

# *The Flotsam of the New California*

Henry Yan

*Upper Canada College, Toronto, Canada*

henryyanhy@gmail.com

**Keywords:** Golden dream, Joan Didion, Class struggle

**Abstract:** Joan Didion's essays provide a deep dive into the world of 60's California. Beyond the nostalgic Hollywood glamour that has become the Californian image, Joan Didion reveals a whirlpool of disappointed dream chasers, such as Lucille Miller, the famous real-life reenactment of *Double Indemnity*. Through the essay, we come to the realization that perhaps Lucille Miller's story is not one about murder, but a story about class struggle.

## 1. Introduction

Those who want more can never have enough, because that which they truly require is not what they strive for. In her essay *Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream*, Joan Didion, through an examination of Lucille Miller's murder case, explores the identity of California as a "paradise" of false hopes and empty promises.

## 2. Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream

### 2.1 Exposition

Didion uses exposition to highlight the gap between the reality of California and people's expectations of it. She begins by painting an ominous picture of the San Bernardino Valley in the 60's. Contrary to the "coastal California of the subtropical twilights," it is described as "an alien place," "a harsher California" that is "haunted" by the Mojave and "devastated" by the hot dry Santa Ana wind that "whines" through the eucalyptus windbreaks. The month is October, the season one of "suicide and divorce and prickly dread." Regardless of how accurate this may be, by establishing the story's time and place in such a way, Didion sets the stage for a story about broken dreams and betrayal. She continues by describing the various shops and establishments one encounters on the way to Banyan street. These are described as the trail of "an intention gone haywire, the flotsam of the New California." Flotsam is floating debris often as a result of a shipwreck. Didion implies that this country is lined with failed intentions to realize the golden dream in "New California." Moving on to the scene of the crime, one arrives at the "desolate, roughly surfaced" Banyan street, lined with sunken lemon groves that are "too lush, unsettlingly glossy, the greenery of nightmare," and fallen eucalyptus bark that is "too dusty, a place for snakes to breed," with the San Bernardino Mountains, a "dark mass looming too high, too fast" in the distance. Beside from foreshadowing the heinous murder, Didion uses the ominous setting to create a stark contrast between Lucille Miller's "golden dream" and what she was presented with instead. This allows the reader to step into her shoes and understand the

sentiments of those chasing after the golden dream in the 1960's.

## 2.2 Storytelling

Didion demonstrates a deep level of understanding of the Millers' case through specific details, which gives her voice credibility, and allows the reader to personally engage with the story. She extends beyond the case itself to provide context and a full story of how the girl came to kill her husband. She introduces Lucille as an only child from Manitoba born to a family of devout Seventh-Day Adventists. "Lucille wanted to see the world," Didion quotes her father, "and I guess she found out." She is characterized as an ambitious young girl, "coming off the prairie in search of something she had seen in a movie or heard on the radio." Setting up her story allows Didion to explore more than the case itself, but the mentality of all those who "drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways" in search of "a new lifestyle." It is evident from her account of the case itself that she has done thorough research. The "temperature reached 102" that afternoon. Cork Miller said that his head felt "like it had a Mack truck on it," which was "something he often said." Didion even has his debt as of that evening down to the dollar, \$63,479, "including the \$29,637 mortgage on the new house." She even notes the movie the Millers watched that night, "John Forsythe and Senta Berger in *See How They Run*." These are details not necessarily relevant to the murder itself, but significant to her essay, because it is through these details that we connect to the characters as human beings and understand their motivations. They allow us to understand why Lucille committed adultery with a man who "seemed to have the gift for people and money and the good life that Cork Miller so noticeably lacked," and even to some extent, why she murdered her husband. Regardless of the obscenity of her crime, the reader can understand where she comes from, a woman who "perhaps wanted too much," who fell victim to the façade of California as seen in the Hollywood movies. As to whether she was motivated by "love and greed," or just "couldn't control her foolish little heart," Didion does not explicitly take a side. She embodies the concept of these insatiable, empty dreams of California in Lucille Miller using engaging details that allow the reader to understand her experience, where the "dream was teaching the dreamers how to live."

## 2.3 The broader context

The account of Lucille Miller's murder goes far beyond an account of a murder one might find in a newspaper. The title, *Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream*, suggests that the essay discusses one manifestation of a larger issue. Lucille Miller is one of many dreamers entranced by the promise of "revolving credit and dreams about bigger houses, better streets." In the 60's, California's identity as shaped by the media was one of great promises. Didion describes it as "the last stop... for all those who drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways." In the golden land, the future always looks good, because "no one remembers the past." Lucille Miller came in search of a new, more exciting life. Her dreams were not satisfied even with her new, bigger house on the better street. She wanted more than a new house and to "go to parties and run up high telephone bills." As Cork Miller fell into debt, she went as far as to murder her husband "for his \$80,000 in insurance, making it appear an accident in order to collect another \$40,000 in double indemnity and straight accident policies" in a desperate attempt to sustain her illusion of being in high society, living the good life. The problem with wanting to rise above one's socioeconomic class is that there is never such a thing as "enough." To Lucille, her life was never as interesting as she would have liked. Moving to California didn't help, and neither did starting an affair. Didion uses Lucille Miller's story to communicate a broader story of greed and vanity, of the identity of the Californian dream.

### 3. Conclusion

To the outside, California was where everything happened. With the hippie movement in the 60's, it seemed like where changes took place, where life was exhilarating and cinematic. Being in the thick of it all, Joan Didion brings to attention the dangers that such false promises can bring. Even beyond the image of California in the 60's, Didion points to the broader idea of the middle class's longing for an escape from their mundane, meaningless lives, to that golden dream they watch in movies and hear on the radio, or in today's context, see on Instagram. It is certainly quite human to strive for a better life, and become disoriented in our own false dreams. Lucille Miller was a rather extreme example of such tendencies, and should serve as a cautionary tale that is just as relevant today.

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