

# A Study on the Psychological Trauma in the Novel *The Sense of an Ending*

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**Abstract:** *Psychological Trauma refers to the destructive emotion after experiencing some destructive affairs. This kind of trauma widely exists in our society and sometimes can even be used to define the nature of human and society. Memory and trauma are two important elements in The Sense of Ending by Julian Barnes. In the pursuit of memory, Tony starts the journey to inspect and discover himself. In the end, he realizes the harm he has done to others. From the author's understanding towards history, time and moral, the psychological trauma can be strongly sensed. The Sense of an Ending provides a paradigm for the modern people to explore the meaning of life.*

**Keywords:** *The Sense of an Ending, Psychological Trauma, Memory*

## 1. Introduction

Julian Barnes is regarded as one of the most influential writers in Britain since 1980s. Along with Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes becomes one of the most significant writers in England. His recent publication includes *The Sense of an Ending*, winner of 2011 Man Booker Prize, *Through the Window: Seventeen Essays (and One Short Story)*, and *Level Life*.

*The Sense of an Ending* follows a middle-aged man as he contends with a past he has never much thought about it until his close childhood friend's return with a vengeance, one of them from the grave, maddeningly appearing. Tony Webster thought he'd left all this behind as he built a life for himself, and by now his marriage and family and career have fallen into amicable divorce and retirement. But he then presented with a mysterious legacy that obliged him to reconsider a variety of things he thought he'd understood all along, and to revise his estimation of his own nature and place in the world.

## 2. The Trauma Theory

The word "trauma" is borrowed from a Greek word which means the external force causes people to get the psychological wound. The Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary explains "trauma" as "a very severe shock or very unsettling experience, which may cause psychological damage". Besides, trauma has been used in the medical and psychiatric field.

In the process of trauma studies, the traumatic concept and symptoms had not been explored clearly until the 1980s. In the years since Vietnam War, the fields of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and sociology have taken a renewed interest in the phenomena of trauma, which has laid a solid foundation for the further research of trauma.

Many scholars are conducting research about the relationship of trauma and fiction. Among them, Anne Whiteland is the pioneer and authority. In her book, *Trauma Fiction*, she illustrated that "The term 'trauma fiction' represents a paradox or contradiction if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language and repetition, how then can it be narrative in fiction" (Anne Whitehead, 2004:3)<sup>[1]</sup>.

The appearance of trauma theory injects the novels with new ways of defining trauma and has cast attention from the question of what is remembered of the past and how and why is remembered. Thus, the research begins to focus on the politics, ethnics, and aesthetics, which leads to the emergency of various cultural groups.

