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MASTER

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**Memory Between Distortion and Reconstruction  
in Julian Barnes' The Sense of an Ending (2011) and The  
Only Story (2018)**

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## **Dedication**

*I dedicate this work to all my beloved and precious family*

*To my dear mother and father*

*To my brothers and sisters*

*I would also love to dedicate this work to my dearest teacher and supervisor*

*Dr.Yasmina Djaafri, who inspired me to carry on this path.*

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## **Abstract**

Many contemporary novels are concerned with traumatic events, whether driven by collective experiences such as war, slavery or colonialism, or by more individual experiences as sexual assaults or self-deception. Despite the fact that trauma or traumatisation is not a postmodern theme, trauma has been absorbed into the current ideologies of history and memory. In addition, the relation of trauma and memory to narrative are represented through cathartic writing or writing as healing, which dates back to the middle ages and the practice of confession first introduced in Augustine's *Confessions*. The therapeutic role of narrative, however, has revived and flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Julian Barnes is a prominent English contemporary author whose works often deal with the recursive nature of memory, and the individual's need for redemption and restoration. Barnes' exploration and examination of memory, history, and narrative in his works is crucial to the understanding of the individual's struggle to overcome the inner turmoil, imposed upon him through the traumatic past events. In his two eminent narratives *The Sense of an Ending*(2011) and *The Only Story*(2018), Barnes engages in a deep discussion on the malleable nature of memory. In his works, Barnes explores how the mind paves the way to unconsciously forgetting fear, denying shame, and reconstructing one's self by confabulating and repressing parts of one's memories and rendering them into life narratives. In this respect, this work tackles three issues: First, how does the traumatic experience or "traumatisation" shaped by the historical memory lead to the reconstructive act of narrative? Second, what is the therapeutic effect of turning memory into narrative? Finally, how, in the course of a life, do we edit and erase our memories?

Keywords: Julian Barnes, memory, confabulation, trauma, history, life-narrative, self-reconstruction.

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# General Introduction

## General Introduction

The history of the concept of trauma is filled with contradictory theories and controversial debates, which gives the field of trauma studies a paradoxical nature. Trauma studies first developed in the 1990s and then gained significant attention in 1996 with the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The concept of trauma, itself a source of critique, is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world. Trauma studies, however, explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analysing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance.

The role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities is a central concern that defines the field of trauma studies. Therefore, in *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), Freud and Breuer emphasize that the original event is not traumatic in itself but only in its remembrance, for the process of remembering is what inflicts the psychological pain and also ascribes value to a previously repressed traumatic experience in the unconscious. Trauma is thus defined in relation to the process of remembering and as an event harboured within the unconscious that causes dissociation or a psychological wound. Equally, the processes of memory remain central to the depiction of trauma's impact. If, however, memory is viewed as a fluid process of reconstruction rather than a storehouse, then the traumatic past is not retrieved but rather is reproduced and recreated in moments of recollection.

The traumatic experience exerts a negative and frequently pathological effect on consciousness and memory that prevents the past from becoming incorporated into a life narrative. Since traumatic experience enters the psyche differently than normal experiences and creates an abnormal memory that resists narrative representation, the unique process of

this remembering results in an approximate recall but never in an authentic recollection. Many contemporary authors tackled the issue of the imperfections of memory and the inauthenticity of life narrative that is influenced by traumatic past experiences, as well as, man's need to build a therapeutic narrative that its cathartic nature is essential for recovery. The British novelist Julian Barnes is well known for having examined the malleable nature of human memory and portrayed the difficulty of being confronted with an alternative explanation of truth. Therefore, the present work tackles the issue of the unreliability of memory triggered by past traumatisation, and its reconstruction into a life narrative for the purpose of healing. This issue is presented by Barnes in two of his prominent works *The Sense of an Ending*(2011) and *The Only Story*(2018).

*The Sense of an Ending*(2011) and *The Only Story*(2018) By Julian Barnes, deal with deep human issues, such as memory and self-deception. Both narratives open with the protagonists struggle to relive their pasts, and atone for their feelings of shame and missed opportunities. The endings, however, seem to be left blank for the readers to fill up, according to each individual's past experiences and sense of self. *The Sense of an Ending* is Barnes's eleventh novel which won him the 2011 Man Booker Prize, after being short-listed for three times. The same following year also won the David Cohen Prize for literature. His honors also include the Somerset Maugham Award, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, the Shakespeare Prize, and the E.M. Forster Award from the American Academy and Institute of Art. In *The Only Story*, similar to *The Sense of an Ending*, the narrator reflects on the path he has taken and while doing so, he gets back to certain unreserved mysterious questions. About the resilient nature of memory, and the effect of time and age on one's sense of self.

Memory and narrative are interrelated concepts. writing is always about the past, and to write means to remember and recollect events from the past. This act of remembering is not always remembrance of memories but also the remembrance of forgetfulness. Memories that

one believes are forgotten and have disappeared in the back of the mind, do actually reborn and become a mental torment. This act of forgetfulness is driven either by one's unconsciousness and distorted memory system or due to some traumatic experience that affects the psyche and the mind. Therefore, narrative comes as a healing procedure, or as an act of reconstruction. Barnes is well known for using the cathartic role of narrative, as well as, musing on the nature of memory. His characters share the urge to atone for their pasts through narrative, as well as, reconstructing their stories. Barnes indicates that Memory is not only remembering the events but remaking them and re-experiencing them more than once in a lifetime. Memory selects the events and arranges them in an emotional and personal order.

Therefore, this research paper aims to prove that, the ongoing trauma results in feelings of guilt, fear, or remorse, hence, the traumatic individual tends to falsify and modify his account through the “mutability of memory” in an attempt to make the past yield to plot-making. Through the characters of Tony and Paul, Barnes illustrates that in the purpose of self-preservation we develop certain methods to cope with the damage and that this may result in the repression and omission of certain memories. This results in a history that is reconstructed in terms of one's own psychological preferences to avoid further damage.

To explore this issue, three questions are raised. First, how does the traumatic experience or “traumatisation” shaped by the historical memory lead to the reconstructive act of narrative? Second, what is the therapeutic effect of turning memory into narrative? Finally, how, in the course of a life, do we edit and erase our memories?

For that, my work is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, trauma is defined in relation to both literature and memory, in addition to the role of trauma as well as literature in psychoanalysis. The chapter also includes a definition of false memories and how they occur as a result of our fallible memory system, and the role of past-traumatisation in shaping them.

Besides, the chapter highlights other memory deficiencies which are confabulation and fabulation of memory and the distinction between the two. In addition, the chapter describes the reconstructive nature of memory and its link to narrative. The second chapter is set to analyse *The Sense of an Ending*. First, it provides a summary of the novel along with its major themes of history and memory, as well as, a description of the structure of the novel. Therefore, this chapter contemplates on the nature of memory and history and the way the two notions are interrelated in the novel through narrative, along with the type of the narrator. Then, it examines the therapeutic effect of narrative in general, and for the protagonist in specific. Finally, The third chapter is an analysis of *The Only Story*. First, it includes a summary of the novel, indicating its main themes of memory, history, love, and identity. Therefore, the chapter includes an exploration on the deceitfulness of memory and the way one manipulates one's own account through narrative in order to rewrite one's past. Besides, the chapter describes the structure of the novel and the type of the narrator. This chapter also indicates the link between the two novels, and the way memory is portrayed in both plots.

# **Chapter One:**

## **Memory and (In)authenticity**

## **Introduction**

Trauma and memory are interrelated fields of study that draw much attention, for they both have a strong impact on identity and society. Psychological trauma, its representation in language, and the role of memory in shaping the self are the central concerns that define the field of trauma studies. First, trauma will be defined in relation to both literature and memory, in addition to the role of trauma as well as literature in psychoanalysis. The chapter will also include an explanation of false memories and how they occur as a result of our fallible memory system, and the role of past-traumatisation in shaping them. Besides, the chapter will highlight another memory error which is confabulation of memory that is generally related to the former one and is born when combining truth with imagination to fill vacancies in memory. In addition, the chapter will describe the reconstructive nature of memory illustrating that memory is not merely a recording of the past, but rather piecing together the restored information in an attempt to remodel our memories in order to make sense of the past.

