

Remembering and Forgetting in the Novel *The Only Story* by Julian Barnes

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Abstract

The novel *The Only Story* by Julian Barnes explores how memory plays an essential role in shaping love and identity through a reflective narration of the protagonist of the novel, reminiscing about his life and his affair with Susan, a middle-aged woman, dwelling deep into the intricate aspects of remembering and forgetting. The paper attempts to examine how the author portrays memory as both the cause of suffering and solace, emphasising its being selective, subjective and malleable. The protagonist's reminiscence of the past is more inclined towards emotional truth rather than factual accuracy, which highlights how one reconstructs the past to serve psychological needs through memory. How forgetting serves as a coping mechanism for the protagonist to manage the emotional hurt and pain of the struggles with Susan's struggles and eventual separation. Also, the act of forgetting proves to be insufficient

as the protagonist remains tethered to unresolved memories, showcasing the paradoxical relationship between two opposing forces, remembering and forgetting. The fragmented and non-linear narrative structure reflects the unpredictability and cyclical nature of memory. Through the exploration of the paradoxical nature of memory both as a burden that comes with remorse and hurt and as an anchor that preserves love and identity. *The Only Story* positions memory and forgetting as intertwined processes that determine the human condition, showing the inescapable tension between holding onto and letting go of the past.

Keywords: Memory, Identity, Past, individuality, Guilt

I. Introduction

Memory plays a pivotal role in the shaping of identities, relationships and the sense of reality in the human experience. It is a lens through which, in literature, characters grapple with their past and try to make sense of reality or come to terms with reality.

Julian Barnes' novel *The Only Story* is a poignant meditation on love, memory, and the emotional scars that define a life. The novel, which was published in the year 2018, is divided into three parts, each relating to different phases of the life of the narrator and his attempts to understand life and his love and its nature in his relationship with Susan. The themes of passion loss, a sense of rebellion and societal expectations and the interplay of youthful idealism with the bitter-sweet reality of adulthood. The narrator refers to his being nineteen too many times, be it to talk about his relationship with Susan or with his parents or even referring to Joan and Mr. Macleod. At first, it is a thrilling and fanciful affair that develops between Paul and Susan. For Paul, it is a statement of rebellion that he chooses not to become the furrow-dweller or to fall in line with societal expectations. He believes in the absolutism of love. He believes, with his naïve nineteen-year-old self, that love thrives in obstacles, and he is ready to overcome anything with his lover, Susan. However, once they both have run away and start living together in England the seams start coming out. As Paul grows age and experience compels him to

revisit the notions that he had about love and about life in general. Susan's struggle with alcoholism and mental deterioration becomes the pivotal aspect of their relationship. With the alcoholism and mental health deteriorating it becomes hard for Paul to manage, and is constantly rebuffed by feelings of remorse, guilt, and anger. He feels isolated and conflicted between his love for Susan and his inability to save her. Paul begins to question his prior belief in the absoluteness of love. The intense, idealistic romance of their early days transforms into something more complicated and painful.

The novel deals with the complexities of memory both as a source of solace and suffering. The novel is a retelling through first-person, second-person and third-person points of view of Paul's life, a man who is reflecting on a love affair that played a definitive role in his youth and later life. The novel's introspective style gives the narrator an opportunity to explore how he reconstructs his memories of love loss and growth. The author invites readers to question the reliability of memory and consider the complex emotional processes behind both remembering and forgetting. The author dwells on the interplay between remembering and forgetting as a means of understanding life's defining relationships in the novel, be it Paul's relationship with Susan or with his parents or friends. Paul's retrospective narration reveals the selective and subjective nature of memory, how it plays an important part in shaping identity, and the possibility of memory being redacted or distorted. Barnes suggests that memory is not just a record of events but a dynamic force that reflects our desires, regrets, and efforts to make sense of our experiences. On remembering about the incident when Susan was Physically assaulted, and her two front teeth were broken beyond repair, he remarks-"Those teeth I used to tap so lovingly were gone for ever; and I had no desire to touch their replacements."(Barnes 103)The nature of memory is sometimes unreliable and selective, which implies Paul reconstructs and reshapes the past at his convenience. Forgetting serves as a coping mechanism that reveals how Paul uses it to manage pain and navigate his relationship with Susan. The

paradoxical interplay between remembering and forgetting, where memory becomes both a source of connection and a burden. The analysis will conclude by discussing the broader implications of Barnes' portrayal of memory, positioning it as a universal human struggle that resonates beyond the pages of the novel.

