

## Marriage and Loss of Self-Identity in Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer*

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### Abstract

The narratives of marriage have evolved in the early twenty-first century. In American society, they contrast sharply with mid- to late-twentieth century depictions of marriage in literature. Since the late twentieth century, American woman authors have crafted their own narratives on marriage. This study entitled "Marriage and loss of self-identity in Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer*," examines Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer*, which can be considered a memoir because it explicitly addresses issues confronted by white, Western American women throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Didion examines marriage in her work, exploring the theme in relation to her social, cultural, and psychological contexts. Examining her biographies in chronological order provides insight into the evolution of her perspectives on marriage. Marriage, in Didion's narratives, serves as a reflection of not only the social and economic changes that have taken place over the years in the lives of women, but also the psychological changes that take place in their minds. Didion's female protagonists attain financial fulfilment through marriage, yet marriage also ensnares them. Each woman character enters or persists in her marriage insincerely, because marriage undermines their individuality through psychological pain, physical violence, emotional abandonment, and sexual estrangement.

**Key words:** marriage, psychological pain, physical violence, emotional abandonment, disillusionment.

### Introduction

In *A Book of Common Prayer*, Didion has re-established the significance of story creation as a fundamental aspect of human existence. She had transcended the profound effects of filial bereavement in contemporary society. Didion directs her creative faculties towards the process of connection in both her non-fiction and fiction works. A shift in geographical position indicates a change in aim. This is hardly remarkable, as physical locations serve as mental constructs for Didion. She shifts her focus from her homeland, the American West, to Central America in *A Book of Common Prayer*. The geographical shift demonstrates a quest for new ways to establish connections in modern life. Joan Didion's profound connections to California and her works encapsulate California society throughout the twentieth century. In addition to her role as a novelist, she is a proficient dramatist, screenwriter, journalist, and nonfiction writer. A significant aspect of Didion's reflection encompasses an analysis of the artistic legacy she inherits, particularly emphasizing its mostly patrilineal character.

Didion's endeavor to establish her rightful status as a woman within a creative lineage that has often dismissed its female contributors on parity with their male counterparts due to patriarchal principles is exemplified in *A Book of Common Prayer*. Her works clearly substantiate this stance, indicating a lack of critical sensibility without gender parity. This novel clearly substantiates her assertion about that condition. Didion is not concerned about legitimacy at this stage of her literary career. She attempts to convey the authenticity of her own voice as a writer in her work.

The narrator of *A Book of Common Prayer* is Grace, a well-published anthropologist from Colorado who gave up her profession in her thirties and married a wealthy planter from Boca Grande. Now widowed and dying of cancer, she has decided to spend her remaining days in Boca Grande because she finds peace in the country's "opaque equatorial light." Grace tells us that the novel is her 'witness' to Charlotte Douglas, who came to Boca Grande as a tourist and remained there for almost a year before she was killed in a revolution. Charlotte arrives in Boca Grande and establishes herself as a permanent sojourner. She has an affair with Grace's brother-in-law, Victor, and compels the narrator's interest by her odd mixture of strength and weakness and her fixation upon an illusory past in which she and her daughter Marin were inseparable.

The central theme of the story is history, especially history as biography. Grace opens the novel with a brief summary of Charlotte's personal history and then summarizes her own. She states several times that Boca Grande has no history; what she means is that it has no early patriots, no national heroes, and no known founding fathers. She gives an account of its recent past which consists of elaborate roadway and building projects aborted after the assassination of President Luis, also her brother-in-law, in 1959. Grace wants the reader to understand that the setting for the story of Charlotte Douglas is not a romantic one.