### **1.1.Trauma**

The term trauma originated in the late seventeenth century from Greek *τραῦμα* (traūma) which literally refers to "wound", and trauma means a highly stressful event or an experience undergone by the individual who is overwhelmed by a noxious event or incident.

#### **1.1.1.Psychological Trauma**

Psychological trauma occurs when the traumatic experience reaches the individual's ability to cope with the situation or even with life embedding fear and wound within the psyche; it leaves the traumatised individual struggling with upsetting emotions, memories, and anxiety that will not go away. Psychological trauma refers to the impact of an extreme stressor critical incident on an individual's psychological and biological functioning (Beall, 1994).

Those who are traumatised will develop characteristic symptoms that may result in Post-traumatic Stress Disorder ( PTSD ), which is a condition that develops from intensely fearful, horrific, and uncontrolled trauma where the individual is injured ( physically or mentally ) or he witnessed the death or injury of others. This condition is characterised by re-experiencing the traumatic event through recursive memories, flashbacks, nightmares, and physiological responses similar to when the traumatic event was occurring; avoidance and denial such as avoiding situations and people that remind them of the trauma, amnesia for certain events in the past, loss of interest in the present, and denying or altering some memories (Beall, 1994). The impact of trauma and PTSD dates back to the "Shell Shock<sup>1</sup>" of W.W.I and "Combat Fatigue" of W.W.II, however, it still plays a major role in our contemporary world. Trauma is not only the encounter with death or shock, it is rather the ongoing experience of having survived it. Therefore, memory is a crucial element to trauma.

### **1.1.2.Trauma and Memory**

Memory is indeed a powerful tool which enables the individual to store his past experiences and revive those at a later point of time, it is simply defined as a collection of past events. The Oxford English Dictionary defines memory as “one’s ability to remember things or a thought of something that one remembers from the past.”

Memory distortions in humans may occur simply with the passage of time. This is partly because, over time, memories typically become less episodic (highly detailed and specific) and more semantic (more broad and generalised), as the information is repeatedly retrieved and re-encoded in varying contexts. In other cases, the distortion of memory could be triggered by external factors such as traumatisation, in fact, traumatic memory distortion appears to follow a particular pattern as people tend to remember experiencing even more

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<sup>1</sup> was coined by the soldiers in World War I, and it was often diagnosed when a soldier was unable to function and no obvious cause could be identified. It bore a little overt resemblance to the modern diagnosis of Post-traumatic stress disorder.

trauma than they actually did which is experienced through PTSD or over-remembering trauma.

In Freud's early work Studies on Hysteria(1895), he argues that traumatic hysteria develops from a repressed, earlier experience of sexual assault, he emphasizes that the original event was not traumatic in its self but only in its remembrance. Hence, the traumatic event is understood only after a latency period of deferred action that delays the effects and meaning of the past (Freud et al 192). The process of remembering inflicts the psychological pain but also ascribes value to a previously repressed experience in the unconscious. This traumatic remembering is termed “Pathogenic Reminiscences” for the pathologic symptoms the memory causes (Freud et al 40).

Trauma is thus defined in relation to the process of remembering and as an event harboured within the unconscious that causes a splitting of the self or dissociation, and according to Freud, the traumatic experiences are repeated compulsively as they influence memory differently than other experiences, and are unable to be experienced initially but only in a narrative reproduction of the past. Although our memories of the past can be vivid to the point that we seem to re-experience them, they can fail to be true to the original experience. Memories of earlier exploits are often embellished or distorted, and often downright false as we remember events that simply never happened.

## **1.2.False Memories**

In recent times, the question of false memory has been revived and has assumed special importance. In the 1980s and 1990s, many therapists adopted the view that psychological problems in adulthood could be traced to sexual abuse during childhood, among other sufferings. Because of their traumatic nature, such memories were often repressed, and the

main purpose of therapy was to recover these memories so that patients could then face the real causes of their problems and deal with them presumably with the therapist's help.

One of the most significant researchers in this field, Elizabeth Loftus, recounts a false memory of her own mother's death:

I remember a summer many years ago. I was fourteen years old. My mother, my aunt Pearl, and I were on vacation, visiting my uncle Joe in Pennsylvania. One bright sunny morning I woke up and my mother was dead, drowned in a swimming pool. (Loftus et al 39)

The scene to her is vivid. In her mind she sees and smells cool pine trees, tastes iced tea, and sees her mother in her nightgown, floating face down. But the memory is false. She was in fact asleep when the body was discovered, not by her but by her aunt Pearl. The memory is a construction, built partly of knowledge of what happened, and partly of extra details supplied by imagination. Actually, false memories were widely discussed in the late nineteenth century and were known as "paramnesia" (Burnha 568).

Studies in that field have shown that memory is not quite what it seems, it is far from a faithful record of past events and is also complex, made up of several systems. The traumatic memory is only evoked under particular conditions, occurring automatically in situations that are reminiscent of the original event. False memories occur when we remember events differently from the way they occurred, or in the most dramatic cases when we remember events that never happened. False memories often result when we mistakenly merge elements of various past experiences or when imagination is used to fill holes in a sketchy recollection.

In his old age, American author Mark Twain once mused that his mental faculties had decayed such that he could remember only things that never happened. “When I was younger, I could remember anything, whether it had happened or not, but my faculties are decaying now, and soon I shall be so I cannot remember any but things that never happened”(Twain 38). False memories are triggered either by ageing and the decaying of human memory with the passage of time or through past traumatisation which results in unconscious repression of memories. Moreover, we humans can effortlessly transport ourselves mentally to other places and other times. We remember specific events, imagine possible future ones, and even invent fictional ones. Memories do indeed tend to alter, fade, and undergo transformations over the course of time resulting thus in confabulated accounts of memories of the past.

### **1.3. Confabulation of Memory**

Memory errors play important roles in both psychology and philosophy. In psychology, they provide insight into the mechanisms at work in successful and unsuccessful remembering. In philosophy, they serve as test-cases for accounts of the difference between genuine and merely apparent remembering. But there is little consensus in either psychology or philosophy on the definitions of and relationships among different types of memory errors. However, confabulation is defined as a falsification of memory occurring in clear consciousness in association with an organically derived amnesia (Berlyne, 1972).

The term confabulation was coined by German psychiatrist Karl Bonhoeffer in 1900, which he used as an explanation when someone gives false answers or answers that sound fallacious or simply made up. It is a symptom of various memory disorders in which made-up stories fill in any gaps in memory. At first, it sounds like lying but confabulation occurs when the individual has a condition that affects his memory such as past traumatisation or amnesia. In fact, confabulation can even occur in individuals who have no identified cognitive or psychiatric disorder by creating false information to fill in memory gaps resulting from

normal forgetfulness, which in this case is termed “fabulation” when the individual combines true elements with those which are imagined to make his own version of a story. As Barnes defines it in his novel *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* as: “... the technical term is fabulation. You make up a story to cover the facts you don’t know or can’t accept. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story” (Barnes 109).

There are many ways for confabulations to occur. This could include less dramatic errors in reporting such as intrusions (a memory from another experience intrudes on the current memory), embellishments or elaborations (providing extra information that was not requested), and paraphrasing (rewording) of actual memories. Other errors created by confabulation include distortions of facts or events, blatant false reporting of events, or even creating bizarre and spontaneous stories such as those that might be seen in someone with schizophrenia<sup>2</sup>. Again, all of these examples share the belief that the information is true or accurate, thus confabulation can be categorized as spontaneous or provoked in nature. Spontaneous confabulation may be rare and occur in the context of neurocognitive or physiological deficits or damage, whereas provoked confabulation could be a more common, normal response to faulty memory (Kopelman, 1987).

