

JENNIFER EGAN'S *A VISION FROM THE GOOD SQUAD*: A NARRATIVE OF HEALTH, DISEASE, AND DEATH

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ABSTRACT. *Jennifer Egan's A Vision from the Good Squad: A Narrative of Health, Disease and Death.* This paper analyzes Jennifer Egan's novel/ short story cycle entitled *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, winner of the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The chapters/stories shift back and forth in time, moving from the late sixties to the present day and into the near future. The Proustian influence is obvious in this fascinating narrative of the self, the ailing body, and finally death. The interesting structure of the book, due to the influence of the TV series and the power point slides, adds a fascinating quality to this text which is the result of a vision that has all the characteristics of the contemporary age.

Keywords: *death, disease, the sixties, age, time, body.*

REZUMAT. *A Visit from the Good Squad de Jennifer Egan: o narațiune despre sănătate, boală și moarte.* Această lucrare analizează romanul/ciclul de povestiri al lui Jennifer Egan intitulat *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, câștigătorul Premiului Pulitzer pentru proză, în 2011. Capitolele/povestirile se mișcă înapoi și încolo în timp, deplasându-se de la sfârșitul anilor șaiszeci până în prezent și chiar în viitorul apropiat. Influența proustiană e evidentă în această fascinantă narațiune a eului, a trupului măcinat de boală și, în final, de moarte. Interesanta structură a cărții, datorată influenței serialelor de televiziune și a diapozitivelor de power point, adaugă o calitate deosebită acestui text care este rezultatul unei viziuni ce are toate caracteristicile epocii contemporane.

Cuvinte cheie: *moarte, boală, anii șaiszeci, vârstă, timp, trup.*

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Jennifer Egan is a contemporary American writer who was born in Chicago, in 1962. She was raised in San Francisco and consequently, was influenced by the atmosphere of the sixties, San Francisco being the cradle of the American revolt during the turbulent decade. Her literary work shows this filiation in a very convincing way. This paper analyzes Jennifer Egan's novel/short story cycle² - there is some hesitation here - entitled *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, winner of the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The book has not been the object of too much critical attention from the specialized readers (literary critics). Actually, the critical bibliography on *A Visit from the Goon Squad* consists mostly of reviews and journalistic articles. See: Julie Bosman, Ron Charles, Jennifer Schuessler, Judy Woodruff, Jeffrey Brown, Jane Ciabattari, Christian House, Marko Fong, Robert Fulford, Lynn Neary, Cathleen Schine, and some anonymous reviews. The present article is also an attempt to dwindle this lack. Our analysis of this polyfocal narrative focuses on the following issues: disease and death, the relation between the self and the body in first person narratives, the peculiarities of self-writing when talking about the body and the self.

Can *Goon Squad* be considered a short story cycle? Of course. Can it be considered a novel? Both answers can be positive. The duality of the literary format called "the short story cycle" has already been under close examination by Ingram and Nagel, two classics of short story studies. The short story cycle is made up of short stories that have, each of them, the coherence of a chapter in the novel but they can also be read and understood separately. The short story cycle is, therefore, the object of two coherence strategies: one at the level of each component short story and one at the level of the whole text. Certainly, this is an exercise of exquisite literary craftsmanship in terms of constructing a narrative. We can also talk in this respect about the influence of television as each of the chapters/stories has its own autonomy exactly as a single episode of a television does. In an interview given to Ron Charles, Egan admits that four of the stories were completed before she had the overall concept for her book but the result is masterly. Egan succeeded in giving an impressive unity to the whole text by a linking theme, that is time and its effect on the frail human body: aging, disease, death. When the stories are seen as a group, the analepses and the prolepses between them deepen the meaning and the emotion of the reading experience. It is relevant for the understanding of Egan's literary structure that the author refers to her book as "entangled stories" ("2011 Pulitzer Prizes for Letters, Drama and Music." *New York Times*, 18 April 2011). Neary makes a recommendation following Egan's own advice

