

Age, Memory and Identity in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*

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Abstract:

This paper looks at Julian Barnes' novel *The Sense of an Ending* and how memory operates within in. While written as fiction, *The Sense of an Ending* can be understood to contain autobiographical elements, due to the similarities in both Webster and Barnes station: they're both men from middle class families, have had a liberal education, and are at present what can be called "aged". The text deploys memory, remembrance to re-construct the protagonist's identity, and reading it through the lens of narrative gerontology can be a fruitful exercise, providing useful insights into the processes of aging and remembering.

Keywords: literary-gerontology, memory, identity, ageing, narrative.

Conventional ideas about memory have long held that it is a fixed entity, which serves as a factual, objective, and immutable register of events as they occurred. We witness something, and then neatly file it away in our memory; so that we may retrieve it later, unaltered. New research however, has challenged these notions. According to gerontologists, memory is fluidic, and what we make of past occurrences might not stay same forever. This modification of memory; while at first glance might seem to be a shortcoming in that it does not aid in remembering "factual information"; is actually a defence mechanism that works to help individuals formulate and re-affirm a positive identity of themselves. It does this by distorting, or even concealing negative events, and foregrounding "happy" events, thus helping the individual build a positive perception of themselves. This is one of the main themes present in Julian Barnes 2011 novel *The Sense of an Ending* which won the 2011 Man Booker Prize. The plot of this novel features a retired man Tony Webster, who narrates his life from his college days onward. This paper attempts to read Barnes' work in light of these new findings and glean new insights into the mechanism of memory.

While the study of old age has traditionally been seen as something of concern only to medical professionals, new work done in humanities is fast changing this line of thinking. Apart from disciplines conventionally understood to be involved in study of old age, such as

sociology and anthropology; literary studies in the recent decades have emerged as another part of the humanities that improve our understanding of the world around us. But how might this be? Isn't most literature fiction? How can fictitious accounts be taken as sources of empirical knowledge into the human condition? These questions can be answered in the following manner: Literature, just like other parts of the humanities, contains reflections that have shaped our social mores. Matthew Arnold said that literature enshrines the best of all that has been said and thought in the world. Literature produced by a people can be understood to reflect the way they think about and perceive the world around them. In addition, the way in which individuals view the world is determined by the language they use to perceive reality and by the images (including, but not limited to literature) through which they depict it (Deats 1). Gerontologists have echoed similar sentiments. For example, gerontologist Mike Hepworth looks at literature in order to understand contemporary ideas about the ageing process. He says that contemporary fiction is a valuable resource in understanding conceptions and dynamics related to contemporary ageing, because "it allowed the writer through the exercise of imagination, access to personal variations and ambiguities underlying the common condition of growing older" (Hepworth 4).

At the same time, these cultural artefacts also shape reality, serving as examples of what is popular, which often gets conflated with what is natural, or even, what is "correct". Thus, literature also *shapes* our reality, while documenting it. It follows that analysing literature might open up pathways via which we might be able to deconstruct societal assumptions about old age; which can often be dangerously discouraging to the aged. Societies around the world tend to associate old age with end of useful life, and these assumptions are so prevalent that they get internalised leading to what is known as "narrative foreclosure" (Bohlmeijer 3).

The development of the discipline known as narrative gerontology has been a key milestone in understanding ageing. As Kate de Medeiros quotes, Clark, Kenyon and de Vries have described narrative gerontology as unpacking the "metaphor of story in order to determine the ways in which the dimensions of story, such as genre, plot, and theme, can shed light on the dynamics of our lives as we grow, and change, and age." (de Medeiros 17). Narrative is the key term here, and must be understood as separate from story. Simply put, while a story is a system of events that are ordered logically and chronologically, narrative is the process through which the narrator relates a set construction of events, either to an audience or to herself. Narrative is concerned more with the telling and the architecture of the story; and less with the story itself (Zeilig 9). But that begs the question, why is studying

narrative so important to one's understanding of ageing? This can be explained through theories about identity formation, particularly theories that study how human beings see themselves. Research in this area suggests that human beings have an innate tendency to see our lives as stories. Thus, questions like: 'Who am I?', 'Where am I going?', and 'What is my purpose?' can be answered by constructing our life as a story; with a clear beginning, path, and in some cases-even a visualised ending. This story is constructed not all the same time, but in parts; built gradually as we reminisce upon all that has happened in our life so far. This reminiscence, or "stock-taking" as it is more commonly called; although a continuous process; becomes much more frequent in the case of aged people; owing primarily due to plenty of free time as well as a desire to "sum up"-to wrap up all loose ends, as it were. For researchers, looking at the narratives through which these stories are delivered can be fruitful in revealing previously ignored aspects of age.

