



The Reconstruction of Truth through Unreliable Voices in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*

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Article ID: CLS-1912-1030

Received: December 22, 2019

Reviewed: February 5, 2020

Accepted: March 7, 2020

Abstract

The present study intends to examine the reconstruction of truth through unreliable narration in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). In the process of seeking a fiction in which the narrator is manipulated by the authorial voice to self-refutation, it finds Barnes' fiction to the purpose. As such, we contend that Barnes resorts to unreliable voices to make his readers suspect the truth of his narrative. In addition to the unreliability of the narrator, the reader is also aware of a cunning voice that is not present in the fiction as the voice commenting on the narrator's words, but as a scheming intelligence distorting the narrator's integral sequence of events. This study wants to argue that such a voice can itself be established within the novel as unreliable. To this end, a narratological analysis will be conducted in two stages. The first will focus on the level of the story, mainly on the position of the narrator, to suggest that the narrator gives us three main reasons to doubt his reliability: his age, dementia, and addiction to alcohol. The second stage is going to concentrate on the level of the text to examine the role of the implied author. It will ultimately show that the implied author is an unreliable voice that further twists the narrator's accounts.

Keywords

Unreliable Narrator; Implied Author; Narration; Voice; Readerly; Writerly

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1. Introduction

Unreliable narration is broadly defined as the narration that triggers doubts about its credibility. Unreliable narration has been developed in the Romantic period when it was employed “as a possibility for dramatizing – in one way or another – deviant or idiosyncratic subjectivity, or as a possibility to explore and question whether and how reality, truth, the past, can be known and reconstructed” (Bode 218). Yet, the first systematic discussion on unreliable narration has long been attributed to Wayne C. Booth. In his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth describes a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (that is to say, the implied author’s norms), and unreliable when he does not (Booth 158-159). To clarify the boundary between the reliability and the unreliability, Booth introduces the concept of the implied author (Bode 207). Booth writes that “in the narrative text there is always – as the embodiment of the norms and value judgments held by the real author – a superior version of himself implicit, i.e. the implied author” (207). The question remains though that if this implied author is defined as the measure of the narrator’s unreliability, how would his own reliability be measured? Sparshott maintains that “authors become unreliable where fictional boundaries are most readily transgressed; so that an extravagance built into the text at once undermines the text itself by intruding the unascertained predilections of the person who wrote it” (160).

The present study intends to examine the reconstruction of truth through unreliable narration in Julian Barnes’ *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). Seeking a fiction in which “the narrator is manipulated by the authorial person to self-refutation” (Sparshott 160), it finds Barnes’ fiction to the purpose. The present study intends to argue that Barnes resorts to unreliable voices to make his readers suspect the truth of his narrative and hence posits “text and reader as two elements in a relationship, a particular association with each other” (Bode 210). The unreliability of the narrator is evident in this novel as it is narrated by an elderly man who is trying to make sense of the past through his distorted memories. Not only does his age give the reader a justifiable reason to doubt his accounts, but also the narrator himself admits the uncertainty of his narration: “This last isn’t something I actually saw, but what you end



up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed" (Barnes 4). In addition to the unreliability of the narrator, the reader is also aware of a scheming voice that is not present in the fiction as the voice commenting on the narrator's words, but at a different level: "as a manipulating intelligence sensed as ventriloquially skewing a narrator's supposedly integral version of events" (162). This study asserts that this cunning voice can itself be established within the book as unreliable. To this end, a narratological analysis will be conducted on Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* in two phases. The first will focus on the level of the story to examine the use of the narrator. The second stage then concentrates on the level of the text to consider the role of the implied author.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Vraisemblance: Readerly or Writerly?

