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Compare and Contrast

When looking at three modern, talented writers such as Jonathan Lethem, Sapphire and Jennifer Egan, a picture emerges of writers skilled in their craft. It is amazing to see how diverse these three styles are and also how they come to overlap, as anyone skilled in a craft certainly shares similarities with his or her community of professionals. Each of these writers knows stylistically how story works, how linguistic tactics can aid in the telling and when to break the rules in favor of their individual styles, or styles that suit the novel. To begin looking down a field of angles, to see what these writers share and don't share, the point of view of narration seems an obvious place to start.

In terms of point of view Lethem and Sapphire share the use of the first person narrative, a distinct lens, which allows them to get inside their characters internal monologue. The first person allows the writer to directly enter the psyche of their characters, as opposed to more external views where the lens is more detached and more objective. With Sapphire the reader penetrates the cracks, and shares in experiencing J.J.'s internal landscape. The reader lives intimately with the character. The same is true for most of Lethem's story and parts of Egan's, Lethem only varying the point of view occasionally when Perkus is involved. Egan differentiates herself with the other two authors' by incorporating second person and third person omniscient and by doing so broadens her range. By changing perspective she can show us her characters in different ways, she can step outside of the first person in order to experience them without their personal perspectives coloring the readers view. However, it is impossible to view any character in total objectivity; the narrator is always presenting a lens. Because of the structure of her book, she is in a rare position to tackle many of these angles. Such variety is not possible in most traditional novels.

Sometimes an author's voice leaks through the writing, sometimes you can see them behind the veil of their characters. In a literature analysis this happens more frequently than in casual circumstances. Within the pack of books, dissected for this paper, the author who revealed herself the most was probably Jennifer Egan. Sometimes her music business speak was too clichéd and unrealistic. Once that veneer dissolved so did the authority of her characters. It seemed much more her writing than them living. With *Chronic City* the characters had a fictional authenticity, perhaps because they were culled from realms too fantastical to be real. In that way, readers of *Chronic City* can ease into a willing suspension of disbelief because the world that everything takes place in is comical and surreal by virtue of Lethem's wild writing. Sapphire in her portrayal of J.J. is hard to question from outside of the culture she describes. From an etic perspective, as an outsider, it's harder to say with any sureness that she didn't leak through as the author in light of some questionable characterization. It does seem that she is deeply attached to the culture she speaks about, which gives the reader reason to believe she is authentic and that the voice of her character is authentic too. She seems to understand the nuances of his movements and conversation, expressing this understanding through vivid imagination and other times by sharing affinities in terms of race. It seems that writers like Egan

who seek to break out of their comfort zones, to expose worlds that they aren't really a part of run the risk of exposing themselves unless their fictional characters present airtight personalities, ones the reader can buy into.

In terms of plot structures, Sapphire has the most straightforward and Aristotelian arc. She fulfills her reader's expectations of traditional storytelling with an inciting incident, crisis, climax, etc. In other words, the reader can see this book unfold like a film. Jennifer Egan's story is less typical, arranging itself into chapters each with their own story events. It lacks the typical plot points that are expected, but those elements still occur in microcosm within her chapters. *Chronic City* would never make it to Hollywood either, it sits dead in a pair of roller skates for its first half, gliding around without any substantial tension. The book runs on its interesting characters and feels free to explore them laterally or orbitally without those traditional constraints of storytelling holding all the power.

Time also grows important in considering the structures of these books. According to the *Carving Your Story* text, by Julia Keefer, time is an element used to incite drama and *intensify conflict*. Often the *compressions* of time or *imposed deadlines* create this tension. All three writers use this device in some way, whether it's in broad or small strokes. For example, Egan creates this time compression through her orchestration of chapters. In jumping from Lou's safari with his family to Jocelyn's encounter with Lou close to death, she adds this tension of time into the story and creates a sense of urgency in Jocelyn's own character, witnessing his decline. She feels, viscerally, the weight of time on her and the reader in turn is able to experience this heightened state of awareness. Sapphire uses time more traditionally but with even more urgency than Egan. In a broad sense, she uses time to expose J.J.'s full story arc, cutting ahead years at a time. The reader becomes anxious to see his development, a very subtle tension is created to see how he turns out. By jumping to points of his life that have the most heat, she also maintains the maximum amount of tension to her work, probably one of the reasons why *The Kid* feels so passionate and urgent.

