

## **“You” and “We”: A Rhetorical Analysis on “You” Narrative in Jennifer Egan’s “Black Box”**

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**Abstract:** Building on rhetorical narrative theory, this essay analyzes Jennifer Egan’s 2012 Twitter fiction “Black Box,” as the writer moves seamlessly among three kinds of second-person narration: (a) the protagonist “you,” a woman on a U.S. national security mission in the not-so-distant future, addressing herself in her own voice; (b) “you” addressing herself in the voice of a “we” even when “we” is not explicitly marked; and (c) “you” addressing herself by repeating what “we” has instructed her. Egan orchestrates the interaction among these three kinds of narration to deliver a sharp contrast between the technological breakthroughs of the near future and the persistent devaluation of women by those in power. This essay further suggests that Egan’s text is itself a “black box,” whose distinctive use of “you” narration and “we” narration conveys rich signals that her audience needs to decipher on multiple levels: interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic.

**Keywords:** “Black Box”; The Second-Person Narration; Rhetorical Narrative; Gender And Power

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Second-person narrative, as Monika Fludernik pointed out: “flies in the face of any ‘realistic’ concepts of fictional story telling: it is one of the most ‘nonnatural’ or contrived types of narrative since real-world speakers would not usually narrate to the current addressee their own experiences in the present or in the past” (Fludernik, 1994). Unfortunately, such narrative had never been taken seriously before the 1980’s and even the 1990’s. Percy Lubbock neglects it; E. M. Forster says nothing about it; Gerard Genette mentions second-person narrative but he calls it “a rare but very simple case” (Genette, 1980); Wayne Booth, states only in a footnote of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* that “effects to use the second person have never been very successful” (Booth, 1983); Gerald Prince simply explains that “in many narratives ... the ‘you’ may constitute the only reference to a narrative audience...we learn nothing explicit about the narratee as such, except that he takes part in the events recounted to him: we do not know what he thinks of these events as he is told them; we do not perceive what his attitude towards the narrator and his narration is; and so on and so

forth” (Prince, 2019). In the past two decades, however, more critics have paid attention to second-person narrative, and second-person texts have proliferated and been (re)discovered in great number. Among the important recent studies on second-person narrative are articles written by Brian Richardson and Monika Fludernik. Richardson defines second-person fiction as “any narration that designates its protagonist by a second-person pronoun. This protagonist will usually be the sole focalizer, and is generally the work’s narratee as well” (Richardson, 2006). He classifies three types of second-person narrative: “the ‘standard’, the ‘hypothetical’, and the ‘autotelic’” (Richardson, 2006). The standard form, according to him, can be identified by its designation of the protagonist as “you”, rather than “I”, “he,” or “she”; the hypothetical form employs the style of the guidebook to recount a narrative; and the autotelic form employs direct address to the reader or narratee. Fludernik alleges that second-person fiction is “fiction that employs a pronoun of address in reference to a fictional protagonist” (Fludernik, 2002). Viewing from the perspective of their relation to a realist reading of the text, she categorizes three types of second-person story: (a) “I” and “you” narratives (in which the narrator shares a fictional past with the narratee and can therefore be “in the know” about it); (b) the entirely nonrealistic case of a pure rendering of a second person’s consciousness; and (c) the playful metafictional case of a deliberate manipulation of the irreality and ambiguity factors of the second-person pronoun (Fludernik, 1994). Fludernik also argues that because “second-person fiction destroys the easy assumption of the traditional dichotomous structures which the standard narratological modes have proposed, especially the distinction between homo- and heterodiegetic narrative or that of the identity or nonidentity of the realms of existence between narrator and characters” (Fludernik & Fiction, 2005), it cannot be easily accommodated within current narratological paradigms. Agreeing with Fludernik’s announcement, Jan Alber claims that “you-narratives present us with another fairly recent storytelling scenario that is unnatural because it involves impossible mind-reading abilities. In such narratives the ‘you’ refers to a protagonist whose mind is depicted in great detail by a covert narrative voice” (Alber, 2016). In this way, he subsumes second-person narrative into the category of “unnatural narrative”. David Herman, taking a cognitive approach to narrative “you”, demonstrates what he calls the quality of double deixis of the “you” pronoun, the referential and the address. The referential functions of narrative “you”, according to him, “associated with textual you pertain to one functional subtype of the pronoun, a subtype marked by an uncoupling of the grammatical form of

