

A Study on the Second-Person Narrative in Jennifer Egan's *Black Box*

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Received 2 September 2015; accepted 11 October 2015; published 15 October 2015

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Abstract

Notable for the second-person Twitter narrative, Jennifer Egan's 2012 short science fiction *Black Box* is one of the most triumphant and fully-fledged fictions written in the form of new media. This paper mainly explores the second-person narrative employed in *Black Box*, pointing out that the second-person narrative leads the reader to participate in the story, allowing the reader to sense the same feelings as the protagonist does. From the second person's perspective, Egan expresses her concerns and worries about the security of the American security as well as the whole world in the post-"9-11" period and at the same time she embraces the virtues and pleasures of traditional storytelling delivered through a wholly new digital format. This paper concludes that *Black Box* is perhaps one of the boldest experiments of narrative form and it is a direct exploration into the contemporary image culture.

Keywords

Jennifer Egan, *Black Box*, Second-Person Narrative, Image Culture

1. Introduction

Jennifer Egan (1963-), winner of the 2011 Pulitzer Prize, is a contemporary American fiction writer with popular appeal and a novelist of ideas noted for the elegance of her style. Egan is the author of *The Invisible Circus* (1995); *Emerald City and Other Stories* (1997); *Look at Me*, a finalist for the National Book Award in fiction in 2001; *The Keep* (2006), a national bestseller after its publication; and *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010), the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In 2012, Egan published a short science fiction *Black Box*. First released in an unusual serialized format on the *New Yorker's* Twitter account from the second-person narrative, *Black Box* was published as a series of 606 tweets releases at the rate of one tweet per minute for an hour between eight to nine p.m. EST (Eastern Standard Time) on nine

consecutive evenings from May 24 to June 2, 2012. There are 140 words for each tweet and totally 8500 words.

The story of *Black Box* is in the form of “mental dispatches” from a spy living in the Mediterranean area (south of France) in the near future (perhaps in the 2030s). After trained as a spy and being planted high-tech equipment in the body by the American National Security Department, a woman was sent to the Mediterranean area to steal highly secret information from some powerful men, who were thought to be terrorists to threaten the American security. As she went undercover among such suspected terrorists by deploying badger game, she kept a mental log of events in her body and her physical person was the “Black Box”.

As her habitual way of writing, Egan originally wrote *Black Box* by hand. She wrote it in a Japanese notebook she bought in New York which had eight rectangular boxes on each page and she wrote the story with each paragraph in one of these boxes. She filled five to seven pages of those rectangles a day. The story was originally nearly twice its present length and it took her a year to control and calibrate that material into the now published *Black Box*. It is not easy to write a science fiction in the form of “pure literature”, let alone composing a vivid Twitter story, but Egan succeeds by using her unique “weapon”: the narrative strategies. She uses second-person narrative in this Twitter story. Employing the “nonnatural” second person or imperative voice, and labeling individuals as contextual types such as the Designated Mate, the new host and the alpha beauty, the story written in the Twitter form is rich in character, situation, description, atmosphere, and setting.

2. Literature Review on Second-Person Narrative

Second-person narrative, as Monika Fludernik points out: “moreover, flies in the face of any ‘realistic’ conceptions of fictional story telling: it is one of the most ‘nonnatural’¹ or contrived types of narrative since real-world speakers would not usually narrate to the current addressee their own experiences in the present or in the past” [1]. As the rarest mode in fiction works though quite common in nonfiction including letters, greeting cards and memorial speech, second-person narrative usually refers to the reader as “you”, therefore making the audience or the reader feel as if he or she is a character within the story. Second-person narrative mode is often paired with the first-person narrative mode in which the narrator makes emotional comparisons between the thoughts, actions, and feelings of “you” versus “I”.

