Scientific Research Publishing

Advances in Literary Study, 2024, 12, 30-45
https://www.scirp.org/journal/als
ISSN Online: 2327-4050
ISSN Print: 2327-4034

Cracking the Wasp Code: Joan Didion and the Soul Word

Victor Strandberg

English Department, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA
Email: vhs@duke.edu

How to cite this paper: Strandberg, V. (2024). Cracking the Wasp Code: Joan Didion and the Soul Word. *Advances in Literary Study, 12,* 30-45.
https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2024.121003

Received: December 13, 2023
Accepted: January 28, 2024
Published: January 31, 2024

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Open Access

Abstract

"Cracking the WASP Code: Joan Didion and the Soul Word" is a study in Literature and Language. The "Language" component is the idea of the Soul Word, used here as a generic term for words that represent a code of values and behavior that is admired and aspired to in various subcultures. Examples include "Soul" (African-American), "L'Chaim!" (Jewish), "Genutzat" (Armenian), "Sissu" (Finnish), "Dom" (Serbo-Croatian), "Yamato-Damashi" (Japanese), "Machismo" (Hispanic), and—most important for this essay—"Class" (WASP). The "Literature" component of this essay includes definitions and literary excerpts to explain these terms. Among the authors of these excerpts are such writers as Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow, Oscar Hijuelos, Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, John Updike, and William Faulkner. The main thrust of this essay is to bring this concept (Soul Word) to bear on the contradictory portraits of the main character in Joan Didion's masterpiece, *A Book of Common Prayer*. Charlotte Douglas, Didion's protagonist, is portrayed as a scatterbrain who does not even seem to know whether she and her daughter did or did not see the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen or the rose window in the cathedral at Chartres. In the latter instance, for example, she says her daughter cried upon seeing the beauty of the window; elsewhere she says a British television crew prevented them from entering the cathedral. Yet she sometimes displays exceptional competence and presence of mind, as when she saves the life of a man with an emergency tracheotomy. The bridge between these two portraits, it turns out, is Didion's deployment of the WASP Code, as I explain in my central argument.

Keywords

Didion, WASP Code, Soul Word, Class, L'Chaim

1. Portraits of a Lady

In Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer* (Didion, 1977) the protagonist ap-

pears to be a dimwit. In the opening chapter, she (Charlotte Douglas) is observed composing "Letters from Central America", intended for the *New Yorker* magazine, claiming nonsensically that the dismal backwater country she is visiting could become "the economic fulcrum of the Americas (p. 14)[1]". At the Boca Grande airport where she spends much of her time, she "reads" a local newspaper with "her concentration apparently passionate, …here a nod of approval, there a moue of disagreement; her eyes scanning the Spanish words as if she understood them"—which she does not (p. 30). Though she is around forty years old, she behaves like a child. At an American embassy party, Charlotte "talked constantly. She talked feverishly…Every memory was 'lyrical', every denouement 'hilarious', and sometimes 'ironic' as well…She used words as a seven-year-old might (p. 36)." She does not seem to know whether she did or did not see the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen with her daughter Marin. In one account, "they had wandered beneath the colored lights until Marin's heels blistered." In another, Charlotte says that "because Marin had run a fever all weekend, …they had never left the Hotel Angelterre (pp. 47-48)." Likewise, it seems that Charlotte and Marin both did and did not see the rose windows at Chartres. In one account, Charlotte had "taken Marin to see the glass at Chartres and Marin had cried because it was so beautiful". In another version, Charlotte recounts that "a British television crew had been filming inside and she and Marin had been unable to see the glass at all (pp. 109-110)." And in the current moment Charlotte keeps claiming that she and Marin are "inseparable", though the teenage girl is separable enough to be on the lam from the law after joining a leftwing cult that hijacks and then destroys an airliner as a political statement.

The observer of these and many similar peccadilloes is the story's narrator, Grace Strasser-Mendana, a sixty-ish American expatriate who takes a caustic view of this Norteamericana intruder's nutty behavior, notably including her chaotic love life. While still married to and pregnant by her second husband, Charlotte has spent some five months touring the South with her first husband and, after leaving him and delivering the baby (who soon died), is now engaged in affairs with both the narrator's playboy son and the (married) dictator of Boca Grande.

