

Linear ~~narrative~~ storytelling generally seeks to establish a series of happenings through the fleshing out of connections. Readers learn what the characters do and why/and see the natural progression between the two. Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays* abandons this line of cause and effect in favor of one that seeks to uncover the falsity of connections. Events are disordered and cannot be placed in any way that clarifies them. Maria Wyeth's journey from childhood to failed motherhood and finally to solitude is not a smooth one. It is fragmented into pieces that contribute to the story but do not form an identifiable pattern. Her tragedies do not stem one from another and her inability to gain control over this leads her to a state of passivity in which she finally finds that "nothing applies" (4). Didion demonstrates this fragmentation by reflecting it with stark, underdeveloped <sup>CF</sup> and unconnected chapters that leave gaps in the text and in the disjointed process of Maria's search for nothingness.

<sup>interesting</sup> The sparse chapters of *Play it as it Lays*, surrounded by white space, serve as flashes of the memories that Maria would prefer not to dwell on. These separate memories demonstrate a disconnect between her experiences and point to the nothingness around them. As individual scenes, they deny the validity of a linear narrative which would imply a system of cause and effect, of reasons for events. Maria insists, and the novel demonstrates <sup>CF</sup> that reason and causality are at best deceptive and more often completely false. In the first person narrative that opens the novel, Maria explains that seeking reason is what her psychiatric <sup>PS</sup> doctors do. "They will misread the facts, invent connections, will extrapolate reasons where none exist" (4), but Maria has learned not to seek reasons and not to ask questions. "Certain facts, certain things that happened" (4) are then what the novel presents, not as evidence of the importance of such facts, but as tools to point to the nothingness between them. Nothing connects the scene in which Maria plays with an apparently healthy baby Kate (14) and subsequent scenes in which the

reader realizes that Kate has since been institutionalized for an unnamed but severe health issue. Likewise, there is no reason for Maria's mother to have fatally driven off the road, or for Maria to sleep outside. Events are not connected. However there are undercurrents which beg to be read as reasons, only to eventually prove Maria's point that "nothing applies"(4). Maternity, Maria's longing for her mother and her daughter, runs throughout the novel; <sup>CS</sup> however <sup>CF</sup> it does not put the pieces together. Maria can feel this longing and make plans to "(1) get Kate, (2) live with Kate alone, (3) do some canning" (210) but neither the feeling nor the plans lead to a willed result. *good*

The novel's chapters present the facts and do so at a halting pace. They begin typically, by setting a scene and introducing action. Then, as the action begins to rise, the chapter ends; the scene is abandoned and a new, unrelated one begins with the next chapter. <sup>PS</sup> The lack of relation between chapters exists in their disparity of time and place, but there is continuity in the presence of Maria and the maternal anxieties that dominate her psyche. This is evident in Chapters 25-29 where the physical setting moves from the house in Encino <sup>CF</sup> where Maria has her abortion, to dinner with Les Goodwin, the last time she saw her mother, a brief talk with Carter, and the bleeding that results from the abortion. The temporal setting is unknown, save for the logical progression from abortion to bleeding. In nearly all of these chapters <sup>CF</sup> though, <sup>R</sup> are references to maternity; Maria aborts her pregnancy, remembers her own mother, and rejects BZ's mother. Her longing for motherhood, both to receive and give it, runs through every aspect of her life, but *good* it does not serve as a means for bringing order to it. The loss and longing ~~can~~ cause pain, but they do not heal. Rather, Maria's life is a collection of disordered scenes, of conversations that do not achieve resolution, and longings that go unfulfilled.

The brevity and discontinuity of the novel's chapters attempt to make sense of the disorder by stopping quickly; they try to start over in hopes that the next scene will clarify the last. The result though is actually a demonstration of the novel's belief that "[n]o moment more or less important than any other moment, all the same: the pain as the doctor scraped signified nothing beyond itself, no more constituted the pattern of her life than did the movie on television in the living room of this house in Encino" (82). In fact, her life as seen through these snapshot chapters resemble the flashing images of television more than a continuous and linear narrative. "Her mind was a blank tape, imprinted daily with snatches of things overheard, fragments of dealers' patter, the beginnings of jokes and odd lines of song lyrics" (170). Maria receives all of this sensory information and although it forms much of the scenery of her life, it does not "constitute the pattern of her life." Maria could hear the sound of the television coming from the next room as she had an abortion; this is a fact. However, as Maria and the novel insist, these facts, which crowd her mind at night, only serve to obscure the harsher reality which is the "blankness" of Maria's mind. At some point, she encounters the nothingness that lies beneath all of the babble that forms her days: ominous news on the television, banal conversations with actors, and grocery shopping for the family she does not have. This point cannot be located though, because it is lost in the babble and the temporal dislocation of the novel.

