

## Cognitive Confusion And Escape From Patriarchal Constraints In *Play It As It Lays*

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### Abstract

This research entitled “Cognitive Confusion and Escape from Patriarchal Constraints in *Play It As It Lays*,” focusing on cognitive confusion and the importance of flexibility in *Play it As It Lays* refers to the mental agony experienced by women due to the constrictive societal roles that are placed on them and their resultant attempts to escape from their suffocating domestic constraints. It is the act of escaping such responsibilities by separating oneself from them. The conceptions of flexibility emphasize freedom, independence, and access to possibilities for success; nevertheless, offer more limited experiences of flexibility in America and by the privileged upper middle-class white men. Didion’s writings thus paint a rather dismal picture of women’s mobility in the post-war era. Since even those who manage to break free from the mental constraints of traditional gender roles ultimately fail to succeed in achieving more concrete modes of journey, despite their best efforts. On the other hand, mental escape is a noteworthy feat. Indeed, the most significant accomplishment in these writings may be the realization of mental mobility. Cognitive confusion is a common reaction to loss of freedom or immobility in Didion’s female protagonist in *Play It As It Lays*.

**Key Words:** Cognitive confusion, patriarchy, immobility, psychological, *Play it As It Lays*.

The domestic trappings to white middle-class women were largely confined during the post-war era of the 1950s and 1960s. This research article explores the realities of women’s situation in America and the impossible ideal that leads to breaking free from constraining roles. Cognitive confusion leads to feel alienated and separated from such positions that result from being bewildered by the reality of constricting social roles imposed upon them. It also leads to a kind of escaping from the gender roles of women in society and family. The societal conventions that define these gender roles are resisted and challenged by this strategy of escape. Cognitive Confusion plays a crucial part in bringing about social change since it sets off a process of realization. It also serves as a form of mobility itself because it offers an escape. A female is affected sometimes psychologically by a harsh and constricting reality, due to which she tries mental, social, and physical escape from the society.

While Cognitive Confusion primarily serves as a means of mental mobility, escape, removal and realization, it also facilitates or initiates specific forms of physical mobility. Women who have escape from cultural boundaries on the physical level of the body. Such as sexual transgressions and physical movements outside of the domestic sphere and social mobility escape from traditional societal roles. This is a woman’s journey in the sense that she is not constrained by conventional gender norms in the same way.

Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* tells the story of Maria Wyeth and her entourage as she attempts to find meaning in her life as an Hollywood actress in the late 1960s. Its setting is Hollywood, and its heroine is an actress and a movie-making figure prominently in her action. The novel depends upon an intimate connection between setting and theme; its overriding thematic concern is a woman’s relationship with herself and with existence in general. Didion’s novel is primarily a sociological commentary on the values of contemporary American society and also a psychological case of its heroine. It is a picture of personal dread and anxiety, of alienation and absurdity lurking within and without.

Maria Wyeth is a thirty-one years old actress and former model. The novel presents her encounter with an existential nothingness which envelops her like a coastal fog. Her marriage with Carter Lang, an egocentric, ambitious young film director is breaking up. Her four-year old daughter, Kate is institutionalized with some sort of brain damage. Her casual affairs are many but mechanical and lifeless. When Maria discovers that she is pregnant, probably not by her husband, she has an abortion. Her closest friend, BZ, a homosexual who produces her husband’s movies, commits suicide by taking an overdose of pills while cradled in her arms. Finally, Maria herself is hospitalized for what is usually loosely described as a “nervous breakdown”.

Maria is a woman who has difficulty with what she terms “as it was”. Her past includes a childhood in silver wells, Nevada, as a model and actress in New York where she knows a lot of southerners and faggots and rich boys and that was how she spent her days and nights. As she is a woman who allows men to direct her life, it is appropriate that she marries Carter Lang, her director in two films. One film, which she likes, is a motorcycle movie in which she does not recognize herself as the woman on the screen that, unlike her, seems to have the ability to control her own destiny. Because, she cannot confront herself, she is nauseated by the other movie, in which the camera follows her through her own everyday existence.

Maria Wyeth is a contemporary heroine par excellence, for she nurtures a secret dream of family solidarity while living and working in Hollywood and Beverly Hills, among people who recognize only power, success and physical beauty and pleasure. At the age of eighteen Maria leaves her home in Silver Wells, Nevada, at her father's urging, to take acting lessons in New York. Her father sees no conflict between the values of family and his daughter's potential career as an actress; aware of her beauty, he sends her forth with the assurance "You're holding all the aces, baby" (*Play It As It Lays* 9).

