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ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is to identify a theoretical approach for teaching narrative theory with television as a strategy. I argue that television serves as an accessible introduction to narrative theory and that following the template in study prepares students to transfer their new understanding of popular television narratives to the reading of complex novels. This thesis asks whether the critical acclaim attached to American television shows of the New Golden Age should push us to reconsider the place of television within the context of English studies as a pedagogical tool. It addresses the current relationship between television and the novel in America as understood by television critics, literary critics, students, and teachers while recognizing the ways in which popular television can inform student understanding of narrative theory. The selected texts for this case study include *Lost* (2004), *Arrested Development* (2003), and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. All three texts were chosen because of their mainstream success combined with critical acclaim, along with their similarities in structural experimentation and innovative storytelling methods, and have proven a successful grouping in my own teaching practice as part of a Contemporary Novels course. During development of the course, I recognized the need for an understanding of formal plot structures and theories of narrative, and this thesis responds to that pedagogical concern. I conclude with suggestions for broadening the scope of the teaching approach I describe to include alternate narratively complex television shows and/or televisual novels.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Making Narrative Theory Teachable: Experiments and Overlaps in

Lost, Arrested Development, and A Visit from the Goon Squad

by

Kristen Lynn Zosche

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of

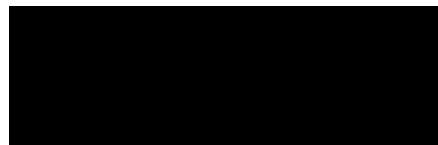
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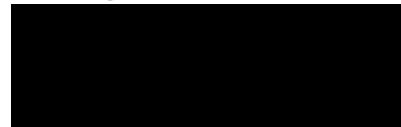
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MAKING NARRATIVE THEORY TEACHABLE: EXPERIMENTS AND OVERLAPS
IN *LOST*, *ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT*, AND *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

KRISTEN LYNN ZOSCHE

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2018

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Introduction

The complexity present in recent television series has attracted the attention of the public and critics alike. With the rise of prized content and the critical acclaim attached to American television shows of the current era, this moment seems to call for teachers and scholars of literature to reflect on innovations in the medium and consider television as a focus of English studies. *How to Watch Television*, by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, identifies television criticism as “textual analysis” (Thompson and Mittell 4). The book “assumes that there is something to be discovered by carefully examining a cultural work, or ‘text’” and identifies how a “close watching” of a program can yield “a broader argument about television and its relation to other cultural forces” (4). The work of Thompson and Mittell suggests a connection between the formal critical analysis of television (“close watching”) and that of literature (close reading).

Television has long been studied as a cultural artifact. Lynn Spigel’s cultural history of American television, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, explains how television became a dominant medium between 1948 and 1955, a time when “television was installed in nearly two-thirds of the nation’s homes” (1). The 1950’s are widely considered The Golden Age of Television, an era when television became part of people’s daily routines, but the lack of programming choices led to a uniformity of viewing and lack of incentive to experiment. By the late-1990s, radical shifts in television programming resulted in a cluttered media space and a newfound pressure for shows to defy boundaries and gain watercooler status. This New Golden Age of Television (from the late-1990s to the present) is characterized by complex story worlds, intersecting narrative threads, nonlinearity, and fragmentation.

In creating *The Sopranos*, considered a forerunner of the New Golden Age, HBO established itself as a gated community, and inside these gates the “rules” of television dissolved. The series signaled a shift in the formal structures and expectations of television. The character-driven show with its multitude of narrative layers rewarded me for returning every Sunday. Upon an initial viewing of the series, I shifted into academic discourse in my discussions of the episodes, as my everyday vocabulary did not allow me to thoroughly assess what I was watching—my training as an English major did. I relied on the language of literary analysis and instinctively compared my viewing to the experience of close reading a novel; it demanded the same engagement and skills for analysis. Surprisingly, these increased demands placed on viewers resulted in drawing viewers in, not deterring them.

The early 2000s continued this rise in experimentation on television. The innovative narrative structure and manipulation of temporality in *24*, the intersecting narrative threads and reliance on coincidence in *Arrested Development*, the ensemble cast and nonlinearity characteristic of *Lost*, the complex storyworld and character development in *Mad Men* all contribute to our shifting expectations of television and an understanding of this new era as something different than the television of previous generations. Amanda Lotz’s book *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* can help us think about teaching innovation on television: “Changes in what we can do with television, what we expect from it, and how we use it...are revolutionizing television” (3). The rejection of traditional conventions combined with expanded audience access have sparked a rise in unconventional stories and innovative methods of storytelling.

In 2014, while this evolution in TV was happening, I began developing a Contemporary Novels course to be taught in an independent secondary school. As I began reading the award-winning texts of the previous decade, and the texts most often cited on college syllabi, I found many experimental novels, seemingly affected by the same cultural norms as television. The rise in narrative experimentation in television from the 1990s to the present is mirrored in many novels of the era, perhaps most notably Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. From a teaching perspective, I was drawn to Egan's novel because it defies expectations of structure, form, and point of view. Once I selected *Visit* as the principal text for the class, I recognized the need for an understanding of formal plot structures and theories of narrative, and to help students grapple with narrative theory, I turned to the narrative complexity of contemporary American television.

In the introduction to *Teaching Narrative Theory*, the editors discuss the interdisciplinary spread of narrative experimentation across genres and media and argue for pedagogical resources focusing on narrative and narrative theory (Herman et al. 1-2). The publication of their volume makes the case for narrative theory being brought into the classroom. They recognize that the terminology of narrative theory "can create impediments for newcomers to the field" (2) but translation of this vocabulary to make theory accessible for students is essential to the teaching of narrative. Since my Contemporary Novels course is an elective in the English department, the student population within the class is varied in regard to academic levels (i.e. College Prep, Honors, AP); providing accessibility to theoretical concepts was my primary concern and the reason why I looked to television as a point of entry. The Contemporary Novels

course offers an opportunity for students to practice their skills of literary analysis while engaging with a variety of recent novels. I recognize the broader utility of narrative theory in this context, encouraging students to think more critically about the variety of narratives they encounter in their daily lives.

My argument is that using television, and narrative theory about it, is a less “academic” and more accessible introduction to reading complex novels. In *Recent Theories of Narrative*, Wallace Martin argues that “to understand...theories of narrative, it is necessary to study and attempt to apply them” (Martin 105). Formal narrative analysis requires tools for labeling storytelling practices, and to understand theories of narrative, students must study these tools before moving on to application and analysis. My students tend to think of television as uniquely their own, perhaps because it is a form with which they consider themselves experts. My purpose is to enrich their viewing experiences and resituate them as more critical viewers, with the ultimate intended effect of translation into literary study, resulting in more engaged and critical readers.

The novel remains one of the most versatile modes of storytelling, deeply embedded in cultural history and literacy, and novels remain a hallmark of humanities study in independent schools. Yet it is precisely the mingling of traditional novelistic elements and those Egan has drawn from television and multimedia that make her novel useful for considering the rise of narrative complexity, the formal structure experiments that we can observe coming from it, and the value of narrative theory for understanding rewarding narratives of all kinds following this cultural shift, including podcasts, political narratives, and legal discourse.

I propose teaching the necessary concepts of narrative theory through American television on the basis of accessibility and student familiarity with the form. Then, those understandings can be applied to a study of Egan's novel and translated back across media to television, film, and a variety of digital forms. *Visit* is an ideal choice because of its mainstream success (the novel made its way onto a variety of "Best Books" lists, from *The New York Times* to *O: The Oprah Magazine*) combined with its critical acclaim (including the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction), in spite of (or perhaps because of) its demanding nature. The novel offers a mix of accessibility and innovation, and its televisual components make for a rather straightforward transition from television to literary fiction. *Lost* and *Arrested Development* serve as the appropriate companion texts because they offer a similar hybrid of mainstream success and critical acclaim, while relying on experimental narrative choices akin to those found in *Visit*.

Chapter 1 explores practices involved in establishing a theoretical foundation through popular American television, specifically through the pairing of *Lost* and *Arrested Development*. I turn to the key ideas and definitions particularly important for engaging with narrative theory and recognizing the innovation in both television and the novel. While Egan explicitly credits *The Sopranos* as inspiration, I suggest that the structural experiments present in *Visit* are more prevalent and easier for students to identify in *Lost* and *Arrested Development*, a pairing that has worked well because students can recognize similarities in form. In selecting a drama and a comedy for intensive study, my pedagogical goal is the recognition of storytelling norms across genres before moving onto norms across formats. Furthermore, these shows are age-appropriate and more likely to be accepted in secondary-classroom settings. The teaching

of television shows provides students with enjoyable/accessible examples for narrative analysis, including the application of key vocabulary. I conclude the first chapter by situating *Visit* as a televisual novel to introduce genre hybridity and cross-media influence.

Chapter 2 looks specifically at narrative theory as an analytical tool for the study of *Visit*. I address the application of the theoretical foundations established in Chapter 1 (i.e. narrative progression, ensemble narrative, nostalgia effect, time and space, perspective and focalization, and characterization) as they relate to the teaching of the novel. In the course of discussion, students will begin to view television and the novel in relation to one another, discovering more parallels than differences between the two mediums. A reading of *Visit* is enhanced by a knowledge of narrative theory and once students recognize this, they can begin to see an understanding of narrative, and the reading of a complex novel, as both useful and rewarding. I then turn to genre hybridity with the pedagogical goal of teaching students to understand digital narratives in formal ways. If narrative theory is to be an analytical tool for students, one that functions as a shared vocabulary to understand genre hybridity, the teaching of digital media within the context of this ambitious literary novel is necessary, and *Visit* encourages recognition of the influence of digital technology in literary fiction.

