausible to increase melancholy if the mourning process fails.⁷¹ By writing the book Didion created a language to interpret the grief into understandable words for the mourners.

Vortex makes the mourner be paralyzed by memories. Memories that are mundane. It was not until Didion achieved emotional fortitude that she sensed the vortex to subside. Throughout her book, Didion tries to distinguish between grief and mourning. How grief on one hand is the emotional experience she faced, mourning was the process and journey of loss.⁷²

Conclusion

Grief happens, and grief is complex. It is experienced in many ways and we rarely experience a “normal grief”. One might assume it will be a “good” grief, with healing, but no one mentions how it can feel oblitative instead.⁷³ Grief is complicated, and it can feel meaningless. Didion wrote that meaningfulness as a child look a lot different from when she became an adult.⁷⁴ Didion put words to what grief is, and how it can be experienced. While she herself went through her grieving process, her book helps others make sense of it. By

⁶⁹ Didion, 131.

⁷⁰ Didion, 132.

⁷¹ AIPC, «Theories of Loss and Grief», Explore Our Extensive Counselling Article Library, 15th of March 2010, <https://www.aipc.net.au/articles/theories-of-loss-and-grief/>.

⁷² «Reflecting on the Year of Magical Thinking | by Aadit Vyas | Curious | Medium».

⁷³ Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 188.

⁷⁴ Didion, 189.

putting words to it, she lifted grief out of the dark. Didion said that one never can be prepared for the unending absence, the void and the meaninglessness that will come.⁷⁵ For Didion, wishful thinking was the thing that she spent most time doing. As an author she used writing as a tool through her grieving process. In a span of two years Didion lost two of her closest people, both her husband and her daughter, the two people she loved the most. Two years that were filled with sorrow, loneliness, anger, what ifs, reminiscence, irrational thinking, missing memory and eventually acceptance.

By writing this book, she opened for a new way to face grief, and by using understandable language, readers become included in her experience. Grief is a process that looks different for everyone, but by putting words to it, it can help people better understand each other's grieving process. As the reader looks at Didion going through the five stages of grief, the reader might recognize the five stages as more relatable and plausible. By defining her grief through her language makes it easier to understand grief. By looking at the close readings we've got an insight in Didion's journey after her husband's death. The reader has become included in the book, in her journey, while she navigated herself through the grief process. Throughout her book Didion responds to how grief shows up in different ways and by lifting grief out of the dark it isn't longer a scary and unknown thing. While the reader becomes included in her process, she defused grief as a concept one might not have great experience with from before.

⁷⁵ Didion, 189.

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