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Literary Theories

Memory, Identity, and Self-Deception in Julian Barnes 'The Sense of an Ending'

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Abstract: This research paper explores the complex relationship between memory and personal identity in the novel *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes. The story follows Tony Webster, a retired man who has constructed a comfortable and positive identity based on his selective memories of his youth. Through the lens of narrative gerontology and psychoanalysis, this paper examines how Tony uses self-deception and defense mechanisms to hide his past mistakes. When unexpected physical evidence from his past surfaces, Tony is forced to confront the flaws in his memory. The central argument of this paper is that human memory is not an objective recording of factual events, but rather a fluid and highly subjective tool used for self-preservation. The novel demonstrates that true ethical awakening can only occur when an individual deconstructs their false narrative and accepts responsibility for their past actions.

Keywords: Julian Barnes, Memory, Identity, Unreliable Narrator, Self-Deception, Narrative Gerontology, Ethical Awakening.



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Introduction

In the modern study of literature and psychology, traditional ideas about memory have significantly changed. People have long held the conventional belief that memory serves as a factual and objective register of past events, acting like a video camera that neatly files away information for later retrieval. However, contemporary research suggests that human memory is incredibly fluid and subjective. People constantly edit and modify their memories in order to build a positive perception of themselves. This concept sits at the very heart of the 2011 Booker Prize winning novel *The Sense of an Ending*. The novel tells the story of Tony Webster, a retired cultural bureaucrat who lives a quiet and unremarkable life. Tony has spent his entire adulthood believing a specific version of his own history, casting himself as a harmless victim of his youthful relationships.

As the story unfolds, Barnes uses Tony as an unreliable narrator to question the concepts of truth and history. Tony narrates his life in two distinct parts. The first part focuses on his school days, his brief romantic relationship with a young woman named Veronica Ford, and his friendship with a brilliant student named Adrian Finn. After Tony and Veronica break up, Veronica begins dating Adrian. Shortly after, Adrian commits suicide, and Tony convinces himself that Adrian died for purely philosophical reasons. The second part of the novel takes place forty years later. Tony receives an unexpected inheritance that forces him to reexamine his past. Through this journey, the novel highlights the profound fragility of memory. This research paper will explore how Tony constructs a false identity through self-deception, and how the disruption of his unreliable memory eventually leads to a painful ethical awakening.

The Construction of Identity Through Selective Memory

The development of a person's identity is deeply connected to how they remember their past. Researchers in a field known as narrative gerontology study how aging individuals use storytelling to make sense of their lives. According to these theories, human beings have an innate tendency to see their lives as continuous stories, which helps them answer important questions about who they are and what their purpose is. Memory provides the essential building blocks for this life narrative. However, because healthy aging requires a positive view of the self, individuals often scrub away their negative memories. This psychological defense mechanism prevents aging individuals from slipping into despair and allows them to maintain a sense of peace.

Tony Webster is a perfect example of someone who uses selective memory for self-preservation. Throughout his life, Tony claims that he is a very peaceful man who has achieved a state of peaceableness. To maintain this positive self-image, Tony heavily relies on the defense mechanism of projection, which allows him to blame others for his own destructive behaviors. When individuals encounter threatening thoughts or negative feelings, they often project their own flaws onto other people to defend their own egos. Tony projects his own maliciousness and cowardice onto Veronica and Adrian. He remembers Veronica as a cold and arrogant person who manipulated him. He remembers her family treating him with severe contempt during a weekend visit to their home. By painting Veronica and her family as the villains of his story, Tony completely exonerates himself from any blame regarding their failed relationship.

Furthermore, Tony actively represses his traumatic experiences. Sigmund Freud proposed that individuals repress memories because they are associated with painful feelings that threaten the conscious mind. Tony admits that he completely erased Veronica from his life story when he met his future wife, actively pretending that Veronica had never existed. He also destroys the letter Adrian sent him, avoids contacting Veronica after Adrian passes away, and essentially banishes both of them from his mind. Through these actions, Tony constructs a narrative where he is the innocent bystander. He tells the reader a rendered story that is internally consistent but deeply flawed. This intentional distortion is a perfect example of self-deception at work. As Tony explains in the text, he actively rewrote his history to hide his humiliation:

I did a slightly odd thing when I first met Margaret. I wrote Veronica out of my life story. I pretended that Annie had been my first proper girlfriend. The odder part was that it was easy to give this version of my history because that is what I had been telling myself anyway. I viewed my time with Veronica as a failure, her contempt, my humiliation, and expunged it from the record. I had kept no letters, and only a single photograph, which I had not looked at in ages.(77)

Human memory is highly vulnerable to the emotions that are attached to events. Barnes uses the motif of water to symbolize this fluid and elusive nature of time and memory. Just as water can distort images beneath its surface, Tony's mind distorts the reality of his past. During his youth, Tony watches the Severn River rush upstream, a rare natural phenomenon that makes him feel as though nature and time are briefly reversed.

