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The Feminine Wasteland:

Gender Roles and Women's Mental Health in Joan Didion's *Run River* and
Play It As It Lays

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Abstract

The American author and journalist Joan Didion was especially known for her non-fiction that pertinently described the culture she lived in, but her novels also offer a frank and realistic perspective on American society. In her two first novels *Run River* (1963) and *Play It As It Lays* (1970) Didion portrays the respective main characters, Lily Knight McClellan and Maria Wyeth, as fragile women who are failing to live up to the gender roles that were imposed on them. Lily and Maria attempt to balance marriage, motherhood, and, in Maria's case, a career, but ultimately fail and decide to give up. The restrictive gender roles that these mid-century American women are instructed to incarnate develop into their prisons. Due to the outside pressure, their mental health worsens, and the characters feel trapped in their personal wastelands.

In this essay, I argue that the mental health issues that Lily and Maria face are based on a dissonance between their personalities, and the role that society encourages them to play. In addition to Didion's novels, I have also used Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) to contextualise the setting of the novels.

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Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, middle-class American women were presented with the idea that their ideal life was built on a foundation of marriage and motherhood, i.e., life as a housewife. Women who had previously been active participants in the workforce now retreated to the comfort of their homes, and the young girls who reached adulthood during this time were taught from an early age that the best way for them to contribute to society was to find happiness and fulfilment as wives and mothers. On the surface, these women's lives seemed perfect, but they could not escape thinking that their lives lacked purpose. Thus, a conversation about women's feelings of meaninglessness and societal expectations of women emerged in the beginning of the 1960s. Feelings of emptiness, helplessness, and desperation were common among this demographic, although it was seldom talked about.

The beginning of the 1960s was also the time that journalist and author Joan Didion rose to fame. Didion was one of the originators of the New Journalism movement, in which journalists incorporated their personal creative writing style in their reporting (Bradbury 202). Throughout her journalistic career, Didion blended the frontier between reality and fiction, resulting in numerous essays and articles written in her distinct "tough, knowing, at times cynical" voice (Grimes). While Didion was mostly known for her journalism and non-fiction essays, which have been thoroughly studied, analysed, and celebrated since their first apparition in the 1960s, she also published five novels. Whether she was writing fiction or non-fiction, Didion depicted society as she observed it. Hence, it is not surprising that the burgeoning discourse around gender roles and female meaninglessness made its way into her first two novels.

In Didion's first novel *Run River* (1963), the story is centred on the gradual breakdown of a Sacramento family during and after the Second World War. The main character Lily Knight McClellan attempts to find her way out of girly adolescence into adulthood through marriage and motherhood. During this same time, Lily is witnessing the rapid cultural changes happening to her Californian land. Alongside her husband Everett, Lily anxiously tries to navigate the cultural transformations around her but ends up betraying both herself and her husband. As for Didion's second novel *Play It As It Lays*, the main character Maria Wyeth first appears to have little in common with Lily of *Run River*. Maria is a former actress, as well as a divorcee and the mother of an institutionalised child. She spends her fragmented life driving aimlessly around Hollywood, contemplating her childhood and longing for her daughter. Ultimately, Maria suffers a nervous breakdown and ends up in a mental health facility. Despite their different starting points, Lily and

Maria both eventually reach a similar mental state, characterised by helplessness and despair. According to Michiko Kakutani's New York Times article, published in 1979, Lily and Maria are typical "Didion women" who "lose their men to suicide [and] divorce; their children to abortion, bad genes, and history". Throughout the novels, the reader witnesses Lily and Maria unsuccessfully balancing their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters, before deciding to abandon their attempts completely. As they let go of the roles that society has imposed on them, Lily and Maria give in to their personal wastelands lined by their dead men and unwell, or uninterested, children. Moreover, the mental health problems of the main characters appear to be subsequent, as Lily's issues end where Maria's begin, as will be explained later on.

As mentioned above, Didion's non-fiction has been studied thoroughly. Her novels, on the other hand, have received less scholarly attention. While *Run River* has been examined in reference to Didion's own Californian heritage, there is little written about Didion's portrayals of the contemporary expectations of women and men. The same applies to *Play It As It Lays*. Rather than the gender aspect, literary critics have concentrated on themes like silence, or the use of tranquilisers, or performed comparative studies, contrasting the novel to other Hollywood novels.