My hope is that this research will make the case for bringing television into the English classroom as both a multimedia text and pedagogical tool. By giving students opportunities to grapple with complex narratives we can teach them the broad utility of narrative theory as a tool for critical analysis.

Chapter 1: *The (R)evolution of Television*

The first unit of my Contemporary Novels course is an introduction to innovative narrative and narrative theory. The unit aims to equip students with the necessary tools for narrative analysis of complex material, including the application of key vocabulary, and to enable students to use narratology for textual analysis, by which I mean considering the effects of narrative choices or close reading. The primary “texts” for this unit are *Lost*, *Arrested Development*, and *Visit*.

I begin each academic year by surveying all students in the course about their own reading and viewing practices (See Appendix A). The results highlight that popular television is the dominant mode of narrative consumption for secondary students, far exceeding their free-time consumption of novels, and my aim is to teach them to utilize the similarities between the two mediums to further their critical analysis of both. Today’s students were born into a world of narrative complexity on television; as a result, they expect the demands placed on them by the series they watch. Alternatively, they anticipate that the novel is linear in form and fail to realize that novels can, and do, make the same innovative narrative moves as the shows they love. The discrepancy exists because of their assumptions about genres and storytelling. In an effort to resolve this discrepancy, I begin with a general introduction to narrative. While all students enter the course with a basic understanding of plot, the classical approaches to narrative that they have learned depend on a notion of linearity. The students expect exposition in literary texts, but when they encounter complex narratives, they are forced into a conflict without knowing where, when, or who the key events are taking place. They are willing to resolve

this conflict while watching TV and narrative theory will help them transfer that skill to novels and other narratives.

James Morrison argues that the modernist heritage of narrative theory “makes it especially attuned to unconventional narratives that revise, modify, or challenge conceptions of what stories...can do” (196). While Morrison is specifically concerned with American film, the key concepts can be translated for American television. Unconventional narratives are the new mainstream with a “commitment to...rearranging chronology, broaching extreme ellipses, slowing down or speeding up narrative time, and generally deriding the norms of traditional storytelling” (197). Jason Mittell argues that these storytelling devices of narratively complex programs “are used with such frequency and regularity as to become more the norm than the exception” (36). This is why students are not surprised when exposed to innovative storytelling on television.

This part of the course seeks to find order in “the new disorder” in television narrative. The overlapping and intersecting storylines, alterations in chronology, and fragmentation characteristic of the post-90s New Golden Age of television encourage student recognition of the grasp they already have on these narratives and how it is transferable. Steven Johnson argues that contemporary “viewers have to follow intersecting narrative threads that include many distinct characters, each with their own continuing storyline” (169). The increased demands placed on viewers are actually contributing to audience engagement and popular acclaim, rather than hindering it, as proven by the success of first season of *Lost* which premiered on September 22, 2004 to a record-breaking audience of 18.6 million viewers. As the season continued, the show never lost its appeal; it maintained an audience of almost 19 million viewers for every

episode during the first season. These numbers suggest that contemporary audiences have an appetite for this kind of narrative complexity on television and explain the proliferation of complex narratives like *Lost*.

This type of complexity is scattered throughout contemporary television's landscape. While Jennifer Egan credits *The Sopranos*, which Steven Johnson deemed, in the late 1990s, "the most ambitious show on TV to date" ("Watching TV Makes You Smarter 173), I suggest two equally ambitious shows for teaching complexity in accessible TV programs: *Lost* and *Arrested Development*. According to Jason Mittell, "it is hard to imagine how someone might watch *Lost* or *Arrested Development* without noting their formal innovations and considering how the use of flashbacks or reflexive narration changes [the audience's] perspectives on the narrative action" (38). Together, *Lost* and *Arrested Development* provide material for teaching a variety of contemporary storytelling strategies including episodic and serial forms, the story-discourse divide, temporal sequencing, and focalization. Below, I will explain how I approach teaching these two shows as complex narratives, both to introduce narrative theory and prepare students for *A Visit to the Goon Squad*.

Lost

From the very first episode, the series relies on subverted linear plotting, complicatedly intertwined character arcs, and flashbacks as a vehicle for narrative backstory. Heather McLendon defines *Lost* as a flexi-narrative because it straddles episodic (e.g. *House*, *CSI*) and serial (e.g. *The Sopranos*, *Game of Thrones*) forms, refusing to provide closure at each episode's end (McLendon). The primary objectives

while teaching the show are narrative shapes/temporal sequence, focalization/perspective, and characterization. To understand how *Lost* deploys these narrative techniques, we look at the first two episodes: “Pilot” (September 22, 2004) and “Pilot Part 2” (September 29, 2004).

If we consider narrative as the interplay between content and form, how the story is told takes precedence over the plot itself in narrative analysis. Adopting the language of Roland Barthes, students need to distinguish between *story* and *discourse*, or what is happening within the diegesis (story-world) versus how the story is presented to us (including chronology, point-of-view, etc.). Contemporary works of significant narrative complexity, including film, television, the novel, and other digital forms, rely on a variety of techniques to manipulate the story-discourse divide. The first episode of *Lost* presents a story-world filled with action: a plane crash, a jungle monster, a pregnant woman, a (possibly) dying man. But the mystery does not rely solely on the story itself; it is supported by the way in which that story is told. The pilot episode opens in the midst of a plane crash presented through the perspective of a single character, and viewers have no grounding in where, why, how, or even who they encounter. This element of the unknown is created by the point of entry and lack of backstory for viewers; the narrative structure recreates the state of confusion, uncertainty, and disarray felt by the characters themselves. Inherent to this understanding of temporal manipulation is an awareness of narrative pliability and the ability of *Lost*'s creators to manipulate viewers through narrative sequencing yet retain their interest.

Understandings of narrative are shaped by the temporal sequence in which events are distributed. David Herman suggests that “one way to introduce students to the

concept of narrative worlds is to focus on how story openings prompt interpreters to take up residence...in the world being evoked” (125). The first event coincides with the beginning of a central action and what follows can be both earlier and subsequent events (Kafalenos 101). The pilot of *Lost* opens on an unknown island in the aftermath of a plane crash, a seemingly standard castaway narrative, and progresses in a linear fashion until the revelation of nonlinearity occurs approximately 21 minutes into the episode. When the audience is abruptly forced back onto the since-crashed airplane, the result is disorienting. From this point forward, chronology is determined based on a pre-crash vs. post-crash binary.

This shift in the space/time continuum is not the only disorienting factor; the sequencing also contributes to the audience’s confusion. The introduction of the ‘jungle monster’ rejects the presumed cliché orientation of the castaway, stranded-on-an-island plot and presents an unexpected narrative turn: this is not an ordinary island. As Heather McLendon has noted, this is a critical moment for the characters and viewers: she writes, “we immediately desire more details; however, instead of returning to the jungle and the mysteries therein, the writers delay that particular narrative thread by reversing back in time to the still-airborne plane” (McLendon). The narrative purposely withholds information, halting any forward progression. The jungle monster storyline is then situated as another narrative arc woven into the already complex series of interwoven character threads. We know that Jack is a doctor who may have an alcohol addiction and recognize a possible romantic connection between him and Kate, who so graciously stitches his wounds. We know that Boone and his sister, Shannon, have complicated relationship not unlike the relationship between Sun and Jin, which we realize is also

complex. There is a desire to know more about Michael, and his son, Walt, who appear more like acquaintances than father and son; to know if the brooding Sawyer is a hero, villain, or anti-hero; to know the identity of the prisoner being transported by the U.S. Marshal; to know if Claire's baby will survive and if Rose will ever reunite with her husband. Ultimately, there is a proliferating desire for more information based on the number of characters introduced.

Returning viewers to the plane (pre-crash) after they have already experienced the island (post-crash) prompts the recognition of people, topics, items from the first "chapter" present in the second and creates an uncertainty in regard to *when* we are. In "Across the Curriculum: Image-Text Studies," Emma Kafalenos offers an approach to teaching temporal sequence that asks "students to consider the effects of narrative shapes" through a temporality graph (101). In relation to *Lost*, these graphs help students create order and begin to assess chronology. Students depict the chronological sequence of major events as a horizontal line, essentially an x-axis. A vertical line, or y-axis, intersects the x-axis at the temporal position of the initial event that is given scenic treatment: the plane crash (See Appendix B). This approach forces students to recognize intentional choices within narrative sequencing as they continue viewing, and it encourages discovery of how the current situation came about and how it will be resolved. Brian Richardson suggests that "the study of plot and progression discloses the shifting dynamics of narrative beginnings, middles, and endings [and] their respective relations in different works" (120). The focus on this story opening in relation to world creation in television shows has served as an effective introduction.

At this point in their analysis, students will benefit from an understanding of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotope and the space-time nexus. Narrative time and narrative space are of primary concern in the narratively complex story-worlds of contemporary television and novels, with viewers and readers alike asking, "where are we?" and "when are we?" Bakhtin's "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" defines chronotope as the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in the literature" (Bakhtin 84). Bakhtin is centrally concerned with the relationship between a character's past, present, and future in relation to the broader narrative and the character's place within the story-world. For example, the flashbacks that occur in *Lost* can be considered chronotopic moves that reveal critical turning points for characters and resituate them within the "present" post-crash island world.