The use of “you” in narrative appears to have been preceded by the use of “you” by lyric poets and it is difficult to say precisely when “you” first appeared in fiction as a narrative form, few if any analysts of fiction have seriously considered the second-person narrative form. Percy Lubbock, the pioneer of point-of-view studies, neglects it; Joseph Warren Beach devotes a paragraph to it; Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren write as if only first- and third-person modes existed; E. M. Forster says nothing about it; Genette subsumes second-person narrative which he calls a “rare but very simple case” [2]; Wayne Booth, in his voluminous and authoritative work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, referring to Michel Butor’s second-person fiction, states in a footnote that “effects to use the second person have never been very successful” [3], but cites no other illustrations. Gerald Prince’s discussion of the issue consists in presenting an invented two-sentence passage and noting that “we learn nothing explicit about the narratee as such, except that he takes part in the events recounted to him: we do not know what he thinks of these events as he is told them; we do not perceive what his attitude towards the narrator and his narration is; and so on and so forth” [4].

Helmut Bonheim discovers numerous second-person stories in recent Canadian fiction and coins two evocative terms to describe the typical ambiguity and multifunctionality of the second-person pronoun in second-person texts. Bonheim uses the term “referential slither” to denote the “you’s” inherent capacity for addressing both the actual reader and a narratee as well as denoting a fictional protagonist and his second term, “conative solicitude”, used in the title of his 1982 paper on second-person narrative. He manages to pinpoint one of the more prominent emotional effects of second person, namely, its decidedly involving quality, which provokes much greater initial empathy with second-person protagonists than with first- or third-person characters.

Besides Bonheim’s work, there have been some academic papers on second-person narrative. The most recent

¹The accepted term is now “unnatural”. Unnatural narratives means anti-mimetic narratives that challenge and move beyond real-world understandings of identity, time, and space by representing scenarios and events that would be impossible in the actual world. In 1996, Monika Fludernik published a book called *Toward a “natural” narratology*, in which she put forward the term “unnatural”. Then a group of narratologists started a project in reaction that she called “unnatural narratology.”

Here I’d like to thank Professor Marie-Laure Ryan who has shared with me her opinion on the two words of “nonnatural” and “unnatural”. Ryan also claims that one cannot draw a line between what is natural and not natural, so “unnatural narratology,” while it has produced some interesting work, rests on a very shaky theoretical foundation.

studies on second-person narrative are the articles written by Brian Richardson and Monika Fludernik. Richardson defines second-person fiction as “any narration that designates its protagonist by a second-person pronoun. This protagonist will usually be the sole focalizer, and is generally the work’s narratee as well” [5]. Richardson’s definition differs from Prince’s in that Prince makes the protagonist’s narrateehood the principal criterion of second-person fiction; Richardson, by contrast, sees reference to the protagonist as central and makes narrateehood a secondary criterion. One should add immediately that, although most second-person fiction is indeed written in the second-person pronoun form, the choice of pronoun is that of an address’ pronoun or of other elements of address such as the imperative rather than, specifically, of “you”. In some languages the address’ pronoun can be a third person or plural form within that language’s morphological system.

Fludernik alleges that second-person fiction is “fiction that employs a pronoun of address in reference to a fictional protagonist” [6]. She points out that second-person narrative cannot be easily accommodated within current narratological paradigms. There are now a great number of very different second-person texts available which require cursory analysis. In 1994, Fludernik also gave a bibliography of second-person narrative, in which she not only listed all the second-person texts and criticism that she had been able to verify but also categorized them into four sections:

A. a list of those second-person texts that meet my requirements as explained in my “Introduction” to the special issue of *Style* on second-person narrative, Volume 28, No. 3 (Fall 1994). The second-person pronoun refers to a fictional protagonist. B. a list of texts noted in the literature as being second-person texts but that do not correspond to my definition. C. a very short list of a few films with second-person voice-over that I have found mentioned or seen myself.... D. a list of criticism on the second person and address in general, on second-person narrative, and on second-person uses in poetry [7].

