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Original Paper

Devouring Time: A Study of the Narrative Time in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

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Abstract

Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer-prize-winning novel A Visit from the Goon Squad *conceives of time as a brutalizing force which ravages characters who wonder where time went. The novel calls attention to readers' own experience of time passing. Order, duration, frequency; time passed and time regained; time's forward march and memory's backward loops: these are the recurring preoccupations of this novel. However, most academic researches focus on the author's interviews, thematic analysis, and the novel's postmodernist characteristics etc. Based on Gérard Genette's theory of the narrative time, this article studies how Egan demonstrates the theme of the "passage of time" in her writing through a deliberate arrangement of the narrative time.*

Keywords

Jennifer Egan, A Visit from the Goon Squad, Narrative Time, Passage of Time

1. Introduction

There have appeared unprecedented changes in the U.S. foreign and domestic policy in the wake of international terrorist attacks, especially the September 11 attacks in 2001. Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer-prize-winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is just concerned with the human life in the 50 years of U.S. history from the 1970s Bay Area punk scene to the 2020s New York City. The novel dramatizes the battle with time undertaken by youth. It conceives of time as a brutalizing force which ravages characters who wonder where time went. Many characters work in the youth-obsessed music industry that imparts a concern with time and aging to them. Time is central to this novel. Meanwhile, this novel has posed some challenges for its unusual form. The thirteen chapters are organized into an A- and a B-side, by which Egan pays homage to the "old-fashioned" form of CD. Each chapter focalizes around one different character in a non-chronological order. Egan's innovative use of narrative perspectives, manipulation of

narrative time and other postmodernist techniques render this novel resonant with an authentic human experience, which encourages readers to piece together various stories, sketches, and vignettes into a cohesive account of events.

At the current stage, most academic researches focus on the author's interviews, thematic analysis like anxiety and trauma, and postmodernist techniques etc. Narratology is also an important perspective to interpret the novel. Although some scholars have discussed its narrative space and narrative strategies, the narrative time of the novel hasn't received much critical attention. In fact, it is through the exquisite combination of the narrative order, narrative duration and narrative frequency that the theme of the "passage of time" can be distinctly demonstrated. Shakespeare writes in Sonnet XIX that "Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws, And make the earth devour her own sweet brood." Responding to Shakespeare's call, Egan turns the "goon" in the novel into a metaphor for the "devouring" time. The novel shows that Sasha, Bennie (Sasha's former employer) and people related to them ultimately achieve the justice or redemption in their fight with time. This article will study the life transformation with time from the narrative order, the irreversibility of time from the narrative duration, and the erosion by time from the narrative frequency in the novel based on Gérard Genette's theory of the narrative time, which may contribute to readers' appreciation of the passage of time as an eternal concern for human beings.

2. Narrative Order: Transformation with Time

According to Genette, "Narrative is a […] doubly temporal sequence […]: There is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative" (Genette, p. 33). The temporal duality is emphasized, which are the opposition between the story time and narrative time. In traditional novels, the narrative time is congruent with the story time. However, Egan applies a non-chronological narrative order or narrative anachrony to emphasize the overwhelming power of time. Genette defines the narrative anachrony as "the various types of discordance between the two orderings of story and narrative" (Genette, p. 36). It can be classified into two kinds: prolepsis and analepsis. "In such a case the chronological chaos is often still quite meaningful" (Bal, p. 81). This narrative strategy breaks the limitation of the traditional linear narratives and shifts between the past, present and future. "It is in the phenomenon of intervention that our powers of action are linked to the world order" (Ricoeur, p. 177). The life transformation of Sasha can be displayed clearly by the following flowchart, and is perfectly presented by the switching of analepsis and prolepsis within the novel.