² We distinguish between the short story collection and the short story cycle. The short story collection is made of disparate stories which have their own meaning but do not shed a unitary meaning upon each other as in the short story cycle. In the short story collection it is only the title which can spread its metaphorical, symbolical call to all the short stories, but this is a quite elusive narrative man oeuvre if compared with the unity of the short story cycle.

for her readers, "You can call it linked short stories; you can call it a novel — just don't call it experimental". The authorial refusal of experimentation goes hand in hand with the process of turning the culture of the sixties (the background of the basic stories in this collection) as a classical period in the history of American culture. Schine goes so far in this classical-ization process of Egan's narrative that she compares it with a Dickensian novel. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* " would be "an enormous nineteenth-century-style epic brilliantly disguised as ironic postmodern pastiche".

A very important point of Egan's short story cycle is the realization that America's decline was catalyzed by 9/11, it did not begin with it. The young people of the sixties turn old and ill, dying after the year 2000. Their disease is the biological, bodily manifestation of the country's pathologization.

Most of the stories in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* concern Bennie Salazar, an aging man who used to be part of the rock music circles of the sixties, his former assistant, Sasha, and their various friends and associates from the same period. The book which also has powerful dramatic qualities relies on a large number of mostly self-destructive characters as they grow older and fate sends them in directions they did not intend to go. The stories shift back and forth in time, moving from the late sixties to the present day and even into the near future. The Proustian influence is obvious in this fascinating narrative of the self, of the ailing body, and finally death. Christian House explains this influence in the following terms: "*A Visit from the Goon Squad* is obsessed with time: how it passes, how we pass through it, how it changes everything and, more pertinently, wears everything down, including us, to little more than specks of sand in the great desert of history".

The possible comparisons with Joyce³ and Proust show that Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is a postmodern display of stories commenting on human relations in the digital age connecting on the lives of the listless people who experience disease and death. Jennifer Egan has the unique ability to tie humor to disease and death, which lose their tragic edge, and the result is a cynical perspective on our contemporary world.

An important linking element in this short story cycle is the music of the sixties, the symbol of a whole generation. Characters either create it, market it, or just listen to it. From the adolescents in San Francisco who delight in the music of the punk bands to the downfall of the music business of the sixties presented against the disappointments of the characters in New York, everywhere there is a musical connection that can remind one also of Huxley's modernist literary-musical construction *Point Counterpoint*. Egan connects music to the way she structures her social critique of America around one of the most visible

³ Especially, with the Joycean short story cycle: *Dubliners*.

problems of the digital era, namely the problem of limitless reproduction defying copyright regulations. And contemporary music offers such relevant examples, in this respect.

Egan's narrative agility is amazing. We find details about a character's childhood, then about his adulthood, and then she jumps back to the initiation years in one's life⁴. Her technique relies on an unpredictable ability to put together isolated scenes. According to Fulford, her technique is inspired from the way our memory works: "we sometimes hear about old friends only in brief glimpses that don't really make sense until we think about them later". Every chapter/story is a narrative shock. And every chapter/story is a confrontation with disease and death. Jennifer Egan is able to shift from a first person narrator to narrative omniscience. One story relies on the journalistic style, the last one is a dystopian sci-fi, and another is a Power Point, which is a radically different writing.

Alison, a very bright twelve-year old girl, uses PowerPoint to overcome her family's failure to communicate. Her digitalized writing is an effort to overcome the lack of communication within her family. The parents refuse to go back to an accidental death that happened a long time ago. Alison's brother, Lincoln, suffers from a form of Asperger's syndrome and consequently, has an obsessive interest in the pauses on famous records, such as David Bowie's *Young Americans*.

The connection from one character to another is very quick, even abrupt, like a mad narrative race. The first character who appears in the narrative texture is Sasha. The analepses and the prolepses lead to our understanding of Sasha as a broken human being who has healed only partly at middle-age. A childhood of abuse, followed by a difficult young adulthood in Europe, and by the accidental death of a friend only leaves her more listless back in America. Sasha's mid-adulthood life is compromised by anxieties and ghosts.