From the above analysis, we can observe that although the adoption of second-person narrative has been noticed by critics for quite a long period and it has been discussed by many critics, there still has been no fixed and comprehensive definition of second-person narrative. One of the major handicaps to an adequate treatment of second-person narrative is probably the lack of an unequivocal definition of what exactly a second-person text is. Seeing that second-person narrative is still too rare to cause most readers pause, critics do not seem to make much sense to insist on an overly restrictive definition of the phenomenon. On the other hand, subsuming all second-person fiction under the entire spectrum of second-person forms in narrative may have the risk of diluting the very specificity and originality of the phenomenon. In addition to this, recent researches which analyze the second-person realm have uncovered a wide variety of second-person texts that can no longer easily be classified under one and only one form of second-person fiction, a factor that complicates the issue of definition even further. Finally, in light of the difficulties of integrating second-person texts within standard narrative theories, second-person narrative can be regarded as a touchstone for the very basis of narratological models and particularly of their fundamental categories. As a consequence, it becomes problematic to define second-person texts by reference to the very models and categories that have proved inadequate to an incorporation of second-person fiction in the first place. This theoretical deadlock can only be resolved by rewriting narrative paradigms in a way that will as a matter of course accommodate second-person texts, and it is beyond the analysis of the present paper.

3. Second-Person Narrative in *Black Box*

Jennifer Egan, one of the boldest practitioners of different narrative forms in her fiction writing, directly adopts the pronoun “you” to narrate the story *Black Box*. Yet it is not the first time that Egan employs the second-person narrative. Chapter Ten of *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, “Out of Body”, is narrated from the second person’s perspective. There, the protagonist as well as the narrator Robert was fighting in the rip current and was in a state of out of body experience before being drowned in the river. In *Black Box*, “your” identity has not been revealed until Section Five: the protagonist “you” belongs to one of the members of trained national security personnel; “you” is a woman spy who is willing to sacrifice yourself for the nation’s security in the world of terrorists by means of badger game.

“You will be infiltrating the lives of criminals.

“You will be in constant danger.

“Some of you will not survive, but those who do will be heroes.

“A few of you will save lives and even
change the course of history.

...

“An abiding love for your country and a
willingness to consort with individuals who
are working actively to destroy it;

...

Your voluntary service is the highest
form of patriotism.

Remind yourself that you aren't being
paid when he climbs out of the water
and lumbers toward you.

Remind yourself that you aren't
being paid when he leads you behind
a boulder and pulls you onto
his lap. [8]

The sentences with quotation marks without any interval or any refuting remarks in Section Five show that the protagonist “you” is willing and obedient to sacrifice yourself for the national security without any refutation. Along with the development of the story, “your” identity has become much clearer: you are a thirty-three-year-old woman spy who lives in the future; you are performing secret missions in the arena of the internal part of the terrorists; your body has been planted various high-tech equipments which can perform functions secretly and effectively:

A microphone has been implanted just
beyond the first turn of your right ear
canal.

Activate the microphone by pressing the
triangle of cartilage across your ear
opening.

...

Your Subcutaneous Pulse System issues
Pings so generic that detection would
reveal neither source nor intent.

A button is embedded behind the inside
Ligament of your right knee (if right-
handed).

Depress twice to indicate to loved ones
that you are well and thinking of them.

...

Your Field Instructions, stored in a chip
beneath your hairline, will serve as both a
mission log and a guide for others
undertaking this work.

Pressing your left thumb (if right-handed)
against your left middle fingertip begins
recording.

...

The camera implanted in your left eye is

operated by pressing your left tear duct.

...

Attached to the plug is a cable with a connection pin at one end for insertion into the handset's data port.

[8]

With such high-tech equipments in the body, "your" physical body is "our Black Box; without it, we have no record of what has happened on your mission" [8]. Your ultimate task is to bring the information filled in the "black box" to a rescued site called "hotspot".

In *Black Box*, "your" primary aim is a man who is "your Designated Mate" without real name. "You" follows him to a new remote and unfamiliar place where your ultimate target, that is, your "new host" lives. "You" photographs the sketches with the camera hidden in your left eye; "you" sneaks into "your new host's" bedroom and downloads the data from his handset:

Reach between your right fourth and pinky toes (if right-handed) and remove the Data Plug from your Universal Port.