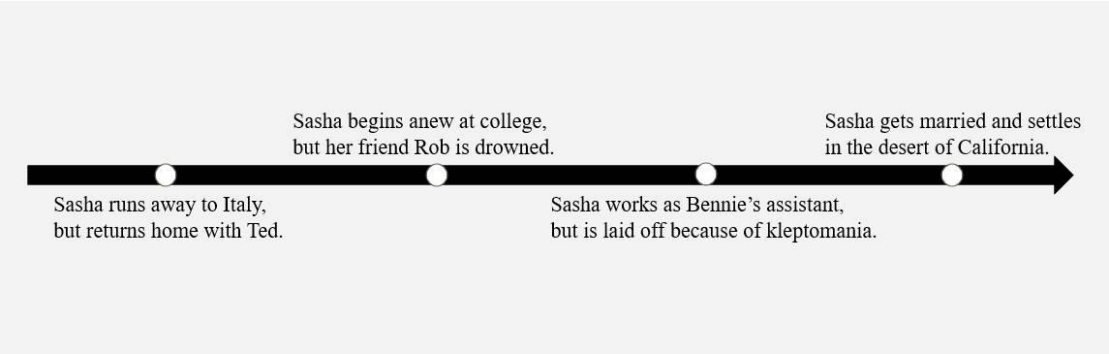

Figure 1. Narrative Order in Sasha's Plotline

Egan has made an extensive use of analepsis in the novel. Analepsis refers to "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (Genette, p. 40). In this novel, the analepsis is presented by the stream of consciousness of characters. Sasha is first introduced to readers in "Found Objects," the first chapter of the book. She is now in her thirties and working for Bennie Salazar as his assistant. When working for Bennie, Sasha suffers from kleptomania due to her tumultuous childhood, which is why she is seeing a therapist. This mental illness is also the reason why Bennie eventually has to fire her. The chapter starts from Sasha's once stealing of a purse in a luxury hotel of New York. She spies an open handbag left on the floor of the lavatory while its owner is absent, so she steals the "fat, tender wallet" (p. 3). Along with the flow of Sasha's consciousness, the hotel scene soon changes to Sasha's therapist's office where she is undergoing a psychotherapy. It is at this office that she recounts having stolen a wallet from the bathroom of a hotel bar. Egan gives readers a list of "the things she'd lifted over the past year": "five sets of keys, fourteen pairs of sunglasses, a child's striped scarf" (p. 4). It is clear that Sasha does not steal things either for the sake of "use" or "exchange value." Moreover, in telling her story, Sasha self-consciously frames her experience in terms of a novelistic narrative process: "She and Coz were collaborators, writing a story whose ending had already been determined: she would get well" (p. 6).

After hearing this event, Coz, Sasha's therapist, brings up the "plumber" story that happened a month ago. When a plumber came to her house to fix the bathtub, Sasha "saw the plumber's tool belt lying on the floor at her feet" (p. 7). There was "a beautiful screwdriver in it." She felt an impulse to "hold the screwdriver," so she "plucked it noiselessly from the belt" (p. 8). But the screwdriver quickly loses its magical glow, and looks "normal," "not special anymore" once the plumber leaves. This makes Sasha feel especially guilty for stealing from that plumber. The chapter ends with Sasha and Coz "in silence, the longest silence that had ever passed between them" (p. 18) at the therapist office. A successful story should not be static and would require forward movements, "turning points" and "change." "It was a turning point; everything feels different now […] or just I'm changing I'm changing I'm changing: I've changed!" (p. 18) marks the difficulty of locating that "turning point" when "change" occurs. Sasha's disclosure of the past experience seems to hint not yet at "progress" or "change" but at a self-acceptance

