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New York Authors

Compare and Contrast

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LSE

The three recent novels by Sapphire, Jennifer Egan, and Jonathan Lethem are vastly different in writing styles and subject matters. Sapphire plunges into the mind of a sexually abused Harlem orphaned boy in *The Kid*, Egan takes a journey into the New York City downtown punk rock music scene with her squeaky clean characters that somehow intersect with one another in *a visit from the goon squad*, and Lethem drags us to the Upper East Side of Manhattan where his cast of characters pitifully pontificate amongst those who are primarily the 1% in *Chronic City*. Lethem spins us in trite circles, Egan remains in the safe zone of white flawed suburbia that becomes tainted by technology, and Sapphire whirls into the dark dismal subject that touches one in four males and one in three females in America, which is sexual abuse. All three write with unique styles that make each one identifiable.

The Kid is written in first person from Abdul's point of view. Sapphire writes in a stream of consciousness manner, which pulls us into Abdul's sexual abuse experience. She does this with the language that she uses, or what she called a second language. Abdul's inner dialogue is different from his speaking voice. It is raw. It is primal. It is primitive, and yet completely, utterly, and earthshattering honest. Sapphire blends the conscious and the unconsciousness of Abdul's mind, which creates this dream reality state that mimics the hazed confusion that a sexually abused child would likely

experience. The sequencing of events is in chronological order; although what specifically occurred is not always described verbatim, it is alluded to. For example, Abdul's time with Roman is not fully developed, and Abdul's true inner thoughts are not revealed until he speaks about him with Dr. Sanjeev. As Abdul ages, his language changes. He adapts to his social setting, which is reflected in his dialogue; however he remains a wounded little boy throughout the story, which is revealed throughout his internal dialogue.

Sapphire's style is simple, and to the point. She states,

“Me and My Lai are eating breakfast at a diner on Seventh Avenue off Sixteenth Street. My Lai is chowing down on a bowl of high-fiber cereal swamped with two orders of blueberries and nonfat milk. She's spooning the cereal into her mouth trying to get as many blueberries on the spoon as she can. The perfect smell of bacon sizzling on the diner's grill brings tears to my eyes. I'm remembering Aunt Rita picking up a slice of bacon with her red-tipped fingers and holding it to my mouth. The greasy, salty pleasure of pork filled my mouth as I stared at the dark place between her breasts accented by her low-cut dress and hard black push-up bra. The bra I had thought was extra breasts when I saw it laid out on the white bedspread and buried my nose in the cups, drinking in her musky perfume smell. I get up and head to the restroom in the back of the diner, the tears almost spilling over. I head past the urinals for the one stall. Locked inside I sob, seeing her leaning out a hotel room door as I trot down the hall to the bathroom, the floor always sticky-slick with piss, sometimes blood and needles, occasionally shit, no matter how she complained or cleaned. I couldn't imagine why she felt she had to stand watch; I was a big boy, nine years old, what could happen to me”(Sapphire 302)?

Sapphire uses gustatory, visual, and olfactory imagery within this passage. The novel is filled with it, which thereby elicits a powerful emotional reaction. She wants us to feel what Abdul does, and she is successful at doing so. Lethem also evokes strong feelings with his writing, but he does so in a complex convoluted manner.

Lethem is brilliant at using olfactory and gustatory imagery when describing food or an apartment, but thematically Sapphire rubs our noses into blood, excrement, and

cum. Sapphire uses “bacon” as a trigger for Abdul that consequently and simultaneously will lead us down his emotive path; however Sapphire does not describe the “bacon” as Lethem would have. She describes, “The perfect smell of bacon sizzling on the diner’s grill”, whereas Lethem describes the “Jackson Hole burger” as ‘those mammoth burgers, let alone the slag of fries that came with a deluxe’ (302, Lethem 175). Lethem’s meal is not appetizing, because we already experience the indigestion before the burger has even been served. Sapphire’s “bacon” is “sizzling” which makes our mouths water, as well as Abdul’s, but it is more of the memory that is evoked by the “bacon” that she is going for rather than the gustatory imagery. Sapphire wants us to go back in time and remember the nine-year-old Abdul before he was abused. Lethem, moreover, has us contemplating whether Perkus Tooth likes the waitress or not. The weight of the matter is trite in comparison, which in fact speaks to Lethem’s entire work. Thematically there is no comparison, as Sapphire trumps Lethem and Egan.

Egan, on the other hand, goes for the Xanax, when she uses gustatory imagery, which is a culturally acceptable drug, not a food that the masses have all tried and digested tenfold. She describes, “Sasha...took a tiny sip of grappa. It tastes like Xanax”(Egan 14). This gustatory imagery offers a medicinal sensation that is experienced in the mind not within in the entire body like a blanket providing comfort. Burgers and bacon are comfort foods for the soul, whereas grappa is a drink that burns on the way down and inebriates the human spirit. Egan does not take us upon an emotional ride; she embarks upon a journey whereby we must employ our intellect, not that our intellect is not necessary for the other works; however she does not play upon our emotions in the same manner Sapphire and Lethem do.

Egan's *a visit from the goon squad* employs many characters compared to Sapphire's *The Kid*. Egan alternates with first and third person point of view. Sapphire writes solely in first person. It is an intimate grueling experience when one person has the stage for 373 pages. His painful life is laid out before us without any fanfare. Egan's cast is a colorful cocktail; however intimacy with her characters is impossible, because each one has less page time, and each character has one chapter to reveal him or herself. Sapphire writes a memoir like novel whereas Egan writes a short story compilation that she cleverly weaves together as a novel. Lethem's *Chronic City* is penned from Chase Insteadman's point of view, and Chase, a has been child star engaged to an astronaut who is in outer space, is not an empathetic relatable character, and as a result Lethem's satirical intellectual attempt did not move me. Sapphire engulfs us in Abdul's world because of her topic in question, which is child sexual abuse in twenty-first century America. Egan's sequencing is what engaged me, because I wanted to find out how these characters were connected or relevant to one another. Egan designed a puzzle of characters, and in order to make sense of her story, one must put the pieces together, including the chapters that are a power point presentation that was created by a twelve-year-old girl and a magazine article. I became a detective and emotion was not necessary to solve the riddle. Lethem's characters strike the same chord throughout his work, which is bloated, paralyzed, and inconsequential. I am not invested nor interested in his characters because they seem to be not of this earth and their conflict is insignificant. Lethem's strength is his sentence structure and vocabulary; however these assets did not lead to a relatable story.

Lethem suffocates us with his diatribe compared to Sapphire, where as Egan is politically correct, as she never rubs her readers the wrong way. She uses culturally correct issues. For example Bennie suffers from Erectile Dysfunction Disorder, and thus he puts real gold flakes into his coffee, which he believes is some sort of trendy healing method. We are not permitted to hear about his EDD internal dialogue that would accompany it. We are privy to the sanitized version, which creates a civilized Bennie. He is like a crisp white sheet. Sapphire's approach is to expose her characters unedited. We get to see the bowels of Abdul's mind, which impacts how we feel and think about him, as well as the theme of the novel.

Comparing these authors to contemporary artists of the twentieth century I think that Egan writes like Georgia O'Keefe, who painted precise colorful images that never veered outside the lines, Lethem is like Jackson Pollack whose paint dripped and poured upon an entire canvas leaving little void or empty space, and Sapphire is like Frida Kahlo whose self portraits exposed her internal organs, she let her guts hang out for the universe to see.