

# Research on the Image Culture — A Narrative Study on Jennifer Egan's *The Keep*\*

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**Abstract**—Renovating the Gothic tradition by applying a male voice to narrate the story and by leaving it an open ending in *The Keep*, Jennifer Egan revitalizes the Gothic fiction and at the same time makes it her own. The metafictional narrative in the story is noticed by the interruptions of another character's voice into the ongoing narrative of the main story. However, Egan's tactics, do not achieve at the expense of character and story; all the characters in this fiction are imprisoned either physically or mentally. In *The Keep*, Egan takes a bird's eye view of the image culture, it also concerns more about our connectedness with technology and how that connection changes the way that who we are to ourselves and who we are to each other. So often we are dealing with something ephemeral and virtual instead of actual beings, our measure of what they mean to communication is very different as well.

**Index Terms**—The Keep, Gothic narrative, metafictional narrative, image culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

Jennifer Egan (1963- ), winner of the 2011 Pulitzer Prize, is a contemporary American fiction writer with popular appeal and a novelist noted for the elegance of her style. Egan is the author of *The Invisible Circus* (1995); *Emerald City and Other Stories* (1997); *Look at Me*, a finalist for the National Book Award in fiction in 2001; and *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010), the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Upon its publication in 2006, Egan's fiction *The Keep* had received deservedly praises for its "bold imagination, fully realized characters, enchanting pace, genuine surprises, perfectly pitched and memorable dialogue, uncommonly successful blend of humor and horror, and artistically metafictional Gothic narrative". (Olson, 2011, p.328) *The New York Times* praises that Egan is such a refreshingly unclassifiable novelist that she deploys most of the skills developed by metafiction writers of the 1960s and refines by more recent authors like William T. Vollmann and David Foster Wallace (Bell, 2006).

Inspired by a trip she took to the castle of Godfrey de Bouillon, a leader of the First Crusade in Belgium, Egan creates *The Keep*, a spooky Gothic-inspired castle fiction built from multiple levels of storytelling and fictionality. Initially she thought she might set the story of the book in the medieval period as most Gothic writers did, but as a writer full of creativity and innovation, Egan wanted something cheesier than that. So she eventually puts the Gothic genre in the modern world of telecommunication and tries to explore the question of "how reality as a concept might have changed — or needs to change — in light of all the new states of being and new experiences that communications technology has created." (Reilly, 2009, p.443)

As a contemporary Gothic fiction, the settings of the story alternate between a castle in Eastern Europe and a U.S. prison, the complex plot is manipulated mainly by two long-estranged cousins who reunite at a medieval castle somewhere in Europe twenty years after a childhood mischief that caused devastating consequences drove them apart. Danny now is a 36-year-old New York hipster who wears brown lipstick and whose body can detect Wi-Fi availability. Because he does not have a real job and is desperate for money, he accepts his wealthy cousin invitation to come to Eastern Europe and help the latter to fix up the castle, a castle that Howard dreams of turning into a unique luxury Luddite hotel which cuts off from the rest of the world and let people be tourists of their own imaginations. After arrived at the castle, Danny soon finds that it is a mysterious and horrific place. There are secret passages and bizarre habitants, an old lady who appears young and beautiful from distance, who claims to be the Baroness von Ausblinker, the owner of the castle. Danny tries to escape and return to his familiar high-tech New York world but he fails again and again. The location of the keep is so indeterminate that even the characters do not know exactly where they are. No matter what he does, no matter how hard he tries, Danny could not find the way out of the castle. Fate seems to be directing him back to the castle and bring him back to Howard. Both Danny and Howard end up trapped deep in the castle by the mysterious baroness and they two together search a way to escape and survive.

This fiction within a fiction is told by Ray, a murderer in a prison's creative-writing program, who is writing the story of Danny mainly to win the attention of his writing teacher, Holly. Despite the fact that she has no writing degree or

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teaching experience, instead, she has some dark experiences, including a drug addiction, her killing of her tiny baby and the warning that child service will take her other children away, Holly is deeply attracted by Ray and also tries to help him to escape from the prison. In the last chapter, Ray disappears mysteriously and Holly takes a trip to a castle in Europe which is almost the exact one that Danny has stayed.