you from its deictic functions”; the address functions, by contrast, refer to “discourse functions that differ in degree, not kind, from the functions we call referential”, they “can be respecified as a convergence between the grammar of you and its deictic profile” (Herman, 1994). James Phelan, working in his rhetorical mode, clarifies the long-debated question of “who are you?” by stating that it depends on a clear and stable distinction between “an intrinsic, textual ‘you’ – a narratee-protagonist – and an extrinsic, extratextual ‘you’ – a flesh-and-blood reader” (as Rhetoric, 1996). Phelan examines the relation between rhetorical theory’s concept of narrative audience and narratology’s concept of narratee, arguing that the two concepts are not competing but complementary (as Rhetoric, 1996). Phelan’s rhetorical concept of second-person narrative, as it shows, accepts the insights of Fludernik, Herman, Richardson, and Alber. Yet as rhetorical narrative theory claims “somebody telling somebody else for some purpose,” it highlights particularly two points in second-person narrative: First, rhetorical reading is interested in the dual tracks of the you-narrative—the narrator addressing you on one hand and the author implicitly addressing her audience on the other hand. Second, regarding to the multi-layered dimension of the authorial communication to her audience, rhetorical reading is interested not just in the cognitive dimension (emphasized by the other theorists) but also in the ethical and affective dimension. Due to the emphasis not only on the narrative features of the text but also on the audience’s responses to it, this paper studies “you” narration in Jennifer Egan’s 2012 Twitter story “Black Box” from the perspective of rhetorical narrative, focusing on both Egan’s innovative use of the technique and the interpretive challenges, ethical judgments, and aesthetic assessments it generates. Other commentators such as Daniel Aureliano Newman (Newman, 2018) and Amelia Precup (Precup, 2015) have offered insightful commentary on the thematic meanings of Egan’s story. I will look more closely at how Egan uses the you-narration, and its intersection with we-narration to affect her audience’s responses to that thematizing. More specifically, I focus on Egan’s unusual but seamless deployment of three kinds of you-narration: “you” addressing herself in her own voice; “you” addressing herself in the voice of the “we” even when “we” is not explicitly marked; and “you” addressing herself by repeating what “we” has instructed her. The three kinds of narration, as it appears in the text, are not clearly separated but often glide into each other. Egan uses the technique to offer a radical analysis of how the fusion of national security concerns and new technology re-inscribe and reinforce old relations between gender and power. Although “you” in the story has

strong heroism and patriotism, with the technological devices implanted in "your" body and "you" functioning as "our Black Box," "you" is very conventionally feminine. "We" regards "you" as expendable and inferior, as long as "you" fills the "black box" with data, "we" doesn't care whether "you" lives or dies. At the same time, Egan's innovative use of her technique for these thematic purposes makes her story function as an aesthetically appealing narrative black box. The paper then relates these thematic and ethical issues to the story's overall aesthetics and the beauty of Egan's narrative.

## 2. WHO IS "YOU" AND AN ANALYSIS OF "YOU'S" VOICE

In "Black Box", the protagonist is named as the second-person pronoun "you" with no real name. "You" is a woman spy living in the future, belonging to a unit of trained national security personnel; "you" is performing undercover anti-terrorist missions by means of badger game, fulfilling sexual roles and functioning as an object of power play; "your" body has been planted with high-tech equipment which can perform functions secretly and effectively. With such equipment, "your" physical body is "our Black Box"; "your" ultimate task is to bring the information filled in the Black Box to a rescued site called "Hotspot". "Your" primary aim is a man who is "your Designated Mate", and "you" follows him to a new remote and unfamiliar place where "your" ultimate target -- "your new host" lives. Once there "you" photographs the sketches with the camera hidden in "your" left eye; "you" sneaks into "your new host's" bedroom and downloads the data from his handset. While stealing the information, "you" is found and injured by "your new host", "you" succeeds escaping from the house and gets to a "Hotspot" by resorting the unique ability of "your Primal Roar" which horrifies "your opponents". In spite of the starting point where the distinction between "you" as addressee and observer, or as narratee and audience is somewhat blurry, as the narrative goes on, the "you" clearly fits Phelan's category of an intrinsic, textual "you": a narratee-protagonist -- a woman character who lives in the future world performing a secret mission. In this way, there is less fluctuating between the "you" as character and "you" as reader in the text than many other second-person texts which undermine the clarity and stability of the distinction between "you" as a narratee-protagonist and "you" as a flesh-and-blood reader. Thus, the actual reader obtains the position of the observer role, from which "we (readers) watch characters think, move, talk,