The recognition of both focalized and backgrounded elements of the narrative world accentuates the shifts between foregrounded and backgrounded objects, regions, and characters (Herman 134). *Lost* is rooted in a consistent shifting of focalization and perspective. The return to the plane signals recognition of background characters from a post-crash island world. With a background in narrative time, space, and sequencing, students are now prepared to notice that all of the major characters later identified are present in the opening sequence. For example, John Locke is present approximately four minutes into part one of the pilot episode, but exists in the background; he is foregrounded as we see Jack attempting to help as many survivors as he can. Viewers are limited to this perspective because of Jack's status as focalizer in the opening sequence of the first episode. This proves that awareness of focalization, Gerard Genette's term for

modes of perspective (Genette), is required for analyzing the relationship between “major” and “minor” characters in *Lost*.

Temporality determines *when* we learn information about the story-world, but this information is limited to *what* specific characters experience; the characters serve as a lens through which viewers see events and other characters. In her focalization diagram assignment, Kafalenos asks students to follow the pattern “*Perceiver* looks through *lens* at *object*” (103). I ask my students to do the same and sketch a diagram that identifies a specific character as a lens in the show. This assignment supports student understanding of focalization in *Lost* and helps them identify the core elements for understanding narrative perspective: perceiver, lens, and object. Here are some suggested approaches for this assignment:

1. The viewer sees through Jack’s perspective at the plane crash. The audience sees the destruction as he does, introduced to it for the first time together. The confusion Jack feels in the opening seconds of the show, looking through the trees to the sky, noticing a lone dog wandering in the jungle, trying to orient himself in an unknown location, is also experienced by the viewer.
2. The viewer looks through Michael at Sun and Jin’s relationship. Not only does a language barrier hinder any ability to communicate with them, a lack of cultural grounding encourages misinterpretation.
3. The viewer sees Shannon as focalized through her brother, Boone. His lack of patience towards his sister and her behavior stems from his personal relationship with her, while other characters are meeting her for the first time and, as a result, are much more lenient.

4. The viewer sees Kate as focalized through Jack. The audience is shocked to learn that Kate is the criminal on the airplane because they are introduced to her through Jack's eyes. She shows him kindness and selflessly agrees to sew his wound, initially characterizing her as a "good" character.

Lost provides a variety of perspectives of the same events. In the two-part pilot, viewers continuously return to the plane, pre-crash, and the island, post-crash, but from the perspectives of different characters. The result is character development that is surprising, constantly evolving, uprooting value judgments, and more authentically representative of meeting new people.

Traditional, less complex texts often rely on character tropes and more objective, third-person focalization as vehicles of character development. For example, another less complex version of *Lost* might situate Jack as the hero and primary protagonist with Kate as his heroine and love interest. Instead, *Lost* manipulates the clichéd versions of characters in an effort to keep the audience guessing. The characters are instead far from one-dimensional; they are not solely "good" or solely "bad" and there is no clear, singular villain established in the first episode. McLendon sorts the character development in *Lost* to three specific narrative choices: narrative arcs, flashbacks and character-centered episodes, and the slow secretion of details. The framing question for a study of this multifaceted characterization in the show is: What is the consequence of this unconventional treatment of character? Characters that seem "major" fade to the background and then reappear, with "minor" characters replacing them in the forefront. This structure is repeated for the development of different characters.

The treatment of the initial event posits Jack as the show's main protagonist. In the opening minutes, he reaches into his jacket pocket and removes an airplane bottle of what appears to be vodka, then reaches for his head wincing in pain. This suggests that he has been drinking prior to our introduction to him. Eventually, we learn that he struggles with alcohol addiction. As the opening sequence continues, we witness Jack jump into trauma/savior mode. He ties a tourniquet on an injured man's leg just after the four minute mark and then runs to a screaming, pregnant Clare (who still sits in the background). Every choice Jack makes in the (almost) 8-minute opening sequence builds his characterization as a doctor.

Because Jack remains the focalizer throughout the opening sequence, *Lost* pushes the decentralization of other primary characters. The soon-to-be foregrounded characters are present, but in the background, in the opening sequence and Jack is the lens through which we view them. At 3:10, Charlie is dazed and wandering near the engine. At 3:24 and 3:27, respectively, Jin yells for Sun, his wife, and Michael yells for Walt, his son. By 3:30 Shannon is standing still in the midst of the chaos, screaming. At 4:10 Jack elicits the help of John Locke. Jack embraces a frightened Clare at 4:55 and then glances to Boone who is performing CPR on Rose. At 5:28 Jack yells to Hurley for assistance and it is not until 5:44 that Hurley asks and Jack tells us his name. Each of these characters seamlessly moves in and out of the foreground as part of Jack's experience.

The expectations of the audience are halted when *Lost* deviates from traditional narrative approaches and the background characters take center stage. The 11-character ensemble cast "introduced" in the opening sequence offer 11 distinct storylines, all with narrative gaps to fill, making the narrative structure that much more complicated and the

characters that much more intriguing. This reliance on an ensemble cast threatens to reject the “rule” that the protagonist must survive, therefore dividing our sympathy and limiting the safety of every character, every episode.

Flashbacks are the primary vehicle for character development in *Lost* and they extend characters’ narrative arcs backward, into the story’s present, and forward (and eventually, SPOILER ALERT: into the future) in time. They also allow for thorough and ambitious backstories. In the first two episodes, the arcs shift from the present, post-crash, beach reality to the pre-crash plane to weeks and months before the Oceanic 815 flight (McLendon). The show withholds personal details about the characters and this narrative accretion decentralizes our initial perception of characters and requires the audience to actively participate to follow all the characterization.

The thematic uncertainty in *Lost* keeps viewers engaged. The audience is presented with details, moments, entire sequences that we cannot gauge the importance of (i.e. jungle monster); it feels as if everything and nothing is important. Because my students are often unaware of Chekhov’s gun, this seems the opportune moment to reintroduce them to the concept. They begin to recognize themselves as “narrative detectives,” with every object and every reference potentially playing an important role in the plot. While the result is a bit overwhelming, this approach serves to refine skills important to close reading. The airplane bottle of alcohol, the lost dog, the tennis sneaker hanging from a tree—even in the first few minutes of the show, we have to assume that nothing is without purpose.

Thus we can say that a single episode of *Lost* relies on a variety of storytelling strategies and tropes beyond McLendon’s characterization. Traditionally, episodic

storytelling limits narrative complexity and innovation, but *Lost* relies on atypical storytelling and a hybrid of episodic and serial approaches. While there are varying beginnings and endings of multiple storylines, each does not open and close with one episode. The beginning of the series relies on a different central character in each episode combined with the cumulative narrative enigma of the mystical island and the jungle monster that inhabits it. Thus *Lost* is characterized by complexity in both its setting and ensemble cast, and the seriality of its hybrid form supports the complexity of both. The work I assign ensures students have a foundation in the kind of narrative complexity that characterizes contemporary television and gives them opportunities to practice the application of narrative theory.

Arrested Development

Due to the overlap in narrative techniques across both series, *Arrested Development* works to reinforce many of the lessons from our study of *Lost*. We can use *Arrested Development* to review key concepts and introduce a few new ones, focusing on how these transfer across genres. Similar to *Lost*, episodes offer seemingly minor details that viewers do not recognize will be important in the bigger scheme until they are; this is how coincidences and intersecting storylines occur. The narrative complexity in *Arrested Development* is characterized by “interwoven plotting” that results in unlikely coincidences and ironic repercussions (Mittell 34). It is important to note the form of the series as complementary in both tone and theme. The series tells the story of “a wealthy disconnected family” (253) and this disconnect is furthered by the narrative structure itself. The storytelling strategies convey that contemporary family dynamics are messy,

unexpected, and layered with confusion and misunderstanding. In *Lost*, the complexity is used to create suspense and deepen the mystery; in this show, the operational aesthetic aims for comedic effect.

I teach *Arrested Development* after *Lost* because it provides a mixing of genres and character relationships that are more closely aligned with *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. *Arrested Development* is a family-oriented sitcom with a touch of workplace comedy, not a deserted-island disaster, and as a result the relationships between characters are much more comparable to the relationships in *Goon Squad*, which are between family members, friends, lovers, coworkers—people who already know each other.

The *Arrested Development* “Pilot” episode (November 2, 2003) opens at the retirement party for George Sr., and the necessary set-up for the comedic coincidences occurs in brief, flashback-form within the first two minutes of the episode. Viewers are introduced to each member of the family and provided with a seemingly random sampling of details that turn out to be crucial backstory. The ostensible protagonist, Michael Bluth, is the first character introduced, situating him as the focalizer for the series; while there is voiceover narration explaining the events as they are occurring and the necessary details in flashback form, the value judgments the narrator offers are rooted in Michael’s perspective. The introduction of Michael’s brother (1:09), George Oscar Bluth, Jr., more commonly referred to as G.O.B., includes his new “magic trick,” which he refers to as an *illusion* because “a trick is something a whore does for money” (a statement that serves as stand-alone comedy because of the juxtaposition of his language and his audience of children). Viewers also learn that G.O.B. founded The Alliance of

Magicians that blacklists any magicians who reveal secrets. Later in the episode, just past the 11-minute mark, when representatives from the Securities and Exchange Commission crash the boat party sending everyone into a panic, G.O.B. attempts to save his father by hiding him in The Aztec Tomb (G.O.B.'s new "illusion") and promising to make him disappear. The narrative then jumps to news coverage later in the day as the reporter explains how "Gob" hid his father in the tomb. In doing so, she reveals the secrets of the magic trick which warrants G.O.B.'s blacklisting from the very alliance he created.

Buster's introduction (1:42) acknowledges his random educational background, including cartography lessons, and a history of disabling panic attacks. After these laughable seemingly random details are revealed, the episode jumps forward in time, to "the morning of the boat party." In the most unlikely of scenarios, Buster is called upon for his useless knowledge of maps. In the midst of the SEC chaos, Lucille forces the captain out of the helm and urges Buster to navigate the yacht into the ocean. Buster's background in cartography should have prepared him for this moment, but, when the ability to read maps is essential, Buster collapses under the pressure. Not only does he mistake land for water on the map, the crippling panic attacks mentioned earlier inhibit his ability to do *anything*.