Nonetheless, confabulations are most frequent in the autobiographical domain. This is what some researchers refer to as episodic memory. This is the process of individuals attempting to recall memories from their own personal experiences. Episodic memory is usually taken to refer to memory for actual events, located in time and space. It involves consciously projecting oneself back in time. Episodic memory may combine with some aspects of semantic memory to make up what is known as “autobiographical memory” (Tulving et al

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<sup>2</sup> The term was introduced into the medical language at the beginning of this century by the Swiss psychiatrist Bleuler. It refers to a major mental disorder, or group of disorders, whose causes are still largely unknown and which involves a complex set of disturbances of thinking, perception, affect, and social behaviour.

3-20). Besides, it has been suggested that confabulation is a memory distortion resulted from the difficulty of restoring memories and past events and opting instead for fabricating new ones. More recent research suggests that memory failure is not just a matter of retrieval failure, which of course does occur, but also reflects failures of storage (Loftus 409-420). It is about the amount of time in the lived life and the amount of time from Life that is stored in memory. Memory does not store or record everything that happens in one's life. If it does so one will end up having too much memory, and too much memory may spoil the mind and even results in the condition known as “savant Syndrome”<sup>3</sup> which is characterized by prodigious powers of memory, but deficiencies in other aspects of intelligence. Too many trees, and it's hard to see the wood.

Memory errors occur not because memory is fundamentally flawed but because it is reconstructive. That is, our memory of events is not a verbatim playback of what happened. Rather, it is a reconstruction based on the retrieval of some stored remnants of the original experience that may have persisted in memory, along with our conceptual framework for other similar previous experiences, that serves to make the memory coherent. So memory is not simply a recording of the past. It is a deliberate piecing together of retrieved information in an effort to make sense of the past.

#### **1.4.The Reconstructive Nature of Memory**

Reconstruction of memory is the process of restoring old memories and while retrieving them, one tends to alter and modify those memories. Recollections are indeed reconstructions that are partly true and partly fiction thus memories of an event are often incomplete, as one only recall the important points. Reconstructive memory suggests that in the absence of all information, people fill in the gaps to make more sense of what happened.

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<sup>3</sup> It occurs when a person with below-normal intelligence displays a special talent or ability in a specific area. the syndrome is often associated with autism.

According to Bartlett, people do this using schemas; these are previous knowledge and experience of a situation and they use this process to complete the memory. This means that memories are a combination of specific traces encoded at the time of the event, along with knowledge, expectations, beliefs, and experiences of such an event. He claims that memories are actively reconstructed upon retrieval using all available information including pre-existing schemas and any post-event information. Schemas can shape a witness's perception of an event, as information is distorted to fit in with existing thoughts. Bartlett's main conclusion is that, "remembering appears to be far more an affair of construction than of reproduction." (Bartlett 189).

Bartlett used a Chinese Whispers technique where English people read a Native American folk story called "War of the Ghosts"<sup>4</sup>. This story was unfamiliar to the English and from a different culture, so it did not fit in with their schemas. When it came to recalling the story, as time went on the story became shorter and shorter, and the accounts were distorted in a number of ways. He found that the English left out bits of the story that they did not understand and changed information and rationalised it using their own culture. This shows that people do reconstruct memories.

In psychology, the view that memory is reliable has been much less common. This is not very surprising, given that much psychological research on remembering focuses on unsuccessful remembering. What is more surprising is that psychologists have sometimes gone too far in the opposite direction, assuming that, because remembering is constructive, it is bound to be false. The distinction between authenticity and truth enables us to see that constructive, generative remembering need not be characterized by falsity. The generative character of remembering does, however, point to the need for a more sophisticated criterion of truth while the fact that remembering is generative does not imply that memories are bound

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<sup>4</sup> An Indian folk tale that tells the story of a young man from Egulac, who fought in a war between ghosts.

to be outright false, it does suggest that they are frequently false in some respects. This, in turn, suggests that remembering need not be fully accurate in order to be fully adequate, thus pointing towards a need for a criterion that acknowledges that truth in memory comes in degrees.

Furthermore, the reconstructive memory system is designed to be very adaptive. It is likely that memory evolved not as a system that retains verbatim information about past experience, but rather one that helps understand, experience, and interpret the world. It works well for what it is intended; guiding current and future behaviour. When the self is constructed from memories, the self can be a false self, based on beliefs and memories that do not accurately represent the past. This is mostly the case when trying to turn memory into narrative to atone for past crimes or errors.

### **1.1.2.Trauma and Literature**

The last twenty years or so have witnessed an upsurge of publications devoted to psychic trauma and the question of its representation in different fields, of how to responsibly depict apparently untellable events and perhaps work through these non-experiences, as it were. Literature explores how these non-events can be represented and what it entails to testify to trauma while emphasizing the need to tell and narrate the experience as well as the urgency for witnessing.

Literature is very broad, for it takes the influences of other fields in order to signify some aspects of life, it is concerned with literary texts which illustrate the imaginary people as representations of the real world. Apart from this, psychoanalysis is concerned with the psyche of the people and trauma as a term has been taken from psychoanalysis indicating that

past trauma and traumatic memories affect the mind of the people or characters and their psyches.

The literary works focus on the traumatic individual and his inner self, they offer great insight into trauma through characters. However, the traumatic experience is not fully experienced as it occurs, it is rather transmitted and theorized through literary texts which serve as witnesses. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth refers to literature \_literary forms of interpretation \_to emphasize the structure of traumatic events and belated experience. She emphasizes the significant role of literature which enables bearing witness to events that cannot be completely known and opens our ears to experiences that might have otherwise remained unspoken and unheard. Cathy points out that because the event in the fiction and reality was not assimilated as it occurred; it only comes into being "belatedly". She writes, “ The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time”( Caruth 9).

Literature has become a site for a belated enactment and witness of what can be referred to as an unclaimed moment of trauma. Caruth uses the image of the wound “that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth 4), to indicate that trauma can only be understood through literary or symbolical language. This also illustrates that trauma does not always have a negative meaning or impact, it may serve as a paradigm of change which begins from trauma, suffering, and pain to knowledge and understanding. Trauma has been studied from various perspectives within different disciplines including psychoanalysis which makes an intimate connection with literature.

## **Conclusion**

As a summary, trauma is a psychological distress that impinges on the psyche and causes developmental problems and unrest, it comprises an event or an experience that overwhelms the individual and resists language and representation. However, the processes of memory remain central to the depiction of trauma's impact, for memory is viewed as a fluid process of reconstruction rather than a storehouse where the traumatic past is not retrievable in a cryogenic state but rather is created and recreated in moments of recollection.

Reconstructing one's memories, despite being a source of distortions, could be a sign of healthiness. Memory, when reconstructed and adjusted new experiences can be fitted into it. When the individual tracks down a part of his life that he had left at the end of his mind, he tends to revisit and revise his account in order to atone for his fallible acts. Therefore, life narratives have the function of providing a sense of continuity and logical meaning to a long life trajectory. More of that, though, in the next chapter.

# **Chapter Two:**

Memory in *The Sense of an Ending*

## **Introduction**

Julian Barnes' narrative, *The Sense of an Ending*, winner of the Man Booker Prize 2011, explores the possibilities of imperfect memory and its consequences on the present. *The Sense of an Ending* is Barnes' eleventh book which brought him recognition worldwide. The title of Barnes' book is borrowed from Frank Kermode's 1967 book of the same name, which is considered as a well-received piece of literary criticism among scholars and literary critics. Like other Barnes' novels, this one offers a profound contemplation on the slippery and ambiguous nature of memory, history, and even on one's sense of the self. It is a brilliantly evocative portrait of one man's painful emotional excavation. The narrator Tony's adolescence and young adulthood take place in the 1960s, a time of vast cultural change, including movements for sexual liberation, women's rights, and civil rights. Even though Tony notes that the sixties only happened in some parts of his own country, other parts of the country remained a decade or so behind. Between that period and the late 2000s when retired Tony is telling his story much has changed as well, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Tony particularly lingers on the changes in gender norms, thinking at one point about how the young girls he sees in short skirts would never have been allowed to wear such outfits in the 1960s, nor would they have been permitted to spend time near a boy's school like his own. However, the narrator struggles to overcome certain intractable character traits that he does not like and yet cannot seem to hold. He tells the story of his life and the way he narrates it, what he includes and leaves out, suggests that he is not an altogether reliable narrator.

