

Georgia O’Keeffe

Biographical Essay by Joan Didion

What is the source of **INSPIRATION?**

COMMON CORE

RI 2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development.

RI 4 Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **RI 5** Analyze how an author’s ideas are developed and refined.

L 4b Identify patterns of word changes that indicate different parts of speech.

What drives painters to create vibrant pictures? What compels movie directors to invent alien worlds or makes songwriters dream up meaningful lyrics? Artists find inspiration in their daily lives, in nature, or even in the work of other artists.

QUICKWRITE Think of the most powerful work by your favorite artist, be it a painter, a dancer, an actor, an author, or a musician. What do you think inspired the artist to create this work? Whether it’s a song about the person who broke his heart or a huge mural of her neighborhood, try to imagine the inspiration behind the art. Describe your artist’s source of inspiration in a short paragraph.



Meet the Author

● TEXT ANALYSIS: TONE

Tone is a writer's attitude toward his or her subject. Just as people often speak in a particular tone of voice, such as sarcastic or amused, writers create a tone with their choice of words. As you read "Georgia O'Keeffe," record details that help you identify Joan Didion's tone. Look for the following:

- unusual words Didion uses to describe O'Keeffe
- emphasized or repeated words and phrases
- details about O'Keeffe's life Didion chooses to include

Details from the Text	Tone Established
Didion describes O'Keeffe as "this angelic rattlesnake." (lines 63–64)	

● READING SKILL: IDENTIFY IMPLIED MAIN IDEAS

The **main, or central, idea** is the most important idea in a paragraph or essay. Often, the main idea is not directly stated but **implied** by supporting details. As you read, use these strategies to identify and understand Didion's main ideas:

- Identify the specific topic of each paragraph or section.
- Examine all the details the author includes in that section.
- Ask what idea or message the details convey about the topic.
- State the idea or message in a sentence.

▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Didion's vibrant portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe is enhanced by her use of the words shown in bold. To see how many words you already know, restate each phrase, using a different word or words for each boldfaced term. Then, in your *Reader/Writer Notebook*, write a brief definition of each word you're familiar with.

1. a **condescending** attitude toward teenagers
2. witness the **genesis** of an idea
3. scorned with a **derisive** laugh
4. bitter **rancor** between enemies
5. painted with bright, **immutable** colors

Joan Didion

born 1934

A Sharp Eye

Joan Didion's keen observations of American society have earned her popularity and critical acclaim. Whether on the antiwar movement of the 1960s or American politics in the aftermath of September 11, Didion's insights have earned her a prominent place in American literature. They have also served a more personal purpose. "I write," she says, "entirely to find out what I'm thinking."

Speak for Yourself

Didion's work, which includes essays, novels, and screenplays, spans four decades. The author is a firm believer in the power of language. She warns young people not to "settle for other people's words" but rather to voice their own opinions. "I am still committed," Didion declares, "to the idea that the ability to think for one's self depends on one's mastery of the language."

BACKGROUND TO THE ESSAY

Artistic Flair

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) was a significant 20th-century American painter intrigued by the idea of "filling space in a beautiful way." Although she was born in Wisconsin, she is most closely associated with New Mexico, where she spent much of her life. In the Southwest, O'Keeffe painted what she saw: clouds, desert flowers, bones, and rocks. Some of O'Keeffe's most famous paintings are dramatic close-ups of flowers.



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Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Georgia O'Keeffe

JOAN DIDION

“Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant,” Georgia O’Keeffe told us in the book of paintings and words published in her ninetieth year on earth. She seemed to be advising us to forget the beautiful face in the Stieglitz photographs.¹ She appeared to be dismissing the rather **condescending** romance that had attached to her by then, the romance of extreme good looks and advanced age and deliberate isolation. “It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest.” I recall an August afternoon in Chicago in 1973 when I took my daughter, then seven, to see what Georgia O’Keeffe had done with where she had been. One of the vast O’Keeffe “Sky Above Clouds”
10 canvases floated over the back stairs in the Chicago Art Institute that day, dominating what seemed to be several stories of empty light, and my daughter looked at it once, ran to the landing, and kept on looking. “Who drew it,” she whispered after a while. I told her. “I need to talk to her,” she said finally.

