

THE INTRICACY AND COMPLEXITY OF TIME AND MEMORY IN
JULIAN BARNES' THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

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Abstract:

This paper shall attempt to deal with the concept of time and memory in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*. It shall explore the unreliability and unpredictability of memory as seen in the recollection of the first person narrator in the novel. The recollection of the past is an integral part of the novel. This paper shall deal with the casual and random recollection of the past by the narrator, and how this serves to challenge narrative objectivity and impersonality. The paper, through the recollections of the narrator, will also throw light on how subjective recollection of the past can be and how this affects perception and insight. The paper will also show how Barnes' narrative challenges the traditional notions of perception, and reiterate how a single perception cannot be an all-encompassing and meaning-generating observation.

Key Words: Time, Memory, Perception, Recollection & Barnes

Postmodern fiction often refuses the omniscience and omnipresence of the third person and engages instead in the dialogue between a narrative voice and a projected reader. Its viewpoint is avowedly limited, provisional, personal (Natoli and Hutcheon 250). Julian Barnes uses the character of Tony Webster as a first person narrator in *The Sense of an Ending*. There is often the case that the reader places his naïve but common trust in the representational veracity of a first person narrator. This plays with the convention of literary realism (Fokkema and Bertens 82). Julian Barnes' characters show passivity and self-reflexivity in the observation of the passing of time. This is done by studying the novel *The Sense of an Ending* in particular. In this novel, the protagonist Tony Webster is detached and disconnected as he recounts his past life and his past relationships.

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, "time" means all the years of the past, present and future. It means the passing of these taken as a whole. Memory is defined as "an individual's power to remember things, a thought of something that one has seen, done or experienced previously" (730 & 1251). The British postmodern writer Julian Barnes uses the concept of time heavily in his novels. His novels are predominantly concerned with the passing of time and how time occupies a centrality in the lives of the characters. In the novel *The Sense of an Ending*, time is as much a character as the human characters are. The passage of time is an essential part of the novel. The narrative goes back and forth to the past and the present. It seems like the stories of the characters and the events happening in the novel cannot progress if time does not shift from the past to the present and vice versa. The protagonist Tony Webster recounts his past- his school days and college days, and the things that happen in between like his recollection of a particular vacation. His memories are referred to many times for the narrative to progress and to take shape. But Tony does not seem to be a keen observer of the passage of time. His recollections are untidy and haphazard, and are often random and chaotic. It seems that synchronicity of events is not a concern for him. This indicates the author's attempt to show that a single representation of events is often unreliable. This is evident in the opening lines of the novel:

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; gouts of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house; a river rushing nonsensically upstream, its wave and wash lit by half a dozen chasing torchbeams; another river, broad and grey, the direction of its flow disguised by a stiff wind exciting the surface; bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door. (Barnes 3)

From the above lines, it can be seen that Barnes does not intend for the reader to register a chronological progression of events, or the adherence to a regular clock-time. The narrator of the novel, Tony Webster, does not aim to portray an organized recall of time or the passage of time. For him, it seems to be the case that time is fluid and therefore one cannot attempt to have a structured and ordered assembling of it. The things that he remembers seem casual and unimportant, as if he is undertaking an inconsequential task in his act of recollection. They lack coherence and discipline, and could not possibly be more random. He himself admits that he does not necessarily remember things in a specific order.

At the start of the novel, the protagonist Tony introduces the reader to incidents in his life which have become memories. But the way that his memory is recollected seems to have no specific meaning or purpose. It does not seem to foretell an event that might be significant. The way that it is presented suggests that the narrator is reflexive when he recalls the past. It may be the case that the narrator is passive in his observation of time. He does not want to hold to his observations or affirm them. He says, "...what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed" (3). Tony does not want to be held accountable for what he remembers. He seemingly tries to distance himself from his memories, while relying on them to narrate his past and what he had experienced. As a postmodern fiction, the novel often refuses the omniscience and omnipresence of the third person and engages instead in the dialogue between a narrative voice and a projected reader. In Umberto Eco's terms:

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. (Hutcheon 67)

Julian Barnes uses the character of Tony Webster as a first person narrator in the novel. He refuses to hide his interpretative and narrating acts behind a third-person voice of objectivity. This echoes Linda Hutcheon's belief that postmodern works challenge narrative singularity and unity in the name of multiplicity and disparity (90). Barnes, through the character of Tony, challenges the implied assumptions of historical statements like objectivity, neutrality, and impersonality.