Neither gender nor feminism are the primary topics in Didion's literature, possibly due to the writer's belief that that "fiction is in most ways hostile to ideology", which she wrote in a 1972 New York Times article titled "The Women's Movement". Nevertheless, I would argue that the gender roles that Didion's generation was subject to (Didion was born in 1933 and reached adulthood in the post-war period) permeate her writing. Thus, I do believe that it is fair to take gender roles into consideration when analysing her novels. Based on my analysis of the female characters of Didion's *Run River* and *Play It As It Lays*, I argue that the societal expectations of women of the post-war period are the root cause of Lily and Maria's respective mental health crises. Furthermore, I aim to examine how the narrow gender roles of mid-century America, primarily during the two decades following the end of the war, are presented by Didion in the novels. I will study this by looking into how the characters act in order to live up to the gendered expectations, and what consequences they face when they fail. I will primarily focus on the characters Lily and Maria, but other minor characters will also be subject to analysis. To create a historical background and to contextualise the period, I have chosen to incorporate Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). It is important to note that I have chosen to analyse the novels according to their years of publication, 1963 and 1970, rather than the years during which the stories take place. While *Play It As It Lays* does not mention a specific time period, *Run River* is set between 1938 and 1959. As is explained in the next section of this essay,

the post-war period was a time of radical change for many American women, and I argue that the lives of the female characters in *Run River* are more similar to the destinies of the women coming of age in post-war America, rather than the those of the women who entered adulthood before or during the Second World War. By combining Didion's portrayals of women in her novels and Friedan's contemporary ideas about the "feminine mystique", I aim to display the connections between restrictive gender roles and mental well-being. Having studied the testimonies found in Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, I believe that the possibility for women in post-war America to lead independent, fulfilled, and meaningful lives was heavily restricted.

Expectations on Women in Post-War United States

In an endeavour to stabilise the United States following the end of the Second World War, a nuclear family model was promoted among Americans, according to Jürgen Martschukat, professor of North American Studies at the University of Erfurt. While the archetypical strong patriarch as the head of each family has been an ideal since the American revolution, Martschukat explains that this ideal was shelved in the beginning of the 20th century. The traditional gender roles, which had men participating in the work force and women doing unpaid labour inside the home, were dramatically altered as the employment rates plummeted during the Great Depression, resulting in men spending more time at home with their families. The Second World War furthered the disorganisation of the home life of American families. After the end of the Second World War, however, the reinstalment of traditional gender roles came to concur with the rebuilding of the post-war American society. Due to the economic boom that followed the Great Depression and the Second World War, middle class families were able to gain an unprecedented financial stability, and the one-income family to become the standard again (9).

In order for men and women to conform to the contemporary ideal of the nuclear family, they had to adhere to narrow gender roles. The men, many of whom were now war veterans, were ordered to go back to their previous occupations and provide for their families financially, while the women, who had replaced the men in the workforce during the war, were instructed to retreat to their homes and selflessly tend to the needs of their husbands and children (9). The urge to radically emphasise the differences between the sexes was unexpected in light of the female ideals of the last few decades. During the first wave of feminism, beginning in the middle of the 19th century, women fought for their right to vote and to access education, and in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, "spirited career girls", "feisty heroines" as well as popular female athletes were idolised and celebrated in contemporary

media (Coontz 36). Women were further encouraged to be an active part of society when the iconic Rosie the Riveter campaign launched in 1942, featuring the slogan “We Can Do It” and a picture of a woman with a serious expression rolling up the sleeve of her shirt to show off her muscles. Rosie the Riveter was depicted as a patriotic war worker and the aim of the campaign was to empower American women to fill in for the departing soldiers to keep industries, and thus the economy, afloat during the Second World War (Santana 3). By the end of the war, however, the expectations put on American women drastically shifted.

In post-war America, the great-granddaughters of the first feminists were no longer needed in the industries, which resulted in multiple demographical changes. 3.25 million women left the workforce in 1946, willingly or unwillingly, and resumed their domestic duties (Menand 543). Following the return of the war veterans, of whom 98 percent were men, the birth rate augmented rapidly. This typical post-war phenomenon persisted with time and the United States continued to observe a high birth rate throughout the 1950s and 1960s, causing the American population to expand by 30 million people between 1950 and 1960 (Menand 543; Oakley 111). In addition to the expansion of couples becoming parents for the first time, families grew larger as the desire to have four, five, or even six children augmented amongst Americans (Friedan 6). This enforced the already omnipresent gender roles, as fewer women resumed their careers after having children, and many did not even enter the workforce in the first place (Friedan 7).

