



ISSUES OF TIME AND PLACE IN JOAN DIDION'S RUN RIVER

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Joan Didion, a contemporary American writer who commands respect both as a fiction-writer and as a non-fiction writer, is considered a novelist, an essayist, and a New Journalist. Didion uses narrative elements to enhance her non-fiction. She does her best work in the real world - observing, contemplating, and reporting what she sees around her. However, in her fiction she lacks the imagination to create and people a world of her own. Writers like Didion can produce splendid prose because of their acute observations, their intelligence, and their natural talents with the language.

Of the narrative elements, Didion emphasizes setting most in her fiction. Time and place are detailed so thoroughly that they represent more than elements of setting; they are significant thematically. All of Didion's novels explore the effect of time and place on the sensibility of the heroines. Jennifer Brady writes that Didion's fiction concerns itself with the effects of cultural loss and change over time, a "then" and "now" effect. Thomas Mallon asserts that in each of Didion's novels the heroine has a confrontation with the past made inevitable because she no longer has a future. Mark Winchell points to Didion's affinity for place, which he sees as not just a physical entity, but as a matrix for emotional associations, a frame of reference. Didion's obsession with time and place could be strength in her fiction if she had a believable world in which to develop it. The fictional world is diminished, yet, by her interest in ideas about the effect of time and place on herself. The strength of Didion's non-fiction ideas damages her ability to create a fictional world.

Didion's first novel, *Run River*, published in 1963, received scant notice and virtually no critical attention. *Run River* is a novel preoccupied with the power of time and of place in people's lives. This preoccupation is apparent from the conscious over-attention to time and place in the development of the book's setting. The novel is built around a tripartite time framework. The first section begins August, 1959; the middle section extends from 1938 through August, 1959 where it concludes in the final section. Every chapter in *Run River* has an early reference to the time at which a scene is taking place - either in an indication of month, season, time of day, or flashback. The reader is always reminded of where the narrative exists - in time.

The most universal of the novel's themes, the relentless power of time, is suggested by Lily's diamond wristwatch, by the office clock that Martha finds intolerable, and by Didion's precise accounting for time. Time references abound for the trivial and the significant. After the August 1959 gunshot scenes, Didion flashes back to "nine hours before, at four o'clock that afternoon" (4). In the same flashback the reader learns that still earlier, late in June, Lily had made everyone lie down after lunch. After Lily heard the shot, "Everett sat on the dock fifteen minutes before Lily came" (12). Everett is "suffused with a single fear" each August, just before time for picking the hops (12).

Months are always included like "the February morning in 1942 when she learned she was pregnant for the second time..." (68), or when her father dies "in June," (73) and, "there were roses (so many for September) and late poppies" (81). Exact time appears important to the characters. Edith Knight, in a casual reference to Francie Templeton's sister, remarks of an acquaintance that "She's been dead seventeen years next month" (104). Joe Templeton "calls at 3:00 after the sugar incident at 2:00. By 5:30 he has arrived with twenty pounds of sugar" (108). Everett calls Lily at six-thirty "... she has gotten up at five-thirty to lie on the terrace...by six o'clock the sun is high..." (47).

The characters' lives seem surrounded by, even oppressed by, a continual attention to time. Everett had been home from Fort Bliss six months, "even since his discharge in February, and through that two seasons of 1945 he had not slept..." (128). Lily could not breathe for months. "She would lie for hours then without waking; one morning he had sat on the bed and held her hand for 20 minutes while she lay as if drugged..." (128).

Martha's discovery of Ryder's engagement is marked by precise time. "At ten-thirty on the morning of December 18, 1948" while she was having a fourth cup of coffee, she sees his engagement, (181) Martha, depressed over Ryder, fills her time after he is married. "She went to parties every night between Christmas and New Year's, and on the first business day of 1949 she went to San Francisco" (192).

After Martha dies, time is measured more broadly. "The third spring after Martha died (it was 1952, but that was not the way time was reckoned on the ranch)" (218). "The fourth spring after Martha died, Lily decided that it would be all right if they



could go away together occasionally... at last they went...one weekend in June” (220). “Although she heard in July, that Ryder and Nancy Channing were in Sacramento again, she did not talk to him until one afternoon in September...” (222).

The characters in *Run River* are not just surrounded by a sense of time; they are deeply affected by it. In the final scene of the book Didion suggests that what Lily hears echoing in her ears is not just the gun shot, but its force “cracking reflexively through all the years before...” (245). It is time that has not worked for Lily and Everett; it has worked against them. In *Run River* there is a contrast between the “then” of the past and the “now” of their world. The “then” exists in the pleasant memories of the past. “Now” is uncertain. Part of the past’s security rests in the heritage of the settlers who were ancestors of both Lily and Everett. They are fixed absolutes, people to emulate. With pride Walter Knight points out to Lily that if a “lot of people a long time back hadn’t said what they wanted and struck out for it you wouldn’t have been born in California.” (32) True Californians are tied to the land and to the past inescapably, but they celebrate that tie.

Lily recalls that as a child she saw on the walls of Martha’s room not Degas ballet dancers nor scenes from *Alice in Wonderland* but

a framed deed signed by John Sutter in 1847, a matted list of the provisions carried on an obscure crossing in 1852, a detailed relief map of the Humboldt Sink, and a large lithograph of Donner Pass on which Martha had printed, in two neat columns, and the names of the casualties and survivors of the Donner - Reed Crossing. (93)

Often Everett retreats into the more pleasant past. In the scene where he sits on the porch holding a picture of Lily, Martha, Sarah, and himself he tries to recoup the past by looking intently at the photo. But time makes changes. After Walter Knight’s defeat, Lily remembers her Aunt Laura and Uncle Alex and recollects the changes years later, both to her and to them. Her father had told her things change, but Lily’s perspective on the change becomes personal. As an adult she sees “Everything changes, everything changed...” (43). The problem is her inability to cope with the change.

