The Publicly Private Joan Didion: Literary Celebrity Combining Literary Persona and Photographic Images

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The Publicly Private Joan Didion: Literary Celebrity
Combining Literary Persona and Photographic Images

by
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ABSTRACT

The Publicly Private Joan Didion: Literary Celebrity
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by

Jessica Salfen

Advisor: Linda M. Grasso

This thesis is not a traditional biography of Joan Didion — it is an examination of her celebrity and her dual personas that make her public face. It begins with an analysis of Didion’s 1967 essay “Goodbye to All That” as demonstrative of her literary persona. Then by tracing the prominent times and places the essay was published and paid tribute to, this thesis documents Didion’s rising celebrity to her status as a member of the literary elite. The second half of the thesis is an exploration of Didion’s persona through photographs. Where her literary persona shares intimate details of her personal life with the reader, Didion’s photographic image — the “cool-girl” poses, not smiling, hiding behind large sunglasses, holding a cigarette, a drink in her hand — fuels the impression she is guarded, elusive, and yet also alluring. Didion’s public persona is made up of these two seemingly contradictory halves. They work well together, allowing Didion space within her celebrity to control what and how she shares personal information with the public. This is how she ultimately controls her own story.
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Introduction

Introducing Joan Didion, Literary Celebrity, and the Need for Personas

Joan Didion is a literary celebrity who has remained in the public eye through her writing and photographic image for over fifty years. Her public persona warrants a critical study because by writing about American culture with a critical eye for decades she has intertwined her literary voice and photographed image with the cultures and movements she describes in print. This persona is a constructed duality which allows her to reveal parts of herself to connect with her readers, but in reality it also creates privacy for her real self. The images of Didion available to the public are carefully designed in a way that the viewer receives the same messages about Didion again and again, reinforcing the persona Didion wants the public to know. She is penetrating. She is a mother. She is unshakeable. She shares parts of herself but she is also just out of reach. She is a loner and elusive. Despite this sometimes contradictory disposition, Didion has a huge following of fans, professionals and amateurs who are fiercely loyal and protective of her, emulating and promoting her work and persona.

My research focuses on two components that make up Joan Didion’s public persona, which upholds her position as a literary celebrity: her literary persona and how other writers commend and emulate her work, and her public persona as constructed through photographic and video images. I analyze both aspects of Didion’s persona, which require a great amount of control on her part. First I look at her literary persona, the basis of her work, and how it is lauded and analyzed by peers and academics. Second, I examine how Didion uses photography as an outward performance aimed to create allure, and how she manages her performance in front of the camera to complement her literary persona. Ultimately, looking at these facets of Didion’s public face will show how Didion’s reputation and legacy are not based solely on her written work alone as she makes it
appear. Rather, Didion’s public persona is carefully crafted, curated, and maintained; it is separate from Didion’s private self and sustained by her own as well as the efforts of others.

Born in 1934, Joan Didion spent her youth in Sacramento, except for two elementary school years when her family followed her military father to Washington, North Carolina, and Colorado before returning to California. She earned a degree in English from Berkeley College in 1956, after which she moved to New York City to work at the fashion and female lifestyle magazine *Vogue*. Eight years later, in December 1964, she married fellow writer John Gregory Dunne and the following spring the couple moved to Los Angeles.

Early in her career, Didion distinguished herself through her nonfiction essays and journalism, inserting herself and unexpected details of her private life, which became a signature of her literary style. For example, in her book *The White Album* (1979) in the essay titled "In the Islands," Didion explains that she, her husband, and daughter are confined to their Hawaiian hotel room on account of the tsunami threats from the earlier 7.5 Richter scale earthquake along the Aleutian islands. Then in the second paragraph, Didion nonchalantly mentions a personal aside about being in Hawaii in the first place. "We are here on this island in the middle of the Pacific in lieu of filing for divorce" (133), she says. This bomb-dropping style of intimacy that leaves the reader yearning for more personal details is a key aspect of the New Journalism writing style Didion became known for in the 1960s and 1970s.

New Journalism was different from other reporting at the time. Loosely defined, New Journalism, a name coined by Tom Wolfe, meant that the journalist became immersively entwined in the topic at hand. It is nonfiction presented as narrative, journalism as storytelling. This personal element of Didion’s writing is the major appeal to her audience, and early in her career the style linked her with other big name, mostly male, New Journalism authors like Wolfe, Truman Capote,
Norman Mailer, and Hunter S. Thompson. Why Didion was often the token female reflects the male dominance of the publishing world of the time, but it also shows how this new style quickly gained attention for a group of then young writers in the literary world. Wolfe in his 1975 book *The New Journalism* elaborates,

> All of a sudden, in the mid-Sixties, here comes a bunch of these lumpenproles, no less, a bunch of slick-magazine and Sunday supplement writers with no literary credentials whatsoever in most cases - only they’re using the techniques of novelists, even the most sophisticated ones - and on top of that they’re helping themselves to the insights of the men of letters while they’re at it - and at the same time they’re still doing their low-life legwork, their “digging,” their hustling, their damnable Locker Room Genre reporting - they’re taking all these roles at the same time - in other words, they’re ignoring literary class lines that have been almost a century in the making. (40)

Didion’s inclusion in this group of New Journalists may not have had so much to do with her gender, but rather with her appearance in magazines like *Vogue, Mademoiselle, and The Saturday Evening Post*. In the articles she published in these magazines, she used a dramatically different novelistic writing style that helped her stand out and establish her name as a literary celebrity. The immersive writing style she practiced allowed a lot of room to lay out her literary persona, giving readers an understanding of who she was on the page and who she may be off the page. However, when pressed in public, Didion remained private and elusive by being brief and direct in interviews, which fed the desire to know her better.

As a literary celebrity with a career that spreads over the span of five decades, Didion has written thirteen nonfiction books, five novels, six screenplays, and countless essays, reviews, and
articles. She is not famous for simply being famous (Ommundsen 244), nor are her published works alone responsible for her status as a literary celebrity. For Didion, her accomplishments in the literary field combined with her public life maintain her relevance as an author and as a literary celebrity.

Joe Moran’s theory of literary celebrity helps us to understand Didion’s status as a published author who is known to the public as a writer apart from her written works. In his book *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (2000), Moran explains that establishing and maintaining celebrity entails a complex and active engagement that goes beyond authorship. “The author represents both cultural capital and [is a] marketable commodity, [she must] be commercially successful and penetrate into mainstream media, but also perceived as in some sense culturally ‘authoritative’” (6). What Moran means is that while Didion must maintain connections with influential members of publication houses and their media, she must also position herself and her work as authentic and desirable. Her work itself is as important as her image; personality alone does not sell books. Both image and content must appeal as valuable so the public will continue to buy her books and seek to engage with her outside of her writing. To do this effectively, writers like Didion develop a persona to present to the public.

Moran’s ideas lead to the question of what constitutes celebrity. In *Star Authors*, John Cawelti discusses the distinction between literary fame and literary celebrity. According to Cawelti, “The test of artistic fame is that one’s words or images remain in the minds of men [sic]; the test of celebrity is being followed everywhere by a photographer…The object of celebrity is the person; the object of fame is some accomplishment, action, or creative work” (qtd in Moran, 3). This definition assumes that authors’ artistic endeavors can be shared with the mass public and consumed in a vacuum, void of celebrity media and marketing. Today, contemporary authors must
develop and maintain a celebrity status in order to achieve fame. Authors must have some sort of relationship with the public to have their work read.

Joan Didion has always understood the need for maintaining a form of celebrity status. To cultivate a relationship with the public, she developed a public persona that worked in harmony with her literary persona. Evident through the legion of her cool-woman photographs, she slowly tweaked and perfected her public persona throughout the decades, staying relevant with the changing times of media and publicity; indeed, she was a forerunner in pre-selfie self-promotion.

Persona is an assumed character adopted by an author in his or her writing (OED online). Its purpose in the celebrity driven literary marketplace may seem disheartening, even intimidating, to writers like introverted Didion who have so much to say on the page but so little to say in public. However, Didion was and continues to be creative with her persona, manipulating her image in photographs to show readers she is nearly the textbook definition of cool, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as, “not affected by passion or emotion, dispassionate; controlled, deliberate, not hasty; calm, composed” (OED online). Presenting this persona in images where she smokes cigarettes, wears large sunglasses, and rarely smiles, ties in well with the Didion persona on the page who pivots in her very rhythmic, eloquent sentences a demeanor of intimate-revealing while observing-reporting the events and culture around her. The cool-persona also grants her a large amount of space; it suggests she is not bubbly or talkative. This reflects her personality; in interviews Didion is known for her brevity, and several sources report that when together, her husband Dunne did the talking for her (Anolik; Flanagan). In all, Joan Didion’s public persona served her well; it allowed the public to have access to her, but in a way it also made the public understand her in her own terms.

Often the literary celebrity persona is similar to the persona the author presents in their written work; however, like any other type of celebrity, the persona presented to the public may
differ from the private individual. Moran clarifies how writers can creatively use this flexible margin to their advantage. He states, “Authors actively negotiate their own celebrity rather than having it simply imposed on them” (10). Moran means authors like Didion have more room for a private self than other types of celebrities who are famous for being in the public eye as entertainers. This is because authors are known for their written work as compared to physical performers, like actors, who are more easily recognized because they perform in public.

Moran also helps us to see how Didion straddles the public lifestyle of literary celebrity by pointing to the fine line between keeping a form of privacy while still meeting the public demands that literary celebrity requires. He explains how the author risks losing authenticity by contradicting the literary persona that the public associates with them. For example, if an author is seen eating meat after writing the praises of a vegetarian lifestyle. At the same time, the author-celebrity must avoid being too elusive so that the public does not lose interest. Ultimately, if the author becomes irrelevant, they lose their star power. Didion balances this tension by projecting a persona of being simultaneously straightforward and remote in photographs and interviews, which creates a barrier between herself and the public.