Within certain scenes there is also the presence of time in order to produce tension. In *The Kid*, during the St. Ainthalus experience, there is constant reference to the clock in the boy's dormitory, referencing odd hours of the night or the time to sleep or the time to wake up. After he is kicked out J.J. is horrified by the fact that he never knows what time it is, and this comes at a point when he is most out of his mind, adding another way for Sapphire to make J.J.'s experience come to life. While Lethem favors a slower pace to his novel and a more succinct period of time he also introduces the time conflict to build tensions. For example, the Chaldron bidding on eBay. However, much of the time the pace feels fairly innocuous.

With a discussion of time in writing, linear and non linear frameworks should be distinguished. Linear means that the story exists on one timeline, whether it jumps forward or backward, whether it starts in the middle of the story or the end. It seems that linear favors a central storyline and protagonist. Sapphire and Lethem would both qualify as having these linear qualities. *A Visit From the Goon Squad* offers a less traditional structure, exposing a variety of times, places and characters. Its chapters often decline to share storylines, staying connected only through the shared threads of characters and theme. For Egan's book, it is the perfect form. She values strangeness, stepping outside of her own personal boundaries in favor of

experimentation, which she finds rewarding. In a way Egan is more effeminate in her approach to the sensuality of her storytelling structures, she appeals to more lateral senses, averts a main climax and reaches several more imperceptible ones along the way.

Each story also maintains a unique space and reality for its presentation. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* presents a face of realism with a tint of the fantastical mixed in, realism being a world which resembles the concrete reality of life. In contrast to realism, *The Kid*'s realm deals with a much more violent and gritty reality, which could be considered naturalism, naturalism dealing with external forces and issues like war, poverty and abuse, in other words a high concept novel. Egan favors a reality she can create in order to derive meaning from, extracting her themes from the fiction. Jonathan Lethem favors a style that borders on surrealism. His story is whimsical, told in waves of figurative language, eventually becoming hallucinatory and comical.

Narrative sequencing is most beautifully used in Sapphire's work. It is done in a way that really extends into the theme. When J.J. joins his first foster home, he is attacked by a boy named Batty. After the attack occurs, J.J. loses consciousness. Sapphire doesn't tell the reader this, she makes the reader experience it. J.J. moves from a black out to someone standing over him. It's like a piece of time is missing rather than explained away. This happens several more times within the book, once shortly after this first experience, where he ends up in a hospital. Sometimes dreamlike sequences also intertwine with J.J.'s narrative. All of this builds into a distorted state of reality where the reader shares the jarring and disjointed life of the protagonist. Jennifer Egan seems to try to follow her characters in a natural progression of interest but in a way that also serves to reflect her theme of time. Lou is a great example again because at the point when his deathbed chapter is introduced, the reader has become familiar with him and his family. By offering this chapter after the reader's attachment to a character's life solidifies, she creates a much greater impact on their emotions. In order to express a truth in a good book, the thematic elements have to be felt as well intellectually perceived. Here, her choice of narrative sequencing exposes that feeling and the her theme begins to flesh out. Lethem is harder to puzzle out. One can say that the narrative sequencing, the repetitive encounters with Perkus and certain circles could mimic the orbital theme of the novel. In a way, the reader follows Chase's orbit and by doing so discovers how his life changes as a result of new direction.

With character orchestration, these books seem successful, each in their own way. Lethem uses his characters in the way that Egan uses hers, as reflective surfaces that scoop out the protagonist's traits. This is important in *Chronic City* because almost everything is told through the perspective of Chase Insteadman. It isn't until the other characters in the book begin reacting negatively toward Chase and Chase's behavior in light of them that his true character is revealed. With Egan a great example is Jocelyn, feeling the weight of her own age with Lou on his deathbed by the pool. She spends equal time in this scene haunted by her failures and Lou's age, as she is by the perpetual youth and dreamy moments she spends ruminating over Rolph, the immaculately preserved memory of a self destructive, romantic youth. Sapphire's characters don't always serve as philosophical prism, like Egan's but rather as physical forces which shape the character's life. They aren't given as much room to take shape because J.J.'s richness is so vast and dense that there is hardly space for anyone else.