Memory is one of the most significant issues we deal with when working with narrative gerontology. Memory can be understood as the source of the building blocks of narrative. Using memory, a life narrative is constructed and as narrative progresses, an identity is shaped. Thus, narratives serve to shape, streamline, and provide meaning to the trajectory of our lives, by serving as building blocks.

Memory, that is to say, autobiographical memory can be understood as a textual entity. Just like a text can have meaning outside and often radically different from the authorial intention, memories are accounts of events coloured by our biases and perspectives with which we look at occurrences. Contrary to the popular perception of memory being an established, immutable, "read-only" entity; memories are a combination of events and our personal investments in them that make them important to our life narrative. They are edited, interpreted renditions of past episodes seen in the light of present circumstances and our own future aspirations. If these changes, so do our perceptions of the past. Remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present, where "the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering" (Smith 16).

This is one of the central themes in life of Tony Webster, the protagonist of Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*. He is an aged, retired, divorced man, living alone in a quiet suburb of London. He has a few, unremarkable hobbies that take up his time. His life revolves around his daughter Susie and her daughter. This seemingly peaceful life gets set into turmoil when he receives a letter from the mother of Veronica Ford, who he dated in college. Mrs Ford has passed away, and left him 500 pounds and two documents in her. Puzzled over this unexpected inheritance, Webster starts to recollect his youth; and attempts

to piece together a narrative of life; assumedly triggering the beginning of the novel. This narrative is multi-faceted, in that it simultaneously relates, interprets and reshapes events from events from memory; questioning traditional assumptions about memory in the process. The start is itself a foreboding of things to come, where, after describing a series of flashes from his past, the narrator gloomily comments on the unreliability of memory: "This last isn't something I actually saw, but what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed" (Barnes 4).

The novel is divided into two parts. The first part chronicles Webster's life from his school days until the receipt of the letter detailing his inheritance. Tony, Colin and Alex had a tight-knit clique at their high school, when they were joined by Adrian Finn. Adrian was among one of the smarter students at school, and would often indulge in discussions on philosophical questions with them. After school is over, they all go their separate ways in life: Adrian winning a scholarship to Cambridge. Tony dates a girl named Veronica during college. But, this relationship seems like a relationship of unequals; with Veronica always behaving with him with an air of condescendence. The narrator pays a visit to her family, and receives the same treatment there from them- except her mother Sarah who tells him: "Don't let Veronica get away with too much" (Barnes 28). A few months later, Veronica tells Tony that she think their relationship has stagnated and they break up. However, a few weeks later Veronica tries to get back by seducing him, but he refuses. They finally go their separate ways for good, the narrator deciding to focus on his education. Tony remembers himself during these years as a carefree man, living life without any permanent commitments. Sometime later, he gets a letter from his school friend Adrian, telling him that he is dating Veronica, and asking is Tony is okay with this. Tony replies in affirmative. He keeps his tone casual, trying to not show any signs of anguish at the news and asking Adrian to be prudent with the relationship. After finishing college, Webster goes on a backpacking tour through the US, working odd jobs to make ends meet. When he returns home after four months, he received information that Adrian committed suicide, leaving behind a note in which he, after philosophically contemplating the worth of life, had reached the conclusion that since life was a gift unasked for, it was morally correct to renounce it when one saw fit.