Didion’s public persona is more guarded than her literary persona. She is a loner and prefers time to herself, as she plainly states in her “Goodbye to All That” essay: “I began to cherish the loneliness of it, the sense that at any given time no one need know where I was or what I was doing” (235). Though she is not reclusive, this solitariness works to her advantage and disadvantage. Moran elaborates, “[T]he celebrity attempts to authenticate its image of the author by a fascination with the ‘private’ self, which means that there is sometimes little escape for authors from the imaging effects of celebrity” (62). Didion portrayed in photography bridges this gap between maintaining a high profile for the public and also remaining insular in her private self. Photographs, of which there are many, build on Didion’s public identity of being cool and
elusive. Her writing gives the reader details of her personal life, but she is notably private in public, allowing photography to fuel the impression that she is a woman of few spoken words. Didion’s celebrity depends on the public having access to her, and the photos demonstrate her complying with this demand. The photographs lend to, but do not dominate, her public persona.

Following Didion’s return to California in 1964, she continued to write many essays, books, novels and screenplays. In 1988 she and Dunne moved to New York where both continued their literary careers until late 2003 when two catastrophic events occurred. First, Didion’s 37-year-old daughter Quintana suffered an unexpected and severe illness causing her to fall into a coma. Four days later on December 30th John Gregory Dunne, Didion’s husband of nearly forty years, suffered sudden heart failure and died. Didion waited to hold Dunne’s funeral services for three months until Quintana awoke from her coma and recovered enough to attend. Then twenty months later in August 2005, Quintana passed away from complications of acute pancreatitis. Didion was then alone.

As a celebrity, Didion could not shield these private events from public discussion. In October 2005, just two months after Quintana’s death, Didion published *The Year of Magical Thinking*. The book is about processing her grief the first year without Dunne while caring for the often-hospitalized Quintana. The book was adapted into a Broadway play in 2007 starring Vanessa Redgrave. Didion later wrote *Blue Nights* in 2011 about Quintana’s death.

Writing about the deaths of her husband and daughter gave Didion a new authority over her private life. By making these private incidents public in the voice of her literary persona, Didion wrote as the character “Joan Didion.” In writing *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*, Didion merged her literary persona with the tragedies she experienced in her private life, and therefore her literary persona also suffered the loss of Dunne and Quintana. In interviews Didion could speak more freely about the personal loss once the “Joan Didion” character had experienced
the same tragedies. Joe Moran explains the phenomenon behind this concept. “The figure of the author is culturally constructed...the significance of promotion in contemporary culture means that the author authors the “author” even as he or she writes...they will never be out of the promotional loop” (67). In other words, because the public knows no difference between Didion’s private life and her literary and public personas, there must be overlap between the private and public. As a celebrity, she could not keep the topic of her family’s deaths private, yet no matter how Didion expresses her herself publicly, even in the face of tragedy, she reinforces her celebrity. In the case of the very private matter of the sudden deaths of her husband and daughter, Didion takes control of the private information becoming public on her terms, in her own words through the books, even though it means renewing attention on the tragedies themselves. The upsurge in celebrity status Didion experiences over the subsequent book sales, book tours, and promotion of the Broadway rendition of *The Year of Magical Thinking* reinforces this point.

To examine Didion’s status as a literary celebrity, this thesis considers two facets of Didion’s persona: her literary persona on the page and her persona in photographic images. Both personas merge and lean on one another, always coming back to Didion’s aim of complete control of her image. The first chapter discusses Didion’s 1967 essay “Goodbye to All That” to explain how she establishes her literary persona and how that persona, through this specific essay, has led to the continued success of Didion’s literary celebrity. The second chapter examines Didion’s use of photography and how important the physical representation of her “Joan Didion” character is in giving her some degree of privacy. In all, the two facets paint a portrait of Didion and how she has maintained her literary celebrity through the decades.
Chapter One

The Publicly Private Joan Didion: “Goodbye to All That” and Literary Celebrity

This chapter examines Joan Didion’s essay "Goodbye To All That" as an example of the work that has sustained and bolstered her authority in the craft of the personal essay, and in turn, her status as celebrity. I analyze “Goodbye to All That” in several contexts and over time beginning with its original publication in the January 1967 issue of The Saturday Evening Post, its position in the 1968 release of Didion's first nonfiction book Slouching Toward Bethlehem, placement in two literary anthologies edited by Phillip Lopate, Columbia University's former head of its nonfiction creative writing program, and the 2013 short story collection titled Goodbye to All That: Writers on Loving and Leaving New York, edited by Sari Botton. Although many of Didion's essays have been anthologized, I focus on "Goodbye to All That" and the ways it has been published, republished, and made into a literary tribute, because this particular essay serves as an example of how Didion's status as a literary celebrity was formed and remains firmly in place. Above all, this essay is the best way to examine Didion’s persona since “Goodbye to All That” is completely about Didion and her own experiences, whereas her other essays include her but focus primarily on other events or subjects.

Didion’s essay “Goodbye to All That,” originally published in 1967, sets the foundation for her literary persona. The narrative provides a loose history of her beginnings as a writer and establishes how her voice as the author is in cadence with her public persona. The essay begins with Didion reflecting on her twenty-year-old self, ruminating over how her naive optimism in first moving to New York City gave way to knowing, eight years later, that New York had ended for her like a relationship in which two people fall out of love. As the essay progresses, the reader learns of Didion’s slow disenchantment with the city as she matures from youth into adulthood.
Her disillusionment with New York is spelled out through examples of her conversations with seasoned New York friends, like one who complains of no “new faces,” and Didion reflects through hindsight, admitting she was too in love with the city at the time to understand what he meant, but now shares the sentiment.

The epigraph to “Goodbye To All That” is an old nursery rhyme, “How Many Miles to Babylon,” which establishes rhythm and thoughts of childhood for the reader, as well as creates the foundation for the essay that everyone emerges from childhood looking to explore the world around them. The essay then begins with Didion talking to either herself or the reader about the past.

It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends. I can remember now, with a clarity that makes the nerves in the back of neck constrict, when New York began for me, but I cannot lay my finger upon the moment it ended, can never cut through the ambiguities and second starts and broken resolves to the exact place on the page where the heroine is no longer as optimistic as she once was. (225)

This opening paragraph establishes Didion as a narrator relating her thoughts about her past in New York. Together with the dismissive title “Goodbye to All That,” it is clear her impressions of the period are unpleasant, but were not always so. She has grown up and moved on. The essay then moves to Didion’s beginnings in the city. In hindsight, she sees her sense of self immediately began to change.

When I first saw New York I was twenty, and it was summertime, and I got off a DC-7 at the old Idlewild temporary terminal in a new dress which had seemed very smart in Sacramento but seemed less smart already, even in the old Idlewild temporary
terminal, and the warm air smelled of mildew and some instinct, programmed by all
the movies I had ever seen and all the songs I had ever heard sung and all the stories
I had ever read about New York, informed me that it would never be quite the same
again. In fact it never was. (225)

Didion goes on to talk about the growing pains of moving to Manhattan, how she was timid
in not knowing her way around, or the customs. She reflects, “Was anyone ever so young? I am
here to tell you that someone was” (227). And then the tone changes, and she tells the reader her
essay is not just happy, naive reminiscences.

In retrospect it seems to me that those days before I knew the names of all the bridges
were happier than the ones that came later, but perhaps you will see that as we go
along. Part of what I want to tell you is what it is like to be young in New York, how
six months can become eight years with the deceptive ease of a film dissolve, for that
is how those years appear to me now, in a long sequence of sentimental dissolves and
old-fashioned trick shots – the Seagram Building fountains dissolve into snowflakes,
I enter a revolving door at twenty and come out a good deal older, and on a different
street. But most particularly I want to explain to you, and in the process perhaps to
myself, why I no longer live in New York. It is often said that New York is a city for
only the very rich and the very poor. It is less often said that New York is also, at least
for those of us who came there from somewhere else, a city for only the very young.
(227)

The essay expands into Didion’s memories of friends and parties, how everything was new
and interesting, the thrill of “the mysterious nexus of all love and money and power” (231),
walking the winter streets looking into the windows of brownstones, and meeting people from all over the world. Didion muses on some of the friends who seemed bitter, jaded, and tired of New York, while she was full of love for the city and these friends. At the time, she did not understand the disillusionment and brushes it off. Yet she reflects on her then transient living habits: never buying furniture, staying in friend’s apartments, keeping the flight schedule to Sacramento in her nightstand near the city map of her hometown that she hangs on her bedroom wall. For as much as she loved New York, she admits she was always prepared to leave at a moment’s notice. And then Didion says she is twenty-eight and suddenly she feels like everything is different.

That was the year, my twenty-eighth, when I was discovering that not all of the promises would be kept, that some things are in fact irrevocable and that it had counted after all, every evasion and every procrastination, every mistake, every word, all of it. (233)

After this revelation, she describes the year in detail with a more critical eye. At a bar she watches the television broadcast of an astronaut launch but is distracted by a cockroach on the floor. She finds herself relishing her time working at Vogue as refuge from otherwise wandering the empty city streets on sleepless nights and hiding out at friends’ apartments so no one knows where to find her. Though she admits,

that late in the game I still liked going to parties, all parties, bad parties, Saturday-afternoon parties given by recently married couples who lived in Stuyvesant Town, West Side parties given by unpublished or failed writers who served cheap red wine and talked about going to Guadalajara, Village parties where all the guests worked
for advertising agencies and voted for reform Democrats, press parties at Sardi’s, the worst kids of parties. (236)

But from this she turns her lesson learned to the reader.

You will have perceived by now that I was not one to profit by the experience of others, that it was a very long time indeed before I stopped believing in new faces and began to understand the lesson in that story, which was that it is distinctly possible to stay too long at the Fair. (236)

Didion then talks about what she did after realizing just how bad things were for her that year. Though she married the following year, she was still depressed four months later and her husband suggested they move to California for six months. “It was three years ago he told me that, and we have lived in Los Angeles since” (238). In her closing paragraph Didion can’t help but compare the beauty of her new home to the grittiness of New York, and it only solidifies for her that she made the right choice, now the experience of New York feels long ago in the past.

Why does this resonate with readers so powerfully? Why is this essay so important? To understand and begin analysis of Didion’s literary persona within the essay, author Caitlin Flanagan in her The Atlantic article “The Autumn of Joan Didion,” describes Didion’s literary style.

