

Behind the Veil of Memory: A Psychoanalytic Study of Repression and Rationalization in

Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*

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ABSTRACT

The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes explores the psychology behind human mind, memory, self-deception and the guilt that comes along with deceiving oneself by reconstructing the event through Tony Webster, the central character of the novel. This article aims to examine the work through Freud's concepts of rationalization and repression and demonstrates how one's subconscious mind suppresses events that causes pain by justifying one's actions to preserve their moral image and how it leads to unreliable narration, which reveals the interplay between defense mechanisms and memory. Through close textual analysis using the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, the study reveals how Barnes transforms psychological processes into literary strategies by presenting memory as a contested space where guilt, truth and identity continuously negotiate with one another. It suggests that one can only understand their true self by not letting their subconscious mind suppress the source of their pain and uncomfortable truth and by confronting with the truth. Thus, Barnes presents

psychological defense mechanisms not only as sources that shape one's character but as narrative principles that determine both the meaning and structure of the novel.

Keywords: Repression, Rationalization, Memory, Guilt, Psychology, Unreliable Narrator

Introduction

Julian Barnes has employed repression and rationalization through the character Tony Webster which helps take the story forward and discloses the main incident in the life of Tony which serves as a cause for the tragic death of Adrian Finn, another major character in the novel, whose death played a major theme in the novel and it is revealed to the readers later because of Tony's repression. Being the recipient of the Booker Prize in the year 2011, the novel departs from conventional linear narration by presenting the past through fragmented recollections of the protagonist. One of the striking features of the novel is Barnes' brilliant use of memory as an active process of reconstruction which reveals an incident later in the novel that helps transform the novel as merely a story of remembrance into a profound psychological exploration of self-deception and moral responsibility. This psychological complexity makes this novel suitable for analyses through the lens of Freudian concepts of Repression and Rationalization.

Analysis of the Central Character through Repression

Repression can be defined as an act of suppressing the thoughts, feelings, or memories that are unacceptable so they are unconsciously pushed by our conscious self as an act of defending their act and as a means of protecting themselves from overwhelming or uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. Repression is identified as a psychological defense mechanism by Sigmund Freud, which is true in the case of the protagonist Tony Webster. Freud continued to develop and elaborate on his theory of repression in one of his later works, *Repression* (1915) as, "The essence of

repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance from the conscious” (147).

Tony Webster’s narrative is constantly characterized by ambiguities, doubts and unreliability leaving the readers in confusion and making it hard for them to trust the narrative of Tony Webster and it implicitly suggests the readers that he has repressed some of the events in his life and key aspects of his past life, especially those associated with his relationship with Adrian and Veronica. A critical example of this repression emerges in the novel when Tony has a chance to read the letter he wrote to Adrian, while being jealous of the relationship between them after his breakup with Veronica. Tony cannot remember that he wrote such a letter that condemns them both for entering into a relationship and that degrades the character of Veronica. Tony cannot bring himself to remember how rude he was in the past and how his jealousy has made him a kind of person that his present self cannot remember even after witnessing the letter wrote once through Veronica. This letter, which he has forgotten, is a key example of repressed guilt. When he finally sees it again, he admits: “I looked at the letter and the letter looked at me. I tried to remind myself of what I had been feeling when I wrote it – but it was no good” (116). His repressed desires slowly pave way to disclose the mystery behind Adrian’s death.

Analysis of the Central Character through Rationalization

Freud’s psychoanalytic theory identifies rationalization as one of the ego’s defence mechanisms through which individuals unconsciously provide logical and socially acceptable explanations for actions that are motivated by guilt. The human mind constructs the truth with events that preserves a positive self-image avoiding being held accountable for their mistakes. The central character Tony, repressing certain events in his life has directly contributed to justify the theory of repression in his own words in the novel,

But time. . . how time first grounds us and then confounds us. 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. . . gives us enough time and our best-supported decisions will seem wobbly, our certainties whimsical” (Barnes 93)

After being confronted by Veronica with the letter he had written earlier, he is filled with guilt and regret and at the same time he is unable to accept the fact that he is the one who wrote the letter. Tony is portrayed as a complex character who struggles with repression that he even finds it difficult to acknowledge himself as the author of the letter even after giving it a thorough read. Tony’s repression is considered a coping mechanism that allows him to avoid confronting painful truths and uncomfortable realities. However, this repression also leads to a lack of self- awareness and understanding of his own emotions and motivations. His life experiences also serve as a reminder that no matter how one has the capacity to repress their uncomfortable situations or emotions, life always finds a way to bring it back to you in the most unexpected way and makes one feel remorse, guilt or any emotions that one has repressed to save himself in the long run as Tony feels in the novel, “It wasn’t shame I now felt, or guilt, but something rarer in my life and stronger than both: remorse. A feeling which is more complicated, curdled and primeval. Whose chief characteristic is that nothing can be done about it: too much time has passed, too much damage has been done, for amends to be made.” (99)

Interplay of the Two Defense Mechanisms

According to the Freudian Theory, repression is the act of exclusion of memories or events in our life that is distressing from consciousness awareness. Through the lens of this theory of repression Tony’s fragmented narrative through his memory of the past can also be viewed as a deliberate act of self- protective distortion and not as merely forgetfulness. This is also evident through the words of the unreliable narrator Tony in the novel who admits that, “What you end up remembering isn’t always the same as what you have witnessed” (03), which also signals the discrepancy between actual events and what is only remembered in his memory.

