

“Everywhere is Walking Distance, If You Have the Time”

by Owen Kosik

To most, the passage of time is equated to the waning of youth, or the advancement of technology, or the introduction of new generations. The link between the inexorable progress of time and the growth of a person is often taken as a given: when people have seen more years pass, they attain certain knowledge particular to their age. This type of knowledge, however, is often upstaged by today’s more traditional avenues of procuring knowledge, the most obvious being school. The modern definition of education is limited almost entirely to the concept of credit hours and diplomas, with no resource to quantify one’s life experience.

In *Using Critical Theory*, Lois Tyson says that “When a character reminds us of someone we know or knew in the past, we may have responses similar to those elicited when we identify with a character” (18). My interpretation of Scotty was largely influenced by the fact that he reminds me of a close friend of mine. This friend, Jason, has been in my life since the seventh grade, and not for a second has he struck me as an academic. A deep thinker, certainly, with a love of good books and philosophy, but not the kind of person who could sit in a classroom for seven hours a day and be content. In fact, it was entirely possible for a while that he would not graduate high school on time, but that is not because Jason is not a smart person.

Jason is a lot like Scotty, in this regard. Both are musicians, for one, and both have histories with drug abuse. Both work menial jobs and live in small apartments. For all these reasons, both Scotty and Jason have been pigeonholed as druggies or losers. Despite all of this, or perhaps in spite of this, Jason developed a more sophisticated perception of the world around him than any of my other friends or even me. This option of autodidacticism is mentioned by

Melissa Luke in an article for *Chief Learning Officer*, a magazine dedicated to improving corporate productivity. Luke states, “A four-year degree and high grades might prove that a person can focus on a goal and take tests, but test mastery is not necessarily important for developing creativity” (Luke). Essentially, this means that the current college model is not actually fostering the most important facet of a successful member of the workforce—being able to innovate and create new ideas. The fact that the business world has also recognized the potential value of self-learning shows that Jason’s case is not an isolated incident; more and more people are educating themselves and are showing that they are just as valuable as their peers. Luke goes on to suggest that it would be beneficial to the business world to “[delete the phrase] ‘degree required’ from the application and replace it with ‘How did you educate yourself for this position’” (Luke)?

Obviously, the idea of trusting to oneself to learn is a viable tactic. A professor of mine frequently repeats the maxim of “So what?” while teaching. The short meaning of this saying is that we, as students, should attempt to relate our insights into literature or pop culture to the world we live in today, or at least to our lives. Jason beat me to the same idea without a day of college education. In a common Facebook post, Jason laid out the following idea:

In the past two months or so I’ve gotten over almost all my fears that I used to carry... I can do fucking anything. There is no median between my body, mind, and soul. I can stand up next to a mountain and chop it down with the edge of my hand.

I told him that this was one of the better applications of a piece of pop culture to one’s life that I had ever seen (“I stand up next to a mountain/and I chop it down with the edge of my hand” being Jimi Hendrix lyrics). He replied, “Gotta apply all books, movies, songs to your life, it’s a

frame of reference... We must interpret, we must apply!” In one short conversation over a social networking site, Jason revealed that he had, entirely on his own, developed the same ideal which one of my esteemed college professors had to drill into my head from day one. I was astounded, not to mention a bit ashamed by my underestimation of my friend. I, like Bennie, had just assumed that Jason was a guy who knew a lot about music but who could not relate to my college life with its many liberal ideas and progressive foundations.

I was equally affected when I saw Scotty gain the upper hand in an encounter with his much more affluent, successful friend; indeed, I saw a nearly direct parallel. Despite his disadvantage in not having access to the levels of education which I have been steeped in, Jason derived the most important part of experiencing a text entirely on his own. This simple occurrence proved to me that education and position were far from the most important factors in determining either intelligence or perspective. Jason singlehandedly proved that even a barely-high-school-graduate can be just as intelligent as his college-educated friend, if not more so. Given the influence which Jason has had on my life, I would be remiss to not include a brief summation of the experience which spurred my viewpoint on this subject.

With this in mind, it is the purpose of this essay to show, through reader-response and New Critical interpretations, that the passage of time can provide a brand of perspective and knowledge that cannot be attained through ordinary schooling or even landing one’s dream career, and that the potential for finding oneself is also tied to time’s progression.

According to the New Critical theory for interpreting texts, a theme is “what a literary text says about a given topic” (Tyson 41). The topic which *A Visit from the Goon Squad* focuses on most is time; the theme which can be derived from that topic is the effect that time has on

people. This theme becomes more clear as the book jumps around both time and place, the only constant being the characters. This allows the reader to simultaneously see the growth of multiple characters and how they change over time. The thread that ties these characters together is their cathartic experiences, which, while not always directly linked to each other, all come as a result of the things which they experienced throughout their lives rather than from some ultimate pinnacle of their formal education.