Yet the narrator also observes in this woman a feature that might redeem the whole portrait—various instances of what the writer Eric Hoffer considered the most uniquely significant American characteristic, "the diffusion of competence". When it counts most, Charlotte Douglas is remarkably tough, resourceful, and knowledgeable. In one moment of crisis, this seemingly hare-brained woman saves the life of a man who is choking to death by performing an emergency tracheotomy, making sure to first sterilize the knife by plunging it into a vat of boiling rice (p. 61). When a cholera outbreak hits the country, Charlotte dispenses vaccine for thirty-four hours without sleeping. To protect her own health, she displays expertise in pharmaceuticals, correcting the local druggist

[1]These page numbers throughout the text refer to the books in my Works Cited list.

who tries to sell her the wrong drug compound (p. 41). And she knows all about guns, distinguishing between carbines, M-1, M-3, and M-16 firearms (pp. 238-239). In the end, she proves heroically tough, standing by her work in a birth control clinic in the face of murderous hostility from the new dictator, though she had many opportunities to save her life by leaving the country.

So how do we reconcile the two portraits of Charlotte Douglas? The bamboo bridge between them, as Nabokov might say, is the WASP code. To define and illustrate the term, we need to address the concept of the Soul word, defining the WASP code against the backdrop of other subcultures. We may then come around once more to Joan Didion's masterpiece of fiction.

2. Soul Words

I got the idea of Soul words from a Jewish classmate of mine who married a Finn.[2] One day, when among his in-laws, he hurt himself in a fashion that caused serious pain. His first impulse, he told me, was to scream, but there were all these Finns about, so he managed to keep a poker face. It was by discerning a look of admiration on their part that he learned about *sissu*—the characteristic that the Finnish subculture most admires and aspires to attain. The word implies an invincible toughness that will sustain serious pain and hardship while showing no sign of discomfort. The best known instance of it is the common Finnish practice of *bastu*—taking a hot steam bath followed by a dip in ice water or a snow bank. In national history *sissu* seems evident in the Soviet-Finnish war of 1939-40 wherein the Finns stood off the markedly superior Russian forces through a fierce winter campaign, a feat that might help explain why Stalin never absorbed the little country the way he took over the rest of Eastern Europe. He would have been swallowing a porcupine.

Having added *sissu* to his own Jewish Soul word, *l'Chaim*! (*To Life*!), my college classmate speculated that other subcultures may have a similar word of high significance. Because *Soul* is so widely disseminated in works like *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, by W. E. B. Du Bois), *Soul on Ice* (1968, by Eldridge Cleaver), and *My Soul Has Grown Deep* (2001, by John Edgar Wideman), it seems reasonable to apply the term to such words in general. In my studies and travels abroad I picked up the thread and put together a little necklace of such nomenclature as follows:

Dom—The Serbo-Croatian Soul word. It implies the ultimate worth of home in the largest sense, including the sacred soil of the homeland. Conflicting *dom*-based territorial claims dating back to medieval times have caused terrible bloodshed in the Balkans, including the 1990s warfare among Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Soul words can have a dark side in the hands of demagogues.

Genutzat—The Armenian Soul word, translated as "I give you everything I have." This is an ethic of tribal survival, evoking the necessity of mutual support

[2]The classmate was Gerald (Gershon) Weisenberg.

in a population subject to millennia of stigma, persecution, and slaughter, culminating in the 1915 genocide. An engaging example of *genutzat* occurs in a memoir by Vartan Gregorian, who arrived in New York as an impoverished youth and rose to become the President of the Brown University and President/CEO of the Carnegie Corporation. Barely conversant in English and with empty pockets, he relates in *The Road to Home*: *My Life and Times* (Gregorian, 2003) how a remarkable network of diaspora Armenians helped him at every turn—in Beirut, New York, San Francisco and elsewhere. William Saroyan's hit song "Come On A My House" ("I'm Gonna Give You Everything") is a sort of diaspora anthem (available online) for the *genutzat* principle.

Yamato-damashi—The Japanese word-literally means "Japanese soul". It implies extreme self-discipline to the extent that thousands of youths volunteered for kamikaze service in WWII, flying planes with just enough gasoline to reach and dive into the American fleet. This variation of *yamato-damashi*, known as the Bushido code, signifies "Don't come back until the job is done." This ethic had some soldiers still fighting decades after the war ended, notably including one Hiroo Onada, who stopped fighting in the Philippines only in 1974, after his wartime commander, Major Teniguchi, ordered him to do so (He was given a spectacular reception in Tokyo soon after). It is noteworthy that even after Hiroshima, Emperor Hirohito's personal intervention was required to overcome *yamato-damashi* and end the war.