etc.”, and usually, “the fuller the characterization of the you, the more aware actual readers will be of their differences from that you, and thus the more fully they will move into the observer role — and less likely that this role will overlap with the addressee position” (as Rhetoric, 1996). Though unnamed, the protagonist “you” can be inferred from evidence within the text to be Lulu, a character in Egan’s previous fiction *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, where she appeared first as the nine-year-old daughter of the disgraced Public Relations Executive Dolly and later as a student working for the record producer Bennie Salazar and represents “a living embodiment of the new ‘handset employee’: paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent” (Egan, 2011). In *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Lulu’s date of birth can be calculated about the year 2000; consequently, *Black Box* can be dated to the early 2030s when Lulu is thirty-three years old and married. By replacing the name “Lulu” with the unnamed pronoun “you,” Egan enables to stand on its own (even as she seemingly invites readers of *Goon Squad* to consider “Black Box” another chapter in the novel). In addition, the replacement emphasizes the importance of “your physical person” -- “our Black Box” and the significance of “your” mission. “Your” name is so meaningless that it is not worth mentioning at all.

### 3. “YOU’S” SELF-ADDRESS INDEPENDENT OF “WE”

As is explained above, the three kinds of narration in the text are not clearly separated but sometimes glide into each other. “You” addressing herself in her own voice, one of the three types, appears gradually as “you” is getting more familiar with the daunting mission and knows better how to react at each moment of the danger. Staying at “your” Designated Mate’s room and pretending to nap, “you” reflects about “your” husband, “your” past experience and “your” future. Using parallel sentence structure, Egan vividly presents what “you” is thinking:

You will reflect on the fact that your  
 husband, coming from a culture of tribal  
 allegiance, understands and applauds  
 your patriotism.  
 You will reflect on the enclosed and  
 joyful life that the two of you have shared  
 since graduate school.  
 You will reflect on the fact that America

is your husband’s chosen country, and  
that he loves it.

You will reflect on the fact that your  
husband’s rise to prominence would have  
been unimaginable in any other nation.

You will reflect on your joint conviction  
that your service had to be undertaken  
before you had children.

You will reflect on the fact that you are  
thirty-three, and have spent your  
professional life fomenting musical  
trends.

You will reflect on the fact that you must  
return home the same person you were  
when you left.

You will reflect on the fact that you’ve been  
guaranteed you will not be the same person.

You will reflect on the fact that you had  
stopped being that person even before  
leaving.

You will reflect on the fact that too much  
reflection is pointless.

You will reflect on the fact that these  
“instructions” are becoming less and less  
instructive. (Section 15)

Remembering the happy past “you” and “your” husband shared together, thinking about “your” dim and uncertain future would make “you” feel confused and helpless, bringing “you” more unpleasant personal feelings. Nevertheless, those feelings are neither permitted by the urgency of “your” task nor by “our” instruction, “avoid excessive self-reflective; your job is to look out, not in” (Section 19). “You” must remind “yourself” that “too much reflection is pointless”. But facing more and more difficulties, “you” has to cope with them bravely and independently, and “our” instructions become less helpful and less instructive. Such self-doubt and self-reflection expose how hard the mission is, how lonely “you” is and how much “you” has to pay for heroism and patriotism. At the same time, “you” wishes that “you return home the same person you were when you left”, but the fact is that “you will not be the same person” and “you had stopped being that person even before leaving” because the mission is fulfilled through “your” sacrifice even by means of badger game and

performing sexual roles as an object of power play. In this way, “your” self-reflection not only emphasizes the thematic meaning of heroism and patriotism, but also automatically calls the audience’s attention to stand in “your” shoes, to reflect on “your” sacrifice, and to show sympathetic feeling towards “you”.

