

Deconstruction of the Complex Human Relationships in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*

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Abstract

Adrian Finn gives the readers a story of his relationships through two mathematical equations in the second part of Julian Barnes' Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). In these equations, all the main characters – Sarah Ford, Veronica Ford, Tony (Anthony) Webster, Adrian Jr., and Adrian himself, are mentioned. The equations convey the cause of all the events in this sleek but full of insight and intelligent novel. The novel, divided into two parts, is a tale of past events recalled by Tony Webster. Since beginning, he does not have much confidence on his memory. He recalls past events after receiving a letter written forty years ago by someone who was very close to him. He colours events and relationships to his needs in the garb of his fading memory during his old age. This paper highlights the relationships of Tony Webster, the protagonist, with other major characters of the novel deconstructing the two equations which reveal the actual relationships in the novel. Since the main themes are memory, death, and sex; these will be taken as references to discuss the main issue of human relationships in the paper.

Keywords: Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, human history, memory, relationship, sex, suicide

The British author Julian Barnes wrote his eleventh novel, *The Sense of an Ending* in 2011 under his own name. He has written his crime fiction under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh. Tony Webster is the protagonist and the narrator of the novel. He is an old man who is retired as a Librarian. The novel grabbed the Man Booker Prize in October 2011. In the novel, Tony, when he receives a letter and an envelope in the beginning, goes into the flash back where he recalls how he and his group met the most intelligent among all the friends, Adrian Finn at school and vowed to remain friends for life. When the story goes in the flashback, the first section describes the episodes of the growing relationship between Tony and Adrian Finn. But the friendship has mysteries.

History, as narrator Tony Webster reminds us, consists not only of “the lies of the victors,” (Mukherjee) but also of “the self-delusions of the defeated.” (Mukherjee) Tony is one of the defeated, and the novel is a record of his self-delusions. It is a personal history, and like all histories, it is a “certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation.” (Mukherjee) Tony narrates the story remembering the past events but that cannot be trusted at all as Tony’s version of events are projected according to his own comfort of narration with scattered memories. For a book that weighs in at 150 pages, just, much heavy weather is made of such faux-philosophizing; the thoughts are not exactly original. It is these regular routes that deceive us into thinking that the book is going to be one of those fictional meditations on time, such as Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, that shakes the kaleidoscope of reality into a novel contour. How English it appears, this transformation from the exalted to the prosaic, camouflaged as insightful. All the essential elements for a mystery narrative are present in this novel, for instance, a narrator/protagonist with an unreliable memory, a diary, missing letters, a death in the form of suicide, and a character continuously claims about Tony that, “You just don’t, You never did” (SE 304), a club-footed way of indicating to readers that they don’t get it either and that a Revelation is going to come along soon that turns this fantasy world upside down for the readers.

Adrian, as a new entrant at school, was permitted to be a part of the circle of three friends. After a few meetings, the friends observe that Adrian is far ahead in intelligence and has a unique quality of being serious about serious things, but this serious new friend seems to be unknowable and unreachable. Part of this territory Barnes has traversed before, with witty astringency, in his first novel, *Metroland* (1980). On completion of the school, Tony joins a university in Bristol and Adrian in Cambridge. At Bristol, Tony has a brief and unpleasant relationship – although non-relationship would be a more accurate term – with Veronica, who, shortly after their hostile breakup, starts going out with Adrian. But the sophisticated Adrian seeks permission in writing from Tony to date Veronica. As Tony is the only person apart from the two who knows this secret. Tony writes him a frivolous card to the effect of ‘Be my guest’ and, later, a more well thought-out stern letter. After that, he left for a year, travelling to the USA. When he comes back, he discovers the Adrian’s suicide.

