



The Quest for Truth: History and Narration in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*

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ABSTRACT

There is never a shortage of postmodern ideas in Julian Barnes' works. The author reflects on the unreliability of historical writings and the impossibility of any writer to write an objective account of the same. This paper endeavors to bring out some of the postmodern ideas the author has revealed in the book. It is an attempt to expound how the motive of a writer plays an important role in what is being recorded. It highlights the subtle clues the author believes are required to unearth the truth which are often overlooked.

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Introduction

Novelist Julian Barnes, as Dalton mentions is a name that neither academics nor recreational readers are very familiar with. He is one of the lesser known authors among his contemporaries. But, Barnes became well known after winning the Man Booker Prize in the year 2011. Barnes' writing is unconventional and it does not conform to a set pattern and hence his works defy the usual norms of a novel. He experiments with various techniques of writing. Barnes' writing is elegant, witty and playful and according to O'Reilly he is well known for using "techniques associated with postmodern writing - unreliable narrators, a self-conscious linguistic style, an intertextual blending of different narrative forms - which serve to foreground the process of literary creation, the gap between experience and language, and the subjectivity of 'truth' and 'reality'". Barnes is known as a postmodern writer because of this tendency to experiment with various techniques of writing.

"Julian Barnes is one of those marvelously inventive authors who writes a very different book each time. He experiments with historical and contemporary fiction, memoir, biography and essays, seamlessly moving from genre to genre. ... His prose is rich without being showy; he has a precision and economy of language..." (Owens).

Although Barnes frequently uses a humorous tone and experiments with various language form and style, his fiction is rooted in psychological realism and his themes are serious, poignant and heart-felt. He also explores the nature of love, particularly its dark side, exploring humankind's capacity for jealousy, obsession and infidelity, alongside perpetual search for true love. Most of his works have these afore mentioned recurring themes which many critics feel borders near obsession. Benfey says, "Barnes is among the most adventurous writers—in style, versatility and narrative structure..."

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Barnes, delves into the disadvantage of a narration which refers to the point of view

of a single person. He illustrates the ease with which a writer can distort facts and portray half-truths. Barnes maintains objectivity is unattainable while writing history. He calls this the central problem of History. There is continuing debate over the definition of the historical field and about the strategies deployed to collect, record, and narrate evidence (Hutcheon). He firmly believes that the motive of the writer decides how the story is written and how the characters are represented. He also ventures to show the fragility and unreliability of memory in correctly remembering the past. He shows the importance of written documents in decoding the events of History. There are several ways History is revealed. It can be eyewitness accounts of the incidents that took place or it can be people telling their own stories. In this book, Barnes, particularly points out how people narrating their life stories can easily change the narrative to show themselves in a better light. He makes clever use of the unreliable narrator to illustrate how even eye witness accounts can be misleading.

Barnes focuses on the writing of history and its inherent practical and philosophical difficulties (Martin 1). Barnes has made use of this as the central theme in *The Sense of an Ending*. Barnes displays how History can be defined in as many ways as it can be interpreted depending on who is writing it. Barnes depicts a discussion the narrator and his class have with their History teacher where the different ideas are highlighted. For some "History is the lie of the victors" (16), while for others it can also be the "self-delusion of the defeated" (16), many believe that History keeps repeating itself as there is nothing new under the sun. Barnes says very few realize that "History is the certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation." (17). Some believe in eyewitness accounts whereas others distrust reports of those involved. Barnes ventures to display how History is not any one of these but an amalgamation of all the definitions.

He later concludes that it is neither the lie of the victors nor the delusion of the defeated but rather the accounts of those who survive to tell the tale.

