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Eros, Thanatos and Existential Progression in Julian Barnes' The Sense of an Ending

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Abstract:

Existentialism as a philosophy is said to have developed in the mid to late nineteenth-century. Modern existentialism was developed by Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, nineteenth-century Danish philosophers. There has been a close relationship between existentialism and the psychology of 'death'. Sigmund Freud's theory of drives: 'life' and 'death' (*Eros* and *Thanatos*) instincts are responsible for the substantial volume of our human behavior. The distinction between these two biological theories and their relationship with the psychological philosophy of existentialism has been much of a debate in quite a few types of research. Both the instincts are indispensable for the sustainment of life and its being. These two instincts or drives have been well-depicted in various literatures and in the writings of many writers. Julian Barnes' Booker Award-winning novel, *The Sense of an Ending* very explicitly develops the theme of existentialism intertwined with the two drives: life-instinct 'Eros' and death-instinct 'Thanatos'. The analysis of the two instincts and their association to existentialism is presented and expanded upon in this research.

Keywords: *Eros, Thanatos, life, death, being and non-being.*

Julian Barnes is an English writer of distinguished talent. His three novels: *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *England, England* (1998), and *Arthur & George* (2005) were shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Finally, the novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, bagged the prestigious literary award in 2011. Along with these outstanding novels, Barnes has to his credit collection of essays and short stories. His crime fiction is written under the pseudonym of 'Dan Kavanagh'. He has been honoured with the Somerset Maugham Award and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. His works also include a translation of Alphonse Daudet's *In the Land of Life* and *Keeping an Eye Open: Essays on Art*. On 25th January 2011, the French President appointed Barnes to the rank of Officer in the Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur acknowledging his love of France and portrayal of French culture in his writings.

The Sense of an Ending, Julian Barnes' eleventh novel is a highly acclaimed novel. Apart from having won the Man Booker Prize, the novel had also won the David Cohen Prize for literature in 2011 and Europese Literatuurprijs. Barnes's writings deal with various thematic

aspects of love, truth, history, and reality. The title, “The Sense of an Ending” is borrowed from Sir John Frank Kermode’s work *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the theory of Fiction*, published in 1967. The title justifies the essence of the novel. It refers to ‘apocalypticism’ signifying the end of the meaningless existence in this universe. As reported by Tim Masters, Entertainment and Arts Correspondent, BBC News about Chairwoman, ex-MI5 boss, Dame Stella Rimington’s observation on Barnes’ novels as, “the makings of a classic of English Literature”. Further, she designated the novel, *The Sense of an Ending* as, “exquisitely written, subtly plotted and reveals new depths with each reading”. The novel is divided into two parts, covering the life story of the narrator-protagonist, Tony Webster. The narrative focuses on the intricate details of the complex situations and circumstances of the lives of the characters. The novel is a memoir and highlights the narrator’s quest to find meaning in the meaningless past events and identify their consequential results in the present. Barnes’ novels have always been the exemplifications of existentialism and alienation. Existentialism is by far trying to find meaning in the meaningless existence.

Alienation and existentialism have always been popular subjects of discussion in the literature. To understand ‘alienation’ in modern literature, it is important to understand the meaning and depth of the philosophy and its portrayal in the works of literature. The two philosophers, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche had inspired the 20th Century existentialism. To quote Edmund Fuller, “man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine, and ruin; but from inner problems....a conviction of isolation, randomness, meaninglessness in his way of existence”. The transcendental meaning of “The Sense of an Ending” is deep and embedded with existentialism and absurdism. Absurdism to speak as a philosophy has originated out of the fundamental discord between an individual’s quest for meaning and identity in the meaninglessness of the Universe. Julian Barnes’ *The Sense of an Ending* reflects the absurdism at its existential height. The absurdism of the characters and their relentless search for happiness and meaning in their lives appear from the formless chaos of the Universe. There is a very close relationship of alienation, absurdism, and existentialism to that of ‘death’; and with the philosophy of ‘death’, the philosophy of ‘love’ co-exists. ‘Love’ and ‘death’ are “the two elemental forces of human existence” (Süskind 2006). Julian Barnes’s novels had been ‘chronicles’ of existentialism with the philosophy of ‘death’ being his prime objective. ‘Death’ is a fascinating fact for Barnes as he highlights the mechanism of the psychology of ‘death’ on the people and how they deal with it. ‘Death’ is an insoluble question and is at the core of existence in this Universe. It is destructive as well as constructive in nature (Wenquen 2015). The enigma of ‘death’ drive is both a return to nothingness and a force of destruction (Kahn 2016). *The Sense of an Ending* is yet another novel justifying the rational decisions taken by the man in this irrational and meaningless world. In this acclaimed novel, with the death-instinct or ‘Thanatos’, Barnes had intersected Sigmund Freud’s idea of life-instinct, ‘Eros’ or ‘love’ to build the plot and draw the canvas of his novel. The novel strikes a balance between the two great biological instincts– ‘Eros’ and ‘Thanatos’ and the psychological mechanism of the philosophy of existentialism.