According to Mittell, "complexity, especially in comedies, works against [storytelling] norms by ...creating interweaving stories that often collide and coincide (Mittell 34). In *Arrested Development* viewers are forced to evaluate and make connections between events that occur in different parts of various episodes, while performing the same task based on the past, present, and future within a given individual episode. A return to the theory of Chekov's gun, the suggestion that all details should be

significant, is useful here to discuss the payoff of narrative anticipation. As in *Lost*, viewers recognize that nearly every detail matters and know that the plotlines will all formulaically converge in the end, but the unexpected narrative turns in *Arrested Development* result in comedic clashes. In addition to G.O.B.'s alliance and Buster's backstory, Lindsey and Tobias are intertwined in a Chekov's-gun scenario. In the opening two-minute introductory sequence, Lindsey recognizes a blouse she owns on one of the gay activists protesting outside her father's boat party. Halfway through the episode, at approximately 11:37, viewers discover that a series of unfortunate events have resulted in her husband, Tobias, being the "gay activist" that she sees. The joke is that she does not have a blouse like the one she sees, it is *her* blouse. The altered chronology, her recognition of the blouse before revealing the events leading up to that moment, is what sets up the comedy. When Tobias is introduced as Lindsey's husband through a flashback, he is identified as "not on boat." This minor detail foreshadows, and narratively allows for, Tobias being the "gay activist" on the boat wearing Lindsey's blouse. In an effort to analyze the theory of Chekov's gun and its comedic effects in *Arrested Development*, I recommend another temporality graph as a vehicle for students to analyze the details in relation to the sequencing of the episode (See Appendix B).

The fragmented chronology and shifting focalization continues throughout the pilot episode and throughout the series as a whole. Like *Lost*, flashbacks are a vehicle for character development. At around 4:45, Lucille tells Michael, "if you're saying I play favorites, you're wrong. I love all my children equally." Then, the scene jumps back to "earlier that day" and she proclaims "I don't really care for G.O.B." From this, the audience assumes that Lucille is not only unreliable, but that her motives are often, if not

always, manipulative. These kinds of cumulative backstories are necessary to the show's cumulative story. We need to know that Tobias lost his medical license due to an unfortunate misinterpretation involving CPR on a sleeping man, and that he is looking for a sign from the universe to provide a path for his future. The climax of his storyline comes with his realization that, after ending up on a boat with gay activists who are actually actors in the local theater, he wants to be an actor. The pursuit of this new goal continues over the course of the following episodes illustrating the presence of seriality. The result of the serial-episodic hybrid form is that viewers can understand a singular episode on some level, but it is impossible to truly appreciate the episode's significance in its entirety because of the show's reliance on reflexivity.

This reflexivity is a key strategy in *Arrested Development*, with episodes not only referencing other episodes, but also earlier moments in the same episode, or soon to come scenes that never actually happen. For example, the pilot episode ends with an "on the next *Arrested Development*" segment portraying an extremely uncomfortable George Michael listening to Maebe sing "Baby, One More Time" in the shower, a scene that never actually happens in the subsequent episode. The "Top Banana" episode (November 9, 2003) opens with a news report announcing a fire that destroyed the Bluth family banana stand. Immediately, the narrative shifts back to a week before the fire and a conversation between Michael and his father. In this conversation, and throughout the episode, George Sr. repeats the phrase: "There's always money in the banana stand." The resulting coincidence is Michael's false assumption that his father views the banana stand as a reliable source of income; however, George Sr. is referring to money literally hidden in the walls of the banana stand. In the same scene, George Sr. introduces his roommate

in prison, T-Bone, as a “flamer.” He, coincidentally, is the arsonist who ultimately sets the banana stand on fire. The references to fire that foreshadow this event begin in the previous episode, with Lucille claiming within the first minute: “it just makes me want to set myself on fire.”

Regular viewers of *Arrested Development* are rewarded for their commitment to watching because familiarity with the characters and their backstories is where much of the comedy evolves. Jason Mittell’s description of the series supports the utility of narrative theory for analysis of it: “[The] self-referentiality and use of in-jokes evolved over multiple episodes; old jokes returned unexpectedly and passed by quickly in a manner that added to the pleasure of longtime viewers” (253). The coincidences, overlapping narratives, and bits of seriality provide the payoff for viewers.

Students can enjoy the show, but breaking it down models ways of thinking that are applicable in other contexts, specifically to literary fiction. My goal is for students to move beyond recognition of formal narrative elements to critical engagement with innovative storytelling practices. What emerges for students in this approach to watching television in general and *Arrested Development* in particular is their understanding of themselves as student critics who can participate in the discourses that television shows produce and think critically about narrative theory.

Summary

Narrative has a propulsive tendency and *Lost* rejects that progression. Whenever you want to know what will happen next, you jump back, or make a lateral move. This decentralizes the power of sequence and makes the act of putting the details together, of

creating a chronology, the viewer's responsibility. In *Arrested Development*, the interwoven plotting of coinciding narratives creates a series of elaborate inside jokes for viewers to recognize and they are forced to evaluate and make connections between events that occur in different parts of various episodes. Both *Lost* and *Arrested Development* demand viewers pay attention. Much like my need for the language of literary analysis to deepen my engagement with *The Sopranos*, by giving students the tools to not just enjoy, but analyze, these complex shows, we are training them to be more sophisticated consumers of contemporary narrative.

The storytelling devices of narratively complex programs are not unique to television, and cross-disciplinary approaches to teaching narrative are particularly useful in the current age of genre hybridity and influences across mediums. Teaching narrative theory in this way reveals the complexity students are already grappling with through the television shows they watch and prepares them to engage with complex literary fiction. When presented with a novel that makes similar narrative choices, in this particular case, *Visit*, students will recognize the similarities between television and the novel, resolving the discrepancy identified at the beginning of the course. This yields a confidence in students that they can enjoy, absorb, and discuss complex literary narratives and can engage intellectually with their complexity.

Chapter 2: Teaching *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in the Context of Television

Narratives

Our study of recent television narratives segues into a discussion of the relationship between television and the novel, specifically in relation to innovative storytelling. This is where we turn to Egan's *A Visit from the Good Squad*. Phil Maciak characterizes *Visit* as a "televisual novel" because Egan models televisual plotting and uses the tools of novelistic storytelling in an effort to situate readers as serial viewers (125-126). As Maciak notes, "[Egan] suggests that her novel is an attempt to mirror and reproduce the 'feeling' or 'sense' of watching *The Sopranos*" and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is "an example of what happens when an artist thinks self-reflexively about her experience of another art form and brings those insights to bear in her own work" (127). I argue that the payoff of teaching the novel with an understanding of cross-media influence is inducing student recognition of the similarities between the two storytelling mediums and encouraging them to approach difficult novels without hesitation. *Visit* is a series of stories that collectively reflect and echo one another, like individual episodes that straddle episodic and serial forms; each story can stand alone, yet is enriched by the interrelated stories. While we might note that this type of reflexivity is often prevalent in ambitious literature, what differentiates Egan's text is her concern for the felt effect of television. In the era Egan composed *Visit*, Brett Martin argues that "the open-ended twelve- or thirteen-episode serialized drama...had become the signature American art form of the first decade of the twenty-first century" (11); *Visit* fits within the description of this formal shift in both structure and scope. As discussed in my previous chapter, both *Lost* and *Arrested Development* demand viewers pay attention in order to grasp the

reflexive narrative and Egan relies on similar reflexivity to create active readers. The crossover language between television and the novel—both Netflix and HBO frequently use “chapters” interchangeably with “episodes”—signals the inextricable link between the two forms. Once students recognize similarities across these forms, they are prepared to assess their mutual influence on one another, yielding a better understanding of narrative in all its forms in the process. Their ability to both understand and analyze narrative manipulation supports the development of close reading skills, an objective often considered paramount in English classrooms, and I am teaching the transfer of those skills to other media and/or genres.

Egan’s manipulation of time, plot progression, and intersecting storylines attempt to reflect a commonplace experience of her characters. The characters in *Visit* are struggling with the progression of time and growing old—for characters as well as mature readers, the book reflects the feeling that one minute you are young and the world is filled with endless possibilities, and the next you are washed up and feel trapped. As Maciak describes it, the networked narrative moves in all directions, but not necessarily forward, which produces this feeling of sped-up time (129). Memories disrupt the narrative and highlight the characters’ struggles with the passing of time. For example, readers are introduced to Sasha in Chapter 1 and “the raw, warped core of her life” (Egan 15), and Bennie and his “shame memories” (19) in Chapter 2 where some of his biggest regrets are interrupting his present. But the novel does not limit the past lives of characters to these brief recollections occurring in adulthood; the chapters that follow submerge readers into those past lives, and for many characters Egan goes back to their formative teenage years. While there is still forward motion of plot with each chapter, the

progression of events is not necessarily temporal. The narrative is further complicated by the ensemble storytelling, which complements and interweaves several strands of narrative, alternating chapter-by-chapter.

Students can note that while Egan adopts many characteristics of television, there are still traditional novelistic elements present in her text, including both a concern with memory and a reliance on theme. *Visit* opens with an excerpt from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*:

Poets claim that we recapture for a moment the self that we were long ago when we enter some house or garden in which we used to live in our youth. But these are most hazardous pilgrimages, which end as often in disappointment as in success. It is in ourselves that we should rather seek to find those fixed places, contemporaneous with different years.

