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December 4, 2013

Stylistic Analysis of Joan Didion's

"Quite Days in Malibu"

Just outside the city limits of Los Angeles' vast terrain travelers and city dwellers alike will find the nostalgic beach community of Malibu perched upon the vast hills of the Pacific Palisades. The name "Malibu" reignites in the minds of people across the world as a place where visitors can relax, ride the waves, soak up the California sun, and cruise along the Pacific Coast Highway. Yet, Malibu has come to mean something completely different to the economically privileged that live so highly perched above the Los Angeles skyline. As a California native I have found myself mesmerized by the obscurity of those who live there. I don't go there for the people I go there every once in a while I seek refuge at my favorite beach tucked away in a cove off the coast of Malibu.

Joan Didion, a former magazine journalist, published a narrative called "Quite Days in Malibu," it uses multiple stylistic approaches to convey a new literary meaning on what it really means to live in Malibu. Didion uses the stylistic structure of sentences as an arrangement of words creates pictures in the reader's mind and tells the reader how to form new meanings. According to Simpson's book *Language, Ideology, and Point of View* stylistics is "the practice of using linguistics for the study of literature," (pg3). From the three pre-conceived notions of literary-critical approaches by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's book "Metaphors We Live By" and Simpson's previously stated book on metaphors, I will analyze "Quite Days in Malibu" in regards to language style, point of view, and ideology.

The most prevalent language style Didion uses in this passage is the figurative conception of metaphor, simile, and personification. Lankoff and Johnson describe metaphor as, “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another,” (p. 5). The two passages in which I will be analyzing use a conceptual system of metaphors, which are also simile and personification. The first passage involves the Zuma Beach lifeguards as she job shadows them to convey a message to the reader about their significance within Malibu. The second passage is about a greenhouse that contains very special orchids that needed to be pollinated with care.

The first passage’s metaphorical style is based on the semantic or semiotic dialect of words such as, crew, patrol, person, operations, and situations. The author’s word choice forms a tone for the passage that builds upon the dialect of the lifeguard crew of Zuma Beach. The metaphor conveys that Zuma Beach crew is a militant infantry. Didion states, “They easily talk about ‘functions’, as in ‘the function of maintaining a secure position on the beach,” (p. 495). Therefore, the reader begins to perceive the crew as more than just lifeguards having a good time on the beach but now as a militant group of personnel. Didion continues, “Life guards favored dictum as flat and finally poetic as that of Houston Control.” In society we know words Houston Control are idiom for language used with a specific group of government personnel.

Not only does the author use semiotics to help the readers convey a sense of meaning but she also uses simile. For example, Didion states, “**Like** other men at war they had charts, forms, logos, counts kept current.” Again, the structure of this sentence is referring to the word war to define the men’s tactics as lifeguards who are not at war but perform a similar duty of saving people or protecting people from harm by being prepared for nautical accidents. Simile appears again from the third person narration of Leonard McKinely, a boat lieutenant states, “Some days we just sit here **like** firemen,” (p. 479). In this sentence there is no reference to an infantry or

war but Didion wants to categorize the experience of waiting for nautical accidents as being similar to the experience that comes with being a fireman. Didion is creating this reference because she is trying to depict the importance of being a lifeguard to the beach community as a fireman is to the city dwellers who were losing their homes to brush fires occurring in the Los Angeles area at that time.

The second passage metaphorical context focuses on the greenhouse, the orchids, and their caretaker Amado Vasquez. The second passage uses simile and personification more than metaphor because of the character, Amado, has become limited in the English dialect based on his Mexican nationality. Also Amado's dialect could be conversational language between him and the author. Didion's narrative style changes as she begins to use simple sentences to convey complex or ambiguous meanings. For example metaphor appears twice, "we are standing in a sea of orchids" (p. 501) and "Maybe your heart wants to break," state Amado. The first sentence uses the word **sea** as a metaphor for the term **a lot** and the second sentence uses the terms: **heart** and **break** to convey the meaning of **being sad**. These abstract ideas therefore become concrete to the reader.

The unique stylistic of this passage is when Didion begins to describe the relationship between Amado and the orchids. The metaphorical language uses personification as "an ontological metaphor where the physical object is further specified as being a person. This allows us to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with nonhuman entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and actions," (Lankoff and Johnson, 33). Didion wrote, "Amado places the pollen from one plant into the **ovary** of a flower on another," (p. 499). Ovaries are often associated with the **female reproductive organs** and thus metaphorically signifying the flower's pollination. The author uses personification to display an emotion from

Amado to the orchids and Didion later emphasis' his relationship with use of simile. Now that the plant and Amado are both humanized Didion further emphasizes the connection through Amado stating, "They're **like** my children. You wait for the first bloom **like** you wait for a baby to come," (p. 501). Amado is saying that the orchids are his children and that he waits for them to bloom as if he were waiting for his wife to give birth. Thus concluding the unique ways in which Didion expressed metaphors within the two passages.