Machismo—An Hispanic Soul word, based on the Spanish word *macho*, meaning *male*. Soul words often bear a masculine connotation, but *machismo* evokes its pure essence, sometimes to the point of strut or swagger. In *A Book of Common Prayer*, the narrator explicitly ascribes "machismo" to her adult son who tools about in an Alfa Romeo and indulges his appetites in the fleshpots of Rome, Monaco, and Paris (p. 20). Sexual conquest is a special hallmark of *machismo*. In Oscar Hijuelos's novel *The Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love* (Hijuelos, 1989), the first book by a Hispanic writer to win a Pulitzer Prize, two brothers respond to the challenge of *machismo* in contrary fashion. The younger, Nestor, suffers from "his sense of unworthiness, his fears that he could never be a real macho in the kingdom of machos (p. 106)." His brother Cesar, however, is ultra-macho, with a harem of lovers large enough for an army barracks. Here, late in life, he savors some long memories:

> "He fell in love again: Ana and Miriam and Veronica and Vivian and Mimi and Beatriz and Rosario and Margarita and Adriana and Graciela and Josefina and Virginia and Minerva and Marta and Alicia and Regina and Violeta and Pilar and Finas and Matilda and Jacinta and Irene and Jolanda and Carmencita and Maria de la Luz and Eulalia and Conchita and Esmeralda and Vivian and Adela and Irma and Amalia and Dora and Ramona and Vera and Gilda and Rita and Berta and Consuelo and Eloisa and Hilda and Juana and Perpetua and Maria Rosita and Delmira and Floriana and Ines and Digna and Angelica and Diana and Ascension and Teresa and Aleida

> and Manuela and Celia and Emelina and Victoria and Mercedes and…" (p. 434)

That's *machismo*, as portrayed by an eminent Cuban-American writer. We come now to the three most important such constructions in American usage up through the middle of the twentieth century—the Black, Jewish, and WASP Soul words. As already indicated, the Black word is *Soul* itself, defined in Ralph Ellison's classic book *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1952) in terms of Soul food ("I yam what I am") and Soul music (Louis Armstrong singing "What ever did I do/To be so black and blue"). Emotional expression is the goal. What makes music so dominant is that mere words are inadequate. Toni Morrison indelibly affirms the singular power of Soul music for the tragic youth Cholly in *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

> The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or in the touch of black-and-white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors, could give true form to his life…Only a musician could know…that Cholly was free…Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity (Morrison, 1994: p. 159).

L'Chaim!, the Jewish Soul Word, carries implications beyond its immediate meaning of a celebration of, and gratitude for, the gift of life. To begin with, it defies the history of stigma, persecution, and wholesale massacre that has afflicted Jewish life for four millennia, summoning each generation to celebrate life anyway. But it is crucial to understand that we are speaking of life as it actually is, not winnowed and idealized but admitting its full measure of both horror and glory. Another way of defining *l'Chaim*!, then, is "*To Reality*!" Or, to take the term to its final stage, we can say it means "*To Truth*!" This embrace of the Reality principle arguably helps to explain the extraordinary range of Jewish achievement—in science, business, the humane arts, philanthropy, and, where permitted, politics. George Bernard Shaw wrote that most of our revolutionary thinkers have been Jews—Spinoza, Marx, Freud, Einstein. If so, the primacy of truth ensconced in *l'Chaim*! may be a factor.

In literature, Jewish-American writers like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Allen Ginsberg have opened new vistas of candor while trying to tell the truth about their own subculture and American culture at large. Ginsberg and Roth went to the extraordinary length of endorsing the example of the French writer Louis-Ferdinand Celine in the name of unconstrained Truth. Celine, a fanatically venomous Jew-hater and Holocaust-denier, had written in 1937 of the Jew as "the swindler, the traitor, the felon…their filthy kike grins, boorish, slimy, …the very outline of a sucking snout, the Vampire…", and during the war he was a fervently anti-Jewish Vichy collaborator. Nonetheless, in 1958 Ginsberg visited Celine in Paris, and Roth declared Celine "a great liberator. I feel called by his voice." The great liberation was the Frenchman's gonzo style that dispensed with

all politesse, an example that apparently freed Ginsberg and Roth to proceed with their graphic truth-telling in verse and fiction. Kurt Vonnegut stated precisely the rationale of this new freedom:

> [Celine] discovered a higher and more awful order of literary truth by ignoring the crippled vocabularies of ladies and gentleman…Every writer is in his debt…By being so impolite, he demonstrated that perhaps half of all experience, the animal half, had been concealed by good manners. No honest writer or speaker will ever want to be polite again. (Kaplan, 2022: p. 21)

Alice Kaplan, in her essay "The Master of Blame" ((Kaplan, 2022)—my source for this Celine material), cites Morris Dickstein's forceful argument that the great turning point of Roth's career, the then scandalously carnal *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), was written under Celine's influence. In these instances, *l'Chaim*! shares with *Soul* an innate antipathy to the final entry in our little necklace of special words.

