

# IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

**Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal**

**ISSN-2321-7065**



**Volume V, Issue III March 2017**



[About Us](#) | [Editorial Board](#) | [Submission Guidelines](#) | [Call for Paper](#) | [Paper](#)  
[Submission](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Terms & Condition](#) | [More.....](#)

**(HIS)TORY THROUGH IMPERFECTIONS OF MEMORY:  
EXPLORATION OF THE NARRATIVE DEVICE IN  
JULIAN BARNES' THE SENSE OF AN ENDING**

**DR. KIRAN RAKIBE  
DEPT. OF ENGLISH  
KSKW ARTS, COMMERCE, & SCIENCE COLLEGE  
CIDCO, NASIK, MAHARASHTRA  
DR. PAYEL DUTTA CHOWDHURY  
SCHOOL OF ARTS & HUMANITIES  
REVA UNIVERSITY, BENGALURU, KARNATAKA  
INDIA**

**Abstract**

Memory has always played an important role in flash-back narratives. Julian Barnes' 2011 Man Booker Prize Winner novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, explores the limitations of memory after the lapse of a period of time. Written in a typical Barnes' style, the one hundred and fifty pages short novella, reflects on the possibilities of imperfect memory and the consequences of it. Barnes' protagonist, Tony, narrates the story of his life and while doing so, seems to have erased certain crucial memories. The readers too, on their journey with Tony, get only limited knowledge of his past. Barnes' story starts during Tony's school days and continues till the time when he is past sixty. Employing the flash-back technique, Barnes' story highlights how Tony recollects his past – his school days, his friends, his love relationship, his marriage – but his memory seems to fail him in recollecting important bits of his life which surprisingly he has forgotten. Given such a scenario, Barnes' choice of first person narration lends authenticity to the story. This paper is an attempt to study the narrative device employed by Barnes and in doing so, highlight the uniqueness of his selection of the first-person narrative technique. It also explores the follies of memory vis-à-vis the question of credibility of the narrative voice in the novel.

**Keywords: memory, deception, flash-back, narration, relationships, illusions, perception**

Memory is indeed a powerful tool which enables us to store our past experiences and revive those at a later point of time. But what if the memory is not authentic? Julian Barnes' book, *The Sense of an Ending*, winner of the Man Booker Prize 2011, explores the possibilities of an imperfect memory and its consequences on the present. Noted English writer, Barnes, has been widely recognized as a prominent writer. Prior to the publication of *The Sense of an Ending*, three of his books had been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He is also popular for his crime fiction which he writes under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh. *The Sense of an Ending* is Barnes' eleventh book which brought him recognition world-wide. The title of Barnes' book is borrowed from Frank Kermode's 1967 book of the same name, which is a well-received piece of literary criticism. Many scholars have found Barnes' choice of borrowing the title from Kermode's book puzzling. A detailed reading of Barnes' novel, however, would make it clear that the title of his book is intricately connected to the life-changing perception of his protagonist at the end.

Written in the first person narrative mode, *The Sense of an Ending*, portrays the trajectory of its central character, Antony aka Tony, as he looks back at various phases of his life and certain relationships. Julian Barnes' choice of first person narration is appropriate in such a context as this is essentially Tony's story and more importantly, his understanding and misunderstanding of his own past. Identifying the most important issue in Barnes' book, Justin Jordan says, "A secret permeates the text, heavily withheld. But this schematic element pales beside the emotional force of Tony's re-evaluation of the past, his rush of new memories in response to fresh perspectives, and the unsettling sense of the limits of self-knowledge." Typical of Barnes' style, the book is crisp with a sense of mystery till the very end. Moving along with Tony's perception, the readers too are caught in a maze of illusions much similar to the narrator. Barnes' hero is much alike our everyday next-door neighbor with his own follies and foibles. The novel begins with Tony's recollections of his school days. His memory of those days reveals that he was an ordinary boy living a normal life. His school life amidst his friends, the classroom scenes, the jokes, humour, and wit are all a part of every young growing boy's life. Tony's mundane life changes the day the new boy, Adrian Finn joins their school. Adrian, with his serious philosophical bent of mind, seems to be the odd boy in Tony's gang. Certainly more intelligent than the others, Adrian is matured than his friends too. Even though he becomes a part of the group, Tony recollects various ways in which Adrian was different from the rest – "At morning prayers he could be heard joining in the responses while Alex and I merely mimed the words, and Colin preferred the satirical ploy of the

