

Structurally Sound -

A Look into the Form of the Book: A Visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan

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There is much debate about whether or not Jennifer Egan's novel, A Visit from the Goon Squad, is in fact a novel and not a collection of short stories. "Despite an arsenal of bold literary experiments (including one celebrated chapter written in PowerPoint) , a sundry crew of characters and their various intersections with the music industry, and the commitment to a peripheral, collage-like narrative, Egan's novel swayed even the most jaded of postmodern critics" (Manderfield). Throughout Egan's entire book, there are shifts at the beginning of each chapter. Each time the reader flips the page to a new chapter they are greeted with an almost brand new story. This makes each theme from the book come from a different perspective. Her major shifts in themes throughout the novel as a whole are what causes this debate. Egan experimented with the form of her book, A Visit from the Goon Squad in order to reflect her themes with more power to her readers through shifts in characters, perspectives, settings, and narrative styles throughout the book. In every chapter there is a new character telling their story in a different way.

According to Lori Prior, an author of the article, "Picture This: Visual Literacy as a Pathway to Character Understanding," "Characters have been described as the driving force of stories (Cullinan & Galda, 1998), and Emery (1996) argued, 'character states, such as their desires, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs, are the glue that ties the story together'"(1). In almost every one of Egan's chapter, one character, whether they were a main character throughout the

chapter or a minor, is pulled over to the next chapter to be the narrator. During the first nine chapters, for instance, this is the case seven times. In an interview with Katherine Manderfield, Egan told Manderfield, “Once I had a few chapters of *Goon Squad* and realized that it was going to be a book, I could see it was not going to be your average centrally-oriented novel. What was fun about *Goon Squad*, to me, was moving around and not moving forward, but moving backward” (Manderfield). For example, in the first chapter, which is told from the third-person perspective of Sasha, she has a passing thought where she mentions her old boss Bennie. The second chapter is told then from the third-person perspective of Bennie while Sasha is still working for him. Again, in a passing moment, he recollects his time with his old friends from high school and the next chapter the reader is taken into the past for a first person point of view story told by one of Bennie’s old friends, Rhea. As the reader continues to read on, they are taken back in time until they suddenly are shot forward into the future.

One of the major themes from the novel is the idea that one’s youth is a fleeting time in life as a whole. It can be seen in the change in characters, especially when Egan shifts perspectives as well as time periods. When Egan uses the character shift and/or time shift throughout her work, it helps emphasize the theme of youth because of the different ways the reader can get inside a character’s head. For instance, later on in the novel there is an entire chapter in the form of a PowerPoint presentation written by a twelve-year-old girl. Egan does an amazing job at capturing the tone of a young girl compared to any of the earlier chapters that were written through the perspective of adults over the age of twenty-five. Through the PowerPoint chapter, Egan also manages to capture the theme of innocence through the twelve-

year-old daughter of Sasha. While the shift in characters is, at times, tricky to follow, it also brought a new element to the novel as a whole.

Another shift that Egan works with throughout her books is the ever-changing shift in different perspectives throughout the novel. There are many different ways to describe what a perspective is in literature. “The Perspective is the scene as viewed through the eyes/mind of the chosen character. The story, however, can be told from any one of several points-of-view regardless of the perspective chosen” (Writer’s Craft). Perspective is very important in literature. It can very easily define how a book is supposed to be read through the eyes of the reader, therefore aiding or hindering its perception. According to The Writer’s Craft, an online website, there are at least four different perspectives in the form of viewpoints. There is single major character viewpoint, minor character viewpoint, omniscient viewpoint, and multiple viewpoints. Single major character viewpoint is the most commonly used perspective in most literature. “The story can be told from first, second or third person POV but it is told throughout by just one character” (Writer’s Craft). Again, this is most commonly used because it is seen as a much simpler route to follow when writing a story. Egan does not use this perspective very often. Very few of her chapters are in this perspective due to the fact that each chapter usually jumps to a different setting or time frame. Minor character viewpoint is very much like single character viewpoint but a minor character from the story is doing the telling. “This technique is used in *The Great Gatsby*. Nick is merely an observer of the story, while Gatsby is the protagonist” (Writer’s Craft). Some critics would say that Egan uses this perspective multiple times but it is hard to determine this because of she as well as the reader is unable to pin down a main character in her story. Omniscient viewpoint is when “the story is not told by any one of the characters, but