Sasha works for Bennie who is an executive in the world of musical records. Lou is Bennie's protector and he is seduced by Jocelyn who was in love with Scotty, a guitar player for the Flaming Dildos, a San Francisco punk band. This musical group also links Scotty to Bennie who also played bass guitar for the Flaming Dildos. This happened before Bennie married Stephanie who tried to revive the career of Bosco, a rock legend of the sixties. Stephanie's interest in Bosco can only be explained by the fact that the latter had given permission to Jules Jones, Stephanie's brother and a journalist, to cover his farewell "suicide tour". The narrative continues with Jones' attempt to seduce Kitty Jackson, another starlet of the sixties. Kitty has to work for La Doll, Stephanie's advisor in advertisement, because her career went down while Sasha was a prostitute in Naples. The latter will work for Bennie and then disappear into the desert to dedicate her life to sculpture and family together with Drew, her college boyfriend. The forty years of the narrative are covered in 13 stories/ chapters

⁴ John Maslin even calls *A Visit from the Goon Squad* "an acrobatic book".

linked by the painful feeling of time that wrecks both love and body by disease, aging, and death.

We fully disagree with Ron Charles who reviewed the novel for *Washington Post* and who talks bitterly about "Egan's sloppy work". According to Charles, "[i]n presenting her cast of characters as indicative of contemporary America, Egan makes the mistake of sacrificing intimacy to achieve universality, which makes any pronouncement hollow. Egan wants so badly to say something that she says nothing of worth. Her characters, for all their tragic flaws, feel like symptoms, not people, and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* holds few pleasures outside the child's play of the implied character relations falling into place".

On the contrary we appreciate Egan's narrative voice which is always the voice of the protagonist. Exquisite is also the narrative perspective presenting the unfolding events with the gaps inherent to a limited personal vision characteristic of the first person singular. The cases of disease are numerous in this novel/short story cycle and Egan excels in overpassing the medical discourse through the multitude of tropes. Here is, for instance, a public toilet where Sasha, the kleptomaniac, gets fascinated by a woman's wallet. "She'd glimpsed the wallet, tender and overripe as a peach. She'd plucked it, from a woman's back and slipped it into her own small handbag, which she's zipped shut before the sound of peeing had stopped. She'd flicked open the bathroom door and floated back through the lobby to the bar. She and the wallet's owner had never seen each other" (5). Egan's sentences sound as implacable as the pathological call of disease.

Bennie Salazar, another important character of this thought provoking fiction, has his own medical problems. He sprinkles gold flakes into his coffee and pesticide at his armpits. "He'd begun this regimen two months ago after reading in a book on Aztec medicine that gold and coffee together were believed to ensure sexual potency. Bennie's goal was more basic than potency: the sexual drive, his own having mysteriously expired" (21). Other characters are not at all healthier. Benny's idol, Lou Kline, "had died after being paralyzed from a stroke" (37). Bosco, the star of *The Conduits*, a punk rock group, becomes "obese, alcoholic and cancer-ridden" (113). A visit from his former admirers now eager to put him back on track as a kind of musical relic reveals the implacable effects of time. Remembering how they used to consume drugs and tried to avoid the police, the characters (the goon squad⁵) create a kind of bodily symphony of memories. "Now he [Bosco] was huge – from medications, he claimed – but at a glance into his trash can nearly always reveal an empty gallon box of Dreyer's Rocky Road ice cream. His red hair had devolved into a stringy gray ponytail. An unsuccessful hip replacement had left him with the lurching, belly-hoisting walk of a refrigerator on a hand truck" (125).

⁵ In American English, the goon squad is a group of mercenaries or criminals. Drug users refer to themselves in this way relying on specific group solidarity.

Equally worn out but still keen on singing for ever younger audiences is Scotty Housman. "A guy with gutted cheeks and hands so red and gnarled he looked like he'd have trouble playing a hand of poker, much less the strange sensuous instrument clutched between his knees" (332).