### **2.1.*The Sense of an Ending*: A Summary**

*The Sense of an Ending* is a short, concise narrative in which the narrator and protagonist Tony, is forced to re-evaluate his life and his sense of self-identity. Tony, who is now sixty, narrates sequences from his life which on the surface appear to be in linear form but actually

they are in random order. He begins his narration from his school days with a small group of close friends who welcomed a new member, Adrian. Adrian is the most intelligent and the most admired one in the whole group. They used to discuss various topics such as art, history, life, and literature. They also discussed philosophical topics such as truth, time, death, and suicide. While retelling the story, the narrator slips in his memory and he puts many gaps and dots before the conscious reader.

Tony further remembers that after some time the friends have gone in different ways and to different universities. Tony goes to Bristol University where he meets a girl named Veronica and starts going out with her. Later on, he spends a boring weekend with her family where he encounters her calmer, quieter, and middle-aged mother of artistic airs who turns out to be central to this story. Veronica, after breaking up with Tony starts dating his best friend Adrian who writes to Tony asking for his permission. Tony seems to think of Veronica as a damaged person for most of the novel, and he takes solace in identifying her as manipulative and selfish.

Later, Tony comes to know that Adrian has committed suicide leaving behind no definite reason. After this incident, his life seems sorted out, a chain of little victories and failures with no real unresolved past mysteries, marriage, fatherhood, and civilised divorce. All of which, it seems, amounts to a respectable life and a sense of one's self as a fairly decent person. When Tony receives a letter from a solicitor, that the deceased mother of his college girlfriend Veronica left him £500 and two documents, it does not make much sense to him. Tony starts to re-examine his past, he thinks back about his relationship with Veronica and about his friend Adrian. He feels quite helpless in trying to manage all the events in their logical order due to his orderless and random memory. He looks back and tries to find the truth about events which happened in the past not so much to him, but to people with whom he was once

connected. He tries to find out what exactly happened and how he was personally involved in it. The novel is concerned almost exclusively with memories and what time does to them.

Tony's constant questioning of the truthfulness of his own memory makes the reader aware of his unreliability. Paradoxically, at the same time, it gives Tony an aura of frankness and honesty. Tony is portrayed as an unreliable narrator, but his unreliability seems to result from the fallibility of memory, not from a twisted personality and intentional lying. He seems to try to be as honest with the reader just as he is with himself. At the end of the novel, Tony finds out why Veronica's mother left him Adrian's diary, he learns more about the circumstances of Adrian's suicide and the role he played in it. Tony's search for answers about his past caused reappearance of his repressed emotions and memories, as it induced him to revise his past actions and his way of thinking. It removed Tony's protective shield of self-deception and brought strong feelings of remorse and unrest.

## **2.2.History in *The Sense of an Ending***

Where Barnes artfully stretches and collapses time to reflect how little memory has in common with chronology, he also denounces the authenticity of history. The fact that memory is constructed also means that history is constructed as well. Hence with the fallible memory, the narrative and the individual history or rather history in general also appear to be unreliable. As Adrian articulates upon the notion of history, “History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation” (Barnes 17). Meaning that history is not what happened. History is just what historians tell us. Barnes explores the tension between narrative conventions that people use when they try to both tell and alter their stories as well as histories.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, one can find the notion of intertextuality<sup>5</sup> as an echo of one text into another. Though the novel does not have an epigraph which is a device usually used in intertextuality, it has a title identical to that of a celebrated work of narrative and literary criticism published by the late Frank Kermode in 1967<sup>6</sup>. The title signifies that we human beings need to make sense of our lives in relation to time. When an event happens before us it has an instant impact upon our consciousness and we are unable to scan all the aspects of the event. As time passes, that particular event bears a new image and we perceive that event in different colours. The novel explores the intriguing premise that our own views of our lives may be incomplete and even inaccurate and that our views of our pasts do not always reflect what actually happened, which is the case with history, “Historians have always been faced with the lack of direct evidence for things ” (Barnes 18).

Tony uses memory and history as filters through which he tries to understand his life story. For Kermode there is something naturally appealing to us about creating coherent narratives to order experience or even to alter it. Tony wants a story that makes his experience make sense to him, which is a desire he shares with the rest of humankind. But Tony does not seem to be a keen observer of the passage of time. His recollections are haphazard and untidy and are often random and chaotic. This gives another perspective of history as portrayed by Barnes, “We need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us” (Barnes 12). It also indicates the author’s attempt to show that a single representation of events is often unreliable. Barnes, through the character of Tony, challenges the implied assumptions of historical statements like objectivity, neutrality, and impersonality as he illustrates, “We live in time - it holds us and moulds us- but I’ve never felt I understood it very well” (Barnes 3).

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<sup>5</sup> The term was coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966, which means that all texts are inter-texts because they refer to, recycle and draw from the pre-existing texts.

<sup>6</sup> A critique of fiction that illustrates the relationship between reality and fiction, time and memory, genesis and apocalypse.

### **2.2.1.The Historiographic Metafiction of Barnes**

The term historiographic metafiction was coined by Linda Hutcheon<sup>7</sup> claiming that history is very similar to fiction, as both are constructed narratives. She argues that the past did actually exist, but we can only know that past through its textual traces. Therefore, the past representations in the present are often complex and indirect as Hutcheon states, “best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past” (Hutcheon 120). Barnes applied this concept in his 1985 *Flaubert's Parrot*, which is a combination of biography, fiction, and literary criticism. Barnes uses historiographic metafiction as a tool to rewrite history in his fiction, or at least to illustrate upon it as it is the case for *The sense of an Ending*. In this novel, the narrator compares and contrasts history and life in general to “literature” as he complains:

This was another of our fears: that life wouldn't turn out to be like Literature. Look at our parents – were they the stuff of Literature? At best, they might aspire to the condition of onlookers and bystanders, part of a social backdrop against which real, true, important thing could happen... Real literature was about psychological, emotional, and social truth as demonstrated by the actions and reflections of its protagonists; the novel was about character developed over time. (Barnes 15)

History-making and narrativizing memory are equally problematised in the work, for they both are subject to unreliability and confabulation. As Christine Berberich puts it, that, “history is not something that we can possess or know, but it is only a process, something

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed study, please refer to Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

that we can desire but never actually attain because historical artifacts and texts are fundamentally unreliable'' (Berberich 117).

### **2.3. Memory in *The Sense of an Ending***

Memory is the main theme in Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*, which is the conscious reliving of the past. The novel explores the notion of memory as a recursive phenomenon. As Tony recounts his life story, he comes to realise that he has a distorted view of his life and history. He begins by saying that, "I remember, in no particular order" and goes on to describe the images he remembers and ends the paragraph by saying "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 3). But there is more to the story than the examination of the past. As the reader understands through the novel that memory may also provide us with a sense of time, musing in the present, extending into the future as well as the past. This generalised notion of time comes with costs, such as a lingering sense of guilt for remembered indiscretions, or anxiety over anticipated events that might repeat earlier unpleasant ones.