#### 4. THE AUDIENCE’S ETHICAL JUDGEMENT ON THE “YOU”

From the rhetorical perspective, narrativity is a double-layered phenomenon, involving both “a dynamics of character and event and a dynamics of audience responses” (Phelan, 2005). Phelan defines the double-layered phenomenon as narrative progression, “the synthesis of textual dynamics and readerly dynamics” (Phelan, 2018), in which textual dynamics “govern the movement of narrative from beginning through middle to end” and readerly dynamics “both follow from and influence those textual dynamics” (Phelan, 2005). Often, “authors construct narrative progressions that so deeply intertwine textual and readerly dynamics that readerly dynamics become not just a consequence of textual dynamics but also a force that shapes them” (Phelan, 2018). The experience of reading, or the dynamics of audience response, encourages two main activities: observing and judging, that is, “the authorial audience perceives the characters as external to themselves and as distinct from their implied authors, and the authorial audience passes interpretative and ethical judgments on them, their situations, and their choices. The audience’s observer role is what makes the judgment role possible, and the particular judgments are integral to our emotional responses” (Phelan, 2007). Usually, the audience makes three types of narrative judgments: interpretive, ethical and aesthetic, “interpretive judgments about the nature of actions or other elements of the narrative, ethical judgments about the moral value of characters and actions, and aesthetic judgments about the artistic quality of the narrative and of its parts” (Phelan, 2007). In the text, despite the fact that “you” has strong heroism and patriotism, the audience interprets “you” as one of the female agents who are sacrificing their lives, under the instruction of “we”, to fulfill the mission of nationalism. As the reading process goes on, the audience reconstructs “your” story, making judgments on “your” behavior. Like the protagonist in the text, the audience cherishes and values human rights, but he/she has deeper understanding of “your” sacrifice. In spite of the fact that technological devices are implanted in “your” body and connected to the network, “you” is very conventionally

feminine: “You” is a daughter who recalls “your mother rocking you in her arms when you were a baby, that she has always loved you fiercely and entirely” (Section 43); “you” is a wife whose husband is an admirable engineer “coming from a culture of tribal allegiance, understands and applauds your patriotism” (Section 14) and who is “a visionary in the realm of national security, occasionally has access to the screen...tracking your dot of light” (Section 22); “you” imagines “yourself in the arms of your husband” (Section 42); in addition, “you” is also a woman who dreams of having children, raising a family and living a life “you” and “your” husband both cherish. Besides the interpretation of “you” as a traditional female figure, the audience’s deeper understanding of gender issues goes further. I’ll sketch that deeper understanding here and then elaborate on the sketch in the next sections as I look more closely at Egan’s variations of her narration. In order to complete the heroic mission of stealing information from some powerful men, the character “you” and “your” companions have to embody the social cultural stereotype of “the beauty”: beautiful, attractive but nameless women, pretending to have “true freshness of ingénues” and “a lovely, innocuous, evolving surprise” to please “your Designated Mate” and “your new Host”. “The beauty” are viewed as human subspecies, with clearly established behavioral patterns, such as “giggles; bare legs, shyness”, “a giggle and a look of incomprehension are a beauty’s most reliable tools”(Section 24). As a “beauty”, “you” has to sacrifice yourself and fulfill sexual roles, “you” functions as an object of power play, “you” has to accept male domination that you “will sometimes be expected to change hands. Generally, you will pass from the hands of a less powerful man to those of a more powerful man”(Section 30) and have to endure sexual intercourse against “your” will, though you can practice a dissociation technique so as not to appear uncomfortable and break the illusion of being a prostitute. In the text, the most distinguished stance of showing gender discrimination is the repeatedly emphasized topic sentence “your physical body is Our Black Box”. The story happens in the future when “technology has afforded ordinary people a chance to glow in the cosmos of human achievement” (Section 21), “your” body has been implanted with various high-tech equipments which can perform functions secretly and effectively. The “we” of the story instructs the “you” as follows:

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



triangle of cartilage across your ear  
opening. (Section 12)

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

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

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

...

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

Pressing your left thumb (if right-handed)  
against your left middle fingertip begins  
recording. (Section 15)

...

The camera implanted in your left eye is  
operated by pressing your left tear duct. (Section 25)

...

Attached to the plug is a cable with a  
connection pin at one end for insertion  
into the handset's data port. (Section 35)

It seems that what “you” only needs is to press the button to download the data, but all the high-equipment is in fact still planted in “the beauty’s” body, it is “the beauty” who is the carrier of high-tech, whose physical body embodies the utility of technology. As Amelia Precup notes, Egan offers a vision of the future in which technological advancement further reinforces the “sexist, racist, ethnocentric, classist tendencies embedded in the hegemonic social matrix” (Precup, 2015). By highlighting these issues of gender, power, humanity, and technology, Egan invites the audience to meditate on a future in which the concepts of patriotism and national security can be used to dehumanize people in general and women in particular.

