

Reconstructing the Past: A Critical Study of Julian Barnes's

The Sense of an Ending

Mehar Jahan Bushra

Ph.D. Scholar, Dept. of English and M.E.L

University of Lucknow

Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

mjbushra8@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines how the protagonist of Julian Barnes's novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), Tony Webster, reconstructs his past through memory and narrative. Tony, an unreliable narrator in his sixties, attempts to decipher the truth and meaning of his past through his fallible memory and limited and insufficient documents. The central argument of the paper posits that Tony's narration of his personal history holds a comparable level of authority to that found in any traditional historical narration. Therefore, like a professional historian, his narration of the past employs the narrative strategy of emplotment to make his story coherent and persuasive. As Hayden White argued, a historical narration is parallel to storytelling and a historian employs 'fictive elements' to make the historical representation comprehensive and sympathetic to the target readers. The paper also throws light on the fragmented depiction of Tony's past which is effectively linked to his struggle to fully comprehend and cope with his somewhat traumatic history. By incorporating the theories of Hayden White and Pierre Nora to explore the connections and differences between memory, history, and fiction in the novel. The paper contributes to the critical studies of Barnes's novel by highlighting the ethical and epistemological implications of Tony's interest in the past and self-historicization, providing a nuanced perspective on the novel.

Keywords: Memory, Past, History, Emplotment, Narrative.

Introduction:

The Sense of an Ending is a 2011 novel by British author Julian Barnes, who won the Man Booker Prize for this work. The novel is a postmodern exploration of memory, time, and truth, as the narrator, Tony Webster, revisits his past and questions his own reliability. The novel is divided into two parts, the first one narrates Tony's school days and his friendship with Adrian Finn, a brilliant and philosophical boy who joins his group of friends. Tony also describes his relationship with Veronica Ford, his first girlfriend as confusing and upsetting. Tony and Veronica break up after a year, and Tony later learns that Adrian and Veronica have become a couple. Tony writes a bitter letter to Adrian, wishing them a miserable life. Shortly after, he receives a letter from Veronica's mother, informing him that Adrian has committed suicide. The second part of the novel takes place decades later when Tony is a retired and divorced man in his sixties. He receives a letter from a lawyer, telling him that Veronica's mother, Mrs. Sarah Ford has died and left him a bequest: Adrian's diary and five hundred pounds. Thus, Adrian starts questioning his past and his memories. Tony tries to contact Veronica to find out the truth behind Mrs. Ford's will, but she is elusive and cryptic, refuses to give him Adrian's diary, and only sends him one page. He eventually discovers that the mentally challenged man is actually his friend Adrian's son with Veronica's mother, who later had an affair with Adrian. Tony realizes that he had misinterpreted and forgotten many details of his past and that his hateful letter to Adrian may somehow have contributed to his suicide.

Barnes employs the dominant narrative techniques of postmodern fiction i.e. an unreliable narrator with a fallible memory to represent the interplay between the overlapping themes of disturbing past, memory, and identity. It actually tries to suggest that our understanding of the past is in constant flux and evolving and our sense of self is based on the narratives we construct around it. The novel is a complex and intricate exploration of the

relationship between time, memory, personal history, and identity which mainly focuses on the protagonist Tony Webster. Tony, is shown reminiscing about his past, his formative years, youth, early adulthood, college-going guy who does not take things that seriously.

At the very beginning of the novel, Tony gives an ominous warning to the readers that he has a fallible memory so he may or may not remember the past in the way it had actually happened. The opening lines immediately capture the attention of the reader – “I remember, in no particular order – a shiny inner wrist; – steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly tossed into it; ... – bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door. This last isn’t something I actually saw, but what you end up remembering isn’t always the same as what you have witnessed.” (Barnes 3). These lines set the groundwork for a novel concerning memory, truth, philosophy, the past, and a search for a peaceful existence. So, this serves as a kind of disclaimer where we cannot question the narrator and just sympathize to understand his bend of mind and situations that compelled him to behave in a certain way. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes more and more evident that Tony has been (un)consciously altering and laundering certain parts of his memories, of which he may or may not be fully aware. This realization suggests that memory can be subjective and unreliable and that individuals do not have complete control over their own recollections. The novel’s plot develops through his recent and distant memories. His recent divorce from Sussanne and receiving letters from his girlfriend Veronica’s mother triggers him to take a trip down memory lane.