Attached to the plug is a cable with a connection pin at one end for insertion into the handset's data port.

...

Spread apart your toes and gently reinsert the plug, now fused to your subject's handset, into your Universal Port.

You will feel the surge as the data flood your body. [8]

While stealing the information, "you" is found and injured by "your new host", but "you" succeeds escaping from the house and gets to the "Hotspot" by resorting the unique ability of "your Primal Roar" which horrifies your opponent. Here, Egan explicitly explains "the Primal Roar" and vividly describes the scene of the beauty's "Primal Roar":

When you find yourself cornered and outnumbered, you may unleash, as a last resort, your Primal Roar.

The Primal Roar is the human equivalent of an explosion, a sound that combines screaming, shrieking, and howling.

The Roar must be accompanied by facial contortions and frenetic body movement, suggesting a feral, unhinged state.

The Primal Roar must transform you from a beauty into a monster.

The goal is to horrify your opponent, the way trusted figures, turned evil, are horrifying in movies and in nightmares. [8]

Besides the ability of "the Primal Roar", "you" has another magical power: "the Dissociation Technique". It is a kind of technique that the body and spirit are separated momentarily. "You" manipulates this power whenever your physical violation is imminent. Egan accurately describes the scene of ten seconds while "you" was beginning to employ "the Dissociation Technique". When seduced by "the Designated Mate", "you" employs this

technique by counting number backward:
Close your eyes and slowly count
backward from ten.

With each number, imagine yourself rising
out of your body and moving one step
farther away from it.

By eight, you should be hovering
just outside your skin.

By five, you should be floating a foot or
two above your body, feeling only vague
anxiety over what is about to happen to it.

By three, you should feel fully detached
from your physical self.

By two, your body should be able to act
and react without your participation.

By one, your mind should drift so free that
you lose track of what is happening below. [8]

Egan seems obsessed with the description of the scenery of the magical power of “the Dissociation Technique”. Chapter Ten of *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, “Out of Body” has similar scenery. There, the spiritual part of the protagonist “you” is in a state of out of body, leaving “your” physical part struggle and be swallowed up in the torrent. The difference of this magical experience in the two fictions is that “you” obtains the ability while “you” is in a state of dying in *A Visit From the Goon Squad*; while in *Black Box*; “you” was born or endowed with the magical power of “the Dissociation Technique”, which accords with the science fiction genre. Again, when attracted and seduced by “the new host”, “you” also deploys the ability of “the Dissociation Technique” by counting number backward:

Begin your countdown early—as he lowers
himself into the tub.

By the time he seizes your arm, you should
be at five.

By the time your forehead is jammed
against a rock, you should perceive your
body only vaguely, from above.

....

If you feel, on returning to your body,
that much time has passed, don’t dwell
on how much. [8]

After the experimental employment of second-person narrative in *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Egan uses such narrative more deftly and smoothly in *Black Box*. She tactically utilizes one of second-person narrative’s key attributes in *Black Box*—the firm’s ability to “manifest ... in narrative technique the notion that someone or something outside of yourself dictates your thoughts and actions” [9]. The “you” pronoun forcibly asserts itself so that the reader cannot help but feel put upon. Despite a particular reader’s desire not to think the thoughts he or she is told what “you” is thinking, or do the things “you” is doing, there is no escaping the intrusiveness of the pronoun. For patriots who sacrifice themselves for the security of the nation, the feeling is the same—that someone outside himself/herself is dictating thoughts and actions.