### 3. The Trauma Theme in *The Sense of an Ending*

#### 3.1 Uncertain Historical Trauma

The uncertain and unreliable history is one of the common themes in Julian Barnes's novels, which tries to answer the question—"what is history" proposed by the British historian E. H. Carr. *The Sense of an Ending* inherits the above theme. By moulding the characters like Tony Webster, Adrian, etc. and focusing on their individual history, Barnes analyzes the common ones' tragedies through analyzing the traumatic memory and puts that "history is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meets the inadequacies of document" (Julian Barnes, 2011: 18)<sup>[2]</sup>. These characters' illustration about the history during the period of their middle school reflected their suspiciousness towards the recorded history. Tony preferred George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, while Alex read Russel and Wittgenstein, Adrian liked Camus and Nietzsche, and Colin was keen on Baudelaire and Dostoevsky. All these writers or scholars were unsatisfied with their own times and held a critical attitude towards the society. The young characters lived in similar environment; thus, they were liable to have a sense of community. Their unsettling living environment exerted a great influence on these young persons — they held a suspicious attitude towards the people and society and did not trust them. Under prolonged conditions of unsafety, the group shared that their mutual loyalty and devotion could protect them from harm or unsafety. "Sharing day-to-day experiences in such groups reduces shame and isolation, fosters practical problem-solving and instills hope" (Judith Herman, 1992: 158)<sup>[3]</sup>. As the inevitable consequence after experiencing some traumatic events, trauma is closely related to the personal experience. And, the conflict between the individual and the community containing in Barnes's historical outlook is forceful evidence. Regardless the historical records of the World War I, Adrian alleged that all the historical records are unreal and "we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us". The common people were impotent towards the official history. "At best, they might aspire to the conditions of onlookers and bystanders, part of social backdrop against which real, true, important could happen". Here, the personal experience became meaningless, which was the main factor that leads to personal tragedy and psychological trauma. The life experience of Adrian is a forceful evidence that shows the individual powerlessness facing those established social rules. Thoroughly struck by the wars, the social environment, and the educational system, which would be explained in detail in the following chapters, Adrian had no power to fight against with them; thus, he had no choice but commit suicide. The research concludes that the person, who lives in the negative environment with discrimination, will suffer serious psychological trauma. Because of the long-term negative influence, this kind of psychological trauma would deeply influenced the people and let them feel self-abased, helpless and so on in varying degrees. Sometimes, this kind of trauma may fundamentally destroy the people's self-value and self-confidence. As the representative of the tragic figure in the novel, Adrian's self-experience largely influenced him. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Adrian lived in a broken family his mother abandoned them in the early age; thus, he becomes "a tall, shy boy who initially kept his eyes down and his mind on himself". In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman analyses the importance of childhood experience. "Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the life structure of personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation". Thus, the unhappy childhood experience changed Adrian's understanding towards the world, especially the historical outlook which had the characteristics of "uncertainty". Adrian believed that "history just repeats" and "we've seen it again and again this year. Same old history, same old oscillation between tyranny and rebellion, war and peace, prosperity and impoverishment". The historical belief he upheld was that "we want to blame an individual so that everyone else is exculpated. Or we blame a history process as a way of exonerating individual". Undoubtedly, his historical attitude was the aftermath of the psychological trauma. What's more, he used his life to illustrate his suspiciousness and uncertainty towards the history and society. After falling in love with Veronica, Adrian could not resist Tony's suggestion and sought confirmation from Sarah—Veronica's mother. Thus, Adrian fell in love with Sarah and abandoned Veronica, which resulted in both Veronica's family and Adrian's tragedy. The more distressful thing was that the son of Adrian and Sarah had amentia which coincides with Tony's curse — "I hope you get so involved that the mutual damage will be permanent" and "you are left with lifetime of bitterness that will poison your subsequent relationships". Therefore, Adrian could not bear the burden anymore and committed suicide. In Adrian's suicide note, the life's tragedy and helplessness can be strongly sensed — "life is a gift bestowed without anymore asking for it that the thinking person has a philosophical duty to examine both the nature of life and conditions it comes with; and that if this person decides to renounce the gift no one asks for, it is a moral and human duty to act on the

consequence of that decision”. Facing with Adrian’s death, Tony and his friends expressed nothing but indifference and valued it as “first-class degree, first-class suicide”. They thought Adrian’s death “was exemplary rather than tragic” and “he treated from us rather quickly slotted into time and history”. Here, the common people’s tininess had been highlighted thoroughly. Barnes strongly emphasized the individual history. Towards the truth of history written by the individual, Barnes held a negative attitude — everyone had his or her private and unrecorded history, and the individual and individual history were controlled by the time.

