

Law, History, and Literature as Narrative in *The Sense of an Ending*

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**ABSTRACT:** This thesis explores how Tony Webster constructs personal narrative in *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes. Using the work of Hayden White, J. Christopher Rideout, and Frank Kermode as a critical foundation, the paper discusses the intersection of legal, literary, and historical lenses for viewing narration. Of particular interest is “the fantasy space of the trial,” a term introduced in this paper that applies to situations in which literary characters imagine themselves in hypothetical courtroom spaces. Barnes’ novel also uses correspondence (letters, notes, and e-mails) to create a convergence point for legal, historical, and literary narrative. Law, history, and literature are all constructs receiving social support that provide a method for ordering the difficulties and uncertainties of the human experience.



Law, History, and Literature as Narrative in *The Sense of an Ending*

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“What was memory after all, but the recording of a number of possibilities which had never been fulfilled?” (91)

D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*

Chapter 1: Prologue

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes explores the tension between narrative conventions that people use when they try to tell stories. His protagonist Tony Webster struggles to reconstruct the narrative that leads up to his childhood friend Adrian’s suicide and Tony’s eventual role as the legal inheritor of Adrian’s diary. The novel is a case study of the unreliable narrator, whose self-awareness leads him to announce the limitations of his own credibility.<sup>1</sup> Tony isn’t naïve enough to believe in perfect memory: near the midpoint of the book he reflects, “We live with such easy assumptions, don’t we? For instance, that memory equals events plus time. But it’s all much odder than this. Who was it said that memory is what we thought we’d forgotten?” (69). Recognizing the “oddities” of the past and abandoning faith in pure memory, Tony uses three constructs to provide a frame in which he can reconstitute the story of him and his childhood friend Adrian. The most prominent of these structures is the law. Tony’s interest in framing the past legally leads him to seek what he calls “corroboration” from the statements of others who were involved in the story, as well as from various forms of correspondence—notes, letters, and emails. Tony sees the process of decoding the past as a sort of legal case, but he also

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<sup>1</sup> See *Flaubert’s Parrot*: “When a contemporary narrator hesitates, claims uncertainty, misunderstands, plays games and falls into error, does the reader in fact conclude that reality is being more authentically rendered?” (89).



sees it in terms of historical and literary narratives. Collectively, these constructs give Tony access to pre-established strategies for making what he hopes to be a truthful narrative.

### **Diachronic and Synchronic Narratives**

Hayden White's work on historiography and fiction frames an understanding of how "narrative" functions in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*. In "The Structure of Historical Narrative," White outlines the functional difference between stories with defined endings versus stories whose endings remain uncertain. In stories with clear-cut endings, White argues, the role of argumentation, themes, and structure is reduced (114). These complete stories provide a comprehensible sequence to understand how a character or group of characters advances through time from point A to point B (114). They show a finished plot without proposing a general pattern or structure for all human behavior. On the other hand, stories lacking definitive endpoints propose one or more possible outcomes in the future. To accomplish this, they must rely upon a structural theory for patterns of human behavior. Argumentation assumes a logical outcome for the future based on what is already known. White classifies open stories as "synchronic," in that they propose a stable theory about human nature or history that should tell readers how things will turn out later (115). They share a common structure with similar stories that happen again and again throughout history. These synchronic, or "open" stories place more importance on theme. In White's lexicon, a diachronic story clearly has motifs and patterns, but the reader can ignore these themes and still derive enjoyment simply by following the plot of the story. White refers to diachronic stories as "processionary" and synchronic stories as "structuralist" (118). The diachronic story arranges events in a procession through time that leads

to an already confirmed ending. Synchronic stories take place in the middle of things and set down a structure of patterns and arguments that can point toward a logical future outcome.

*The Sense of an Ending*'s Tony Webster is caught in the tension between these two different narrative modes: he tries to establish specific incidents in his life as matters of fact, a storytelling mode that is concerned more with plot than argument. However, he also wants to make a structural argument about generalized themes in life which might also structure the stories of others. For White, these two storytelling modes achieve two different effects, namely to answer two questions. Plot-based diachronic storytelling answers the question "what happened," while structure-oriented synchronic storytelling answers the question "what's the point?" (115). Tony strives to answer both questions, as is made clear near the end of the novel when Veronica accuses him of missing the point: "You just don't get it, do you? You never did, and you never will." (138). "What's the point?" is less concerned with a finished story because the "point" can be extracted from the underlying structure: Veronica doesn't accuse Tony of missing the point only this one time. The failure to "get it" is an underlying structural aspect of Tony Webster's whole life.