on her part that may be the prelude to the eventual change. The use of analepsis "brings us back from within-time-ness to historicality, from 'reckoning with' time to 'recollecting' it" (Ricoeur, p. 178). Sasha's thefts can be interpreted as attempts to stop time because the objects she steals seem to operate, if following the logic of the art object, as Shakespeare's sonnets that resist time passing. She resembles a writer who attempts to memorialize, to symbolize, and to represent her experience in some lasting form. "The primary direction of care is toward the future" (Ricoeur, p. 181). Prolepsis "consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later" (Genette, p. 40), which forms a sharp contrast between the present and future. This technique is used effectively in Chapter 11, "Good-bye, My Love," in which characters' future life is predicted by prolepsis. The narration firstly shifts into Sasha's adolescence with analepsis, and then characters emerge as important players in the larger scheme of the narrative with prolepsis. Sasha's uncle Ted, an art professor, travels to Naples on a mission to find and retrieve the college-aged Sasha, who has run away with a drummer of a punk band and ended up in Italy. The narrator takes on several different identities through a shifting, omniscient point of view. Couldn't find Sasha, Ted instead visits "the ruins of Pompeii, observing early Roman wall paintings and small, prone bodies scattered like Easter eggs among the columned courtyard" (p. 208). He seems drawn to Pompeii in part as a vivid and extreme instance of art and culture as, in effect, representation of the past life. When he explores the streets of Naples, Ted observes that "Soiled, forgotten coats of arms were carved above their massive doorways, and these unsettled Ted" (p. 215). These "forgotten coats of arms" are evidences of the frightening power of time that evacuates human symbols of meaning and value. The flowing of time and history are impossible to resist, but individuals can record personal and public history through artistic works.

When he finds Sasha in Naples, she appears to Ted as "a girl whose feathery bones did not quite heal" (p. 217). Ted notices that her forearms "were scarred and scuffed like furniture" (p. 225). Although Ted draws the obvious conclusion that she has attempted suicide, the scars suggest that this young body has been heavily "imprinted" by time and experience in a broader sense. Scarring can be seen as a radical version of the usual "imprinting" of experience on bodies. Time's passing sometimes represents a painful and even traumatic experience. Ted tries to persuade Sasha to go home, but Sasha doesn't answer him, only looking at the sun. Prolepsis helps to predict the outcomes of individual behavior to give a glimpse of their future. The narration jumps from here to the life of twenty years later. Sasha will marry her college boyfriend Drew and have two children. She will settle in the desert area of California. On the other hand, Ted will get a divorce due to his loss of feelings for his wife. Ted's wife, Susan, once declared to him, "let's make sure it's always like this" (p. 231), which is certainly an impossible wish. After so many twists and turns, Sasha will finally be able to get her life back on track and enjoy the happiness of a family union. Ted, too, will lead an idle life after the divorce. They both have struggled with the insight that time speeds everything toward decay and loss. In other words, time is capable of transforming everyone's life. Egan has deliberately disrupted time to convey that the elapse of time is unstoppable.

3. Narrative Duration: Irreversibility of Time

Chatman points out that "Duration concerns the relation of the time it takes to read out the narrative to the time the story-events themselves lasted" (Chatman, p. 67). He has summed up four basic forms of narrative duration: pause, scene, summary and ellipsis. He believes that "a narrative cannot do without anisochronies," which can produce "effects of rhythm" (Chatman, p. 88). What makes this novel fascinating is that Egan is adept at modifying the novel's rhythm with these four forms. They are employed to control the tempo of the plot. And "a plot establishes human action not only within time, but within memory. Memory, accordingly, repeats the course of events according to an order that is the counterpart of time as stretching along between a beginning and an end" (Ricoeur, p. 180).

Mieke Bal holds that the pause means "all narrative sections in which no movement of the fabula-time is implied" (Bal, p. 108). Genette, too, thinks that pauses are "not connected to a particular moment in the story […] and consequently cannot in any way contribute to slowing down the narrative but, indeed, the reverse" (Genette, p. 99). It exhibits a new way of experiencing time passing, and indicates that time persists without the exact space. One instance of pause is in the twelfth story, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," in which pauses recur in the rock music. This chapter is completely composed of PowerPoint slides created by Sasha's twelve-year-old daughter, Alison, in the near future. It shows that traditional forms of prose fiction may adapt to the twenty-first-century technologies. In telling an idiosyncratic yet touching family story, the banal corporate software is endowed with creativity and humanity. Egan seeks to "locate artistic potential in the very 'blankness' of today's digital world" (Moling, p. 65).