### 3.2 Irrecoverable Trauma of Time

Barnes also holds a negative attitude towards the view of time, believing that “we live in time — it holds us and moulds us — but I’ve never felt I understood it very well”. In this novel, Barnes incorporates the past, present and future into the time structure of “tick” and “tock”. To some degree, Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending* is a kind of salute to Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*. Barnes even adopts the same book title. In Barnes’s novel, the readers can strongly sense Frank Kermode’s influence. According to Kermode, “tick” is our word for a physical beginning, and is “a humble genesis”; while “tock” is “our word for an end” and “a feeble apocalypse” (Kermode, 2000: 45)<sup>[4]</sup>. “Tick-tock is in any case not much of a plot” and the time between “tick-tock” is significant. In the victim’s mind, the time is not linear but cycle. The bound between the past and the present is obscure. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes also puts that “I mean ordinary, everyday time, which clocks and watches assure us passes regularly: tick-tock, click-clock. Is there anything more plausible than a second hand? ”. And, Tony adopted “a kind of man-centered mode of world-time”. At the beginning of this novel, Tony recalled six fragments of memory which were arranged “in no particular order”. According to Kermode, “in the mildest, we look for a fullness of time, for beginning, middle and end in concord”. Tony continually tried his best to search for the “beginning, middle and end in concord” and, sometimes, in order to embellish himself, he even distorted the truth. He maliciously cursed the love of Adrian and Veronica, believing that time would revenge them. However, in the end, he fought that “time was telling not against them, it was telling against me”. According to Freud’s theory, belatedness and repetition are the main characteristics of the trauma. Cathy Caruth further illustrates “the impact of traumatic events lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance insight into trauma, that the impact of traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness” (Cathy Caruth, 2001: 8)<sup>[5]</sup>. The influence of traumatic events and traumatic experience has the subsequent characteristic, i.e. the psychological trauma may last for a long time. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony realized what he had done after 40 years. When he traced history and restored himself, he realized how ridiculous “that memory equals events plus time” was and what kinds of perpetual damage he had done to others. Although Tony himself was also the victim—in the past, Veronica’s father patronized on Tony, her brother loftily scrutinized Tony, and Veronica manipulated him, but what Tony himself had done was more severe. The son of Sarah and Adrian and Tony’s malicious curse like nightmare haunted him. However, as the mistakes had been conducted, nothing could be done except the confession. Tony also felt sorrowfully. “But time...how time first grounds us and then confounds me. We thought we were being mature when we were only being safe. We imagined we were being responsible but were only being cowardly. What we called realism turned out to be a way of avoiding things rather than facing them”. Time makes the best-supported decision become wobbly, and changes the certainties whimsical. Time let Tony rediscover himself thoroughly and let him realize the harm he had done to others because of his own indifference. Time gave his serious revenge—“If time did reward merit, then I deserve shunning” and “The fact that the young me who cursed and the old me witnessed the curse’s outcome had quite different feelings”<sup>1</sup>. Philip Larkin’s poem is a better illustration to the time’s influence:

“Truly, though our element is time,  
We are not suited to the long perspectives,  
Open at each instant of our lives,  
They link us to our losses...”

### 3.3 Moral Perplexity

In *The Sense of an Ending*, the uncertain historical trauma and irrecoverable trauma life has caused irrecoverable trauma to the characters and has made Tony regret in his whole life. In the moral perspective, Tony’s memory let him sense the moral falling and conscience’s death of himself. Judith Herman puts that the traumatic victims always use highly emotional but self-contradict words to

describe their own experience. In this novel, Tony presents a paradox ego. Even he himself admitted that—“we muddle along, we left life happen to us, we gradually build up a store of memory”<sup>[6]</sup>. And this “store of memories” is far from being true. At the beginning of this novel, Tony recalled his middle age, during which he, Adrian, Colin and Alex combined a small group. However, Adrian was basically different from the other three. The three others are book-hungry, sex-angry, meritocratic and anarchistic and preferred radical words. While Adrian was prudent, clever, and studious, from the single family but never complains about it. Adrian loved his mother, respected his father, and adored Nietzsche and Albert Camus. However, Tony and his friends showed no sympathy but jealousy. They even satirized that “a key to a happy family was for three not be a family—or at least, not one living together. Having made this analysis, we envied Adrian the more”, which contained a sense of taking pleasure in other’s misfortune. Towards this, Adrian held a placid attitude. During the middle school, another important event is Robson’s suicide—Robson of the Science Sixth passed away because he could not shoulder the burden that his girlfriend’s pregnancy. Towards Robson’s death, Tony held an extremely cold-blooded attitude. Tony and his friends even joked about the way of Robson’s suicide:

“I’d never have thought he knew how to gang himself”.

