

Seeking Integration from Fragmentation: Analysis of Collage Strategy in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

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Abstract—Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, which was one of the most innovative experimental novels in contemporary American literature. The book is full of fragmentation and disorder, which needs readers to collage out the integrity of the whole story. This paper attempts to analyze how the technique “collage” constructs a complete story in the end, showing slices of different time periods occurring between the late 1970s and the 2020s.

Keywords—*A Visit from the Goon Squad*, integration, fragmentation, collage strategy

I. INTRODUCTION

American contemporary novelist Jennifer Egan’s most recent book, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, won the 2011 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction and the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. American literature critics have also praised highly of this novel. For example, more than 600 professional book reviewers gave a high degree of evaluation of its experimental novel form; The Wall Street Journal regards it as a “post-post-modern” novel, which can not be explained by the definition of novel in the dictionary; Time even praised it as the “new classic of American fiction”. All of these appraisals center around new, innovation and experiment, which is inseparable from Jennifer Egan’s innovative literary practice. She not only inherits and element and technique into the novel. The experimental writing concept constructs this novel. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is unconventional in the way its narrative unfolds. Each chapter stands as a self-contained story, but as a whole, the individual episodes create connections that form a cohesive narrative. The novel not only constantly transforms time, scenes and characters, setting suspense, but also narrative perspectives and narrative voices, which truly reproduces the living conditions of Generation X in the United States, and the ups and downs of many music dreamers. The whole novel is just like a collage, which presents a problem for readers to solve. It builds up the broken text and puts the readers in the fragments to pursue the connotation and cohesion of the text. Jennifer Egan’s experimental novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* employs the avant-garde technique “collage” of the painting into literature writing.

The technique “collage” actually originated from painting. Through the development of postmodernism, the employment of collage also expanded to the literature field. In the postmodern context, collage has almost become a symbol for postmodernism. Peter Bürger claims that the

technique of “collage” introduced “reality fragments” into paintings [1]. In the novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the technique of “collage” introduced “reality fragments” into novel. It is presented to readers like pieces, which is in line with the cultural form of postmodernism. Jennifer Egan expands the use of collage, which is not confined to words and sentences. It is more reflected in the construction of the whole novel, including time and space, style, and narrative. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore how the “collage” strategy constructs a complete story following the aspect of time and space, style and narrative, and how exactly are readers supposed to go about piecing together the various stories, sketches, and vignettes (which move backward and forward in time) into a cohesive account of events [2].

II. THE COLLAGE OF TIME AND SPACE

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan adopted the “fragmented time”, which means the time in the novel is inconsistent, leading to the absence of order and logic, but a patchwork of disordered text world. Fragmentation was first put forward by American critic Fredric Jameson as an important post-modern concept [3]. It is often used by many post-modern writers to reflect the fragmented and decentralized society. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, time is completely disrupted and separated into unrelated and mutually independent pieces [4]. For example, a story that occurs in the contemporary era is often followed by a story that occurred a few years ago or even decades ago. In the following chapter, it may return to the present or future. In addition to the discordance of story sequence between each chapter, there are many examples showing slices of different characters’ lives in different period in each chapter. One of the obvious examples is in Chapter 4, when the little boy Rolph dances with his sister Charlie full of joy. Being shy and embarrassed at the beginning, Rolph feels his embarrassment miraculously fade and becomes confident as he moves together with his sister Charlie over the music. Charlie is also over the moon from the bottom of her heart, just as Egan writes “this particular memory is one she’ll return to again and again” [5]. However, when readers are still lost in this happy time, the author collages the future of Rolph, who shot himself in the head. The sharp contrast between the present and the future gives people a deep feeling of time’s flying and cruelty, which is achieved by the collage of time. No matter the collage of time between chapters or slices of the past or future in each chapter, readers can find a sense of integration

from fragmentation in the end.

Time and space are two important dimensions of narratology and basic elements of novel, which are interconnected. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the collage of time results in the collage of space. The novel is divided into thirteen stories, each of which can be an independent short story. The place where the stories take place does not fixed, varying from New York to San Francisco, Naples, and Africa. Even in New York City, the author adopts different regions of New York with completely different cultural and historical characteristics. Human beings are always wrapped in a complex relationship with the environment. Therefore, the collage of space also presents the complex world spanning from the late 1970s to 2020s to the readers clearly. Following the author's fragmented time and spatial description, the readers seem to have experienced the life of a dream for fifty years.