What Didion wrote about were the exquisitely tender and often deeply melancholy feelings that are such a large part of the inner lives of women and especially of very young women—and girls—who are leaving behind the uncomplicated, romance-drenched state of youth and coming to terms with what comes next.
Flanagan links the majority of Didion’s fans as female to Didion’s seven years working at *Vogue* that taught Didion the ins and outs of fashion and decorating, knowledge deeply imbedded into Didion’s writing style. Flanagan then ties this to Didion writing about women and status culture and elaborates,

There can’t be a novelist who writes with more authority about clothes. If you are going to pay serious attention to women—to their sense of themselves, their position (social, political, economic), their assumptions about the face they are presenting to their world, it helps a good deal if you know exactly what they are wearing.

In one sense Flanagan is correct; however, loving and leaving New York is not a gender-specific topic. Didion’s writing style resonates with men and women alike, and the essay, a great piece of writing, stands as an example of failure turned to success, and it grounds her literary persona as a member of elite circles, a reimagined 1960s version of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Gatsby partygoers.

Didion uses “Goodbye to All That” to establish her history as member of the elite and upper classes, even if just by association, as she describes how she navigates through New York life and its gritty charms. In the essay, detailing her eight years as a New Yorker, Didion only appears to befriend literary and other elites at parties. While she scoffs at her senior coworkers at *Vogue* who recommend she buy tailor-made designer clothes, Didion never mentions anyone below her elevated class and privilege. She makes several references to her struggles to support herself in New York on her $65 a week paycheck, an undertaking many people can relate to, yet in the same breath she naively states she had no choice but to charge meals at the Bloomingdale's gourmet counter in order to eat. She then adds how she needed to keep such information from her father in California so he wouldn't send her money.
Though Didion’s youthful need to prove her independence is relatable, in the essay she is oblivious to others outside of her upper-middle class station. For example, Didion states how important it was that she financially "make it" on her own, but then she says, “If I needed money, I could always make it” (229), and pretentiously names three preposterous jobs: teen advice columnist, gold smuggler, and high-end call girl. These three jobs are noted in a disingenuous tone and reflect Didion’s disregard for class. In this way, she establishes several aspects of her persona: that she does not need to worry about money; that she never questions the talents of the company she keeps; and that she assumes that everyone can relate to her lifestyle and upbringing. She never acknowledges that her class privilege, even before she was a celebrity, is any different from anyone else’s, even if the opposite is blatantly true to the reader.

To further this point, even in Didion's imagination of those who grew up on the East coast outside of New York, she cannot muster a hypothetical lifestyle that doesn't involve coming into the city on a regular basis and frequenting high-end shops and neighborhoods. She marvels at the idea of New York being a livable city, “living in Xanadu” (231)—an idyllic place of great beauty and luxury—yet she cannot imagine the city existing outside of those upper-class experiences; nothing is out of reach because the cost is too high. Her reference to New York as Xanadu is one of several to her experience in the city as being like a fairy tale, one that ends with the sad realization that "one can stay too long at the Fair." Not a fair—the Fair.

Also important is how Didion builds on her literary persona within and outside this essay through discussion of her career as a writer and of her work at Vogue. Despite the unnamed reason for her sadness and gradual disillusionment with her New York life, Didion notes she that finds solace in her time at her office. This noteworthy information brings us to one of the main points of the essay. Regardless of what is happening in Didion's life, writing is what defines her. She realizes that her career is not the problem; it is maintaining her career in New York that vexes her. She gave
New York a chance and now it is time for her to leave and pursue her writing elsewhere. The essay itself, a reflection on her past, stands as evidence that her career continued.

The “Goodbye to All That” essay is timeless for its theme of lost youth, but more so for saying what nobody likes to say aloud: it is okay not to make it, it is okay to fall out of love with New York. It is a sentiment and an experience countless individuals have undergone: the youthful ambition of chasing dreams in New York City only to discover that the city isn't what they thought it would be, or that things didn't work out as they hoped. That Didion bluntly dismisses New York in just the title alone, “Goodbye to All That,” demonstrates how she waves off the giant coastal city, the center of American culture, the maker and breaker of dreams. This gesture encapsulates the tone of Didion’s literary persona.

Forever a skeptic, Didion is observer and reporter. In the essay Didion reports on her own experience of loving then rejecting New York, yet she writes about this reflection of her youth from a distance, from a place in the future that gives her space from the emotions she experienced at the time. This is the crux of Didion’s literary persona and best described by English professor Deborah Nelson in her 2017 book *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil*. Nelson states that Didion, “alternates between two diametrically opposed characterizations: one as an anxious and emotionally fragile sensitive and the other as an unsentimental, ironic, and unsympathetic critic” (147).

This literary style of reporting, even reporting her own feelings and experiences from a removed position, is Didion showing us the complex duality of her literary persona. To apply this directly to the essay, Didion's rejection of New York—saying goodbye to all that—as a memory of the struggles of youth from a position of having embraced adulthood, resonates with readers so much that the essay has granted Didion the exclusive privilege of being considered a New Yorker for life, making her a top authority on the subject of leaving New York. Since its initial publication,
"Goodbye to All That” has become a celebrated, discussed, republished, and inspirational essay to many, and a prime example of why Didion continues to be a literary celebrity.

The development of Didion’s literary celebrity traces back to her early work featured in *Vogue*, *Mademoiselle*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* before she published her first full collection of essays in book form in 1968. Writing in these American magazines allowed Didion to make her name and style known to a broad audience of readers. From the 1930s to the 1960s, before television became the preferred American form of media, magazines were the venues for news and entertainment. Illustrated weekly magazines, like *Time*, *Life*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*, invested in cultivating literary personalities to bolster subscription sales (Moran 24). Didion’s essay “Goodbye to All That” originated in such a magazine and would later become one of her most timelessly famous pieces of writing.

Examining “Goodbye to All That” in its original publication in the *Saturday Evening Post* alongside the other contents of the issue positions the now landmark essay in the place and time in which it was first shared with the public, and helps us to understand its authenticity. Far from the accustomed Norman Rockwell paintings usually associated with the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine, the cover of the January 14th, 1967 issue that first featured “Goodbye to All That” is dedicated to an investigation of the Kennedy Assassination that occurred on November 22, 1963.
The cover art emanates a warning, awash completely in red, black, and small details in white. An illustration depicts ominous black figures form the president’s motorcade. In the foreground are two four-door Lincoln Continental convertibles and three military agents on motorcycles. John F. Kennedy sits with three secret service agents and is immediately recognizable in the first car. Jackie Kennedy is not clearly presented, though she is possibly the indistinct shadowy figure behind the faintly smiling president. In the background looms a larger-than-life black silhouette of a figure holding a sniper rifle, aimed to the right, off the page to some distance away from the reader. On the top right corner against the red background in shocking white letters reads:
THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION

Did Oswald act alone?

Was the Warren Report wrong?

Was evidence suppressed?

Do we need a new investigation?

There is no inkling that anything inside the magazine would have anything to do with a young woman from Sacramento telling the story of her eight-year pilgrimage of self-discovery in New York City. Though the magazine cover addresses serious material, Didion’s inclusion in the issue speaks to her literary persona. She can carry her weight.

In 1967, the Saturday Evening Post was printing bi-monthly and consumed by an audience of mainly white middle-class, middle-aged readers. The magazine’s advertisements for General Electric flashcubes, Campbell's soup, and Citgo gas station breakfasts reflect the patriarchal views of the time and reinforce the nuclear family. The advertisements are alongside male-targeted cigarette brands such as Marlboro, Lucky Strike, and Viceroy, as well as car ads for Ford, General Motors, and the new 1967 Dodge Coronet. The tone of the magazine is strictly patriarchal as well, notably visible in the "Letters" to the editor, which are each addressed to a formal "Dear Sir," "Dear Sirs," or simply "Gentlemen." The conservative overtones are reinforced in the issue's featured articles:

"We Need More Censorship" by Pamela Hansford Johnson

“The Amazing Americans” by Stewart Also

“My Slice of the Real-Estate Pie” by Marvin Kitman

"The Kennedy Assassination" by Richard J. Whalen
“Steve McQueen: A Loser Makes It Big" by Trevor Armbrister

"Israel: Land of Unlimited Impossibilities” by Barbara Tuchman

"Farewell to the Enchanted City" by Joan Didion

"Can Basketball Survive Lew Alcindor?” by Rex Lardner

"Goodbye to All That" is printed here under its original title, "Farewell to the Enchanted City," already sounding too lofty to be sandwiched in between an article about Israel by a Pulitzer prizewinner and another about a 7'2” tall, still relatively unknown college basketball player who four years later would change his name to Kareem Abdul Jabbar.

But Didion's essay with its melodramatic title isn't as out of place as it may appear to the Post’s middle-class audience. After all, "Farewell to the Enchanted City” is steeped in class markers and is a rejection of New York, both conservative themes that Post readers could relate to, especially considering the national disillusionment of the time. Yet Didion's writing style was not for everyone. In the Letters to the Editor section of the issue, there are two comments regarding Didion's "Hawaii: Taps at Pearl Harbor" article published in the previous December 17th, 1966 issue. While one commenter from Massillon, Ohio praises Didion's "beautifully etched portrait," another from Los Angeles criticizes her, writing, "Dear Sir: Joan Didion probably had something interesting to say about Hawaii, but I did not find out what. Her 150-word sentence on page 24 stopped me. It was a pleasure to turn over to Richard Lemon's article on Billy Wilder for some easy-to-read reporting" (6). The comment may be a criticism, but it reflects Didion’s inclusion in the budding elite literary circle of New Journalists who were not so concerned with “some easy-to-read reporting” but rather with narrative reporting.

The subsequent Saturday Evening Post Letters to the Editor regarding "Farewell to the Enchanted City" were only positive, with the commenters praising Didion's writing and theme and
even emulating her poetic way with words. Noted excerpts, from both men and women, include descriptions such as: "a wonderful piece of nostalgia," and "to be 20 is such a brief and sudden thing. I too left the fair, but I still hear the music," and "Dear Editor: The title of Joan Didion's deeply moving article is a misnomer - Farewell to the Enchanted City. She has not said good-bye to a Place; she has sung a requiem to a Time. And let her be consoled by the thought that planes are still landing and new dreams are part of their cargo" (6). These letters are proof of how readers’ were enraptured by Didion’s writing style and persona on the page, and they serve as early examples of her budding status as a celebrity.

