

**Dirtied Hands:
A Look at Time and Change in *A Visit From the Goon Squad***

By Morgan Ewald

People often use the saying their life flashes before their eyes when they come close to death. In our world of rapidly changing technology, time flashes by even faster. Times are changing, and with the passage of time the ideals and tastes of the United States of America are also changing. Ultimately, time plays a vital role in each and every one of our lives. In Jennifer Egan's novel, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, she relays the message that no matter what we do, time marches on. Throughout the novel, Egan's characters focus on their pasts and how the passage of time has changed their lives right in front of their noses. For some of the characters, they haven't even realized time has passed until suddenly reality hits them. Many of the characters in Egan's novel are musicians or somehow involved in the music industry. She uses this industry and other elements of popular culture as an example of time's passing because these industries are constantly changing. However, just as things change for the characters over time, America is changing as well. The 9/11 tragedy and modern technological advances are the main ways this is shown throughout the book. Just as the characters mourn their lost youth and innocence, so does America. Jennifer Egan shows the themes of the passage of time and the trends of change through popular culture and the music industry, new technology, and the September 11th tragedy in her novel, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*.

For many of the characters in Egan's novel, the life of a musician is a strong force to be reckoned with in dealing with one's past and lifetime. The music world is constantly changing, which gives Egan a good reason to use this as the outlet for her novel about time marching on. Time stops for nobody – not even the greatest musician. Often, it seems that time may go by even faster for those in the music business. Many musicians will be at the top of the charts one week, and find themselves a number of songs down a few weeks later (if they're lucky). In an article written after an interview with the Rolling Stones, Brian D. Johnson spoke with Mick Jagger about musicians and some of the things that happen to those in the business as they age, such as going out of style, trying to act younger than they are, or feeling they haven't accomplished much of anything besides writing songs. Jagger says to Johnson in the interview, "It tends to drop off if you're older and a drug addict and don't work hard" (Johnson n.pag.). This shows that these things do actually happen to real musicians, and that Egan was on the right track in this area.

An essay entitled, "Growing Up Punk: Negotiating Aging Identity in a Local Music Scene" by Joanna R. Davis, a professor at the University of California, explains a little bit about the Punk Rock scene, which is the music scene the characters in Egan's novel are most related to. The essay discusses the situations that can result when those who are a part of the scene, or follow it closely, don't know when to grow up. The essay gives an example of a man whose friends still hang out at the local bar while he is living his life and is married. The essay reads, "As examples of stagnant punks, these friends represent unsuccessful aging through their lack of change – there is nothing new or vital in their lives. This stagnation can also take the form of inappropriate displays of youth, that is, trying to act younger than one is" (Davis 66). It seems like this happens often with those involved

with the music industry. They were so busy during a huge chunk of their youth that it's passed them by and they missed the boat. I would wager to guess that much of the reason they tend to act younger than they are is because they never had a chance to live that part of their life because the high point of their career was during their youth.

Egan also brings in other elements of popular culture with the character of Kitty Jackson. Kitty, a young starlet, is the fresh face in Egan's novel. She's a young actress and pretty much the best thing since sliced bread. However, later in chapter eight, which is entitled "Selling the General," Kitty is described as falling from the top. The chapter reads, "Kitty's ensuing bad behavior and fall from grace were relentlessly cataloged in the tabloids . . . No one would hire Kitty anymore, but the public would remember her . . . And she was still only twenty-eight" (Egan 144). While Kitty was once the hottest thing around, now she's just old news. She made a couple mistakes, and since she was always in the public eye, people knew about them. Popular culture and the music industry work this way, and it can be detrimental to the people involved in it. Their lives go by so quickly sometimes they don't even notice at first – suddenly reality hits, and they're forty. Take the character, Jocelyn for example. Jocelyn says, "Everything went past, without me" (Egan 86). Jocelyn had such busy, troubled times when she was young that she "got lost" (Egan 88) along the way. Now she's 43, and doesn't really have a whole lot going for her anymore.

Just as the characters' lives change in Egan's novel, technology in the 21st century changes rapidly. As soon as the population gets accustomed to the most recent technological gadgets, there is always something new for sale. In chapter "X's and O's" in the novel, one of the characters explains his fear of technology. Scotty says, "real computers scared me; if you can find Them, then They can find you" (Egan 97). This also ties in to the

idea of safety. Is anywhere really safe anymore now that technology has advanced so far? A person can log in to Google Earth and see almost anywhere. Other forms of technology such as social media, cellphones, and the Internet as a whole are drastically changing the way humans live their lives. As Jennifer Egan said during an interview with Tom Ashbrook at On Point radio, "Technology allows us to process our present lives into memory practically as they're happening" (Egan n. pag.). Egan was speaking about the use of social media and the fact that millions of people document their every move on sites like Facebook and Twitter.