Alison records her autistic brother, Lincoln's obsession with intentional gaps of silence within pop recordings. She explains that "right now, he's obsessed with rock songs that have pauses in them" (p. 243); "A 'full rest' is four beats long, a 'half rest' is two beats." (p. 243). In a slide entitled "Songs with Lincoln's Comments," Alison transcribes Lincoln's commentary on several pauses from classic rock and pop between the 1960s and 1970s. For example, regarding David Bowie's song "Young Americans," which features a very short pause, Lincoln thinks that "it would've been so easy to draw out the pause after '… break down and cry …' to a full second, or 2, or even 3, but Bowie must've chickened out for some reason" (p. 244). The attempt to understand why Bowie doesn't prolong the pause points towards Egan's assessment of rock music's potential and limitations on immortality. By looping pauses in songs, Lincoln tries to step outside the arc of time. His hobby of recording and commenting on these "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" also offers a window into the psychological dynamics of the family as a whole. Alison and Sasha have displayed an affectionate patience toward it, but Sasha's husband Drew has trouble understanding Lincoln and cannot make sense of those pauses. Only after listening to Sasha's explanation does he come to accept the "haunting power" of pauses.

For Lincoln, pauses in songs are more important than songs. The pauses are in fact a kind of creation, as well as an invitation to a listener or a reader, from which one's own perceptions are projected. This merit in turn allows Alison to respond with her own interpretation. She views the natural surroundings of their home in the California deserts as a pause. Egan thus aligns the great rock and roll pauses with the desert,

which is a vast and never-ending void. "The whole desert is a pause" (p. 287) offers an enlightening insight into the natural world, implying that pauses can be understood not only as "nothing," but as a space that calls for creativity and imagination. The concept of a "pause" broadens from a trivial element in the pop music to a much more widely resonant figure for art. A pause is the aesthetic representation of the passage of time, which further embodies the emptiness of human life. The implication is that just as the looped pauses cannot evoke the desire to "break down and cry," time possesses a fundamentally tragic power to hollow out meaning and make human passions difficult to maintain.

"The scene is the incorporation of the dramatic principle into narrative" (Chatman, p. 72). "In a scene the duration of the fabula and that of the story are roughly the same" (Bal, p. 105). Moreover, "The so-called 'dramatic climaxes,' events which have a strong influence on the course of the fabula—the turning points, moments at which a situation changes, a line is broken, such events are presented extensively in scenes" (Bal, p. 104). Many profound scenes are described in this novel, revealed by dialogues and actions of characters. The author remains detached in order to let characters speak for themselves in these scenes. One crucial scene is in Chapter 10 "Out of Body." Instead of the familiar third-person narration, a direct second-person narration is employed. Rob, Sasha's university friend, is the narrator of this chapter, who speaks as "You." Readers are easily to be skeptical about the fidelity of this narrator. It is a narrative technique from the "unreliable narrator" proposed by Wayne C. Booth. "Your friends are pretending to be all kinds of stuff, and your special job is to call them on it" (p. 186). Rob is a sophomore of New York University, who has a suicidal tendency. He and Sasha have been best friends since the first day at NYU, so Sasha has told Rob everything from her childhood and adulthood. Nonetheless, Sasha's revealing of her past to Rob has its negative side.

Fearing that Sasha is "starting to forget, begin over again as the person she is to Drew" (p. 197), Rob attempts to divulge Sasha's secrets to her boyfriend Drew. "You don't really know her," Rob says. "She was a hooker. A hooker and a thief—that's how she survived in Naples" (p. 204). Rob knows that to begin anew, Sasha has to abandon her past, which would remove the little control he has over her. "Why couldn't you do that for Sasha? Who's going to do it for you?" (p. 197). When Drew threatens to tell Sasha about Rob's betrayal, sharp conflicts break out between them. Rob is "seized by a wild conviction that containing Drew will seal off the damage you've done" (p. 205). This scene truthfully shows Rob's complex feelings for his best friend, Sasha, and her boyfriend, Drew. On the one hand, Rob and Sasha are close friends because they both have a miserable past. However, Sasha is able to start all over again and begin a new relationship, which make Rob very envious. On the other hand, he is tortured by his desire for Drew's masculine body. He wants to live with Drew "in that cabin" (p. 204) like brothers. These paradoxical emotions impel him to speak ill of Sasha, and it turns out to be a turning point of his short life. Regretful and painful for this misbehavior, Rob impulsively jumps into a river and is drowned.