## 5. WHO ARE “WE”

An examination of the “you” in the text needs to be followed by an

account of the other closely related issue of the “we” in it. We-narrative, as Natalya Bekhta suggests, can be defined as “a narrative situation with a dominant category of person where ‘person’ refers to a group who narrates and who is also a character, consistently using the first-person plural pronoun for self-designation and self-reference” (Bekhta, 2017). Based on the work of other narratologists such as Franz K. Stanzel, Susan Lanser, Uri Margolin, Brian Richardson, Monika Fludernik and Alan Palmer’s analysis of communal and collective storytelling, Bekhta summarizes four types of we-narration: a group is speaking as a whole; several (at least two) group members are speaking in unison, referring to the group they represent (e.g., a chorus in ancient Greek drama); group members speak individually, taking turns, but use “we” to refer to the group and themselves as its members; and a single group member speaks about and, if empowered to do so, for the group she represents (Bekhta, 2017). We-narration in “Black Box” fits perfectly in the first category that a group is speaking as a whole, the pronoun “we” emerges first in section five where when encountering “your” first Designated Mate, “you” is delivering a strong self-lecture and recalling what “you” has been told about the mission:

“We ask of you an impossible combination  
of traits: ironclad scruples and a willingness  
to violate them;

...

We cannot promise that your lives will be  
exactly the same when you go back to  
them.” (Section 5)

Here the audience understands that “we” mentioned in the text should be a certain group of people who give the character instruction and dictate her to perform as what “we” says. Egan does not tell us clearly the identity of “we” at the outset, but instead, she invites the audience to explore through the process of reading. While observing “your” performance under “we’s” instruction, experiencing “your” personal feeling of braveness and loneliness during the process, the audience gradually has a clear knowledge of “we’s” identity: “we” are National Security Personnel of the United States of America; “we” have trained “you” to perform this task; “our Black Box” is implanted in “your” physical body; “we” have been sitting in front of a big screen and watching “you” all the time; “we” have the power to protect and rescue “you” but “we” will not do it until “you” fills the “black box” with data and reaches one “Hotspot”. Egan exposes the identity of “we” step by step through the textual progression:

As Americans, we value human rights  
above all else and cannot sanction their  
violation. (Section 37)

...

Your physical section is our Black Box;  
without it, we have no record of what has  
happened on your mission. (Section 38)  
We can't tell you in advance what direction  
relief will come from.  
We can only reassure you that we have  
never yet failed to recover a citizen agent,  
dead or alive, who managed to reach a  
Hotspot. (Section 43)

It can be observed from the above sentences that what "we" represents in the text is a small portion of people, the privileged authorities who have the power to employ and train those women to sacrifice their lives willingly for the sake of national security. And contrary to the detailed description of the character "you" who is performing the heroic mission, Egan neither depicts "we" in detail nor reveals "we's" inner thoughts. Instead, she portrays "we" in an exaggerated but negative way, employing more negative words and expressions, such as "we ask of you an impossible combination of traits", "we cannot promise", "we cannot sanction", "we have no record", "we can't tell you" and so on, those expressions automatically inducing in the audience negative feelings towards "we" and what "we" represents. I will discuss this further in the following sections

## 6. "YOU'S" SELF-ADDRESS INFLECTED BY "WE"

In "Black Box", the second kind of narration, "you" addressing herself in the voice of "we" even when "we" is not explicitly marked, dominates and runs throughout the text, it starts from the very beginning of the text,

People rarely look the way you expect  
them to, even when you've seen pictures.

The first thirty seconds in a person's  
presence are the most important.

If you're having trouble perceiving and  
projecting, focus on projecting. (Section 1)

Although it seems that "you" is giving a self-lecture, "you's" self-address is actually instructed by "we." For example, the last sentence of the above

quotation can be explained as: “If you’re having trouble perceiving and projecting, *we* ask you to focus on projecting.” Appearing at the very start of the text, “you’s” self-address inflected by “we” shows that “your” action is always under “we’s” instruction, and that “where stray or personal thoughts have intruded, you may delete them” (Section 14). As a trained woman spy, “you” is so confident and proud of what “you” is doing even before performing the mission, “you” trusts “yourself” and believes that “you” will fulfill the daunting mission easily and successfully. As the narrative goes on, when encountering “your” first target - “your” Designated Mate while swimming to some rocks a hundred feet from shore, “you” delivers a strong self-lecture. Possibly because of meeting him unexpectedly and facing a danger of being seduced, “you” does not get ready to cope with the hardship. At that crucial moment, “you” just copies what “you” was told in “your” training. The sentences of self-addressing, therefore, are put under quotation marks:

“You will be infiltrating the lives of criminals.