Technology has always been changing, but more recently it has been changing more rapidly than ever before. Egan's novel takes place during the beginning of the rise of technology. She shows the fact that people are beginning to fear the changes that are taking place. Later in the novel, in the final chapter entitled "Pure Language," there is this overwhelming fear from some of the characters of a technological item called a handset, which resembles a cellphone or tablet. Babies and young children are supposed to easily grasp the technology – which is not surprising seeing how often children use technology now – but the characters in this chapter, specifically Alex and his wife, Rebecca, seem worried about their daughter learning about the product. They keep it from her almost to the point where it seems a little excessive. At one point in the chapter Egan writes, "She was pointing at Alex's handset, which he'd been using, unthinkingly, mere inches from her face" (Egan 321). This refers to his daughter, Cara-Ann asking about his handset. Just a few moments after this occurs, Lulu, another character, tells the father that she'll just message the child so she'll understand.

Considering the correlation between these handset devices and our cellphones, the connection becomes apparent. People worry that cellphones are diminishing our ability to

have real relationships with people because so many of our interactions are built through texting and social media. It's interesting how the novel portrays that, and also how it portrays the generational gap, which we all know exists. For example, younger generations are growing up in the in-between stage of the change to the age of technology. Younger siblings are growing up with even more technology. Our world is changing and becoming more technologically powerful, and it is frightening people because they are becoming so dependent on it. Older members of society are also frightened because the younger generations are beginning to take control because of the immense dependency the population now has on technology. Egan shows us that this is a concern by including technology scares within her characters Alex and Rebecca. They've decided not to let Cara-Ann around the device until she's five years old.

This brings up an interesting point as well. People are getting ahold of electronic devices at younger and younger ages. For example, when cellphones were beginning to be more popular and parents were giving them to their children, I was allowed to have one when I joined the cheerleading squad in middle school. However, just a few years later, my sister received one while she was still in grade school. Technology is becoming more and more prevalent as they years go by. Young children are now using tablets for learning and playing games. An example of the fear that is sometimes caused by the younger generation's use of technology is discussed in an article by C.J. Pascoe, an assistant professor in the department of sociology at Colorado College, entitled "Studying Young People's New Media Use: Methodological Shifts and Educational Innovation." It says, "Parents, educators and those who work with youth are struggling to catch up with young peoples' orientations, practices, and ideas about digital technology. These adult

constituencies are simultaneously fearful of the effects new media have on youth and are eager to harness the power of digital technology for the learning process” (Pascoe 1). They act as though something is lurking within new technologies – something that might hinder the learning process. Though it seems like it is simply that the adults fear what they do not understand. Much of the new technology is unknown to them, and so they fear it.

However, in our society nowadays, it isn't just older people who are beginning to fear technology and the things it can do, but also the things it prevents. Some members of the younger generation are becoming fearful as well as they see the progression within those who are even younger. They are now seeing the problems and potential issues that were unseen in their youth. For example, social media allows us to connect with people we know more easily. We can message them on a social networking site, and be in touch almost instantly even if they live far away. However, many people are taking this use of social media and turning it into their only means of communication. People are beginning to stop having personal interactions with others, and are beginning to only converse through social media. For many people, this is one of the biggest threats of technology – that it will ruin human relationships. In an article entitled “Tangoing Through These Techno Times,” author Mia Katz discusses her views on the matter. Katz quotes Tom Hodgkinson, from *The Guardian* in saying, “Doesn't it rather disconnect us” (Katz n. pag.) when talking about the social media usage in our technology-centered world. Katz also introduces an older topic, the Luddites, made famous because of “Ned Ludd, an English worker who destroyed weaving machinery” (Katz n. pag.). These Luddites are those who reject the use of technology. However, a different type of new Luddites is becoming prevalent. Katz explains, “New Luddites are young, urban and employed individuals who

have simply opted to stop using the Internet – typically as a way of gaining control” (Katz n. pag.). They seem to think that by rejecting technology they will be free from the hold technology has on many other people. However, what they do not realize is that no matter how much they try to avoid it, technology is still going to keep changing society. It didn't stop when the original Luddites tried to remove it, and technology will prevail as long as there is someone willing to work to improve it. Like time, technology is relentless.

One of the most prevalent new technology increases has been the use of surveillance technology. Security cameras can be found almost anywhere now, from airports to shopping centers. We are constantly surrounded by danger, much more so than before. A good chunk of this danger comes from technology itself. Technology allows people who intend to do ill will to someone the means to do it anonymously, or to plan it secretly until it is time for the attack. One example of this is the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in the United States.