In Genette's opinion, summary and ellipsis are capable of accelerating the speed of the narrative. As it is impossible to cover every detail of various events, the less important events may be summarized briefly or omitted to make room for more important ones. Though "insignificant events-insignificant in the sense

that they do not greatly influence the course of the fabula-are quickly summarized," "that which has been omitted-the contents of the ellipsis […] may have been so painful that it is being elided for precisely that reason" (Bal, p. 103). We first learned of Bennie as one of the protagonists in Chapter 2, "The Gold Cure." He is a successful middle-aged musician and owns a record company. Sasha works as his assistant at this period. Bennie so desperately wishes to regain his bodily vitality that he squanders thousands of dollars to buy eatable gold flakes. Like his body, the music he loves also becomes obsolete because of the progression of time. This chapter criticizes a complicated set of forces that convert music recordings into digital data.

Sitting in a record studio, Bennie listens for realness in old recordings that have been discarded by producers like him who prefer to chase the perfect sound. "Nowadays that quality (if it existed at all) was usually an effect of analogue signaling rather than bona fide tape—everything was an effect in the bloodless constructions" (p. 22). Bennie views pop music as having been devitalized, and he grieves for the lost musical authenticity. In the final chapter, the novel brings readers to the futuristic New York City where people are more consumed with their digital handsets than with one another. Bennie is now nearly sixty years old, and has been kicked out by his own company. Despite his effort to produce music again, none of music records are sold. Nonetheless, Bennie manages to remarry and take up his old trade again. His past life experience from the wreckage of his first marriage to the later business failure is not described in detail, but summarized and omitted into brief sentences. Bennie's story is a story about the irreversibility of time. Memory persists but time moves forward.

4. Narrative Frequency: Erosion by Time

"An event is not only capable of happening; it can also happen again, or be repeated: the sun rises every day" (Genette, p. 113). Genette defines the narrative frequency as "the relations of frequency (or of repetition) between the narrative and the diegesis." Four types of relations of frequency are classified: narrating once what happened once (singulative narrative); narrating n times what happened n times (reduced to the previous type); narrating n times what happened once (repeating narrative); narrating one time what happened n times (iterative narrative). Among them, the repeating narrative is applied by Egan to foreground some basic facts, especially "Time's a goon." "A story entirely constructed of such singular presentations would create a highly peculiar and ragged effect" (Bal, p. 112). "Through repetition, the character of time as stretching-along is rooted in the deep unity of time as future, past, and present; the backward move toward the past is retrieved in the anticipation of a project, and the endlessness of historical time is grafted on the finite structure of being-toward-death" (Ricoeur, p. 182).

The phrase "Time's a goon" is repeated twice in the novel. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "goon" refers to "a silly, foolish, or eccentric person," or "a bully or thug, especially a member of an armed or security force." In the novel, it functions as a central metaphor. Egan has discussed the book's title in an interview: "Time is the stealth goon, the one you ignore because you are so busy worrying about the goons right in front of you." What the writer means is the way that time strips many

of the novel's characters of their youth and success. This phrase is firstly commented by Bosco in Chapter 7, "A to B." Bosco, a former rock star, is visited at home by his publicist Stephanie (Bennie's first wife) and her brother Jules. He is proposing a concept album based on the fact of his own decline. In parallel with Bennie's previous encounter with his high school classmate and bandmate Scotty, Bosco asks, "The album's called A to B, right?" He wonders "how did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about" (p. 127). To enhance his point, Bosco then remarks, "Time's a goon, right?" This remark echoes with Egan's viewpoint above. To Bosco, the thuggery of time is too harsh as he has lived most of his adult life as an icon of youthful energy, but his residual public image being cruelly at odds with what he has actually become. The personification of time as a threateningly violent "goon" is one marker of the common preoccupation with the erosive effects of time.