Just like the intricate network of caves beneath the castle, stories in *The Keep* move in and out of each other, connecting and moving off into new directions. In the end, it turns into a contemporary attracting book filled with mystery and suspense, setting against a deeper portrait of moral conflict and an examination of how the past haunts people and how the modern image of telecommunication affects people in different ways. *The Keep* incorporates a layered metafictional narrative, the story in it is narrated from a male character's voice and there is an open ending with some mysteries remain unsolved. In *The Keep*, all characters are imprisoned physically or mentally. It is a fiction of ideas, a meditation on how our contemporary vices have tainted our ability to think freely and creatively, and the illusions that modern life thrusts upon us.

## II. GOTHIC NARRATIVE IN *THE KEEP*

"Gothic" originally refers to the (pseudo)-medieval buildings in which many of these stories take place. Gothic fiction, a genre that combines fiction, horror and Romanticism, is originally attributed to English author Horace Walpole, with his 1764 fiction *The Castle of Otranto*, subtitled "A Gothic Story", which contains almost all the elements that constitute the genre. Under the influence of Horace Walpole's successful Gothic story, Gothic fiction had much success later in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century as witnessed by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and the works of Edgar Allan Poe. The works of Anne Rice, some works of Stephen King show the sense of Gothic. Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and *Jamaica Inn* (1936) also display Gothic tendencies. Thomas M. Disch's novel *The Priest* (1994), with the subtitle *A Gothic Romance*, partly modeled on Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), is also a Gothic fiction. An enormous, decrepit heap somewhere in Eastern Europe is both the physical setting and the metaphorical heart of Egan's *The Keep*. With its underground passageways, silted-up pool and ancient torture chambers, the castle is an emblem of the shadowy place in which past and present mingle, and modern technology meets the ancient way of life. In this book, Egan successfully and movingly works the theme of "renovation" on several aspects simultaneously. Like most Gothic fictions, *The Keep* positions its characters in antiquated and decaying places, one location is a mysterious castle which is either "in Austria, Germany, or the Czech Republic", (Egan, 2006, p.4) a place we never do find out; the other location an American prison. Though it literally has a castle full of Gothic elements, including the ghost, the baroness, the deep tunnel and skeleton, it is actually the whole design of Howard's "new" castle and Egan's neo-Gothic romance, it is an invitation for our imaginations to create.

In creating a male protagonist and leaving the story with an open ending, Egan defies the tradition while at the same time using it. The protagonist in the fiction is a modern man Danny, who has been a "front man" for various night clubs and restaurants in downtown Manhattan, which is quite different from the traditional Gothic stories whose protagonists are generally insane women. The male protagonist Danny knows almost everyone and everything in his hotspot universe, and being connected and "in the know" is so essential to his existence. Cyberspace creature that he is, he has lugged a satellite dish all the way from New York to the isolated castle. His skin tingles in the presence of wireless Internet access, but at the castle some other forces make Danny's skin lose this ability. When questioned about her choosing a male protagonist, Egan replies that she "loved the idea because it reverses the classic Gothic setup, which is basically: helpless female, trapped..." (Vida, 2006, p.81)

Different from the frequent female narratives in the traditional Gothic stories, Egan has fun with the idea of narrative voice in *The Keep* as well. In the fiction, Danny's story is told by Ray, who is an inmate taking a prison writing class. Ray does not have much education nor can he write good articles, he is not an experienced storyteller. For example, he does not know how to use metaphors and similes to elevate his prose; he does not use quotation marks around dialogue, neither does he care so much. A dramatic form of dialogue seems much more natural to him, it is a struggle for him just to say what he is trying to say, he just wants to get the job done and to get attention from his writing teacher Holly. But the characters' emotions told by Ray are so real, the author's insights so moving, that the reader will be happy and willing to follow him. For the voice she chooses in the fiction, Egan states that it is the biggest challenge while writing the book. Egan explains that she has written her previous fiction *Look at Me* thinking that it has to be very beautiful, while writing *The Keep*, she challenges her own assumption and states that she finds "Ray's inexperience very appealing. I felt freed from the need to make it pretty. There should be strength, but does it need to be beautiful? ... I found that very freeing." (Johnson, 2007, p.18) The important reason that Egan, as a novelist, chooses Ray's voice is that his voice is totally different from hers and also Ray lacks experience in the fiction writing. Such a voice is a new way to break out of certain conventions that she is tired of.