By the time "Farewell to the Enchanted City" debuted in the Saturday Evening Post in 1967, Didion had been married, living in Los Angeles for several years and had already adopted newborn Quintana Roo Dunne on March 3rd, 1966. It was a very different life from the one she described in “Goodbye to All That” of crying in Chinese laundries back in 1964 New York. In California, Didion was busy with her writing life. In 1968 she selected twenty of her published articles from the last few years to put together in a book she titled Slouching Towards Bethlehem. The last story of the collection is the “Farewell to the Enchanted City” essay now retitled for the first time as "Goodbye to All That," the name change directly reflecting Didion’s dry wit. In the preface to Slouching Towards Bethlehem, Didion addressed criticism she had received regarding her association with the conservative Saturday Evening Post. Didion states:

Quite often people write to me from places like Toronto and want to know (demand to know) how I can reconcile my conscience with writing for The Saturday Evening Post; the answer is quite simple. The Post is extremely receptive to what the writer wants to do, pays enough for him to be able to do it right, and is meticulous about not
changing copy. I lose a nicety of inflection now and then to the *Post*, but do not count myself compromised. (xii)

Didion is really talking about control, which is necessary to maintain her celebrity. She is not placating her audience by addressing the controversies of the conservative *Saturday Evening Post*; rather she is being firm in what is important to her as a writer: being given the freedom to do as she pleases. Above all, Didion is concerned with what is best for Didion.

*Slouching Towards Bethlehem* was well received because the essays, now grouped together, showcasedDidion’s authority as a writer who had her own distinctive style, and also her authority as a cultural critic. Dan Wakefield in the *New York Times* ends his June 21, 1968 positive review with a powerful statement on the equally powerful last essay in Didion's book. Wakefield states:

"Goodbye to All That," an essay on the author's years in New York, does for my generation's love-hate affair with that capital what Fitzgerald's essay "My Lost City" did for the generation of the twenties. Speaking of her arrival in Manhattan fresh out of college, Miss Didion explains that during the first few days the only thing she did was "talk long distance to the boy I already knew I would never marry in the spring. I would stay in New York, I told him, just six months, and I could see the Brooklyn Bridge from my window. As it turned out the bridge was the Triborough and I stayed for eight years." If there are any readers who do not appreciate that last sentence, this reviewer is powerless to save them.

*Slouching Towards Bethlehem* directed new attention to Didion's talents. In his book review, Wakefield referenced Truman Capote's take on Didion, stating, "Capote has pronounced that such
work may achieve the stature of art,” which suggested that no one should underestimate Didion's
talent and her ability to impact the literary field.

Capote’s prediction was correct. Twenty-six years later "Goodbye to All That" would serve
as a defining example of personal essay writing in Phillip Lopate's lauded literary anthology The
Art of the Personal Essay (1994). Lopate’s influence reaffirmed Didion’s fixed position within the
literary canon, and emphasized her celebrity as a breakthrough New Journalism essayist and a
living member of the literary elite.

Philip Lopate is a professor at Columbia University and the former director of its MFA
nonfiction creative writing program. A noted author, he has dedicated a vast majority of his career
to the craft of writing. Of his notable works on the subject are two anthologies in which he includes
Didion's "Goodbye to All That." The first is The Art of the Personal Essay and the other is Writing
New York (1998). Both anthologies are landmark authorities on their topics, and Lopate includes a
brief introduction to explain why each selected essay is important to the canon. Lopate's inclusion
of "Goodbye to All That" in not one, but two separate tomes, added to the essay’s fixture as a
remarkable piece of literature as well as to Didion's status as a female literary celebrity in a field
dominated by men.

The Art of the Personal Essay entries range from Seneca in the first century AD to Richard
Rodriguez in the late twentieth century. The works are organized chronologically by author and
indexed by theme and form. In his introduction, Lopate walks through the history and development
of personal essay writing and the difficulties in mastering a somewhat self-deprecating,
conversational tone. He explains his criteria for selection, careful to acknowledge the lack of
women writers in the earlier categories due to what he says is the lack of material. He selected
essays, he writes, that are memorable in themselves, that stress the personal rather than the formal,
and that are self-contained individual essays as opposed to excerpts from autobiographies.
In *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Lopate describes how reflecting on the past – employing a retrospective perspective—is the natural form of the personal essay, and therefore there are few young authors who have made significant marks on the personal essay as a form, with the exceptions of James Baldwin and Didion. "Didion's elegiac ‘Goodbye to All That,’” he says, “written at [age] thirty-four, is already saturated with her trademark disenchantment" (xxxvii).

Lopate’s recognition makes it possible to see Didion’s disenchantment, candid and eloquent and direct, is what is valued by her readers and helps her stand out as a literary celebrity. Didion’s blunt and forthright manner is how she controls what she wants her readers to see. In painting a picture of her New York life, she neither complains nor is nostalgic; rather she is able to shrug off her past through hindsight. In other words, her disenchantment is so appealing because the essay ultimately became the mythic American success story: the reader simultaneously sees how Didion’s youthful enchantment with New York was never going to succeed, but also how Didion’s failure in New York became the root of her literary success. In the Lopate anthology, Didion has two essays featured, "Goodbye to All That" and her 1968 essay on living with migraines called "In Bed.” For Lopate to include two Didion essays marks her relevance and expertise in the field of the personal essay, as well as demonstrates that he sees Didion as his literary contemporary.

In 1998 Lopate published another anthology of short writings, titled *Writing New York* which, per the title, consists only of stories about New York City in fiction, poetry, nonfiction, stand-alone essays, and excerpts from books. Lopate is brief in his introduction, explaining that he selected what he felt were the most memorable and best written pieces on the subject. He chose each entry, he says, for their ways of capturing the myriad neighborhoods, time periods, and timelessness of countless New York City experiences. Again, Lopate is bestowing his name, taste, and expertise as an academic literary celebrity to name what he believes are the best literary representations of New York City. In deciding who to include in the book, Lopate is extending and
sharing his authority, marking the authors as his literary equals and essentially canon building with
his living contemporaries.

Didion’s rejection of New York in "Goodbye to All That" stands shoulder to shoulder with
over one hundred other literary heavyweights like Charles Dickens, Langston Hughes, Henry
David Thoreau, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman. Seventeen of Lopate’s selections are women
writers such as Djuna Barnes, Willa Cather, Vivian Gornick, Jane Jacobs, and Edith Wharton.
Lopate helped to elevate and sustain Didion’s status by including her as one of the just twenty-two
women of the one-hundred-and-ten featured authors, the men having composed nearly 80% of the
essays and excerpts. The inclusion of “Goodbye to All That” in both Lopate anthologies nearly
thirty years after its initial publication shows this is a timeless essay. Lopate gave “Goodbye to All
That” prestigious recognition in the 1990s and people continue to pay tribute to the essay today.

The theme of giving New York a try is so relatable, and Didion is so revered for having said
it so well, that in 2013 writer and former New Yorker Sari Botton put together an entire book of
essays inspired by Didion and "Goodbye to All That." Although Didion’s tale of 1960’s literary
New York is limited to upper class life, Botton attempts to dilute this elitism throughout the essay
collection while simultaneously capitalizing on Didion’s celebrity by aligning herself with Didion’s
work. Goodbye to All That: Writers on Loving and Leaving New York is an anthology of essays
collected from twenty-eight female authors and edited by Botton. Each author contributed a piece
about their own youthful New York experiences, composed with Didion’s leaving New York
theme in mind. The writers share individual tales of romanticizing New York City and later coming
to terms with the sometimes harsh realities and struggles of New York life, recognizing that
leaving the city is a necessary option. The essayists keep to the theme of loving and leaving New
York, but also, like the Didion in “Goodbye to All That,” acknowledge themselves as members of
the New York City literary community.
Botton’s book brings up several issues: self-promotion, class, privilege, and Didion’s status as a celebrity. The writers were inspired by Didion’s essay to tell their own stories, but in a roundabout way they are capitalizing on Didion’s fame to promote themselves. In other words, because the authors are not literary celebrities, they connect their work to Didion to increase their readership. They took advantage of the fair use copyright law, tying Didion’s hands in their use of the “Goodbye to All That” title.

Didion is very familiar with copyright law, and knows that titles—book titles, essay titles, movie titles, etc.—are not protected under copyright. Didion has used this law to her artistic advantage several times. She links her own work to that of others through the titles of her essays, not for celebrity association, but for literary association. For example, “Goodbye to All That” shares its title with Robert Graves’ 1929 autobiography. In the prologue to the 1957 reissue, Graves states,

It was my bitter leave-taking of England where I had recently broken a good many conventions; quarrelled with, or been disowned by, most of my friends; been grilled by the police on suspicion of attempted murder; and ceased to care what anyone thought of me. (i)

It is clear why Didion would adopt Graves’ title for her essay when she was considering her own feelings about leaving her New York life. Aside from the murder charge, her experiences were very similar to Graves’. Here, for example, is an excerpt from Didion’s “Goodbye to All That”:

I hurt the people I cared about, and insulted those I did not. I cut myself off from the one person who was closer to me than any other. I cried until I was not even aware when I was crying and when I was not, cried in elevators and in taxis and in Chinese
laundries, and when I went to the doctor he said only that I seemed to be depressed, and should see a “specialist.” He wrote down a psychiatrist’s name and address for me, but I did not go. (237)


Didion uses literary illusions intentionally. Those familiar with Graves’ autobiography will know that much of his story is about the loss of innocence following World War I and the recognition that England would never be the same. The “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” title links Yeats’ poem and Didion’s essays as cultural commentary. The Orwell title marks her opinions and motivations as equal to Orwell’s; her acknowledgement of Orwell head on makes this comparison clear.

Sari Botton’s motivations are different. In her anthology, she uses Didion’s famous “Goodbye to All That” essay title to profit from Didion’s celebrity. The book easily could have had a different title since Didion’s essay is not included in the collection and not all of the stories directly reference Didion.

Another aspect of Botton’s inspired-by collection is how the book addresses race, class, and gender in direct contrast to Didion’s silence on these issues. Didion’s essay fails to acknowledge classes other than the privileged, and even Didion’s struggles can be scoffed at—few consider having to charge their meals at the Bloomingdale’s Gourmet Counter as roughing it. Yet, Didion’s “struggle,” as a now famous author, are seen as inspirational to Botton and the other authors who seek their own literary celebrity because they share her gender and aspire to her class privilege. The
one thing they all have in common is that they moved to New York to become successful writers. In “Goodbye to All That,” Didion is run down by the city and it took giving up New York for her career to take off. The authors in Botton’s collection aspire to have Didion’s successes, seeing that one can achieve such successes even after failing in New York.

