Play It As It Lays: Sleeping Pills (Chapters 66 – 84)

"He was swallowing the capsules with a glass of water. There were not very many left…"

Things come to a head in the desert. Tension grows between Carter, Maria, his now ex-wife, and Susannah Wood, the lead actress in Carter's new film. Carter's star actor assaults Susannah who has to cover up the bruises on her face for the last few days of the shoot. BZ reveals that Helene and Carter are having an affair, reaching out to Maria for comfort. But, consumed by her own physical and mental deterioration, all she can tell him is "nothing" matters. As the story moves into its final stage, the narrative structure changes and Maria speaks directly to the reader from the psychiatric hospital, admitting that she has lost her sense of humor – but not her mind.

BZ begins to act more mechanically. Suffering from the same despair as Maria, he concludes that he wants "exactly nothing." Stirring something in Maria, for the first time she seems alarmed as she knows what he plans to do. But she cannot stop him overdosing on sleeping pills. Holding his hand, they both fall asleep. Next morning, Carter and Helene find the two of them side by side: but BZ is dead.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know these chapters?

1. Who comments on Maria's weight at the beginning of this section?
(a) Helene
(b) Les
(c) Carter
(d) Ivan

2. Maria dissociates from what probable event that is elided from chapter 67?
(a) She takes drugs with BZ and Jeanelle
(b) Ivan Costello forces himself on her
(c) Kate is released from the hospital
(d) There is a fire on Carter's film set

3. What does Jeanelle want?
(a) Barbitol
(b) Edrisal
(c) Coffee
(d) Bourbon

4. What is the name of the bar in the desert town?
(a) The Rattler Room
(b) The Coral Lounge
(c) The Copper Head
(d) The Viper's Nest

5. How high does the heat get in the desert town?
(a) 70 degrees
(b) 100 degrees
(c) 130 degrees
(d) 180 degrees

6. What does Helene say to Maria?
(a) If it's not funny don't say it
(b) Something bad is going to happen to us
(c) You gotta play it as it lays
(d) Why do you say those things

7. Who is the lead actor in Carter's film?
(a) Ivan Costello
(b) Harrison Porter
(c) Ralph Kramer
(d) Dwight Johnson

8. What two lessons did Maria learn as a child?
(a) Always keep your sense of humor sharp
(b) Life is a crap game
(c) Dropped toast always lands butter side up
(d) Overturning a rock is apt to reveal a rattlesnake

9. Which is NOT one of Maria's plans for the future?
(a) Get Kate
(b) Kill Carter
(c) Live with Kate alone
(d) Do some canning

10. What are the last words of the novel?
(a) Don't start faking me now
(b) I lie here watching the hummingbird
(c) Keep on playing
(d) Why not, I say?

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What happens to BZ at the end of the story? What prompted his actions? By this point, how is he similar and different to Maria?

2. In chapter 72, Maria and Carter have a (possibly real, possibly imaginary) argument when he uses the word *'menopause'* to hurt Maria. Why is this word particularly hurtful? What does it reveal about attitudes towards women?

3. As the novel reaches its end, Didion changes the structure so that Maria's first-person narration, spoken from the present day, interrupts the past tense narrative. What effect(s) does this create?

4. In chapter 76, Maria describes herself as *'a radical surgeon of my own life.'* What is significant about this description of herself?

5. In the very last chapter of the story, Maria directly addresses the reader: *'I know something Carter never knew, or Helene, or maybe you.'* What is the effect of this moment?

Literary Study: *Unreliable Narrator*

"Some mornings she would wake with her eyes swollen and heavy and would wonder if she had been crying."

Play It As It Lays is told as a flashback related by Maria from the psychiatric hospital to which she has been confined. Given the setting, can readers trust Maria's version of the story? Readers' suspicions are aroused as early as the prologue when she neglected to tell us about BZ's death. **Elision** is the act of missing out or skipping over important details, and this is a frequent habit of Maria's. In this section alone, Maria elides: Ivan Costello forcing himself on her; her crying in front of Carter; her physical deterioration. In fact, despite her obvious fear of ageing, Maria almost never comments on her own looks. We are left to wonder if, unlike those around her, she honestly doesn't care about her appearance, or whether this is another example of her unreliability.

Activity

Think of the various ways in which Didion crafts Maria as an unreliable narrator and find examples to complete this table. Compare your results to a classmate and decide to what extent Maria can be considered a reliable or unreliable narrator:

Elision: misses out important details	
Behaves erratically	
Displays prejudice or bias	
Dissociates from reality	
Dissociates from the past	

Important Character: *BZ*

‘“Tell me what matters,” BZ said. “Nothing,” Maria said.’

One of the most important supporting characters in *Play It As It Lays* is BZ. Although he appears less frequently than Maria, BZ helps Didion explore one of the novel's central ideas: existential nihilism, the belief that life has no intrinsic meaning, purpose, or value.

Of all the characters in the novel, BZ is perhaps the one who understands Maria most completely because he shares many of her doubts about the world. Early in the novel (chapter 8), Maria asks him whether he ever gets *"tired of doing favours for people."* His reply, *"You don't know how tired,"* hints at a weariness that goes beyond ordinary exhaustion. Like Maria, BZ appears disillusioned with the social performances and empty relationships that surround them. While other characters continue pursuing success, pleasure, status, or power, both Maria and BZ seem unconvinced by the values of the world they inhabit. Their connection becomes even clearer in chapter 81 when Helene asks BZ what he wants. His answer, *"Exactly nothing,"* is one of the clearest expressions of nihilism in the text. On hearing this confession, Maria immediately drops a tray of ice. The moment conveys her recognition: she has encountered someone else who shares her belief that life offers no deeper purpose or reward.

Throughout the novel, Maria struggles with the possibility that existence is governed only by chance. She wonders how a harmless king snake can look almost identical to a deadly coral snake, and she cannot reconcile herself to random accidents, such as her mother being killed in a car crash or her daughter suffering a random genetic condition. She constantly asserts her desire to see cause preceding effect: she tempts fate during her pregnancy, she *“expected that planes would crash if she boarded them in bad spirit”* and thinks that adultery will cause fatal accidents in children. These superstitions reveal her need to believe that suffering follows some kind of logic. However, as the novel progresses, Maria finds less and less evidence that the universe operates according to any meaningful pattern. Like BZ, she gradually comes to doubt that suffering serves any purpose or that there is any larger order behind human experience.

However, Didion also encourages readers to consider an important difference between the two characters. When BZ asks *"Why?",* he is searching for a reason to continue living. Unable to find one, he concludes that life is not worth enduring and takes his own life. Maria, by contrast, eventually abandons the search for answers altogether. Her response is captured in her question: *"Why not?"* If life has no inherent meaning, then death has no inherent meaning either. For Maria, suicide solves nothing. As a result, she chooses to *"stay in the action"* despite her belief that *"nothing applies."*

This contrast makes BZ an important foil to Maria. Both characters recognise what they see as the randomness and meaninglessness of existence, yet they respond in different ways. BZ's nihilism leads him to reject life, whereas Maria's nihilism leads her to endure it. Through the relationship between these two characters, Didion invites readers to consider whether recognising life's apparent emptiness inevitably results in despair, or whether it is still possible to continue living without the comfort of meaning.

Activity

Think about the novel’s climax and discuss possible responses to nihilism with a partner. You can use the prompt: *If Maria and BZ both believe that life lacks meaning, why does BZ choose death while Maria chooses to "stay in the action"? Which response does Didion present as more appealing or convincing?*