

Been There, Done That:

An Author's Struggle for Individuality through Postmodernity

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When presented with the haphazardly interwoven amalgam of storylines and characters in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, readers are left wondering about the aims of their host as Egan escorts her confused audience across timelines and datelines without transition or overall purpose. As subjective as it is to apply a self-conceived symbolism to the abstract paintings of an anonymous artist, critics at New York Times Book Review, BBC Saturday Review, Time Magazine, People Magazine, The Boston Globe, and countless other major book review sites began to assign far-fetched but seemingly ingenious designs to Egan's admitted attempt at literary nonconformity and, in effect, lack of definitive purpose or structure. Here, in this essay, Egan's motives, her character, and her emotional expression in this text of self-conflict, imagination, and social curiosity are explored using a psychoanalytic approach. Beginning with what is known about Egan's past, and gathering evidence from the many literary interviews and author commentaries this book has inspired, this thesis will explore what *Goon Squad* can teach us about its author who hides behind a veil of nonchalance and a labyrinth of prose. Through this analysis of Egan's personality as expressed in her writing, it is possible to better understand her message: that each of us must strive for individuality.

Jennifer Egan's illustrious literary career is foreshadowed by a rich and entirely unique personal history, involving extensive travel and unconventional employment, as well as an early intrigue with the counterculture punk rock movement. It is apparent that, throughout her life, not only was she thrown off the beaten path but she gladly sought out opportunities to take scenic

detours, while still managing to succeed in attaining scholarly merits along the way. What causes an author to feel as exceedingly unique and almost separate from society as Egan clearly demonstrates herself to feel can be a variety of factors (Demir 2011), but for Egan, it is evident that an introspective desire to outshadow her peers in terms of attaining individuality is a key motivator. This desire to avoid typicality or repeat past experiences of even her audience pushes her to constantly reinvent herself and her literary work, breaking all traditions, breaking her own rules, and constantly revising her plans for *Goon Squad* as it was written. This text originated as unrelated self-contained short stories that Egan decided had enough accidental similarities that characters could be shared between them. In the end, no two stories were told from the same perspective, and a range of attitudes are expressed, none of which Egan associates with her own person. This observation is particularly important to demonstrate Egan's pervasive effort to be unique as an author as she compiled the chapters of *Goon Squad*.

Egan's work is applicable to Freud's observations in his 1907 *Lecture on Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, over a century before Egan's work, but nonetheless relevant today: Egan employs the characters and colorful settings of her *Goon Squad* stories as a sort of testing ground to better understand the peculiarities of others. Typically, a fiction story presents the audience with a central protagonist to which the author ascribes autobiographical attributes. As such, a structural consistency is lacking in *Goon Squad*, a Freudian analysis would be disadvantageous without the realization that in actuality, Egan is the protagonist of this collection, a sort of puppet master of absurdity who plays a meta-role above the level of the narrator. Further, outside of the text itself, she helps to orchestrate the societal reception of her work in such a way as to fulfill the very prophecy of the book: in the last chapter, as this text continues to prove, society is so far lost from its traditional genres and means of critiquing

creative merit, that it behaves like a mob of automatons in the reception of Egan's work. To best capture this facet of *Goon Squad*, I have incorporated a Reader-Response approach to the literary criticism here presented, which aids in demonstrating the complete evolution of *Goon Squad* from Egan's collection of short stories into society's reception of the text as a novel filled with important parables with pervasive and witty themes.

I intend to make my individual contribution to understand the thirteen different stories that *Visit from the Goon Squad* falls into. Complex as it may seem, the proper understanding of this work is as intricate as our own interpretation might reach to. So as to go down to the nitty-gritty, we supported our analysis with Freud's theories related to creative writers together with Egan's deliberations about her life, inspiration and works. These two main sources along with some other publications shall come as a great clarifying beacon light on the tangle of happenings, characters and ideas.