To narrate means to claim something is real but that real, as Christophe Bode observes, is not "a characteristic of some kind of content of a text – but the relative proximity or distance, difference from or congruence with prevalent apprehensions of reality" (46). This is why, as Bode concludes, the English word 'verisimilitude' "denotes the effect intended by the realist narrative better than the German 'Wahrscheinlichkeit' – for in modern usage the latter suggests 'probability' rather than the more appropriate 'having the appearance of the true and real'" (45). In his *S/Z*, Barthes (Zavarzadeh 611), argues that when it comes to 'vraisemblance' all narratives might be divided into two types: 'readerly' or 'writerly'. The readerly is the domain of established and public intelligibility, which generates such traditional forms of fiction as a realistic narrative. The writerly, in contrast, is the grid of sense-making that the reader employs in his encounter with texts that do not yield to the available models of vraisemblance. Barthes maintains that "opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the readerly. We call any readerly text a classic text" (Barthes, 5). Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*, as this essay will show, is a writerly text because of its "self-engendering" and preoccupation "by its own materiality", or to use Saussure's term, "the shape of its signifier" (Zavarzadeh 614). By resorting to unreliable voices for both his narrator and the implied author, Barnes casts "aside the claim that he is creating



something real, a claim which, however, no word, not even his words, can escape” (Adorno 34).

2.2. The Position of the Narrator

An unreliable narrator is defined by Abrams as the “one whose perception, interpretation, and evaluation of the matters he or she narrates do not coincide with the opinions and norms implied by the author, which the author expects the alert reader to share” (276). In his *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), Wayne C. Booth describes “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), and unreliable when he does not” (158-159). Booth writes:

It is true that most of the great reliable narrators indulge in large amounts of incidental irony, and they are thus "unreliable" in the sense of being potentially deceptive. But difficult irony is not sufficient to make a narrator unreliable. Nor is unreliability ordinarily a matter of lying, ... It is most often a matter of what James calls inconstancy; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him. Or, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, the narrator claims to be naturally wicked while the author silently praises his virtues behind his back. (158-9)

Bode names two internal textual motivations for unreliable narration. The first, according to him, is when “the narrator has a reason to tell the story differently from how it really occurred: he distorts it deliberately, whether perhaps to embellish his own role in it, or to expunge himself, etc.; and the reader smells a rat” (213). The other is when “the narrator is mentally incapable of telling his story reliably – for instance, he could be mentally handicapped, unstable, under the influence of drugs, or suffering from memory loss” (213). In *The Sense of an Ending*, we are dealing with a narrator, named Tony Webster, who seems to fit into both categories. Moreover, he does not refrain from admitting the unreliability of his narration: “But school is where it all began, so I need to return briefly to a few incidents that have grown into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty. If I can’t be sure of the actual events any more, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left. That’s the best I can manage” (Barnes 5).



The fact that the narrator opens his accounts with an appeal to the reader's sense of reality subjects the reliability of his narration to doubts. As Bode argues, "unreliable narration needs realism – at least as a foil, but probably as soil too. For only realism can activate the reader's everyday suppositions about reality" (218). Bode also observes that "unreliable narration requires the frame of realism in order to be perceived as unreliable narration at all – and that according to our pragmatic relational interpretation, means in order to be unreliable narration at all" (218). The employment of unreliable narration in a realistic fiction like *The Sense of an Ending* which flashes back to Tony's schooldays seems to be an effective strategy as it offers the readers the possibility to further examine the reconstruction of truth and reality by the knowledge of the past in this story.

3. Text Analysis

3.1. The Voice of the Unreliable Narrator

When the narrator flashes back to his school days, we find ourselves in the company of Tony's three friends; namely, Adrian, Alex, and Colin, who are traumatized by their school-fellow's recent suicide. Adrian, we understand, seems to be the brain of this brotherhood and is held in high esteem by the other three. The conflict of the story begins when Tony falls for a bookish shrewd girl named Veronica whom he breaks up with after a while only to discover she has taken up with his close friend, Adrian. The story reaches its climax when Adrian commits suicide, leaving Tony and his friends in a state of trauma. Now that Tony is lonely and elderly, the memory of his friend's suicide rushes back as he helplessly struggles to make sense of his past. His narration, however, gives us three main reasons to doubt its reliability: his age, dementia (memory distortion), and an addiction to alcohol.