In conclusion, this part analyzes the rupture of time and space between stories resulting from the collage strategy. The collage of time and space makes for the construction of fragmented world and the reinforcement of theme-time is a goon. In addition, the meaning integration needs to be sought by readers. It is said that there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes. Different readers' interpretations make the text and meaning infinitely open.

III. THE COLLAGE OF STYLE

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, collage dispels the traditional grand narrative and uses different styles to reflect the world. In addition, the employment of collage in the novel gives the work the features of anti-genre and mixed styles, bringing different stylistic reading experience to readers. The collage of style in this novel mainly refers to the employment of news report and new media expression "power point".

The first example is Chapter 9 "Forty-Minute Lunch: Kitty Jackson Opens Up About Love, Fame, and Nixon! JULES JONES reports". This chapter is mainly about the self-narrating journalist Jules Jones recounts his attempted rape of the young actress Kitty Jackso. Firstly, the report style of this chapter itself is different from the normal novel style of other chapter, which gives the readers feelings of freshness. The report here is neither needed by the plot development nor element of traditional novel. It is simply a collage of style, which implies post-modernism writers' deconstruction ability to the monotony style and the pursuit of diversity. What's more, in this chapter, a large number footnotes and news reports are inserted into the novel. The author employs the theory of entangled particles to explain how and when the people occupying tables nearest to Kitty Jackson inevitably recognize her and then lists the possibility of Jules Jones' psychological activities. "Theoretical explanations: (1) The particles are communicating. Impossible, because they would have to do so at a speed faster than the speed of light, thus violating relativity theory. In other words, in order for an awareness of Kitty's presence to sweep the restaurant simultaneously, the diners at tables nearest to her would have to convey, through words or gestures, the fact of her presence to diners farther away who cannot see her—all at a speed faster than the speed of light. And that is impossible" [5].

These footnotes paradoxically complement, contradict and support the main text [6]. Actually, the physics and entangled particles have nothing to with the plot and content of this chapter. The simple question that how people occupying tables nearest to the star Kitty Jackson recognize her does not need theoretical explanations. The collage of professional footnotes here gives an implication of absurdity of the world. In addition to the large number of footnotes, this chapter also collages many news reports concerning the event of JULES JONES reports in the end. Front-page headlines, titles of follow-up articles, editorials and op-ed pieces addressing an array of related topics are inserted into this chapter, for example, "the 'increasing vulnerability of celebrities' (The New York Times); the 'violent inability of some men to cope with feelings of rejection' (USA Today); and the lack of adequate daytime security in Central Park". The endnote also includes a long letter from Jules Jones to the editor, "To the Editor: In the earnest spirit of your recent editorial ('Vulnerability in Our Public Spaces,' Aug. 9), and as the embodiment.....I' d prefer to stand at a distance next time, and wave". The whole chapter is like a picture of collage, giving readers a sense of disorder and deviation. The disorder and absurdity in the text is consistent with the support of post-modernism.

The other obvious example of the collage of style is Chapter 12 entitled "Great Rock and Roll Pauses by Alison Blake", which is simply supposed to be a "diary" of a little girl recording the people and events she knows. However, Egan does not follow the traditional narrative structure and method. Instead, she inserts new media expression "power point" into novel writing, showing the influence of highly-developed digital technology on culture and people's lives. Power point, a program pertained to the popular Microsoft Office suite of software, allows users to create visual presentations using slide templates and the image [7]. In recent years, power point slides are used everywhere for better narration. But as a media tool, power point seems unlikely to be a literary device or strategy. No one expects to find this format in a imaginative and narrative novel. But Egan deploys it with great delicacy. In this chapter, the producer of these presentations Alison recalls her parents' past and family trifles in the form of power point, a new media expression. Each slide is independent, but the whole is coherent. These seventy-five Microsoft power point slides are the thumbnail of the whole novel. As a writer growing up in the digital age, Egan knows about the current situation and way of communication between people in post-modernism and the influence of new media and new technology on people's lifestyle. The digital becomes an indispensable in human relationship, that's why the author chooses to insert power point style.

To be concluded, the collage of style breaks monotony of text and releases the possibility of readers' interpretation. Egan integrates news reports and new media expressions power point into the construction of the novel, which makes this seemingly patchwork content better express the characteristics of post-modernist society and the lifestyle of people in the new digital age.