The most prominent example of this experience-based realization is found in Scotty's character. Scotty was introduced as a guitarist in a punk rock band. At first a vicious, angry youth, Scotty's true colors do not show themselves until a near-riot breaks out in a punk club; his response:

Scotty tears off his dripping T-shirt and snaps it at one of the garbage throwers, right in the guy's face with a twangy crack... Then one of the garbage throwers tries to storm the stage, but Scotty kicks him in the chest with the flat of his boot—there's a kind of gasp from the crowd as the guy flies back. Scotty's smiling now... and I realize that, out of all of us, Scotty is the truly angry one. (Egan 55)

This anger-fuelled side of Scotty is what makes him a true punk, but it is not what ultimately defines him as a character. After years of hard living, Scotty's catharsis comes when he visits his old bandmate, Bennie Salazar. Bennie is now the president of a record company, a millionaire who has grown accustomed to a much more opulent lifestyle than has Scotty. At this point, Scotty has given up on being a professional musician and is working as a janitor in a school. From this position, Scotty has developed his own view of the world based on his experiences. In and of itself, this seems like a simple premise—everyone develops their own

perspective on their lives in this fashion. However, when one takes a closer look at the difference in perspectives between Scotty and Bennie, a more significant insight can be found.

Scotty has conceived a system, the validity of which he regularly doubts, wherein he states:

...if we human beings are information processing machines, reading X's and O's and translating that information into what people oh so breathlessly call "experience", and if I had access to all that same information...if I had not only the information but the artistry to shape that information using the computer inside my brain... then, technically speaking, was I not having all the same experiences those other people were having?

(Egan 102)

More summarily, it is Scotty's perception that by merely possessing the relevant data which provides a human brain with the sensation of an experience, he could potentially arrange it in his mind so that he would gain the same sensory and emotional response which such a situation provokes. Scotty brings up this system twice. On the first occasion he attempts to experience a gala event without actually being inside. The second occasion is during his meeting with Bennie, where he tries to tell himself that everything which Bennie owns can be expressed in a certain combination of X's and O's, essentially saying that Bennie has nothing which Scotty could not also have. In both cases, Scotty determines that the system is flawed, that merely having an equivalent stimulus is not the same as having a certain thing. Taking the system intrinsically, it appears to be a failed experiment, a premise with no real basis in reality. The larger implications behind the creation of this system, however, becomes apparent at the end of Scotty's meeting with Bennie.

This particular section of this essay will benefit from the “close reading” aspect of New Critical theory. Simply put, close reading is just that: reading a text closely to find different points that support the theme of the novel and to satisfactorily prove a textual interpretation (Tyson 44). At this point in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Bennie is the happily-married president of a record company. Scotty unearths this information and is soon unsettled by the sudden realization that, once again, his X’s and O’s have failed him. He cannot convince himself that anything which Bennie has is also available to him. This realization is compacted by Bennie’s assumption that Scotty had come for some form of a handout, automatically placing Scotty below himself. Had Scotty encountered this scenario during his time playing music with Bennie, he would likely have responded as he did before: with violence and aggression. Within the text, Scotty actually visualizes this very scenario, picturing himself tearing Bennie’s head from his body. Bennie, remembering Scotty’s tendency towards assaulting those who upset him, rises immediately from his seat when Scotty suddenly stands; Scotty notices this and interprets it as Bennie assuming that he will become violent. However, Scotty’s advanced perspective on the situation allows him to take a more sophisticated tack—he wishes Bennie well. At the same time, he smiles at Bennie, showing his many missing teeth.

These two actions resulted in a single important goal: by refusing to rise to Bennie’s expectation of violence, Scotty is shaming him for his judgment; and by showing Bennie his ruined teeth, he is shaming him again for not considering the different paths that they have taken. He is reminding Bennie of his value as a human while making Bennie realize that their lives, while different, are both subject to the experiences they have had. The surest sign of Scotty’s better-developed perspective is that Bennie was so thoroughly undone by two simple, polite gestures.

Egan is trying to show that Bennie is quick to jump to conclusions about one of his oldest friends; he has either lost his perspective or it has been buried under the many accolades and rewards which his new success has elicited. Scotty, on the other hand, recognizes that he does not need to beat Bennie up or destroy his office in order to win their confrontation. He has realized that a person like Bennie is best beaten by reminding him that he is less developed than Scotty. This realization is made even more piercing by Bennie's perception of having an excellent, well-adjusted life, far removed from his punk roots. At the root of his X's and O's theory, Scotty is trying to prove that everyone can be equalized, that society itself is an illusion, that success and intelligence are mere constructs of a society who, too often, see the successful as being the right. Scotty, by showing himself as the colloquial "bigger man", is telling Bennie, through subtext, that success is not the surest indicator of intelligence, or even of a well-adjusted perspective.