is rather commented on by a god-like, omnipotent being who can choose to dip into the head of any of the characters and reveal things that have occurred in the past of which will happen in the future” (Writer’s Craft). This perspective is becoming more popular in modern literature but is not used as much as one would think. Egan’s novel could be seen as being told to the reader by an unknown narrator, much like the god-like figure above. However, in the end, Egan has taken on the multiple viewpoints perspective to base her novel on therefore taking in all of the viewpoints above and putting them in her book. With the multiple viewpoints perspective, “the story is told by only one character at a time, but the viewpoint character switches between two or more characters throughout the course of the novel” (Writer’s Craft). In Egan’s case, each chapter is narrated by a different character and she tries to never use the same character twice. Each character has been made up in Egan’s head. In an interview with Paul Gallagher, Egan’s said, “I don’t use people I know at all,” along with, “I feel tired of exposition and back-story; the more you can suggest without spelling it out, the more you can encompass in the same space” (Gallagher).

Egan’s ever changing perspective helps influence her themes throughout the novel especially her ever-present theme of time that is present from the first chapter to the last. Time is the most important theme in Egan’s whole novel. Time is what affects the characters in their older age when they reminisce about their youth and at the same time affects how they look into their future from their youth. Time is what causes these characters to have limited happiness throughout the novel. They are never truly happy because it is apparent through each perspective of every character in every chapter that time has slipped away from them. Since Egan uses the multiple viewpoints perspective, she is not stuck writing about the same character going through the novel with their feelings about time dragging on and never changing. While using the

multiple viewpoints she is able to project the same feelings onto multiple characters and therefore enhancing her theme of time throughout the novel to make it more important. Without realizing it, Egan also projects this theme onto her readers. Readers are affected by time as well when they flip the page to the next chapter and find themselves shot into the future or thrown into the past along with the characters. Egan does not write background stories and her readers are left with gaps that she has them fill in themselves. Instead of handing her readers the stories they are dying to read about she makes them think for themselves and come up with it on their own. For example, in the chapter “You (Plural)” the readers find out that Scotty Hausmann has not been seen in over twenty years. In another chapter, X’s and O’s, the reader finds out that he has married and divorced Alice, his girlfriend from the end of chapter three. Egan has left a large gap of time where her reader must fill in the blanks themselves. When Egan chooses to not write a back-story to every character the reader loses a major period of time that they must create themselves. This, along with other factors, may lead some critics to question whether or not Egan’s novel is even a novel at all.

To some critics Egan’s novel is seen as a collection of short stories with the same underlying theme rather than a novel. “In fact, one of the big decisive elements of the book is what the order of the chapters is,” says Egan in an interview with Paul Gallagher, “and I actually had that really wrong in the planning stage. I thought it would just go backwards, but when I read through a fairly finished draft in that order, it was very flat” (Gallagher). This is caused by the structure of her chapters throughout the whole book. While most of her chapters are like chapters in any other books, quite a few of her other, chapters throughout the book are very different from the other normal chapters due to their different narrative styling. Narrative styling is how the

chapter is written and not what it is written about. In other words, since Egan's structure of some chapters was different, this sets her book apart as being different. For example, there are thirteen chapters in this novel and of those thirteen chapters; nine are "normal" chapters that one could find in any other book. Unsurprisingly, the four chapters that are different from the others are irregular due to their different narrative styles. Two of the four chapters are set up in a multi-chapter structure inside the single chapter, meaning the one chapter is split into four sections but is still read as one single chapter. In one case, the chapter is called "Safari." It takes place in four different sections of time throughout a trip in Africa but is told by one character because Egan does not change perspective in the middle of a chapter only at the beginning of chapters. Another chapter is written in the form of a news article written by one of the characters from the previous chapters. The last irregular chapter is written and printed in the book as a PowerPoint presentation. Egan even has a link on her website to the presentation in color, with sound bites, and animations. Each of these different narrative styles is important in Egan's novel because it disrupts the readers flow in the story but for the right reasons. Each character achieves something in these multi-chapter sections whether it is good or bad. An example of this would be in the PowerPoint chapter. In an interview that was stated earlier with Katherine Manderfield, Egan states, "It's actually very hard to write something in PowerPoint and it's not something that I'm rushing to do again" (Manderfield). Later on she said, "I could barely manage it for 76 slides and I was so happy to return to conventional narrative when that was over" (Manderfield). The twelve-year-old girl who is writing this PowerPoint is using it as a diary of sorts. Through this diary, we are able to see her mother, Sasha's, success over time along with finding out about her relationships with her family. Success is determined in different ways and Egan defines success

in this chapter as Sasha being able to put her life together enough to settle down with someone and even have children.