“From this point onwards Barnes masterfully compresses the events in Tony’s life that are not germane to this particular story – steady job; marriage to Margaret; birth of daughter, Susie; divorce; retirement – to two pages then moves on to Part Two, where the long shadow of the past with Veronica and Adrian falls over Tony’s life again.” (Mukherjee)

When Veronica and Tony were in relationship in university, Tony had a visit on a weekend to her family where he met Sarah Ford, Veronica’s mother, only once. An endowment of £500 and

some 'documents' from the recently-deceased Sarah regenerates the past and Tony's interest. The 'document', which Tony comes to know from the legal representative that is Adrian's diary but was in the possession of Veronica till that time and with the endowment Veronica sends only one page from that diary to him. He persistently tries to pursue Veronica, whom he has not seen since they split up, into giving the diary to him. "Why does Veronica give him only one page of Adrian's diary?" (Mukherjee) The page contains some pretty dodgy cod-philosophizing, arranged like the propositions of a tract on logic to fool readers into thinking that they're getting Wittgenstein redux. A later illumination of the codes used in the page helps only to highlight, inadvertently, the anticlimax involved in applying investigative philosophy to the actions of a secretive life.

Then, there is Veronica, already an intensely aggravating creature, who does not help her cause, nor Tony's, by repeatedly stating that he doesn't get things that he never did. To corroborate this, when they were going out one day, she hands over him a venomous letter that he wrote to Adrian when in university to show his disagreement to the relationship of Adrian and Veronica. But, as a narrator, Tony recalls and narrates only those events that suits him, so he does not remember that he wrote a letter as such to either of them. So, that was a blow on his face that awakes his memories. It is pointlessly cruel and petty, and Tony, thinking that this is what drove Adrian over the edge, is afflicted by severe repentance. Another round of determined perusal of the remarkably unyielding Veronica follows, this time to apologize and try to make amends. The final twist in the book is the weakest and defective as discussed in the following lines. A furious but curt Veronica who refused to propose any clarifications ever, introduces him to a group of people that he assumes are care in the community people. One out of them, a forty year old man but mentally a child, seems extremely happy seeing Veronica and calls her Mary. This arises curiosity in Tony that why she has taken him here, who these people are, and especially that man who is pleased to see her and calling her Mary. When they all met with steely silence and, finally, ejection from the car.

Tony, determined to find out the truth, follows the group on their next expedition to the pub and talks to their career. After some understanding, Tony deduces that the man who called Veronica Mary is Arian and Veronica's son. This causes him much anguish as one of the things he had written in that savage letter was,

"Part of me hopes you have a child, because I'm a great believer in time's revenge, but revenge must be on the right people, i.e. it would be unjust to inflict on some innocent fetus the prospect of discovering that it was the fruit of your loins, if you'll excuse the poeticism." (SE 289)

Be careful of what you wish for, they say; seeing his imprecation embodied like this curdles something in Tony. It seems that to prove himself innocent and the letter as an act of immaturity,

he writes an apology letter to Veronica to tell that he still doesn't get it. But the last twist is yet to be revealed. In a chance encounter at the same pub some months later, Tony has another conversation with a career who is minding the same group. Further, it surfaces that the differently abled man is not Veronica's son but Adrian and Sarah's son. Like pieces in a giant puzzle, everything begins to fall into place for Tony: the goofy man's condition; the cryptic remarks of Veronica and her introversion; Adrian's suicide; that page from his diary; Sarah Ford's bequest to Tony, which Veronica had called "blood money". (SE245)

"What doesn't make sense is the dissonance between the content or exact nature of the illumination and the feelings, indeed the existential crisis, it generates in Tony and, by extension. A man gets his girlfriend's mother up the duff; the son born to them, at a dangerously late age, is physically and mentally damaged; the man in question kills himself." (Mukherjee) this may precipitate, if you are the extremely hypersensitive type, as Adrian clearly is, some grave predicament in the culpable man's life – it's barely the stuff used to be called *la condition humane* – but what are the chances that it induces in this man's school friend an existential contingency of equal magnitude? "For of such proportions it is; no page goes by, particularly in Part Two, when we are not treated to somber assessments of the Big Things: guilt versus remorse" (Mukherjee); memory as fiction; the vast human capacity for delusion as a self-protective measure; selfishness that knowledge turns to self-flagellation; the nature of history and time; whether life is a series they are wise, stylish, unpretentious, if predictable, and emerge organically from plot and character, but you wouldn't expect anything less from a writer of Barnes' caliber. It is when one sands back and ask oneself what had given rise to such deliberations, the uneven nature of it can only lead to disappointment; after all Tony's crime, if such it can be called, is of obtuseness and inadvertent insensitivity, venial matters in the grand design of things. It can be said that Tony is not a reliable narrator but even here Barnes seems to be lagging behind the critically real renaissances of this other age-old device in fiction that other contemporary British novelists have accomplished. After all, a lot of Tony's ignorance is caused by Veronica's obstinate behaviour (but then if she did come clean from the very beginning there would be no novel).