“You will be in constant danger.

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

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

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

“The instincts and intuition of experts, and the blank records and true freshness of ingénues.

“You will each perform this service only once, after which you will return to your lives.” (Section 5)

As the narrative goes on, “you’s” self-address under “we’s” instruction diffuses into the text, though there is occasional self-reflective distraction. The ultimate of “you’s” self-address comes near the end of the text. Reaching the approximate location of a Hotspot and feeling that “you” is dying, “you” reminds “yourself” again in the form of parallel sentence structure:

Remember that, should you die, your body  
will yield a crucial trove of information.

Remember that, should you die, your Field  
Instructions will provide a record of your

mission and lessons for those who follow.

Remember that, should you die, you will have triumphed merely by delivering your physical person into our hands. (Section 43)

Interestingly enough, also under “we’s” instruction, “you” is endowed with some superpowers. Egan vividly describes “the Dissociation Technique”, a kind of technique that the body and spirit are separated momentarily. “You” manipulates this power whenever “your” physical violation is imminent. When seduced by “the Designated Mate”, “you” employs it by counting backward:

Close your eyes and slowly count backward from ten.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Because it is “like a parachute – you must pull the cord at the correct time. Too soon, and you may hinder your ability to function at a crucial moment; Too late, and you will be lodged too deeply inside the action to wriggle free” (Section 8), the technique is mysterious but thrilling. Egan seems obsessed with the description of the scenery of the superpower of “the Dissociation Technique”. Chapter Ten of *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, “Out of Body” has a similar scenario. There, the spiritual part of the protagonist is in out-of-body state, leaving his physical part struggle and be swallowed up in the river’s torrent; while in “Black Box”, “you” employs this supernatural technique when “you” is seduced by “your” targets-some powerful and frightening men who stay in ambiguous and exotic locations to threaten “our” nation, which not only accords with the hybrid spy-science fiction genre Egan uses, but also emphasizes the theme that “your voluntary service is the highest form of patriotism...these acts are forms

of sacrifice”, countering “your” feeling that “you” is acting like a prostitute.

Besides the “Dissociation Technique”, “you” also possesses another superpower, “the Primal Roar”, which “is the human equivalent of an explosion, a sound that combines screaming, shrieking, and howling. The Roar must be accompanied by facial contortions and frenetic body movement, suggesting a feral, unhinged state” (Section 38). While stealing the information from “your new host”, “you” is found and injured by him, but “you” succeeds in escaping from the house by resorting “your Primal Roar” to horrify the opponents:

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

The goal is to horrify your opponent, the  
way trusted figures, turned evil, are

horrifying in movies and in nightmares. (Section 38)

The powers of “the Primal Roar” and “the Dissociation Technique”, from a rhetorical narrative perspective, strengthen the “you” narrative in the story, emphasizing the thematic meaning of “your” heroism and patriotism. “You’s” superpowers, which seem mysterious and unnatural, are actually things that make “you” more useful to the “we.” The only thing what “we” wants is that “you” fills the “Black Box” with data and gets to a “Hotspot” successfully, no matter how hard it is and what sacrifice “you” has to make. “You must pull the cord at the correct time”, neither too soon nor too late. “You’s” self-address inflected by “we”, therefore, has significant consequences for the readerly dynamics. Though the second-person “you” in the text clearly refers to the narratee-protagonist-a female agent who sacrifices herself by performing badger game, the audience can still empathize with the character and the way she is being manipulated by the “we.” Egan’s skillful use of the “you” narration invites her audience to project themselves into the narratee’s position, to sense and affirm you’s feeling of patriotism while also recognizing what “you” does not know: the way she is being dehumanized by the “we” valued only for her potential usefulness to the “we.” I shall elaborate on this point in the next section.

## 7. “YOU’S” SELF-ADDRESS WITH “WE” EXPLICITLY MARKED

Besides the two kinds of narration discussed above, there is also another kind in “Black Box”: “you” addressing herself by repeating “we’s” words and instruction, that is, “you’s” self-address with “we” explicitly marked. As discussed previously, the pronoun “we” first emerges in section five

where “you” delivers a strong self-lecture:

“We ask of you an impossible combination  
of traits: ironclad scruples and a willingness  
to violate them;

...