3. The WASP Code

At the end of our list, we come at last to the WASP Soul word, which is best identified with the idea of "c*lass*", not in the sense of a class hierarchy but in the sense of "she's got *class*" or "that was a *class* act". In this usage, *class* invokes two equally strong imperatives: first, one must always maintain one's dignity in front of other people; and second, one must always allow other people to have theirs. To that end, the WASP code stands in contrast to both *Soul* and *l'Chaim*! Whereas *Soul* elicits emotional expression, *class* imposes emotional discipline. It is all right to cry when alone, for example, but never in front of other people—as Jake Barnes illustrates in *The Sun Also Rises*. And unlike *l'Chaim*!, the WASP code subordinates truth, or reality, to the strictures of dignity. If maintaining either one's own or anyone else's dignity involves ignoring reality or pretending not to know something, so be it. Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" (Frost, 1969) renders a perfect example of this ethos when the frail old hired man seeks to offset his plea for his former employer's help with a promise to "ditch the meadow" (drain its rainwater). Both he and the employer, along with the employer's wife, know full well that the old man is too feeble to ditch the meadow, but all three pretend to believe it. The hired man dies as the poem ends, but what matters most is that he has preserved his dignity.

If Frost's homeless man embodies the lowest end of the social hierarchy, Ernest Hemingway brings on the highest end in his portrait of deposed royalty. But class hierarchy crumbles to nothing when measured against the other meaning of *class*—the dignity that king and beggar share. The king and queen in "L'Envoi" (1925) might be hauled out and shot at any moment, but they appear exquisitely at ease during the ordeal:

> "The king was working in the garden. He seemed very glad to see me. We walked through the garden. This is the queen, he said. She was clipping a

> rose bush. Oh how do you do, she said. We sat down at a table under a big tree and the king ordered whiskey and soda…The revolutionary committee, he told me, would not allow him to go outside the palace grounds. Plastiras is a very good man I believe, he said, but frightfully difficult. I think he did right, though, shooting those chaps. If Kerensky had shot a few men things might have been altogether different…It was very jolly. We talked for a long time." (Hemingway, 1995: p. 233)

One other feature of *class* merits scrutiny: maintaining the dignity of either oneself or the other often requires the practice of reticence. Traditional WASP writing, therefore, abhors the confessional mode and disapproves much talk about the self in general, especially about one's sorrows and sufferings. The crucial resource in this respect is the social mask or veil that serves as a shield for the private inner being. Nathaniel Hawthorne set the standard in his "Custom-House Essay" (1850): "we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost me behind its veil." (Hawthorne, 1969: p. 4) That inmost Me is the central focus of the WASP code. Its inviolable cocoon of privacy is a special requisite for the artist, according to Hawthorne's "Mosses from an Old Manse" (1846):

> "So far as I am a man of really individual attributes I veil my face; nor am I, nor have I ever been, one of those supremely hospitable people who serve up their own hearts, delicately fried, with brain sauce, as a tidbit for their beloved public." (Hawthorne, 1970: p. 581)

Robert Frost codified the stricture in a letter to his friend Louis Untermeyer as follows (Untermeyer, 1964):

> I'd impose it as a penalty on you that you shouldn't wax literary on what you've been through, or turn it to account in any way. It must be kept way down under the surface where you must confine yourself to everything else in the world but your own personal experience. (Untermeyer, 1964: p. 19)

Capping it off, in the Modern period, is the "Impersonal theory of poetry" promulgated by T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919):

> "The progress of an artist is… a continual extinction of personality…Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." (Eliot, 1964: p. 10)

Before proceeding further, three constraints about Soul words must be noted: First, none of these words are exclusive property of any cultural community: Jews have *Soul*, Blacks have *l'Chaim*!, Armenians have *sissu*, and everybody's got *class*. The point is that the Soul word defines for its community what is ***most*** admired and striven after, at the top of their ethnic totem pole. The second constraint is that, like the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, the Soul word promotes an ideal that is not always observed in practice. The impor-

tant thing is that, practiced or not, it persists across generations. And last, as those generations pass, cultural changes may weaken, strengthen, or otherwise modify the Soul word.

There remains the other main thrust of the WASP code. One must maintain one's dignity, yes, but it is equally imperative to allow other people to have their dignity, *aka* their sense of worth. No purer example of this precept exists than John Updike's widely anthologized story, "A & P" (1961). Narrated by Sammy, a young clerk, the story opens with three teenage girls, led by "Queenie", entering the store wearing bathing suits. The manager cites store policy: "Girls, this isn't the beach…We want you decently dressed when you come in here." Queenie's protest ("We are decent"), accompanied by a deep blush, suffices to evoke the WASP code in Sammy:

> "Did you say something, Sammy?"
> "I said I quit."
> "I thought you did."
> "You didn't have to embarrass them."
> (Updike, 2002: pp. 609-610)

It is a steep price to pay—Sammy can't afford to lose the job, but "remembering how [his boss] made the pretty girl blush" makes him drop his apron and walk out. Defending the girl's dignity is paramount. He's got *class*.