IV. THE COLLAGE OF NARRATIVE

Different from the conventional novel narrated by a single voice, Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* contains at least ten voices, which is defined as 'polyphony' in academic. Polyphony literally means "multi-voicedness". This "multi-voicedness" breaks the single perspective and results in different centers of consciousness. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the narrative alternates between different person accounts. Each chapter has different narrative perspectives, ranging from Sasha to the record executive Bennie, to Bennie's mentor Lou, to Bennie's past friend in the band Scotty, to Bennie's ex-wife Stephanie and the former guitarist of the Conduits Bosco, to Stephanie's boss Dolly, to Stephanie's brother Jules Jones, to Sasha's college friend Rob, to Sasha's uncle Ted Hollander, to Sasha's daughter Alison Blake who narrates the story by way of power point presentation, and in the end to almost all the characters in the last chapter. Although the different narrative perspectives in every chapter cuts the main plot into pieces and fragments, every character has inextricably link, which may be old friend or the relation between supervisor and subordinate. The narrator draws his/her picture, which finally pieces together into an integrated picture of the youth of a generation and a times. For example, the second chapter "The Gold Cure" is narrated from the perspective of Bennie, who depicts his daily life as a record executive and the speechless problem he met. The perspective of the next chapter "Ask Me If I Care" shifts to Bennie's mentor Lou, who recalls the past happy time of band and hippie including Bennie. From Chapters 2 and 3 we can see that although there exists fracture in narrative perspective, the events and stories between Chapters 2 and 3 can be put together to get an intact frame. The collage of narrative perspectives contribute to the situation that every character in the novel occupies similar position. Everyone is closely related to others.

Apart from narrative perspective, the collage of narrative also embodies point of view. Point of view is the vantage point from which a writer tells a story. It can be clarified into three levels: the first person point of view, which is narrated by "I"; the second person point of view, which is narrated by "you"; and the third person point of view, which uses the character's name or the third person pronoun "he", "she" or "they". For the traditional novel, writer would choose one fixed point of view to create steady and ordered narrative pattern. However, in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan collages different point of view to increase the extent of fragmentation and disorder, which also make reader's reading process inconsistent in a sense. For example, in most of chapters, the narrative point of view changes from the first person point of view to the third person point view, but in chapter 10 "Out of Body", Egan employs the rare second point of view "you" to portray a suicide man's experience. Compared with the first person point of view and second person point of view in former and following chapter, the second person point of view "you" in chapter 10 is a collage. Such writing strategy make the readers confused, and thus attracting them to read this book deeper and deeper. The readers would think more during their reading processes and construct the integration of this novel according to their own interpretations, which is coincident with the infinity of text and the diversity of meaning advocated by post-modernist. In

addition, the collage of point of view makes the readers enter a fragmented world which is the reality of world in post-modern society.

To make a conclusion, Egan switches a character's perspective and point of view to collage her own works, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. The application of collage strategy on narrative on the one hand makes the author's narrative tone switch between seriousness, poetry, satire and ridicule, achieving an aesthetic effect. On the other hand, as the saying goes, "only by breaking the world can we reconstruct the world", collage of narrative breaks the traditional narrative pattern and gives readers all the freedom to reconstruct the text.

V. CONCLUSION

Collage originated from painting in French, referring to "paste". Later, it was employed into literature creation by post-modernist to reflect the fragmented reality of the world. From the analysis above we can see Jennifer Egan expand the use of collage to the construction of the whole novel, including time and space, style, and narrative, which is not confined to words and sentences. The successful application of collage strategy reveals the world's diversification and fragmentation, the individual's confusion, helplessness, and uncertainty, and the impact of new digital and technology towards culture and people's lives. In addition, with a strong visual impact, collage brings blankness and segmentation, which leaves completeness and meanings for the readers to seek from by themselves. It also greatly develops reader's ability to seek integration from fragmentation, which is an important skill in post modern society. In short, Jennifer Egan's experimental novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* "records" lives of a generation and a country between the late 1970s and the 2020s by way of collage and it expresses Egan's concerns and responsibility for social issues as well.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Huang Yibin and He Pan analyzed the whole novel and wrote the paper. Lin Jiaxin revised the paper. All authors had approved the final version.

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