Grace identifies the signs of coming violence in her marriage. Charlotte displays more public energy than ever, but her emotional stability, always precarious, is now breaking down. Unable to sleep at night, she goes out to the movies or calls the California Highway Patrol in San Francisco and listens to the taped road conditions report. A bomb explodes in the clinic where she works, killing four persons; she drags three people to safety, but remembers afterwards only that she was changing a Tampax at the time of the explosion and consequently bled all over the floor. Leonard Douglas comes to Boca Grande to tell Charlotte that Warren is dead, that he knows where Marin is, and that she must leave country. But Charlotte prefers to pretend that nothing is happening for Leonard, and on the night that Grace leaves the country she pins a gardenia on her dress as a farewell.

Charlotte's menstrual blood in part five prefigures her death in the final section, which represents the culmination of all earlier themes of chaos and corruption. When the October violence ends, Grace returns to Boca Grande to learn that Charlotte has been shot, her body thrown on the lawn of the American Embassy. Grace can reconstruct the circumstances of her arrest, but she does not know which side actually ordered her death. Although Charlotte and many others lose their lives to the revolution, the only political change it effects is Victor's replacement by Antonio as Minister of Défense. In the end of the novel, Grace confesses that, she had to rely so much on hearsay in telling Charlotte's story; she has not been the biographer-historian she wanted to be. She attests that she is still interested in the past, but understands it no better. Her confession of failure is linked with a deliberate image of obscurity, "Today we are clearing some coastal groves by slash-and-burn and a pall of smoke hangs over Boca Grande. The smoke obscures the light I wish that I could see the light today" (271). It is clear that Grace does not understand the life of Charlotte.

*A Book of Common Prayer* further highlights the ambiguity in Didion's work focusing on the challenges faced by a female narrator in her attempt to tell a story. Didion employs a quintessential feminist strategy in the novel's structure. Didion constructs a story that examines the connection between two women and the literature produced by and about them. Concurrently, Didion acknowledges her distinctions from radical feminists while effectively conceding her affinity with women as a collective. The novel features a more intricate narrative structure and a form of parallel narration. Charlotte Douglas and Grace Strasser-Mendana's narratives intertwine. The readers encounter progressively subjective interpretations of what constitutes "reality." In "Against Interpretation: Narrative Strategy in *A Book of Common Prayer*," John Hollowell argues that the novel's narrative structure of the failed promise promotes Didion's theory of fiction as "an elusive surface without a final meaning" (164).

Grace's gender as a female is significant to her narrative about another woman's existence, despite her disavowals of any affiliation with the feminist movement. Grace's opinions on Charlotte's self-image and her own acknowledged personal shortcomings are examined from a broader perspective. Narrators face inherent challenges in conveying any narrative objectively. Grace Strasser-Mandana articulates her intention to execute her narrative function with utmost precision and objectivity, aligning with her job as an impartial scientist. Grace is determined to accurately narrate Charlotte Douglas' story. She states, "I will be her witness." (*A Book of Common Prayer* 1). She concludes that replicating entire personalities doesn't come as easily. A laboratory setting allows for the organization of amino acids. A revelation forces Grace to acknowledge the specific shortcomings in her account: "I have not been the witness I aspired to be" (272).

In *A Book of Common Prayer*, Charlotte confronts the veracity of her existence against the reality of the superhuman realm. Charlotte willingly relinquishes her sense of self to the shadows and wetness of that domain. The transition from self-creation to self-destruction encompasses an element of mimesis, since it is nature that engenders people and nature that extinguishes them. The governmental system is severely compromised; social difficulties abound; interpersonal relationships are limited; and the water is unsafe for use. In *A Book of Common Prayer*, Charlotte matures inside an affluent household in proximity to Hollister, California. All the fundamental amenities of a middle-class lifestyle are available to her. Moreover, her parents in still in a steadfast confidence in the merits of cultivated and irrigated land, high-yield agriculture, frugality, diligence, the legal system, development, education, and the overall trajectory of historical advancement. She maintains an excessively optimistic worldview, believing all grievances will vanish, all situations will improve, and success is certain. Charlotte's upbringing, rooted in genuine faith, propels her into bad faith; it allows her to delude herself into believing that the external world operates by a code like her own. Charlotte's sheltered existence in Hollister has preserved her innocence about politics, although her American naivety starkly contrasts with the political turbulence she encounters in Boca Grande.