Herbert Marcuse in his work, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* had emphasized that “Instinct” refers to primary “drives” of the human organism which are subject to *historical* modifications; they find mental as well as somatic representation. Sigmund Freud had accentuated in his famous work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “We must also be struck with the fact that the life-instincts have much more to do with our inner perception, since they make their appearance as disturbers of the peace, and continually bring along with them states of tension the resolution of which is experienced as pleasure; while the death-instincts, on the other hand, seem to fulfill their function unostentatiously”. According to him, the two major instincts are impulses which originate in the body and are transferred to the mental apparatus driving the physical, emotional and psychological actions. The word ‘Eros’ and ‘Thanatos’ are words derived from the Greek mythology. ‘Eros’ is the God of ‘love’, son of Aphrodite. ‘Eros’ refers to ‘life instinct’ which further refers to love, procreation, peace, cooperation and God; whereas, ‘Thanatos’ is the personification of ‘death’ and comprises of hate, murder, war, devil, anger, aggression and anti-social behavior. ‘Eros’ procreates love and sexual desires, and ‘Thanatos’ drives a traumatic mind to death as the unconscious mind starts creating a desire to die. ‘Eros’ is a drive towards ‘creation’, whereas ‘Thanatos’ is a ‘drive’ towards ‘self-destruction’. But both the instincts are counterparts and cannot exist without each other. “The uncontrolled Eros is just as fatal as his deadly counterpart, the death instinct. Their destructive force drives from the fact that they strive for gratification which culture cannot grant: gratification as such and as an end in itself, at any moment” (Marcuse 1966).

Julian Barnes has been a master in carving out a fine niche in his novels. Contrary to the three-act structure which is a common recurrence in Barnes’ novels, the narrative of *The Sense of an Ending* is divided into two parts covering two different time periods. The first part of the book comprises of the exposition elaborating the setting of England of early sixties with a group of four “book-hungry, sex-hungry, meritocratic, anarchistic” young and carefree students ready to take on the world. The narrative opens with the past story being told by the protagonist, Tony Webster. Barnes’ use of telling the story of the past and the present together as the backdrop and the flashback technique helps in the development of the plot and understanding the present more effectively. In the present, Tony Webster is a man in his 60’s looking back at his life and trying to reinvent the past. His recollection comprises of his youthful days when he enjoyed his friendship with his four friends at school, one of whom was tall and shy Adrian Finn. The focus of the novel is Adrian although Tony is the protagonist and the story proceeds from his point-of-view in the first-person narrative. Tony also reminisces of his one-year relationship with Veronica at the University followed by a humiliating visit to her parents and finally culminating with their break-up. He admits that he was always playing safe and was reluctant to take risks. His ‘peaceable’ nature was asserted by Veronica as being ‘cowardice’. After his recalling the break-up with Veronica, Tony rewinds his memory on the next two very important happenings which change the course of the novel as well as the lives of the characters: Veronica’s coming together with Tony’s best friend, Adrian Finn and Adrian’s ‘Roman’ suicide in a bathtub. The

key event in this novel is Adrian Finn's suicide. Barnes' objective of dividing the novel into two parts helps in recreating the past and reveals the reason for suicide with the 'peripeteia'.