The above-mentioned quotation by Tony acts as a clear evident that Barnes has effectively portrayed the character through the theory of rationalization as it not only acts as a reflection on the unreliability of memory but a pre-emptive rationalization, excusing any inconsistencies or omissions in his account. He positions memory itself as malleable, not only to absolve himself, but to justify the selective truth he is about to present which clearly presents him as a person who engages in rationalization to justify his doings. Rationalization is a Freudian theory that in his definition, is a defensive mechanism where individuals unconsciously create seemingly logical explanations to justify one's feelings, behaviors, or impulses that are unacceptable, thus avoiding confronting the real or underlying causes. Although Freud did not use the term as explicitly or frequently as some of his followers, the fame of laying the groundwork for the concept through his analysis of the ego's defense mechanisms. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud notes: "The task of the ego is to find a balance between primitive drives, morals, and reality. . . The ego employs defense mechanisms to avoid anxiety and among them it often distorts or disguises reality" (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 30). The definition of rationalization in the words of psychoanalytic theorist Anna Freud, one Sigmund Freud's followers defined rationalization directly: "Rationalization is the process by which the ego constructs a logical justification for an action that was actually driven by unconscious impulses." (A. Freud 35). Sigmund Freud gives his theory in relation to self- deception and moral accounting, which is the consequence of engaging in rationalization. Freud states: "When the ego finds itself in conflict with the super-ego, it may give itself moral alibis, reshaping its memories or decisions in order to maintain the illusion of integrity" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 96).

These ideas constitute a major role in analyzing Tony Webster's psyche, as his narration is steeped in self-exonerating logic that unravels under the weight of suppressed memory and moral reckoning. As a narrator himself, Tony takes the responsibility of how he wants to be projected to the readers by telling us a curated narrative, as part of his psychological defense. He says, "I remember, in no particular order: a shiny inner wrist; steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly

tossed into it; gouts of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house" (1). These lines signal the unreliability as a narrator.

Over time, it becomes evident that Tony's narration is not the actual truth of what had happened, but rather a constructed truth to ease his conscience and to rationalize his past behavior. Even after being confronted with the vile letter he had written to his friend during his college days, his subconscious mind does not allow him to take responsibility. Upon being confronted with the full content of the letter, Tony says, "I was young. I did not know what I was doing. I thought I was being clever." (143). These words by Tony reflects that he had completely forgotten about a part of himself and now blames it on youth, ignorance and naivety. He is quick to rationalize his behavior but to take responsibility for his own actions. Tony initially rationalizes his role, "Yes, it had been a mean letter. Yes, I had been a stupid and angry young man. But I hadn't caused Adrian's suicide, had I?" (104). These words by Tony mark pure Freudian rationalization. He fails to acknowledge his own writing and character and quickly comes with an excuse to rationalize his behavior to free himself of the guilt. This is explained by Freud as a way of shielding oneself from anxiety.

In doing so, Tony saves himself from the ethical consequences of his own actions. Truth does not shape his memory, rather the urge to preserve his moral image he had constructed over the years shapes the events which results in unreliable narration. Barnes has skillfully used these psychological defense mechanisms as a way of narration, as the truth is not only shocking to the central character but also to the readers as Tony with his unreliability and repression presents himself as a passive victim until being confronted with the truth. He avoids confronting the emotional intensity and ethical consequences of his actions. This passivity is part of a rationalizing schema. He says: "I just didn't get it. But then, I've always been one of life's bystanders" (150).

The journey of Tony and the narration about himself reflects what the psychoanalyst D.W Winnicott calls "the false self" (143), a defense structure one builds to safeguard them from the consequences of one's own immoral actions. His rationalisations and the conceived image of himself

begin to collapse when the raw truth about himself is revealed. The recognition that the self he believed in is constructed around mechanisms of forgetting and excuse-making retains his image of being a morally acceptable one. Freud emphasizes that rationalization often leads to a moral alibi: “Man's moral alibis are among the most cunning disguises of guilt—he replaces unbearable truth with a tolerable fiction.” (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures* 97).

The power of Barnes's novel lies in the slow dismantling of Tony's rationalizations. When he finally rereads the letter he had written decades earlier—a letter far more malicious than he had recalled—it becomes clear that his mind has censored and revised the memory. He admits: “I looked at the letter and the letter looked at me. I tried to remind myself of what I had been feeling when I wrote it—but it was no good” (116).

This moment is what Freud called the ‘return of the repressed,’ when the previously denied truth resurfaces with the truth that he cannot justify or rationalize anymore. He finds it hard to accept and acknowledge the fact that he is the one responsible for Adrian's death as he suggests him to meet with Veronica's mother thinking that she will make them breakup. It does not go as planned and results in the death of Adrian, which is hard for him to accept. Previously denied material resurfaces, often with destabilizing force. Tony's reaction is a mixture of confusion and denial. He narrates: “I couldn't believe I'd written that. It did not sound like me. But it was me.” (151). His failure to remember the letter is both a repression of a traumatic memory and a foundation for rationalizing his innocence.

Conclusion

The Sense of an Ending offers a profound exploration of the human psyche through the psychoanalytic concepts of repression and rationalization. As Tony reflects toward the end, “You get towards the end of life—no, not life itself, but of something else: the end of any likelihood of change. When you realize that most of the damage you did was because you were too passive.” (Barnes 161).

Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* offers a powerful study of rationalization as a psychoanalytic defense mechanism, illustrating how individuals construct narratives to protect

themselves from guilt, shame, and anxiety. As Barnes skillfully demonstrates, these defenses are ultimately fragile. When confronted with repressed memories and the failure of justification, the illusion of control collapses. Through this lens, Barnes's novel becomes a profound study not only of individual psychology, but of the unreliable nature of memory and the stories we tell ourselves.

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