In taking a closer look at the dynamic between Scotty and Bennie, Egan is trying to show how the passage of time can be a large factor in determining one's perspective. However, this same dynamic bleeds into another overarching theme of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, namely the issue of authenticity. Throughout the chapter "Ask Me if I Care," the characters are consistently concerned with whether or not they qualify as true punks or if they are just posers. This chapter is the first to focus on the relationship between Scotty and Benny, their music writing and social interactions in particular, as well as how they fit into the punk scene. Scotty is identified as the real punk, but the true manifestation of this theme is in Scotty's and Bennie's growth as people.

Bennie proves his inability to progress past his youthful perspective in another chapter, "A to B". In this chapter, Bennie has moved to a new home in an extremely affluent

neighborhood. Surrounded by the same people who would have scorned his punk roots, Bennie finds himself filled with spite for all of his neighbors, especially after he realizes that they are profiling him as a terrorist in the wake of the September 11th bombings. This frustration simmers until it boils over when he suspects his wife of having an affair. In reality, his wife was playing tennis regularly with a doubles partner, but because of Bennie's own history of infidelity and the pent-up anger resultant from his surroundings, he quickly misinterprets this. By the end of the chapter he has had an affair of his own to get revenge.

There are few surer indicators of immaturity than jumping to conclusions, especially about something as severe as a spouse having an affair. It becomes clear that Egan is trying to imply that, although he is more successful than any of his friends, Bennie is still possessing of a very ill-formed view of the world.

Bennie's growth is much more gradual, and it takes him many more years before he can accept his age and position in life. The first time the audience is fully introduced to Bennie is in the chapter titled "The Gold Cure." Here, Bennie is depicted as a middle-aged man facing impotence, an alienated child whom he has partial custody over, and disillusionment with his place in the music industry. He has turned to ancient Aztec medicine in hopes of revitalizing himself. He is also trying desperately to recapture the particular sound which music possessed in his youth. According to *A Visit from the Goon Squad*: "The deep thrill of these old songs lay, for Bennie, in the rapturous surges of sixteen-year-old-ness which they induced" (Egan 24). This short sentence outlines perfectly Bennie's main flaw: he lives in the past.

It is apparent that Bennie is trying to recapture his youth. These attempts do not end well for Bennie, which is a point that Egan hinted at by including the following quote from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* at the beginning of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*:

Poets claim that we recapture for a moment the self that we were long ago when we enter some house or garden in which we used to live in our youth. But these are most hazardous pilgrimages, which end as often in disappointment as in success. It is in ourselves that we should rather seek to find those fixed places, contemporaneous with different years. (Egan, preface)

Including a quote at the beginning of a novel is a bold move; it sets the stage for the entirety of the story, and so it must apply to every facet of the book. Considering how directly this theme applies to Bennie, it is clear that Jennifer Egan is proposing that the reader should strongly consider the themes which it implies. It is not until the end of the story, when Bennie contacts Scotty in the hopes of reigniting Scotty's music career, that we see signs of growth on Bennie's behalf.

In "Pure Language," the last chapter of the novel, we see Bennie at age sixty. He has returned to the music industry after being fired from his own record label because he hated the music he was making, and now he wants to host a concert at the site of the World Trade Center attacks.

Until this point in his life, Bennie has been railing against the system, from playing punk music to disrespecting his neighbors to refusing to make music that he found to be inferior. Now, however, Bennie makes an important change: rather than try to defeat the system and force his life to return to the way it was in his youth, he chooses to use that same system to his own ends. By paying off reviewers to promote his concert, Bennie creates a chain reaction that results in a massive amount of people coming to Scotty's concert. This turnaround is symbolic of Bennie's new outlook on life: he will no longer try to make things the way they were. Instead, he is adapting to the world around him, manipulating it so that he can get what he wants. As far as Bennie's character goes, this is the high point of his maturity. He has finally become a real person, validating himself and proving his authenticity, by moving out of the past.

A Visit from the Goon Squad has a multitude of themes and topics which can be discussed at great length, and it is one of the virtues of the novel that they are not difficult to find. In this case, it is clear, merely from analyzing two characters, that Jennifer Egan was trying to establish the concept that time's passage can adjust a person's perspective in ways that commercial success and depending on the system cannot. In the case of Bennie and Scotty, it became clear that time can beat one down, yes, but it can also raise them up. Scotty was elevated, however briefly, from a janitor to a state where he was above the president of a record company. Bennie is introduced as an impotent executive who is quickly losing relevance, and by the end of the story he is back on top, having organized a concert which touched unknowable numbers of people. In the end, Egan is trying to point to the importance of having a well-adjusted perspective and the validity of learning how to survive in the world on one's own.

Works Cited

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