In the second part of *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony recounts how his life gets challenged with the surface of a 'will' from his ex-girlfriend Veronica's mother, Mrs. Sarah Ford whom he had met 40 years ago. He had always desired his life to be simple and without any trouble, "had wanted life not to bother me too much, and had succeeded". Tony's life gets disturbed as he receives the information that Mrs. Ford had bequeathed him 500 pounds and a 'diary' which the 'will' declares was of Adrian. In her 'will', Veronica's mother had passed the diary as a 'legacy' on to Tony but which Veronica is reluctant to hand over to him. In order to get the possession of the diary, Tony reluctantly had to connect with Veronica with whom he had broken up years earlier while the pain remained. Tony's efforts to get the diary from Veronica is the beginning of the second part of the novel. The connectivity in the two parts of the narrative is well-scripted and interestingly drawn by Barnes. The flashback technique unleashes the doors of the past incidences. The novel is a quest for 'truth' making the past responsible for the present. 'Remorse' is the key word which builds up the foundation of the narrative. The revelation that the diary is in Veronica's possession complicates the later developments of the story and brings to light the erratic relationships of the characters and series of unwanted happenings. The past revealed is one shrouded in shame, mystery, and silence. The disclosure of the 'real reason' of Adrian's suicide is shocking, disapproving and is rather unexpected. It's possibly the reason for Veronica's reluctance to hand over the 'diary' to Tony.

Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* reflects the philosophy of existentialism and Sigmund Freud's theories of instincts: 'Eros' and 'Thanatos'. As the story proceeds, the characters are introduced to us by Tony Webster. Tony's burden of guilt increases slowly as he rewinds his memory. His rewinding of the past to search for the reasons and the bases of the present situations and circumstances is a purgation and going through a process of cleansing his guilt and sins. Tony's search for the reason for Adrian's suicide pushes the story forward as the complexities of the lives of the different characters of this novel unfold layer by layer. Of the four friends of his school days, Adrian Finn was the most intellectual one and his nature was poles apart from the group of three members he was involved with. Adrian was, in fact, very different from the whole lot of students. Even the teachers admired him and "were interested in him" than the others. Tony remembers him as the one who "kept his eyes down and his mind to himself". The group members rebelliously believed that the 'social construct' is at a 'flaw'. They hated their parents while Adrian didn't. Instead, he lived by his principles. He was a product of a broken home still he believed in living by the societal standards of living. Adrian loved 'life', its ways and purpose. He had a fascination for Albert Camus and his philosophies. Adrian was the philosopher of the group and a guide upon whom Tony and the other boys depended. In the course of life, when Adrian commits suicide, Tony and his friends are left wondering the reason for the extreme step. Adrian's love of Camus is paradoxical to his suicide. This enigmatic setup is built by Barnes to emphasize the absurd elements and the philosophy of existentialism in the

plot. Barnes' use of 'peripeteia' in the narrative forces the readers to adjust their thoughts. He had very artistically sketched the character of Adrian reflecting the two vital but contradictory instincts of 'Eros' (life) and 'Thanatos' (death). As Tony recollects the impressions of the past, "the chain of individual responsibilities" he remembers his own 'letter' to Adrian after breaking up from Veronica. Adrian had asked Tony's permission to court Veronica. In reply, Tony had delivered an offensive and malicious 'letter' to Adrian wishing him and Veronica a failed relationship and advised him to see Veronica's mother. Tony blames himself for his friend's suicide sitting in his present. His realization of his offense at sending an aggressive letter to Adrian all the more makes him responsible for the tragedy.

Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* illuminates the mechanism of the two instincts of 'Eros' and 'Thanatos', their interdependence and their untidy collisions in the form of human struggle. Adrian Finn's mention of 'Eros' and 'Thanatos' in the text highlights his awareness of the two 'drives' and their dependence upon each other. He interprets "Eros and Thanatos" as "Sex and death". He furthermore asserts, "Or love and death, if you prefer." "The erotic principle," in every possible case, "coming into conflict with the death principle". When a student, Robson commits suicide after learning of his girlfriend's pregnancy, Adrian comments on his death, "Thanatos wins again". The theme of 'Eros' and 'Thanatos' can be identified in the cases of both Robson and Adrian Finn. Barnes' use of these two ideological conflicts in the narrative traces the fate of man and his existence in the Universe. "His sensitivity to the matter of love and death is illustrated by his reaction to a poem the literature teacher asked the class to interpret" (Wenquen 2015). It is enlightenment, order versus abstraction and chaos. Adrian Finn's suicide remains a mystery till the end of the novel. Tony's realization of the 'reason' of Adrian's death comes as a shock to him which he 'didn't get' earlier. Instead of getting involved with Veronica, Adrian had developed a relationship with her mother, Mrs. Sarah Ford and which consequently resulted in Mrs. Ford's pregnancy. Adrian's severe psychological dilemma and emotional shock stemmed out from this unwanted pregnancy led him to suicide. The depression, despair and unable to find meaning in life resulted in his death. His suicide is an internal restoration and artistic catharsis. Tony's returning to his memories that have grown into "anecdotes" is not because he is "nostalgic" but taking responsibilities for them as a purgation. As he says, "to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty. If I can't be sure of the actual events any more, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left. That's the best I can manage." Adrian's suicide is due to his inability to take responsibility for his actions. His suicide is his rejection of his own freedom.

The news of Adrian Finn's suicide was a sudden shock for Tony Webster and the group. The exploration of the two Greek, Freudian instincts and their psychology help in illuminating how the existential decisions are taken. Adrian's existential philosophical attitude and worldview can be linked to understanding his psychological and intellectual dispute. His decision to commit suicide cannot be justified by logical considerations. The radical difference between 'Eros' and 'Thanatos' brings to reality the existential crisis developed in Adrian's life. Developing an affair

with Veronica's mother Mrs. Sarah Ford was Adrian's subjection to false desires and his love for 'Eros' (life or being) and with his philosophical suicide, 'Thanatos' (death or non-being) wins. "...Thanatos, or the Death Wish that seeks resolution to all of life's tensions by returning to an undifferentiated, inanimate state of death." On being questioned on a poem, Tony was impressed by Adrian's answer as he had justified, "Or love and death, if you prefer. The erotic principle, in any case, coming into conflict with the death principle". Barnes' use of existential progression and the philosophy of 'death' makes it clear to evaluate the expression of the two instincts. The counterforce of 'Thanatos' is more compared to 'Eros'. As F. David Peat had quoted in *From Certainty to Uncertainty: The Story of Science and Ideas in the Twentieth Century*, "Thanatos and Eros form a duality in constant conflict within individuals and societies." In his suicide note to the Coroner, Adrian had termed his own death as "philosophical suicide". During one philosophical discussion, Adrian had quoted, "Camus said that suicide was the only true philosophical question".

"In the sense of death, it is not the Ultimate act of human freedom, but the renunciation of human freedom" (Foley 2008). As Tony Webster recollects, "It had seemed to us philosophically self-evident that suicide was every free person's right: a logical act when faced with terminal illness or senility;". Adrian's suicide is designated by Tony as a superior act over the inferior meaningless existence of life.

Existentialism is by far a quest for identity and meaning in the meaningless existence. At the end of the narrative, Tony realizes the identity of the 'man' whom he had mistakenly thought as Veronica's son from Adrian. His discovery and realization of the truth brings the culmination of his retrospection when he comes to know that the mentally challenged man was Veronica's brother, not a son, born out of Veronica's mother and Adrian Finn's illogical and adulterous relationship. The reason for Adrian's suicide also becomes clear to Tony. Adrian and Robson's suicide under similar circumstances reflect their psychological conflict and dilemma. The two suicides, as well as the death of Mrs. Sarah Ford, publicize the philosophy of 'death' in this fictional work of Julian Barnes. The existential progression of the characters is well-developed by Julian Barnes. The intricate mechanism of the Freudian instincts of 'Eros' and 'Thanatos' aids in exploring the existential progression of the narrative.

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