Patricia Merivale writes in her article, "Through Greene – Land in Drag: Joan Didion's *A Book Common Prayer*:" "Grace comes very close, in the writing of this elegy, to acknowledging that she has now lost the daughter whom she barely found, never claimed, and could not save: Charlotte. A 'daughter' is perhaps that younger alter ego in whom the dying may fancy themselves reborn and in whom the living glimpses their immortality, as Charlotte glimpses it in her daughter Marin" (49).

Grace intentionally isolates herself from Charlotte, expressing interest in her not as a friend but rather in relation to her transient presence in Boca Grande, which remains enigmatic to Grace. Grace acknowledges her similarity to Charlotte as a mother: "One thing at least I share with Charlotte: I lost my child" (20). She states that Charlotte "lost one child to 'history' and another to 'complications'" (53). Remarkably, these two mothers of "lost" children eventually "discover"

each other's children. After Charlotte's death, Grace confronts Marin, while Charlotte maintains a close relationship with Gerardo. The expression that blind course implies that Charlotte proceeds without contemplation or awareness of her actions. She arrives at the airport and boards a flight to a southern destination, distancing herself from whatever she is attempting to evade at that moment. During her time at Boca Grande, Charlotte maintains a meticulous routine of visiting the airport each morning, seemingly devoid of any specific direction or purpose for her excursions.

Friedman argues in his "The Anti-Heroine's Voice. Narrative Discourse and Transformations of the Picaresque" that Charlotte visits the airport as a mother would do if her daughter was arriving, and she reads the newspaper as a way to pass the time until her flight arrives. However, her daughter, Marin is resolute in her decision not to visit Boca Grande. Charlotte weaves a story in which the principles of love and devotion guide individuals. She is visiting the airport each morning; Charlotte sustains the delusion that Marin loves her and will come to see her. If Marin is able to see her mother, then she cannot be a terrorist. The dynamics of Charlotte's relationship or absence of one, with Marin are crucial to this novel. She always recalls Marin as a child and is unable to accept that she may engage in terrorist activities. Charlotte fabricates a sense of nostalgia over Marin's youth, reconstructing memories in which she provided Marin with an idyllic upbringing, exemplified by Marin's third Easter when she "had a straw hat" and "Warren gave her his coat" (90). Charlotte reminisces on that specific Easter, stating to Leonard, "I believe I have never been so joyful on a Sunday" (91).

Subsequent revelations reveal that she had overindulged in alcohol and engaged in sexual relations with Pete Wright on the night before that unforgettable Easter. She woke up to Warren's disparaging comment, "Look at the slut on Easter morning" (136) which was followed by repeated physical assaults. The rest of her recollection remains unchanged: "Marin possessed a straw hat one Easter, accompanied by a floral lawn dress. Warren bestowed his coat upon her" (136).

Charlotte selectively recalls some aspects of the past while omitting others during her times of contemplation. Grace asserts, "We all recall what we must remember" (259). Charlotte must recall fleeting instances of love, such as Warren giving Marin his coat on Easter morning, while choosing to forget the distressing occasions. Despite her passive demeanor throughout her life and the narrative, Charlotte has the ability to do remarkable feats, like slaughtering a chicken with her bare hands and remaining up for thirty-six consecutive hours to administer immunizations to the residents of Boca Grande. Nonetheless, she mostly concentrates on her maternal role, despite her little engagement in nurturing her children.

A striking illustration of Charlotte's unawareness of her shortcomings as a mother occurs when she recounts a weekend visit to Tivoli Gardens with Marin. Grace's face illuminated with delight as she recounted this adult's ideal weekend, one that a kid would enjoy, including the puppet shows, watermills, and picnics shared with the youngster. They prepared meals consisting of salami and petit fours. They had hardly slept. Under the illuminated lights, they roamed until Marin's heels blistered, at which point they took off their shoes and proceeded barefoot. Charlotte Douglas extended her reach over the table. Upon our return to the hotel; "we requested cocoa from room service. I allowed Marin to place the order, gave a gratuity to the waiter, and gave her instructions on how to wash her underwear at night" (47). Charlotte states, "Additionally, Marin and I are inseparable" (111).