The unknown element in the lives of other people is like that of nature, which each fresh scientific discovery merely reduces but does not abolish. (Egan 1)

The epigraph offers a meditation on nostalgia, memory, and the nature of time, which serve as primary thematic concerns in the novel. Proust suggests that yearning for a past self is one of the “most hazardous pilgrimages” because we can never return to who we were, since we are who we are now; it is dangerous to dwell on “lost time” as the result is a loss of time in the present. This reference to Proust suggests that Egan’s experimentation with time and character development is a vehicle for reviving rather typical, even classic, themes. But I will argue that her design uses televisual elements to complicate the formal presentation of this theme in an effort to make a novel about memory and time that eschews nostalgia in the way Proust suggests, but that nonetheless

considers how the past influences the present. The novel recognizes that the past returns but goes unchanged and the return and impact of memories often cannot be controlled, while an unproductive nostalgia is something that can be prevented, because the characters are responsible for their own emotional reactions to their fates. The novel's episodic form and POV shifts support the presentation of different ways of feeling when confronting the past, highlighting both remembrances of times past and individual versions of the rediscovery of youth, each of which are primary thematic concerns. Egan's narrative success depends on her manipulation of normative conventions in support of innovation. Egan's chapters are episodic (read: fragmentary) but connected by themes (read: normative).

Characterization as Plotting

Egan forces readers to engage with her characters at different moments in their lives; her characters are often in transition, which means their futures (initially) are unclear. The result is a recognition of their individual struggles and a richer understanding of how they got from "A" to "B" than in a linear treatment. In addition to the fact that "A" and "B" are the titles of Parts I and II of the novel, wanting to know what happened between A and B is the narrative drive of *Visit*'s structure. As Maciak argues, "Egan's novel is not as interested in plot as it is in the management of plot. It is interested in the various routes available to get between A and B" (129). Like *Lost*, the manipulation of time, in the form of pasts, presents, and futures, is a primary mode of plot progression and essential to character development.

Also like *Lost*, *Visit* uses a sprawling, ensemble cast, but more like *Arrested Development*, the cast is comprised of initially unlikeable characters. Unlike the almost immediate attachment viewers develop with Jack in the opening sequence of *Lost*, Sasha, the first character we meet, does not have the same “hero” qualities. She is intriguing, but not particularly likeable. Her incessant need to make excuses for her own immature behavior, the ease at which she lies to everyone around her, and her kleptomaniac tendencies that negatively affect innocent bystanders all contribute to the audience’s frustration with her. Lou, another character introduced early on, is a particularly relevant example of an unlikeable character who struggles with time and an inability to face the aging process. Readers are not asked to forgive Lou for his indiscretions, or Sasha for her self-absorption, but instead to acknowledge why they make the choices they do. Through an analysis of these two characters, students can recognize how Egan uses nonlinear plotting as a form of characterization that is not driven by a desire to produce sympathy but instead a wider encounter with a character.

The initial event treated in *Visit* is Sasha stealing a woman’s wallet in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel. While the chapter is written in third person, it is limited to the perspective of Sasha, making her the initial focalizer. The result is a detached and cynical tone indicating her space in “lost time.” Sasha’s life itself lacks any narrative progression and she struggles with her current reality; the chapter details how “her online profiles all listed her as twenty-eight” but her “real age” is thirty-five, which not even her therapist, Coz, knows (Egan 6). Sasha is a kleptomaniac whose condition seems to be worsening; each item she steals leads to a feeling of “instant relief” (8). The act of stealing is all that matters, not the objects being stolen, which implies that her

kleptomania is an outlet and therefore tied to an emotional root cause. Egan leaves the cause open-ended, at least for this episode.

Readers are finally reconnected with Sasha in a direct way in Chapter 11, “Good-bye, My Love,” when her uncle, Ted Hollander, travels to Naples to find her after she runs away as a teenager. The purpose of the chapter in relation to Sasha’s storyline is one of backstory. The most shocking of realizations is not that Sasha disappeared two years ago, at seventeen (213). More heartbreaking are the descriptions of an adolescence plagued by “drug use, countless arrests for shoplifting, a fondness for keeping company with rock musicians...four shrinks, family therapy, group therapy, and three suicide attempts” (213). When Ted finds Sasha in Naples, she is staying in a rundown palazzo currently serving as a rooming house. The “walls were stained with what looked like patches of mold” and it smelled like “dope and stale olive oil” (229). Ted realizes how alone and empty-handed Sasha is in this foreign place and tells her, “You can do it alone. But it’s going to be so much harder” (232). When readers can finally combine Sasha’s childhood experiences with both the Naples episode and the death of her best friend in college, the issues she is grappling with in the Chapter 1 present are framed differently—as a continuation of a difficult life, not isolated as a moral/psychological failing. Even if readers still do not like her much, they at least understand her more. Rather abruptly, Egan jumps into Sasha’s future at the conclusion of the chapter: she reconnects with her college boyfriend (Drew) via Facebook; she has two children; she leaves the city and moves to the California desert. Readers retroactively invest in Sasha and immediately want to know more about her surprising future, and Egan does not disappoint. This “new life” is described in the following chapter, “Great Rock and Roll Pauses.”

Because the first chapter is written in 3rd person, in an effort to provide an aerial perspective on Sasha's conclusion, Egan writes Chapter 12 from the perspective of Sasha's daughter, Alison Blake. Alison has not been privy to Sasha's entire life the way we have, so her daughter helps readers gain some objective clarity regarding Sasha at the end of the book versus Sasha at the start (of both the novel and her life). Chapter 12 fuses all of the different moments in Sasha's life together, completing her characterization. Sasha uses "found objects" that "come from our house and our lives" (265) to make art. According to Heather Duerre Humann, "it's only by looking at her story backwards that readers are able to understand it" (90); it is not until we have all the different moments in Sasha's life that her characterization, and reinvention, are complete, and the act of putting the pieces together offers different pleasures than a simple deepening of affection. Sasha's "found objects" are references to both the first chapter of the novel that revolves around Sasha's struggles with kleptomania and also the piecing together of memories reflective of the book as a whole. Sasha explains how "they tell the whole story if you really look" (265); this statement reflects the design of the text: each individual story, taken together, signals the broader concerns of the novel.

Our discussion of Lou begins in Chapter 2, where Bennie's remembrance of his idol and mentor echoes Proust. He had "looked into his idol's famous face and thought, *You're finished*. Nostalgia was the end—everyone knew that. Lou had died three months ago, after being paralyzed from a stroke" (37). This is not the Lou we meet in Chapter 3. Late-1970's Lou picks up a teenage Jocelyn on the side of the road in San Francisco, does some lines of cocaine off of her bare butt, and proceeds to have sex with her multiple times (43). This Lou Kline is old enough to be Jocelyn's father, as evidenced by

the ages of his own children; he is the epitome of a male-dominated Hollywood and the systems of abuse perpetuated by Harvey Weinstein-types. This makes it even more difficult to sympathize with Lou, but creating immediately sympathetic characters is not Egan's intent. Egan is simply providing readers with the ability to recognize how he got from A to B. As suggested in Chapter 3, reiterated in Chapter 4, and clarified in Chapter 5, Lou is a narcissistic, charming, and powerful male grappling with growing old and fighting to stay relevant.

While at Lou's house, Jocelyn finds a picture of Lou and his children (there are six of them), stating that the eldest two, Charlie and Rolph, went on a trip to Africa with him. This trip is the focus of Chapter 4, "Safari." In the "Safari" chapter, specifically, the narration takes on several different identities through a shifting, omniscient point of view. Chronologically, this chapter precedes the previous one, as proven by Jocelyn's awareness of the trip and references to the future, including that "thirty-five years from now" will be 2008 (61); Chapter 3, the exploration of Bennie's high school gang and Lou's tryst with Jocelyn occurs in 1979, while Lou's safari with two of his children and his young girlfriend (no surprise), Mindy, occurs in 1973. By situating "Safari" post-Jocelyn in the novel, the chapter itself exists as more of a memory of a past life; the placement of the chapter itself supports the events within it. In the opening lines, Rolph's repetition of "Remember?" brings the past into the narrative. Lou's relationship with the young Mindy, when situated with his later relationship with an even-younger Jocelyn, highlights his struggle with aging and fear of irrelevance. In a series of future-tense descriptions at the conclusion of the chapter, Egan prompts the reader's recognition of choices and the unpredictability of life's directions. For Mindy, "she will periodically

[think of Albert] after marrying Lou and having two daughters, his fifth and sixth children, in quick succession, as if sprinting against the inevitable drift of his attention” (81). It is not until both her children are in high school that “she’ll finally resume her studies, complete her Ph.D. at UCLA, and begin an academic career at forty-five” (82). For Charlie, “she’ll join a cult across the Mexican border...[and] nearly die of salmonella poisoning before Lou rescues her” (80). After Rolph dies at twenty-eight, “she’ll revert to her real name--Charlene--unlatching herself forever from the girl who danced with her brother in Africa. Charlene will cut her hair short and go to law school. When she gives birth to a son, she’ll want to name him Rolph, but her parents will still be too shattered” (82-83). The ways the characters end up are a direct if not necessarily predictable result of where they have been and with whom; however, Egan sets us up to expect unpredictability and these outcomes often acknowledge the unexpected choices characters make.