The body is pathologized in Jennifer Egan's novel by the treacheries of the individual. See, for instance, Stephanie after discovering Bennie's adulterous relationship with her friend, Kathy. "She lay down curled on her side in the grass, as if she were shielding the damaged part of herself, or trying to contain the pain that issues from it. Every turn of her thoughts increased her sense of horror, her belief that she couldn't recover, had no more resources to draw on" (135).

The body is also pathologized by the unhealthy atmosphere in which the whole nation is obliged to live: "... to generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar" (335).

The most important sequence from the point of view of the death and disease discourse in this narrative structure is Chapter (Story) 5: "You Plural". Bennie tracks down five of the former admirers of Lou and invites him to say good bye to the former star. Lou is "in the bedroom, in a hospital bed, tubes up his nose. The second stroke really knocked him out – the first one wasn't so bad, just one of his legs was a little shaky. The view of so much decrepitude logically leads to questions about the insidious arrival of old age which occurs from the moment when we are born. 'How did you get so old? Was it all at once, in a day or did you peter out bit by bit? When did you stop having parties? Did everyone else get, too, or was it just you? Are other people still hiding in the palm trees or holding their breath under water? When did you last swim your laps? Do your bones hurt? Do you know this was coming and hide that you knew, or did it ambush you from behind?' "(85). For John Donne, the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poet, youth is an ambush in the sermon Donne delivered on 8 March during the Lent of 1625. In Donne's words: "[a]ge is a sickness, and youth is still an ambush" (123). We don't know whether Egan was aware of this intertextual vicinity or this trope is just a coincidence. However, the insidiousness of old age and the treacherous nature of youth, the battle of the body with disease, all these are marvelously caught by both writers. The body whom the young people think unbeatable is an ambush of time.

In the twenty-first century old age comes with a whole set of technological devices meant to replace the decaying physical functions of the body. Look at Lou, for instance. The writer fights stylistically, in an admirable way, for the accurate representation of Lou. "A guy comes in dressed in black, a diamond in his ear, and he fiddles with Lou's tubes and takes his blood pressure. From under the cover, tubes twirl from other parts of Lou into clear plastic bags, I try not to look at" (87). The oral sex scene, underwear present from Jocelyn, is a daring act of love defying death and impotence. But questions about the

inevitability of death never stop. Does all that begins also have an end? Inescapably? "Was this outcome a freak aberration from natural laws, or was it normal – a thing they should have seen coming? Had they somehow brought it on?" (132).

There is no definite answer to this fundamental question from Jennifer Egan but the chronological placement of the narratives suggests an answer in itself. "Nineteen eighty is almost here, thank God. The hippies are getting old, they blew their brains on acid and now they're begging on street corners all over San Francisco. Their hair is tangled and their bare feet are thick and gray as shoes. We're sick of them" (40-41). They pass, we are passing, everything passes.

A Visit from the Goon Squad is, therefore, obsessed with questions about time and body. How does time pass? How does time change everything? And the most pertinent question: how does time wear our body down leading it into disease and death? The Pulitzer of 2011 for fiction is a moving panorama of stories about bodies and selves and a categorical statement that one can never escape his body: be it healthy, or ailing, or dying.

Disease and death shape the Augustinian eternal present that Egan makes the temporal background of her narration. In the end she tells us, readers, through one of her characters, "Time's a goon. You gonna let that goon push you around?"⁶. Time works through the cracks of memory represented, from a narrative point of view, through the gaps between chapters and in the distance between different views of the same event. Jennifer Egan's *Visit from the Goon Squad* is a brave book which faces the tragedy of our lives and bodies built in time and submitted to time through disease, aging, and finally death.

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⁶ According to Jane Ciabattari, the writer explained, "time is the stealth goon, the one you ignore because you are so busy worrying about the goons right in front of you." This declaration backs and reinforces the thesis of this article: *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is meditation upon time and its effects on our body through disease, aging, and death.

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