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) renders an exquisite version of the WASP code among the lowliest folk in the social scale—uncouth, impoverished hillbillies. Consisting of fifty-nine interior monologues, the book portrays a community so committed to the concept of dignity that even within her innermost mind, a long-married wife thinks of her husband as "Mr Tull" (p. 5) and the book ends with Anse Bundren introducing his new bride to his children as "Mrs Bundren". And if dignity gets violated, grave consequences may ensue, as when someone reacts to the stench of Addie's decaying corpse in the wagon. Darl Bundren records his brother Jewel's reaction:

When we pass the negroes their heads turn suddenly with that expression of shock and instinctive outrage. "Great God," one says, "what they got in that wagon?"

Jewel whirls. "Son of a bitches," he says. As he does so he is abreast of the white man, who has paused….

The man moves. He begins to edge around me, watching Jewel, the knife low against his flank. "Cant no man call me that," he says. (Faulkner, 1987: p. 212)

From this point forward, the protocol of defusing the encounter is as elaborate as a peacock's dance. Both parties understand precisely the difference between volunteering an apology, an acceptable option, and being forced to say one, which is unacceptable:

> "He thought you said something to him," I say.
> "I never said nothing to him. I never see him before."…

"I know," I say. "He never meant anything. He'll take it back."
"Let him take it back, then."
"Put up your knife, and he will."
The man looks at me. He looks at Jewel. Jewel is quiet now.
"Put up your knife" I say.
The man shuts the knife….

Jewel's apology, when it comes, includes a sharp warning about observing boundaries. The stranger understands that the dignity of both men must be honored:

"Tell him you didn't mean anything. Jewel" I say.
"I thought he said something," Jewel says. "Just because he's…"
"Hush," I say. "Tell him you didn't mean it."
"I didn't mean it," Jewel says.
"He better not," the man says. "Calling me a…"
"Do you think he's afraid to call you that?" I say.
The man looks at me. "I never said that," he said.
"Dont think it, neither," Jewel says.
"Shut up," I say. "Come on. Drive on, pa." (Faulkner, 1987: pp. 213-214)

In this instance, the conflict affects two men who share the same Soul word. The conflict assumes a different tone when the combatants subscribe to different words.

4. When Soul Words Collide

In a large, diverse population, it is highly desirable to understand one another's cultural heritage. Otherwise, conflict can ensue. In *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Ernest Hemingway provides a memorable example of cultural friction between WASP and Jew, with a pronounced slant in Hemingway's favor.[3] The occasion is Robert Cohn's homage to *l'Chaim*! He has already dumped his fiancée because "he's decided he hasn't lived enough" (p. 46), and now he ups the ante: "I can't stand it to think my life is going so fast and I'm not really living it." (p. 11) Inevitably, Cohn's pursuit of *l'Chaim*! violates the WASP code of reticence. He states a truth that we all know but must not mention:

"Listen, Jake," he leaned forward on the bar. "Don't you ever get the feeling that all your life is going by and you're not taking advantage of it? Do you realize you've lived nearly half the time you have to live already?"
"Yes, every once in a while."
"Do you know that in about thirty-five years more we'll be dead?"

[3]In this instance, Hemingway had no *class*. Robert Cohn was based on Harold Loeb, a drinking buddy, tennis partner, and presumable friend who stirred Hemingway's malice when he bedded Lady Duff Twysden, the woman on whom Lady Brett is based. Twysden had rejected Hemingway because he was married. Hemingway told Loeb's ex-girlfriend that "I'm tearing those bastards apart. I'm putting everyone in it, and that kike Loeb is the villain." ((Meyers, 1985), *Hemingway: A Biography*, p. 158)

"What the hell, Robert," I said. "What the hell." (Hemingway, 1954: p. 11)

It is not surprising that later on Cohn will cry copiously in front of other people. After all, he is not a WASP and has no reason to place dignity above the truth of his ruined love life. But for Jake Barnes, who cannot have a love life because of his wound in the war, emotional discipline prevails. When, on the last page, Lady Brett issues an invitation to self-pity ("Oh, Jake, we could have had such a damned good time together"), Jake ends the conversation (and the novel) with a call for emotional discipline: "'Yes,' I said. 'Isn't it pretty to think so.'"

A contrary version of the WASP-*l'Chaim*! conflict occurs in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (Bellow, 1956), which opens with this sentence: "When it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow…He had once been an actor…and he knew what acting should be." This is a Jewish man adopting the WASP code of reticence, hiding his suffering behind a mask. Bellow's entire plot line consists of putting mounting pressure on Wilhelm so as to rip off the mask and allow *l'Chaim*! (in the sense of *To Truth*!) to emerge. The initial pressure comes from losing his job, which Wilhelm conceals from his father by getting dressed up and pretending to go off to work each morning. Other pressures come from his estranged wife, who will not grant a divorce so he can marry his girlfriend. She also turns his boys against him and demands increasing amounts of money he does not have. In fact he does not have enough for this month's rent in the hotel, and his well-to-do father turns down his plea for help with brutal contempt.