“He was in Science Sixth”.

“But you need a special sort of slip knot”.

“That’s only in films. And proper execution. You can do it with an ordinary knot. Just takes longer to suffocate you”.

Tony did not give a little concern to his schoolmate, but just cared about the so called gossip. He even put that—“We concluded that it could only be considered philosophical in arithmetical sense of the term; he, being about to cause an increase of one in the human population, had decided it was ethical duty to keep the parents’ numbers constant”. The above two cases expose that Toby’s deficiency in the aspect of morality—indifferent and shorts of sympathy; while his love relationship with Veronica in the deeper aspect highlights Tony’s moral anomic. According to Tony’s memory, “Veronica wasn’t very different from other girls of time”. The visit to Veronica’s home, to Tony, was seriously terrible. He felt that Veronica’s father and brother do not respect him. Veronica’s brother “behaved towards me as if I were an object of mild curiosity and by no means the first to be exhibited for appreciation” . When Veronica, her father and Jack went for a walk, they even left Tony alone. Only Veronica’s mother—Sarah gave Tony a little sense of warm. In Tony’s memory, “I was so ill at ease that I spent the entire weekend constipated: this is my principle memory”. When Tony introduced Veronica to his friends, the communication between Veronica and Adrian, studying in the Cambridge, arouse Tony’s anger. He believed that Veronica was vain, and deliberately got close to Adrian who studied moral science in the famous university; and that kind of atmosphere made Adrian feel that he had been left out. According to the psychological theory, the traumatic victims’ memories always occurred repeatedly in a distorted or disguised form. In Tony’s memory construction, he described him as an antique while Veronica was vain and calculating. What’s more, in order to escape responsibility, Tony deliberately arranged his first sex with Veronica after their breakup in his memory. Veronica’s skilled sexual behavior made Tony extremely disappointed—“And did you still think her a virgin when she was rolling a condom on to your cock?”. Here, he totally neglected the fact he was not a virgin in the high school. At the beginning, he considered that Veronica was a virgin only because Veronica was unwilling to have sexual relationship with him. He even took this kind of unreasonable speculation as a fact. When the fact proved wrong, Tony could not bear accepting the fact. At last, Veronica could not bear Tony’s cowardice, selfishness, and unambitious. She told Tony that “Well, you can believe what it suits you to believe” and proposed breakup. Tony did not conduct any introspection but explained that he was a “peaceable” person. “But I think I have an instinct for survival, for self-preservation. Perhaps that is what Veronica called cowardice and I called being peaceable”. What’s more, he further made a self-defense that “I didn’t have anything to feel guilty about: we were both near-adults, responsible for our own actions, who had freely entered into a relationship which hadn’t worked out. No one had got pregnant, no one had got killed”. After their break-up, Tony still remained sexual relationship with several girls, drinking and smoking marijuana. The moral standard Tony conducted was totally different from the one he self-proclaimed. He deliberately beautified himself and defamed Veronica. Out of the kind-hearted thinking, in the last year of college, Adrian told Tony that he fell in love with Veronica. If Tony replied and sent his best wishes to them, then the adversarial relationship between him and Veronica could be repaired. However, Tony concluded that it was Veronica who deliberately let Adrian do that—“to let me know how she, Veronica, had trapped up: to my cleverest friend, and what’s more, a Cambridge chap like Brother Jack. Also, to warn me that she would be hanging around if I planned on seeing Adrian”.<sup>[7]</sup> Tony made many malicious speculations about Veronica and told what had happened between him and Veronica to Adrian. He even threatened Adrian to be careful towards Veronica to avoid harm. When he got the news about Adrian’s suicide, Tony should show his grief to Veronica but