Different from many of the traditional Gothic fictions which conclude with a satisfying ending and with the dissolvment of the conflicts, in *The Keep*, however, Egan leaves us with an open ending and some mysteries still remain unsolved in the end. For instance, Egan does not tell us the destination of Ray, the inmate who writes the story of Danny, neither have we found any reference about him, whether he is dead or he successfully escapes from the prison and get his freedom. Do Danny and Howard really die by jumping in the pool of the castle? Besides, where does the baroness vanish to? Just as the open ending of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the indefinite and

unsolved mystery of the ending leaves much room for the reader to wonder and to find out the truth of the mysteries. We do not know the answer, neither does the author herself. The author, however, wisely provides us not with what we want, but with what we need. Like Howard in the fiction, Egan intimates that readers need a hallucination now and again, what she suggests is probably for readers to make their own ending, which is the highest respect an artist can pay to his/her readers. When questioned about the baroness's disappearance, Egan replies:

I don't have a definitive answer.... Maybe she leaves behind an ashy trail like she did in the bed she and Danny shared...or perhaps she's handing out towels by the swimming pool! In fact, I rather like that idea. But to my mind, I guess, the sort of seeps into the atmosphere and becomes part of the air, the soil, the walls and floors, just as her hundreds of relatives did before her. (Olson, 2011, p.340)

Egan's answer accords with her idea that nothing is definitely real and everything is open in the contemporary image culture. She puts forward the question: "Well, was it real or not?" (Reilly, 2009, p.443) She invites readers to respond as well, "We're talking about a novel: of course, it's not real." (Reilly, 2009, p.443)

Besides employing a male protagonist, narrating from an inmate's voice and leaving us an open ending, *The Keep* keeps using the old Gothic tropes to a new purpose: to affect a transformation tale. Most of the characters in the fiction have some trauma, and they recast it, relive it, and refashion in their response, hoping to get it "right" the second time either in their actions or in their writing. The ruined castle in *The Keep* is under renovation. On the one hand, Howard, an entrepreneur as well as the new owner of the castle, plans to turn it into a hotel, but he has mixed feelings about erasing the castle's past. "I'll probably leave some of it like this," (Egan, 2006, p.39) he says, standing in a room without a ceiling. "It's evocative. It's...history." (Egan, 2006, p.39) Danny, on the other hand, holds different attitude toward the castle. According to him, the way of renovating the old castle is not only asserting our ownership of the past but also probing into the question of how we should honor the past without letting it rule us.

### III. METAFICTIONAL NARRATIVE IN *THE KEEP*

"All fiction is ... implicitly metafictional." (Waugh, 1984, p.148) As Patricia Waugh claims, metafiction refers to the literary device describing fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact. It normally poses questions about the relationship between fiction and reality frequently by using irony and self-reflection. Metafiction can be compared to presentational theatre, which does not let the audience forget that they are viewing a play; it also makes the reader to be clear that he or she is reading a fictional work. Unlike the conventional texts, the storytelling in the metafictional text is no longer the most important part of a fiction. In metafictional text, the reader's reading process is frequently interrupted by the writer's voice, which aims at reminding the reader that what he/she is reading is not real. Therefore, the reader should not only concentrate on the development of the story, but also pay attention to the process of how the writer creates the story. When the reader plunges into the complex plots, he/she is suddenly roused by the writer who intends to inform the reader that he/she is reading a fiction instead of reality. At times the reader can find some traces of the event or characters existing in the real world or the reader need to walk into the text to decide where the text would go. Furthermore, the reader may sometimes confuse on the question of whether the fiction he/she is reading is the reality or the world he/she lives in is just fiction.

Essential to the Gothic mode in Egan's *The Keep* is the device of the story within a story, that is, the metafiction of fiction writing. Danny's story is being told by an "I" who jumps into the narrative on page 17, telling us: "Danny didn't know why he'd come all this way to Howard's castle. Why did I take a writing class?" (Egan, 2006, p.17) Reading on, we discover that the narrator is Ray, a murder convict in a high-security American prison. Cut off from the rest of the world, Ray imagines a character like himself cut off from everything that has held his life together. Ray takes Holly's writing workshop as a means of escape from his seemingly deranged cell mate. In his first story, he commits an aggressive act by writing about a prisoner who rapes his writing teacher:

I started the class with a bad attitude. For the second meeting I wrote a story about a guy who fucks his writing teacher in a broom closet until the door flies open and all the brooms and mops and buckets come crashing out and their bare asses are shining in the light and they both get busted. It got a lot of laughs while I was reading it, but when I stopped reading the room went quiet. (Egan, 2006, p.17)