3.1.1. Memory Distortion

The Sense of an Ending is often described as a memory novel because it contains a lot of discussions on the theme of memory: "that memory equals events plus time [...] who was it that said memory is what we thought we'd forgotten?" (Barnes 59). In his 2013 interview, Julian Barnes is asked about the significance of memory in his fiction, to which he answers in the following words:

I wanted to write a book about time and memory, about what time does to memory, how it changes it, and what memory does to time. It's also a book about discovering



at a certain point in your life that some key things that you've always believed were wrong. This is something that I started thinking about a few years ago, and it's probably one of the preoccupations that you have as you age. You have your own memories of life; you've got the story that you tell mainly to yourself about what your life has been. And every so often these certainties are not. Something happens, someone reports something from 20 or 30 years ago, and you realize that what you'd believed is not the case. So I wanted to write about that. (Barnes, 2013)

Examining the role of memory in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*, Kumar argues that the presentation of memory distortion in this novel has destabilized the authenticity of its narration. The narrator Tony, we learn, is an elderly man. That might be one reason to doubt his accounts because even if he does not suffer from Alzheimer's disease, his aging could not have left his memory intact. As it happens, Tony, himself admits the condition of dementia as a consequence of aging in his narration:

When you start forgetting things – I don't mean Alzheimer's, just the predictable consequence of aging – there are different ways to react. You can sit there and try to force your memory into giving up the name of that acquaintance, flower, train station, astronaut ... Or you admit failure and take practical steps with reference books and the internet. Or you can just let it go – forget about remembering – and then sometimes you find that the mislaid fact surfaces an hour or a day later, often in those long waking nights that age imposes. Well, we all learn this, those of us who forget things. (Barnes 105)

Yet, Tony puzzles his readers throughout his narration by first insisting on the fact that his memory could remember truthful events: “But my memory has increasingly become a mechanism which reiterates apparently truthful data with little variation. I stared into the past, I waited, I tried to trick my memory into a different course. But it was no good” (60). Only to contradict himself later by admitting the unreliability of his memory:

At least, that's how I remember it now. Though if you were to put me in a court of law, I doubt I'd stand up to cross-examination very well. 'And yet you claim this memory was suppressed for forty years?' 'Yes.' 'And only surfaced just recently?' 'Yes.' 'Are you able to account for why it surfaced?' 'Not really.' 'Then let me put it to you, Mr. Webster, that this supposed incident is an entire figment of your imagination, constructed to justify some romantic attachment which you appear to have been nurturing towards my client, a presumption which, the court should know, my client finds utterly repugnant.' 'Yes, perhaps. But – 'But what, Mr. Webster?' (113)



The unreliability of the narrator's memory eventually becomes evident for the reader when none of the letters and photos he mentions is available to prove his claims. In other words, the narrator is unable to procure any proof or evidence for the charges he makes against the other characters to acquit himself or those that prove his villainy towards Adrian and Veronica. Tony pretends that he receives a consoling letter from Veronica's mother after breaking up with her daughter: "I wish I'd kept that letter, because it would have been proof, corroboration. Instead, the only evidence comes from my memory – of a carefree, rather dashing woman" (38). Later he purports to have received a letter from Adrian in which the latter informs him of his affair with Veronica, "actually, to be true to my own memory, as far as that's ever possible (and I didn't keep this letter either), what he said was that he and Veronica were already going out together, a state of affairs that would doubtless come to my attention sooner or later" (40). Tony also remembers destroying Adrian's last letter after reading it, "Then I wished him good luck, burnt his letter in an empty grate (melodramatic, I agree, but I plead youth as a mitigating circumstance), and decided that the two of them were now out of my life forever" (42).

