

Play It As It Lays: A Fading Starlet (Chapters 1 – 10)

“Don’t you ever get tired of doing favours for people?”

Maria Lang’s husband Carter, a famous film director, has moved out of their house. To cope, Maria takes to driving aimlessly in her Corvette around Los Angeles. Scenes of her driving are interspersed with flashbacks about her fledgling film career, and of her interactions with her social circle, and the parties she goes to. Gradually, the pieces start to fit together. Maria’s professional life is on the slide as well. She calls her agent to try to get more parts, but all he can offer her is television work which she thinks is beneath her.

Once again on the freeway, Maria finds herself unconsciously driving towards where Carter is shooting on location. She fantasises about a conversation they might have, and she decides that seeing him again would only end in an argument. A few days later, he unexpectedly returns home and he speaks to her in a passive-aggressive way, confusing Maria over who is at fault for their separation. He also implies that she should not see so much of their daughter, who is in a psychiatric institution. Apparently, Maria’s visits are bad for Kate, although the reasons why are unclear. This section of the novel ends at yet another party. This time, Carter storms off – and Maria worries that her period has still not come...

Knowledge Check

How well do you know these chapters?

1. In what part of Los Angeles do Maria and Carter have a house?

- (a) Fairfax
- (b) Beverly Hills
- (c) Venice
- (d) Wilmington

2. What is the name of the second picture Maria made with Carter?

- (a) Angel Beach
- (b) Brighton Rock
- (c) Donkey Punch
- (d) Precious

3. What is the name of Maria’s agent?

- (a) Les Goodwin
- (b) Tommy Loew
- (c) Zoe Halloran
- (d) Freddy Chaikin

4. What temperature is the swimming pool always kept at?

- (a) 55 degrees
- (b) 70 degrees
- (c) 85 degrees
- (d) 99 degrees

5. Where does Maria say Larry Kulik’s going to die?

- (a) On the street
- (b) In his bed
- (c) In a barber’s chair
- (d) In prison

6. What did Maria do to lose her last job?

- (a) Walked off the set
- (b) Slept with the producer
- (c) Demanded a pay rise
- (d) Took an overdose

7. Where is Carter working and staying in October?

- (a) Pasadena
- (b) Baker
- (c) Las Vegas
- (d) Santa Monica

8. What happened on the set of BZ’s latest film?

- (a) An actor fainted
- (b) An armed robbery
- (c) A fire
- (d) A serious fall

9. How does BZ feel about fixing favours all the time?

- (a) Guilty
- (b) Indifferent
- (c) Important
- (d) Tired

10. For how long has Maria’s period not come?

- (a) A week
- (b) 18 days
- (c) 30 days
- (d) Fifty-one days

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What is the importance of Maria driving in Chapter 1? Describe the way she drives and the significance of interactions she has on the road.
2. How do Maria's thoughts in chapter 2 about the two films she made develop your ideas about both her and Carter's characters?
3. How do Maria's interactions and behaviour over the chapters you've read so far establish her antisocial personality?
4. It seems like Maria's personal and professional life are both on the rocks. What methods and moments does Didion use to imply the downwards trajectory of Maria's personal and professional life?
5. Aside from Maria, the opening chapters establish the character of BZ. How would you describe his character. Would it be true to say that he and Maria are close? Do they seem like kindred spirits?

Important Theme: *Superficial Hollywood Society*

“They had already talked about Helene’s week at La Costa and they had already talked about an actress who had been admitted to UCLA Neuropsychiatry with her wrists cut...”



Play It As It Lays is set in 1960s Hollywood; a time and place in which appearance is everything and style always triumphs over substance. Nobody appears to be sincere, vulnerabilities are hidden (or else they are ruthlessly exploited) and communication is rarely, if ever, meaningful. The general attitude adopted by Maria’s social circle is to entertain above all else. In an early scene between Maria and her friend BZ, he comments that *“it’s uphill work making you laugh, Maria”* (ch. 4). Later, he again comments sarcastically that *“you’re a lot of laughs this afternoon, Maria”* (ch. 7). When BZ retells a crude joke he overheard (*“What I like about your wife, Carter, is that she isn’t a cunt”*) Maria’s reaction is to say nothing. Her lack of ‘humour’ is something that sets her apart from her friends – and they are quick to criticise her when she doesn’t play the game right: laugh at others’ jokes, keep things light, don’t burden anyone with your discomforts. It seems that Maria has got tired of following the script and her increasing bluntness is too honest to take.

