

# Root of the "magical thinking"



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The Year of Magical Thinking, by Joan Didion, highlights the trip a mind takes when the death of a loved one occurs. The author examines her life as a whole and evaluates the situation without directly addressing her grief and mental state. Joan Didion writes The Year of Magical Thinking to mask the impending truth about her husband and place her upcoming depression into perspective by using information from different sources, recalling past memories, and implementing her philosophical knowledge.

The utilization of information from literature is the tool Didion uses to gain control of the situation at hand, even though control is inevitable. Didion mentions repeatedly, "Read, learn, work it up, go to literature. Information is control" (Didion 94). For the author, whenever a difficult-to-understand situation presents itself, Didion approaches literature for answers. She loads the memoir with technical terms and information about her husband's or daughter's situation, and excludes the emotion in order to mask the sadness within her character. Information is control since it happens to allow the author to extract her solutions to unanswered questions, as well as a distraction from the reality of the situation.

Continuing the argument, different sources explain the tragedy in depth, which enhances the reality of the situation and introduces new information. The author recalls an excerpt from a handbook on forensic pathology: "Although lividity is variable, it normally begins to form immediately after death and is usually clearly perceptible within an hour or two" (qtd in Didion 203). After reading this information, Didion is overwhelmed with the aspect of her husband's time of death. She begins to overthink with the new information, believing her husband passes an hour or two earlier, while they

were experiencing a normal afternoon. The excerpt gives rise to the fault of Joan Didion in the case of her husband's death as she ponders if there was anything possible for her to do in order to prevent it.

Furthermore, Didion uses case studies to introduce depression as a definite effect of death of a loved one. Joan Didion remembers the results of the "Young, Benjamin, and Wallace, *The Lancet*: 2: 454-456, 1963" study showing "significantly higher mortality for bereaved spouses in the first year" (qtd in Didion 47). The case study directly states the present situation that Didion resides in. The author, existing as a bereaved spouse, looks at this information as a conformation that being severely depressed after these times is reality and justifies through research. The inclusion of the quote begins to perceive Didion's condition as a serious and dangerous change to her emotional health.

Looking back at her memories, Joan begins to decipher new truths to her husband's death. In denial about test results and appointments with doctors, Joan Didion articulates, "You no more know how you're going to die than I do or anyone else does" (Didion 158). In the memoir, Joan Didion was notified about her husband's health problems yet, she refuses to acknowledge them. The author's husband knew he was going to die, but it was Didion who believes everything will be alright. The memories directly foreshadow the events to come, nevertheless, the readers can acknowledge Didion's attempt to mask the unavoidable outcome of her husband's future.

Adding to the previous claim, Didion finds memories which foreshadow the events that took place. John Dunne states, "It all evens out in the end" (qtd

in Didion 173). While speaking to his daughter, John Dunne tells her these words to help her deal with her loneliness of death. He believes that all the good times and all the bad times in your life will balance out. Dunne also mentions this claim to foreshadow his death as well as how others will also experience death because it is a present feature in our society which it unavoidable. The symbolism in this remark is overlooked as Didion is trying to conceal the impending reality.

Due to Didion's oblivious attitude, she keeps refusing the approaching end of her time with her husband by not paying attention to the past signs around her until catastrophe strikes. The author remembers an aspect of a memory: "The red flashing light had by then seemed an urgent warning" (Didion 131). In a memory of her by herself, Didion witnesses the neighbor's husband dying and the ambulance approaching the house with its flashing lights. The event clearly foreshadows her own husband's death as she had felt the need to call her husband at the moment. Events like these occurred previously in Didion's life, and her not analyzing the events as thoroughly as she should have, made the death harder to accept.

The first thing Didion mentions in her memoir is her philosophical knowledge of the timing of a casualty and how it is completely unexpected. Didion writes, "Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant" (Didion 3). Didion notes how every catastrophe or death occurs during an ordinary setting. The meaning behind it is expressed as these events are so unexpected and unusual that anything compared to or preceding it will come off as ordinary. Similar to this knowledge, since John Dunne's death was so unexpected and

all of the sudden, Didion's thoughts go straight to finding a way to hide the reality of the event and continue with the ordinary instant of that afternoon.

In terms of her depression, Didion begins to discuss the beginning of her condition using prior knowledge and extensive thinking. The author deciphers, " Grief was passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention" (Didion 143). Didion uses her knowledge to distinct her condition, as she believes that her condition was ongoing and requires attention which can be something similar to depression. The author begins to put her condition into perspective with the distinctions she makes.

Didion once again continues with the refusal of accepting the events around her, as if she can use her philosophical thinking as a path to normalcy. Joan Didion evaluates, " If she did not have a trach. This was demented, but so was I" (Didion 125). The author goes on and on stating how if her daughter did not have a trach she could go home and return to her life. She believes that if she can cause one event not to occur, she can thus take control of her life and steer it in the direction she wants it to go. Her philosophy is so bizarre that she begins to address herself as demented and how her idea was not practical, however she still wanted her ideas to be executed.

Using information from different sources, recalling past memories, and implementing her philosophical knowledge, Joan Didion constructs her memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, to conceal the reality of her husband passing as well as allowing her depression to be revealed. Throughout the course of the memoir, Didion is exposed to new factors of death, and she uses these three ideas to conceal her emotions because information is a

copied mechanism she uses. Joan Didion has a hard time dealing with her emotions, but by the end of the memoir she has articulated her feelings through facts as well as her way of writing.