My daughter was making, that day in Chicago, an entirely unconscious, but quite basic assumption about people and the work they do. She was assuming that the glory she saw in the work reflected a glory in its maker, that the painting was the painter as the poem is the poet, that every choice one made alone—every word chosen or rejected, every brush stroke laid or not laid down—betrayed one’s character. *Style is character*. It seemed to me that afternoon that I had rarely
20 seen so instinctive an application of this familiar principle, and I recall being pleased not only that my daughter responded to style as character but that it was Georgia O’Keeffe’s particular style to which she responded: this was a hard woman who had imposed her 192 square feet of clouds on Chicago. **A**

condescending
(kŏn’dĩ-sĕn’dĩng) *adj.*
assuming an air of
superiority

Analyze Visuals ►

Examine this 1932 Stieglitz photograph of O’Keeffe. List three **traits** you would attribute to O’Keeffe based solely on this photograph.

A IMPLIED MAIN IDEAS

Reread lines 14–23 and think about the details Didion includes about her daughter’s reaction to O’Keeffe’s work. What is the main idea of the paragraph?

1. **Stieglitz** (stĕg’līts) **photographs**: American photographer Alfred Stieglitz, O’Keeffe’s husband, took and exhibited many photographs of O’Keeffe.



“Hardness” has not been in our century a quality much admired in women, nor in the past twenty years has it even been in official favor for men. When hardness surfaces in the very old we tend to transform it into “crustiness” or eccentricity, some tonic pepperiness to be indulged at a distance. On the evidence of her work and what she has said about it, Georgia O’Keeffe is neither “crusty” nor eccentric. She is simply hard, a straight shooter, a woman clean of received wisdom and open to what she sees. This is a woman who could early on dismiss most of her contemporaries as “dreamy,” and would later single out one she liked as “a very poor painter.” (And then add, apparently by way of softening the judgment: “I guess he wasn’t a painter at all. He had no courage and I believe that to create one’s own world in any of the arts takes courage.”) This is a woman who in 1939 could advise her admirers that they were missing her point, that their appreciation of her famous flowers was merely sentimental. “When I paint a red hill,” she observed coolly in the catalogue for an exhibition that year, “you say it is too bad that I don’t always paint flowers. A flower touches almost everyone’s heart. A red hill doesn’t touch everyone’s heart.” This is a woman who could describe the **genesis** of one of her most well-known paintings—the “Cow’s Skull: Red, White and Blue” owned by the Metropolitan—as an act of quite deliberate and **derisive** orneriness. “I thought of the city men I had been seeing in the East,” she wrote. “They talked so often of writing the Great American Novel—the Great American Play—the Great American Poetry. . . . So as I was painting my cow’s head on blue I thought to myself, ‘I’ll make it an American painting. They will not think it great with the red stripes down the sides—Red, White and Blue—but they will notice it.’”

The city men. The men. They. The words crop up again and again as this astonishingly aggressive woman tells us what was on her mind when she was making her astonishingly aggressive paintings. It was those city men who stood accused of sentimentalizing her flowers: “I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see—and I don’t.” *And I don’t.* Imagine those words spoken, and the sound you hear is *don’t tread on me*. “The men” believed it impossible to paint New York, so Georgia O’Keeffe painted New York. “The men” didn’t think much of her bright color, so she made it brighter. The men yearned toward Europe so she went to Texas, and then New Mexico. The men talked about Cézanne,² “long involved remarks about the ‘plastic quality’ of his form and color,” and took one another’s long involved remarks, in the view of this angelic rattlesnake in their midst, altogether too seriously. “I can paint one of those

genesis (jĕn’ĭ-sĭs) *n.*
the origin or coming into being (of something)

derisive (dĭ-rĭ’sĭv) *adj.*
expressing contempt or ridicule

COMMON CORE L4b

Language Coach

Derivations Many adverbs are **derived**, or formed, by adding *-ly* to an adjective. Reread lines 50–52. What *-ly* adverb can you identify? What adjective is it derived from? Use a dictionary to find the meaning of both words.

COMMON CORE RI5

B IRONY

Reread lines 59–65 and look for **irony**, or the difference between the actual result and the expected one. In this instance, O’Keeffe is doing the opposite of what one might expect in response to the expectations of the art world. Why do you think the author focused on O’Keeffe’s ironic behavior in this section of the essay? Explain your answer.

2. **Cézanne** (sā-zăn’): Paul Cézanne, late-19th-century French painter whose style and study of shapes influenced new art movements in the early 20th century.



Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue (1931), Georgia O'Keeffe. Oil on canvas, 39 7/8" × 35 7/8". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1952. © 2007 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Georgia O'Keeffe/Metropolitan Museum of Art (52.203).