Botton’s collection of essays differs from Didion’s initial perspective in “Goodbye to All That” because it exemplifies the lifestyles, class differences, and ethnicities that Didion was oblivious to in her first eight years of living in New York City. For example, Marie Myung-Ok Lee writes of her experience as a Midwestern Korean-American in the city. African-American Valerie Eagle writes of her struggles with crack addiction. Some authors, like Emma Straub and Dana Kinster, are native New Yorkers and they write about the strangeness of leaving the city everyone wants to move to. Some talk about September 11th and how it changed the city; others speak of drugs and prostitution; others of leaving or staying for boyfriends or girlfriends. In all, these women’s stories of success, failure, and hard choices of where to live in the world are on topic, but they are very different from Didion’s experiences in the 1960s, with her laments of no new faces at the parties she attends, and her bafflement over other women who bought fixtures like toasters for their apartments, which rooted them to the city.

Since the book’s publication, Botton has been questioned about her choice to include only women writers. She addressed the question, somewhat, in the introduction of her next book Never Can Say Goodbye: Writers on Their Unshakeable Love for New York (2014).

Why no men? It’s a long story, but before I even had the chance to tell it, some interviewers suggested that only women write those kinds of essays. “No,” I’d always respond, “that’s hardly the case.” In fact, some of my favorite essays about New York City have been written by men—Luc Sante’s “My Lost City,” Colson
Whitehead’s *The Colossus of New York*, E.B. White’s 1948 classic “Here is New York.” (xviii)

*Never Can Say Goodbye: Writers on Their Unshakeable Love for New York* includes essays from twenty-seven authors, no longer setting limits to the gender of the writers or scope of the essays to youthful New York experiences. This sequel reflects the success of the first book as exemplified in the big-name contributing authors such as Rosanne Cash, Elizabeth Gilbert, Whoopi Goldberg, and Phillip Lopate. The second book was also successful because Botton created an association with Didion and the “Goodbye to All That” essay in the first book. The second book was able to attract its own famous New York authors, fueled by the success of the Didion inspired collection.

While Botton was certainly aided by the celebrity association with Didion, Didion also benefited from the use of her “Goodbye to All That” theme because it presented her work to new readers in a way that linked her to the other female authors. Botton’s *Goodbye to All That* diffuses Didion’s elitism by gathering authors of different classes to share their “Goodbye to All That” moments. The book contains multicultural, multi-class experiences, which through association, distance Didion from the patriarchal setting upon which she built her career. Alone, Didion’s essay is steeped in whiteness and privilege, but tied to the experiences of twenty-eight other female authors, Didion is just one of an influential group of women writers. Together in one book, the essays form a collective experience allowing Didion's elite and privileged take on her New York experience to be one story among many.

Richard Dyer’s article “Heavenly Bodies” provides context on how Botton’s book, which in one view capitalizes on Didion’s celebrity, is actually an act of labor that endorses and promotes Didion’s celebrity. Dyer states, “stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they
are both labour and the thing that labour produces. They do not produce themselves alone” (86). Dyer’s statement explains how Botton’s new feminist interpretation of Didion’s persona makes Didion more relatable and increases her readership. The contributing authors use Didion’s work to furnish the traits they see as most fitting for their own stories, and subsequently their labor furthers Didion’s promotion and adds to her image as an admirable, successful female author, uplifting her celebrity.

Is New York only for the very young, as Didion states in “Goodbye to All That?” Apparently not. Didion returned to New York in 1988 and has remained since. A superficial reading of the essay is that it is simply a story of a young woman abandoning New York after realizing she needn’t stay if it isn’t working. But Didion, the talented writer she is, made her leaving New York story—full of snark and the illusion of being unwittingly surrounded by the literary elite—her New York success story. Didion shows us through the publishing and republishing of “Goodbye to All That” that her New York struggle was worth the effort. Whether the essay and Didion’s success as a literary celebrity should serve as an aspirational one is up to the individual, as many of Sari Botton’s writers can attest to. What is certain is how “Goodbye to All That” is repeatedly lauded through time as a model example of theme and craft. It is not coincidental that it is also the pivotal essay which best introduces Didion’s persona to her readers. Didion maneuvers between public and private, revealing and concealing. She heightened her celebrity further by applying the same control and effort to photographic images as she did to her persona on the page.
Chapter Two

Joan Didion: Combining Literary Persona and Photographic Images

Who is Joan Didion? A celebrated writer, journalist, novelist, screenwriter, essayist, mother, wife, widow, style icon. It is nearly impossible to describe Joan Didion’s writing style without also mentioning her physical style - both tell different versions of the same story. Joan Didion is cool: she is popular, fashionable, verbally terse, and possesses great poise and self-control, though she can be overlooked as if hiding behind her large sunglasses and tiny frame. Her physical appearance adds to the allure of her literary persona and she uses images of herself as a deliberate performance that constructs the figure of an insular and untouchable celebrity. In fact, she outwardly attributes her small 5’0” stature to her success as a writer. “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” (xiv), Didion quips in the preface to her 1979 book of essays Slouching Towards Bethlehem. Yet these are parts of her public persona that she allows us to know. The persona is a character similar to Didion in many ways. She tells us through her writing that she is open with details about her life, but through her photographs she tells us she is reserved, withdrawn. The persona allows Didion to be a performer, playing the Didion persona when necessary. For example, though Didion is articulate and eloquent on the page, author Caitlin Flanagan recalls how shy Didion was when she met her in 1975.

I can tell you this for certain: anything you have ever read by Didion about the shyness that plagued her in her youth, and about her inarticulateness in those days, in the face of even the most banal questions, was not a writer’s exaggeration of a minor character
trait for literary effect. The contemporary diagnosis for the young woman at our dinner table would be profound–crippling–social-anxiety disorder.

This is why Didion has curated a public, physical image in photographs to pair with her literary persona. Didion’s persona in photographs allows her to exercise complete control. It tells us she needs space and is not one for idle conversation; it masks her awkwardness and inarticulateness as coolness and remoteness. Didion reveals as she conceals, generating a public face to keep parts of herself private. She gives the performance of a cool girl to conceal her anxiety.

What is performance? Applied to Didion, the Oxford English dictionary provides the best definition: performance is “an instance of performing a play, piece of music, etc., in front of an audience; an occasion on which such a work is presented; a public appearance by a performing artist or artists of any kind. Also: an individual performer's or group's rendering or interpretation of a work, part, role, etc. In extended use: a pretense, a sham” [Emphasis mine] (OED online). However, Susan Manning in Keywords for American Studies more aptly frames performance by stating, “the connotation of the verb shifts from the achievement of an action to the embodiment of an identity” (190). Didion performs her persona and embodies it, but for her it is a public action. She performs her literary persona in public appearances, in photographic images, and on the page in her essays and books.

Regardless of the subject of Joan Didion’s writing, she is ever present as the author, woven into the text, lingering in the subtext. Her literary persona is her voice, the version of herself constructed on the page: unsentimental, frank, alluring. She shares aspects of her personal life with the reader, especially domestic details regarding her daughter. Her perspective reads as if she is confiding in someone she trusts. Yet readers never receive full disclosure from her.
The same can be said of photographs of Didion through an almost fifty-year span of her literary career. It is clear Didion has mastered her performance in front of the camera to complement and heighten the literary persona she has created for the reader on the page. A sweeping look at pictures of her shows a time-lapse photography-like repetition, as if the same photo has been recreated again and again at different periods of her life. If she is not wearing her trademark pair of oversized sunglasses, she stares unblinkingly into the camera as if to challenge the viewer. Her lips are always pursed, serious but not stern. In a few instances the corners of her mouth pull into a slight smile. She holds the prop of a cigarette. She holds a drink. Her daughter, Quintana, in many of the photos still a young girl, sits in her lap or is held by her hand. If these physical mainstays are unavailable, her arms are crossed on her chest. Didion appeases the public by allowing this access to herself. In many photographs she gazes directly into the camera, unblinking, not smiling, giving an impression that she is somewhat uncomfortable posing solely for the viewer and also making the viewer uncomfortable.

How is it that so many photographs spanning over five decades are so similar? Didion is a literary celebrity who is both professionally relevant and remains appealing to the public through her writing and photographic image, yet her public persona is more guarded than her persona on the page. Is she approachable? The images available to the public are carefully cultivated in a way that the viewer receives the same messages about Didion again and again, though deeper examination shows that she makes slight adjustments that are not immediately noticeable.

In her acclaimed book *On Photography* (1977), essayist Susan Sontag states that “between photographer and subject, there has to be distance” (13). Didion, known for her tiny frame, often uses overly large dark sunglasses or a cigarette dangling from her mouth or between her fingers to serve as a barrier between herself, the camera, and the viewer. As Sontag elaborates, “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed” (4), which suggests that the photograph of
Didion becomes something that no longer belongs to Didion but to the viewer. The public images are a construction of a “Joan Didion character” that is intended to belong to the public. In turn, Didion’s photographs dominate her public persona. In a 2017 *Vanity Fair* interview with Sloane Crosley titled “Hello to All That,” Didion’s niece Annabelle Dunne notes, “the power of the photograph! She [Didion] was on the verge of the “Frida Kahlo” epidemic, as I call it–known more for her image than her work” (qtd in Crosley). Ultimately, to know Didion is to know her writing, but to see her picture is in its own way to know Didion’s writing, as Didion has become an icon of the American culture she has spent her life writing about.

There is much to explore in the connection between Joan Didion’s elusive literary persona and how she is portrayed in photographs. Even in her essay “Why I Write” she is not direct in telling readers, though she addresses them as “you,” exactly why it is she writes. Instead, she steps around the issue by giving examples of her thought process in developing a story and an ephemeral shimmer of images when she recognizes something that inspires her. Didion is direct in her indirectness, an essential part of her tough-woman, cool persona. In the first sentence of the essay she declares she stole the title “Why I Write” from George Orwell and then she confesses–using a very personal form of communication–“I stole the title not only because the words sounded right but because they seemed to sum up, in a no-nonsense way, all I have to tell you.”