One of the major issues Barnes highlights about History is that it is inconclusive. He reflects that the evidence that the historian uses to write the story can have a variety of interpretations and therefore cannot be accepted as the truth as the story presented depends on the writer and his motives. Barnes furnishes few incidents in the story that show why truth cannot be unearthed by the historians. The first reason he provides is that no one ventures to find out the truth for themselves but rather rely on what they read or hear from others. The narrator in *The Sense of the Ending*, Tony Webster, mentions only one of his friends had an interesting life as opposed to himself and other friends who had rather ordinary lives. Adrian Finn, was the only one among them who had a broken family. Adrian's mother had left them and was living in London. When the friends question Adrian about his mother's life in London he is unable to answer all their questions. They conclude that the only way to find out is go to London and find out but they never venture out to do so. Another reason Barnes mentions is the unavailability of the eye witness accounts. One of the narrator's school mates commits suicide and everyone at school only knew what was told to them from various sources. Adrian points out that none of these can be concluded as the real reason without the testimony of the person himself, which they would never receive as he was no more. The real reason for his suicide can only be guessed but cannot be confirmed. Occasionally, the entire story cannot be pieced together as only partial documents might be available to the historian. During the narrator's college days Adrian ends his own life by slitting his wrists. He writes a meticulous suicide note detailing why he decided to do so. Years later the narrator, Tony comes across few pages of Adrian's personal diary which brings to light the real reason for his suicide. But Tony does not get all the answers as he only had access to partial contents of Adrian's diary. Even though he realizes Adrian had lied in his suicide note about the real reason he ended his life he still did not find the entire truth and had to guess most parts. These incidents show how when someone reveals their own motive there is more chances of lying about it as Adrian had lied in his suicide note. The suicide note was intended for the public, the contents of Adrian's diary was not meant to be read by anyone and it had the truth in them. This incident illustrates how the available documents also cannot be trusted to reveal the real story because it depends on who is writing them as well as on the audience for whom it is written. Barnes echoes this point yet again by revealing the same flaw in the narrator's story. Tony's version of the story turns out to have mendacities of its own which is discovered when he comes across a letter he had sent to Adrian. Barnes explores the process of writing History and the hurdles that are faced by the historians. A writer with motives of his own reads the documents of another writer who in turn has motives of his own in writing his life story.

The Sense of an Ending is mostly written in the first-person narration. Most part of the story is recounted by only one of the characters, Tony. The readers get insight into the life of the narrator, Tony and his friends only from one point of view. The readers are at the mercy of one narrator to reveal the life of all the characters.

At no point in the narrative does the author give room for the others to corroborate the narrator's story. The story is

divided into two parts the first consists of the school and college days of Tony and the second part consisting of his retired life. The first part of the narration is presented as the retrospection of his early days while the second part is reported as incidents happening at the present. The narrator is a sixty-year-old retired man recalling his past. The narrator changes the entire narrative when he comes across letters that he had written to one of his friends. Barnes use of the narrator and the selection of the first-person narration holds great significance to the theme of the story. The first person point of view is very efficient in forging a bond of trust with the character. The readers find it very easy to connect and sympathize with the character as they are seeing everything through his point of view. The author uses this point of view particularly to gain the trust of the readers before unveiling they have been believing a liar all along. Webster is an unreliable narrator who consistently misinterprets or misses things, we cannot be sure that the "ending" he is relating is valid (Semeiks).

Lezard acknowledges that Barnes has effectively doubled the length of the book by giving a final revelation that compels the readers to reread it. The narrator is exposed to be an unreliable one. The word unreliable narrator was first used by Wayne C Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Booth calls a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not. If [the narrator] is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed. (158-60) Webster exonerates himself by refusing to confirm the authenticity of his tale from the very beginning. The obvious lack of taking responsibility by the narrator should have put the readers on their guard. However, the admission does the contrary of making the readers believe the story narrated as a genuine one.

Barnes aims to uncover the unreliability of eyewitness accounts that depend solely on their memory to ascertain facts of any episode. Barnes' story is "a meditation on the unreliability and falsity of memory" (Lezard). Barnes' intention is to convey not the impossibility of writing History, but rather the difficulties involved in any attempts to do so (Martin 1-2). History according to Barnes is not something to be read from the pages of a book but rather it needs going to the source and discovering the truth for ourselves. He has demonstrated how biased writers can be while recounting a story and how effortless it is for a writer to feed the readers lies and to make it believable. His deliberate use of the unreliable narrator depicts the ease with which writers can manipulate facts. He encourages to question the motive of the writer as that is what dictates the narration of the story. He also expounds the importance of studying every version of the same incident from different sources. It is always good to know the point of view of everyone involved in an incident before concluding about the facts. The warning to be awry of writers who have written their own life story is relatively resounding. As John Barth said, "The story of your life is not your life it's your story". Relying solely on memory without any documents can lead to gleanings facts that can be erroneous. Barnes encourages to trust stories that are backed up by proper documents as evidence. These postmodern ideas of distrusting History run throughout his body of work.

His work reveals his affinity toward postmodernism and the impact it has on his work.

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