*Play It As It Lays* is a grim portrayal of a world in which people use each other to gain success, recognition or sexual pleasure. Among Maria's friends and lovers no relationship is too sacred to be exploited. Carter himself objectifies Maria in two movies: in the first he shoots scenes of her daily life without telling her of his intention to tie them together in a film; in the second, a commercial film, where she plays a luckless girl raped by an entire motorcycle gang. As a rich producer, BZ has considerable influence on young actresses; when his friend Larry Kulik mentions his desire to get into a particular young girl in a white halter dress, BZ arranges for the satisfaction of Larry's desire. BZ's wife Helene is paid large sums by her mother-in-law to stay married, presumably because the marriage serves to disguise BZ's homosexuality. Both men and women in this culture are perceived as decorative and sexual objects; no one is valued for themselves. Persons with money and power are respected for their success, however, and, since most of the people with economic power are men, women are at a perpetual disadvantage unless they are protected by a powerful man. All of Maria's casual acquaintances view her as Carter's property. When she meets an actor in an elevator, "the look he gave... was dutiful charged with sexual appreciation, not for Maria herself but for Carter Lang's wife" (23).

Maria cannot survive among these "beautiful people" because her private dream is completely at odds with their values, and she lacks the courage and discipline to live out the dream alone. Central to Maria's dream, and foremost in her value system, is the traditional concept of the family- a group that includes mother, father, and child, and within which people work and love.

Maria's vision of the family is an idealization of her own family life as only child. She has nostalgic memories both of her childhood relationship with her now-dead parents and of visits with them after she had moved to New York. In one remembered scene, Maria is eating dinner with her parents when she announces that she does not want to go back to the city. Her mother would like to stay, but her father is ambitious for her. He says that "She can't win if she's not at the table, Francine" (88). When Francine Wyeth is killed in a car accident soon after this visit, Maria is unable to work for a month, for not only is she devoted to her mother, but her mother's death also seems confirmation of the evil in the world, the "rattle snake under the rock."

Throughout the novel, Maria lives alone. She cannot even say clearly whether Carter leaves her or she leaves him; their marriage simply collapses under the weight of her sorrow over Kate. Kate is working compulsive and their joint failure to communicate their feelings. Maria deals with her fear and loneliness by spending the day driving on the highways of Los Angeles; her driving seems pointless, a distraction, an end in itself, until, at the end of chapter six, we realize that through her long drives she is moving toward Carter, on location in the desert. Finding herself sixty miles from him, she would like to call, but the conversations she remembers led only to rage on both sides, and, afraid of rage, afraid of rejection, she does not call. The drives towards the desert are the first instance of a pattern that dominates Maria's relationships with all the people in her life. The pattern is an elaborate dance; when the partner moves towards her, she moves away; when he moves away, she follows.

Maria is met with social criticism, and ultimately, she finds herself, at least physically, unmovable than the women who are confined to conventional patriarchal positions. However, despite the fact that Didion's woman characters are unable to function well in the socially accepted positions, their journey comes from their capacity to reject these conventional categories and function not within but outside of them. Because it makes it possible for them to move, cognitive confusion serves as a kind of journey.

When considering the post-war period, flexibility is especially crucial to investigate different interpretations of journey when referring to women. The female experience of journey in the decades after World War II was undoubtedly not one marked by freedom, independence, and opportunity. It was hindered by extremely constrained and restricting societal roles. In this perspective, women's freedom is better described as their capacity to rebel against oppression and start breaking free from restrictive gender norms. Conversely, immobility refers to the state of being stuck in conventional social positions and the inability to move beyond them on a mental or physical level.

Maria's confusion and alienation occur in *Play It As It Lays*. She comes from the ghost town turned nuclear test site of Silver Wells, Nevada, and now lives in Hollywood. The story begins in the mental hospital where Maria currently resides, and the majority of the story travels back in time to explain the events leading up to her institutionalization. From the outset, it is clear that Maria is a severely mentally disoriented character. Geherin symbolizes, "From the beginning of the novel, Maria Wyeth seems disillusioned. The pursuit of the American dream becomes self-destructive in this culture everything that is tawdry, artificial, and superficial about America" ("Nothingness and Beyond: Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*" 64). K. Edington in her essay, "The Hollywood Novel: American Dream, Apocalyptic Vision" observes: "The dream proves unachievable even for the successful; and moral disarray prevails, anticipating the fall of America. Literature has focused the Hollywood and the nightmarish aspects of a highly competitive culture" (64). Being acutely conscious of

the moral decay permeating her environment and adopting a pessimistic worldview in which fate controls everything and action is irrelevant, one must “Play It As It Lays.”