3.1.2. Alcohol Abuse

The fact that Tony often narrates after drinking is the second reason to doubt the narrator's accounts:

having arrived at this tentative explanation, I waited until the evening, had my supper, poured an extra glass of wine, and sat down with the envelope [...] The other night, I allowed myself another drink, turned on my computer, and called up the only Veronica in my address book. I suggested we meet again. (Barnes 106)

In addition to his nocturnal consumption, Tony makes frequent diurnal visits to bars. His dates and meetings are often held in bars. In consequence, most of the events he remembers and relates happen to be set in such places:

a few minutes later the three of them joined the two drinkers. The care woman went to the bar and ordered [...] I decided that it was time to order food. My path to the bar would take me close by them [...] I carried on to the bar, put half a buttock on a stool and started examining the menu [...] One day, I said to the barman, "Do you think you could do me thin chips for a change?" (129- 138)

The narrator's addiction to alcohol goes so far as to his alliterating 'Webster' (his last name) with 'Whisky' (a brand of alcohol): "Tony Whisky, I find, helps clarity of thought.



And reduces pain. It has the additional virtue of making you drunk or, if taken in sufficient quantity, very drunk” (91).

3.2. The Voice of the Implied Author

The Sense of an Ending is what Genette (1980) would call ‘homodiegetic narrative’ because its narrator, Tony Webster, “is present as a character in the story he tells” (225). We have already mentioned that Tony is an old lonely man who struggles to come to terms with his traumatic past by remembering his early life events. We also argued that his position might be established as an unreliable narrator because of his age and dementia, and the excessive consumption of alcohol. This part of the study will be exploring the role of the implied author and his unreliable voice.

In his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth coins the term ‘implied author’ to refer to “an ideal, literary, created version of the real man” (Abrams 259). Booth prefers the term ‘implied author’ to ‘the voice’ because, according to him, the former could better indicate that “the reader of a work of fiction has the sense not only of the timbre and tone of a speaking voice but of a total human presence” (259). Booth, as quoted in Abrams, also argues that the implied author is related to the actual one. Yet, the former is part of the fiction that the real one gives life to in the process of his writing. Overall, “the sense of a convincing authorial voice and presence, whose values, beliefs and moral vision serve implicitly as controlling forces throughout a work, helps to sway the reader to yield the imaginative consent” (259). In order “to maintain the integrity of the fictional world”, Booth writes, some critics have warned that all comments from “an authorial voice should always be suppressed in fiction, as in artistic; and some have even held that an author of fiction should always posit a fictional narrator, a first-person singular within the story itself” (Sparshott 147). Apart from “the mistrust that may arise from lack of sympathy with the sort of person the narrator seems to be, ”Booth concludes, “such a narrator may be ‘placed’ as unreliable by the text itself, the narrator's view undercut by the implicit author who as it were winks at us behind the narrator's back” (147).

In his article “The Case of the Unreliable Author”, Sparshott argues that the authorial voice (his preferred term for implied author) makes itself present in a text not only “as a distinctive voice through which a personalized writer is projected for



what is written”; but also “as the writerly intelligence postulated when we accord to a set of marks the status of a written text” (162). Sparshott concludes that while a story is told, a text is presented by someone whose authorial voice is the inherent warrant of its readability (161). In this part of the study, we will attempt to answer two questions concerning the reliability of an authorial voice. Namely, is it possible to talk about the unreliability of an implied author the way we do about the narrator? And how can the question of authorial unreliability arise in fiction in the first place? Sparshott maintains that such questions could arise “precisely because the novel is an impure art form, and not purely fictional” (148). If a novel, he goes on to write, involves a pact between the authorial voice and readerly ear, then the authorial voice can be undercut by what goes on inside the work but outside the fiction, by betraying an ignorance the persons reading will know that the person writing cannot be expecting them to believe in (149). E. D. Hirsch also observes that it could not be simply said that the author's intention is sovereign and leave it at that; nevertheless, since the author's internal thoughts cannot function as founding anything in the text because they are not independently accessible; the locus of meaning, then, is the text (Sparshott 151).

