

## **Facing the Goon:**

### **Understanding the Role of Time in *A Visit from the Goon Squad***

by Elizabeth Buzard

Time: throughout history, it has been understood and portrayed in very different ways. Dictionary.com has 41 separate definitions for the word. Different societies throughout history have measured time with different calendars, and in Biblical days, "Time [was] a line to the Jews, a circle to the Greeks" (Momigliano 5). Science fiction television shows have tried to explain it in ways that make time travel seem both possible and logical; *Quantum Leap* demonstrates chronological time as a crumpled string while according to *Doctor Who*, "it's more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey stuff" ("Blink"). Einstein taught the world that time is relative. In many cultures and works of literature, time has been personified in forms as various as the people that have personified it. But as confusing and indefinable as time is, it is inescapable. This is one of Jennifer Egan's main themes in her novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Egan approaches time in an interesting and unique way in her book, telling the tale as a sequence of anachronic stories. But even though time isn't present in the normal, chronological sense, it often appears throughout the stories in the personification of a goon. Each of the characters have fallen victim to this goon's beating, and each must come to terms with it in their own way, overcoming their fears and regrets to fully live their lives. By connecting and relating to these characters and their situations, readers face the goon themselves and learn how to stand through his attacks, braving the relentless passage of time.

In an interview, Egan once said, "I don't experience time as linear. I experience it in layers that seem to coexist" (Julavits). Her choice of telling her stories in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* anachronically is not surprising, but it is still an interesting one to say the least. It seems to

work on multiple levels and adds an extra depth to the work as a whole. The structure of the book reflects the content; just as the characters have experienced a seemingly sudden battering at the hands of time, readers are dragged along from one story to another without any set-up or transition, and it takes a moment for one to orient oneself to the new setting and characters. In this way, the structure of the book shapes the reader's experience of it. The novel jumps around between the present day, the 1970s, the near future, and everywhere in between, but the sudden changes in time aren't just random; Egan chooses when and how to move the characters through time very deliberately. Rather than telling each story in order of when they happen, she tells them by character; a minor character from one story will be the main character of the next. For example, in the first chapter entitled "Found Objects," Sasha is the main character. In this story she briefly mentions her old boss, Bennie, making the transition to the second chapter—in which Bennie is the main character—feel smooth and easy, even though it doesn't follow chronologically. By telling the stories this way, *what* happens becomes less important than *to whom* it happens; characters are emphasized over plot. By focusing on these characters and how they deal with time's relentless passing rather than dwelling on the specifics of what exactly the characters face in the long run, Egan brings out the theme that everyone, no matter their circumstances, must come to terms with time.

However, these seemingly random jumps in time do more than just bring out character relationships; they also emphasize the effect the passage of time has on each of the characters. Many of the novel's characters change drastically over time. For example, over the course of the novel, we see Sasha go from being a playful teenager to a kleptomaniac as an adult to a mother raising two children. However, readers don't experience her life in this order. They see her first as an adult before going back to see her as a teenager and what events made her into the woman

she is at the start of the book. Then at the end of the novel, the readers see how she has turned her life around as a mother. If the story were told chronologically, these character changes would reveal themselves more subtly over time, making them less obvious. However, when readers are shown a character at one point in his life and then immediately shown the same character years later or before, the juxtaposition makes changes in personality and circumstance seem much more drastic. In this sense, time is felt as a powerful presence in the lives of the characters, changing not only the characters' circumstances but also the very characters themselves. It is almost as if time is there physically as another character, making these changes to their lives. Egan plays up this idea when she directly personifies time as a goon.

Although the personification of time may seem like a minor detail in Egan's novel, only appearing overtly twice, it is extremely important to the understanding of the work as a whole. After all, the title *A Visit from the Goon Squad* focuses on that personification. However, Egan is not the first to personify time; she falls into a long tradition of trying to make sense of difficult ideas through personification, and her choice of making time a goon can be better understood when it is seen in context of where it falls in history. Literary writers perhaps first picked up the idea of personification from the Greeks and Romans who worshipped gods and goddesses that were essentially personifications of aspects of life. In his article "Two Types of Ovidian Personification," Arum Park describes personification as "one of the tricks" Ovid uses in his love poetry, drawing from "Hesiod and Plato for representative views of ancient *eros* that the poet-lover incorporated in his own depictions of *amor*" (225). In medieval England, personification allegories such as *Piers Plowman* were extremely powerful, and more modern allegories such as *The Wizard of Oz* are still very much a part of our culture today. Clearly, personification is important to us as humans; it helps us to understand difficult or abstract concepts, and it makes

these ideas feel more real and personal in our lives. Personifying time is no exception. Time is a concept that we all think about on a daily basis, measuring it out in minutes and hours, but when asked to describe exactly what time itself is, it is difficult to come up with an answer. By personifying time, giving it human characteristics, and treating it like a physical being rather than an abstract concept, it is easier to explain our everyday interactions with time. When we see ourselves changing and growing bitter or nostalgic as we get older, it is easier to turn time into a goon and blame him for beating us down than it is to really face ourselves as the heart of our problems.