Across the whole narrative the tension tightens mostly around Wilhelm's investment of his last thousand dollars in the stock market under the guidance of a con man. The final pages verge into sadism as Bellow turns the screws ever tighter to make Wilhelm crack. First, he gets wiped out on the stock market, but the mask stays put. To the question "You get hit?" he pretends it's no big deal:

> Wilhelm, quite coolly, said "Oh, it could have been worse, I guess." …The lie helped him out—for a moment, he was afraid he would cry…His need to cry, like someone in a crowd, pushed and jostled him…He said to himself, "I will not cry in front of these people. I'll be damned if I'll break down in front of them like a kid…" (p. 104)

Next, his final appeal to his father for help triggers a terminal rupture: "Go away from me now. It's torture for me to look at you, you slob!" (p. 110) Yet, up to the last page, Wilhelm will not crack. But in the final paragraph *l'Chaim*! breaks through. When Wilhelm gets caught up in a crowd that moves into a synagogue, he finds himself attending a stranger's funeral, and his mask clatters to the floor. In the book's closing words, his inner me pours out for the world to see:

> The great knot of ill and grief in his throat swelled upward and he gave in utterly and held his face and wept. He cried with all his heart. He alone, of all the people in the chapel, was sobbing…One woman said, "Is that perhaps the cousin from New Orleans they were expecting?"…He sank… dee-

> per than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need. (p. 118)

Bellow's main purpose in *Seize the Day* was to remove Wilhelm's WASP-like mask, and it took him the whole novel to do it. But at the last he let the truth prevail: *l'Chaim*!

In *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1952), Ralph Ellison depicts a similar contest between WASP and Soul values among his Black protagonists. In New York City Black men who are janitors and messengers dress like Wall Street bankers, "with their Brooks Brothers suits and bowler hats, English umbrellas, black calfskin shoes and yellow gloves, …[and] the *Wall Street Journal* carried beneath the left elbow." (pp. 223-224) This is effective satire, perhaps, but it fell to Toni Morrison to take on the WASP code with a flamethrower. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison's pours harsh contempt on "brown girls" who live by false white values. The sarcasm begins with their work ethic: "Such girls live in quiet black neighborhoods where everybody is gainfully employed." (p. 82) Next comes their penchant for neat, well-kept homesteads:

> "Where there are porch swings hanging from chains. Where the grass is cut with a scythe, where rooster combs and sunflowers grow in yards, and pots of bleeding heart… line the steps and windowsills…"(Morrison, 1994: p. 82)

Their genteel manners are likewise intolerable, along with their belief in college education. It is these white (WASP) values that turn Black girls brown:

They do not smoke, drink, or swear…They sing second soprano in the choir…They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement.

> …Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. (Morrison, 1994: pp. 82-83)

It stands to reason that these brown girls will prove sexless, even in the married state. When "she senses some spasm about to grip [her husband], she will make rapid movements with her hips…and pretend she is having an orgasm." (p. 84)

The brown girls' denial of *Soul* gives Morrison the occasion to render her own version, which she renames funkiness—the "funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (p. 83). Passion, nature, emotion—*there* is the essence of *Soul*, in sharp contrast to WASP mask and its inhibitions. To express feelings, not suppress them, is the role of the Black artist. For Joan Didion, however, the WASP code still holds sway. Its role in her best novel solves the mystery of her protagonist's contradictions.

5. Conclusion: Lost Splendor

In *A Book of Common Prayer*, the woman who talks like a seven-year-old and

does not seem to know whether she did or did not tour the Tivoli Gardens with her daughter is wearing the WASP mask, retaining her dignity through emotional discipline. And what a magnificent false front it is. To understand why, we must take account of her losses—griefs far deeper than anything suffered by Wilhelm in Saul Bellow's novel. First, she has recently buried her newborn child, a hydrocephalic baby with terminal liver failure doomed to a very short life span. But true to the "Occupation: Madre" tag stamped on her passport, Charlotte takes the baby on her Caribbean flight and mothers it through its final hours:

> Merida was where she had taken the baby to die…Toward the beginning of the two weeks she waited for the baby to die she moistened its lips with tap water and told it about the places they would see together…. The night in Merida when the diarrhea finally came Charlotte held the small warm dehydrating creature in her arms all night…The baby had gone into convulsions and projectile vomiting and Charlotte…walked with the baby… and sang to the baby…in her arms, trusting at last, its vomit spent… (Didion, 1977: pp. 147-150)