Grace is unaware of the events that transpired in Tivoli Gardens. Upon meeting Marin, Grace enquires, "Did you enjoy the Tivoli Gardens?" (260). In response, Marin Bogart abruptly turned and placed the tray on the table, her expression tense. Her reaction was reminiscent of her mother's reaction the morning the FBI first arrived at their residence on California Street. Grace's remark on Tivoli is the sole catalyst for an emotional reaction from Marin, leading readers to infer that it had sentimental significance for both mother and daughter. The events that transpired are irrelevant. Upon discovering that Marin is the primary suspect in an American terrorist incident, Charlotte safeguards her daughter by withholding a picture from the FBI. Charlotte initially struggles to comprehend her instinctive urge to withhold the photograph from the FBI, but later recognizes that "any photograph beneficial to them would reveal Marin's eyes, and then Marin's eyes would gaze back at her from newspapers and television screens, and she was not yet prepared to consign her child to history" (74). After Marin has perpetrated her offense, the only means by which her mother can safeguard her is by preventing her portrayal in the media. Charlotte explicitly informs the FBI that if Marin had reached out to her, she would, in fact, deceive him. She says: "I would lie to you and be found guilty of perjury in a court of law. You are aware of it. You overheard my telephone conversation with my husband" (75). When the media finally locates a photograph of Marin for broadcast, it is an outdated image of Marin attired as a candy striper. Grace informs readers that in the expanded printing of the newspaper piece, "Marin was nearly indistinguishable... her eyes merely smudge on the gravure screen" (76).

Consequently, Charlotte should not concern herself with consigning her daughter to oblivion when the only depiction in circulation renders Marin hardly identifiable. Despite Charlotte's apparent intention to safeguard Marin, Grace's first encounter with Marin compels readers to scrutinize Charlotte's true motivations. Grace states, "The day I finally beheld Marin, I was astonished by her eyes. She has Charlotte's eyes. She doesn't possess anything else that belongs to Charlotte, but she does possess Charlotte's eyes" (76).

Charlotte is apprehensive about consigning Marin or herself to history. Charlotte seeks refuge from her existence via air travel. Charlotte departs from her husband without any forethought or reflection. The death of Charlotte's mother prompts her divorce from Warren. Upon receiving an inheritance, Charlotte departs with Marin, leaving Warren without formally notifying him of her absence. Following a telephone discussion with Warren, during which he states, "You're going to lie awake and remember this for the rest of your miserable unfortunate life," she recalls a previous instance when he issued the same warning. She confesses to Leonard, "I just realized I never told Warren about my departure" (109). Leonard comforts her, stating, "He has had fifteen years; I presume he has discerned it" (109). Leonard is certain that Charlotte would eventually leave him with the same abruptness and disregard. Similar to Didion's earlier novels, the protagonist in *A Book of Common Prayer* experiences pregnancy.

In this novel, Charlotte desires and gives birth to the baby instead of terminating the pregnancy. However, shortly after giving birth, she learns that the infant's fate is death. The readers are not aware of the child's specific disease, only that it has a limited life expectancy. Despite Warren and Leonard's conclusion that Charlotte should not see the infant, she remains resolute in her refusal to let her child perish without her affection and attention. Her choice to not only give birth to the baby but also remain with her till her natural demise epitomizes Charlotte's singular decisive action in the story. On one occasion, she fled with intent after informing others of her actions. Charlotte transports the infant to Mérida, believing that the child would perish more rapidly in that location. Despite her profound care, love, and commitment to the kid, Charlotte fails to take any active measures to ensure the baby's survival. She only awaits its demise. She names the baby Charlotte, or Carlota, as translated by the doctor, only after the infant's death.