Entering the 1950s and 1960s, a decrease in the number of women in academia became apparent (Menand 543). Since the societal standards of the time expected women to be wives and stay-at-home-mothers, women were advised to not pursue university studies. If a young woman decided to go into higher education, it was presumed that she did so in order to meet a suitable husband or to become more marriageable (Oakley 294). Furthermore, women were informed that they were not “as gifted as men in areas of abstract thinking”, and that they should avoid studying mathematics and natural science (294). Instead, they were advised to prepare for their roles as housewives by participating in courses in home economics (294). Women who attended university were also advised not to become “too intellectual”, and to avoid “enter[ing] academic fields and careers that would put them in competition with men”, since that would lessen their chances to marry (295). Ultimately, the majority of young women proved to be susceptible to these teachings. In the 1950s, only 37 percent of female college students graduated, since the majority of women left academia to marry, have children, and dedicate their life to domestic chores (Oakley 295). During this time, women were on average less educated than they had been before the Second World War: in 1920, 47 percent of college students were women and 20 percent of PhDs were awarded to women, whereas in 1963, only 38

percent of college students were women, and a mere 11 percent of the PhDs were awarded to women (Menand 543). Because American women prioritised marriage before their education, the marrying age dropped. At the end of the 1950s, the average American woman was married by age 20, and millions of girls were engaged or married as teenagers (Friedan 6).

In 1960s America, a “good wife” made her husband feel like “the boss at home”, while she cooked, cleaned, and made sure that her home was a “restful haven” for her husband and children (Coontz 16). At the time, this was considered an important and inspirational full-time occupation (16). “Once they were married, women’s work was truly never done” writes social historian Stephanie Coontz in her book *A Strange Stirring* (2011), in which she discusses *The Feminine Mystique* and American women’s situation during the 1960s (15). If a woman needed to work outside of the home for economic reasons, she was advised to always prioritise her homemaking duties before her part-time job, and she should never think of her potential career as more important than her husband’s (Coontz 16). According to the media of the time, the American woman was the winner in this situation (Oakley 291). Described as healthy, education-oriented, and more feminine than the “emancipated girl of the 1920s and 1930s”, American women were told that women all over the world envied them and the comfort of their everyday lives (Oakley 292, Friedan 7). If an American housewife had two or three children, a nice suburban home, and a husband providing financial stability, she was told that she had all that she could ask for. However, for many women, this was not enough.

Despite the clearly cut out roles for women and the seemingly comfortable life of an American housewife, many women could not escape feeling a sense of meaninglessness. In 1957, freelance writer Betty Friedan set out to investigate the inner life of the average American housewife. She sent out a questionnaire to 200 women with whom she attended Smith College in the late 1930s and early 1940s (1). A majority of the surveyed women had married and become housewives once they left college, and they were now living in the suburbs, spending their days cooking, cleaning, and driving their children to and from school and extracurricular activities. At first, Friedan’s subjects of study seemed to live in conformity with the outside world’s idea of the happy and feminine American woman. Indeed, Friedan describes her first impression of the average surveyed woman as “healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home”, and as though she had “found true feminine fulfilment” (7). When digging a bit deeper, however, Friedan found that many of her peers were experiencing dissatisfaction, frustration, and helplessness on a daily basis. Her questionnaire had tapped into a unanimous anxious state amongst the women who confessed feeling fatigued, desperate, and depressed due to their repetitive work and suppressed potential (Friedan 7, 10). The women surveyed by Friedan had been subject to a devolution” according to

Coontz (35). They had attended prestigious universities and had happily joined the workforce, but once they were married and had children, they abandoned their hopes of pursuing a career outside of the home, and they no longer felt as though they could make any meaningful contribution to society (Coontz 35). “I feel empty somehow...incomplete [...] I feel as though I do not exist”, confessed one housewife in a letter to Friedan, while another expressed her frustration by writing that she was “ready for a padded cell” after a half day’s worth of domestic work (Friedan 10, 17).

The aching absence of meaning these women experienced could be explained by “the feminine mystique”, referring to the assumption that all women should be able to find fulfilment in their homemaking roles. According to Friedan, women gave way to “the feminine mystique” by abiding by the numerous traditional gender roles that were put on women, and by committing to their roles as wives and mothers selflessly. “The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity”, Friedan writes, explaining that women were taught to exist only in relation to the men in their lives and that their identities solely lay in their roles as mothers and wives (53). Women who struggled to adjust to their new identities were accused of being selfish and maladjusted to their feminine roles, with some being prescribed therapy and tranquilising medication in order to combat their feelings of helplessness and anxiety (Coontz 73).

