

Decision: To Seek For a Temporary Comfort or Life-long Contentment

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A Visit From the Goon Squad, written by Jennifer Egan, is a novel composed of thirteen pieces of short stories and portraying how people deal with frustration and dilemma throughout their lives and how they look upon those difficulties. There are no fixed main characters and narrators in each story. Roles change within chapters and their lives intermingles with each other throughout the whole book. The way Egan writes the book is actually portraying one's life in reality in which every person may play either a big or small role in other's life depending on how much influence and contribution his life has created for him. Characters, as I mentioned previously, are complex, intriguing and so true to life. Therefore, the investigation about all the character's behavior will be demonstrated below.

Through my observation toward each character in the book, they could be divided into two groups: people who are once defeated by the goon squad, referring to time filled with dilemma and complication, but later overcome and prevail, such as Sasha and La Doll; and the other who are completely defeated by the time and submit to the rolling tide of life. Rob, Bosco and Lou and Mindy belong to the latter group of

people. Their failure of resistance, comparing to the successful group, is worth to investigate further, on account of the theory according Raymond Webster to Ludwig von Mises, “individuals engage in conscious actions toward chosen goals”.

That is to say, human action is no more than pursuing the goal of better life or condition. They will not stop chasing the ideal life until the success is right in the hand. Therefore, based on the previous statement, a flourishing prospect is bound to be reachable to all mankind. The failing characters, however, are demonstrated and compared to vary from the principle and prevailing characters in which a research of these exceptions are presented on the following paragraphs.

Some characters in the book have gone through the struggle of their lives. They confront their miseries by means of different ego-used defense mechanisms when they are challenged. The temporary comfort may work for a while; however, it is their perpetual defenses that bring about the unhealthy and weak mental defenses, leading to an unpromising and wretched future that they would never expected afterwards.

In order to confer about those failing character, the definition of one’s success or defeat to his pursuit of happiness is necessary to be clarified in advance. People who

belong to the group of “winner” are regarded to be successfully attaining their life-long goals, and satisfied the ultimate outcome after the long-standing effort. The eternal happiness is emphasized here whereas the short-lived contentment is too small and delicate to bring stable comfort within one’s entire life. For example, Lou, as one of the failing characters, he tries to control every situation by seizing advantageous chances so that he could have the upper hand within relationship among his children, wives and lovers. However, what he has done is to gratify his vanity, i.e. to gain small and temporary victories, though none of them can sustain him the rest of his life. Lou’s later years, as a consequence, is miserable and solitary lying in the hospital bed, as we see in *A Visit From The Goon Squad*.

Perhaps people deem that he is intoxicated with his small success following by conquest. Yet there is no doubt that Lou has been avoiding the truth of failing in handling the relationship involved in his life. In fact, he is protecting himself from the negative feeling by unconsciously applying the defensive mechanism, referring to a way of thinking and behaving pattern to accustom the tough circumstances or intractable situation according to *Encyclopedia of School Psychology*. “The ultimate goal of human action is always the satisfaction of the acting man’s desire”. (Webster

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In other words, the purpose of human action is nothing else but following what he desires. To remove the painful and distressing feeling, defense mechanism is frequently used whenever difficult situation is needed to deal with. The psychological strategies that Lou uses to cope with, based on the Freud's theory, are denial, reaction formation, replacement and repression. They fully explain the incentive to his playfulness toward life and relationship in which the pessimistic and gloomy consequence is predictable in terms of the following utterance:

Defensive processes are the psychical correlative of the flight reflex and perform the task of preventing the generation of unpleasures from internal source. In fulfilling this task they serve mental events as automatic regulation, which in the end, incidentally, turns out to be detrimental..." (Freud)

In other words, Freud also brings up the possibility of unhealthy and consistent use of coping mechanism. The possible psychological reaction-tendencies may happen on those characters when they constantly rely on defense mechanism in order

to eliminate the negative feeling or internal unease rather accepting the challenge. Most commonly used mechanisms are denial, repression, and regression in which people is reluctant to confront the frustration and endeavor to escape the negative feelings and affect from that very moment. Most characters in *A Visit From the Goon Squad* are presented undergoing the ego-defense process. As I mentioned previously, Lou is the very character who would deny his defeat at any cost in terms of relationship. His strong condemn on Mindy when his son Rolph reveals her abnormal intimate interaction with Albert, who persuades Mindy to abandon her present and start a new life with him. Initially, both Lou and Mindy react aggressively regarding the truth because he is losing the domination on that girl whom he is seeing with, and to Mindy, because she is afraid of making the wrong choice for her life. Yet later on the anxiety has stirred them to acting normally as usual, to deny the truth, and deliberately forgetting what has happened without blaming each other as normal couple does, to repress. Although it is fairly common that every couple quarrel with each other, Lou's successive failures on two marriages unquestionably signify his consistent counting on psychological defense mechanisms; in other words, he did not and will not confront the problems, and cope with them properly in his third marriage

with Mindy. What Lou does not submit to the fear, till almost the end of his life when Jocelyn and Rhea visit him in the hospital: his fear of being abandoned and isolated without anyone's concern. He eventually shows his strong need of companies: "he clutches our hands as if they might flee but they don't." though it is too late to regret.