In applying the psychoanalytic approach to the analysis of *Goon Squad*, I have adhered to the early theories put forth by Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939), who was the pioneer of psychoanalysis as a method to better understand an individual's desires, stressors, and psychopathologies through a developmental approach. In modern medicine and psychology, a psychopathology is more strictly defined as a disorder that affects an individual's pronouncedly, but in Freud's time, when much of the theories of behavior were merely conjecture, a psychopathology could be considered any cognitive abnormality that affects one's quality of life (Gelfand, 1992). Freud's approach took into account not only the story of an individual's life and self-reports of their symptomatology but also their dreams, imagination, and if applicable, their artwork or other forms of creative expression. It was through the symbolism, the characters' personalities, the setting and plot, and the choice of descriptive words that Freud

began to understand an individual's repressed desires that caused stress in their everyday life (Demir 2011).

Having borne in mind the abovementioned Freud's theories so as to analyze *Goon Squad*, I consider Egan's unique literary style, her choice of characters, and the almost accidental symbolisms and themes that have emerged from this collective text that may or may not have been originally intentional but are nonetheless commonly identified by her audiences and are thus apparent. Much of Egan's development of *Goon Squad* was driven by fleeting inspiration that she used so as to write these set of stories as a diversion from her main literary work which she has still yet to complete (BOMB Magazine, 2010; More Intelligent Life, 2013). Egan points out that the stories almost interconnected (BOMB Magazine, 2010; More Intelligent Life 2013), and this sort of inspiration could be seen under Freud's exploration light to be a reflection of meaningful "impressions" in an author's past, "einfalls." Thus, although Egan does not explicitly associate any important structure or themes or even a consistent plotline to *Goon Squad*, important themes do emerge and give us clear hints about the author and her underlying thinking process that renders the foundation of this text—the main theme puts forward our human urge to establish contentment through individuality in a modern society that is becoming ever too conformist.

With the purpose of demonstrating the effectiveness and appropriateness of my literary critical approach, I will briefly explore a prominent plotline in the story: the life of Bennie Salazar. Egan took great endeavor to prevent any character from being central or standing out from her overall text (BOMB Magazine, 2010), but from a critical perspective, Bennie's tale is dominant to the unfolding of *Goon Squad* not only due to his clear redundancy but also because Bennie was her original inspiration to continue from the first story in the book (about Bennie's

assistant Sasha) into a connected story, an inspiration which carried her throughout the entire work (BOMB Magazine, 2010). Through analyzing Bennie Salazar, the themes of the text become apparent. Egan warns her readers to avoid common pitfalls as we walk our path upon happiness amongst a society that makes it increasingly difficult to happen. It is in Bennie's dialogue that we find the title of the text—in spite of the fact that it was said before—in Bennie's dialogue it has enough power to make it understand the audience the main meaning of the book. Besides, Bennie is at the center of the music industry, which she openly uses as a creative inspiration for the structure and subject matter of the text (BOMB Magazine, 2010), (although, as I will point out, there was much more than “great musical pauses” in her mind as she composed these stories). Bennie's encounters together with the happenings surrounding his life demonstrate Egan's intent to produce a unique work of fiction. She clearly describes some of the most remarkable Bennie behaviors to support her approach; his habit to eat gold dust, the punk band (called The Flaming Dildos) he forms part of, his decision to try to make a washed-up former member of the band turned janitor a celebrity after he bombards his office and slaps a polluted raw fish on his desk, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that he succeeds in the end in becoming a star. These are some of the unusual features that she displays as an extension of his pursuit of individuality given that they are not stereotypical or everyday comportments.

In *Goon Squad*, Egan employs different styles and perspectives in each story, expressing her creativity in terms of literary style and her struggle for uniqueness as an author. In many interviews, she recounts that she was driven by a strong urge to break all conventions and rules when writing her text, yet still, as discussed below in my Reader-Response analysis, a structure and themes pervade. Despite the attempt to tell the story from many perspectives and in many formats, from old and young voices, both male and female, Egan's words are still her own—each

chapter is quintessentially Egan. For instance, in Chapter 12, where Egan writes in PowerPoint format from the perspective of a twelve year old girl, she calls a man in a photo “primordially cute”, which is something unexpected to hear from a twelve-year-old girl. This PowerPoint story was the last of the series she wrote, and while some critics have called it gimmicky, it beautifully demonstrates her interest in breaking the mold of what readers imagine a story shall look like. Another good example is the chapter 10 “Out of Body” written from a second person point of view. This kind of writing is not very usual and does not produce indifference in the readers. Outside of the *Goon Squad* text, she has even been exploring writing related stories in a Twitter format.