Hearing the story in the class, Holly is undoubtedly offended, nervous and scared, but she maintains calm enough not to explode but explains: "My job is to show you a door you can open.... It leads wherever you want it to go, ... That's what I'm here to do." (Egan, 2006, p.19) Further on, she is brave enough to come to Ray and offer him a means of escape through "a door in our heads". Here "a door in our heads" said by Holly refers, of course, to the imagination. Actually, much of this metafictional story in *The Keep* is about the role of imagination in our lives. For Danny, it is much more problematic. Danny's imagination sometimes stems from paranoia. In contrast, for Ray, imagination represents a way to survive. Ray uses his imagination to create the story. Along the way, he develops an attentive readership with his fellow convicts and also wins the heart of his writing teacher Holly. The imagination, just as *The Magus* by John Fowles, whose textual manipulations always seemed much more like real magic than the merely technical strategies of his contemporaries, *The Keep* presents a shimmering and marvelous world whose infinite self-reflection tends to collapse into an all-devouring paranoia, which is what Danny calls "the worm." Quite different from *The Magus*, in *The Keep*, Egan is able to bring her story and characters out on the other side of the paranoid abyss. On this point, Madison Smart Bell points out:

Egan shares [John] Fowles's unusual gift for transporting the reader into a world where magical thinking actually works. In Egan's case it also counts for something real, durable and concrete. The result is a work both prodigiously entertaining and profoundly moving. Ray's motives for inventing this tale are mostly left to the reader's inference; what he and Egan show is that art and the imagination are the most powerful means of healing. (Bell, 2006, p.7)

On the surface, the metafictional narrative of *The Keep* is comic; the story in the story is narrated by an uneducated murder convict. While in a deeper sense, it is a dazzling presentation that makes us believe that it really is a matter of life, imagination, death and salvation. Danny, in an amazing scene toward the end of the fiction, becomes the savior of the group of people who invaded the keep and were trapped there. This group member includes Howard, who relives his childhood trauma deep beneath the castle and breaks down. When trapped in the deep tunnel of the castle, Danny must do something to save the group. He spots a way out, significantly through a trapdoor, and brings everyone involved out of the tunnel and back into the light.

#### IV. IMPRISONED CHARACTERS IN *THE KEEP*

Character, generally speaking, refers to any kind of entity, either individual or collective, introduced in a narrative work. Characters play an important role in the story world. There are two widely accepted kinds of opinions about characters. One argument is originated from Aristotle who believes that characters exist as subsidiary to the action and plot, thus characters do not exist at all as they are only a part of events. Another argument holds that in the process of action, characters can acquire a kind of distance from the events in which they exist. This argument considers that characters are imitations of real persons. Henry James, in *The Art of Fiction*, claims that character is the determination of incidents and incidents are just illustration of character. Boris Tomashevsky and Roland Barthes both agree with Henry James on the dominant function of character over action. As the process of creating a character, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan puts forward her ideas of character in *Narrative Fiction*:

Characters, as one construct within the abstracted story, can be described in terms of a network of characters-traits. These traits, however, may or may not appear as such in the text. How, then, is the construct arrived at? By assembling various character-indicators distributed along the text-continuum and when necessary, inferring the traits from them. (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005, p.61)

Contrary to the traditional fiction writing, Egan states that her writing defies characterization. In *The Keep*, all characters are imprisoned in one way or another, if not in a physical jail or labyrinth of the keep just as the one inhabited by a few descendants of the castle's founding family who refuses to acknowledge Howard's rights of ownership, then in various mental squirrel cages, of which the world of the addiction is the simplest. Whereas Ray is literally imprisoned, the baroness is symbolically imprisoned in the castle, Danny's imprisonment in the "squirrel cage" takes the form of addiction, not to drugs or alcohol but to the telecommunication that connects him to the other people. Because he is so eager to use the Internet and his cell phone as soon as he arrives at the castle, he goes through a lot of difficulties and dangers to haul his satellite dish along with him and tries to set up there in the keep though probably the satellite dish eventually sinks into a pool filled with rotten water. Danny's desire for connectivity is just as a "mode of being which is scarcely fantastic, but a fair description of the way many of us live now." (Bell, 2006, p.3)

To compensate for the telecommunication addiction of Danny who has been sunken in the "imprisoned" castle, Egan creates Howard, who is against modern telecommunications and is willing to escape to the "imprisoned" castle. What he wants is to turn the castle into a place where he can "let people be tourists of their imaginations." (Egan, 2006, p.45) No computers or cell phones allowed, only imagination can stay there in his ideal castle. As Howard states:

*Imagination! It saved my life.*

...