Friedan received numerous letters after the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, and while some women were thanking her for accurately describing their situation, some women criticised Friedan for being unfeminine (Coontz 30, 31). According to one reader, women should be taught to be “self-sacrificing, gentle and feminine”, while another explains that “real women” were valued by society for their ability to internalise “the finest lesson of all: selflessness” (Coontz, 30, 31).

Run River: Lily Knight and the Feminine Mystique

The act of marrying, or not marrying, irrevocably determines the course of the lives of the female characters in Didion’s debut novel *Run River*. In the novel, marriage serves as the vehicle that drives the post-adolescent girls over the brink of adulthood. While marriage certainly is a source of mutual love and support for the women in the novel, it also comes with negative aspects. Concerning the marriages that Didion describes in *Run River*, I claim that they all contain elements of the testimonies found in Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. However, since Lily’s marriage to Everett is the most detailed in the novel, it will also be the focal point of this part of the essay.

For Lily, the beginning of the transition takes place at age 17, as she hastily and somewhat unwillingly, agrees to marry her childhood friend Everett McClellan out of state, far away from their respective families. Lily herself expresses that their union is “as inescapable as the ripening of the pears, as fated as the exile from Eden” (63). I believe that the primary reason for Lily and Everett’s rushed marriage is the lack of direction in Lily’s life. The year leading up to their Nevada wedding, Lily attends the University of California at Berkley where she struggles to find her place. She is not particularly interested in her classes, nor in her fellow students, which earns her the reputation of behaving like a “deaf-mute” (51). While Lily accepts her academic defeat, she decides to confront her social anxiety and she begins accepting the date invitations she receives from a few of the male students on campus. Due to her awkward disposition, however, the dates are often unsuccessful. At Berkeley, it also becomes clear that Lily cannot fathom a future living anywhere else than her native Sacramento region. For instance, she invites a male student from New York to her parents’ ranch in the Spring, but as soon as he brings up their potential future life on the East Coast, she decides to decline any of his further advances (52). Quickly after she finishes her first year of university, Lily decides to abandon her academic aspirations due to her less-than-average grades and severe shyness. Thus, when Everett falls in love with Lily and asks her to marry him, the marriage proposal becomes the representation of a tangible life plan for Lily.

One on hand, I argue that Lily’s decision to marry Everett redirects the course of her life towards a fate tainted by the “feminine mystique”, however, there are archetypical Friedanian undertones to her life before marriage as well. For instance, when Lily tells her parents that she will not resume her education Berkeley after the summer break, they are neither shocked nor upset. “[S]he had read some interesting books and gone to some nice parties”, Lily’s mother Edith Knight says to sum up her daughter’s experience in academia (51). As stated in the introduction, the young women who came of age during the post-war period were not expected to find fulfilment outside the home, and thus, little expectations were put on them in regard to their academic pursuits. Thus, Didion pertinently captures the American society’s disinterest in women in academia in Edith Knight’s blasé attitude to her daughter’s university studies.

Lacking higher education as well as professional experience, Lily’s youthful beauty becomes her only currency, and her growing angst regarding her need to be desired is another important factor to her and Everett’s rapid nuptials. When it comes to her exterior, Lily fears that her youthful beauty will go to waste if she is not sexually validated by a man. It is only when Everett first approaches her romantically, that Lily is able to look at herself in the mirror “without regretting the waste of her perfectly good but constantly depreciating body”, and she expresses her gratitude towards Everett

who prevents her from “going to waste” like the pears rotting in her father’s orchard (55, 62). The need for external validation is deeply ingrained in Lily. At the chronological end of the story, a few hours before she hears the fatal gunshots, Lily is eager to remove some of the grey strands in her hair. Lily, whose petite frame makes her look “strikingly frail”, worries that greying hair would make the men around her perceive her as too frail, and thus, not desirable (7). I argue that Lily’s grey hair serves as a representation of the end of Lily’s need to feel attractive, not only because grey hairs are a sign of aging, but because the two men Lily wishes to be beautiful for, i.e., her husband and her lover, are both soon to be shot dead.