The novel visits Lou at different points in his life, from the perspectives of those people closest to him. Lou’s story concludes with Jocelyn’s shifting view of him in “You (Plural).” Jocelyn’s experience visiting Lou is overwhelmed by nostalgia and its fraudulent effects. For this reason, Egan situates the chapter after Chapters 3 and 4, as it is the conclusion of Lou’s story—Point B. The opening paragraph highlights the uncanny nature of the moment; Jocelyn says, “It’s all still there: the pool with its blue and yellow tiles...the house is the same, except quiet. The quiet makes no sense” (84). All at once, it is exactly the place she remembers, yet nothing like that place. Twenty years have passed and she is struggling to understand how they ended up right here, in this moment. As she looks at Lou, resigned to a hospital bed, attached to an IV drip, she thinks to herself; “So

this is it—what cost me all that time. A man who turned out to be old, a house that turned out to be empty” (87). This final image of Lou in the novel establishes him as an example of the hazardous pilgrimages Proust warns of and the negative consequences of nostalgia highlighted by the novel as a whole, because he is desperately holding onto the past and fighting for relevance. Jocelyn’s pilgrimage also ends in disappointment; she re-enters this house of her youth in search of closure but finds closure is just as much of a lie as nostalgia.

The character development in *Visit* relies on a series of snapshots of characters at different moments in their lives; various pasts, presents, and futures come together to illuminate how and why people are the way they are and to recognize the different ways that people struggle with the passage of time. According to Humann, “by the novel’s culmination, readers are able to reflect on—and ultimately reconstruct—Sasha’s story. Yet, it is only after the narrative concludes, that readers can make sense of the novel by reconstructing the events that have taken place” (90). Egan shows glimpses of Sasha and Lou in several of the episodes in *Visit*, but refuses to offer a linear trajectory of their lives. The patchwork of episodes ultimately provides a portrait of individual characters so that at the conclusion of the narrative, readers are able to reconstruct their stories and the events that have taken place. Readers are left with gaps in the narrative, with the spaces between these stories and events, and then must actively work to fill those gaps. This kind of “audience” engagement characteristic of prestige television furthers Egan’s televisual purpose, and the goal is similar in the classroom: increase student involvement in what they are reading.

Focalization and Multi-Perspectival Point of View

As students learned in their study of television, temporality determines *when* we learn information about the story-world, but this information is limited to *what* specific characters experience. Discussions of focalization and shifting perspectives are particularly useful at this point in the teaching of *Visit*. For students, understanding focalization fosters recognition of *multiple* perspectives, and *Visit* is characterized by narrator shifts in point of view, making discussion of the effects of these shifting perspectives essential to analysis of the text. For example, Jocelyn at 17-years-old has a very different view of Lou than she does at 37; in 1979, she saw Lou as “the beginning of an exciting story” (87) but by 1999 she sees him as a waste of precious time. In the context of these shifts, I suggest turning to Jesse Matz’s fundamental questions regarding perspective: “Why and how do writers try for different points of view? What are the perspectival choices available to them and how do those choices enrich fiction, enhance human insight, and enable ethical understanding?” (151-152). These questions ask students to examine the consequences of perspectival choices and help them move beyond surface-level identification of point of view.

Students learned that *Lost* is rooted in a consistent shifting of focalization and perspective and discussed how it prompts the recognition of people, topics, items from the first “chapter” present in the second. We can turn to this same territory in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Prior lessons on narrative time, space, and sequencing, have prepared students to notice that many of the characters later identified as “major” are present in the first two chapters as minor, background characters. As Maciak notes, “when Egan describes the way that the sprawling series of this era allow peripheral characters to

displace the ostensible protagonist, we might think of *Goon Squad*'s own multi-perspectival point of view" (129), because Egan's own peripheral characters displace presumed protagonists. For students used to straightforward novels, the result is an unexpected, fresh take on character development. This broadened understanding of characterization will prepare them to tackle other innovative or experimental contemporary narratives.

Narrative analysis leads students towards an examination of perspective in relation to form and structure, thereby rejecting the practice of identification with a particular character's point of view. In an effort to analyze Egan's decentralization of character and sympathy in relation to perspective, I work through a series of examples with my students. Taken together, the first two chapters serve as an approachable introduction to multi-perspectival point of view. We begin with the first few pages of Chapter 1 and the brief reference to Bennie Salazar, Sasha's old boss, known for sprinkling gold flakes into his coffee and spraying pesticide in his armpits (5). This seemingly insignificant detail returns when Chapter 2 shifts to Bennie's perspective and he engages in the behaviors already described. Egan's perspectival choices present characters as focalized, but also situate them as focalizers themselves. Initially, readers see how Sasha views Bennie but are then given the opportunity to make judgments for themselves. Chapter 7 furthers our understanding of Bennie when the perspective shifts to that of his (ex-)wife, Stephanie. The chapter ends with recognition of Bennie's adultery, further illuminating Bennie's apparent resentment towards Stephanie in Chapter 2 as guilt-induced and suggesting reasons for the custody battle. Bennie is a central character, but he is "a person constructed, mostly, from the impressions and recollections

of others” (Jernigan 3). Here we arrive at a central question that emerges in Jessica Jernigan’s review of *Visit*: “are we the sum of our own thoughts and feelings, or are we what other people perceive us to be?” (4) Egan’s novel allows both to be true; the multiple perspectives of a single character enable a more well-rounded, equitable opportunity for analysis.

Every major, focalizing character is referenced at a previous moment in the text in a background role, reminiscent of the opening sequence of *Lost*, where every major character exists in Jack’s background. It is from Stephanie’s perspective that readers also learn of her older brother, Jules, “who’d been gone five years, the first on Rikers Island awaiting trial for the attempted rape of Kitty Jackson, another four after the rape charge was dropped (at Kitty Jackson’s request) and he was convicted of kidnapping and aggravated assault” (Egan 119). The Kitty Jackson mentioned here, in Chapter 7, is the same Kitty Jackson tangled up in Chapter 8 with La Doll who is trying to salvage any semblance of a PR career after “The Party,” while the incident between Jules and Kitty is the focus of Chapter 9. Though complicated, Egan creates interweaving stories that collide and coincide at unexpected moments furthering the interconnectedness of all the characters. This focus on the interconnections between a wide ensemble prevents traditional narrative sympathy; because there are so many different perspectives of each character, the characters’ emotional connection to the reader does not matter—their interpersonal connection to each other does. *Visit* presents a shift away from the reader's perception of characters towards the reader’s recognition of how characters are perceived by one another, trading sympathy as the driver for this play with narrative distance.

Narrative Progression and Reflexivity

I ask my students to examine the consequences of *Visit*'s fragmentation in relation to contemporary television's rejection of narrative progression. Readers experience uncertainty created by Egan's sequencing, making the act of putting the details together, of creating a chronology, the reader's responsibility. For example, Sasha's allusion to the fallen twin towers places the first chapter post-9/11. A moment of clarification happens in Chapter 2 during a discussion between Bennie and Sasha; they reference a previous meeting with Stop/Go:

"Two years ago they sounded...different."

Sasha gave him a quizzical look. "It wasn't two years," she said. "It was five."

"Why so sure?"

"Because last time, I came to their house after a meeting at Windows on the
World."

It took Bennie a minute to comprehend this. "Oh," he finally said. "How close
to—"

"Four days." (26)

Windows on the World was a restaurant located on the 107th floor of the North Tower and the four-day window places their previous meeting on September 7, 2001. Not only does this confirm that the "present" of Chapter 2 is 2006, it also solidifies Chapter 1 as post-2006. Recreating a chronology is only possible when all of the clues are put together. While *Lost* has its infamous Easter eggs hidden throughout the series, not unlike the in-jokes characteristic of *Arrested Development*, Egan, too, has "eggs" intentionally placed throughout her novel. As Humann suggests, "part of the process of reading *A Visit*

from the Goon Squad means retroactively piecing together to form a coherent narrative” (91). Readers are responsible for organizing the bits-and-pieces of information that the characters divulge about themselves and one another.

The Easter eggs (features hidden and unmentioned on screen (Kroon 236); subliminal messages in film and television, in-jokes, and hidden clues are formal elements of reflexivity. These elements throughout *Visit* echo Mittell’s description of self-conscious television narrative as having “a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics” and an “intensified viewer engagement focused on...formal awareness” (39). In my class, students are asked to consider the reflexivity present in *Visit* by looking at how details from Part A reappear in Part B.

In Chapter 10, the initial uncertainty regarding who “you” are (the chapter is written entirely in second person) is resolved with the statement, “You’ve got the *touch*, Rob” (187). We recall the reference to Rob in Chapter 1, when Alex (who does not return until the final chapter of the novel) “paused at a picture of Rob, Sasha’s friend who had drowned in college” (14). The result is a gap that the text has to fill in regarding the space between the opening of Chapter 10 and Rob’s looming death.

Chapter 2 mentions “Bennie and his high school gang—Scotty and Alice, Jocelyn and Rhea—none of whom he’d seen in decades (except for a disturbing encounter with Scotty in his office years ago)” (23). Not only are these the major characters in Chapter 3, but the “disturbing encounter” is recounted from Scotty’s perspective in Chapter 6, “X’s and O’s.” At the time of Chapter 2, Bennie is 44 and divorced from ex-wife Stephanie. In the same passage readers learn that Bennie has “burns on his left forearm, sustained at ‘The Party,’ a recent debacle engineered by none other than Stephanie’s former boss,

who was now doing jail time” (22). This former boss, La Doll, and the party are the focus of Chapter 8.

Recognizing the reflexivity in *Visit* is crucial to understanding the complexity of its narrative structure, and one way for students to track Egan’s reflexivity is through a two-column journal, with column one reserved for Part A and column two reserved for Part B (See Appendix C). The structure gives students space to identify and organize the connections.

Lost and *Arrested Development* raised students’ awareness of intratextuality and established the foundation for our discussion of how “minor” details and chronology function in *Visit*. The novel presents unique opportunity to reconstruct the stories of an ensemble of characters, and through such analysis students enrich their understanding of character development as a product of narrative sequencing.