II. The Nature of Memory in the Novel

The narrator of the novel starts with the premise of a philosophical question about having one story that is told and retold to all and oneself, time and again. The first part or rather the first section, is dedicated to intellectual musing in which he asked the question- "would you rather love the more, and suffered the more ; or love the less, and suffer the less? That is, I think, finally, the only real question." (Barnes 3) the narrator proposes that most of us have only one story to tell. And the truth and the amount of amalgamation in the said truth, he emphasises that there is only one significant story that is told to self and others time and again, also the role of self in the story and how one turns out in this story at the end depends on how one looks at the story. He talks about time, place, and social milieu in a dismissive way or implies that they don't make any difference. The time being more than 50 years ago, and the place about 15 miles South of London and the milieu: the stockbroker belt. Then, he goes on to describe how the general day-to-day life was in the suburban village of Sussex, England. Here the narrator paints the general life during the said time. The pictorial view of life at the suburb shows the idiosyncrasies of the time. The philosophical musing of the narrator prepares the readers for the possibilities of the tricky nature of memory. It could change or take a form that is eventually governed by the idea the narrator wishes to convey; he also talks about the weather and the absence of any significant memory associated with his memory. He does not have a distinctive memory of the weather; the narrator in the novel goes on to say, "I do not much remember what the weather has been like during my life."(Barnes 5)

The novel begins in the 1960s in the suburban village of Sussex, England. Paul Roberts, a 19-year-old university student who is home for the summer, joins a tennis club at his mother's insistence. It was a sort of socialisation scheme by his mother. By being introduced to the society of tennis players and receiving their acceptance, she hoped he might meet a girl that they would approve of. probably the “when I accepted my mother’s offer, it was in the spirit of nothing but satire.” (Barnes 6) There, he meets Susan Macleod, a 48-year-old married woman. Despite the significant age gap and the constraints of Susan’s conventional marriage, they begin a passionate affair. Their relationship is marked by youthful rebellion and the exhilaration of breaking societal norms. “But I refused to be a cliché...” (Barnes 11)

Susan is witty, charming, and unconventional, qualities that fascinate Paul. However, her marriage to Gordon, an emotionally distant, drunk and occasionally abusive husband, creates tension. Paul, believing in the supremacy of love, convinces Susan to leave her family. Together, they move to London, where Paul at the beginning, views their life as a triumph over convention.

Paul acknowledges that his memories are not entirely reliable, emphasising their subjective nature. “I’m not trying to spin you a story; I am trying to tell you the truth. (Barnes 33)” He frequently questions the accuracy of his recollections, admitting that he may have unconsciously altered or embellished certain details over time. This distinguishes memory as often serving emotional needs rather than strictly recording facts. The story is told from Paul’s perspective decades after the events, making his memories vulnerable to distortion by nostalgia, guilt, or regret. His inability to present an entirely objective account underscores the human tendency to reinterpret the past based on present emotions and beliefs. The novel frequently juxtaposes Paul’s memories with moments of doubt, creating a sense of ambiguity. Readers are left to consider whether Paul’s version of events is an honest attempt at self-reflection or a narrative shaped to justify his choices.

You understand, I hope, that I am telling you everything as I remember it? I never kept a diary, and of the participants in my story- my story! my life! - are either dead or far dispersed. So I am not necessarily putting it down in the order that it happened. I think there's a different authenticity to memory, and not an inferior one. Memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer. Do we have access to the algorithm of its priorities? Probably not. But I would guess that memory prioritises whatever is most useful to help keep the bearer of those memories going. So there would be a self-interest in bringing happier memories to the surface first. (Barnes 16)

Further, he keeps asserting that the nature of memory is fluid, it is subjective and it is personalised as per the demand made by the rememberer. The narrator gives the readers the choice to take the memory at its face value or to take it with a pinch of salt.