Each of these different narrative styles in these chapters has something to do with Egan's theme of success. Only a few characters in Egan's novel have achieved success in their careers, social life, or family life. Sadly, in the end, each character has also lost their success on some level. For example, when the reader first meets Bennie, they have found out that he has recently sold his music producing company but he continues working for it. He is also divorced from Stephanie. The reader finds out that Bennie is having trouble admitting to himself that he is unhappy with where his life is going/. In another chapter, the reader meets Dolly, formally known as La Doll, very popular PR agent. At least she was until she had a party display collapse overhead her guest thus spraying each person with burning hot oil. Dolly is then sent to prison for six months and the lawsuit destroys her financially. Both of these characters at one point had achieved great success only to be met with complete and utter failure down the road. The theme of success and what burden it can bring is expressed through these instances along with others throughout the novel.

Egan takes the idea of multiple viewpoints and brings it to a new level. Not only does she change the character, point of view, perspective, and sometimes style of the chapter, she also changes the setting in every chapter. Of course, she reuses some settings but never are there two chapters back to back with the same general setting nor are they usually in the same time period. For instance, chapter five takes place much closer to the present when Lou is dying and chapter six takes place in the past when Scotty visits Bennie at his job as a music producer, when he still

owns his own company. Even though chronologically chapter five of course comes before six the content of the chapters, do not follow this rule. Chapters five, four, and three are examples a few other instances where there is a dramatic change in setting. In chapter five, Lou, the man who began to date Jocelyn in chapter three, is dying years, if not decades down the road from the last chapter that was written about him. The last chapter that Lou was a part of was the chapter previous. Lou was on a long vacation with his children and his current girlfriend in Africa on a safari. Again, these two chapters are one of the biggest time jumps in the whole novel. When the reader first meets Lou, he is already in his late thirties to early forties picking up a younger girl, Jocelyn, on the side of the road. This is during chapter three. He introduces Jocelyn and her friend Rhea, the narrator at the time, to a world that they after Lou they never really see again. It is a world where most everything is handed to them on a silver platter. Then when the setting abruptly shifts to the Africa trip, it is one of the earliest, if not the earliest event that happens in this book. When a time shift happens once more suddenly, the reader is shot forward through the ages in chapter five to when Lou is much older and dying. This idea of changing settings also runs parallel to Egan's theme of time once more, even more so than the previous encounter stated earlier. Time changes abruptly through each chapter with each shift. When the settings of the chapters change and shift, it is easier for the reader to understand, how simple it is to lose track of time.

This is just another prime example of how Egan uses shifts to emphasize her themes. Without these dramatic time shifts the reader would not be able to fully understand what Egan is trying to convey. The three chapters that involved Lou happen back to back to back. Yet each chapter is able to stand-alone and that is what Egan wanted. In an interview with Katherine

Manderfield, she stated, “I was enjoying that every piece felt very different from the others, and yet they were connected. So I thought, I really have to stick to it. And it did become harder and harder to do that. I wanted to revisit certain characters- I did try to break that rule- but it was flat, and it didn’t work” (Manderfield). If this novel had been written differently and focused on a main character, setting, or period of time, the theme of time, along with any of the other themes, may have been lost on the reader. There is a monumental difference in trying to determine Lou’s character from three chapters, none of which were written through his point of view, than trying to determine it through a whole book. If this novel had focused on Lou and his life, his chapter where he was dying could have been used as an epilogue. However, this would have definitely hurt Egan’s story in the end and her book would have been something completely different from what she had created. The theme of time is too important to ignore in this story since it has such a big impact on every single character.

In the end, it can be said that Egan messed with her form for all the right reasons. She strayed from what is already out on bookshelves everywhere and found something new. “Time’s a goon, right?” Moreover, where does the time go in life? In the end, there is never enough time. Each character in Jennifer Egan’s novel comes to realize this over time. Whether the reader is able to determine this through any of the underlying themes that Egan has incorporated into her novel or through the way that she went against the grain in terms of the way, she structured her book a few things are for sure. Her characters are affected by time. They are missing the days of their youth, wishing they still had the innocence they once possessed, or reveling in the success they have now finally achieved in life. Each chapter of Egan’s novel proves that with every shift in themes and structure there is a major loss of time that we can never get back.

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