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“Did I Miss a Key Point?”: A Study of Repetition in Joan Didion’s *Blue Nights*

Joan Didion’s most recent memoir *Blue Nights* was published in 2011, but it took me four years to work up the nerve to read it. I knew what the book was about, as did everyone who followed her life and career: the death of her only child and adopted daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne. The similarities between Didion’s story and my own—though few—felt large enough to keep me away. I’m the mother of an only child, also a daughter, so Didion’s loss represents my greatest fear and perhaps the greatest fear of *all* mothers. And although my daughter isn’t adopted, I am. Like Quintana, I met my biological parents when I was an adult, and the reunion (of sorts) sent me into an emotional tailspin. For these reasons, I was afraid of *Blue Nights*. So when I finally read it late at night, with my young daughter alive, well, and asleep in her bed, I was surprised to find the words soothing and palliative, like ointment rubbed on a wound.

Readers of *Blue Nights* will have trouble locating even one page of text that does not repeat a phrase, sentence, bit of dialogue, an entire brief scene—or, as is frequently the case, all four of these structures. In the first two pages which also form the entirety of chapter one, for instance, Didion uses the phrase “blue nights” five times and “dying of the brightness” twice (3-4). The latter initially functions as a foreshadowing for the “illness” and “dwindling of the days” of Quintana, who died at age 39 after a series of prolonged illnesses and hospitalizations. The second appearance of “dying of the brightness” is evoked as a “warning” to the reader—what follows is not a happy story. How could it be? Didion is facing the last quarter of her life without her husband or child: two years before Quintana’s death Didion’s husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, slumped over at the couple’s kitchen table, dead from a heart attack.

Several *Goodreads* reviewers responded to Didion's use of repetition in *Blue Nights* with confusion and irritation: "her repetition of phrases [...] seem something of a tic" wrote Claire M., and Deborah A. described her stylistic repetition as "tricks." Melissa said, "These stories seem to lose their potency for me through repetition." While generally more magnanimous in their reviews of *Blue Nights*, professional reviewers have also described the repetition as "a mantra of self-flagellation" (Kachka) and "overextended" (Wilentz). Meghan Daum called Didion's book "less a story than a series of effects" in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Reviewing *Blue Nights* for the *The Washington Post*, Heller McAlpin wrote, "She also relies, sometimes to a fault, on an almost incantatory use of structural repetition." Didion has *always* used repetition as a rhetorical device—and to mixed reviews. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, writing in 1979, for example, referred to a repetitious passage in *A Book of Common Prayer* as "elegant padding." At first glance, what makes the repetition in *Blue Nights* unique is the sheer quantity of it, as this annoyed *Goodreads* reviewer, Ciara, speculated: "If an editor excised every repetitive phrase from the book, you might seriously be left with about twenty pages." Not exactly, but Didion does repeat herself in *Blue Nights*. Often.

Deborah Tannen, in *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*, argues that at its most basic storytelling function, repetition is used for emphasis. We repeat the messages that we most want others to understand, those plot points that shape our life's narrative arc. For Didion, these plot points land where she feels she and John failed as parents. Didion recalls, for instance, her bewilderment after meeting the infant Quintana for the first time in the nursery at St. John's Hospital. She writes: "I had not considered the need for a bassinette. I had not considered the need for a layette" (57). The implication is that she had not fully considered her role as a mother. She asks: "*What if I fail to take care of this baby? [...] what if I fail to love this baby?*" (58). She didn't fail to love Quintana but conceded her inability to recognize Quintana as a real person, instead "raising her as a doll," (73) a "perfect baby," (72) a "perfect child" (120). Casting Quintana in the role of "perfect child" means that Didion and John misunderstood

the darker aspects of their daughter's personality that emerged as she grew up. "Failed to see," "failed to mention," and "failed to recognize" are phrases repeated several times throughout the book. Consider the following passage where Didion describes John's toast on Quintana's wedding day:

There were aspects of living in that house overlooking the Pacific that he failed to mention—he failed to mention for example the way the wind would blow down through the canyons and whine under the eaves and lift the roof and coat the white walls with ash from the fireplace, he failed to mention for example the king snakes that dropped from the rafters of the garage into the open Corvette I parked below, he failed to mention for example that king snakes were locally considered a valuable asset because the presence of a king snake in your Corvette was understood to mean [...] that you didn't have a rattlesnake in your Corvette [...]. (27-28)

What John failed to mention formed his wife's critique of the sun-bathed, idyllic California family life that he instead conjured in his wedding toast. This compare-and-contrast between husband and wife accentuates their inability to recognize Quintana's life in its entirety—the good *and* the bad. Later, Didion uses repetition to stress her failure to comprehend the depths of Quintana's mental health issues: manic-depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, borderline personality disorder, and "something else" that Didion "could never remember" (47). Didion writes: "I had seen the charm, I had seen the composure, I had seen the suicidal despair. [...] I had seen the impulsivity. I had seen the 'affective lability,' the 'identity diffusion.' What I had not seen, or what I had in fact seen but had failed to recognize, were the 'frantic efforts to avoid abandonment'" (49). Didion eventually realized that her daughter's fear of abandonment was a result of her closed adoption, but this realization comes only after her daughter's death. Didion ends the scene with a question: "How could we have so misunderstood one another?" (51). Miscommunication becomes a main theme in the book. Repetition emphasizes the many ways Didion and John misunderstand Quintana and thereby fail to recognize and know her fully.