When I gave you my estate agent's sketch of the village, some of it might not have been strictly accurate. For instance, the Belisha beacons at the zebra crossing. I might have invented them, because nowadays you rarely see a zebra crossing without a beautiful pair of flashing beacons. (Flanagan 33)

Though Paul initially claims that he never kept a diary however, later on he admits to keeping one. He does not have a distinct memory of their first kiss, he is not aware of the weather the kind of clothes he wore and he does not detail on his friends in the beginning of the novel when his affair with Susan was budding. Paul's inability to remember a hotel or flat they rented near the West coast when they went on a holiday also, he admits "what we said, thought, discovered about one another – all gone." (Barnes 63) He is selective in the act of remembering and misses out on things which are significant yet left no lasting impact or he simply chooses not to dwell upon those memories.

Paul tends to emphasise significant emotional moments with Susan, such as their initial connection, acts of tenderness, and the intense love they shared. These memories dominate his recollection, while mundane or unpleasant details are often omitted or glossed over.

Paul's selective remembering reflects his need to construct a coherent narrative about his life. The memories he chooses to focus on define his understanding of himself and his relationship with Susan, revealing the intimate link between memory and identity. The lines "First love fixes a life for ever. ... Though sometimes, first love cauterises the heart, and all any other searcher will find thereafter is scar tissue" (Barnes 71) do reveal the overarching impact of the memory of his first love that is his love affair with Susan which had a lasting impact on his life and became emotionally unavailable to anyone and went through minor affairs with other but remained emotionally detached.

Although Paul recounts some of the darker aspects of his relationship with Susan, such as her struggles with alcoholism and their eventual separation, he often distances himself emotionally from these memories. This selective focus suggests an effort to preserve the beauty of their early love while minimising its later deterioration. He reflects that when she died the most vital part of his life had finally come to a close. He goes on to say that he would always think of her well and would remember it all this way if he could, but he could not. Paul tries to keep the good memories of Susan with him though it foreshadows the rough patch that came afterwards in their lives. Most of the time when the narrator talks about Susan's alcoholism, depression and being disoriented the narrative is in the second person point of view. As his relationship goes through a tumultuous phase the narrative switches to the second-person point of view. The memory is riddled with guilt. As he runs away with Susan to London, and if she was lonely at her place she is lonelier with him, and when she succumbs to depression and alcohol he is conflicted about his love and his responsibility.

As the narrative progresses further, we can observe that with the passage of time, the clarity of memory is brought to question. The memory begins to decay and the difference between a retrofit of circumstances and situations interfere with the memory he has of the past.

As Paul ages, he acknowledges that many details of his past have grown vague or inaccessible. This gradual fading of memory highlights the transient nature of human recollection and its susceptibility to the passage of time. Paul's memories are shadowed by a sense of longing for the passion and intensity of his youth, at the same time they are also haunted by regret and pain. The duality of memory as a source of solace and as a source of suffering remains a central theme of the novel. The abrupt and broken narrative structure mirrors the fragmented nature of memory itself. The story of Paul unfolds in a manner that is non-linear, it keeps switching between past and present which resonates with the idea of the unpredictable and incomplete surfacing of the memory.

III. Forgetting as a Coping Mechanism

The final section of the novel is narrated from Paul's later life, as he reflects on his formative relationship. The tone is melancholic and introspective. Paul acknowledges that Susan was his "only story," the relationship that shaped his emotional life. However, he also comes to terms with the limitations and costs of that story. Paul has distanced himself from others emotionally, unable to fully commit to new relationships. He recounts how Susan's decline led to their eventual separation and her move to an institution. The narrative delves into the nature of memory—how it shapes and distorts reality—and Paul's attempt to make sense of the love that defined him while also causing him profound pain.