As described above, it is apparent that Egan is compelled to be different from other authors. In the modern American literary culture, individuality and creativity are expected, but Egan goes above and beyond these expectations in creating *Goon Squad*, and society has richly rewarded her for it (she has received the Pulitzer Prize for this work and was offered a million dollar contract from her publisher and a potential HBO series) (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2011; Vulture 2011). However, apart from social pressure to think outside of the box, Egan conveys in her interviews a lifelong pattern of novelty-seeking behavior. Egan’s life is almost as fascinating as that of the fictional characters in her stories: she spent her youth going to punk rock shows in San Francisco, then dated Steve Jobs at the Philadelphia Ivy League, the University of Pennsylvania, toured around the world including the USSR and China as a backpacker, catered at the World Trade Center in New York City, and was even the private secretary for a former Office of Strategic Services female spy who had married the Count of Romanones from Spain (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2011; New York Times 2011). When asked about her involvement in the punk rock scene, she considered herself an onlooker rather than a member of any group or

“squad” (Star Tribute, 2011). Punk rockers were the most anarchist and counter-culture, flashy group you could be a part of in the time of Egan’s upbringing, and although she played the role of more of a “poser” than “punk,” she was clearly fascinated from an early age by the novelty of the setting and its people (BOMB Magazine, 2010). From a psychoanalytic perspective, her decision to create *Goon Squad* in an edgy punk/counter-cultural music framework demonstrates her inner desire to reexamine this aspect of her youth, and possibly relive it by playing the role of a more integral contributor to the punk community. Much as children play, imagining adult scenarios (with often a fantastic twist), creative writers generate imaginative settings and characters to explore their interests, some of which might not even be apparent to the writer until later inspection.

Freud believed that, although childhood play disappears at an adult age, creative writing and artistic expression as well as simple day-dreaming take the place of this childhood practice (Freud, 1907). Interestingly enough, nowadays, playing is an active area of research within the scope of psychology. Playing behavior is observed all through the animal kingdom, and is being regarded as a necessary developmental stage in which youths practice adult behavior, much as Freud theorized (Burghardt, 2005). Although Egan does not admit to be associated with any of the characters in *Goon Squad*, she still must imagine what it would be to be one of them possibly in a day-dreaming way as Freud said she is able to analyze the people in the fascinating world that she has known throughout her eventful past. This is the way in which Egan accomplishes this goal, by empathizing with an outlandish and satirical group of characters across a variety of timelines and settings that makes her effort unique.

A popular modern expression is “it’s not the destination but the journey.” In the case of *Goon Squad*, it is clearly the opposite. The journey is impossible to be followed as each chapter

is merely a glimpse from a different perspective, location and time in the lives of characters that cross paths with one another. This is a primary reason why the text falls outside the presiding view of what a novel is: according to Merriam Webster, for instance, a novel contains a “connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting.” *Goon Squad*’s most poignant message is conveyed with the concluding chapter, when Bennie orchestrates a new musical sensation in the form of an ignorant and washed-up, unattractive and distasteful slide guitarist playing children’s songs in a technologically-driven futuristic society that is so dissociated from natural humanity that everyone follows each other in approval of the music and lacks all individuality. This is, perhaps, the most foreboding chapter, because it shows how difficult it will become to be an individual if our society continues along its current path—losing her individuality would be an incredible travesty in Egan’s mind. Interestingly, she wrote this text assuming that people would have fun reading it—almost writing it for a selective audience that could appreciate certain aspects of it, and had some doubts about how people would receive her work.

Nonetheless, Egan is continually surprised by the massive degree of praise the book has received, and in interviews she points out that the work has taken on new meaning for its readers that she did not intend when she was writing (BOMB Magazine, 2010). Egan points out that she herself prefers to not read an authors’ work in the heat of its social popularity because she wants to preserve her own perspective and come to her own conclusions without outside influence (Vulture, 2011). In a way, by entering the large pool of American fiction as an underdog, an experiment with low ambitions, *Goon Squad* has outperformed its author’s intentions and become a piece of popular culture, with its readers influenced by well-known book critics’ articles in major media and her numerous awards. *Goon Squad* has, in this sense, fulfilled its

own prophecy—it warns readers against following popular opinions on works of creative expression, and she openly states that the book was just for fun and that there really isn't much that she intends her readers to understand, just a light-hearted read (Egan, Reader's Guide, 2010), but due to public acclaim, the book is viewed as a witty new style of novel, and with this new definition, a sort story with a clear message and theme (Scottish Book Trust, 2012).