Some of the changes brought on by the passing of time or of the coming of the new times are overlooked by the people in *Run River*. Oblivious to the meaning of a World War, “Lily had been at a loss to understand what the United States was doing in Europe at all. The Pacific, of course, was another case” (82). The Pacific was closer in both time and space - a part of Lily’s world. In the scene between Francie Templeton and Everett, Francie refers to the enjoyment she received from talking to him “the other night.” The other night had not been the other night, but a month before, on V-E Day. (133) Although things are taking place to change the world of *Run River*, time and events are relevant to the characters only when they touch them.

Ryder Channing provides the best evidence that times have changed. He tells Everett that the future belongs to real estate and advertising. “You think branch Hoffices are going to be enough for long, you don’t realize what we’re sitting on out here.” (148) Ryder embodies the future of California. He is in tune with the times. “It was a season of promise for anyone with a little land or a little money or even nothing more than an eye on the main chance...” (194).

Lily, Everett, and Martha do not recognize that the world outside of the valley has changed. What they sense is that their world is different from what it was. Sarah,

Everett’s and Martha’s sister comes from her home in the East and does not sense any change either. “Nothing’s very different, is it?” (234) She senses no change in California because, as an Easterner, she has become a part of the changing time. She does not live in the past, so she is not as affected by a changing future. To her the ranch is a cumbersome investment which should be sold.

Another aspect of setting in *Run River* is place. Closely tied to time, it is the restrictions of place which, either emotionally or physically, confines ail of the book’s major or minor characters. In the world of *Run River* place consists of either here or there. Here is the world of California, the valley, the river. The alien there is everywhere else.

The McClellan house typifies the California home-place. Above the piano hangs the California Republic Bear Flag. One wall is covered with framed certificates from the Native Sons of the Golden West and river maps showing channel depths during the summer of 1932. One table has an assortment of gold nuggets. Stronger than loyalty to the state is devotion to the land. When Everett comes back to the ranch, he realizes that like his father, he has no interest in the land beyond possession. “Like his father, he wanted only to have it” (24). As Everett reads Lily’s note to him that she will make everything all right, music downstairs plays “Give me land, lots of land, under starry skies above. Don’t fence me in...” (151).



Another home place is Lily's own private domain. She does not care to be with people beyond her acquaintances in the valley; she rarely goes out. In a sense, Lily withdraws into a personal hiding place within her home, both as a child and later as Everett's wife. The corrosiveness within her would subside when she was in her own room with its oriental chest, Dominican alumnae magazines, and flowered curtains that she had made on her mother's treadle sewing machine the summer she was thirteen.

Any place outside of the valley is "there" and therefore foreign. When Lily returns from Berkeley her mother observes that she had "read some interesting books and gone to some nice parties..." (47). Once she was back she could read books and have a better time at parties at home.

One of Lily's boyfriends, Leonard, a Jewish boy from New York, visits the ranch once. "He was as alien to the Valley as she might have been to the Bronx and the alienation went deeper than his black turtleneck sweater, went beyond the copy of 'In Dubious Battle' with which he had been briefing himself on the train." (50) When Leonard tells Lily that she will be free from the valley in New York she tells him, "I'm not likely to get away from all this...any more than you're likely to get away from wherever it is you come from..." (50).

The World War takes place outside the world of *Run River*. Until Everett goes into the service it is a matter of conversation, an event that affects "them not us." After Martha's funeral Sarah takes a plane back to her home in Philadelphia. She says that she is going back home "apparently oblivious to the pain she could cause her brother simply by shifting the focus of her belonging" (126). She carries with her a bag full of dried moss to show her children and her husband. To Everett, to Lily, to all those living with their heritage in the valley, Sarah lives in another place, one that cannot possibly be home.

Another significant aspect of setting in *Run River* is the atmosphere. In addition to the few references to rain and gloom in November, in December, and one reference to earthquake weather, the novel is filled with heat. The heat numbs; it affects everything and everybody. As Lily comes back from her abortion in San Francisco she thinks about the heat in the valley. "The heat drained the distinctions from things - marriage and divorce and new curtains and overdrafts at the bank, all the same - and Lily could not at the moment imagine any preoccupation strong enough to withstand the summer" (165). The heat shimmers "so concentrated as to seem incendiary" (4).

Several times in the novel Didion notes the temperature when it is in excess of 100 degrees. The heat pervades everything, stifling not just the literal atmosphere of the world of *Run River*, but the emotional atmosphere as well. Heat is inextricably connected with place and time. The world becomes a hot, dry vacuum within which the characters are fixed - bound by time and place and affected even more by these than by the heat.

Time and place, aspects of setting, are emphasized heavily in Didion's fiction. She describes the physical setting of each novel vividly, emphasizing the place of each story's action and the effect of time on the individuals in each place. Didion commits so much attention to setting, however, that it comes to dominate the fictive narrative. Her characters, her plots, and her point of view, all are influenced by her preoccupation. If Didion's time and place fit into a whole fictive world, her settings would strengthen her fiction. As they exist, they represent Didion's personal obsession with time and place, the main theme throughout all of her works.

References

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