What does she tell us? As is evident in her writing style as well as in her photographs, her attention is on the specific, the peripheral. She does not think in abstracts. Imagery attracts her attention. She states in the essay, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.” Importantly, she does not say she writes to find out what she feels. Her preference for no-nonsense ways of communication does not include room for emotions or the sentimental, and this is especially in line with how she presents herself in photographs, linking the public images with her persona on the page.
In the essay, she continues discussing the structure of writing sentences and connects it to her ever-present awareness of photography. “To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed.” This is just one example of Didion insightfully revealing her depth of knowledge about the camera and how she makes it work for her.

Another instance of Didion speaking frankly of her knowledge about photography is in her introduction to Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1989 photography book Some Women. She begins by attributing her familiarity to the world behind the camera to her seven years at the fashion magazine Vogue, sitting in on the photo shoots. She makes a point of explaining that these studio sittings were not for fashion photography but for the magazine’s feature pages. As Didion describes it, the photographs were of “women celebrated for one reason or another, known (usually) because they were starring in a movie or appearing in a play or known (less often) because they had pioneered a vaccine or known (more often than we pretended) just because they were known” (5). According to Didion, a successful portrait sitting was one “to which the subject conspired, tacitly, to be not ‘herself’ but whoever and whatever it was the that the photographer wanted to see in the lens” (5). She then describes how she remembers “little tricks, small improvisations, the efforts required to ensure that the photographer was seeing what he wanted” (5). Such knowledge of these photographer’s tricks would make it easy for Didion to manipulate her own poses and body language in front of the camera. Her experiences make her more knowledgeable of what the photographer is asking of her, and also enable her not to compromise her own ideas, her preferred version of herself, captured on film. In this introduction, it is evident Didion knows what she is talking about; from these personal experiences at Vogue she is confident on both sides of a camera.

Didion goes on about how the women Mapplethorpe has included in the book are well known for one reason or another, and are mostly New Yorkers. They are pretty, beautiful not
because of makeup or camera angles, but in the way they present themselves to the camera. They are performers, like her. And as is evident in her own photo shoots, she knows enough to turn the motivations behind the photographer’s trigger finger to her advantage. The Didion we see in photographs is Didion performing the Didion character, the curated and controlled persona that projects both the intimacy of seeing her perspective of the world and the removed, mysterious, watchful Didion who hides behind her style.

The images we see of Didion allow us a complete picture of the persona she wants us to see. To question what we don’t see is to glimpse the life Didion keeps private. Just as film celebrities need public images to show they have a real life other than the characters they play on screen, Didion uses images for the opposite reason, to accompany her very personal details on the page with a public image that requests space, reserve. The emotionlessness of Didion’s photographs allows her to keep her emotions to herself. She has convinced us, the public, her emotions don’t exist. Where are the smiling pictures? Where are the pictures of Didion enjoying the cooking and gardening she so often discusses in her essays? Does the woman in front of the Stingray look like she has the mean recipe for pork roast with corn souffle, or the fifty-dollar Kickstarter pledge reward for supporting the funding of the *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold* documentary project?

Didion is most often described in terms of her writing style, as a realist who accepts and describes situations as they actually are. Most alluring and effective is how she disassociates herself from the culture, youth, and politics she reports on, such as in the essay “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” which is set in 1967 San Francisco. At one point, she informs us, she is told she can only observe a particular young family and their friends who are part of the Haight-Ashbury drug culture by partaking in the psychedelic drugs with them. Didion politely refuses to “do” the acid and the family still allows her to observe. She relates a conversation with the father:
“One day Norris asks how old I am. I tell him I am thirty-two. It takes him a few minutes, but Norris rises to it. ‘Don’t worry,’ he says at last. ‘There’s old hippies too’” (94). This remoteness, distance, and aloofness Didion places between herself and the hippie culture she is reporting on creates trust in her readers. She makes clear she is not like the people she is reporting on therefore readers identify Didion as more like themselves. Didion is unsentimental in her style of laying out facts and observations, but she does so in a way that is intimate, if not relatable. She lets readers absorb the information and discover emotions for themselves.

It is one thing to read Didion and experience her sense of literary style, but the words so often used to describe her literary persona—removed, skeptic, hard, and distant—are not often used to describe women in a positive way. This is where the photographic images soften the blow of the cold, stoic, unflinching writer. They depict the exterior of a small, cool woman posing in Golden Gate Park among the hippies she is reporting on. The image matches her warning in Slouching Towards Bethlehem: “People tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests. And it always does. That is one last thing to remember: writers are always selling somebody out” (xiv). The photographs from her visit to San Francisco to report on what would become her essay “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” give the same impression. She is a woman who couldn’t be bothered with trivial pettiness but beware: behind those sunglasses she is always watching.
Fig. 2. “Joan Didion With Hippie at Concert.” San Francisco. April 1967, Ted Streshinsky. Getty Images

In one photograph of Joan Didion in Golden Gate Park, April, 1967, (fig. 2) Didion’s white skin and dark sunglasses at first make it difficult to see that the man standing above her is covered in dark face paint. The whiteness of Didion’s clean skin is in contrast to the tall man’s dirty painted face. So, too, is their posture, since each is looking in separate directions. Didion facing the camera while the man’s gaze is fixed on something in the distance gives the impression that Didion is in the crowd but focused on presenting herself to the viewer; she is not swept up in the events around her. This photograph was used on the cover of the Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2008 edition of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* collection of essays.
In a full figure shot of the *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (fig. 3) photo taken in Golden Gate Park, Didion is again presenting herself to the camera in a way that mimics her literary persona. First notice how Didion has separated herself from the people who are the subject of her essay. She presents herself in the thick of happening events, yet in this photo she has literally turned her back on the people and the movement she is reporting on.

The photograph mirrors Didion's writing style. She looks directly at the camera, slightly smiling as if mocking the situation, wearing bright white tights, black Mary-Jane shoes, and a printed scarf tied around her neck like a Girl Scout. Not only does she not look like the hippies in
the background of the photo, but they look dumpy compared to her childlike choice in dress. It is also telling how Didion stands a few feet apart with her back turned away from them, their backs turned away from the camera—symbolic of their turning away from America—with the exception of the tall man with the sunglasses, lurking in what could be described as a sinister way as he leers over sweet, innocent looking Joan's shoulder. These photographs, taken early in Didion’s celebrity, are important because they connected her persona on the page with an image for the public.

In 1968 TIME magazine commissioned Julian Wasser, who in 1963 had famously photographed Marcel Duchamp playing chess with a naked eighteen year-old Eve Babitz, to photograph Didion shortly after the *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* essay collection was released. Several of the photos from this series have been replicated and repurposed for countless Didion projects and articles, and one is on display in the Smithsonian Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. In the photos, taken at Didion’s rented Hollywood home on Franklin Avenue, a setting in her essay “The White Album,” Didion wears a long-sleeved pale colored floor-length tunic dress and simple leather thong sandals. The Wasser photos are highly popular; they are the photos most reproduced for other uses, and Didion replicated the poses and mood captured in them over and over through the decades with other photographers. This is significant as the photos capture what Didion would later become most known for: a symbol of the Californian and American culture of which she is a critic.
In one Wasser photo (fig. 4), we see how Didion’s image has evolved since her photographs in Golden Gate Park the year before, but her image still matches her persona on the page. Here Didion is wild-haired and wild-eyed as she looks directly into the camera. She holds a cigarette in one hand and lays the other arm across her middle. She wears a long tunic dress as she leans against her Corvette Stingray. This image, when compared to fig. 3 in Golden Gate Park taken just a year earlier, shows Didion physically more like the hippies in the background of the earlier picture than the naïve school girl she presented in the earlier photo. It is this time in her life in 1968 that Didion wrote about in her next book *The White Album*, which focused on California culture and her life within it. This image is one of the most iconic and it was used as the promotional poster for the documentary *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold.*
In yet another Wasser photo (fig. 5), Didion leans against the Daytona yellow 1968 Corvette Stingray, which she bought herself in Hollywood. The car serves as a symbol of California, wealth, and Didion as a trendsetter. Here her posture is relaxed with her head tilted back, sleeves pushed up, both hands in her lap, and a cigarette held in her left hand. She looks down, almost seductively at the camera. This image is exhibited in the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C.
In contrast to the Stingray photos, which are staged outside and depict Didion against an inanimate status symbol, Wasser took several images inside Didion’s house showing a glimpse into her home life but still perpetuating her inaccessible and distant persona. In one photograph (fig. 6), Didion sits on a wooden chair, a Tiffany lamp above her head, a table and bouquet of daisies just inside the frame. Baby Quintana sits on the printed skirt spread across Didion’s lap. Didion looks
into the camera, her hair soft, not smiling but also not frowning, caressing Quintana’s head with one hand and holding a lit cigarette in the other. Didion said in a 2014 *Vogue* interview that this was her favorite photograph (Aguirre). While Didion may love this photo, it sends the viewer a clear message that this unsmiling, serious woman is not approachable; her hands are full with babies and cigarettes.

Fig. 7. Joan Didion in home, Hollywood, 1968. Julian Wasser.

Another Wasser photo showcases the Didion-Dunne family indoors (fig. 7), reinforcing Didion’s serious persona as a writer and a mother. Didion is to the left of the frame, her arm across her waist, a cigarette held up in her right hand. She looks into the camera, not smiling. To the right sits Didion’s husband, John Gregory Dunne, holding baby Quintana on his lap. They, too, look into the camera unsmiling. This photo gives the viewer the impression that this is a serious household.
The spacious room has furniture and books stacked on tables. The windows in the back of the photo look out onto a yard full of trees and shrubbery. While the viewer is given access to Didion’s private life, the way her figure dominates the scene looking unimpressed gives the impression that she is guarding herself and her family against intrusion.