The Reader- Response Literary Criticism stresses the importance of the reader's role in interpreting texts. It is not enough to understand *Goon Squad* just by analyzing its author. *Goon Squad* has evolved into much more than it was intended to be by Jennifer Egan. The Reader-Response Literary Criticism rejects the idea that there is a single, fixed meaning inherent in any literary work and holds that the individual reader “creates” his or her own meaning through a “transaction” with the text based on personal associations. It can be explained because all readers bring their own emotions, concerns, life experiences, and knowledge to their reading, each interpretation is subjective and unique. To understand how the audience receives the book *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, it is necessary to focus on the critiques of the text. The typical reader nowadays will learn of the book by reading or hearing the endorsement of another, which means these published critiques of the work “prime” the new readers to have certain impressions of the book. Thus, this Literary Criticism can be defined as a natural human response to Literature that may be influenced by other reader-responses.

According to what it is said above, a critical analysis of the life of Bennie Salazar is important to appreciate the effectiveness of my literary critical approach. It is noteworthy to mention that Bennie's story is quite unique and certainly a testament to Egan's creativity and her sentiment when creating *Goon Squad*. In the early 80's, Bennie was in a punk band called *The Flaming Dildos*. This is much like the type of music scene Egan herself was a part of in the 80's

and thus it provides us with a bit of an understanding of how she views the members of that scene looking back now as an author. Bennie met Sasha, his kleptomaniac assistant, when he was in his 20's, and he recalls kissing Mother Superior on the mouth just as a taste of his wild lifestyle. Egan herself is not a loud and wild punk rocker, but this exaggerated sense of their glamorous lifestyle shows how far she distances herself from them in terms of her own level of zaniness and immaturity. Bennie meets Scottie again after many years, a former Flaming Dildos member who makes him feel guilty for his success. Scotty doesn't understand what makes him so different from Bennie who is very rich, as Scotty spends his free time eating green beans and fishing for polluted fish. After being caught cheating on his wife, Bennie has a rocky marriage—which demonstrates Egan's message to not neglect long-term happiness in the face of immediate gratification. This can be connected to her message of individuality because maintaining self-control and moral fortitude requires a similar willpower as maintaining your own individuality at times when it's all too easy to conform to the mindset of the masses. Bennie's quality of life continues to take a fall, as he is forced to fire Sasha (despite her beauty, the fact that she steals continually finally takes its toll), and Bennie is himself fired after he feeds his own bosses a "cow pie lunch." Finally, after being washed up in an industry where he was once quite well-known, Bennie finally makes Scotty famous as well. Egan demonstrates to the reader that even though there seemed to be such an ineptitude in Scotty to explain why he was not in the place in society that Bennie held, at the top of a magnificent building, casting a shadow on everyone else, indeed it was easy to trick society with what they read online to love Scotty's music and instantly view him as a musical sensation.

All in all, I have supported my analysis with Freud's theory but without renouncing to my own point of view, especially after reading the book and a long reflection process. Freud put

forward that after childhood, play is replaced by day-dreaming and artistic expression and those are actually both of the most remarkable descriptive terms that I shall use to define this book. Therefore, Egan's usage of vocabulary, themes, characters and the like; ushers us into a semi-levitation feeling that makes us roam across the different stories. As said before, the personal background of the reader makes a great difference when it comes to taste this work. Therefore, we are facing a great book that is not meant to fulfil everybody's expectations or tastes but the one's that have a critical thinking towards our cloned flat-encephalogram society. Far from being a common novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* introduces a different type of story, since it follows an eclectic pattern storyline and pictures outrageous characters. Here lies the greatness of Egan's work; she supports individuality leading by example with this unique work. Not only does she stick to the storyline scheme but also uses witty vocabulary, exceptional characters and uncanny happenings. Obviously, if you do not enjoy the reading of this book, it does not mean that you lack individuality but if you lack it, you will probably not even understand what Egan's aim is or the prominence that underlies beneath that many plot layers.

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