As mentioned earlier, Lily believes her marriage to be “as fated as the exile from Eden”. This Bible reference denotes not only Lily’s apprehension about marrying Everett but also her feeling of obligation. It could be argued that it is this experienced compulsion that pushes Lily, the “young married, river matron, mother of two”, to begin an extramarital affair when her husband is drafted to the army during the Second World War (73). According to the testimonies found in *The Feminine Mystique*, having an affair to escape one’s depressing everyday life was not an uncommon phenomenon amongst 1960s housewives (Friedan 210). Indeed, several wives and mothers confided in Friedan about the extramarital relations they sought out in order to “feel alive” (210). As a young mother, and before that, a very young bride, Lily has spent her entire adult life alongside her husband and their two children, Knight and Julie. I argue that Lily’s personal evolution slowed down as she took Everett’s hand in marriage, and after years of tireless labour around the home, it came to a full stop. As for the housewives cited in *The Feminine Mystique*, an exciting love affair serves as a temporary solution to Lily’s desperate and depressed state.

Lily’s attempt to regain a bit of her independence by seeking out affairs is, shockingly enough, not met with contempt from her husband. Despite Lily’s extramarital affairs and her other moral wrongdoings, Everett repeatedly reminds her of his love for her, as he proves his sensibility from the beginning of his romantic pursuit of Lily to the chronological end of the story. According to Josephine Hendin, Didion’s heroines exist in a depressive state, where their helplessness becomes fatal to the men around them (181). When it comes to Lily and Everett’s marriage, this is utmost pertinent. Due to Lily’s anxious disposition, immoral behaviour, and her “strikingly frail” persona, Everett believes that it is his duty to protect Lily from her moral misconducts “which were, since they were hers, his own” (30). Having shot one of the men with whom Lily has been unfaithful, before committing suicide with the same gun, Everett ensures that Lily will not repeat her previous sinful behaviour.

For a person who has spent their entire life playing a role, what remains when nobody is longer there to see her act? Although she has not always been content with the characters she is assigned, the roles of daughter, mother, and wife give Lily some kind of guideline that prevents her from “[drifting] in a virtually unshakable depression wherever the strongest current takes [her]” (Hendin 181). When Everett kills Ryder Channing, his wife’s lover, and then himself, Lily’s parents have already passed away, and her children are moving away from Sacramento to attend university, which leaves her alone on the Sacramento River. On the very last page of the novel, Lily, who is coming to terms with the heavy absence of her husband, shows her willingness to become one with Everett, as she repeats “we were each other, we were each other” to her husband’s dead body. Lily has since her late adolescence committed her life to living up to the feminine ideal of her time, and when her husband and her lover die, she can no longer keep up with the act. Since age 17, Lily has not existed outside the realms of her marital status. Therefore, when Everett takes his own life, he takes this crucial part her identity with him. As Lily lies down beside her husband’s lifeless body, and her perpetual anxiety turns in to a paralysing depression. The “feminine mystique”, i.e., the dishonest idea that Lily could have been fulfilled by a life of domestic bliss, if she had only been selfless enough to give it her all, has never seemed more far off.

Run River: Additional Female Destinies

While the roles of wife and mother were often regarded as aspirational in mid-century America, a less desirable role was that of the unmarried woman: “the spinster”. In *Run River*, the character of Rita Blanchard is designated the role as the spinster, as well as the mistress of Lily’s father, Walter Knight. Although Edith Knight makes some passively aggressive comments regarding Rita’s close contact with her husband, it is clear that Edith, as well as the other characters in the novel, pity Rita. Didion portrays Rita as a terribly unlucky woman who, despite her trying very hard, never succeeds in the social climate. From Edith consistently negatively referring to Rita – “the adjective ‘poor’ was for her a part of Rita’s Christian name” – to the “tale[s] in the folklore of spinsterhood” that are told about her, the reader quickly understands that the unmarried 35-year-old woman is regarded as an abnormality (39, 40).

Despite Walter’s persistent infidelity, Edith does not overtly express any animosity towards her husband’s mistress. The reason for this is the moral upper hand Edith feels that she has, as the lawfully wedded wife, on Rita, the tragic “other woman”. However, another explanation might be the fear of the potential repercussions if she ever dared to denounce her husband’s behaviour. From the

beginning of the novel, Didion portrays Edith as a petite woman, whose small silhouette is the “proof of her helplessness, her dependence, her very love” when rested upon her husband’s bulky frame (40). Moreover, Edith is described as a woman whose only occupations in life are loving her husband and hosting dinner parties, which presumably means that she has never participated financially to the household. Due to this dependence on her husband, Edith might be putting herself in a financially vulnerable situation if she were to condemn her husband’s infidelity. Edith never openly criticises her husband’s extramarital relationship, even as Walter and Rita succumb to a fatal car accident together.