Point of View in this passage comes from the focalizer of author, who is also the narrator, she speaks in first person or third. This passage is not a fiction but a non-fiction narrative. I believe the definition Lankoff and Johnson give of point of view applies, "perspective through which the story is told," (p. 5). Didion writes in a journalistic style and uses informative narration, which helps, create a collection of people, places, and events. The main three stylistics I want to discuss in relation to point of view by Didion which the use of temporal stylistics in regards to the use of a flash back passage, informative narrative style with use of *italics*, and the use of categorical A assertions in the mode neutral and negative narrative.

The author uses italics as form of open communication between herself and the reader. The italicized sentences with the narration are intended to clarify the subject matter. For example, Didion talks about the *Ursula* sinking but the language of the dispatcher was in a militant form of speech and the author was not sure the reader would grasp the fact that the *Ursula* was an actual a *boat* and not a person (p.479). Another is example was to highlight what she was experiencing. On page 501 Didion talks about the misspelling of Amado's last name by the owner of the greenhouse and therefore she writes *Vasquez* to depict the misspelling from the proper spelling "Vazquez." Overall, italics sentences are another way for the reader to connect

with the experience of the temporal point of view of the author and gain knowledge about the ambiguities of the dialect.

Didion journalistic style uses a lot of dates and events to corroborate her story's subliminal theme of the wildfires that broke during the years she lived in Malibu, California. Didion constructs her emphasis on the previous passages listed under metaphor to narrate her point of view with about the beach community. Yet, it is only in the second passage about the greenhouse readers are given a flashback into Didion's life before Malibu. Simpson defines Didion's the use of the flash back as a, "Temporal point of view with their flashbacks, gaps in the progression of time, and the interweaving of other stories and incidents which break up the linear development of the main body of the narrative," (p. 13).

Didion indicates this separation in time with a semicolon and the indication of time is by the age she gives herself. The passage states:

All my life I had been trying t spend time in one greenhouse or another and all my life the person in charge of one greenhouse or another had been trying to hustle me out. When **I was nine** I would deliberately miss the school bus in order to walk home, because by walking I could pass a greenhouse. (p. 498)

Directly after this passage the reader is brought back to the present time of twenty-five years later. According to Flower, "Temporal point of view refers to...the impression which a reader gains of events...in a continuously chain or isolated segments," (Simpson, 13). Didion gives the reader a little insight into her own hobby and what makes her happy and builds a connection with the reader for the first time in the narrative. This is done so that Didion can build upon the emotional bond by for grounding events to come later in the passage. Later in section

#4 of the passage Didion begins to talk about the community of Malibu and how everyone knew each other.

Didion's use of language began to build up the reader's mood she uses neutral and negative modes to describe certain events between her and the community or another character and the subliminal theme of the story, wildfires. Although, Didion does not discuss the wildfire as much as she discusses people when Didion does it is always negative mode and foreshadowing of what is to come. For example, "Squadrons of planes had been dropping chemicals on the fires to no effect. Querulous interviews with burned-out householders had become a fixed element of the six o' clock news," (p. 494). Metaphorically to me as a reader the fires have become the protagonist of the narrative.

Thus leading me into my final stylistic approach of ideology as a creation of awareness and sense empathy for the readers to obtain while highlighting the plight of the oppressed character. Foreshadowing is used as clues that hint at what is going to happen later on. For the reader, the fires were a fore shadow by Didion indicating how that Amado's beloved orchids would end up being wiped out. Didion goes to see Amado at the nursery after a firestorm 1978 hit the greenhouse. Amado states, "I lost three years," (p. 503). Amado has just bought all the stock at the nursery to move them down to his own nursery and he ended up losing thousands of dollars worth of orchids. The foreshadowing was Didions away of building up tension within the reader and also a sense of sadness after finding out Amado lost his prized orchids.

The ideology of the entire narrative by Didion was to deconstruct the societal myth or 'idiosyncratic' structural or behavioral characteristics that are assigned to those who live in the beach community of Malibu. Dion wanted to take Malibu out of the glitz and glam of Hollywood

and present it to the readers as sometime completely opposite. The author's ideological points of view on reality are shown through the characters abilities to live and thrive doing what they love and one being a lifeguard and one being orchid botanist. Neither of those jobs you would experience outside of the Malibu very often but she gave those careers significance within Los Angeles at the time. In the beginning of the story Malibu was related to 'the easy life' but through the depictions of the characters, readers are able to conceptualize the truth about the struggle Malibu communities face with wildfires, nautical accidents, and how even the most wealthy of society can not buy everything back that is lost.

Works Cited

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