Susan, as her alcoholism progresses over the passage of time, and her dependency on the 'Cheer up pills' is more pronounced the first victim is her memory. Over the time she keeps on forgetting. However instances where she suddenly calls him the greatest criminal, or the love phrase that she used to say where have you been all my life reflect how her memory

registers the important aspects of her life which resonates with the idea of memory of Plato where he compares memory to the wax block on which certain experiences are imprinted.

In *The Only Story*, Julian Barnes examines forgetting not as a failure of memory but as an intentional or subconscious strategy for managing emotional pain. For Paul, forgetting becomes a crucial tool for navigating the aftermath of his relationship with Susan and preserving his emotional well-being. Paul's relationship with Susan is marked by profound emotional highs but also by devastating lows, particularly as her struggles with alcoholism and mental health become insurmountable. To cope with the emotional burden, Paul often chooses to forget—or suppress—memories that evoke guilt, helplessness, or sorrow. The runaway fund that he had deposited he withdraws the money in cash to run away from Susan, he checks into a cheap hotel and spends all the money. Ironically, the money was given to him by Susan to run away together and he uses the same to escape from the struggle of dealing with Susan and her issues. Paul does realise instances where he has intentionally blocked out certain details of Susan's decline. For example, while he remembers her as a cheerful and loving partner, he often omits or downplays moments of conflict, her deterioration, or his own feelings of frustration and inadequacy. "You believe her. You never query her increasing lapses and latenesses" (Barnes 120). Forgetting helps Paul to maintain a psychological distance from the most painful aspects of his past. By erasing or softening these memories, he protects himself from being overwhelmed by regret or grief, making him to function in the present. After the relationship with Susan ends, Paul struggles with lingering emotional attachment. He admits to having an act like everyone else. "His Act, which had developed without his really noticing, was that of someone who had -not really, not truly- ever been in love." (Barnes 210) Forgetting becomes his way of severing ties with the past, allowing him to gradually rebuild his life without being constantly haunted by memories of their love and its eventual disintegration. The switching between first to second person point of view to the third also, informs the reading

how distancing oneself from the story is rather an attempt to forget the problematic aspect of the relationship and Paul's growing resentment and being disillusioned with the youthful idealistic and chivalrous love.

While forgetting helps Paul emotionally detach, it does not equate to forgiveness. His lingering bitterness toward certain aspects of the relationship suggests that forgetting is a practical, rather than emotional, resolution. He often reflects on his relationship with his parents, though he didn't antagonise them but the relationship after he ran away with Susan wasn't cordial. However, over the passage of time in retrospect, he kind of understands his parents, " So there was a kind of posthumous reconciliation, even if on based on a certain rewriting of his parents; more understanding, and with it, belated grief." (Barnes 211) At times, forgetting serves as a means of escaping the guilt Paul feels about his role in the relationship. By erasing or distancing himself from memories where he could have acted differently, he avoids confronting his own accountability in Susan's struggles. Despite Paul's efforts to forget, certain memories remain indelible. For instance, his recollections of Susan's laughter, their early passion, and key moments of connection resurface throughout the narrative, suggesting that some aspects of the past are inescapable. "We may go on as if nothing has been lost, nothing done, nothing said; we may claim to forget it all; but our innermost core doesn't forget, because we have been changed for ever." (Barnes 197) Paul recognises forgetting provides relief but is not a permanent escape. Memories often resurface unexpectedly, bringing with them the unresolved emotions he sought to suppress. This cyclical nature of forgetting and remembering underscores the difficulty of truly leaving the past behind. Even as Paul tries to forget Susan, he acknowledges that she remains an integral part of his life story. The act of forgetting, therefore, becomes paradoxical: by attempting to erase her, he inadvertently reinforces her significance. "He was on nodding and smiling terms with many,So, his life consisted mainly of observation and memory."(Barnes 203)