On the page, Didion is clear-eyed in her personal observations, making her more relatable in spite of being so self-contained in her emotions. For example, in the title essay of the book *The White Album*, her discussion of California culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s is really about how things in life, for everyone, are complicated and not always what they appear, and how sometimes there is no convenient narrative. However, the personal issues she expresses in the essay “The White Album” reveal insight to her photographic images. To link her forthright but still reserved persona, which oscillates between reporting on the hardships of others to her own hardships, Didion weaves reports of her own medical maladies into her description of living in California in “a large house in a part of Hollywood that had once been expensive and was now described by one of my acquaintances as a ‘senseless-killing neighborhood’” (15). She reports on the end of the 1960s in the era of the Manson murders as she rubs elbows with the musicians in The Doors, recounts the scene of the San Francisco State College lockdown over the suspension of a professor discovered to be a Black Panther member, and interviews incarcerated Black Panther member Huey Newton. Here is what she says about Newton:

I am telling you neither that Huey Newton killed John Frey nor that Huey Newton did not kill John Frey, for in the context of revolutionary politics Huey Newton’s guilt or innocence was irrelevant. I am telling you only how Huey Newton happened to be in the Alameda County Jail, and why rallies were held in his name, demonstrations organized whenever he appeared in court. (27)
Like in “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” where Didion separates herself from the hippies she reports on, here she announces her impartiality, imploring the reader to hear what she has to say with neutral ears. She also takes this approach when describing her interactions with Linda Kasabian, a former member of the Manson “Family” and an accomplice in the “Helter-Skelter” Tate-LaBianca murders. Didion met with Kasabian several times as she remained in protective custody waiting to testify in court as a star witness in the prosecution of the Manson Trial. Kasabian had asked Didion to buy her a new dress to wear at the testimony and Didion obliged. In the essay Didion reflects on the senselessness she felt in everything that happened that summer in 1970. The Manson murders had taken place in Didion’s Hollywood neighborhood and the people killed were Didion’s friends. Through all of this, at the end of her essay, Didion shares more medical test results, joining her own life to the events happening outside her front door. She says:

At some point during the years I am talking about here, after a series of periodic visual disturbances, three electroencephalograms, two complete sets of skull and neck x-rays, one five-hour glucose tolerance test, two electromyelograms, a battery of chemical tests and consultations with two ophthalmologists, one internist and three neurologists, I was told that the disorder was not really in my eyes, but in my central nervous system. I might or might not experience symptoms of neural damage all my life. These symptoms, which might or might not appear, might or might not involve my eyes. They might or might not involve my legs, they might or might not be disabling...The condition had a name, the kind of name usually associated with telethons, but the name meant nothing and the neurologist did not like to use it. The name was multiple sclerosis.... (46)
Here Didion confesses she might have multiple sclerosis, which was affecting her eyesight before she received her diagnosis. Instead of lamenting the unfairness of life, she invokes stoicism. “In a few lines of dialogue in a neurologist’s office in Beverly Hills the improbable had become the probable, the norm: things which happened only to other people could in fact happen to me” (47).

One of the most important aspects of this personal confession in “The White Album” essay is how she does not make a big deal about being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, but it was important enough in her life that she felt it necessary to share as part of her literary persona, the Joan Didion character. She does not tell the reader how to feel. Her style makes us feel and relate to the facts and observations. The reader cares about everyone in the essay, not because Didion told us to, but because she offers a new perspective, revealing a human face to people and events that may otherwise seem out of reach.

Her ability to invoke emotion is accentuated when considering the numerous images of her. Photos of Didion show a serious woman who doesn’t cry, who isn’t emotional, so her extraordinary abilities as a writer become even more apparent when we see how she makes us feel so much emotion. In true Didion fashion she danced around her diagnosis and casually dropped her usual may or may-nots, and then moved on without a backward glance. Yet, it is also important to note it took her seven years to write this essay, which allowed her to develop her trademark distance and disenchantment, this time with a much more serious turn. To quote Didion again: “I was told that the disorder was not really in my eyes, but in my central nervous system. I might or might not experience symptoms of neural damage all my life. These symptoms, which might or might not appear, might or might not involve my eyes” (46).

When we link this information about her impairment to her image in photographs, it is apparent that Didion’s ubiquitous use of sunglasses, indoors and out, is a response to light sensitivity, one of the main ailments of multiple sclerosis. Those who are not familiar with “The
White Album” think Didion is a hip style icon who has a penchant for large sunglasses and do not know she may be wearing them because of her diagnosis. Thus, Didion’s continual use of sunglasses, which provoked high-end fashion brand Céline to use her as a model for their $600 sunglasses in 2015, exemplifies how she has cultivated her public persona so well that she has fooled us all. By using sunglasses to conceal common side effects of multiple sclerosis, she has created a fashion trend. Or perhaps she wears the sunglass and has made them her trademark simply because she likes them. Didion has not said anything publicly about multiple sclerosis since publishing “The White Album” essay, so maybe the illness has subsided or she was misdiagnosed. Like most writers, Didion presents facts to the readers and lets them make their own conclusions, even if those conclusions miss the mark.

Fig. 8. “Dunne, Didion, and Daughter” Malibu, 1976. John Bryson - Getty Images.
A photograph taken in 1976 at the Didion-Dunne home in Malibu (fig. 8), depicts Didion and her family after they left Hollywood, the place Didion reported on in “The White Album,” which she published in 1979. The physical distance and the distance of time enabled her to write about the events of 1968-1971. In this photo, Didion, Dunne, and ten-year-old Quintana stand on their wooden deck that overlooks the ocean. Here we see that Didion’s persona is again slightly altered since the last photos in 1968, though she still holds her props, a cigarette in her right hand and a drink nearby. She has a faint smile on her face and her gaze is on Quintana, who looks up and to the left of the camera. Dunne, holding a drink, leans in close to Quintana and looks directly at the camera. This photograph shows a slightly more relaxed Dunne-Didion household. Nevertheless, while viewers are given the impression they are looking in on private moment as Didion looks at her family, the photo also suggests she is guarding them against the camera.

Fig. 9. “Joan Didion: The Art of Fiction LXXI.” *Paris Review*, no. 74, Fall/Winter 1978
In another photograph, taken in 1978 in Didion’s Malibu home while Didion was writing the essay collection *The White Album*, Didion sits on a cushy armchair, a print of “Sky Above Clouds II” by Georgia O’Keeffe hanging on the wall behind her (fig. 9). Perhaps the O’Keeffe print is a memento from her trip to the Chicago Art Institute with Quintana a year earlier, which had inspired her 1976 essay “Georgia O’Keeffe.” Here Didion looks directly into the camera, one arm glued to her side while the other extends out and behind her over the back of the chair. Though she has no prop in her hand like the other photos, she still exhibits discomfort through her stiff posture and challenging gaze. Like the previous photos, the viewer gains access to Didion and her home, but not much about Didion herself. This reinforces how Didion gives access to her private life through photographs, but if viewers want to know what she is thinking they must read her work.

Fig. 10. “Joan Didion, New York.” 2011. Brigitte Lacombe
Through the decades, Didion maintained the use of photographs to sustain her public identity. She wrote essays and published nonfiction books, novels, screenplays, and countless articles and reviews for publications like *The New York Review of Books*, and continued promotional tours and interviews. Photographs of her in the public domain complimented and perpetuated the literary persona she had created in the 1960s. For example, Figure 10 shows the seventy-seven-year-old Didion posing in sunglasses for *New York Magazine* in 2011. She looks directly into the camera, unsmiling, arms crossed in front of her, a stance reminiscent of her earlier photos by Julian Wasser; her skin is the only giveaway that time has passed.

Fig. 11. Juergen Teller, Céline. 2015.
In January 2015, fashion fans and Didion fans alike were pleasantly shocked to see Didion as the new face of the Céline fashion campaign in a sunglasses advertisement. Alessandra Codinha wrote the *Vogue* announcement, “Céline Unveils Its Latest Poster Girl: Joan Didion,” saying:

And now let’s talk about Céline’s just-debuted ad campaign featuring... none other than immortal intellectual-and-otherwise dream girl Joan Didion. Well, did you just feel the collective intake of breath shared by every cool girl you know? Did you feel the pulse-quickening vibrations of every recent college grad and literature fan? Did you sense the earth trembling beneath your feet? *Do you have two eyes and a heart?*

The photograph for the advisement pictured Didion, age eighty-two, sitting on an upholstered sofa, a tan afghan behind her (fig. 11). She wears a black-ribbed turtleneck and a large gold pendant on a long necklace. The Céline sunglasses are very large, black, and slightly askew on the octogenarian’s unsmiling face. Didion wears a small amount of reddish lip gloss. Her blonde-grey-silver hair is chin-length and loosely parted to the side. The camera is close in harsh white light, which creates a dark shadow over her shoulder. This image is important because it again reinforces Didion’s celebrity as an elite who is also a fashion icon. What is most impressive is that she still projects the same reserved persona she cultivated in the 1960s. At the time it was surprising to see Didion associating herself with branding and selling a product, but then it was soon announced that a documentary about her life was in the works.

The 2017 documentary *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold*, produced by Didion’s niece and nephew Annabelle Dunne and Griffin Dunne, gives an overview of Didion’s life and some of her major literary works. Griffin Dunne also served as the director and interviewer, a smart choice since her familiarity with her nephew enabled a different, more intimate view into her life.
than is usually projected. In an interview with Brent Lang of *Variety*, Dunne summed up Didion’s comfort in talking about herself at length in front of the camera.

Nobody’s ever accused Joan of being a chatterbox. She sometimes answers in two or three words and that’s the end of that, not out of real reluctance, but out of a natural brevity that’s like her writing. She did open up to me. One of the aspects that touched me and that I’m most proud of is the difference in expression when she’s talking to me in interviews and the archival footage of her on talk shows. There’s a very different expression on her face when she’s being interviewed by someone she doesn’t really know.

The documentary was funded through the crowdfunding website Kickstarter, and the project reflects the deep influence Didion has on her readers and how much her fan base desires to connect with her on a personal level. The project met and then exceeded its Kickstarter fundraising goal within mere hours of its launch, ultimately bringing in $221,135 dollars in the one-month campaign. The 3,565 people referred to as “backers” were offered pledge “rewards” based on the amount of money they donated.

Here are examples of pledge rewards listed on the Kickstarter website:

Pledge $50 or more:

JOAN’S RECIPE BOOK. John and Joan’s house in Malibu was a fixture on the LA scene, and her recipe book represents a lifetime of entertaining. Some of Joan’s personal recipes for pork roast with corn souffle, gumbo, linguini bolognese and much
more are now available for your culinary exploration, all perfectly preserved in her handwriting. To be delivered in a PDF.