Later in life, he realizes that his memory of this event is completely inaccurate, because he had forgotten that Veronica was actually standing right beside him the entire time. By forgetting her presence, Tony proves that his memory is entirely subjective. He has created a self-serving narrative that helps him avoid the guilt of his past actions. His identity is built on a foundation of lies and omissions.

The Disruption of Narrative and Ethical Awakening

The carefully constructed identity that Tony has maintained for decades begins to crumble when he is forced to face concrete physical evidence. In his sixties, Tony receives a letter from a solicitor informing him that Veronica's mother, Sarah Ford, has passed away. Sarah has unexpectedly left Tony five hundred pounds and Adrian's personal diary. The diary serves as a crucial symbol in the novel, representing the hidden truths that defy Tony's subjective perception. Because Veronica refuses to hand over the diary, Tony is forced to reconnect with her, which ultimately shatters his comfortable illusions.

The most devastating blow to Tony's false identity occurs when Veronica hands him a photocopy of a letter. This is not a letter written by Adrian, but rather the exact letter that Tony himself wrote to Adrian and Veronica forty years earlier. Tony had previously remembered sending them a casual note wishing them good luck. However, the physical document reveals a horrifying truth. The letter is incredibly acerbic and drips with destructive malice. In the letter, Tony curses their relationship, calls Veronica a snob, and suggests that Adrian should consult Veronica's mother about her psychological damage. Tony even hopes that they will suffer mutual damage that will ruin their future relationships. Confronted with this undeniable evidence, Tony is completely shocked and appalled by his own cruelty. His narrative authority disintegrates instantly. He can no longer pretend to be the peaceful and innocent victim. This moment acts as a powerful epiphany for Tony, triggering a painful process of ethical awakening. He suddenly realizes how thoroughly he has deceived himself for his entire adult life. He recognizes that memory is essentially an echo chamber that only plays back the comfortable stories we want to hear. Tony beautifully articulates this profound realization about the human condition:

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.(111) Following this revelation, Tony uncovers the darkest secret of his past. He learns that his malicious letter directly influenced the tragedy that followed. After reading Tony's suggestion to speak with Sarah Ford, Adrian became intimately involved with Sarah. They had an affair, and Sarah became pregnant with Adrian's child. The child was born with severe mental impairments. The overwhelming guilt and shame of having a child with his girlfriend's mother drove Adrian to commit suicide. Adrian did not die for grand philosophical reasons, but rather because he was crushed by the weight of a messy human tragedy. During their school days, Adrian had argued that history is the certainty produced where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation. Now, physical documentation reveals the undeniable truth that Tony's memory tried to hide.

This revelation forces Tony to entirely reconstruct his memory and his identity. He realizes that Veronica was not a cold and calculating woman, but rather a deeply traumatized victim who spent her life caring for her disabled brother. Tony's epiphany requires him to move away from self-justification and finally accept ethical responsibility. He acknowledges that he was an active agent who helped push a family down the path of destruction. True moral growth requires a person to face the harm they have caused, even when they cannot change the past. Tony's journey does not end with a neat or happy resolution. Instead, Barnes leaves Tony in a state of great unrest, weighed down by the heavy accumulation of his responsibilities. He must spend his remaining years living with the painful truth of who he really is.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Julian Barnes uses *The Sense of an Ending* to brilliantly demonstrate the dangerous relationship between memory and identity. The novel proves that the human mind is not a reliable historian. Instead, memory is a highly selective tool that people use to protect their egos and hide from their worst mistakes. The protagonist, Tony Webster, spends decades deceiving himself. He uses defense mechanisms to project his own faults onto his friends, creating a false identity as a peaceful and innocent man.

However, Barnes shows that an identity built on false memories cannot survive the introduction of objective truth. When Tony is confronted with the physical evidence of his own malicious letter, his self-serving narrative collapses. This collapse initiates a profound ethical awakening. Tony is forced to see that his youthful cruelty had devastating real-world consequences, ultimately contributing to his best friend's suicide and a family's permanent trauma. The novel does not offer easy forgiveness for the protagonist. Instead, it argues that taking true moral responsibility requires a person to confront their darkest actions without making excuses. Tony is left with deep remorse and great unrest, highlighting the ultimate tragedy of a life lived in self-deception. Barnes leaves the reader with a haunting reminder that we must constantly question the stories we tell about ourselves, because our memories are often just comforting lies.

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