The myths of the American ideal of freedom, movement, and independence appear to have some kind of immunity on Maria’s part. Maria does not appear to believe in the American dream at all. She expresses a definite desire for movement and escape throughout the novel. Maria is not only a woman of the post-World War II period to suffer from mental illness. In “Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women’s Road Narratives, 1970-2000,” Alexandra Ganser observes, “*Play It As It Lays* can be characterized as an early second-wave feminist text that deals with the psychological disorder and female depression of white middle-class American women in the 1950s” (219).

Maria’s experiences as a woman living in a very restrictive patriarchal culture may be primarily blamed for her mental confusion. It seems that Maria would have a mental collapse after experiencing so many cognitive confusion symptoms. Her friend committed suicide while lying next to her in bed. Her parents have both passed away, her four-year-old daughter Kate has been institutionalized due to a brain disorder, and her abusive husband Carter has physically and emotionally abused her, before divorcing her. Using blackmail to force her to have an abortion is an experience that proves to be highly traumatic for Maria. Moreover, chaos and tragedy abound in her surroundings. In this connection, K. Edington criticises; “*Play It As It Lays* is set against a backdrop of destruction and impending death, with nuclear tests replacing the magnificent California landscape as the setting, along with earthquakes, mudslides, storms, and Santa Ana winds” (“The Hollywood Novel: American Dream, Apocalyptic Vision” 67). Maria seems to be both haunted and confused by the “general devastation” and “unspeakable peril” that surround her.

*Play It As It Lays* has such a distant tone that it may be disconcerting at times. For the most part of the story, Maria manages to keep a straight poker face to speak, despite her inner struggle. She is astonishingly calm and casual. She is disconnected and uninterested that it leaves her feeling numb, motionless, and paralyzed. Similar to Lily’s character in *Run River*, Maria also seems to be dead due to her extreme immobility. Maria not only adopts an indifferent and detached attitude but also uses psychiatric medicines, or barbiturates to encourage protective paralysis, which she maintains throughout the majority of the novel. This kind of psychological defence mechanism and sedation offers Maria an escape from her mental agony and too harsh reality. In addition to freezing and immobilizing her, it also acts as a kind of self-defence for her:

There in the desert, she started to feel, the draw of the water and the pressure of Hoover Dam”. She drove out there when the strain became too much. She experienced the strength coursing through her body the whole day. She had dizziness the whole day, “feeling as if she was submerged in a realm where massive power networks intersected, pulsating lines ultimately descended into the narrow canyon under the dam’s surface, and elevators, like coffins, descended into the depths of the ground. (*Play It As It Lays* 171)

Rose argues that “confinement is a recurring image in women’s accounts of their lives,” and these experiences - the sense of pressurized forces pressing in around her, the sensation of being “sunk,” and the symbolic imagery of the “shallow canyon” and the “elevators like coffins” - provide support for her claim (*Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*144). Rose claims that the use and recurrence of these pictures demonstrate how oppressed women are generally.

The usage of this picture implies that Maria is also restricted in two or more ways and is oppressed on many levels. The dam symbolizes the harnessing of both natural and man-made forces. It’s interesting to note that while Maria is physically attracted to imagery of imprisonment in the text above, her true attraction is to the strength and pressure related to the dam. This line not only captures her sense of personal imprisonment but also her fervent need to escape her acute emotional detachment and excessive apathy, a condition known as the “sleepwalker” (106) state and to really feel something, both physically and emotionally.

Maria is captivated to the physical movement and strength of the water as it pours into the canyon below Hoover Dam. Lily’s character in *Run River* is pulled to the river as a metaphor of movement and mobility. She is so desperate to feel the power of movement and mobility for herself that it is evident from her obsession with pictures of a perpetual prison that resemble coffins. Maria feels trapped and immobile in part because of the way the masculinist spatial imagination views her as an item or possession. Similar to Lily, Maria too seems to be stuck in the role of the feminine object, maybe completely devoid of subjectivity and agency. She has been consistently objectified, misrepresented, and even mistreated inside this patriarchal system. Maria is a television actor, for example when she visits her agent’s office, “look dutifully charged with sexual appreciation, meant not for Maria herself but for Carter Lang’s wife” (*Play It As It Lays* 23). In this instance, Maria is objectified by the male gaze and shows that she no longer feels like a wife or a sexual object.