"Occupation: Madre" also explains why Charlotte came to Boca Grande. Presumably, the little country does not have an extradition treaty with the United States, so she spends her days at the airport, "reading" Spanish language newspapers while waiting for her outlaw daughter to fly in. It is obvious to the narrator that Marin will never come here, having sent an audiotape to a TV station that displays radical militant brainwashing. (Marin's motive for militance began with her rejection by Stanford, where her friend Lisa was admitted.)[4] (Didion, 1977: p. 74) But the WASP code makes truth secondary to a higher value, in this case the role of motherhood in Charlotte's sense of worth. So she and Marin remain "inseparable", because—though physically apart—"I have Marin in my mind" and "Marin has me in her mind."

Half of that formulation is verified. Charlotte does have her remaining child in her mind, obsessively and even sacramentally: "Charlotte adored her, …believed that when she walked through the valley of the shadow she would be sustained by the taste of Marin's salt tears, her body and blood." (p. 69) And when she does enter that valley, on the night she is shot, "Charlotte cried not for God but for Marin."

When she arrives in Boca Grande, then, this avatar of Occupation Madre has lost both of her children. She has also lost both husbands. The first husband, Warren, with whom she has recently spent five months on the road, is in the final stage of death by cancer, and her second husband, Leonard, had earlier lost his battle with Warren over possession of this woman. The moment of transfer occurred during a single blunt sentence uttered by Leonard: "I want you. I don't need you." (p. 139) The distinction matters: everyone wants to be wanted, but that is not enough. The need to be needed goes even deeper, and that need is

[4]Like Marin, Joan Didion herself was rejected by Stanford and had to settle for Berkeley.

what drove Charlotte back to Warren, her first lover as well as first husband. His need for her, attested by his three-thousand-mile trip to see her, makes the flame of past love flare up again.

So Charlotte Douglas comes to Boca Grande as a broken woman, immersed in hopeless grief. But how splendidly she conceals her pain. As she comes for her evening meal at the Hotel Caribe, no one could ever guess that her heart has been ripped out:

> An hour or so after the sunset one could see her walking through the empty casino at the Caribe, nodding pleasantly at the idle croupiers and the national police assigned to the casino…After this ritual turn through the casino she would walk on out through the lobby, her step buoyant, purposeful. Later one could see her eating alone on the porch, …read[ing] the ***Miami Herald***, reading the classified as attentively as she read the front page, reading both as avidly and thoroughly as she ate the spiny lobster. (Didion, 1977: pp. 24-25)

As the plot unfolds, her WASP mask comes under increasing pressure. In a flashback, Charlotte is at a Hollywood party soon after Marin's disappearance. An actress who had visited Hanoi (based on Jane Fonda) "spoke of the superior health and beauty of the children there" and she declares the reason:

> "It's because they aren't raised by their mothers," the actress said. "They don't have any of the bourgeois personal crap laid on them…No mama-papa-baby-nuclear-family bullshit," the actress said. "It's beautiful." (p. 130)

The mask slips precariously: "'I know why you are crying,' the actress said after a while." (Didion, 1977: p. 131) But a moment later, when a *Vogue* photographer snaps her picture, Charlotte has her feelings under control: "The flash bulb blazed. Charlotte smiled." The WASP code prevails. *Vogue* readers will see only the mask.

The next test occurs when she learns that Warren's death, back in New Orleans, seems imminent. Her verbal response is denial— "*He is not dying*"—but the mask cannot keep her eyes from talking. "The tissue around Charlotte's eyes was reddening," the narrator observes, but, importantly, "she did not cry." (p. 235) The final, most excruciating test happens near the end of the novel when Leonard comes to Boca Grande with terrible news. First, Warren is dead; Leonard attended his funeral. Second, Leonard has discovered Marin's hideout in Buffalo, but when he visited her she rejected his offer to get her to Boca Grande. She does not want to see her mother. They are terminally separable.

Now the question is whether Leonard will see her cry. He is still her husband, after all, and would not take it amiss if she broke down. But Charlotte is resourceful to the end. As they stand in the clinic where she works, she states a request:

> "Would you go to the [front] desk for me… Would you tell them I can't see

anyone for a few minutes. Twenty minutes."

"I'll call." Leonard picked up the telephone and jiggled it. "How do you call?"…

"Would you please go to the desk?"

Twenty minutes—enough time for a really good cry, but only while alone. A *class* act.