My *mission* is to bring some of that back. Let people be tourists of their own imaginations. (Egan, 2006, p.45)

The baroness, another important character, has inhabited the "imprisoned" castle for many years, maybe more than a hundred years. Egan describes her as a very mysterious and shape-shifting figure who seems young and beautiful from distant but actually an old woman. She has soft skin, black eyes and a beautiful long and full mouth which are unusual for an old lady. She claims herself the Baroness von Ausbinker, the owner of the castle including the town. She has been living in the castle for many years, she has been so proud of habiting and owning the castle and she has never been defeated by anyone who attempts to invade the keep. For Danny, the baroness has caught his attention as soon as he arrives at the castle: "Danny caught something moving in a window of the keep — not the top part but one lower down. He tipped the telescope a hair and waited. There it was again, a curtain moving, with long blond hair. Just a flash and she was gone." (Egan, 2006, p.25)

Attracted by the beautiful figure from distance, Danny decides to get into the heart of the castle after his failed escape instead of returning to the place where Howard and other colleagues stay. When he gets close to her, he thinks she is gorgeous the way any blonde beauty is if you look at her from far. Closer in, he realizes she is not a girl, "she was a woman, which didn't mean someone Danny's own age (those were girls) — it meant someone who looked the way his friends' moms used to look when he was a kid (in other words, his own age)." (Egan, 2006, p.79) When he gets inside the keep and sits in front of the baroness, Danny realizes that she is older than what he has thought, "Some of what he'd taken to be her features turned out to be makeup arranged in the shapes her features should have had and maybe did have once, a long time ago, when she was one of those ages he'd thought from outside." (Egan, 2006, p.80) Puzzled and

confused, Danny stays with the baroness to learn more about the history of the castle and the family of the baroness. Deeply attracted or maybe coaxed by the mysterious figure of the keep, he drinks wine and even makes love with the baroness on the roof of the keep. The scenery in the keep with the baroness that evening seems amazingly as a wonderful hallucination, which makes Danny feel delighted and intoxicated. But in Ray's story, when Danny woke up next morning, he could not remember what happened the night before and where he is. He feels so ashamed that he is naked in a bed of an old room: "The room looked abandoned, piles of old broken stuff around, cobwebs, like an attic no one had been inside for fifty years. He was in a bed, between sheets that were maybe the softest sheets he'd ever felt ... He was naked. And his clothes were nowhere in sight." (Egan, 2006, p.102)

In this respect, *The Keep* not only reveals that all the characters are imprisoned in the castle or in their own imaginations, it again adheres to the Gothic genre which the operating question is: "Is it real or not?" Has modernity, and particularly technology changed the way we define "real" in a society where so much experience is virtual nowadays? We may be contacted with a fascinating new friend via the Internet, but is this really a friend or a wicked person masking as a friend? Stories such as this appear too often that we doubt the validity of Egan's concerns or that in *The Keep* she has written a fiction of ideas. For Egan, the fiction "is in essence a meditation on how our contemporary vices have sullied our ability to think freely and creatively — and the illusions modern life thrusts upon us." (Firger, 40) Every age has its illusions: ours may be, as Egan so thoughtfully explores, centered upon modern technology and its ability to forge connections. But are these connections real? Egan answers the question as her main concern in *The Keep*: "After all, an extraordinary amount of our daily experience and human contact is virtual, with its attendant ambiguities and uncertainties." (Johnson, 2007, p.18)

## V. CONCLUSION

*The Keep* is a brave departure from the traditional fiction writing. It inherits many elements of Gothic fiction, adding something new at the same time. In this book, Egan moved beyond craft writing a first grade Gothic thriller and became an architect. She made the remarkable transition from a good novelist to an "unclassifiable novelist," executing what seemed to be a literary experiment and accomplishment. *The Keep* reflects Egan's deep interest in the pleasure of narrative as well as the exploration on the issue of image culture. It is in essence a meditation on how the highly developed technology has sullied our ability to think freely and creatively and the illusions modern life and virtual images thrust upon us. Egan starts with the genre of Gothic fiction writing, but ends up being really interested in the way in which modern telecommunications mimic the supernatural experience and the imprisonment of the modern human beings. In *The Keep*, Egan explores the issues in and around images culture from a bird's eye view perspective, which brings us to pause and ponder on the issues alongside with her. In such a society, "who cares what you have done? The important thing is what you look like you have done." (Johnson, 2007, p.20)

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