

Burlaud raises a compelling problem in this essay on Joan Didion's "On Going Home": Why does revisiting a childhood home as an adult make people so uneasy? This problem goes beyond the question Didion raises in order to explore complex issues of memory, acceptance, and change.
(Instructor: Jacqueline Reitzes)

YOUR HOUSE IS NOT A HOME

Sandra Burlaud

But don't you know you can't go home again?" writer Ella Winter once asked American novelist Thomas Wolfe (qtd. in Godwin xii). If the title of his 1940 novel *You Can't Go Home Again* is any indication, we can assume that Wolfe found the idea particularly convincing. He's not alone: the theme of not being able to return home appears exponentially in literature, movies, and TV shows, making it a well-known trope. In these tales, characters are forced out of their homes, and the story revolves around them trying to make it back to where they came from, only to grimly realize that their home is no longer what it used to be ("You Can't"). But these tropes are primarily concerned with a physical separation from home. Sometimes home still appears to be within one's reach, but the issue takes a more psychological and emotional turn. Even when the scenery that framed our childhood remains untouched and familiar, what happens when something still feels *off*?

American novelist and literary journalist Joan Didion, in her essay "On Going Home," reflects on this uneasy sensation, recalling a trip back to her native California for the occasion of her daughter's first birthday. Aiming to reconnect with the home of her youth, Didion decides to closely examine old mementos and memories that she has kept so carefully. At first "paralyzed by the neurotic lassitude" of being assaulted by childhood memories, she is then determined to find an "answer" to these specific snapshots of her youth that she struggles to make sense of (200). However, Didion presents these various objects—a bathing suit, an aerial photograph, a teacup—and the memories associated with them as "ambushes," unexpected attacks

that throw her off-balance and shine light onto the seemingly contradictory situation of being home but not *feeling* home (201). Her inability to find meaning in these items—or to see herself in them—reminds her that she is unable to “go home again” (200). Tired and vanquished, she sits with her mother, the two women both “veterans of a guerilla war [they] never understood” (200). Didion’s repeated use of aggressive, warlike diction paints an uncommon portrait of family life: a series of unexpected blows and attacks, a never-ending emotional struggle that leaves its fighters resigned but still ignorant of the battle’s greater meaning. Didion implies that home is supposed to be a safe haven, filled with reassuring memories and loved ones, but the aggression her childhood home still generates reveals the underlying difficulties that come with such a broad and nuanced concept. Given the inconsistency between our idealized image of home and the troublesome reality of it, how can we define *home*?

At the very beginning of the essay, Didion creates a clear distinction between the home in which she grew up and the house in which she now lives with her husband and daughter—to her, this is “a vital although troublesome distinction” (199). This need to separate the two parts of her family stems in part from the impact Didion’s childhood home has on her. She tends to “fall into [her family’s] ways,” which she describes as “difficult, oblique, deliberately inarticulate” (199). This transformation is beyond her control and seems to frustrate her husband, who fails to understand Didion’s family’s idiosyncrasies. “Marriage is the classic betrayal,” Didion writes (199). To her, there now exist two distinct, almost unrelated parts of her family, and the task of uniting the two fragments seems so colossal, and perhaps even pointless, that she does not even bother trying. Instead, while her brother refers to her husband as “Joan’s husband,” even in his presence, further complicating her pre-marital home’s atmosphere, she prefers to remain distant from the situation, analyzing from afar (199). The meeting of these two opposing parts of her family, her two homes, is at the source of Didion’s anxieties and uneasiness: in addition to being unable to connect to her childhood home, she is torn between two families and her two identities that come along with them.

As Didion goes to visit a family graveyard, her father's ranch, and her great-aunts, her emotional paralysis becomes apparent. At the graveyard, she stays in the car and only observes that some of the monuments are "broken, overturned in the dry grass" (201). During her conversation with her great-aunts, she does not bother correcting them when they mistake her for another cousin. "Questions trail off, answers are abandoned," and Didion seems to be stuck in a kind of incapacitating nonchalance (201). This paralyzing feeling seems to be echoed by the rest of the family members: she and her husband constantly "miss each other's points" and do not bother communicating, while her mother "shrugs" when she hears about the vandalized monuments in the graveyard (199, 201). This bizarre state of mind highlights the contradictory nature of going back home: family members all settle back into their old, ambiguous ways, yet no one can fully reconnect emotionally with their home. However, even when dealing with an emotional question, Didion's voice remains very analytical and detached, and her mere observations do not require the reader to identify with the story.