“We cannot promise that your lives will be  
exactly the same when you go back to  
them.” (Section 5)

Under such explicit and definite instructions by “we”, “you” performs the mission willingly and bravely. As the mission goes on, “you” encounters more challenges and difficulties which are beyond “we’s” instruction, “you” has to react independently, “you” takes actions more according to “your” self-address, or even occasionally “you” is lost into self-reflection, “you’s” self-addressing surpasses “we” narration. But, as the primary task is given by “we”, “we’s” voice and what “we” has emphasized echo around “you” all the time, “you” must always bear in mind that “you” should be loyal to “we” and act according to what “we” has instructed:

We ask that you allow our Therapeutic  
Agents, rather than those in the general  
population, to address your needs.  
Secrecy is the basis of what we do, and we  
require your extreme discretion. (Section 39)

“We” narration, as Brian Richardson has pointed out, “represents a powerful trap that the characters are unable to escape”, it “can attain a highly probable intersubjective sense of things or they can produce an unreliable narration that is bounded by the epistemological limitations of the group they belong to” (Richardson, 2006). In “Black Box”, “we” are National Security Personnel of the United States of America, “we’s” primary and ultimate target is to train “you” to complete the task of approaching and infiltrating the lives of some possible terrorists, to download data and record their details, no matter what the risk to “your” own life. The crucial thing to “we” is that “your physical body is our Black Box”, “we” cares about nothing else except the Black Box; “we” has to use it to trace and defeat “our” enemies. As “we” narration appears at the very moment when “you” encounters “your” Designated Mate, it accompanies “you” in the process of the story, and ends at the moment when “you” fulfills “your” task and reaches a Hotspot. While stealing the information from “your new host”, “you” is found by him and is wounded seriously by a gun, “you” escapes successfully and gets to the “Hotspot” by resorting “your Primal Roar” and stealing “your new host’s” speedboat. Now “you”

is in such unbearable pain that "you" is faint and dying, the boat's movement reminds "you" of a cradle and "you" is reflecting "your" childhood and "your" mother. At this moment, the narration shifts from "you's" self-address inflected by "we" to "we" explicitly marked:

Remember that, should you die, you will  
have triumphed merely by delivering your  
physical person into our hands.

...

We can't tell you in advance what direction  
relief will come from.

We can only assure you that we have  
never yet failed to recover a citizen agent,  
dead or alive, who managed to reach a  
Hotspot. (Section 43)

The gliding from "you" narration into "we" narration highlights the gap between what "you" is suffering and what "we" is expecting. "You" is experiencing intolerable pain, "you" is severely wounded, "crumped and bleeding at the bottom of a boat"(Section 44), "the bloody dress wrapped around your shoulder"(Section 45), "you" is at the brink of death, what "you" needs most is "we's" coming to save "your" life promptly without any delay. But, contrary to what "you" needs, as "we" are National Security Personnel of the United States of America, what "we" worries about solely is "our targets"- some powerful men who are thought to be terrorists who threaten American security. "We" does not care whether "you" is alive or dead, what "we" cares exclusively is not "your" life, but "your" physical body - "our Black Box. Without it, we have no record of what has happened on your mission"; without this Black Box, "we" can not trace the potential terrorists, then, "we" can not fulfill "we's" mission and "we's" patriotism. Even at the crucial moment when "you" is scarcely alive, what "we" continues to emphasize is only "we's" interests-the Black Box and the new heroism, "in the new heroism, the goal is to transcend individual life, with its petty pains and loves, in favor of the dazzling collective"(Section 45), therefore, "should you die, your body will yield a crucial trove of information...should you die, your Field Instructions will provide a record of mission and lessons for those who follow...should you die, you will have triumphed by delivering your physical person into our hands"(Section 43). Reading the sentences, the audience can not help having empathetic and affective feelings towards "you", feeling so sorry for and sympathetic towards "you" and "your" patriotism. At the same time, the audience also senses the mercilessness and inhumaneness of "we" and