Each of us indeed has a story to tell and in the realm of storytelling, each individual possesses a unique and distinct narrative that encapsulates their life experiences. However, intriguingly, there exists a prevailing pattern in the vast majority of these stories. Within these narratives, one can easily sense a compelling need to justify both the unfolding events and the protagonist’s actions. To delve deeper, it seems interesting to think about why this pattern

exists and how it shapes our understanding of ourselves and others. Studies have shown that they serve a fundamental purpose - that of providing a logical and coherent framework within which the lead character's story can be understood, sympathized, and appreciated. Tony's remembering and reconstructing of his past and immersing in the memories form the structure of the entire novel. At the time of the narration of the past, Tony, is an old man who exhibits signs of having a defective memory, a disturbing past, and an identity crisis, especially when he comes to terms with the real yet long-ignored version of his past. He rarely talks about the life he spent after Veronica left him instead focuses on the events in which he can posit himself as the victim of Veronica's manipulative behavior. He documented his life to lessen the effect of the *damage* that took place in his past, through his memories which are not reliable and the documents sent by Veronica's mother to him; when he struggles to understand his past to understand his own identity. "Throughout the novel, Tony's own searches for what he calls "corroboration," for evidence that would confirm or deny his own memory of the past, underline the novel's interest in exploring various means of writing and imagining history." (Baena)

As Nietzsche argues in his groundbreaking work, *The Genealogy of Morals*, The "problem" of the beast is that it does not remember; the "problem" of man is that he remembers all too well. – (qtd. in White 348). This quote suits Tony to a great extent as he chooses what to remember and what to forget, which means he has an ample number of memories of his past concerning Veronica, her mother Mrs. Ford, his friend Adrian Finn, and his time spent with them, but he is unwilling to narrate all of them. The novel presents how individuals manipulate their past experiences to construct a more plausible, acceptable and faultless narrative of their lives by selective remembering. Hayden White in *Metahistory* emphasizes the importance of selective remembering. He says –

Remembering, he insisted, is, like seeing, always a remembering of something, not a generalized activity; remembering is therefore an act of will, with a purpose or aim or object. Moreover, man chooses to remember in a particular way, and the way he chooses to remember a thing is evidence of whether his attitude with respect to himself is destructive or constructive. A look back at his past is a way of defining his present and his future; how he sculpts the past, the kind of image he imposes upon it, is preparatory to launching himself into the future. (White 348-349)

Hayden White argues that history belongs to the category of discursive writing, and thus entails the employment of a narrative tool known as ‘emplotment’ in historiography. Emplotment refers to the act of arranging events into a narrative structure or plot. “Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind.” (White 7). He states that a historian employs any of the four modes of emplotment namely – Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire, to a given historical account. Considering Tony’s narration of his life history, it is obvious that he is shaping his personal history, and engages in consciously selecting and rejecting certain events to be narrated, which is actually a form of ‘emplotment’. He strategically arranges and frames events, emphasizing certain aspects while downplaying or omitting others. Like, from the outset, Tony intentionally portrays Veronica in a negative light while simultaneously (un)consciously dropping hints about his peculiar encounter with Mrs. Ford. Also, Tony forewarns the readers – “Annie was part of my story, but not of this story” which indicates that Tony Webster, in his role as the historian of personal history, reveals an adeptness at deciding what to include and exclude (Barnes 46). Hayden White observes, “[t]he [historian] makes his story by including some events and excluding others, by stressing some and subordinating others” (White 6). This deliberate structuring of his narrative aligns with

White's idea that historians, like storytellers, select a particular plot to give meaning to the past.

Barnes's choice of a protagonist, who was a scholar of history at Bristol and a member of a local history society, is not an accident. It actually indicates that Tony is much more skilled and knows well how the past representations are made comprehensive and trustworthy by embedding some 'fictive' elements in them. Tony successfully done 'emplotment' of his version of the past event into "a story of a particular kind" (White 12). He (re)interpreted his past as a 'tragic' one, where he was a victim of an unloved relationship with "exasperating, stubborn, haughty" Veronica, who looked down upon him and was betrayed by Veronica and his "cleverest friend", "a Cambridge chap", Adrian, who steals his beloved from him. (Barnes 138, 41). However, Veronica's visit after forty years serves as a counter-narrative to the history he is narrating so far and subverts the whole constructed reality by his (im)perfect memory. Veronica's narration provides an alternate interpretation of the same shared event in their history of life. The technique of 'emplotment' enables the past to be revised, distorted, or selectively forgotten by the agents who shape it, and it can have unforeseen and irreversible consequences for the present and the future as happens with Tony.