Didion's deliberately 'cold' choice of narrative style affects the way we read and understand the essay's problem, as we learn in Adam Gopnik's "The Corrections: Abridgement, Enrichment, and the Nature of Art." The *New Yorker* staff writer, in his 2007 essay, demonstrates that manipulating and modifying art can lead to an impoverished final product. Through various examples of "compact editions" of great literary classics or extended edition movies that aim to be "meaningful additions" to the original stories, Gopnik concludes that "art is a business not of clear narratives but of troubled narrators" (562, 566, 569). The narrator's presence is what separates "the compact from the achieved," the superficial from the complex, and "guarantees that . . . the viewer's mind will continue to divide, and multiply" (569). It is crucial to be able to clearly follow the plot or ideas of a story, but Gopnik suggests that a deeper understanding of a text's problem can only be achieved through the guidance of a narrator. After all attempts at abridging classics, cutting out seemingly superfluous details that "undercut" the "tensile strength of the narrative," we see that it is in fact all these details, thoughts, and uncertainties

that make the narrator's voice such a driving force in a story and make these books into the great classics that they are (564).

Didion, in her essay, has a tendency to cut out the non-essential details and create an orderly story, including dates (we notice her journalistic influences) but omitting character names. Gopnik might suggest that she is presenting a "taut, spare, driving' narrative" that makes her stories very clear and easy to follow for the reader but does not call for any emotional involvement (563). Moreover, the initial problem regarding the definition of home needs refining; the essay is not really primarily concerned with a definition, although Didion's sober style might warrant that conclusion. Through Gopnik's concept of the "troubled narrator" bringing a story to life, we can extract deeper meaning. In the first part of the essay, Didion habituates the reader to an almost absent narrator. However, she then suddenly paints a very contradictory picture: "I had by all objective accounts a 'normal' and a 'happy' family situation, and yet I was almost thirty years old before I could talk to my family on the telephone without crying after I had hung up" (200). For the first time in the essay, Didion makes her anxiety apparent in this destabilizing moment that throws the reader off guard. The reader's sudden realization that the author is in fact affected by the situation described in her story urges us to look deeper into the problem. Why does this contradictory sentence stand out? Why is the narrator so troubled? Through this unusual sliver of emotion, we gain insight into the full extent of Didion's thoughts: it seems to be an impossible task to reconnect to the homes of our youth, yet those homes are still the source of inexplicable anxieties that continue to shape us and our relationships.

At the end of her essay, Didion regretfully declares that she will not be able to give her daughter *home*, although she wishes she could (201). Didion has built a contradictory and anxiety-inducing portrait of home throughout her essay, yet she still wants to give her child home the way she experienced it. It seems like Didion sees this struggle as an obligatory side effect of a happy childhood. Moreover, in her brief discussion about generational differences regarding the importance of home, Didion implies that the concept of home might be irrelevant to younger people because it is not "the source of all tension and drama" anymore (200). But does this tension have to be a

defining characteristic of home? It feels like an important part of the restlessness felt by Didion comes from her very fixed mental image of *home* and her lack of motivation when it comes to dealing with troubling family situations. Although it can be a difficult task, changing her expectations of what home should be could make it easier to raise her daughter and offer her a different version of home.

It is true that relationships tend to change and weaken over time when no active work is put into maintaining them. Our relationships with home and family are no exception. While it might be tempting to settle back into old, familiar, but problematic ways around our family, a conscious effort to communicate could perhaps help us grow out of this habituated state of apathy and free us of this “nameless anxiety” that underlies our relationships (Didion 200). Even though it might not be possible to ever truly reconnect to our childhood homes, making sure that our relationships are as open and comfortable as possible can perhaps make that truth less painful. As to offering a home to future generations, what makes the idea of home so special to us is that it is ours, a source of all that we are. This home may be initially created around a sense of “cousins, and of rivers, and of [our] great-grandmother’s teacups” (Didion 201), or around a completely different experience, but it remains home nonetheless.

WORKS CITED

- Didion, Joan. “On Going Home.” *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 199-201.
- Godwin, Gail. “A New Introduction.” *You Can’t Go Home Again*, by Thomas Wolfe, Scribner, 2011, pp. ix-xvi.
- Gopnik, Adam. “The Corrections: Abridgement, Enrichment, and the Nature of Art.” *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 562-569.
- “You Can’t Go Home Again.” *TVTropes*, www.tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/YouCantGoHomeAgain.