Didion states in her essay "Why I Write" that *Play it as it Lays* was to be "a novel so elliptical and fast that it would be over before you noticed it, a novel so fast that it would scarcely exist on the page at all" (7). The speed Didion writes of here is evident in the brevity of the chapters which rush us through the "facts" of Maria's life. Most of the novel's chapters stay under four pages and several consist of a few brief sentences or a terse dialogue exchange. These especially short chapters draw attention to subsequent comments in "Why I Write:"

"About the pictures: the first was of white space. Empty space. This was clearly the picture that dictated the narrative intention of the book—a book in which anything that happened would happen off the page [...] and yet this picture told me no 'story,' suggested no situation" (7). The physical appearance of the novel's pages reflects the narrative structure. While the written words create the story, the space they occupy on the page points to the white space around them. The words describe the facts, and the white space shows the nothingness that runs through the facts, as well as highlights the lack of physical connection between events; cause and effect are kept separate. *good*

Didion writes that "happenings" occur "off the page," and the novel supports this claim with its absence of a clearly defined moment of revelation. By the end of the story, Maria knows that she has encountered nothingness ~~and~~ chooses to keep playing (214), but where and when this encounter occurs is ambiguous. She searches for the nothingness when she compulsively drives the freeways, but abandons this method when the roads lead to Carter (33). Her abortion is certainly a representation of the void that Maria feels both in her emotional longing for motherhood and in her physical state of loss and pain. However, the abortion, like most events in her life, is broken into fragmented scenes throughout the novel. Its impact cannot be summarized within a continuous narrative. Instead, we see the way memories of contacting the doctor, of driving to the house in Encino, hearing the scraping of the abortionist's tools pervade Maria's mind daily, if subconsciously. Even in conversations that do not directly mention the abortion, Maria is preoccupied with it. Breaking off their affair, *she* and Les Goodwin "mention everything but one thing: that she had left the point in a bedroom in Encino" (135). The point is motherhood, and Maria feels pain for having lost it, but not even this single event can account for her confrontation with nothingness. The confrontation takes place "off the page." It is slow *good*

and gradual and cannot be shown, only pointed to. The large empty spaces in the novel are as pervasive as Maria's abortion. They make the reader aware that there is something missing, something that is not named and described along with the facts.

Nothingness and Maria's confrontation with it cannot be shown directly, however they do not entirely escape the realm of the physical. The physical arrangement of the novel points to the nothingness, but there is also a sense that Maria physically feels the nothingness. She feels the pain and the void in her body left by her abortion, and when she gets close to the nothingness that she searches for, the novel points to it in terms of things that can be felt. When Maria drives the freeways, she does so in pursuit of a perfect rhythm; when she smoothly navigates interchanges, "without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly" (16). She seeks a movement that is so consistent and continuous and flows so perfectly smooth that the movement begins to resemble stasis, similar to the hummingbird Maria watches at the institution. Because the nothingness cannot be directly shown, its close proximity takes the form of this smooth stasis, which Maria encounters also at the Hoover Dam. She feels "the power surging through her own body" and watches "the deep still water with the hidden intakes sucking all the while" (171). Prior to this passage, Maria is concerned with "where her body stopped and the air began" (170). Although in every other place in the novel connections are false, here the intense pressure of the water at the Hoover Dam connects Maria's body to "other" (170). *Other* is the nothingness that Maria seeks and feels via the powerful water, whose nature it is to both destroy and renew.

The qualities of destruction and renewal through nothingness are integral to Maria's story. She methodically destroys her present relationships, especially those with men, in the hopes that she will be able to begin again and achieve her idyllic fantasy of living by the sea with Kate.

Although she feels remorse over her abortion, this is in fact Maria's method of purging her body of the men in her life. Whether the child was Carter's or Les Goodwin's is irrelevant; it was conceived in a life that Maria now views as being poisonous. She cuts these poisonous elements out of her body and her life and thus becomes "*a radical surgeon of my own life*" (203). By the novel's end, Maria is living isolated from everyone she knows in a psychiatric institution, and so we see that the destruction of her past is complete in a physical sense, although the memories obviously remain. The renewal is more ambiguous; it is only hinted at, "happening" off the page. Maria states that she is still playing, but clearly the game has changed. She has removed herself from the male dominated world of the Hollywood industry, and now lives by the sea, dreaming of Kate and watching the rhythmic hummingbird.

The style of *Play it as it Lays* is weary, stopping and starting again, and in this way mirrors Maria. She pursues destruction and renewal, giving up on one road only to try another. The effect of this mirror is that the reader becomes immersed in Maria's viewpoint. We can feel the barren Hollywood lifestyle and the lethargic heat of the desert, but before we feel oppressed enough to give up, we start a new chapter, try a new strategy. Thus there is sympathy for Maria. She is not simply a vacuous would be starlet, but a woman striving for renewal.

## Works Cited

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