Since the September 11th terrorist attacks, America has been changing drastically. The sense of security in the country has diminished greatly, causing distress among the citizens. In Egan's novel, during the chapter “A to B,” the character Jules reveals the correlation Egan created between time changing a person's life, and America changing after September 11th. Jules has since been in prison at this point in the novel, and has had some pretty negative things happen in his life. After sexually assaulting Kitty Jackson, the young movie star, in a public place, Jules was sentenced to five years in prison. The attacks hadn't happened yet when Jules went to prison, however when he gets out he finds that everything has changed. In “A to B” Jules remarks, “I'm like America . . . Our hands are dirty” (Egan 124). This character is referring to the fact that now that a serious attack has

happened in the lifetime of the younger generations, things are changing. The United States doesn't feel as safe to people as it once was. The younger generations probably thought something like that would never happen here. Americans have been stereotyped to think they are better than other places in the world, and this attack reinforces that stereotype. Even though the United States was given sufficient warning for the attacks, nobody was worried about it because they didn't believe it could happen here. After 9/11, America realized that as a nation it had lost its youth – its innocence. The bubble was broken, and the problems that have been happening in the rest of the world for centuries were suddenly happening and real on American soil. Americans thought they were protected from the problems of the rest of the world, and when the attacks occurred, Americans were worrying like crazy. People were living in constant fear of what had just happened and whether or not it was going to happen again.

Having lived through the September 11th attacks, I remember things changing as a child. I was in second grade when the attacks occurred. My grandfather used to visit Mexico regularly in order to establish a company, and my family and I would go to the airport to see him off whenever he would have to leave again. In the midst of the company getting started, 9/11 occurred. I remember going to the airport once and seeing a barrier up so that we couldn't go with my grandpa as far as we used to in order to say goodbye. I didn't realize what was happening at the time, but it's interesting to think about now that I'm older. However, it was a bit scary as a little kid seeing metal barriers up, sort of like a cage, so that we couldn't follow him out. As a child I didn't understand, and thought something scary must have been happening because we'd never been blocked before.

In an article entitled “Future Oriented Thinking and Adjustment in a Nationwide Longitudinal Study Following the September 11th Terrorist Attacks” E. Alison Holman, a professor at the University of California, and Roxana Cohen Silver explain the toll that the attacks have taken on America:

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 provided an ideal opportunity to examine the role of future orientation on adjustment over time. The attacks of 9/11 ushered in a period of increased anxiety about subsequent terrorism, two wars in the Middle East, and great socioeconomic change in America, thereby making the potential of a negative future event (i.e. terrorism) concrete and salient for many people. (Holman and Silver 391).

Time is able to change lives just the same way it changed the United States. If a big enough event happens in a person’s life, they will be changed drastically somehow. It is interesting to note how people cope with change, however. When people experience change in their lives, they begin to think about the future. This is especially relevant to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. After those attacks happened, many people were very worried about the future. According to Holman and Silver, “Some people focus on planning their future to the neglect of their present and past. Others draw from their past to build into the future, and others get stuck in reliving the past or believing that their past will ultimately be their future as well” (Holman and Silver 404-5).

This ties back in with technology in the sense that with the use of technology Americans isolate themselves from the rest of the world. Since many had been raised believing that the problems would not touch American soil, people were shocked when the 9/11 attacks occurred. However, just as technology allows us to isolate ourselves by

wrapping ourselves up in all the new electronics, it puts the direct line of information right at our fingertips. If a person opens their computer browser and has a home page such as Yahoo or NBC, the world news will be right there in front of them to see.

Modern culture is changing too rapidly for its own good. People are unable to adapt to the change as quickly as it comes and goes. For us, “our sense of time is purely subjective” (Egan n. pag.) as Jennifer Egan said in an interview. That being said, time passing for us too quickly causes fear and upheaval throughout the United States of America and the rest of the world. People are frightened of the effects technology may have on us, and incidents like the terrorist attacks from September 11th suddenly created a whole new world for Americans to live in – complete with barricades and higher security. Popular culture and the music industry oust people almost immediately after they are “in” with one mistake. These people are pop culture icons, and even though they sometimes spend their lives a bit more lavishly than the average person, many people still look to celebrities as models for their lives. If one messes up, there’s always someone new coming. Egan puts these ideas into perspective through the minds of her characters in *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. She uses these characters in order to give her readers an idea of what could be going on inside their heads given the circumstances in their lives in the world we currently live in. Ultimately, the book is about time and change, and “time’s a goon right?” (Egan 127). Well, times are changing, whether we like it or not. If we refuse to take the leap and see what’s out there, it will soon pass us by. Although technology helps us avoid the problems we are dealing with, often those issues are still lurking in the background. It is impossible to hide from time – from the goon – us as individuals, or us as a nation; we’re all subject to change. (3286)

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