The novel puts forth the concept of memory in a very personal manner, through the main character's gradual retrieval of the memories long lost depicting his struggle in doing so "was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still, it is my best memory of their exchange" (Barnes 19). This self-reflective narrative with autobiographical elements lent itself naturally to an interpretation based on cognitive psychology and more specifically, with the focus on various types of memory distortion. Despite the fact that the narrator occasionally refers to history, his narrative is a mere reflection of the qualities of individual memory and the topics of personal guilt and responsibility. The type of memory represented in *The Sense of an Ending* is an imperfect memory, it is a rather reconstructed one for the purpose of healing from past traumatic events. However, in this case, the discovered trauma and the re-worked

personal history does not necessarily lead to the main character being healed, but it helps him to re-adjust his self-image and come to terms with his life, “ In my mind, this was the beginning of the end of our relationship. Or have I just remembered it this way to make it seem so, and to apportion blame?” (Barnes 35). Hence, Tony’s distorted memory and his forgetfulness of events are not simply the by-product of ageing, but it is rather an intentional act of oblivion. This is one of the characteristics of memory provided by Barnes in most of his works, “memory is an act of will... and so is forgetting” (Barnes *Talking it Over* 16). Barnes highlights, wittingly, and with irony that we seem contented with a self-acquired glory of wisdom, that we create by the memories of our experiences which we choose to keep.

Barnes’s narrative highlights the presentation of memory distortion in the mind of the protagonist, which in turn alters and deforms the authenticity of narration and history. It is a scientifically proven fact that memories tend to alter, fade, and undergo transformations in the course of time. The narrator tries to recollect and record his individual history but experiences lapse in memory, he is well aware of the shortcomings in his narration and often reminds the readers about the distortion of certain memories, “ Again, I must stress that this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of my reading then of what was happening at the time” (Barnes 41). In most cases, recovered memories are traumatic, hence it is important to analyse the nature of Tony’s trauma. Though not given explicitly in the narrative, Tony’s trauma might be something related to his relationship with Mrs.Ford, his girlfriend Veronica’s mother. It is suggested that Tony may have had an affair with Mrs.Ford while he visited Veronica’s house when he was dating her. At the end, Barnes even raises questions as to whether Tony is the actual father of the child, who is presumably Adrian and

Mrs.Ford's. Therefore, Tony's manipulative memories and amnesia are the results of what is called the victim complex<sup>8</sup>.

## **2.4.Structure in *The Sense of an Ending***

In any work of fiction, narration or narrative technique is given much importance and is often considered as the element which decides the success of that particular work. Narration has long been experimented by modern and post-modern writers. They created new modes of narrating stories and experiences and also opened up possibilities for different levels of reading and interpreting a work. *The Sense of an Ending* is narrated from the first-person point of view, the main protagonist narrates sequences from his life or rather he narrates his individual history. Tony Webster, who is sixty and retired, retells his life story. He begins his narration by listing few images that he came across during these sixty years. In the course of the novel, Tony discovers truths about his “Self”. Right from the very first line, the narrator is cautious and treads carefully while narrating his life. The work explores how we struggle to atone for past crimes through our own fallible narratives, as it delves deeply into the problematic nature of transforming memory into narrative.

Tony makes a number of references to “my story”; even urging himself not to digress onto subjects that are not “part of the story” (Barnes 46) without clearly stating what story he is seeking to tell. He tells us that “school is where it all began” (Barnes 4) without really telling us what has begun, and there is no concrete indication as to what status Tony’s narrative is supposed to have: a diary, a memoir, or even a novel we do not really know. Actually, seeds of the narrative in *The Sense of an Ending* can be found, for example, in Barnes’s autobiographical work on his fear of death, two years earlier, entitled *Nothing to be*

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<sup>8</sup> A personality trait of persons who believe they are constantly the victims of the harmful actions of others, even when made aware of evidence to the contrary.

*Frightened of*<sup>9</sup>, in which he writes, “... if, as we approach death and look back on our lives, we ‘understand our narrative’ and stamp a final meaning upon it, I suspect we are doing little more than confabulating: processing strange, incomprehensible, contradictory input into some kind [...] of believable story – but believable mainly to ourselves” (Barnes 189). Barnes illustrates in the novel that we all have our own narratives of life. we have a “version” of that life that is a story we tell to ourselves and others, about what our lives have been. But it is only that, a story, and it is just one version of a possible number of stories:

“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 95)

Tony realises that the version of his life that he has told himself is based on a recollection of an event that is inherently wrong.

#### **2.4.1.The Unreliable Narrator**

What is apparent about the narration is that the narrator is unreliable, and the major factor that makes Tony an unreliable narrator is his memory. An unreliable narrator typically displays characteristics or tendencies that indicate a lack of credibility or understanding of the story. Whether due to age, mental disability, or personal involvement, an unreliable narrator provides the reader with either incomplete or inaccurate information as a result of these conditions. This narrator may be lacking in the ability to depict the events as they happen and unintentionally give the reader inaccurate accounts of the events. Or he may intentionally

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<sup>9</sup> A non-fictional meditation on death in the form of a memoir published in 2008, in which Barnes introduces the concept of thanatophobia or Death anxiety. The term was coined by Sigmund Freud in 1915 in his seminal essays titled: *Thoughts for the Time on War and Death*. This anxiety is generally characterized by a fear of one's own death or the process of dying.

distort the events in the story and give false impressions to the reader, which is the case for Tony who sculpts his memory according to his convenience. He confesses that whatever he is going to tell his reader is the outcome of his broken memory, and that there are some incidents he does not remember properly hence he added his own respective imagination in his narration, “This is my principal factual memory. The rest consists of impressions and half-memories which may, therefore, be self-serving” (Barnes 28). This brings us to the conclusion that Tony may eventually be a reliable narrator. He confesses and warns the reader about his memory distortion, which in turn leads to his fallible narrative. Thus what is unreliable in the novel is memory and not the narrator himself.

## **2.5.The Therapeutic Effect of Narrative**

Writing for therapeutic purposes developed from the psychoanalytic therapies flourishing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The initial psychotherapies of the 1890s used “expressive therapies to relieve ailments associated with traumatic experiences” (Lepore et al 3). Physicians, such as Sigmund Freud, recognized the need in their emotionally disturbed patients to express their traumatic memories in order to recover from them, which led to the emergence of the “talking cure”<sup>10</sup>, “Early psychotherapies were based on abreaction theory, which maintained that keeping traumatic experiences out of consciousness had adverse health effects that could be reversed by recovering the original memories of trauma through techniques such as free association, talking, and releasing the appropriate effect associated with the trauma” (Lepore et al 3-4). Although talk therapy was still the traditional method of exchange in therapy and counseling, practitioners of expressive therapies realised that people had different expressive styles—one individual may be more visual, another more tactile, and so forth, hence, psychotherapists began incorporating art, music, dance, and writing.

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<sup>10</sup> Coined by Sigmund Freud which is a therapy that involves treating mental disorders by delving into a person's possible unconscious issues. It was first practiced on "Anna O", as he hypnotized her and she revealed all sorts of information she didn't recall when she was conscious.

By the 1920s, novels were being published demonstrating connections between writing and recovery from mental instability. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was among those authors who depicted the fictionalization of aspects of the writer's life for the purpose of healing. She explained how the act of daily writing helped her to write herself out of mental illness. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), which told the story of a woman driven to madness through the inability to write her thoughts on paper while experiencing postpartum depression, the protagonist was prescribed the 'rest cure', which prohibited any kind of exercise, either mental or physical. Gilman herself did have depression for a time and was actually told that the best thing to do was have no mental stimulation, no writing, ultimately do nothing. Her short story actually highlights the mistreatment of those with mental illness, as instead of recovering they move closer to lunacy. Indeed, writing as a form of cathartic expression and self-help has been practiced for years under the term "scriptotherapy"<sup>11</sup>, which is used to denote the various forms of writing used for therapeutic purposes.