The superficiality which defines Maria’s social circle is a representation of how 1960s America was suffering from a wider social malaise. Writing in 1970, Didion paints a picture of a country that has lost its way. Embroiled in a foreign war, plagued with crime, and suffering from gender and racial inequality, it felt like America was stuck in the mud; a far cry from the optimism of the early 1960s. When John F. Kennedy was elected as the 35th President of the United States, he laid out a utopian vision of a ‘New Frontier’ in which American people would explore space, conquer prejudice, eliminate poverty, and lead the world into a new era of peace. However, despite achieving certain milestones (America did indeed succeed in reaching the moon) the country failed to enact the social changes Kennedy had promised. In 1963, Kennedy was assassinated; in 1968 another shocking assassination of Dr Martin Luther King threw the country into protest and rioting. The ‘New Frontier’ had failed to materialise.

The atmosphere of pessimism and senselessness embroiling America is something Didion distils in her depiction of Hollywood society, where superficiality is a reaction against meaninglessness. Maria’s life is almost completely superficial. Her relationships are shallow, her hobbies unfulfilling, and her conversations

inane. No wonder she thinks of her life as a game – it's a way of acknowledging the superficiality and phoniness that is her default state of being.

Analytical Writing Practise

The masseur scene in chapter 10 is a perfect illustration of the vacuous meaninglessness of Maria's life. Use selected details from chapter 10 in an analytical paragraph exposing the meaninglessness that lurks beneath the surface of society.

Literary Study: *Fragmented Narrative*

"Sometimes at night the dread would... flood her mind with sharp flash images of Les Goodwin in New York and Carter out there on the desert with BZ and Helene..."

Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* is her second full novel. As novels go, it's relatively short, at just over 200 pages divided into 80 chapters. Her chapters also tend to be short; some are only a couple of pages, and some are just a few lines long (for instance, chapter 8). The novel is **episodic**; one scene does not lead directly into the next, as if the book is a collection of snapshots or cuttings from a film reel. The reader is given glimpses into Maria's life and world through these short **vignettes**, an impressionistic structure that mimics the montage technique used in film to recreate the fast-paced and disjointed Hollywood setting. Moreover, the story is told through mixing present-day scenes with flashbacks and memories (chapter 2 is an example of a chapter set in the past) and fast-forwards (chapter 4 begins in October) to disorient the reader even further.

Didion's writing style is fizzing and energetic. She mixes long and short sentences and presents short, sharp lines of dialogue. Often the reader will interrupt a scene midway through (the beginning of chapter 5 interrupts the conversation between Maria and Freddie Chaikin, her agent, using a technique called **in media res**; to begin in the middle) meaning we have to think fast if we want to keep up. Just as in the introductory triptych, what is not said can be as important as what is said in certain interactions! People talk often on the phone, making certain voices and characters seem disembodied. Chapter 7 begins with a voice on the telephone announcing "*C'est moi, Maria*" and Maria has to fight her way out of sleep to carry on the conversation; as she "*groped on the edge of the pool for her dark glasses*" the reader also feels something of the feeling of 'groping' to follow what's going on. Frequently, Maria will think of people and places whose names are dropped into the story with no foregrounding, giving readers the sense of being suddenly plunged into the frantic Hollywood social scene. Sometimes we are given imaginary scenes as Maria imagines how a conversation might play out. For example, in chapter 6, Maria thinks about what her and Carter "*could*" say to each other should she decide to visit the film set he is currently working on. The disorientation we feel is a taste of the frenetic Hollywood lifestyle where people go from encounter to encounter, party to party, call to call, trying to leverage their social connections for personal advantage.

Activity

Work in pairs to silver bullet the novel by selecting one quotation from each of the first ten chapters that you think best expresses the 'theme' or topic of each one. List your quotations from 1 – 10 in your exercise book, then compare your choices with another pair.