◀ Analyze Visuals

Reread lines 41–49. What message do you think O'Keeffe was sending to the “city men” when she painted this piece? Explain your answer, citing details from the text as well as the painting.

dismal-colored paintings like the men,” the woman who regarded herself always as an outsider remembers thinking one day in 1922, and she did: a painting of a shed “all low-toned and dreary with the tree beside the door.” She called the act of **rancor** “The Shanty” and hung it in her next show. “The men seemed to approve of it,” she reported fifty-four years later, her contempt
70 undimmed. “They seemed to think that maybe I was beginning to paint. That was my only low-toned dismal-colored painting.”

Some women fight and others do not. Like so many successful guerrillas³ in the war between the sexes, Georgia O'Keeffe seems to have been equipped early with an **immutable** sense of who she was and a fairly clear understanding that she would be required to prove it. On the surface her upbringing was conventional. She was a child on the Wisconsin prairie who played with china dolls and painted watercolors with cloudy skies because sunlight was too hard
◀ to paint and, with her brother and sisters, listened every night to her mother read stories of the Wild West, of Texas, of Kit Carson and Billy the Kid.⁴ She

rancor (răŋg'kər) *n.*
bitter and deep ill will

immutable (ĩ-myōō'tə-bəl)
adj. unchanging

◀ GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 76–77. Didion is using a **restrictive clause** (“She was a child . . . *who played with china dolls and painted watercolors . . .*”) to impart necessary information to the reader as well as to enhance her description of O'Keeffe.

3. **guerrillas** (gə-rĩl'əz): members of irregular military units who work to undermine the enemy using tactics such as surprise raids.

4. **Kit Carson and Billy the Kid**: Carson was a scout in the American West; Billy the Kid was an outlaw.

80 told adults that she wanted to be an artist and was embarrassed when they asked what kind of artist she wanted to be: she had no idea “what kind.” She had no idea what artists did. She had never seen a picture that interested her, other than a pen-and-ink Maid of Athens⁵ in one of her mother’s books, some Mother Goose illustrations printed on cloth, a tablet cover that showed a little girl with pink roses, and the painting of Arabs on horseback that hung in her grandmother’s parlor.

90 At thirteen, in a Dominican convent, she was mortified when the sister corrected her drawing. At Chatham Episcopal Institute in Virginia she painted lilacs and sneaked time alone to walk out to where she could see the line of the Blue Ridge Mountains on the horizon. At the Art Institute in Chicago she was shocked by the presence of live models and wanted to abandon anatomy lessons. At the Art Students League in New York one of her fellow students advised her that, since he

100 would be a great painter and she would end up teaching painting in a girls’ school, any work of hers was less important than modeling for him. Another painted over her work to show her how the Impressionists⁶ did trees. She had not before heard how the Impressionists did trees and she did not much care.



Jimson Weed (1932), Georgia O’Keeffe. The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico. © 2007 Georgia O’Keeffe Museum /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Art Resource, New York.

At twenty-four she left all those opinions behind and went for the first time to live in Texas, where there were no trees to paint and no one to tell her how not to paint them. In Texas there was only the horizon she craved. In Texas

110 she had her sister Claudia with her for a while, and in the late afternoons they would walk away from town and toward the horizon and watch the evening star come out. “That evening star fascinated me,” she wrote. “It was in some way very exciting to me. My sister had a gun, and as we walked she would throw bottles in the air and shoot as many as she could before they hit the ground. I had nothing but to walk into nowhere and the wide sunset space with the star. Ten watercolors were made from that star.” In a way one’s interest is compelled as much by the sister Claudia with the gun as by the painter Georgia with the star, but only the painter left us this shining record. Ten watercolors were made from that star. ∞ D

▲ Analyze Visuals

O’Keeffe is celebrated for her ability to make even flowers look strong and imposing. Explain how she creates this air of strength, considering elements such as the flower’s size, position, and color.

D TONE

Reread lines 107–119. What is the “shining record” Didion refers to? Describe the tone conveyed by the writer’s word choice.

5. **Maid of Athens:** the subject of a love poem by 19th-century English writer George Gordon, Lord Byron.

6. **Impressionists:** members of an influential 19th-century French school of painting who focused on depicting quick visual impressions and conveying how light influenced the scenes they painted.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What anecdote, or short personal story, does Didion tell at the beginning of this essay?
2. **Clarify** What did O’Keeffe’s critics tend to think of her work?

Text Analysis

3. **Paraphrase** O’Keeffe asserts, “Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest.” Paraphrase this quotation. Then explain what O’Keeffe meant.
4. **Understand Motives** What inspired O’Keeffe to act the way she did? For each action described in the chart, identify O’Keeffe’s motive, or inspiration. Use a graphic organizer like the one shown to record your answers.