Volume V, Issue III March 2017

pseudo-zealot's enthusiastic bellow. The three of us considered school sports a crypto-fascist plan for repressing our sex-drive; Adrian joined the fencing club and did the high jump. We were belligerently tone-deaf; he came to school with his clarinet. When Colin denounced the family, I mocked the political system, and Alex made philosophical objections to the perceived nature of reality, Adrian kept his counsel...." (*TSOAE*, 7) Adrian's maturity showed in the way he never took part or reacted to the constant complaints on parents by his friends. As Tony remembers, in fact, Adrian had the most logical reason to complain, coming from a broken family. Set during a time when the term 'single-parent family' had not yet come into use, Adrian's case was singularly different and all the more so for his friends who found him loving and respecting his parents instead of heaping abuses on them. Tony's recollections of his school days comprise the first phase of his memory. The narration in this phase seems to be quite authentic and connected in a logical manner without any disruption in Tony's memory.

The next phase of Tony's memory shifts to his relationship with Veronica. Post school days and childhood friendships, Tony moves to Bristol to study history and then finds a girlfriend. This brief relationship with Veronica does not go much further. Even though the relationship was not consummated during their college days, Tony felt that abstinence spared him burdensome conversations about where the relationship was heading. Even though 'sex-hungry and book-hungry' at school, Tony pretends that not being close to Veronica physically is his choice: "Something in me was attracted to women who said no." A trip to Veronica's parents' home does not do much to improve their relationship either. He finds Veronica's family judgmental and weird and Veronica too does not help much in taking their relationship a step ahead and a break-up follows. At Bristol, Tony has a brief relationship again with Veronica, who shortly after their rancorous affair, starts going out with Adrian. Tony is made to know about this through a letter from Adrian seeking his permission to go out with Veronica. At this phase of Tony's memory, he narrates only his short courteous reply to Adrian. The readers do not get an idea of his flawed narration at this stage and it is only towards the closure of the book that he seems to realize the impact of his imperfect memory. Analyzing the effect of partial memory, Brookner says that "(i)ts influence can persist throughout adult life, though what is cause and what effect may be difficult to judge. In this short but compelling novel Julian Barnes tracks the origin of one particular memory through a long and apparently uneventful life towards an explanation that leaves traces of

unease that are difficult to dismiss.” The final recognition of such imperfect memory can change the entire belief system, as occurs in the case of Tony.

Barnes then lets the readers know about Tony’s travel to USA, his getting back home to know the news of Adrian’s suicide, his steady job, marriage to Margaret, birth of daughter – Susie, divorce, retirement – all in a matter of two pages. The narration, even though consists of important details of Tony’s life, is compressed to a great extent, may be because all these facts are not directly linked to the story. The narration moves directly to Part Two of the book where suddenly in his advanced years, Tony receives a bequest of £ 500 and some important documents from Sarah Ford, Veronica’s mother, who had recently died. Tony is flabbergasted at this sudden inheritance as he had met Veronica’s mother just once during his brief stay at their place and had hardly shared half a dozen sentences. He narrates his astonishment and is unable to understand the reason why someone whom he had hardly known had left any money. Pursuing the solicitor, he gets to know that the document that he had inherited is Adrian’s diary which at present is with Veronica. He resolutely pursues Veronica and has to start right from the scratch as he has no clue of her contact details. Reaching Veronica takes quite some time for Tony. They exchange emails; cryptic ones from Veronica which makes Tony go bonkers trying to figure out what’s running in her mind. In a particular email where Tony had asked Veronica the reason for her mother to leave money for him, she replies with a single phrase, “Blood money”, which hardly explains anything for the astounded Tony. His narration at this phase lacks clarity of comprehension, an inability to understand the enigmatic Veronica:

“I had to call up my sent email and read it through again to work out that grammatically her two words could only be a reply to my asking why her mother had left me five hundred pounds. But it didn’t make any sense beyond this. No blood had been split. My pride had been hurt, that was true. But Veronica was hardly suggesting that her mother was offering money in exchange for the pain her daughter had caused me, was she? Or was she?” (*TSOAE*, 82-83)