The title phrase recurs in the final chapter, "Pure Language" when Bennie says to Scotty (another washed-up rock musician), "Time's a goon, right? You gonna let that goon push you around?" Scotty replies: "The goon won" (p. 333). The pathos of aging extends to the rock culture. Bennie organizes an open-air concert at the former site of the Twin Towers where the September 11 attacks have taken place. He tries to persuade his old bandmate Scotty to perform in front of the audience. By situating the concert at the 9/11 memorial site, Egan makes it clear that perhaps art still can rival terrorism as a force of redemption in a fractured society. As a result, Scotty's music that combines the strength, honesty, and purity of purpose unites the crowd for "a swell of approval palpable as rain lifted from the center of the crowd and rolled out toward its edges" (p. 335). The obsolete punk music played at the concert sings a triumphant song for the healing of past grieves and woes. The success of the concert proves that the passage of time can be as glamorous and pure as youth. The French philosopher Levinas believes that "Time is not a succession of instants filing by before an I, but the response to the hope for the present, which in the present is the very expression of the 'I,' and is itself equivalent to the present […] To understand the mystery of the work of time, we should start with the hope for the present, taken as a primary fact. Hope hopes for the present itself" (Levinas, p. 92).

"The reverse of a repetition is an iterative presentation: a whole series of identical events is presented at once" (Bal, p. 112). The sixth chapter of the novel, "X's and O's" offers an instance. The narrator, Scotty, was Bennie's classmate in high school. He used to be a talented guitarist, but now ends up as a janitor in an elementary school. "History is the mediating structure between temporality and within-time-ness" (Ricoeur, p. 181). Scotty meets Bennie again after twenty years when he comes across an article about Bennie's thriving career on a magazine, and decides to send Bennie a note. Scotty often goes to the East River early in the morning to fish. Although the river has been polluted, he still "did this all the time," and "ate the fish, too" (p. 94). Before he visits Bennie's office, Scotty went fishing again. Meanwhile, he takes beans for dinner every day. "I began each night by ordering Hunan string beans and washing them down with Jagermeister. It was amazing how many string beans I could eat: four orders, five orders, more sometimes" (p. 96). In contrast, Bennie is described by Scotty as being "trim," "fit," and wearing "expensive shirts" (p. 98). The novel is compact and readable because of the iterative narrative. It

produces an ironic effect for revealing Scotty's struggles and frustrations. Actually, no one is immune to the erosion of time, even the outwardly successful Bennie.

"There time is the renewal of the subject, but this renewal does not banish tedium; it does not free the ego from its shadow" (Levinas, p. 92). When Bennie asks Scotty what inspired him to reconnect, Scotty replies, "I want to know what happened between A and B […] A is when we were both in the band, chasing the same girl. B is now" (p. 101). He is very much like a novel's reader, eager to track and accept the passing of time and its effects. The novel is written as a finely tuned instrument for the "tracking" of the varying life paths of individuals, with a special interest in the moments when——sometimes only in retrospect——one can see how tiny decisions, or turning points can make one person a "loser" and the other, from a similar background and with no great talents, a great success. Fiction enables readers to observe interrelated lives and careers in order to find out how and why humans took the paths they did. While history is conceived as a progression, it is also seen as a cycle of which the audience is the end, as the last page indicates, the beginning as well. Scotty's momentous concert at the end of the novel takes readers a step closer toward an inevitable finality, but, at the same time, it offers the sense of a new beginning.

5. Conclusion

A Visit from the Goon Squad reveals the anxiety and powerlessness of human beings who cannot control their fate in the long river of time, which exhibits the author's profound concern about time and life. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur asserts that the relationship between narrativity and temporality is reciprocal. Narrative time is intimately connected to the human experience of time for in the world time itself is given. It provides a basic structure for the narrative, and the whole novel operates as a finely adjusted device for measuring time and assessing its effects. Human experience is temporalized by the novel, and characters are often stunned by the passage of time, feeling unprepared for it. The tension is between the inexorable passage of time and the leaping, stuttering quality of consciousness. "Yet do thy worst, old Time!" In order to assert men's power to defeat time and achieve some kind of immortality, characters have endeavored to thrive in the "devouring time" and finally succeeded in living a meaningful life. "The alternation of effort with leisure, when we enjoy the fruit of efforts, makes up the time of the world" (Levinas 90). Hence "despite thy wrong, My love shall in my verse ever live young."

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