Motive →	Action
	O’Keeffe paints “Cow’s Skull: Red, White, and Blue” (line 42).
	O’Keeffe uses even brighter colors in her paintings (line 60).
	O’Keeffe moves to the Southwest (line 108).

5. **Identify Implied Main Idea** Reread lines 72–106. Examine the details in this paragraph. What is the implied main idea conveyed by these details? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
6. **Analyze Characterization** Didion reveals her subject’s traits using the same methods of characterization used by fiction writers. Identify at least two methods of characterization Didion uses in this selection. Then explain which of O’Keeffe’s traits are revealed in each case, citing evidence from the text.
7. **Analyze Tone** Review the chart you filled in as you read. How does Didion’s tone help convey the ideas she wants to express about O’Keeffe?

Text Criticism

8. **Author’s Style** Joan Didion has remarked that “writing is hostile in that you’re trying to make somebody see something the way you see it, trying to impose your idea, your picture.” In what ways might this essay be considered “hostile”? Did Didion achieve her goal of making you see Georgia O’Keeffe the same way she does? Explain your answer.

What is the source of INSPIRATION?

In what other areas besides the arts is inspiration important?



RI 2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development. **RI 4** Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **RI 5** Analyze how an author’s ideas are developed and refined.

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Determine the relationship between the first pair of words in each analogy. Then write the vocabulary word that best completes the second pair.

1. *Tolerant* is to *easygoing* as *smug* is to ____.
2. *Contemptuous* is to *speech* as ____ is to *remark*.
3. *Filth* is to *squalor* as ____ is to *permanent*.
4. *Embrace* is to *affection* as *insult* is to ____.
5. *Birth* is to *death* as ____ is to *termination*.

WORD LIST

condescending
derisive
genesis
immutable
rancor

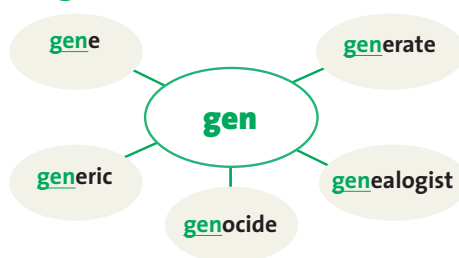
ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

- conclude
- construct
- implicit
- primary
- specific

Construct an imaginary dialogue between Didion and O’Keeffe. Include **specific** details from Didion’s essay to show how the two women react to each other. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: THE WORD ROOT *gen*

The vocabulary word *genesis* contains the Greek root *gen*, which means “birth, race, or origin.” *Gen* is also a Latin root with a similar meaning. You will encounter the root *gen* not only in your English class but in readings for other classes as well, such as science and social studies. To understand the meaning of words with *gen*, use context clues as well as your knowledge of the root.



COMMON CORE

L 4c Consult reference materials to determine or clarify a word’s meaning or etymology.

PRACTICE Choose the word from the word web that best completes each sentence. Use context clues to help you or, if necessary, consult a dictionary.

1. They hired a ____ to trace their family tree.
2. ____ products are usually less expensive than those with brand names.
3. The defective ____ that he inherited led to a serious blood disease.
4. ____ is the attempt to destroy a race of people.
5. They could not ____ enough interest in their project to get financial backing for it.

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Language

◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Use Descriptive Language

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 573. A **restrictive clause** is necessary to the basic meaning of a sentence; it is not set off by commas or dashes. A **nonrestrictive clause** gives only additional information and is not necessary to the meaning of a sentence; it is set off by commas or dashes (like commas, dashes are often used to emphasize parenthetical information).

Didion makes effective use of the restrictive clause in her short, concise description about Georgia O’Keeffe. Didion also uses restrictive clauses stylistically to make the essay more descriptive.

Restrictive Clause: *She was a child on the Wisconsin prairie **who played with china dolls and painted watercolors**...* (lines 76–77)

The revisions in blue incorporate restrictive clauses to lend clarity and enhance the description. Use similar techniques to revise your response to the prompt below.

STUDENT MODEL

Joan Didion effectively illustrates the character traits of an aggressive artist *who possessed a particular “hardness” of character and who desired and her desire* to paint, and live, in unexpected ways.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Improve your understanding of “Georgia O’Keeffe” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

WRITING PROMPT

Short Constructed Response: Evaluation

What character trait does Didion highlight in her essay on Georgia O’Keeffe? How effective are the details the author includes to illustrate this trait? Write a **one- or two-paragraph response**, citing evidence from the text.

REVISING TIP

Review your response. How have you used restrictive clauses in your evaluation of Didion’s characterization of Georgia O’Keeffe?



L.1b Use various types of clauses to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing.

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