Ultimately when he meets her, he is unable to understand the reason behind Veronica’s indifference even after so many years. After much coaxing, she thrusts a letter in Tony’s hand instead of Adrian’s diary and leaves the place. The letter turns out to be written by Tony to Adrian after getting to know that he is dating Veronica. The narrator’s mystification is vivid as he reveals

his complete loss of memory of the time when he had written that epistle to his dearest friend. A critic rightly says, “Decades earlier, Tony had accused Veronica of an ‘inability to imagine anyone else’s feelings or emotional life,’ but it was he, not she, who was incapable of looking outside his own head. Barnes’s unreliable narrator is a mystery to himself, which makes the novel one unbroken, sizzling, satisfying fuse. Its puzzle of past causes is decoded by a man who is himself a puzzle.” (Schillinger) What Tony had narrated earlier on was a brief friendly letter that he had written to Adrian congratulating him and giving him permission to go out with his ex-girlfriend. This letter, which seems to be an after-thought, had been erased from the narrator’s memory. Reading the hate letter, Tony recollects how he had poured out his abhorrence for Adrian and Veronica in that paper and feels ashamed of his deed. He is also shocked to remember that he had suggested Adrian to get to know about Veronica’s true nature from her mother – “Even her own mother warned me against her. If I were you, I’d check things out with Mum – ask her about damage a long way back.” (*TSOAE*, 96) Strange as it may seem, this suggestion to Adrian changes the entire course of action in the book which Tony gets to understand only at the end. The letter, dipped in hostility, also reveals Tony’s wished for revenge as he had stated, “I hope you get so involved that the mutual damage will be permanent....And I hope that when you break up, as you inevitably will – I give you six months, which your shared pride will extend to a year, all the better for fucking you up, says I – you are left with a lifetime of bitterness that will poison your subsequent relationships. Part of me hopes you’ll have a child, because I’m a great believer in time’s revenge, yea unto the next generation and the next.” (*TSOAE*, 95) Tony’s sentiments at that point of time, which had been erased from his memory, seem to have created havoc in his friends’ lives without his knowledge.

Driven partly by curiosity and partly by a sense of guilt, Tony gets in touch with Veronica again to understand the real impact of his letter. A visit to a pub and meeting a strange set of mentally retarded people, one who is called Adrian, leaves him dumbfounded. The narrator’s folly continues as he mistakes the young man to be Adrian and Veronica’s child who was born deformed. It is much later and after quite a lot of fact-finding that Tony is able to understand the full import of the situation. The contents of his letter hit him hard when he gets to understand the true parentage of the young mentally challenged Adrian. An analysis of Tony’s narration at this stage forces us to look back and ponder on a few essential questions on the relativity of old age and loss of memory. In this connection, the questions raised by Turrentine in his analysis of the book are quite

appropriate – “If it’s not mere thick-headedness that’s keeping Tony from seeing what actually happened back then, what is it? What is the “something else” that prevents him from identifying the nebulous shape of his own culpability?” All the bits and pieces of Tony’s deceptive memory fall into pieces as the final realization dawns on him and also the real reason of his friend’s suicide, his inheritance, and Veronica’s indifference.

Julian Barnes’ award-winning novella explores the impact of deceptive memory and the resultant confusion in the mind of the narrator. The choice of first person narration creates the desired bafflement as the readers too go on endless confusing rides with Tony till the very end. “Tony is telling us, or rather Barnes is, what we all know but don’t care to admit: that in writing our own authorized autobiographies, we’re contractually bound to run everything by the subject first. Things — usually the most unpleasant things — get left out. And then, over enough time, those unpleasant events are forgotten — assuming all goes smoothly, and ghostly diaries or documents don’t emerge to contest our memories.” (Turrentine) Relationships at various phases of the narrator’s life form the backbone of the book. Beginning with his school days, the narration continues till the time Tony is past sixty. Barnes’ choice of a first person narration seems authentic as the narrator’s senility lends credibility to the loss of partial memory, albeit important ones. The imperfect memory in that sense truly becomes a “meditation on ageing, memory, and regret.” (Jordan)

**References:**

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

Brookner, Anita.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8652283/The-Sense-of-an-Ending-by-Julian-Barnes-review.html> (25th July 2011).

Jordan, Justin. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/26/sense-ending-julian-barnes-review1> (26th July 2011).

Schillinger, Liesl. “Julian Barnes and the Emotions of Englishmen”. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/books/review/the-sense-of-an-ending-by-julian-barnes-book-review.html>

Turrentine, Jeff.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/book-review-the-sense-of-an-ending-by-julian-barnes/2011/10/06/gIQAERntaL\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.4ffe842ac6b8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/book-review-the-sense-of-an-ending-by-julian-barnes/2011/10/06/gIQAERntaL_story.html?utm_term=.4ffe842ac6b8)