Didion further widens the stream of complex female personalities which are supposed to fit through the restrictive gender roles by incorporating the two McClellan sisters, Sarah and Martha, into the novel. While Didion’s description of Everett’s older sister, Sarah, is less detailed than that of the younger sister, at first glance, the reader might interpret that she is the more traditional one of the McClellan sisters. Sarah, whose married name is never disclosed, moves to Philadelphia at an early age to integrate her husband’s family. At the chronological end of the story, she has married twice again. I argue that since Sarah is such a minor character in the novel, the details that Didion chooses to reveal about her serve a precise purpose.

As the oldest of the three McClellan children, Sarah’s dutiful disposition becomes a measurement of a woman’s marital duty, to which the other characters (as well as the reader) can compare her sisters(-in-law), Lily and Martha. For example, Lily’s marriage to Everett, and Sarah’s marriage to her first husband, both convey the contemporary idea that women were to integrate their husbands’ families after the wedding. I assume that Sarah does so wholeheartedly, as she does move across the country to adhere to her husband’s family (132). In comparison to Sarah, Lily’s efforts regarding her move into the McClellan family seem bleak, considering that she fails to get along with her parents-in-law, and does not even fully change her last name (108, 253).

Additionally, I think that it is important to note that Sarah also falls victim to the gendered norms of this time. Although it is not discussed in the novel, I think that it is fair to assume that Sarah, like so many other women during this era, has limited experience in the professional domain, and thus, her multiple marriages are the results of a need for a financial provider. Whether her two previous marriages ended due to divorce or due to the death of her spouse(s), Sarah, like many other women lacking education and professional experience probably cannot afford to be not be married.

Contrary to Sarah, Martha, who is the younger of the two McClellan sisters, is thoroughly described throughout the novel. Martha is rebellious, independent, and fiercely loyal to her family, and she is

undeniably the person with whom Everett has the closest relationship. The two siblings have an almost incestuous attachment, and while their strong bond sometimes interferes with Everett's marriage, Martha also develops a fond liking for Lily (48). Martha begins a relationship with the "opportunist newcomer" Ryder Channing, but their relationship comes to a temporary halt when Ryder's engagement with another young woman, Nancy Dupree, is announced (Brady 460). The "less blond than Martha, with prettier features" and "cute as a bug's ear" girl becomes the epitome of the domestic, docile, and discreet ideal post-war American woman for Martha (195, 198). When Ryder tries to rekindle his relationship with Martha, Martha is obliged to recognise her lover's lack of tact as well as his reputation of wanting to "use people" (188). Martha can no longer hide the truth from herself: Ryder is not a gentleman, and thus, she is certainly not a lady. On the night of Ryder and Nancy's wedding, she drowns herself in the Sacramento River (224).

The most important reason for Martha's suicide was the awakening from her own disillusion: when she recognised that Ryder was, in fact, morally flawed, she could no longer maintain her own idealised image of herself. I further claim that Nancy Dupree becomes the embodiment of femininity for Martha, and when she realises how far away she is from being that type of woman, she decides to abandon the pursuit all together. Martha's naïveté and idealistic view of love hinder her from coping with reality, but where does this need for escape come from? Martha was not married, nor a mother – "a blessing" according to Edith Knight attempting to find a silver lining in amidst the tragic death (226) – thus, the "feminine mystique" is probably not the culprit of her misfortune. Instead, I would like to present the idea that Didion might have been inspired by the main character in Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1856) when writing about Martha. While the two fictional women on the surface seem to have few characteristics in common, being separated by the Atlantic Ocean as well as approximately a hundred years, I find the similarities between the two characters' rich imaginations and their tragic suicides fascinating. Once Martha takes off her idealistic glasses and takes a clear look on the world she lives in; where her lover exploits people, her sister needs to pursue marriage in order to be financially secure, and her sister-in-law commits adultery to ease her anxiety; there is no going back.