In the end one character does penetrate Charlotte's mask—the narrator, Grace Strasser-Mendana. Like Nick Carraway, whose view of Jay Gatsby changes from "unaffected scorn" to admiration, Grace changes her mind about the scatter-brained *norteamericana* newcomer. A secret sharer, as it were, of the WASP code, Grace takes charge after Charlotte's murder, shipping her body back to America for burial and reclaiming Marin to her mother's memory in a superbly realized scene. Initially, while visiting "that dirty room in Buffalo" where Marin and her gang are hiding out, Grace is stonewalled by the girl's revolutionary babble. Remembering Charlotte's tennis skirt, for example, is enough to set Marin off: "Tennis…is just one more mode of teaching an elitist strategy." To cut her off Grace asks for a glass of water. Then she has a sudden flash of clairvoyance:

> Marin Bogart…stood up and turned to the sink full of dirty dishes.
>
> "Did you like the Tivoli Gardens," I said suddenly.
>
> "The water runs lukewarm. I better get you some ice…"
>
> As she spoke she opened the refrigerator and took out some ice. Her movements were jerky and the tray was not frozen and the water splashed on the floor.
>
> "I said did you like the Tivoli Gardens."
>
> "God*damn* people around here, someone took it out last night and never put it back, I mean *I* had to put it back this morning…"
>
> She was speaking very rapidly…
>
> "Tivoli," I said.
>
> Marin Bogart turned suddenly, and she put the tray on the table, and her face was tight, and\then she broke exactly as her mother must have broken the morning the FBI first came to the house… (259-260)

In this case, breaking through the girl's mask was, on Grace's part, a *class* act.

In an essay titled "On Morality", Joan Didion launched an insight relevant to Soul words. "For better or worse," she says, "we are what we learned as children." (Didion, 1968: p. 158) For better or worse, to incorporate that insight, a Soul word learned during childhood may induce a Hiroo Onada to perform *yamato-damashi* for thirty years in the Philippines or propel a Vartan Gregorian to the top tier of success via *genutzat*.

Among various subcultures in America, the WASP Soul word may be more imperiled than most, not only because of the end of the WASP ascendancy since the 1950s but because of internal rot in what remains of that subculture. Given

the coarsening of the culture at large on the Internet and the barbarian crudities of current political discourse, the genteel constraints of a Hawthorne or Frost or even the very notion of dignity may seem quaintly archaic. Didion foresees as much in her portrait of Warren Bogart, who violates the WASP code with perverse relish at every turn in *A Book of Common Prayer*. But, notwithstanding his domineering personality, he is not the main character. Charlotte Douglas, a woman with *class*, is the protagonist throughout.

It seems apparent that Joan Didion, born in 1934, was harking back to her childhood in construing her finest novel. But even if she wrote in the farewell mode, saying goodbye to all that, she is true to the prophetic role of the artist—to tell the truth of her own time as best she knows and believes it. And in her telling, there was something grand in the constraints of the WASP code, in the strength and discipline expended in maintaining it. Through her portrait of Charlotte Douglas, Didion made *A Book of Common Prayer* her testament to that lost splendor. In doing so, she also provided a poignant instance of an important feature of American literature at large—the often deployed but little studied Soul Word, whose multvarious presence so greatly enriches our national culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Bellow, S. (1956). *Seize the Day*. Viking Press.

Didion, J. (1968). On Morality. In *Slouching towards Bethlehem*. A Delta Book.

Didion, J. (1977). *A Book of Common Prayer*. Vintage Books.

Eliot, T. S. (1964). Tradition and the Individual Talent. In *Selected Essays*. Harcourt, Brace &World.

Ellison, R. (1952). *Invisible Man*. Signet Book.

Faulkner, W. (1987). *As I Lay Dying*. Vintage Books.

Frost, R. (1969). *The Death of the Hired Man*. In *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (pp. 34-40). Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston.

Gregorian, V. (2003). *The Road to Home*: *My Life and Times*. Simon and Schuster.

Hawthorne, N. (1969). *The Custom-House. Introduction to The Scarlet Letter.* Charles E. Merrill Standard Edition.

Hawthorne, N. (1970). Mosses from an Old Manse. In *Hawthorne: Selected Tales and Sketches* (3rd ed.). Holt, Rhinehart and Winston.

Hemingway, E. (1954). *The Sun Also Rises*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Hemingway, E. (1995). *"L'Envoi," The Short Stories*. Scribner Paperback.

Hijuelos, O. (1989). *The Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love*. Perennial Classics, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kaplan, A. (July 21, 2022). The Master of Blame. *The New York Review of Books, LXIX*. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/07/21/the-master-of-blame-louis-ferdinand-celine/

Meyers, J. (1985). *Hemingway: A Biography*. Harper & Row.

Morrison, T. (1994). *The Bluest Eye*. A Plume Book.

Untermeyer, L. (1964). *Robert Frost: A Backward Look*. Published by Library of Congress.

Updike, J. (2002). A & P. In M. Meyer (ed.), *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* (p. 606, 6th ed.). St. Martin's.