Tony's desire to make time flow backward is typical to the notion of healing through narrative or the scriptotherapy effect. Such narrative entails a return to the past and the emotions driven by a certain event in order to write them differently and to alter what one felt at that specific moment. This form of narrative is designed to enable the narrator, and in some other cases the reader, to overcome feelings of guilt, remorse, or traumatisation. Tony's motif of reconstructing his memory is simply the by-product of his dissatisfaction with his past, and by doing so he re-wrote his life story and gave both the reader and himself a revised and refined version of his life. However, the ending of Barnes' novel gives the reader no answers or explanations, which opens the opportunity for a diversity of interpretations and different endings with different illustrations. Here again, we are reminded of Frank Kermode's original

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<sup>11</sup> Stemming from the Latin roots *scriptum*, meaning "thing written," and *therapia*, "to nurse or cure," scriptotherapy can be defined as the deliberate use of writing designed to enhance therapeutic outcomes.

critique of narrative. He states, “... in ‘making sense’ of the world we still feel a need ... to experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions” (Kermode 36). Tony ends his narrative by indicating “great unrest” (Barnes 150). Bearing in mind the structure of the novel concerning the unreliability of memory and the difficulty of attaining corroboration from our pasts, how are we to know whether this story is the “only story” and whether Tony’s version is the only and true version?

## Conclusion

*The Sense of an Ending* is a meditation on memory, ageing, and remorse. In the novel, history-making is similarly problematised and intertwined with issues related to memory and the narrativizing impulse that lies behind our reminiscences. Self-narrative is used to overcome the feeling of remorse and find meaning in life. By using the first person, Tony rewrites his life narrative speaking directly to the readers. As he retells a specific episode from his life story, he reflects on the deceitfulness of memory and the fact that our memories are strongly influenced by our feelings, beliefs, and the knowledge obtained after living a specific experience. As Tony reflects on the biases and imperfections of history and as the novel makes a case for the frightening uncertainty of both history and memory, and the fact that Patrick Lagrange is a made-up historian – whether invented by Adrian or misremembered by Tony – is yet another way the novel interrogates objectivity and reliability in narrative on various levels. However, *The Sense of an Ending* is not the only narrative in which Barnes explores time and memory, such themes reappeared in his latest novel *The Only Story*(2018). A story about an older man recalling his past and puzzling over the meaning of existence, through which Barnes portrays memory as inherently unreliable and bias.

# **Chapter Three:**

Memory in *The Only Story*

## **Introduction**

Julian Barnes' latest novel, *The Only Story* published in 2018 is a novel mainly about love, but with a Barnesian switch. The novel tracks the story of Paul Roberts, a young man who meets and falls in love with an older married woman. It presents a variety of definitions regarding love and its role in moulding one's identity. As all definitions given in the novel were not able to survive the test of time, so Barnes tries to capture love by telling the story of Paul Roberts. The definitions of love are not exactly falsified but the novel subtly undermines the truth claims of these definitions, as love cannot be pinned down in a definition but can only be grasped in an 'only story'. Accordingly, Barnes addresses the manipulative and reflexive nature of memory and the fact that memories change over time; either due to imperfections of memory or the urge to atone for past crimes or feelings of guilt and remorse. History also makes an appearance in the novel as pre-history, which is a term Barnes uses when referring to the older generation. Along with the role that age plays in shaping the meaning of both memory and history. Like *The Sense of an Ending*, the story takes place in the 1960s, an age of liberation and civil rights. Young people and women were finally given a voice and freedom to do what they wanted, and they began to stand up for their beliefs and their individuality. Drugs and alcohol were also synonymous with the Sixties and became more commonly used in the latter part of the decade, in addition to scandalous and deviant sexual behaviours. Despite the fact that Britain was not directly involved in the Vietnam War, this conflict was highlighted on several occasions in the novel. However, the narrator tries to recall his past memories, and while doing so he manipulates and reshapes them in order to reconstruct his story as he wants it to be. Paul muses retrospectively on the nature of love, the loss of innocence, and the unreliability of memory.

### **3.1.*The Only Story*: A Summary**

The story starts in the 1960s in a staid suburb south of London. Like *The Sense of an Ending*, this novel is narrated from the first-person point of view. Paul Roberts who is a nineteen-year-old boy living with his parents, he joins the local country club to play tennis while he is home from university for the summer. There he meets Susan Macleod, a forty-eight-year-old married woman and they start spending time together. Prompted by the lack of affinity with his friends, his resentment of his parents, and the passivity of his sexual life Paul falls in love with her. As they develop a secret romantic relationship, Paul gets to know Susan's husband Gordon; who is a drunken and with whom she has not engaged in physical intimacy for almost 20 years, her two daughters, and her friend Joan. Susan becomes the central focus in Paul's young boring life, and as soon as their relationship becomes public they are expelled from the tennis club. Paul eventually discovers that Gordon is an alcoholic who often beats Susan, and the couple decides to move to London and live together for over a decade before Susan gets sick and dies peacefully. However, this is part one of the story, or rather it is the reconstructed version; the only version worth telling.

In part two, Paul tells the other part of the story, which is the part he actually remembers but would rather forget through manipulating and altering his memories. In this part, Paul decides to study law and urges Susan to divorce Gordon, which she refuses for the simple reason that she does not wish to confront the long history of abuse she suffered at Gordon's hands, and she does not wish to speak of the abuse in court. Paul later reveals that Susan's husband smashed her teeth against the wall, and on another occasion, he punched him as well. After a while from living together, not alone actually but with borders living with them in the attic, Paul discovers that Susan has developed a drinking problem, and the drinking problem soon develops into alcoholism. Her general mental state begins to decline, apparently due to excessive alcohol consumption and she starts taking antidepressants. Paul attempts to help her by having her see a psychiatrist and by checking her into a hospital. Unfortunately, this

was a useless procedure, and Susan eventually begins to suffer from major delusions and severely decreased mental faculties. Soon, the great love between the two begins to crumble, and Paul learns that love can be tough. Finding himself helpless and unable to help her, Paul moves out of the house and he dates another woman for few months. The relationship eventually fails and Paul moves back in with Susan to take care of her. Then he realises that his happiness is based on Susan, while hers is based on alcohol. She is devoted to drinking and he takes that as rejection, so he decides to give up on her.

In the end, after having abandoned the study of law, Paul becomes a professional office manager. He never has another long-term relationship, he never marries, and he never has children. For the rest of his life, he devotes much effort into remembering as many aspects about his relationship with Susan as possible. In the final part, Paul discusses the idea that feeling less and lower expectations can protect you from too much emotion and hurt. He becomes emotionally tethered and his love for Susan causes him to be angry and disgusted with himself, wondering if there is something to be said for feeling less.

### **3.2. Structure in *The Only Story***

The story is narrated by Paul, adopting three different perspectives, as a young lad, then as middle-aged and finally as an elderly. For this reason, the narrative has three chapters, simply named ‘One, Two, Three’. In each of these chapters, the point of view of narration changes. In the first chapter, there is a first-person narrator, “It was a matter of some pride to me that I seemed to have landed on exactly the relationship of which my parents would most disapprove” (Barnes 19). In the second chapter, the first-person narration gradually passes over to second-person narration, “ You picture the scene, from her ashamed first order at the bar to her unsteady walk home, and this too becomes part of your memory bank” (Barnes 81). The third and final chapter is narrated in third-person, except for the last few paragraphs when the narration switches back to first-person, “He sometimes asked himself a question

about life. Which are truer, the happy memories, or the unhappy ones? He decided, eventually, that the question was unanswerable” (Barnes 93). The narrator switches narration from first-person to third-person as he distances himself from intense feelings of lust and love to disappointments and heartbreak.

In chapter one, Paul only narrates the nice memories he has of his relationship with Susan; at the end of the chapter he even says, “and this is how I would remember it all, if I could. But I can’t” (Barnes 83). Paul’s life story encompasses some important but unhappy memories, which he gradually reveals in chapters two and three adding a new perspective and details to the story in each chapter. The pleasurable memories are told in first-person, but the unpleasant ones are told with more distance, providing the impression that Paul is placing some boundaries between his mind and these memories. Paul is a typical Barnesian narrator as much as Tony, as both narrators tend to manipulate and alter their memories in order to rewrite their live accounts the way they favor. They also are typical Barnesian characters, for they tend to wonder about life instead of living it, and to meditate on issues instead of taking action.