By this point students will have done enough thinking to engage in a formal analysis of temporality. I return to the basics of the temporality graphs created for *Lost*, this time asking students to create two different graphs. The first graph has them plot the chapters in the order they appear in the novel, identifying the major events and primary characters in each. The second graph requires students to organize the chapters chronologically, moving from left to right. The juxtaposition of the two graphs allows students to assess Egan’s sequencing. In addition to the graphs, students then write an essay answering the question: what is the effect of altered chronology in *Visit*? By combining visual depiction and written analysis, students learn to articulate how images can produce meaning, better preparing them for the complexities of digital narrative found at the end of the novel.

Genre Hybridity and Digital Media

Visit provides a mixing of genres and character relationships much like *Arrested Development*. To investigate Egan's experimentation, we look to Part B and one of the most innovative chapters in the novel: Chapter 12, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses." In the context of rethinking the nature of narrative forms, I introduce my students to digital narrative, storytelling that relies on digital tools. Egan's reliance on PowerPoint-style storytelling for Chapter 12 can help students understand digital narratives in formal ways, which Scott and Jill Walker Rettburg argue is the goal of teaching contemporary digital narrative. While today's students are digital natives, "they are not accustomed to considering electronic environments as spaces for narrative literature" (Rettburg and Rettburg 221). Not only does Egan incorporate techniques that emerge from digital narrative, she also blends genres by recreating a digital environment in a physical text.

Here we arrive at a central question: What are the benefits of this narrative choice? The PowerPoint is not simply another mode of storytelling, but rather the story requires the technology. Cynthia Selfe notes that the insistence on seeing new media through the lens of traditional forms delimits our understanding of what and how media move rhetorically (45). Rather than rely on our traditional definitions of chapters in a novel, we resist the urge to treat Chapter 12 as a substitute for traditional literary narrative. Instead, we consider Egan's use of PowerPoint as something different with compelling similarities. For example, Egan's ability to trace the progression of Lincoln's thoughts depends on the visual sequencing that PowerPoint affords. "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" is primarily concerned with Sasha's family and their ability to communicate with one another. Lincoln is autistic, which hinders his ability to communicate; Egan is

able to highlight the disconnect between his complex interiority and his limited expressiveness through her chosen medium. In the section, “Lincoln Wants to Say/Ends Up Saying” (See Appendix D), Egan presents what Lincoln wants to say to his father (“I love you, Dad”) versus what he actually says (“Hey Dad, there’s a partial silence at the end of ‘Fly Like an Eagle,’ with a sort of rushing sound in the background that I think is supposed to be the wind, or maybe time rushing past”) (249). Through a series of text boxes and correlating arrows, Egan traces Linc’s thought process, how his first idea, “I love you, Dad,” sparks his recognition of his own love of music, which leads to a chain of thoughts that include a connection between “Dad is from Wisconsin” and “Steve Miller is from Wisconsin” (249). The affordances of PowerPoint allow Egan to bridge the gap between Lincoln’s initial thought and his statement about The Steve Miller Band’s “Fly Like an Eagle.”

Rooted in the same ideological approaches as contemporary television, digital narratives demand engagement and “require new conceptualizations of the relations among reader, writer, and media” (Rettburg and Rettburg 222). In *Visit*, the reader has the power to make choices while navigating the story, functioning as a quasi-coauthor and influencing the outcomes of the narrative. The slide titled “Mom’s ‘Art’” is random and haphazard, with no particularly identifiable linear structure. The reader can move through the pieces as she chooses. Yet the slide is also rich with reflexivity, referencing the title of Chapter 1, “found objects,” when describing what Sasha uses to make her art, prompting recognition of Sasha’s management of her lifelong struggle with kleptomania. The randomness of the slide is not limited to the variety of shapes and fonts; the artifacts themselves are representative of everyday experiences including a flight confirmation

number, “XJKD7877,” an eye doctor appointment at “3:30 Wed,” and a reminder to the kids to “call Gma Blake” (249). But the key to the slide’s narrative is in a hexagon near the bottom: “they tell the whole story if you really look” (249). When pieced together, the individual shapes and messages paint a picture of the everyday lives of Sasha and her family. Like the book itself, a patchwork of chapters give a more complicated picture of a small window of time.

Rettburg and Rettburg address how “contemporary authors of digital narratives have begun to incorporate network-specific communication technologies into their work, both formally and thematically” (230), a move that Egan makes with her approach to Chapter 12. She uses PowerPoint formally, which thematically contributes to the novel’s understanding of the nature of time and how in an instant what was once “popular” becomes “dated.” PowerPoint was once a revolutionary program but now is the equivalent of a flip phone. As a class, we are also in a position to discuss the social and historical contexts of the chapter, considering the obsolescence of technological progress. The novel recognizes the influence of technology on a variety of fields, both literary and musical—for instance, Bennie struggles with an increasingly-digital music industry because he, himself, is becoming obsolete.

Television is Not the New Novel

Much has been written concerning the debate over whether or not television is the new novel. At a minimum, the existence of such discourse signifies a clear relationship between the two mediums. In a 2012 article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Thomas Doherty coins the term “arc TV” to describe recent television, citing “its real

kinship [as] literary, not televisual” (Doherty). He identifies the importance of backstory and evolution to arc TV suggesting that, like the novel, “the aesthetic payoff comes from prolonged, deep involvement in the fictional universe” (Doherty). While his title seems to make the argument that “Cable is the New Novel,” his discussion is more about the impressive evolution of television, similarities to novelistic elements, and shifting perceptions of the form among scholarly communities.

In 2014, *The New York Times* published an article by Adam Kirsch and Mohsin Hamid highlighting the debate over whether or not the New Golden Age television shows are the new novels. Kirsch acknowledges similarities between television and the novel, but argues that the novel can achieve far more than TV could ever attempt. He suggests we “not fool ourselves into thinking that [good TV shows] give us what only literature can” (Hamid and Kirsch). Hamid counters Kirsch’s confidence and warns that “the novel needs to keep changing if it is to remain novel” (Hamid and Kirsch). He considers the ways in which novelists have more freedom than ever before “since audiences can get their fill of plot and character and story [on TV]” but advises that “The novel should only do what the serial drama could never do” (Kirsch and Hamid). Kirsch and Hamid agree that the existence of each form is not dependent on the other, instead acknowledging both as narratives that mutually influence one another.

Regardless of the ongoing debate between television and the novel, both are forms of media that deliver narratives. The idea that television will render the novel obsolete is rejected by the existence of the televisual novel and the continued influence of both forms on one another. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* asserts the novel’s lasting place among contemporary narrative forms and reminds teachers that close reading strategies

are as essential as ever. We have looked at the similarities between television and the novel to support the teaching of narrative theory. The initial study of television prepares students to grapple with traditional themes expressed in experimental ways. At the conclusion of this study, we are also in a position to discuss the differences between these genres. There is the expectation of theme in a novel and certainly themes are certainly present in *Visit*, but they are revived by the cross-genre narrative approaches. The nonlinear structure supports the theme that nostalgia is both dangerous and harmful. Memory and nostalgia are not one in the same; memory is inevitable while nostalgia is preventable. In addition, the ensemble cast supports the theme we are all separate, yet connected. To highlight the interconnectedness of people, Egan relies on shifting focalizing perspectives through innovative organization and genre hybridity. The abrupt shifts in narration become part of the storytelling approach, and the fragmentation and uncertainty that result demand that readers pay attention, not unlike Egan's original goal: the felt effect of contemporary television. Television and the novel can, and should, coexist, and currently their relationship is one of mutual influence. As Maciak identifies, "to presume that the two forms need be rivals in the first place, is to advocate a particularly extreme understanding of cross-media influence" (102). Television is not the new novel, nor is it trying to be, *but* both mediums are innovating in ways that are worth noting, analyzing, and teaching. The teaching of narrative theory in this context serves to enrich students' interactions with both forms.

Conclusion

Reading and Viewing: The Case for Narrative Theory

Teaching Contemporary Novels has made clear to me how essential narrative theory is for textual analysis in this current age of innovative storytelling. I remind my students that not only has television influenced the novel, but the novel has continued to influence television. In the process of working on this research, my course has taken on a new name: Contemporary Novels and TV. The idea is to keep updating and evolving the course in an effort to keep pace with the narratives themselves. Egan's work encourages a meditation on the intricate relationship between television and the novel post-1990s.

The Space Between

Visit is a novel about understandings of time; it is primarily concerned with the space between point A and point B. In Chapter 12 we are privy to Lincoln's thought process, how he gets from here to there, a microcosm of the novel's primary thematic concern with the relationship between then and now. This manipulation of temporality is not limited to *Visit*. *Lost* is structured so that we are forced to wonder how people ended up on the island and, as a result of the flashbacks, how they got from then to now, both physically and emotionally. *Lost*, whose initial jump is an "earlier in the day" flashback, eventually creeps further and further into the past. In the case of *Arrested Development*, the pilot episode begins at the end and is rooted in the question of: how did this happen? The episode tells the story from the beginning of the day, much like *Lost*, and scenes in the present trigger moments in the past which comment on the present. In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, *Lost*, and *Arrested Development*, memories disrupt the present and work to fill the narrative gaps.

Amanda Lotz argues that, “in the network era, watercooler shows were often those that were somehow boundary-defying” (44). This is still true; contemporary narrative forms are nothing if not innovative. All three narratives addressed in this project defy boundaries of traditional storytelling and form and warrant watercooler status. As a result of exploring the narrative complexity of the chosen texts, students gain a more nuanced understanding of cross-media influence and, to borrow Maciak’s phrase, “the star-crossed love story that bloomed between television and the novel at the turn of the twenty-first century” (103).