Linguistically, these novels are far apart. Each is distinctive in style, contains its own cadences and rhythms. Structurally, in terms of sentences, Lethem is the stylist. He favors ornate and rolling rhythms, often his sentences turn in unexpected ways or he leaves the reader with a slew of dependent clauses trailing the central independent. Always his pace is varied. Egan and Sapphire are less ornate, Egan parsing out a great variety of sentences and rhythms, dominated by their grammar and roll. In looking at a passage, one sees this variety and also how it contributes toward the flow of the sounds. “Stephanie wanted to move away, but she couldn’t seem to move. She closed her eyes again. Noreen didn’t speak, and as the minutes passed she seemed to fade into the rummaging breeze and chatter of insects, as if the night itself were alive. Stephanie hunched in the dirt for a long time, or what felt like a long time—maybe it was only a minute.”(103 of 274) Egan moves from compound, to simple, to compound-complex. She concludes this passage with a complex sentence, in the form of an independent clause followed by two dependents with varying syntax in order to vary the look and tone of her pauses. Sapphire uses her structures to mimic the tone of her narrator. In the beginning of the kid, she uses very short sentences to incite the reader to believe in the voice of J.J. as a child. As J.J. ages, his thoughts become more complex and so do the structures of Sapphire’s sentences.

There are also other ways the writers approach rhythm. For Lethem, aside from his sentences there is heavy play in tone color, in assonance, consonance and alliteration. As a simple example: “Georgina gracefully flung across Richard’s lap, long legs and elbows askew...”(140 of 467) The example features the repetition of g sounds as the first syllables at the beginning of the sentence, which could be considered alliterative sound. Then there is the fully and flung where the u assonance pervades and concluding with the repeating lap, long, legs and the ows and ew of elbows and askew as consonance both. Generally his musicality, in terms of these linguistic choices, is so subtle as to be barely perceived. Sapphire takes it a step further, her work bleeds tone color and musicality. She favors repetition of sound and word. Her repetition often becomes percussive, establishes a beat and then skips off into new territories, the way a drummer might keep pace for other musicians wheeling out into space. In looking at a passage this technique becomes clear “Feel like I’m disappearing with every step I take, like my bones radioactive, like in cartoons, glowing. A light is pouring out from inside me, like God. *God!* God or...or Crazy Horse. Crazy Horse riding, killing, kill Custard or Custer...”(102,103 of 374) Here God is repeated three times, three drum beats alike in sound but with varying cadences, the middle italicized *God!* resounding as a plea or scream. There is also the repetition of *like* and the consonance occurring with the c and k sounds, i.e. “Crazy Horse. Crazy Horse, riding, killing, kill Custard or Custer...”(103 of 374). It feels like Sapphire is ultimately aurally centered in her prose, and she let herself have free reign with these expressive rhythmic rants. It fits the form here because J.J.’s consciousness is on the verge of cracking and he is by nature musical.

This passage also points towards Sapphire’s use of figurative and kinesthetic language. In the passage J.J. glows like a cartoon, an image evoking an energy of his inner dynamic as well as introducing simile. She is very much like Lethem in this excerpt; Lethem himself riddling *Chronic City* with such figurative gildings. For example, “I skate on frictionless ball bearings of charm.” (28 of 467) Here the kinesthetic experience of motion is coupled to metaphor. Egan, while employing these styles of writing, leans toward the more visual experience. Her book is filled with colorful examples: Lou’s apples, Bennies gold flakes, the sun in Sasha’s wire rim in Italy, or, most gut wrenching, the visual and tactile experience of hot paint and glass falling on

the social elite. She also visually steps into the realm of typography, exploring a chapter devoted solely to PowerPoint.

There are endless comparisons and contrasts that could be made with these books and under a limitless scope of time they could be brought to the surface and explored in more depth. However, time, as Egan would have a reader notice, is slipping away. In the end it feels that each writer looked extremely critically at their choices, that they are well versed in their craft. In the end though, books are more than tactical choices; they require a great depth of spirit to achieve. In all three books it's safe to say that it was soul that made them come to life. Their subjects are not easy or vain but tackle some of life's hardest elements. In this regard, modern audiences of literature owe them a nod of respect, for maintaining to create fusions of great form and significant content. They stand as fine additions to the large canon of modern prose.