"We live in time - it holds us and moulds us- but I've never felt I understood it very well" (Barnes 3), he confesses, when he tries to explain what time means to him. He insists that he is not referring to theories of time but rather ordinary time measured by the passing of a clock hand. It is interesting to note that though he does not profess to be able to explain what time means to

him, he relies heavily on it: . . . it takes only the smallest pleasure or pain to teach us time's malleability. Some emotions speed it up, others slow it down; occasionally, it seems to go missing – until the eventual point when it really does go missing, never to return". (3)

It is evident that his recollection will not be reliable. Tony is honest when he says that he will not produce a factual recollection of the past. He says:

I need to return briefly to a few incidents that have grown into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty. If I can't be sure of the actual events anymore, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left. That's the best I can manage. (4)

This indicates that most of the things he remembers depend a lot on his convenience and his whim; and shows how subjective the retelling of the past can be. He remembers what he wants and neglects what he does not want to divulge.

Kosinski calls this postmodernist form of writing 'autofiction': 'fiction' because all memory is fictionalizing, 'auto' because postmodern literature is a literary genre, generous enough not to let the author adopt the nature of his fictional protagonist – not the other way around (Fokkema and Bertens 82). There is a need to rid the reader of illusions of totalizing explanations and system of ethics. This kind of genre also challenges the borders between life and art that plays on the margins of genre (Kosinski 34). The narrator of the novel tries to provide an example of how unspecific recollection can be. He believes that the phrase "something happened" would suffice in any effort to recall any event that has happened in the past. Though the phrase does not inform the reader or the listener of an event in its specificity, it does affirm that something did happen and is acknowledged and recalled:

But there is one line of thought according to which all you can truly say of any historical event – even the outbreak of the First World War, for example, is that something happened. (Barnes 5)

In his youth, the narrator shows a passive reaction to the passage of time. He is not willing to go into details whenever he recounts any past incident. Time for him suddenly starts and stops. He tells his story, but not the whole story. It seems that he cannot be specific because he realizes that what he says will be biased and one-sided. His recollection of an event or incident will be different from another person's perspective. This can be seen in the passage which talks about his adolescence in the novel. He talks about what he and his friends understand about the process of moving from adolescence to adulthood:

In those days, we imagined ourselves as being kept in some kind of holding pen, waiting to be released into our lives – and time itself – would speed up. How were we to know that our lives had in any case begun, that some advantage had already been gained, some damage already inflicted? (9)

When Tony's class at his school are asked to define what history means to them, one of the main characters, Adrian Finn says, "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (17). This explanation seems to resonate with the author's suggestion that time is malleable and subjective. The narrator seems to agree with this definition as he reiterates it over and over again in the novel when things are not made clear, or when a new fact is brought to the notice of the narrator which forces him to change his perception.

When the narrator's girlfriend Veronica Ford is introduced for the first time in the story, the narrator feels the need to establish the concept of going out during his youth- "I'd better explain what the concept of 'going out' with someone meant back then, because time has changed it" (21). The narrator is all too aware that everything is susceptible to change. He does not trust his recollections and if things that seem as real and as firm as social conventions of dating can change, a thing as vulnerable as memory can change. His time and experiences with his girlfriend occupy a pivotal part in the narrative. In the passages dealing with the initial stages of their relationship, Tony recounts their first few dates and his understanding of Veronica's character but ended the passage with the confession:

But I was wrong about most things, then as now. . . where's the logic in that?. . . I was so ill at ease that I spent the entire weekend constipated: the rest consists of impressions and half-memories which may therefore be self-serving. . . though whether this was the cause, or the consequence, of my insecurity, I can't from here determine. (28)

A consequence of the far-reaching postmodernist enquiry into the nature of subjectivity is the frequent challenge to traditional notions of perspective. The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity. Narrator in fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate, or they become resolutely provisional and limited – often undermining their own seeming omniscience (Butler 192). Tony does not recall with security or conviction. His tone is defensive and self-protective. He does not like the implication that all he did at college was seeing his girlfriend, but he narrates little else. He says:

I don't want to give the impression that all I did at Bristol was work and see Veronica. But few other memories come back to me, one that does- one single, distinct event- was the night I witnessed the Severn Bore. (Barnes 35)

This statement does not help his case. He cannot recall his other memories and the ones that he does are vague. He does not explain what the Severn Bore is nor gives any inclination into its significance. The reader is left hanging and wanting more. The memory he latches on to and recalls again and again of his college years have something or the other to do with Veronica.