Broadening the Approaches

The approaches to teaching narrative theory identified in this research project can also be adapted to fit other primary texts. For example, Lotz recommends teaching narrative complexity with *House* (Thompson and Mittell 22) while Sean O’Sullivan suggests a study of episodic storytelling with Egan’s primary inspiration, *The Sopranos* (65). Together, these two shows could replace *Lost* and *Arrested Development* as part of the introduction to narrative theory. Depending on the structure and time constraints of an individual course, the number of TV shows could be expanded, or perhaps another novel added. Garth Risk Hallberg’s *City on Fire* would be an excellent choice, as critics agree with its characterization as a televisual novel; *City* contains an interconnected ensemble cast, shifting perspectives, and a nonlinear structure. In a review of the book, Erik P. Hoel aligns it with prestige shows, citing Hallberg’s own acknowledgment of *The Wire* as a source of inspiration, much like Egan’s recognition of *The Sopranos*.

Final Thoughts

We live in a world of narrative complexity in literature, on television, even online. It is certainly time to teach students about the world that they live in, not only the world that once was; English classrooms can be spaces to contemplate the relationship between our own pasts, presents, and futures, both collective and individual. My hope is that as a result of our study of narrative theory my students go on to engage with complex narratives both within and outside of the classroom deepening their relationships with what they currently consume and broadening their appetite for other forms.

Education in the 21st century is about versatility and depth, but relevance is also critical for increasing student engagement. As teachers, specifically those working in independent schools, we have an opportunity to be innovative in our curricular choices, and the approach in this study highlights a course design rooted in interdisciplinarity and focused on fostering skills of critical analysis. Guided by desired outcomes, let us all try to be more open-minded and innovative in the ways we approach designing curricula to achieve those goals, in ways that are significant and accessible for our students.

Appendix A: Survey Template

Reading Habits

- 1) On average, how many hours do you spend reading (for enjoyment) each week?
 - a) Less than an hour
 - b) 1-2 hours
 - c) 3-4 hours
 - d) 5+ hours

- 2) How often do you read for pleasure/enjoyment?
 - a) Every day
 - b) Several times per week
 - c) Once a week
 - d) Rarely
 - e) Never

- 3) How many books have you finished in the last month (not including school assignments)?

- 4) In the last 6 months?

- 5) How do you read (check all that apply)?
 - a) Physical book
 - b) E-reader/tablet (Kindle, Nook, iPad, etc.)
 - c) Laptop/computer

- 6) Preferred genres when reading (check all that apply):
 - a) Mystery
 - b) Science fiction/fantasy
 - c) Historical fiction
 - d) Young adult
 - e) Comedy
 - f) Romance
 - g) Nonfiction

- 7) Favorite books:

Viewing Habits

- 1) On average, how many hours do you spend watching TV each week (this includes streaming online or through providers such as Netflix, but not movies shown on TV)?
 - a) Less than an hour
 - b) 1-2 hours
 - c) 3-4 hours
 - d) 5+ hours

- 2) How often do you watch TV?
 - a) Every day
 - b) Several times per week
 - c) Once a week
 - d) Rarely
 - e) Never

- 3) How many television series (individual seasons) have you finished in the last month?
 - 4) In the last 6 months?

- 5) How do you watch (check all that apply)?
 - a) Live TV
 - b) DVR
 - c) Streaming
 - d) Mobile device/tablet
 - e) Laptop/computer
 - f) Television

- 6) Do you use any of the following apps to watch TV (check all that apply)?
 - a) Hulu
 - b) Amazon Prime
 - c) Netflix

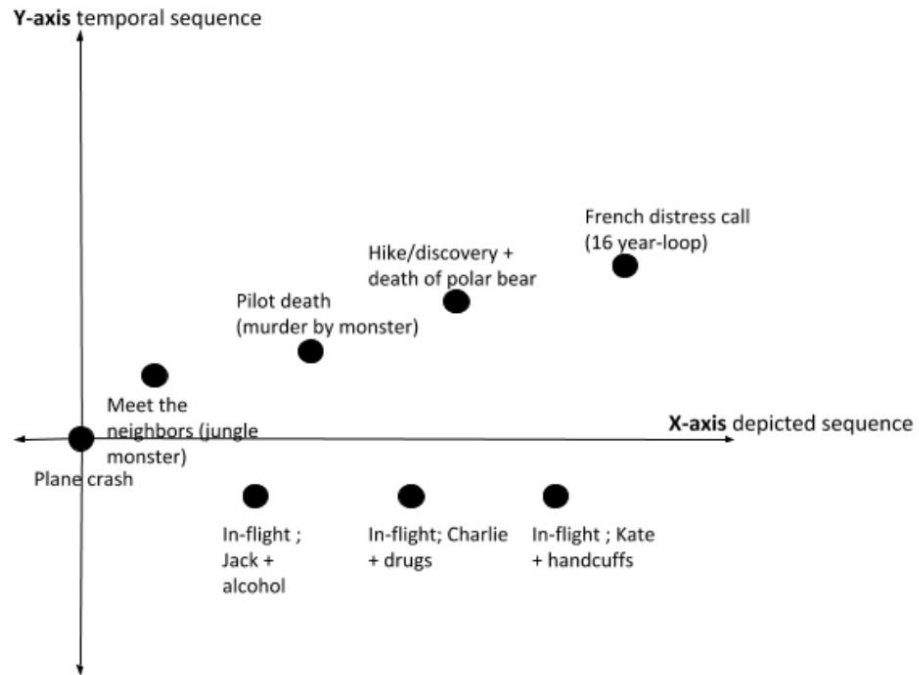
- 7) Preferred television genres (check all that apply):
 - a) Drama
 - b) Comedy
 - c) Reality TV
 - d) Action
 - e) News
 - f) Science Fiction/Fantasy

- 8) Favorite shows:

Appendix B: Temporality Graph (Student Sample)

Lost Temporality Graph

Submitted Fall 2017

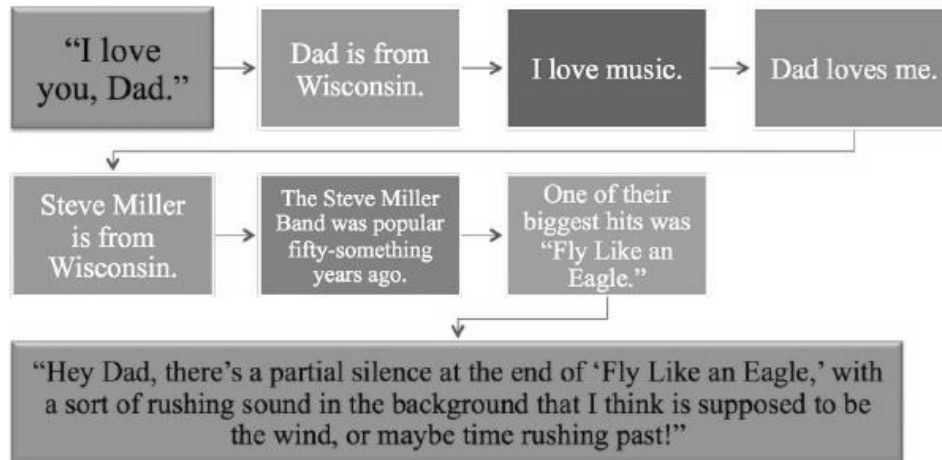


Appendix C: Two-Column Journal (Mock Sample)

Side A	Side B
“Found Objects” (3)	“She uses ‘found objects’” (265).
“And once the screwdriver was in her hand, she felt instant relief...and then something more than relief: a blessed indifference, as if the very idea of feeling pain over such a thing were baffling” (8).	“She’d started shoplifting at thirteen with her girlfriends, hiding beaded combs and sparkly earrings inside their sleeves, seeing who could get away with more, but it was different for Sasha—it made her whole body glow” (194).
“Alex had paid the bill was she was in the bathroom— clear proof that he’d been on the verge of aborting their date (6). “As they passed the angular budded branches by the big glass doors to the street, a woman zigzagged into their path...’Someone stole my wallet’” (9).	“Alex had first heard Bennie Salazar’s name from a girl he’d dated once, when he was new to New York and Bennie was still famous. The girl had worked for him— Alex remembered this clearly— but it was practically all he could remember...The only impressions Alex retained of their date involved winter, darkness, and something about a <i>wallet</i> , of all things, but had it been lost? Found? Stolen” (311)?
“He paused at the picture of Rob, Sasha’s friend who had drowned in college, but made no comment” (14).	“You’ve got the <i>touch</i> , Rob” (187). “If you look carefully, you can tell that Rob will die young...He has that look of someone who’s only in old pictures” (273).
“She’d risked everything, and here was the result: the raw, warped core of her life (15).	“Sasha had fled an adolescence [of] drug use, countless arrests for shoplifting, a fondness for keeping company with rock musicians...four shrinks, family therapy, group therapy, and three suicide attempts” (213).
“The divorce from Stephanie” (21)? DIVORCED	“Stephanie and Bennie had lived in Crandale a year before they were invited to a party” (111). MARRIED
“The tender, circular burns on his left forearm, sustained at ‘The Party,’ a recent debacle engineered by none other than Stephanie’s former boss, who was now doing jail time” (21-22)?	“And then they began to collapse, flop and drape and fall away, sending scolding oil onto the heads of every glamorous person in the country and some other countries, too...she’d served her six months for criminal negligence” (142).

Appendix D: PowerPoint Slide

Lincoln Wants to Say/Ends Up Saying:



(Egan 249)

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