Perhaps even more interesting than the feeling the reader gets of being put upon by the intrusive “you” is the

unique feeling a reader gets of separating from oneself during the reading of second-person narrative texts like *Black Box*. This feeling comes, theorists argue, because the narrative perspective offers two roles for the reader to assume: observer and addressee. On the one hand, the observer role is the standard role that readers take while reading first- and third-person fictional texts: we do not usually participate in the fictional world we are reading about; instead, we watch it from afar. The addressee role, on the other hand, is unique to second-person narrative. Because the text constantly addresses “you”, readers may sometimes take on the role of the addressee, participating in the fictional world instead of merely observing it. The extent of this participatory role can vary, as James Phelan notes: “the greater the characterization of the ‘you’, the more like a standard protagonist the ‘you’ becomes, and, consequently, the more actual readers can employ their standard strategies for reading narrative” [10]. But while there is a general move in any reading toward the observer role with fuller characterization, the reader can move back and forth between these roles: “As readers, we oscillate in complex ways between being participants in the fictional world and in the real world” [9].

As Dennis Schofield has observed, this oscillation causes readers to “experience some of the second person’s instances as both forcefully compelling and alienating” [11]. It is this compelling alienation that most causes readers to feel what it is like to have the responsibility of patriotism as well as the feeling of thrill while reading *Black Box*; readers are, in actuality, being pulled apart and put back together—enduring the same feeling of sacrificing with the movement of the protagonist, which accords with the British essayist, critic and biographer Percy Lubbock’s statement: “The reader of a novel... is perhaps a novelist; he is the maker of a book which may or may not please his taste when it is finished, but of a book for which he must take his own share of responsibility” [12].

In short, “the second person has a Protean, shape-shifting quality that can defeat our willful attempts to specify and identify” [11], we can lose our identities while reading second-person narrative, just as the beauties lose their identities to the tasks of espionage. James Phelan notes that “most writers who employ this technique take advantage of the opportunity to move readers between the positions of observer and addressee and, indeed, to blur the boundaries between these positions, in short, it is not easy to say who you are” [10]. Egan does take opportunities to swing readers between the addressee and observer roles. While her story may cover common ground for many readers, she understands that not every reader will relate to the beauty Lulu’s patriotic experience and her badge game to capture the information from the possible terrorists; therefore, Egan intentionally calls the attention of all readers, at least all the American people who hold patriotic feelings toward their nation. When stealing and transporting the data of the “new host” handset to the “Universal Port” in her body, Lulu was caught by her “new host”. At that moment, Egan, in the form of “yours” voice, tried to call the attention of all the American people to listen to her:

As Americans, we value human rights
above all else and cannot sanction their
violation.

When someone threatens our human
rights, however, a wider leeway becomes
necessary.

Follow your instincts while bearing in mind
that we must, and will, hew to our
principles. [8]

Hearing the words, any American or anyone who loves human rights and hates terrorists would have the same feeling when he/she is in such a circumstance.

4. Conclusion

Told in second-person narrative, the serialized tweeting format of *Black Box* released via computer, iPhone or iPad brings the reader immediate reading experience, allowing the reader to sense the same feelings as the protagonist does. With second-person narrative, Egan draws the reader into the addressee role. By engaging the reader in this way, the author makes it easier for “one of the more prominent emotional effects of second-person narrative: namely, its decidedly involving quality, which provokes much greater initial empathy with second-

person protagonists than with first- or third-person characters” [1], to further allow the reader to sense the feelings of patriotism just as the protagonist does. Egan expresses her concerns and worries about the security of America as well as the whole world in the post-“9·11” period. If the initial invisible narrator is the mission executor, later on his or her identity becomes clear: “we” are American, or more precisely, “we” are national security personnel of the United States of America. “We” have been sitting in front of a big screen and watching “you” all the time. “You” is one of the millions of national security personnel who are sacrificing your lives to protect the nation.

Fund

This paper is part of achievements of Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning of Henan Province “A Study on the Narrative in Jennifer Egan’s Works” (2014CWX038), Project of Education Department of Henan Province “A Narrative Research of Jennifer Egan’s Works: Under the New Media Vision” (2015-QN-350), Youth Innovation Fund of Henan Agricultural University, “Traditional’ Postmodern Narrative—Research on Jennifer Egan’s Works” (B6).

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