447 backers pledged for this reward.

Pledge $350 or more:

Have you ever wanted to tell Joan what she truly means to you? How her writing changed you? Write a two page letter to Joan and her family will read the letter aloud to her.

18 backers pledged for this reward.

Pledge $2,500 or more:

JOAN’S PERSONAL SUNGLASSES. What are one of the most iconic pairs of sunglasses a girl could own? This is your opportunity to see the world as Joan, with a pair of sunglasses from her personal collection.

2 backers pledged for this reward.
Fig. 12. Still from *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold*. Directed by Griffin Dunne, starring Joan Didion, 2017.

One of the still images from the documentary shows eighty-three year-old Didion looking like an elderly little girl with bright red lips and shining eyes beneath the bangs of her soft-grey blonde bob (fig. 12). Watching the documentary, viewers hear a clear and soft voice, the voice of a much younger woman, which does not match the wrinkled face and shaking hands on the screen. This introduction to Didion is striking, immediately showing a different Didion from the Wasser photographs. The documentary makes clear that photographs alone do not communicate how Didion acts in motion. It also shows a different Didion persona: In the documentary, Didion is smiling and laughing as she converses with Dunne. Her laughter itself is an unnatural sounding chitter.

Weaving a plot of Didion’s life, the documentary shows Didion, as well as her friends and colleagues, reading from her works as the camera pans over archival footage appropriate to the recited essay, such as San Francisco hippies from the late 1960s or New York’s Central Park in the
late 1980s. At one point, the camera shows old black and white photographs of accomplished female writers such as Willa Cather and Edna St. Vincent Millay, and artist Georgia O'Keeffe, and then a picture of Didion as a young woman in her twenties in New York. Placing Didion’s photo in this montage encourages the viewer to associate her with these other famous female creatives.

To those familiar with Didion’s life, the documentary does not reveal any new truths. Rather, the viewer is given access to new information through a sequence of photographs, which blends the already familiar public images with previously unreleased private photographs. The images show the smiling Didion, the family Didion, the cooking Didion. There are party photos and candid photos. However, not all the new photos portray a different Didion; there are plenty that show the closed-mouthed, arms-crossed, face-hidden-by-large-sunglasses Didion. The number of photographs, along with the in-person interview footage, do not add up to a more complete picture of Didion. On the contrary, the documentary is a calculated adjustment of Didion’s curated public image constructed by her filmmaker-family with her active participation.

Most important is how the documentary continues to conceal as it reveals in regard to Didion’s life and persona, perpetuating a tactic Didion used throughout her career. The documentary presents Didion as the cool girl, the woman who has rubbed elbows with Hollywood and literary elites on both coasts her entire adult life, yet it brings out the details of the tragedies of the Dunne-Didion family. Why present this information to the public, in this manner, now?

Interviews in the documentary include author Hilton Als, Broadway director David Hare, longtime *Vogue* editor Phyllis Riffield, actress and producer Amy Robinson, and Knopf senior editor Shelley Wanger, all elites who support the Didion persona. In particular, Hilton Als’s take on *The Year of Magical Thinking* is noteworthy. “She did it as ‘the Joan Didion’ character of the novels in a true story about grief,” he says (*The Center Will Not Hold*). This admission supports the idea that Didion’s literary persona has now merged with her personal life in a much larger way than
in her previous books and essays. However, in *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil* (2017), Deborah Nelson explains that this merging does not necessarily alter the usual, guarded Didion. “Penetrable Didion has promised to make her story of grief and loss, [yet] what lies behind the ‘impenetrable polish’ of her elegant sentences are thoughts and beliefs. She does not offer access to her feelings” (144). In other words, as the “Joan Didion character,” Didion approaches her own life with the detached, unsentimental style of laying out facts and observations that she is known for, even when those facts are about the devastating loss of her husband while her daughter is in a coma.

In the documentary, David Hare, who directed the play adaptation of *The Year of Magical Thinking* starring Vanessa Redgrave, speaks about working with Didion during that time.

When we came to make a play we were faced with two problems, one that she had never written a play before. But secondly we were faced with the very real problem that Quintana, her daughter, had died since the book was written. And whereas the book was about grief for her husband, since then, her daughter had died. And so, I was faced with the unhappy task of saying to Joan that she would have to open up about material which is not in the book, but which would be in the play and about which at the time she had no intention of writing. But one of the wonderful things about working with Joan is that she doesn’t ever let any discomfort she is feeling show. (1:20:45)

Ultimately, does *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold* support the Didion we know from the Wasser photographs, which are so well known? Yes, the documentary reveals a different, more animated side of Didion, but, like *The Year of Magical Thinking*, it gives viewers Didion’s personal story, not her personal feelings. Though different from the Wasser photographs of the late 1960s,
the documentary is also a curated performance in which Didion and her family have full control over what is presented to the public. Just as Didion used her poses in the photographs of her youth to create a physical image to reinforce her literary persona, those images, like her sunglasses, conceal as much as they reveal. What is the documentary drawing attention away from? Like her diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, is Didion revealing and we simply don’t want to see what she is showing us?

As Als noted, “the Joan Didion character” and Didion have simultaneously been intertwined throughout her career. Her efforts to create not just a literary Didion, but a physical “for the public” Didion, have resulted in a full embodiment of the Didion character. There is no denying that Didion has been upfront and truthful with us, laying out parts of her life, one by one, ultimately allowing her readers to do what they will with the information. However, by curating a physical image to compliment the Didion on the page, a woman who never asks for our pity and outwardly questions self-pity, Didion may really just want us to enjoy what she gives us.
Conclusion

My research shows that continued examination of Didion’s dual personas is necessary, for in the many ways her literary and public personas are complementary, they are also conflicting. Didion’s prose, in its rhythms, its long flowing sentences, and its detailed talk of flowers, fabrics, and motherhood can be described as feminine, and certainly many of her fans are women and young women. However, in other ways Didion is strikingly anti-feminine, as demonstrated in the “Women” section of *The White Album*. “Women” includes the essays “The Women’s Movement,” in which Didion criticizes the extremism and emphasis on victimhood in the movement, “Doris Lessing,” a profile of the author who “views her real gift for fiction much as she views her own biology, as another trick to entrap her” (119), and “Georgia O’Keeffe,” in which Didion admirably describes O’Keeffe’s “hardness,” her view of herself as forever an outsider from “the men,” and her belief that “style is character” (127). Didion goes on to describe O’Keeffe as if she were speaking about herself. “Georgia O’Keeffe seems to have been equipped early with an immutable sense of who she was and a fairly clear understanding that she would be required to prove it” (129).

These three essays can be interpreted as praise for anti-feminist views, especially since they are written from a position of class and power. In the 1970s, Didion was the solitary female member of the literary New Journalism elite, and she makes it clear that she believes in individualism instead of subscribing to the feminist social movement. Are Didion’s essays gender-traitor criticisms, or is she doing her usual cultural criticism with her removed, skeptical, observing-reporting skills like she does for all her subjects? This question raises another: As a woman, should Didion write, or be obligated to write, about women and women’s movements differently than she writes about other cultural movements? Or is Didion so removed from women’s struggles of her generation because she had the privilege of a successful career so early in
her life, as well as the privilege of a well-to-do upper-middle-class upbringing? Like in “Goodbye to All That,” is it that she cannot see past her own advantages?

Moreover, an examination of Didion’s personas in regard to control is also warranted. Didion has always maintained fierce control over her work and her personas. Sometimes, as with the essay “The White Album,” she has taken years to perfect her wording on the page. Her images, as argued earlier, have also been carefully curated to present a specific persona to the viewer. Studying how Didion handles control is telling. In her book Sharp: The Women Who Made an Art of Having an Opinion (2018), Michelle Dean speaks of the rivalry between Didion and fellow California native and film critic Pauline Kael after Kael described Didion’s second novel Play It As It Lays as “a princess fantasy” (203). Dean spells out the difference between the two writers, pinpointing Didion’s favored method of addressing conflict. “[Didion] prefers an elegant attack to blunt combat” (203), Dean argues. After working on several films, Didion publicly dismissed Kael’s views citing Kael’s credentials in film criticism invalid since Kael had never worked in the industry herself.

Didion demonstrates another form of public combat, showing how she controls her image when her viewpoints are challenged. In an August 1979 film review of Woody Allen’s “Manhattan” for the New York Review of Books, Didion criticized Allen’s film as a fantasy of adult life, arguing that the on-screen adults were acting like well-educated high school children. In the following October 1979 issue, the magazine published a withering response to Didion’s review along with Didion’s reply. Columbia professor John Romano attacked Didion and defended Allen, going on for several paragraphs. Underneath Romano’s letter was Didion’s cutting reply: “Oh, wow.” This example shows how Didion not only arrogantly dismissed Romano’s critique of her work as well as his entire character. It also demonstrates Didion’s power as a literary celebrity since the New York Review of Books printed the biting two words.
Yet in 2014 Didion’s control of her image was challenged in an unprecedented way. Tracy Daugherty published an unauthorized biography, *The Last Love Song*, which begins somewhat aggressively by informing readers of Didion’s refusal to cooperate. Not only did Didion refuse to work with Daugherty, thereby shutting off her entire network from speaking with him, she never publicly acknowledged the work once it was published. Although reviews noted Daugherty’s obvious respect for his subject, they also concurred that he overreached in making uncomfortably invasive assumptions about Didion’s life and motives. It was around this same time that her niece and nephew began work on the *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold* documentary.

The Didion documentary may be interpreted as a response to Daugherty’s biography, at the very least a public relations response, which would explain why the new images of the smiling Didion, the cooking Didion, and the more relatable Didion were released to the public. Didion did not relinquish control by issuing the documentary; instead, it was an act of reaffirming control over her image. *The Last Love Song* was a *New York Times* bestseller. Didion had no control over who read it, but she could reach many more people in a shorter amount of time with a Netflix documentary reporting her version of events.

In all, Didion is a master of persona-making and literary celebrity as shown by her long, successful career. She can have a hard facade, but this does not change what her public persona worked so hard to protect: the writer who has spent her lifetime crafting artistically verbose sentences, which generations of people read and love.
Works Cited


Lang, Brent. “How Griffin Dunne Convinced Joan Didion to Make a Netflix Documentary.”