The second part opens with a monologue on the uncertainty of our memory. "As the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been." (Barnes 56). This part is about Webster trying to make sense of a new development in his life; and in the process having revealed to him (and his readers) aspects of his life he had forgotten. We get an example of how memory operates in a manner

so as to serve as a defence mechanism for the self. When suppressed memories come to the forefront, they make him re-evaluate his life narrative and his carefully constructed identity changes into something much more unpleasant. Webster receives a letter from a solicitor in which is informed that he has been left an inheritance by Mrs Ford, Veronica's mother, consisting of five hundred pounds and Adrian's diary. Also included is a letter from her, where she apologises for how her family treated him forty years ago, and assuring him that Adrian's last days were happy. Getting her contact details through his solicitor, Webster emails Veronica, asking her why her mother had left him the sum, getting in response two words: "Blood Money". After much back and forth, she relents a little and sends him a photocopy of a page from the diary, wherein are contained Adrian's musings on the nature of life represented by an arithmetic equation. A few emails later, she calls him to a meeting, where after informing him that she had burnt Adrian's diary, hands him a letter asking him to read it. The letter turns out to be written by Tony, in response to Adrian's letter asking him if he'd be okay with him and Veronica dating. But it is nothing like Tony had told us in part one. It is extremely acerbic in its tone, violence dripping from every syllable. In it, Tony calls Veronica, among other things; a snob, a gold digger, a control freak and a deranged individual, suggesting that she has issues due to being a victim of incest as a child. He uses equally strong language for Adrian, calling him priggish and asking him to consult Veronica's mother and see what she thinks of their relationship. He gives their relationship six months; hoping that when they do split, they carry baggage that scars them forever and jeopardises their future relationships; and ends the letter by calling for "an acid rain to fall on their joint and anointed heads."

Tony is shocked and appalled at this letter of his. He wonders how he did not remember this part of his past until now, wondering:

How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life. Told to others, but – mainly – to ourselves (Barnes 89).

At this point, we see the identity that Webster had built up for himself over the years, crumbling and getting morphed into something unpleasant. So, was his previous memory of this letter as a casual nod to Adrian false? This transience of memory is actually an ingrained response, and works selectively by 'hiding' negative memories. Healthy ageing requires sufficient amounts of positive biographical capital, or as Randall calls it, a "good, strong

story" (Bohlmeijer 29), to prevent slipping into self-despair – to cope with changes that age brings. Thus, negative memories are forgotten or to be exact, scrubbed away as they come in the way of this. So how do we readjust our identity to adapt to new evidence? The letter is a scathing proof of what Tony has been hiding from himself all along – that after breaking up with Veronica, he was bitter and vindictive.

Tony investigates further, and by the end of the novel comes to know that his letter drove a wedge between Adrian and Veronica; driving the former towards Veronica's mother. The two had an affair, and Mrs Ford ended up getting pregnant with Adrian's child. As a result of her age, the child was born with mental impairments; and the anguish of having cheated on his girlfriend and having a mentally impaired son drove Adrian to suicide. The smoke clears: there was nothing high and heroic about Adrian's suicide. For all his discussions on the value of life, he died like a mortal being, crushed by the weight of shame: shame that his friend had a hand in. Tony is also forced to re-evaluate his thoughts on Veronica when he comes to know that she has been taking care of the child, who is now an adult. Forced to revise his life narrative, he realises that his idea of Veronica as a cold, calculating and distant woman is not a fact, only his own reading of it so as to exonerate himself of any and all blame for their fallout. In light of these new developments, Tony is forced to reconsider all he thought of his youth and his life. He is surrounded by guilt and remorse, as he realises that he had a role in Adrian's suicide. If only he hadn't written that letter denouncing both of them, and hadn't asked Adrian to consult Veronica's mother, none of this might have happened. He is not the calm, cool headed person; the loving husband and the doting grandpa he thinks himself to be, he is also a vindictive sociopath, who is partly responsible for pushing a family down the path of destruction. And now, as a sexagenarian, he must incorporate these dark pages into his life narrative. As he put it: "There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest" (Barnes 142).

So now that negative memories have been earthed, what's next? It would appear that the only alternative that remains is the gradual redefining of the self. The new identity of the narrator will have to incorporate in itself these new elements, and make attempts at repentance, should it be possible. As he says, after reading his own letter: "All I could plead was that I had been its author then, but not its author now" (Barnes 91). How appropriate is it to plead passion as the cause for an action, when the action could potentially have driven someone to ruin? It would appear, then, that there is no way for Webster to escape this conundrum unscathed. He must take responsibility for his actions, and redefine his life story

accordingly. He must remember – and at the same time re-member his life, keeping in mind all parts, whether good or bad.

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