### **3.2.1. Intertextual References in *The Only Story***

Intertextuality is indeed something typical of Barnes’ novels, In *The Only Story*, the narrator Paul writes down people’s statements about love in a notebook. One of the statements is the famous quote from Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem “*In Memoriam*”, “It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all” (Barnes 165). Another quote was written by the French writer Sébastien Nicolas de Chamfort, “In love, everything is both true and false; it’s the one subject on which it’s impossible to say anything absurd” (Barnes 169). Paul extends and interprets the quotes on his own; considering his relationship with Susan and the society’s resentment towards it. There is also a quote from the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev’s play *A Month in the Country*, “In my opinion, every love, happy or unhappy, is a real disaster

once you give yourself over to it entirely” (Barnes 206). In fact, this is not the first time that Barnes uses this quote; it is also featured in a short story of Barnes in the short story collection *The Lemon Table* (2004) in the story of *The Revival*. However, Barnes does not mark these intertextual references as such in his texts. It is his way of indicating the role of intertextuality in Postmodern theory to express the idea that, “reproduction takes over from authentic production”(Allen 182). Barnes applies the same principle to the concept of narrativizing memory, that such narrative is never authentic and is always subject to unreliability. Over the years, Paul reads his notebook a couple of times and crosses out quotes he does not believe to be true anymore, and edits the ones that he feels differently about, which is exactly what he does with his memory and the story he is narrating.

### **3.2.2.The Construction of Self Through Narrative**

Narrative is not only an act of telling but also an act of knowing and being. Therefore, personal narrative is widely linked to the construction of self and identity. In the way this narrative is structured and via the different voices which are present in the story, Barnes illustrates the way memory is edited and altered through the reconstructive act of narrative. While retelling his story, The protagonist of *The Only Story* tends to edit and reshape his memories in order to erase feelings of guilt and shame. In the first part of the novel, Paul tells only the happy memories of his past and claims them to be his “only story”, and in doing so he hoped for a sense of continuity and logical meaning for his present self. Like *The Sense of an Ending*’s narrator, Paul realises that our memories are strongly influenced by our feelings, beliefs, and the knowledge obtained after living a specific experience. Thus he provides different perspectives of the story in different sequences of time. He also reflects on the deceitfulness of memory driven by human beings’ need to go on with their lives, which proves Damasio’s hypothesis proposing that the self is built in stages, passing through three developmental stages: the protoself, the core self, and the autobiographical self. Damasio

forges a close connection between consciousness and the self, as he divides consciousness into core consciousness and extended consciousness; with the first being a requirement for the presence of the second. He then ties core consciousness to what he calls the “core self,” the most primitive form of self, and extended consciousness to the “autobiographical self” (Damasio 180-273).

### **3.3. Memory in *The Only Story***

Similar to *The Sense of an Ending*, memory is a main theme in *The Only Story* as well. When the protagonist and narrator of *The Sense of an Ending* Tony Webster struggles with the idea of a malleable memory, Paul delves deeper into the issue by openly admitting the deficiencies of his memory. Paul analyses his life story retrospectively, and by doing so he openly questions whether retelling memories, or for him retelling his story, “bring you closer to the truth of what happened, or move you further away?”(Barnes 3). He explicitly admits that he is not entirely sure about what he remembers, this is portrayed when he remembers the time when he and Susan are visited by a man in their house in London, “He was a man of fiftyish, I suppose. In my memory I have given him— or he has acquired over the years – a trench-coat, and perhaps a broad-brimmed hat, underneath which he wore a suit and tie” (Barnes 91). This quote is an example of Paul’s acceptance and awareness of the fact that memories are prone to manipulation and adjustment.

As a first assumption the reader would put Paul in the category of a reliable narrator, but the fact that he comments on the nature of memory saying that, “memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer ... Memory prioritises whatever is most useful to help keep the bearer of those memories going. So there would be a self-interest in bringing happier memories to the surface first” (Barnes 16), prompts the reader not to believe everything. This also explains why in chapter one only the happy memories of Paul’s relationship with Susan are narrated. The slippery nature of memory pushes Paul closer to

unreliability, but still what is unreliable is not Paul as a narrator but his memory. Like *The Sense of an Ending*, this story is about looking back on life and trying to make sense of what happened. This retrospective narrative exposes the resilient nature of memory, for instance, Paul's memory of Gordon Macleod, the husband of Susan, changes throughout the chapters. In chapter one Gordon does not make a grand appearance in the story, and Paul does not seem to care about him or his relation to Susan. In chapter two, when Paul reveals the physical abuse of Macleod both towards him and Susan, he creates a new sinister image of Gordon in his memory. Gordon's image changes again in chapter three when Paul is older and more mature, which implies the effect of time and ageing on memory and its authenticity.

Paul openly admits the biased and unreliable nature of memory, but he is unable to point out its true effect on his present self. The elderly Paul contemplates about whether memory is directed towards optimism or pessimism. He articulates on both sides but does not come to a final conclusion. On the one hand, he argues that an optimistic memory, “remembers your past in cheerful terms because this validated your existence” (Barnes 162). On the other, he claims that a pessimistic memory makes all appear “blacker and bleaker than it actually was, then this might make life easier to leave behind” (Barnes 163). However, the question remains unanswered and paradoxically debated, which is typical of Barnes as well as the ambiguous nature of memory.

### **3.4. History in *The Only Story***

Like many Barnesian novels, history makes an appearance in *The Only Story*. Paul addresses this notion of history in his narrative as “pre-history”, but without any interpretations of what this term means. When Susan tells Paul of her generation, which she describes as a “played-out generation”; given the fact that it has experienced the Second World War and was left to co-exist with the consequences, “So, you see, we’re a played-out generation. All the best ones went. We were left with the lesser ones. It’s always like that in

war. That's why it's up to your generation now" (Barnes 29). Paul describes this as her pre-history: "But I don't feel part of a generation, for a start; and, moved as I am by her story, her history, her pre-history, I still don't want to go into politics" (Barnes 29). One of the reasons why Paul uses this term is perhaps he is still quite young at the time, and Young adolescents often do not want to realise and understand that the older generation also once was young and had its problems.

Despite the fact that Paul does acknowledge that pre-history is central to all relationships, "Not that pre-history doesn't matter. Indeed, I think pre-history is central to all relationships" (Barnes 33), he still uses it with a certain negative connotation; especially when describing an older generation. This implies that age also plays an important role in understanding history and life in general. Paul, even after admitting that pre-history is not introspectively linked to the older generation but exists in all relationships, he still does not apply this notion to himself perhaps due to his carefree character, "Well, I have learned to become careful over the years. As careful now as I was careless then. Or do I mean carefree? Can a word have two opposites?" (Barnes 11). Paul never really examines his actions, nor tries to take some of the blame for what went wrong in his life particularly with Susan. He simply claims that, "None of this might have happened. But given that it had, then if you wanted to attribute fault, you were straight away into pre-history, which now, in two of their three cases, had become inaccessible" (Barnes 98). He claims that he simply cannot figure it out anymore since two people involved from the three are dead, thus leaving himself out of query.

### **3.5.Love and Identity in *The Only Story***

*The Only Story* is a novel about the nature of memory and the refutation of truth claims, but the main focus lies on love and themes that are associated with love. Barnes uses postmodern techniques to write about deeply human issues such as love and the vulnerability

of humans, hence in this novel, he links love to the notion of identity. Through the character of Paul, Barnes displays how first love shapes and moulds the individual's sense of self and identity:

First love fixes a life forever: this much I have discovered over the years.