The sections addressing the birth and death of Carlota Douglas are disconcerting in their indifference. Charlotte deliberately abandons Leonard and Warren to be alone with the kid; however, she remains inactive throughout her time in Mérida. Leonard offers to retrieve Charlotte if she desires, to which she responds, "As you wish." Leonard asserts, "You must respond," (151) to which Charlotte remains silent and thereafter informs Leonard that she will return his call, a promise she ultimately fails to fulfil. Despite her intricacies and often enigmatic behaviour, it is evident that Charlotte is not a victim in this story. She is far from being an impotent woman in a patriarchal culture. Her husband does not want to dominate her; rather, he desires that Charlotte maintains autonomy in her life, which is why he asserts that he would only pursue her if she desires his presence. However, Charlotte remains uncertain about her desires. She navigates her existence mindlessly and bears a striking resemblance. She wants to safeguard her children but fails to take any active measures to ensure their safety. Simultaneously, she demonstrates lucidity in her decision-making, cognizant of the high probability of her death at Boca Grande; however, instead of seeking shelter in safer areas, she persists and ultimately meets her demise.

A wealthy household in Hollister, California raised Charlotte Douglas. All the comforts of a middle-class lifestyle are available to her: "clean linens, orthodontic treatment, lamb chops, living grandparents, caring godparents, a brother named Dickie, ballet classes, and timely knowledge about menstruation and the maintenance of cutlery" (59). Furthermore, Charlotte's parents instilled in her a steadfast belief in the merits of cultivated and irrigated land, high-yield agriculture, frugality, diligence, the legal system, development, education, and the overall advancement of history. Charlotte subscribes to an excessively optimistic worldview, whereby adversities will dissipate, circumstances will always increase, and success is certain. Charlotte's upbringing, characterized by a reliance on naive trust, propels her into ill faith; it enables her to deceive herself into thinking that the broader world adheres to a moral code like her own. Charlotte preserved by her existence in Hollister, ultimately is lead to her demise during the political turmoil in Boca Grande.

The relationship between Charlotte Douglas and any of her husbands is as perplexing as that between Maria and Carter Lang. The relationship is fundamentally characterized by ill faith from the outset, with Charlotte assuming a subordinate position. Charlotte is first married to Warren Bogart, her college English professor. Charlotte submitted a paper on Herman Melville to Mr. Bogart, who subsequently failed her. At midnight, Warren Bogart rings her doorbell, and they remain in the flat for forty-eight hours. By the time they leave on the third day, a bond has formed, leading Charlotte to clean Warren's apartment. Warren delights in every chance to manipulate Charlotte. Over the course of five years, Warren subjects her to physical and mental abuse, including insults, strikes, abandonment, and humiliation. His conduct during a fourteen-year hiatus has not ameliorated. His first request for her to have the clothes he brought washed and pressed indicates that he continues to see Charlotte in a subordinate position. He persists in disparaging her "you look like hell" (93) and her recent spouse. Furthermore, he deceives her by claiming that a distant cousin, Porter, is terminally ill, but in reality, it is Warren himself who is succumbing to cancer, a truth that Charlotte only comprehends upon their arrival at Porter's apartment in New Orleans. Warren and the expectant Charlotte embark on an exceptional five-month expedition around the South, notable for the maltreatment he inflicts on her and the societal norms he transgresses. Ultimately, Charlotte reaches her limit. Despite having recognized for two decades that Warren's "preferred hand was outrageousness" (162), on July 18th in Birmingham, Alabama, Warren surpasses himself. Earlier that day, he hit Julia Erskine with sufficient force to induce a slight concussion, and after dinner at the country club, he assaulted both the waiter and his host. Charlotte gets up, makes her way to the ladies' room, and continues on, abandoning him for the second time.