The narrator is deeply unsettled at the treatment he receives at Veronica's home by Veronica, her brother and her father. He recollects the events and wonders whether they were treating him like lower-class scum. But he is also apprehensive to form a decided conclusion as it all might appear as extreme sensitivity from his part. But when a letter arrives from Veronica's mother after his relationship with Veronica ended, he felt that he was right in his belief that they were all condescending. The contents of the letter seem to confirm his belief, and later in his life, as he remembers that awful visit to the Fords' home, he wishes that he had kept that letter as proof of his mistreatment:

I wished I'd kept that letter, because it would have been proof, corroboration. Instead, the only evidence comes from my memory- of a carefree, dashing woman who broke an egg, cooked me another, and told me not to take any shit from her daughter. (39)

He feels justified in his belief that he was mistreated. He believes that Mrs. Ford was his witness and her letter a confirmation. This does not mean that the events that had happened had changed a single bit. But it indicates a postmodern characteristic of challenging a reconsideration of the point of originality or the idea of origin (Natoli and Hutcheon 251). But initially it was his word and his memory that he relied on and he was apprehensive to call it the truth. But Mrs. Ford and her letter provided what he thought was a witness, a corroborator.

The tone in which the narrator narrates his story is irresolute and hesitant. He admits that what he says does not necessarily make sense. When he starts to recollect a certain event his words have a certain uncertainty. There is an awareness of the lack of coherence and reason. For example, in a particular instance when he tries to narrate a past event, he says, "Logic: yes, where is logic? Where is it, for instance, in the next moment of my story?" (Barnes 40). This shows that he is aware of his lack of consistency in his recollection of memory. When a letter from Adrian asking him to go out with his ex-girlfriend Veronica reaches him, he tries to make sense of what the situation implied. He is amused and angered at Adrian's 'moral scruples', and the fact that he would believe 'some modern principle of ethics had been infringed'. But then he hesitates and says that this is his reading of the situation at that time- that is- the past:

Again. I must stress that this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of my reading then of what was happening at the time. But I think I have an instinct for survival, for self-preservation. Perhaps this is what Veronica called cowardice and I called being peaceable. (42, 43)

It is indicated that there is no documentation or proper record of this incident. The understanding of this situation is based on one person's recollection which may or may not be biased and false. The tricky thing with remembering is that the act itself is already predisposed to partiality. When he narrates his story for the first time, Tony chooses to exclude certain facts but in the end, he goes back and admits that he had not done justice to the people in his past. The things that he had overlooked out of his shame or embarrassment came back to him when he got a little wiser with age. Just because they had not been included in his version do not make them any less true. He observes:

Don't imagine you can rely on some comforting process of gradual decline – life's much more complicated than that. And so the brain will throw you scraps from time to time, even disengage those familiar memory-loops. That's what, to my consternation, I found happening to me now. I began to remember, with no particular order or sense of significance, long-buried details of that distant weekend with the Ford family. And suddenly, a complete memory came to me: of Veronica dancing. Yes, she didn't dance – that's what I said – but there'd been one evening in my room when she got all mischievous and started pulling my old pop records. . . On the train up I was remembering when you danced in my room. But she only said, 'I wonder why you remembered that.' And with this moment of corroboration, I began to feel a return of confidence. I told her the story of my life. The version I tell myself, the account that stands up. (112,114 &116)

This debunks the complaint that postmodernism is ahistorical, or that it uses history in a naïve and nostalgic way. What starts to look naïve, by contrast, is the reductive belief that any recall of the past must, by definition, be sentimental nostalgia or antiquarianism (Russell 261). It shows that history, the past and memory can be open to a number of interpretations. In the end, the observation of time seems to come down to person inclination. There will be different perspectives in the re-presenting of the past and they all would be prejudiced at one moment or the other. The narrator believes that it depends on a person's preference to relate and reproduce what they felt and think is important and to be the arbiter of what really matters.

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