In *The Sense of an Ending*, we are aware of a cunning voice that interrupts the narration in an unorthodox way. We say unorthodox because this voice does not appear in the text as a moralizing deity like the one we encounter in Tolstoy or Dickens. Nor does it sound mocking like that of Thackeray. Rather, it appears as a self-conscious intelligence who tries to establish a lively interaction between his text and his readers without assuming an Olympian tone. From the outset, he engages his readers in the process of meaning-making and truth-reconstruction. To this end, he structures his text – in Genette’s parlance – into extradiegetic (a literary act carried out at a first level) and intradiegetic (the events told in that first narrative) (Genette 228). In other words, we encounter two stories in one fiction, one with Tony as a narrator and the other with Tony as a character:

Annie was part of my story, but not of this story [...] my mother-in-law (who happily is not part of this story) didn’t think much of me but was at least candid about it, as she was about most things [...] and I keep up with a few drinking pals, and have some women friends – platonic, of course (And they’re not part of the story either). (43-46)



Sometimes, he shifts his narrator's position from in diegetic as a hero of *The Sense of an Ending* to extradiegetic level to pose questions on the act of story-telling:

In a novel, Adrian wouldn't just have accepted things as they were put to him. What was the point of having a situation worthy of fiction if the protagonist didn't behave as he would have done in a book? Adrian should have gone snooping, or saved up his pocket money and employed a private detective; perhaps all four of us should have gone off on a Quest to Discover the Truth. Or would that have been less like literature and too much like a kids' story? (16)

He also invites his readers to participate in this process:

Logic: yes, where is logic? Where is it, for instance, in the next moment of my story? [...] you can probably guess that I'm putting off telling you the next bit. All right: Adrian said he was writing to ask my permission to go out with Veronica [...] Yes, I know. I expect you're thinking: The poor sap, how did he not see that coming? But I didn't. (36-40)

Still other times, he asks the readers to reflect on the classical definition and the meaning of literature: "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. That's what Phil Dixon had told us anyway" (15). This emphasis on seeking 'truth' through literature is challenged on the next page when he says that "perhaps all four of us should have gone off on a Quest to Discover the Truth. Or would that have been less like literature and too much like a kids' story?" (16). When Robson and Adrian commit suicide, he sets out to examine the motif of suicide throughout the history of literature:

It had seemed to us philosophically self-evident that suicide was every free person's right: a logical act when faced with terminal illness or senility; a heroic one when faced with torture or the avoidable deaths of others; a glamorous one in the fury of disappointed love (see: Great Literature). (47)

All of these artful strategies, among many others, by the implied author frustrate the readers as they engage in the process of truth-construction and meaning-making and that is why this study posits the unreliability of this authorial voice. *The Sense of an Ending* closes with a shocking denouement we find unbelievable: it is Veronica's mother, and not the daughter, who had an affair with Adrian and who bore him a child. But this ending, as the present study has so far tied to show, is at both levels, the story and the text, subjects to uncertainty. That might be one possible reason why



the novel is titled *The Sense of an Ending*; because the readers are not presented with an ending but they are invited to make sense of an ending.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to demonstrate how Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* raises the question of the unreliable author as "it appears charged with an intensity of judgment that defies a simple reading" (Sparshott 158). To this end, a narratological study was conducted in two stages: the first focused on the level of the story, mainly on the position of the narrator, to suggest that Tony's narration gives us three main reasons to doubt its reliability: his age, his dementia (memory distortion), and his addiction to alcohol. The second analysis was conducted on the level of the text to examine the role of the implied author. It showed that the implied author made itself present as a manipulative intelligence that distorts the narrator's accounts. By structuring his text into two layers of narrative, one within the other, and switching the position of his narrator from the intradiegetic level to the extradiegetic one, Barnes engages his readers in the process of meaning-making and truth-reconstruction. To conclude, Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* is a writerly text *par excellence* in that all the classical strategies of writing novels seem to be first put into questions and then ridiculed. The ending pokes fun at the illusory nature of the truth.



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Suggested Citation



Maleki, Nasser. "The Reconstruction of Truth through Unreliable Voices in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*." *Critical Literary Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2020, pp. 103-114.