Comparing with Lou's rejection and ignorance toward suppression, Mindy has the similar experience in dealing with her anxiety, the fear of accepting her procrastination on school research and choice on the wrong person (Lou) that she in fact loves someone (Albert) more. In "Safari", Mindy did not say the truth when Cora asks her the reason for bringing the textbook to the trip and leaving them unopened and untouched. "She assumes she must be learning in other ways that will prove equally fruitful." (Egan 64) However, both readers and Mindy herself knows clearly that she did not flip through her books through the whole trip; instead, she spends all the time with Lou doing nothing contributing to her schoolwork. She furthermore denies Albert's attraction for her even though she feels "a jolt of attraction roughly akin to having someone seize her intestines and twists. She understands now it's mutual." (Egan 68) Mindy's refusing actions of denial, repression and regression regarding to Albert's love-purpose and Cora's suspicion are because she has no

choice but to submit herself to the truth that her wrong decision and choice caused by her pretentiousness has ruined her life when years later she looks back: “she will recognize ‘Albert’ as nothing more than a focus of regret for her own immaturity and disastrous decision” (Egan 82) In fact, Mindy is aware of her inner contradiction about the right and the wrong; however, she doesn’t recognize them all till she is old and sophisticated.

Apart from the frequently usage on denial, repression and regression, there are some characters overestimate their abilities to convince themselves the impossibility does not ever insist in their lives yet sooner or later, the breakdown has brought them to cover up themselves by defense mechanisms fantasy and compensation in order to unease the frustration or depression. Lou is no doubt the person who repeatedly uses his dominated characteristic to compensate for his lack of sense of security. He could not bear Mindy to have special feeling towards man except him. Eventually, his strong jealous, upset, and possessive emotion reveals. “He spent past hours in bed with Mindy senselessly” (Egan 79) after realizing his relationship with Mindy is nothing more than sex whereas her affection towards Albert is more than that. Lou’s overpower on woman after he broke up with Mindy does not stop at all. He also treats

Jocelyn in a dominating way by restraining her calling: he is the only one who can call first. (Egan 48) Although it seems that Lou does not fancy the real relationship from his past three marriages and incalculable love affairs, readers can notice that his extraordinary overpower is always the main reason for his compensation of the anxiety of being solitary. It is predictable that his life, as a result, overwhelmed by coping mechanisms and ended up realizing his real fear in the late life.

Bennie, though, regarded as a successful character defeating the time-torment, was once afflicted by his ethnicity and love relationship. His frustration in his Latino American origin has driven him to work harder, earn more money and rise through the ranks in order to get rid of the labeling that the society has given to him. Readers can be notified that Bennie does not praise his descent in "Ask Me if I Care". When people talk to him in Spanish, he never answers but smile, pretending what a foreigner reacts if someone speaking an incomprehensible language to him. He not only detach the his origin but also moving away from his home place to Crandale, a place where people from higher class live in and, additionally, the farthest distance from his dark-eyed grandmother in Daly. What he has done is all about avoiding people's criticism and judgment to him. His dissatisfaction on love relationship is

another reason for he to prove himself deserve better. According to *A Visit From The Goon Squad*, the gold remedy can be seen as Bennie's love fantasy that he is becoming more attractive and charming after consuming them. Although he is in fact under the illusion of getting better, he gains great gratification for knowing that he is still curable and treatable. His hard working on practicing the musical instruments, great striving to move as far away as he could from his hometown Daly where he couldn't say "old house" or even "house" anymore (Egan 34), and strange attempt to eat gold with coffee in pursuance of curing his sexuality from a magazine, all in all demonstrate Bennie's application on defense mechanism of compensation for his socially incompetence and his fantasy of better life or treatment from the society. He is, different from other characters, portrayed as a determined figure, like Sasha, who confronts all the unfortunate experience and inequality every now and then throughout the book.

As far as the psychological coping mechanism is concerned, characters can feel a sense of relief from the uncomfortable feeling oppressed by anger, repression, isolation, loneliness, envy and regret. However, excessive and unhealthy way of usage on those magical remedies may become an unconsciously habit to elude every

challenge in life. It is possible that the opportunity of attaining one's life goal and promising future, because of the evading, disappear and vanish once and forever.

Egan, in *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, not only shows the dangerous of overused on mental coping mechanisms but also implies that people is capable to conquer the complexity in time within one's life as long as he is aware of every decision-making: either to seek for a brief comfort or to confront the frustration once and for all.

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