what “we” is preaching. “We” has stated that “we” values human rights above all; “we” has promised to rescue “you”, but the truth is that “we” cares nothing but the Black Box, “we” propagates nothing but the New Heroism of “transcending individual life in favor of the dazzling collective”; “we” will definitely not discard “you” but the truth is that we “recover a citizen agent, dead or alive, who managed to reach a Hotspot” because only when “you” fulfills the mission would “you” manages to reach the secured site. No matter whether “you” is alive or dead, the Black Box is there. What’s more, at the very ending of the story, “you” is in a state of coma and unbearable pain, “you” deploys the out-of-body Dissociation Technique again to release the pain, whether “you” will be rescued alive is uncertain, Egan leaves it as a mystery and does not give the audience a definite answer either. The uncertainty of “your” fate at the end strongly affirms the theme that it is only the Black Box that is what “we” cares, “you” is expendable, as long as “you” fills the Black Box with data, whether “you” is alive or dead is meaningless to “us”.

#### 8. THE AUDIENCE’S ETHICAL JUDGEMENT ON THE “WE” AND AESTHETIC EVALUATION OF THE OVERALL NARRATIVE

Ethical judgments in narrative, as Phelan claims, “include not only the ones we make about the characters and their actions but also those we make about the ethics of storytelling itself”, and “narrators typically serve three main functions – reporting, interpreting, and evaluating” (Phelan, 2007). In “Black Box”, Egan typically restricts her narrator mainly to the single function of reporting, because “your job is to look out, not in” (Section 20), she, then, relies on the audience to interpret and evaluate further through the progression of reading. Besides the feeling of gender discrimination, the audience, following Egan’s description, also senses the satirical and negative feeling toward “we” and what “we” claims as New Heroism. The New Heroism, as is stated in the text:

In the new heroism, the goal is to renounce  
the American fixation with being seen and  
recognized.

In the new heroism, the goal is to dig  
beneath your shiny persona. (Section 21)

In the new heroism, the goal is to  
transcend individual life, with its petty

pains and loves, in favor of the dazzling collectives. (Section 45)

Reading what “we” have claimed as “New Heroism”, the audience is more inclined to sense the ironic and unrealistic meaning of the sacrificial task as well as Egan’s satirical attitude toward it. The so-called high-tech program is actually undertaken by human being, the heroism and patriotism are actually fulfilled by “the beauty” performing badger game at the risk of losing their lives. As Amelia Precup puts it: The sacrificial task undertaken by the main character has not been technologically preprogrammed, but predetermined through the very human traditional indoctrination of political discourse, rooted into the mentality of a society driven by the ideology of heroism and a strong sense of national exceptionalism. However, some of the indoctrinating statements flattering American patriotism and righteousness embed ironies meant to undermine the same notions they seem to promote and to expose the potential hypocrisy behind political propaganda (Precup, 2015). At this point, the audience, would tacitly make opposite ethical judgments about the character “you” and the instigator “we”. On the one hand, the audience has positive and sympathetic affection toward “you”; on the other hand, he/she holds a negative ethical judgment of the “we”-American national security personnel and what “we” has labeled as new heroism, which are essentially against human rights. The “we” comes to represent the merciless imperial powers and the institutional authorities who meet their interests by taking advantage of ordinary people’s sacrifice. The simultaneity of these opposite responses to the “you” and the “we” contributes substantially to a positive aesthetic judgement of the overall narrative. Egan’s audience comes to appreciate the unique form of the three kinds of separate but intertwining narration. Not only do the three kinds of narration stress the thematic significance of the story, they also automatically draw the audience’s attention to reconstruct the story, to dig into the true nature of the characters, and to form ethical judgments of the “you”, the “we” and Egan’s storytelling itself. Thus, the audience appreciates the artistic quality and aesthetic value of the text’s overall narrative.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Following rhetorical narrative theory, I have discussed the “you” and the “we” in “Black Box”. Tracing three kinds of separate but intertwining ways of narration, I have identified what’s distinctive about Egan’s use of both

“we-narration” and “you-narration”: the specific “you”, the unusual “we”, “you’s” self-address independent of “we”, “you’s” self-address inflected by “we”, “you’s” self-address with “we” explicitly marked, and the blurring of the “you” as singular and plural in some passages. As a result, Egan offers her distinctive critique of gender and power, as it is tied to issues of technology, heroism, nationalism, and patriotism, her text is itself a “black box” containing all these rich signals, leading the audience to respond with sympathy to “you’s” experiences and to decipher the thematic and ethical significance of the “you”, the “we” and the storytelling itself. In this way, the overall narrative of Egan’s “Black Box” becomes a thing of dark beauty.

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