Contrary to their aunt, Lily and Everett's children, Knight and Julie McClellan, have a more realistic outlook of life. They were born in the beginning of the 1940s, which means that they belong to what is called the Silent Generation (Howe). As they entered adulthood in the post-war economic boom of the 1950s, this generation was able to achieve a life of comfort and conformity by "playing by the rules" (Howe). In this case, "the rules" were in large based on the traditional gender roles that have previously been discussed in the background section of the essay. It is this dedication to conform to

traditional roles that earned the Silent Generation the parallel nickname of the Traditionalist Generation. An instance where the younger generation proves to be less tolerant than the previous generation occurs during a discussion between Everett and his son, Knight. While Everett does not seem bothered by Lily's decision to take his last name in addition to her maiden name, their son Knight makes a point of it at the end of the novel when engaging in a heated argument with his father. With the aim to emasculate Everett, Knight tells him that he "did not count for much", since the people in their surroundings refer to Lily by her maiden name, and not her married name (253). As stated in the background section, I argue that gender roles changed for the worse for women in the post-war period, and I believe that Everett's and Knight's different standpoints during this argument are an accurate representation of this societal turn towards traditionalism.

Play It As It Lays: Maria Wyeth and the Notion of 'Nothing'

Contrary to the ideal woman of the American post-war era, the main character of Didion's second novel *Play It As It Lays* (1970) is not a doting mother and housewife. Neither is she a career girl, who takes pride in her work. Instead, Maria Wyeth is a former actress and a divorcee whose only child lives in a psychiatric institution. In this section, I will discuss Didion's portrayal of Maria, mostly in regard to her maternal and domestic qualities, in order to discern the differences between the ideal woman of this time and Didion's portrayal of Maria.

Maria is, in a way, the continuation of Lily. Lily, who after years of anxiously attempting to adhere to the stereotype, finally gives in, lies down and let depression overtake her body, is the starting point of Maria. Depressed and often ridden by anxiety, Maria leads a life marked by unpredictability and meaninglessness. She alternates between trying to control her day in order to not feel anything, and letting her depressive thoughts get the best of her, spending her day overwhelmed and in bed. By one critic, Maria is described as a "passive heroine of the sentimental novel, interesting because of the tenderness of her sensibilities, but doomed to destruction because of her inability to translate these feelings into meaningful action" (Griffin 480). Indeed, Maria experiences vivid feelings of sadness, longing, and love, not at least for her child, but she is failing when it comes to the proper actions she needs to take in order for her life to change.

The fragmented style in which Didion's second novel is written is a representation of Maria's struggle to structure her life and her story (Hinchman 460). By leaving out details and jumping between passages without explanation, Didion portrays Maria as having little rule over her own thoughts, and

the empty space that is sometimes left between paragraphs symbolises the absence of feelings (Hinchman 460). In one article, Chip Rhodes, professor of English at Western New England University, goes even further in his argument that Maria is an incomplete person. “As one reads the brief, anecdotal chapters that mix first and third-person narration, a main character does not emerge – and that is exactly the point. ‘Maria Wyeth’ is an absence” (Rhodes 132). The notion of ‘nothingness’ is essential to Maria’s character, and it appears in the first and the last chapter of the book. In the first instance, Maria tells the staff at her psychiatric facility that “nothing applies”, and she is annoyed when they come back to ask for clarification: “what does apply, they ask later, as if the word ‘nothing’ were ambiguous, open to interpretation” (4). Again, on the very last page, Maria declares being the only one with a true understanding of the word: “One thing in my defence, not that it matters [...] I know what nothing means, and I keep on playing” (214). The “nothing” that Maria refers to is the emotional absence she feels within herself, since nothing seems to bear any meaning.

I believe that Maria’s lack of meaning, her very “absence”, stems from the absence of roles assigned to her. While Maria experiences deep-rooted feelings of meaninglessness, she also endures a lot of love and longing for her daughter, Kate. However, since she does not have her daughter by her side, Maria is incapable to canalise her deep emotions. One critic describes Maria as a “post-domestic” woman and writes that the post-domestic woman is characterised by the spousal role she was once assigned, but later is removed from: “the post-domestic woman has occupied the role of wife, but she is narratively showcased after she has ceased to occupy that identity” (Sims 7). Moreover, I argue that Maria is also a post-domestic woman in the sense that she has a daughter of whom she does not have custody. My claim is thus that meaninglessness Maria experiences is not equal to a natural absence, but rather a hollow where something once was, as the result of post-domesticity.