Therefore, this embodiment process is not only unpleasant, but it also contributes to the feeling of imprisonment that many women feel, including Maria’s experience. Furthermore, despite Maria’s constant composure and emotional detachment, which she asserts, she knows when someone is thinking of her. Maria is forced into the role of sexual object and victim so often. She is portrayed as “a girl who was raped by the members of a motorcycle gang” (19). In addition, her abusive husband gives her a menacing “look” that “renders her paralyzed” (32). She has multiple inconspicuous sexual encounters that occasionally verge on rape. Her husband said “All right’ take me on. In any case, you’ll enjoy it more that way” (69). Maria feels as if “her life had been a single sexual encounter, one dreamed fuck, no beginnings or endings, no point beyond itself” (181).

Maria's character is traumatized, frozen, and has grown distant from her own life and identity due to being trapped inside roles that are required of her and even imposed upon her. She appears to go through a lot of alienation throughout the novel. Her thinking is often that her existence is just a dream or a sequence of events from a movie. Her description is existence as "one dreamed fuck" (69). Her unusual degree of detachment from specific moments, events, and conversations all point to a general feeling of estrangement. For example, following a confrontation with Carter early in the novel, Maria realizes all of a sudden that "something real was happening: this was, as it were, her life" (41).

Additionally, it occurs to her that in the scenario of her life this would be what was called an obligatory scene. She wondered with distant interest just how long the scene would play during another chat with Carter about her recently found pregnancy. Here, Maria's mental distancing from what she takes to be a scene from a movie shows how her feeling of alienation from herself also contributes to dissociation or a feeling of having two selves. Like the afore-mentioned instance when Maria recognizes that she is seen and valued as "Carter Lang's wife" rather than "Maria herself" (23). She does exhibit a sense of detachment from her identity, as if she and Carter's wife are two separate individuals with two unique identities.

Didion notes that during her divorce hearing in the novel, "this Mrs. Lang to whom the lawyers referred seemed to Maria someone other than herself, an irate wife she might see on television" (108). It demonstrates this experience of divided self or double consciousness. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Judith Butler's observations; "the gendered body enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives and acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space" (277). Maria is aware of the scripted nature of the character she is performing even as she plays it. She appears to be more aware of that artificiality and comparing herself to a television character.

Maria has been limited to specific roles and identities that constructed by others and which she is expected to carry out. These roles and identities are persistently determined by her position as Carter's wife, as a feminine object of desire, and even as a sexual possession. Her feeling of alienation from these roles is a response to this imprisonment and a way for her to defend herself against repressive societal norms. This extreme degree of estrangement and removal from the self and from her identity as a wife in particular functions. As a defence mechanism for Maria insofar as it offers her a certain amount of escape from constrictive gender roles in the form of mental detachment much like her emotional detachment and defensive paralysis. In addition to feeling alienated from herself as a target of masculine desire and particularly as a wife. Maria also feels alienated from these roles and the culture that reproduces and perpetuates them.

Maria's own experiences with depression, marital abuse, mental illness, and cognitive confusion have undoubtedly made her disengaged from the idealized roles of wife and mother. Other women seem to carry out happily and effortlessly. On the other hand, Maria rejects her own home by sleeping outside by the pool because she is so highly uncomfortable within the domestic sphere. Maria is quite alienated from the geographical domain of domesticity in which these domestic responsibilities are situated. The fascinating thing about Maria's alienation and estrangement from domesticity and the house is that it suggests that Didion is criticizing humanist ideas of place and home in *Play It As It Lays*. Maria experiences mental and physical violence in her marriage and is confined to the role of "Carter Lang's wife," the home is in fact a "site of oppression" (*Play It As It Lays* 23). She strives to reject such humanist idealizations of the rooted and moral existence of place, with a yearning to escape the constraints of domesticity, despite her feeling of rootedness inside the house.

The Los Angeles highway repeatedly draws Maria's character throughout the novel; she comes to rely on driving as a quasi-therapeutic means of transient escape and movement. Extreme mental detachment and the use of psychiatric drugs help the protagonist escape from her confining reality to some extent. Maria's desire to driving the freeway compulsively breaks free from her restrictive roles in the society. Maria's driving is a reaction to her socially constrained positions and an effort to combat the tyranny and immobility which she encounters both at home and at her Hollywood job. Despite her disillusionment with the American dream, Maria appears drawn to the myths of mobility connected to "the road". In "Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives, 1970-2000," Alexandra argues, "women's literary texts rewrite the mythical 'open road' as a textual space in which powerful regimes of gender or the American highway's mythical, iconic status, signifying the heroic quest for freedom"(14).

Desperate for an escape or release, Maria frequently travels back to the freeway in the hottest month of autumn. Maria took the wheel of the motorway. It was imperative that she gets on the road by 10 o'clock because to stop would be to put herself in unimaginable danger. If she wasn't, the day's rhythm and its tenuously enforced motion vanished. After navigating to a fast lane on the interstate, she switched up the radio to a loud level and resumed driving. She operated it as a river man operates a river, become more aware of its tricks and currents every day. Time and again, she made her way back to a convoluted section just south of the junction, where passing from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal maneuver across four lanes of traffic. She was ecstatic when she eventually completed it in the afternoon without once stopping or losing the rhythm on the radio. That night, she slept well.