Or is this matter of disproportionality, which has the unfortunate effect of making the book less than the sum of its parts, somehow Tony's belated internalization of a kind of intellectual and behavioral rebellion first sounded by Adrian in his first year at university when he perplexes his friends and punctures an inalienable aspect of their Englishness by declaring, I *hate* the way the English have of not being serious about being serious. I *really hate* it." (SE 238) But to be not only serious about serious things but to also overplay the serious hand to the extent that it brings about an incompatibility between the reality and emotions: would that be an emancipation from Englishness too?

At the book's ending, Tony reaches the shocking conclusion that Adrian, the disabled man that he meets at the pub, is the son of Adrian, Tony's suicidal friend of forty, but as Veronica recaps the readers several intervals, in relation to Adrian, Tony doesn't perceive it properly and he will not ever. Due to this and Tony's untrustworthiness as a narrator, the reader should discard Tony's inference. Rather, it must also be concluded that Tony, himself, is Adrian Junior's real father.

Sarah and Tony had frequent sensual encounters that Tony, with the passage of subsequent decades, had suppressed this meetings in his memories. The first meeting happened when Tony came for a weekend visit at Veronica's place in Chislehurst. It is portrayed that on the first morning of his visit only Sarah is in the house when he wakes up. As Tony remembers that it was Veronica who told the rest of the family that he desired to have a long sleep, resulted in leaving Tony back at home and went for a walk without him. Of course, since Tony was apparently asleep at the time, he could not have known whether the family walk truly was Veronica's idea or actually Sarah's. Sarah's mysterious "horizontal gesture at waist level" (SE 95) in response to Tony's goodbye wave at the end of the visit indicates to the reader that something unusual has taken place between them. But Tony has not reminiscence of their encounter. Tony tells us that Veronica is unwilling to have "full sex" (SE 70) with him, but rather limits their physical intimacy to what he refers to as "infra-sex." (SE 71) Even after the breakup of Tony and Veronica, he recollects bouncing into Veronica at a pub, returning to her room, and having sex with her. He is shocked to know about the Veronica's skills at rolling a condom onto him while he is of the opinion that Veronica is a virgin. Tony of course recalls this as an encounter with Veronica because he cannot bring himself to accept that it was actually an encounter with Veronica's mother. The manners of his partner do not match with that of Veronica, giving a hint to the reader that his partner was actually a far more practiced woman and not at all Veronica.

Forty years later, as it is learnt in Part two, new memories begin to emerge in Tony's mind of other episodes with Veronica that he has forgotten for decades. In one of the memories, he recalls that he is dancing with Veronica, who actually never danced, to 45s played on his record player. Another incident he remembers is that when he was with his friends, he observed the reversal of the Thames in the middle of a night. He suddenly recalls that Veronica was there as well, and that when the rest of the group ran off with torches (flashlights) to watch the reversal, he stayed behind and lastly, he recalls his version of memories of his weekend visit to the Ford family. He remembers that Veronica walked him to his room on the second night of his visit, leaned him against the door, kissed him on the mouth, and whispered into his ear, "Sleep, the sleep of the wicked." (SE 342)

Each of these recollections remains partly suppressed, the facts blurred and ambiguous. It's apparent to the reader that Tony recalls each of these incidents as involving Veronica because he cannot bear to believe the monstrous truth that he had an ongoing but an affair between Tony and

Sarah is the only plausible explanation for Sarah's leaving 500 pounds and two documents (one of them is Adrian's diary) to Tony in her will. There arises a question that without any intimate relationship with Tony, why Sarah leaves him money and documents in her will, as he was her daughter's ex-boyfriend forty years ago and that too for a very short period of time. Moreover, according to Tony's memory he met Sarah only once when he visited on a weekend to their family. Barely an association that would be reminisced in one's will and testimony.