It may not outrank subsequent loves, but they will always be affected by its existence. It may serve as a model, or as a counterexample. It may overshadow subsequent loves; on the other hand, it can make them easier, better. Though sometimes, first love cauterizes the heart, and all any searcher will find thereafter is scar tissue. (Barnes 46)

Barnes opens the novel and also introduces its main theme, love by a simple question, "Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less?" (Barnes 3). However, he also claims that this is not a real question, as we cannot choose how much we love, if we can then it is not love. He thus implies how first love influences one's life and affects one's identity, but without the individual's choice or free will. This is the case for Paul; who did not get the chance to choose with whom to fall in love, nor to what extent.

After Paul experiences love for the first time, Susan becomes the pillar of his life. Even when she becomes an alcoholic and disillusioned, he stands by her side and does not leave. The new lifestyle that Susan imposes upon Paul due to her addiction is not the type of life he signed up for when he "was falling smack into love" (Barnes 16), but he feels bound to this relationship and to helping her. He is addicted to Susan just as much as she is addicted to alcohol. She is part and parcel of his life; though he realises that he is miserable with her he cannot leave her, " You ask yourself: is staying with her an act of courage on your part, or an act of cowardice? Perhaps both? Or is it just an inevitability?" (Barnes 80). Paul simply could not understand love nor control it, which is something he shares with all humankind.

Throughout the novel, he tries desperately to define love collecting definitions said about it in a notebook and musing upon them, eventually, he crosses the definitions one by one as love seems undefinable. At the end of the novel, Paul concludes that, “perhaps he had always been wasting his time. Perhaps love could never be captured in a definition; it could only ever be captured in a story” (Barnes 206).

The older Paul looking back half a century later is highly affected by his past and his toxic relationship with Susan. In the third part of the novel and in the third person, Paul narrates his life after he finally leaves Susan and hands her to her daughter. He lives alone, he works in several countries, and he builds a social circle and has new relationships with women. But he cannot be committed to any relationship, and he usually moves on after a few years. Paul is metaphorically scarred for life as he argues that this type of life is all that he can handle:

This was enough for him to find the sexual companionship, the social life, the daily warmth he needed – until he moved on to the next job, the next country, the next social circle, the next few years of being agreeable to and with new people, some of whom he might see in later years, some not. It was what he wanted; more to the point, it was all he felt able to sustain.

(Barnes 101)

This new Paul and his new identity are shaped and created by the influence of Susan upon him. His life after Susan will never be the same as before her, which is the power of love and its trace on life forever.

## Conclusion

*The Only Story* is a rumination on the recursive nature of memory, love and identity, and the trace of ageing on one’s reminiscences. Barnes asserts that memory is a resilient part of human mind; it is prone to reconstruction, manipulation, and amendment. As Paul struggles

with the idea of a malleable memory, he candidly admits and co-exists with the deficiencies of his memory. Much like the premise of *The Sense of an Ending*, the older man looks back on his youth, and the latter is shaped by the experience of his first love. Through the excavation of his deep-seated memories, Paul comes to terms with his life; as he experiences how memory can confound, fail, and surprise an individual in the course of life. Paul's narrative is a healing process used for the therapeutic aspects of writing, as he retrospectively recollects only the happy memories of his past and accumulates them in his "only story". Finally, apart from what he wants to remember, he tells the reader what he actually remembers. But this is the other version of the story; not the one worth telling.

# General Conclusion

## General Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis has explored how one reconstructs one's self through narrative, and how memory is not only remembering the events but also reshaping them and re-experiencing them more than once in a lifetime. Barnes has portrayed the nature of memory, and the individual's struggle to atone for past deceptions. *The Sense of an Ending* and *The Only Story*, are two narratives that explore the effect of bias and inauthentic memory in the course of life as well as the trace that trauma impinges upon the psyche and memory.

Since its genesis, trauma studies have been related to memory, for the original event of trauma is not traumatic in itself but only in its remembrance. Trauma is generally defined in relation to the process of remembering. Based on Freud's theories, that traumatic experiences influence memory differently than other experiences, and are unable to be experienced initially but only in a narrative reproduction of the past, the narrative of the event is crucial to recovery. However, Barnes, along with postmodernists, hypothesises that individual history is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality which is the case for past memories.

In both works, Barnes expressed how the protagonists have always felt in control of their lives, but when they examine their memories they find instead that they have been disillusioned and misled by their own memories, and that what they considered as free choices were constrained by the forms imposed by their historical context. Barnes employs Kermode's view, about the impossibility of a novel ever actually being true to life to memory. The notion of the unreliability of memory is the key theme in both novels. They deal with the way we live lives hiding deception, pain, and guilt under the cloak of a false sense of complacency.

Moreover, another common point of the two works is the use of retrospective narrative to heal the wound of time and come to terms with the past. In both narratives, Barnes employed the technique of scriptotherapy, which consists of writing as a form of cathartic expression and self reconstruction. The therapeutic role of narrative is key for the characters to restore their sense of self, and reconstruct their individual history. Narrativizing memory is crucial to the understanding of one's self, as the individual is given the opportunity to relive the past through writing. Besides, when one's life narrative is reconstructed and adjusted new experiences can be fitted into it. This act of transforming memory into narrative and the individual's struggle to atone for past crimes brings into light the resiliency of the human psyche and people's need for multiple layers of truth. However, delving deep into the past and moving in the opposite direction of time has its consequences, for no piece of narrative is ever faithful to its original event. As one matures the way one perceives life changes, and at a certain station in life one sits back, reconstructs, and contemplates. In the end, after going through numerous corrections, what remains is never authentic and change is an inevitable by-product of this process. For that, many questions can be raised at this point. How often does one lose one's true self for the sake of preserving retrospective feelings of contentment and self-satisfaction? and to what extent can one be an unreliable author of one's own life story?

# **Appendix**

## **Biography of Julian Barnes**

The British novelist, Julian Barnes, was born on January 19, 1946, in Leicester, England. Barnes studied at the City of London School from 1957 to 1964, then at Magdalen College, Oxford. He graduated in modern languages with honors in 1968. Barnes worked as a reviewer and as a literary editor for British Political Magazine. Barnes had a family who was highly dedicated to literature services. Both his parents were French teachers. His elder brother Jonathan Barnes is a philosopher specializing in ancient philosophy. His wife Pat Kavanagh was a British literary agent until her death on October 20, 2008.

Julian Barnes is one of the greatest contemporary English writers, he is a British critic and author of inventive and intellectual novels about obsessed characters curious about the past. He won the Man Booker Prize for *The Sense of an Ending*, and three of his earlier books had been shortlisted for the prize: *Flaubert's Parrots*(1984), *England, England*(1998), and *Arthur and George*(2005). He has also written crime fiction under pseudonym Dan Kavanagh. In addition to novels, Barnes has published collections of essays and short stories and in 2004 he became a commandeur of L'ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Barnes has been a very creative and challenging writer, he wrote his first novel “Metroland” for which he won Somerset Award in 1981. His breakthrough novel “*Flaubert's Parrot*” won him Geoffrey Memorial Prize in 1985, and Prix Médicis in 1986. He has been the name behind some very fine contributions to European literature. He also translated a French book by author Alphonse Daudet as well as Volker Kriegel’s collection of German cartoons. In 1991, he published “*Talking it Over*” which earned him Prix Femina in 1992 making him the only English writer who has won two awards in France.

He has earned himself extensive fame and respect because of the nature of his writing dealing with history, truth, love, and death. His prose is elegant, witty and playful, and he

often employs techniques associated with postmodern writing such as unreliable narrators, a self-conscious linguistic style, and an intertextual blending of different narrative forms that serve to foreground the process of literary creation. Despite his playful experimentation with language, style, and form, Barnes's fiction is also grounded in psychological realism and his themes are serious, poignant, and heartfelt. He frequently addresses the nature of love, particularly its dark side, exploring humankind's capacity for jealousy, obsession, and infidelity, alongside the perennial quest for authentic love.

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