Jennifer Egan chooses to personify time as a goon. Instantly, the imagery that goes along with the word clicks with how we have already seen this personified time beat up many of the characters. Bosco has gone from a rock star to a sickly, dying man, Scotty has gone from being the popular teenager to the mentally unstable adult, and Jocelyn has changed from a hopeful young girl into what she sees as a pathetic middle-aged woman, just to name a few. Time has not been kind to any of these characters. Although we could see this without the personification, portraying it thusly makes the presence of time seem that much more prominent. Time itself becomes another character, actively present in the story's world throughout the entire novel. And Time isn't a desirable character; Time is a goon. This is an interesting choice made by Egan. Time-personified possesses typically masculine characteristics; Time is violent and rough and strong. In this way, Time is the great equalizer. Although the characters start off in different places, they all—regardless of gender or sexuality or even class—end up facing similar regrets and lost opportunities. Most, if not all, of them feel like they have failed in some way, and they are wasting away as their dreams fizzle out. Scotty goes to visit his old friend Bennie at his office where he works, seeing that unlike himself, Bennie seems to have "made it;" Bennie has

the good job, but his marriage has failed and he is nostalgic for the old days and older music; and Bosco, the one-time guitarist for the Conduits, is slowly wasting away. The only characters that don't waste away because of Time are the ones that die young before Time is able to wear them down. Rob and Rolph both die very young, living on forever in their youth in the memories of their family and friends. In this world Egan has created, the only way to avoid being crushed by time is to die young.

However, the story doesn't end there. The novel is much more hopeful than that. Although the characters are roughed-up by time and weighed down by regrets, they are not entirely beaten. They find ways to fight back and deal with time's unceasing passage. Sasha is perhaps the best example of this. At the beginning of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the audience sees her as a kleptomaniac, taking things simply for the sake of taking them, trying to create meaning and excitement in her life by doing so. She has an entire table in her apartment dedicated to the "found objects." Clearly this is not a healthy habit for her. But at the end of the novel, readers see how she has turned this bad habit into something constructive. Through the eyes of her daughter, the audience sees that Sasha is now turning "found objects" from their everyday lives into art. She is making something beautiful and constructive out of something that was originally very destructive. She has found a way to beat the goon at his own game; she has learned how to deal with the passing of time, and she has become a better person because of this. Scotty similarly seems to find a way to deal with the goon through music. When the audience sees him bring a fish to Bennie's office, they know he cannot be completely stable. His life at that point seems incredibly sad. However, in the last chapter of the novel, Scotty gives a concert that is unforgettable and more real than anything anyone has heard in a long time. He also has used his bad experiences and the hands of time to create something meaningful in a world that

seems to have lost all meaning. And if the characters can learn to deal with time's passing, so can the readers of the novel. At the very end of the book, Bennie and Alex see a young woman that reminds them both of Sasha years before. In this way, Egan reveals that life is a cycle; new, young faces fill the empty spaces left by their older, time-worn counterparts. The young woman could be anyone, and therefore, she could be the reader. This novel isn't specific to the characters within it. While their lives might be a bit exaggerated for anyone reading the characters' stories, they are real enough and relatable enough, that anyone reading the book can look at them and think, "That could be me." In this way, readers learn how to cope with life and time through these characters; they experience this battering by time through the characters in the novel so they hopefully don't have to experience it in real life. Living vicariously through these characters, readers see that life isn't over after their teenage years; they see how they can stand up to time and brave the attack of the goon.

All of us face the goon squad, but that doesn't have to mean our lives are over, as Egan reveals in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. By playing with time, Egan manipulates the way we see both the characters and their story as a whole. The seemingly random jumps in time she makes between chapters causes us as readers to only see snippets of characters' lives, making any character changes they experience appear extremely vividly. She shows us characters that have wasted away at the hands of time, and personifies time as a goon. This personification not only makes time feel that much more present in the characters' lives, it helps us as readers to understand and relate to an incredibly complicated topic. Egan demonstrates time's relentless pounding, but she also reminds us that that isn't all life has to offer. She gives us characters that have learned how to deal with time, regret, and nostalgia, encouraging us as readers to do the

same. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* becomes an incredibly unique and surprisingly hopeful story to help us all brave the goon's visit that we all know is coming in our own lives.

Works Cited

"Blink." *Doctor Who: The Complete Third Series*. BBC, 2007. DVD.

Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. United States: Anchor Books, 2010. Print.

Julavits, Heidi. "Jennifer Egan." *Bomb* 112 (2010). Web.

Momigliano, Arnaldo. "Time in Ancient Historiography." *History and Theory* 6.6 (1966): 1-23.  
*JSTOR*. Web. 12 Dec. 2013.

Park, Arum. "Two Types of Ovidian Personification." *The Classical Journal* 104.3 (2009): 225-  
240. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Dec. 2013.