IV. The Paradox of Remembering and Forgetting

In *The Only Story*, Julian Barnes explores the paradoxical relationship between remembering and forgetting, showcasing them as intertwined and inescapable aspects of human experience. “so his life consisted mainly of observation and memory.” (Barnes 203) Through Paul’s reflection on his past, the novel shows how the act of remembering can be both a source of pain and solace, while forgetting, though seemingly liberating, can deepen the emotional weight of memory. He remembers later certain aspects of his affairs with Susan. For instance, He was physically assaulted by Gordon, and he had run away from the Macleod house. Paul finds solace in revisiting the early days of his relationship with Susan, recalling moments of passion, connection, and joy. These memories serve as a refuge, allowing him to relive the vitality of their love and its transformative impact on his life. At the same time, these memories are tinged with regret and sorrow as Paul grapples with the eventual disintegration of their relationship and Susan's decline in regard to her mental deterioration and alcoholism. The act of remembering becomes a double-edged sword: it preserves the beauty of the past but also reinforces the ache of loss. Paul’s inability to control which memories resurface reflects the involuntary nature of remembering. Even painful or unwanted memories intrude on his consciousness, highlighting how memory can simultaneously nurture and torment. Paul expresses a longing to hold onto certain memories, particularly those that define his relationship with Susan.

Paul frequently questions the accuracy of his own memories, blurring the lines between what he remembers and what he may have fabricated or forgotten. This ambiguity highlights the inherent instability of memory and the difficulty of distinguishing between remembering and forgetting. Paul's introspection is filled with contradictions: he admits to forgetting key details yet feels haunted by the emotional resonance of those same memories. This paradox emphasises the complexity of how we process and integrate the past into our present

understanding of ourselves. Paul is never able to overcome the memory of Gordon, Susan's husband, and he tries to create counterfactuals in his life. How he might have persuaded Susan to marry him, probably he might have uttered the line 'Where've you been all my life?' first which quite often is repeated by Susan. Paul's memories of Susan anchor him to a pivotal moment in his life, shaping his sense of identity and providing a story around which his life revolves. This anchoring gives his life meaning, even as it restricts his ability to fully move forward. At the same time, these memories weigh heavily on Paul, preventing him from fully engaging with the present. His inability to escape the emotional impact of his relationship with Susan demonstrates how remembering can tether us to unresolved pain.

V. Conclusion

Julian Barnes' *The Only Story* is a melancholic examination of the dynamics of remembering and forgetting, demonstrating their profound impact on personal identity, relationships, and the interpretation of the past. It highlights the emotional and philosophical questions the novel raises about memory. The novel reveals how memory shapes identity, preserves love, and functions as both a refuge and a source of pain. In *The Only Story*, Barnes portrays memory as a double-edged sword—both a means of preserving the beauty of life's defining moments and a mechanism through which pain and regret persist. Forgetting, on the other hand, is depicted as a survival strategy that allows for emotional detachment but is never entirely successful. The tension between these forces drives Paul's narrative and encapsulates the universal human struggle to reconcile with the past. Paul's subjective and fragmented recollections demonstrate how memory is influenced by emotional needs and the passage of time. Forgetting enables Paul to cope with the darker aspects of his relationship, but it also underscores the inevitability of losing parts of the past, even those he wishes to preserve. The novel's portrayal of remembering and forgetting as intertwined processes reflects the complexity of human psychology, where we are simultaneously tethered to and estranged from

our past. The novel raises profound questions about the reliability of memory and its role in constructing personal identity. It also explores the emotional impact of holding onto or letting go of the past, suggesting that both are essential and inescapable aspects of life. While deeply rooted in Paul's personal story, *The Only Story* resonates universally by highlighting the shared human experience of grappling with love, loss, and the impermanence of memory.

Barnes' novel ultimately suggests that our memories—imperfect, selective, and subjective as they may be—are integral to our understanding of ourselves and the world. At the same time, forgetting, while imperfect as a coping mechanism, is necessary for emotional survival. Together, these processes define the human condition, forcing us to navigate the delicate balance between holding onto the past and moving forward.

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

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