Tony's reflections on his past, including moments of regret, loss, the inability to fully comprehend the mysteries of history, and the ultimate realization of the consequences of his reckless past actions, echo the themes of tragedy. The use of tragedy as a literary genre allows Tony to convey the complexity of his personal history, emphasizing the inherent challenges and ambiguities. Tony's journey involves a re-evaluation of his past actions and the consequences of them on others. His anagnorisis or realization of the actual truth about young Adrian's relationship with Veronica turns his constructed narratives upside down. Tony's initial understanding of events is biased or sheerly incomplete, and as he unearths more

details, he experiences a tragic shift in his understanding. The impact of his choices, selective remembering, and his deliberate overlooking of the disturbing past for decades can be seen as a form of personal downfall, *peripeteia*, which comes only with Veronica's return.

The novel explores the consequences of misjudgment and the weight of one's adulterated memories, as Tony's tragic flaw. His journey toward accepting and establishing peace with his uncomfortable past and confronting the suppressed truths, especially the brief time spent with Mrs. Ford can evoke a sense of catharsis for both the character and the reader. The novel is undoubtedly not an Aristotelian tragedy but rather a postmodern novel with tragic elements. Tony uses the 'emplotment' tool in such a way that his past can be seen as a tragedy, where he witnesses the emotional damage, rejection by Veronica, and trauma of losing his friend Adrian to suicide. It is a mode that depicts the failure of human agency and the inevitability of fate and suffering. Later, he realizes that his actions, such as writing the angry letter to Adrian and Veronica, had unintended and disastrous consequences. He also acknowledges that he was ignorant, selfish, and cowardly in his youth and that he missed the opportunity to know the truth. He ends his version of the story with a sense of guilt, regret, unrest, and uncertainty.

Tony's narration of his past is undoubtedly an example of irony which means the literal meaning is different from the connotative meaning. Tony uses irony to express his doubts, uncertainties, regret, self-referentiality, and self-effacement about his past actions and decisions. He also uses irony to question the reliability of his own memory and history. He says, "History isn't the lies of the victors, as I once glibly assured Old Joe Hunt; I know that now. It's more the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated." (Barnes 61)

Drawing parallels from Whites' theory of historiography and storytelling, it is palpable that historians and Tony both grapple with the subjective nature of the past.

Historians acknowledge the influence of their perspectives on historical narratives, while Tony's personal history is inherently subjective and shaped by his experiences and emotions. Also, Tony's construction of narratives to fill memory gaps mirrors the historian's challenge of dealing with incomplete or biased historical records. He delves into the past to find, reconstruct, and narrate the past to suit his purpose, as a historian does. As Pierre Nora states, "The task of remembering makes everyone his own historian" (15). Furthermore, both face the task of constructing a cohesive narrative from fragmented or elusive information.

Conclusion:

Barnes, through Tony, engages in a philosophical exploration of the subjective nature of memory, history, time, and identity. This aligns with the intellectual inquiries often present in historical writing, where historians grapple with broader questions about the interpretation of the past. By employing the narrative method of 'emplotment,' Tony structures his narrative in a manner that mirrors his interpretative choices. This involves emphasizing particular events and constructing a meaningful and desirable plot that serves the purpose of portraying him as the one who suffers damage, thereby achieving the desired effects. Simultaneously, the use of the tragic genre adds depth to his storytelling, framing the events of his past as part of a larger, inevitable narrative with elements of regret and introspection. Together, these rhetorical and literary choices contribute to Tony's role as a historian of his own life.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2023 by Mehar Jahan Bushra Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial

purposes, with proper attribution. Authors are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

Works Cited

Barnes, Julian, *The Sense of an Ending*. Vintage Books, 2012.

Baena, Victoria. "The Sense of an Ending Themes: History, Narrative, and Truth." LitCharts LLC, 15 Jun 2018. Web. 12 July 2023.

Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire." *Representations*, no. 26, 1989, pp. 7-24. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2928520. Accessed 14 August 2023.

White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.