he expressed nothing; on the contrary, he thought that “Should I express my condolences? But she would think me hypocritical. If I were to get in touch with her, either she wouldn’t reply, or she’d somehow twist things so that I’d end up not being able to think straight”. In the first half of the story, Tony conducted double-standard in the aspect of morality—describing himself as a victim while self-consciously shielding the harm he did to others such as Veronica, Adrian, Sarah, and so on. For example, in Tony’s youth, his love towards Veronica, to a large degree, only existed in the physical level; thus, the emotional love was controlled by the sexual drive. Self-claimed as a moralist, Tony refused to shoulder the responsibility of his unsuccessful love with Veronica. His memory wanders between moral and immoral. After the retirement, Tony enjoyed a peaceful life; however, Sarah’s letter, which wrote that Sarah left 500 pounds to Tony, broke all these things. Feeling confused, Tony began to search the life meaning of Adrian; thus, he discovered the real Tony and began to amend his broken memory. During this process, he discovered that he has seriously harm Veronica, Adrian and many others. After getting the news of Adrian’s love with Veronica, Tony wrote them a letter—“you are left with a lifetime of bitterness that I will poison your subsequent relationships. Part of me hopes you’ll have a child, because I’m a great believer in time’s revenge”. What’s more, Tony crazily satirized Veronica—“You’ll have to do this behind Veronica’s back, because boy is that girl a control freak. Oh, and she’s also a snob, as you must be aware, who only took up with you because you were soon to have BA Cantab after your name”.<sup>[8]</sup> Tony’s letter let him find the real image of him—“I thought, mainly about me, and how-what I’s been: chippy, jealous and malign”. And the further searching overturned the unreliable ego in a deeper level. Adrian sought confirmation from Sarah, fell in love with her, and gave a birth to a child with intellectual disabilities. Thus, Tony’s curses had come into true, and Adrian committed suicide because of the overwhelmed burden. E. Ann Kaplan puts that the traumatic body not only includes the abuser and the direct victim but also the bystanders, rescuer, the victims’ friends and relatives, medium consumer and so on who were influenced by the traumatic event indirectly. Tony’s behavior 40 years ago has the compelling obligation to the break-up of Adrian and Veronica, and the tragedy for Veronica’s family. Tony’s jealousy, chippy and malign, to some degree, is a kind of invisible violence which impose irrecoverable trauma to Adrian, Veronica, and so on. Meanwhile, the son of Sarah and Adrian was also an innocent one who was harmed by the traumatic event and lived in the communal mental hospital because of spiritual shock of her mother’s death. However, Tony was also a victim of himself. Tony was a common people but experienced a series of significant event in his life—“the fall of Communism, Mrs. Thatcher, 9/11, global warming”<sup>[9]</sup> which considerably affects Tony’s world outlook and life outlook. “We live in time, it bounds us and defines us, and time is supposed to measure history, isn’t it? But if we can’t understand time, can’t grasp its mysteries of pace and progress, what chance do we have with history—even our own small, personal, largely undocumented piece of it” . In the process of reading the novel, the readers will not neglect the unique narrative technique — unreliable narration, by which the historical trauma, irrecoverable trauma of time, and the moral perplexity have been highlighted. Thus, the traumatic memory has been stressed. According to Wayne C. Booth, “a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not”<sup>[10]</sup>. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes chooses the first-person narrator, which is the prominent standard of unreliable narration.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Barnes used the narrator “I (Tony)” as the narrative perspective. The old-aged “I” reviewed and verified the youth “I” in order to explore and to restore the truth of individual history. However, the first-person narrator has a strong subjective sense and limitedness; thus, Tony’s narration is unreliable. The narrative construction of this novel is two-section type and fragmental. Tough the two sections are the memories of the same experience, the two are totally different.

#### 4. Conclusion

*The Sense of an Ending* let common people see themselves and reflect their reflections towards the society, which is the epitome of the modern people’s spiritual state. Through this kind of analysis, the common ones’ helplessness, powerlessness, and life dilemma can be vividly showed to the readers. And it can provide a paradigm for the modern people to explore the meaning of life in this modern world.

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