Tannen writes that repetition is also “used in order to initiate a repair” when the original message has been misunderstood (51). This use of repetition is illustrated most often in moments of Quintana’s repeated dialogue, which on second, third, or fourth mention, take on an ominous, haunting tone, as if occurring in imagined conversations between a mother and her dead child—which is many ways, they are. A series of “what ifs” repeated throughout the book are first asked by a young Quintana who is perplexed by the holes in the adoption narrative that she’s been told: “*What if you hadn’t answered the phone when Dr. Watson called [...] What if you hadn’t been home, what if you couldn’t meet him at the hospital, what if there’d been an accident on the freeway, what would happen to me then?*” (63). The “recommended ‘choice’ narrative” (120) that Didion and John were encouraged to share with Quintana was one where the infant is chosen by one set of parents, and by default, abandoned by another. The tenuousness of the adoption as presented to Quintana and her inevitable feelings of loss in regards to her biological family were things that Didion didn’t want to hear; she wished for the adoption narrative to “end [...] with the perfect child placed on the table” during a celebratory lunch after the adoption was finalized at the courthouse (120). The implication of the repeated “What ifs?” (82; 118; 135-6) is that Didion didn’t hear or didn’t understand what Quintana was saying in the moment and now, only in memory, with distance and hindsight, is the bereaved mother beginning to comprehend their significance.

Didion frames the third repetition of “what ifs” with the voices of mother and daughter. “Do you hear the echo?” she asks the reader. She writes, “*I became seventy-five? I became five?*” (134). Mother and daughter are inextricably intertwined in the circular, repetitious nature of memory, and Quintana’s voice circles back around: “*What if you hadn’t been home when Dr. Watson called?*” She writes: “Only yesterday I was promising her that she would be safe with us [...] Only yesterday I could still do arithmetic” (136). Didion’s repair is offered here: “Adoption, I was to learn although not immediately, is hard to get right” (60).

As if she anticipated what critics would seize upon, Didion admits in *Blue Nights* that writing “no longer comes easily to me” (105) and “languages mingle”; “names vanish” (102). Didion has her own “what ifs” that echo Quintana’s. Hers relate to her diminishing physical abilities (“What if my feet no longer move?”) and cognitive abilities: “What if my new inability to summon the right word, the apt thought, the connection that enables the words to make sense, the rhythm, the music itself—[...] What if I can never again locate the words that work?” (110-1). Mother and daughter “what ifs” pose questions that are never answered, questions that draw attention to gaps in both Quintana’s adoption narrative and the story Didion tells us now. Repeated words, phrases, and questions—with their continual loop back to the initial moment that they were first spoken—also resist linearity and the passing of time, underscoring Didion’s refusal to accept her aging body and eventual mortality.

Tracy Daugherty, author of *The Last Love Song: A Biography of Joan Didion*, writes about her prose: “Didion’s literary magic lay in the amount of control she believed language gave her [...]” (557). It’s ironic then, that through repetition, *Blue Nights* becomes a study of the limits of language; whether spoken aloud, put down on the page, or expressed through bodily cues—language ultimately fails us, the narrator of *Blue Nights* seems to say, especially when we lose a child. There is no transcendental moment or spiritual awakening on the other side of loss for the narrator; instead, there is an illustration of profound grief and Didion’s ongoing struggle to come to terms with the fading “blue nights” of her own body and life.

If the book sounds bleak that’s because it is. To suggest a spiritual awakening would have felt like a lie—at least to me—one manufactured for the sake of a melodramatic climax. Didion, as always, resists sentimentality. I also appreciated Didion’s criticisms of closed adoption—it *is* hard, maybe impossible, to get right. Such a story might be too difficult to read were it not for the repetition and refrains, which don’t introduce new pain as much as they examine and turn over what’s already there, pain that the reader has already confronted. Daugherty notes that Didion, in preparing for the infant Quintana’s arrival at her home, ultimately bought “about five of everything”: “bassinettes, thermal blankets, weighing scales, and

playpens” (196). These are the things meant to make a new mother feel safe and prepared in anticipation of the life-altering arrival of a baby. Perhaps Didion has used her repeated words similarly in *Blue Nights*—to buoy herself and the reader against the inevitability of life-altering loss. The repetition, used mindfully and with rhetorical intent, has similar soothing effects to that of a refrain from a song (perhaps a dark lullaby), lines from a fairytale, or maybe a prayer repeated every Sunday at church. The repeated passages become a meaningful examination of the ways we use, misuse, and misunderstand language. Like a young child repeatedly touching a wound to see if it’s still there, Didion returns to what she missed or ignored the first time around. The wound is still there, of course, because the only person who could answer Didion’s question—“Did I get this all wrong?” (25)—is gone.

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