As written in the Introduction section, where Lily Knight McClellan’s mental issues end, those of the main character of Didion’s second novel *Play It As It Lays*, Maria Wyeth, begin. Lily, who mainly struggles with anxiety, exists in an active state. By channelling her restlessness into activities such as party planning and (unfortunately for her husband) infidelity, Lily keeps herself busy in order to escape her fretting thoughts. Maria, on the other hand, does not experience helplessness, but rather hopelessness. Regularly, she tries to channel her feelings of irrational fears, but her recurring panic attacks and depressive episodes represent her failure to manage her anxiety as productively as Lily. Whereas Lily found herself novel lying on the ground next to her dead husband at the end of *Run River*, Maria reaches her rock bottom in a neuropsychiatric institute at the end of *Play It As It Lays*. Lily, who up until the death of her husband and her lover has been consumed by anxiety, enters her

personal wasteland beginning to feel the paralysing effects of depression. Maria, on the other hand, is completely consumed by her depression. She is in herself an absence.

The parallels between Maria and the women interviewed in *The Feminine Mystique* might seem less evident than those between Lily and Friedan's interviewees. However, since I find that Maria is a continuation of Lily, I also would also suggest that Maria show symptoms related to the "feminine mystique". Even though Maria finds herself in a very different situation than the majority of Friedan's interviewees, *Play It As It Lays* and *The Feminine Mystique* both include descriptions of isolation, alienation from society, fatigue, and depressive episodes. Indeed, for Lily, Maria, and the women surveyed in *The Feminine Mystique*, the "problem with no name" did not necessarily center around the roles they are asked to play, as many women were (and are) capable of finding meaning and fulfilment in their lives as wives and stay-at-home-mothers. Instead, the negative side effects arrived when society deemed that these domestic roles were the only suitable options for women, and thus, should suffice in order for women to be feel accomplished.

Conclusion

By examining Joan Didion's portrayal of the female characters in her first two novels, this essay has explored the societal expectations that American women experienced during the middle of the last century. My claim is that many of the female characters in *Run River* and *Play It As It Lays* feel constrained by the roles they have been assigned due to their sex, and they experience feelings of meaninglessness and helplessness when trying to fit the narrow stereotypes.

Lily Knight falls victim to "the feminine mystique", the phenomenon coined by Betty Friedan, as she fails to conceptualise her own identity, and she frequently chooses not to follow her own internal voice. Lily is exclusively defined by the relationships she has with the people in her surroundings, and she is incapable of perceiving herself as an independent entity: she is her parents' daughter, her husband's wife, her children's mother, as well as Joe Templeton and Ryder Channing's mistress. Not only are these epithets not enough for Lily to lead a fulfilled life, but when the people associated with these relationships disappear from her life, she is left feeling lost, lacking a part of her identity. The secondary characters in *Run River* portray further aspects of the difficult reality of being a woman in mid-century America, as they traverse themes regarding 'spinsterhood', female financial instability, and suicide.

Maria Wyeth's life is marked by depression, anxiety, and a sense of meaninglessness. Despite her deep love and longing for her daughter, Maria fails to translate her emotions into meaningful actions, which leads to her eventual destruction. The absence of meaningful roles, both in her private and her professional life, makes Maria become an outcast of society, and a shadow of herself. Because of the absence of tangible roles to canalise her feelings, Maria becomes an absence herself.

With Betty Friedan's theories regarding "the feminine mystique" and the expectations on women in post-war America, I have shown why the female characters of *Run River* and *Play It As It Kays* experience such difficulty when trying to combine their self-image with the societal expectations that are put upon them. Since the narrow gender roles were, in most cases, so incompatible with the complex personalities the characters possess, they predestined the female characters to a life of restlessness, dysphoria, and depression. Unlike the women interviewed in Friedan's bestseller book, Lily and Maria did not project an image of a perfect life onto the people in their surroundings, they did not appear to "have it all". On the other hand, the inability to lead a fulfilled and multifaceted life is shared amongst the fictional characters in Didion's novels and the surveyed women in Friedan's book.

Furthermore, I maintain that although *Run River* takes place in the years between 1938 and 1959, Didion's debut novel should be analysed in regard to the year of its publication, i.e. 1963. Many of the female characters, in particular Edith and Lily, could easily have fit in in a 1960s environment; they never obtained a university degree, nor did they help sustain the workforce during the war. Instead, they married while still in their teens, became mothers at a young age, and spent their days concentrating on childrearing, homemaking, and trying to appease their increasing anxiety. Moreover, Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was released the same year as *Run River*. While Didion may not have read Friedan before publishing her book, it is almost certain that Didion, the notorious "New Journalist" who wrote about the world she observed, noticed the same societal trends as her contemporary feminist writer.

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