Adrian too was seduced by Sarah. Adrian came to know about their relationship but was not confident whether he or Tony was the father of Sarah's unborn child. The two mathematical equations in paragraph 5.6, " $b = s - v \times a1$ or $a2 + v + a1 \times s = b$?" (SE 258) of Adrian's diary represent Adrian's speculations as to the child's paternity. In the two equations, he encodes himself (a1) as the father of that child and in the other, he mentions Tony (a2) as his father. The ending of the partial sentence from Adrian's diary, "So for instance, if Tony..." (SE 260) is 'the father of Sarah's child.' The possibility that was actually Adrian himself who fathered Sarah's child, and his shame regarding their relationship, led to his suicide.

Tony, unlike Adrian, coped with the shame and pain of his affair through the mechanisms of repressed memory and transference, replacing Sarah in his partially repressed memories with Veronica. Or perhaps this entire theory is bunk. Tony recalls that Veronica had told the rest of the family that Tony wanted to have a "lie-in", (Se 139) so they left the house for a walk without him. Of course, since Tony was apparently asleep at the time, he could not have known whether the family walk truly was Veronica's idea or actually Sarah's. But, Tony has no remembrance of their meetings.

As the narrator explains,

You get towards the end of life – no, not life itself, but of something else: the end of any likelihood of change in that life. You are allowed a long moment of pause, time enough to ask the question: what else have I done wrong? [...] There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest." (SE 456)

He must write his life story considering regret for justification. As Gerben J. Westerhof points out when analyzing the healing role of life narratives in old age, it is not only necessary for the narrator and protagonist of the novel to go on rewriting his life narrative but also a sign of healthiness since when one's life narrative is reconstructed and adjusted new experiences can be fitted into it.

By presenting a specific episode of the life narrative of a retired character, Julian Barnes allows the reader into the growing character's awareness of the fact that when entering into old age, one is not habitually unbound from the same feelings and emotions that have conquered one

in one's previous stages of life. On the contrary, the fact of having more leisure moments to one's memories together with the untrustworthy quality of recollection may compel those in old age to come to terms with negative memories and to absorb remorse and guilt as feelings which need to be integrated in order to go on writing one's life narrative. Indeed, Tony himself confesses that it was truly easier for him to manage remembrances when he was in his prime stage of life. As he explains, "When you are in your twenties, even if you're confused and uncertain about your aims and purposes, you have a strong sense of what life itself is, and of what you in life are, and might become.

Later...later there is more uncertainty, more overlapping, more backtracking, more false memories. Back then, you can remember your short life in its entirety. Later, the memory becomes a thing of shreds and patches." (SE 318) Tony did not imagine himself, at the age of sixty-five, in this position as he consoled himself with the thought that old age was a stage of mental peace and quietness in which one had to wait for the end without making much fuss about it. In one of the first studies on literary gerontology, *Safe at last in the Middle Years: the Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel* (2016), Margaret Morganroth Gullette the emergence of a new kind of novel she names "the progress narrative of the middle years." (1988 xi) She is aware of many recent Anglo-American writers who, instead of portraying middle age and the entering into old age as an age of perpetual loss and decline which will lead to social oblivion, they present ageing heroines entangled in "new plots of recovery and development in those years." (1988 xii) In that sense, as time cannot be defined in a straight line, the entering into old age is not a continuum through which one can go quietly; instead, crisis and coming to terms with them are also part of the game, as they are in the other life stages. As Tony points out, "[we] live such easy assumptions, don't we? For instance, that memory equals events plus time. Who was it said that memory is what we thought we'd forgotten? And it ought to be obvious to us that time doesn't act as a fixative, rather as a solvent." (SE 190)

Literary gerontology helps understand the process of ageing in a more comprehensive way in the sense that it allows the reader to go into mental processes which are quite difficult to express and define in scientific terms. By getting into the life narrative of Tony Webster who addresses the readers as if one was listening to him, one sides with him in the fact that memory is a double-edged weapon. It is the door towards one's past and the construction of a logical life narrative, but it is also the reminder that everything one did in the past and will do in the future is seasoned by feelings and emotions which give subjectivity to our memories and which require constant reconsideration and rewriting of who we are, whatever the age.

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