In situations like this one, driving on the freeway serves as both a vehicle for Maria to express her need for escape and a means of giving her the impression of physical freedom of movement at least momentarily. The road actually transports Maria outside of her home and gives her that feeling. She is attracted to the freeway's "currents" and river-like movement in the same way as she is to the force and flow of the water at Hoover Dam. As the excerpt above illustrates, Maria finds



some solace in her driving habit, which helps her cope with the psychological and emotional upheaval of her household. The overall confusion and tyranny of her everyday existence contrast sharply with the “rhythm” and “momentum” of the road and the feeling of control she feels while operating a vehicle. Alexandra comments: “Driving gives her short moments of peace, numbs her suffering, and the much-needed feeling of order” (220).

Maria may not have slept at all without the recollection of that feeling of movement and order, but it helps her to sleep dreamlessly. Therefore, driving and the dream of driving serve as crucial forms of self-defence for Maria, acting as her only line of defence against losing her mental equilibrium for a time. Maria “envisioned herself driving, conceived audacious lane changes, strategic shifts of gear, the Hollywood to the San Bernardino and straight on out, past Barstow, past Baker, driving straight on to the hard white empty core of the world” in order to clear her mind and sleep soundly when other methods “failed” to “erase” particularly haunting images “from her mind” (162).

The fact that Maria has found a physical means of escape and has grown to seek that escape is significant in and of itself, even if the protagonist’s success in escaping via the highway is ultimately limited and transient, as do her attempts to prevent mental collapse. According to Alexandra, “Maria’s quest for escape is unsuccessful” and she highlights the fact that “Maria’s routes are circular and without destination” (221). She characterizes Maria’s course as a “downward spiral” (218).

Maria is able to break free from constrictive gender stereotypes and enjoy some journey even if her attempts at escape in the form of automobility ultimately prove to be futile in many respects. Maria is unable of achieving physical escape via extramarital relationships. Extramarital sex is not freeing for Maria since her status as a sexual possession is the primary reason of her captivity. On the other hand, the road offers her a feasible means of brief physical escape.

*Play It As It Lays*’ highway scenes are particularly important because they highlight the ways in which female journey is restricted and confined since it is seen as a challenge to the status quo. In “Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World” Domosh and Seager remarks, “It is hard to maintain patriarchal control over women if they have unfettered freedom of movement through space by Governments, families, communities, and individual (115). Maria’s efforts to break free both via automobility and sexual mobility are unsuccessful, which contributes to the understanding of the geographical constraints, rules, and limits that are in place anytime women leave the home. Such efforts at escape seem destined to fail from the start, given the sexist character of Hollywood culture and the constrictive patriarchal framework of the post-war period. In the end, Maria’s sole true accomplishment of journey is full mental disconnection and psychiatric collapse. Even if her highway travels provide her a means to articulate her need for escape and even temporarily experience such an escape. Ironically, by the conclusion of the novel, Maria’s mental collapse and subsequent institutionalization turn out to be her sole options for obtaining a long-term means of mobility and escape. Crucially, Maria’s ultimate hospitalization and subsequent “escape from the social matrix” are the result of the profound confusion and emotional pain she undergoes “in the wake of her abortion,” which stands for the apex of her cognitive confusion.

## Conclusion

Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* discusses the female heroine primarily achieves mental mobility. The writing of Joan Didion provides a perceptive look at the realities of female alienation, separation, and liberation from stifling patriarchal constraints. Didion’s writings offer a perceptive look at women’s experiences of confusion, alienation, detachment, and freedom from restrictive patriarchal roles. The protagonist Maria sums up punished or incarcerated. Maria’s efforts to escape to some extent through her highways journey are an attempt to have freedom like the American women in the 1950s and 60s. Experiences of cognitive confusion and alienation initiate the process of realization, which is vital because it makes women aware of their captivity, which in turn fuels their yearning for escape and begins the effort to attain it. *Play It As It Lays* depicts unsuccessful efforts at journey and escape, which both highlight how difficult that battle will be and serve to start it. Didion’s writings also aid in igniting consciousness since they serve to expose the realities of women’s imprisonment, oppression, and comparatively high degree of immobility. The writings themselves contribute to the greater cultural awakening about the disparity of gendered journeys, a kind of inequality that persisted in the post-war period and still exists now.

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