Although Charlotte's second husband, Leonard Douglas, refrains from using her, he does exert dominance over her; their relationship mirrors the disciple dynamic Charlotte had with Warren. Leonard comprehends Charlotte's thoughts, desires, and intentions, as seen by their apparently chaotic interaction at the Fairmont Hotel. During a conversation with Grace Strasser-Mendana about an Orinoco hamlet that Grace had studied for her anthropological research, Charlotte shares her perspective on personal connections. The practice of "ritually cutting on the inner thigh by their first sexual partners, the purpose being to scar the female with the male's totem" (85) distinguishes this hamlet. Charlotte finds the practice unremarkable, stating, "That is essentially what occurs universally is it not?" Did someone cut you? Where is it not visible? (85). She has been subjugated, lacerated, and marked by both spouses, and she must carry that scar, however internalized, into all subsequent interactions.

In *A Book of Common Prayer* Charlotte Douglas has profound psychological distress for her deceased children. Her husband's subject to physical and psychological abuse, but her inability to connect with her children deeply traumatizes her. From the first page of *A Book of Common Prayer*, we discover that Charlotte "lost one child to 'history' and another to 'complications'" (1). The story reveals Charlotte's arduous journey as she grapples with her children's deaths, navigating through illusion, disappointment, and anguish before ultimately emerging transformed. Charlotte recounts to Grace Strasser-Mendana four instances of connection between mother and daughter, recalling moments when she and Marin revelled in the comforting embrace of maternal affection and closeness. Subsequently, Grace uncovers the truth behind each circumstance and presents a perspective untainted by Charlotte's delusions.

Charlotte fondly recalls an Easter luncheon at the Carlyle when Marin, at the age of three, donned a straw bonnet and a floral lawn dress. Grace later learns that this meal occurred the day after Charlotte had overindulged in alcohol, flirted with Pete Wright, suffered a blow from Warren, and found her short of cash at the restaurant. The headwaiter attended to Marin and promised to send the bill, required Charlotte to explain the situation. However, in her recollection of the day, Charlotte mostly recalls Marin's bonnet and floral Easter outfit. She also reinterprets visits to Tivoli Gardens, Chartres Cathedral, and Calcutta in a more positive manner than the real events warranted. Charlotte promises Grace: "Marin and I are inseparable" (42), however, immediately after this declaration, Grace discovers the true extent of Charlotte and Marin's estrangement. Charlotte's assertion exemplifies her self-deception, her insincerity, and her steadfast adherence to a belief that contradicts all evidence, namely that their relationship is entirely under control.

In *A Book of Common Prayer*, Charlotte is certain that she would not be a mother at this time. However, the child endures, and Charlotte's delusions resurface. She informs the youngster about several destinations they will visit: "Singapore, Calcutta, and Royal Palm Avenue in Peradeniya, which is anticipated to attain its optimal look in 2050" (147). Charlotte is mentally unprepared to become a mother again, as she continues to worry about Marin's departure. She resigns once more not from a spouse this time, but from the responsibility of nurturing this vulnerable youngster.

## Conclusion

In *A Book of Common Prayer* Didion's female characters Charlotte and Grace want to achieve personal happiness via marriage. Instead, marriage has entangled them as each woman enters or navigates her marriage in bad faith. Marriage undermines the self-identity of female characters via psychological torment, physical abuse, emotional despair, or sexual alienation. Disillusioned with marriage, each female character seeks personal fulfilment via an alternative external source: her children. Unfortunately, the external and lateral transformation of each woman, from husband to offspring, only serves to extend the lifespan of her external companion at her own expense. Each woman persists in bad faith by living her life for someone rather than for herself. Motherhood proves to be as disheartening a duty as that of a wife. Marriage imposes a burden on Didion's woman characters: a stigma that Charlotte must endure due to her sexual transgression, a situation that diminishes allure as she is expected to remain loyal to her husband. At some point, the initial bond deteriorates: it either weakens to the extent that the women find it futile to restore the original attraction, or it becomes so dominant that the women can only rely on their own resources and depart in a vehement effort to preserve a semblance of personal integrity. In the novel marriage always fails to improve women's lives.

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