Hayden White avoids a simple dichotomy between processional and structural narratives by adding a third type. The "impressionistic" narrative provides a set of "data" that is not organized around a sequential plot, nor does it correspond to a known theoretical structure (118). The opening page of *The Sense of an Ending* displays this type of tendency: Tony "remembers, in no particular order" a group of images from his past (3). It is an impressionistic list of visual data, ironically "ordered" by the bulleted list format presented in the book. Tony's emphasis, though, is that he does not recall these images diachronically. The first stage of his narrative process is impressionistic: he recalls a swirl of memories that have been disconnected

from the original linear sequence. Before launching into the narrative, Tony states “if I can’t be sure of the actual events anymore, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left” (4). He is quite aware that many of his memories are more like an echo or a residue than a permanent record.

Since there are some things Tony can’t remember, he tries to arrange what he *can* remember diachronically, so he can fill in the blanks. This sequencing helps answer the “what happened?” question that White claims is the driving force behind a closed plot. As we see throughout the novel, Tony can’t help but extrapolate general patterns and structures from his experience—feelings and sensations that might be experienced by anyone at some point in time. Tony, himself, uses all three narrative modes described by Hayden White, and each has its own goal. What must be determined is what effect or purpose each narrative mode has on the reader.

Tony’s desire to string images and incidents into a linear plot represents the processional, or diachronic mode of constructing narrative. When he finds a memory that he can trust, he anchors it as a defined plot point in the story’s sequence. At the beginning of the novel, Tony thinks,

I’m not very interested in my schooldays, and I don’t feel any nostalgia for them. But school is where it all began, so I need to return briefly to a few incidents that have turned into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty.  
(4)

This is Tony’s announcement that the narrative is about to begin. Up to this point, the reader has seen only a bullet list of six remembered images,<sup>2</sup> followed by Tony’s statement that time “holds us and moulds us,” but no narration of actual events (3). The terms “hold” and “mould”

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<sup>2</sup> See the opening page of the novel. Tony remembers an inner wrist, a steaming sink, semen in a shower drain, two rivers, and a tub full of cold bathwater. All of the images are related to fluids and flows, possibly suggesting the flow of time.

suggest a container or a closed, diachronic procession. Although time goes on, it holds the individual's life within a defined set of temporal parameters. On the other hand, the metaphor of the "mould" suggests a structural pattern for how time affects *everyone*. With this paradox, the reader can use the entire novel to explore of the tensions between White's processional, structural, and impressionistic narrative theories.

Tony's expression "where it all began" suggests that his story has a definite beginning, even though the referent of "it" is unclear. Where did *what* all begin? Although the reader doesn't know what *it* is, Tony has established tension and promised drama. The reader assumes that Tony is about to tell the story of something important. With the phrase "where it all began," Tony sets a defined point of origin for the story. From this origin, he will search for plot points that he hopes will lead him, like a trail of breadcrumbs, to a "sense" of an ending. However, Tony's use of the common expression "where it all began" points to something more structural. Even the best efforts to narrate in the processional manner can result in detours to the structural mode. Barnes' novel shows that it is often quite difficult to draw a hard line between these two narrative approaches.

Tony is aware of the tension between these storytelling modes and the paradoxes they contain. He makes special note of how "incidents [can turn] into anecdotes" (4).<sup>3</sup> The idea of "incident" appears more like a defined plot point, something objective and closed-off that already happened and fits into White's processional model of narrative. On the other hand, the choice of the term "anecdote" suggests a memorable event that can teach a lesson or make a general argument about the human condition. While an incident is a more trivial plot point describing something that happened, an anecdote is infused with meaning. The term "anecdote"

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<sup>3</sup> See p. 58 in *The Sense of an Ending* for a similar transformation. Colin, Alex, and Tony have a reunion in which they talk about Old Joe Hunt's and Phil Dixon's history classes. Tony notes, "We were already turning our past into anecdote."

fits into White's structural, or synchronic, model of narration. Although an anecdote reflects a plot point, it is more significant in its pursuit of meaning and an answer to the question "what's the point?"

Tony reverses the incident/anecdote transformation by (re)naming the opposite transformation from "approximate memory" to "certainty" (4). In this case, an "approximate memory" might be reinforced in one's mind by a general theory or structural argument for what "probably happened," fitting into the synchronic mode. When time "deforms" this approximate memory into a "certainty," we again have a solid point in time that fits into a diachronic plot. This reversal indicates that Tony's method of reconstructing narrative will be complicated. Not only does the processional become more theoretical and turn to structural, but also the opposite happens, too.

Tony likes to make thematic generalizations about youth, old age, and women, among other topics. Barnes often offsets these in paragraphs separated by an extra line break, making these aphoristic nuggets stand out visually on the page. For example, "... it strikes me that this may be one of the differences between youth and age: when we are young, we invent different futures for ourselves; when we are old, we invent different pasts for others" (88). The novel contains several of these short paragraphs that interrupt the narrative flow to offer what have come to be axioms for Tony. Certainly, not every youth invents futures for himself, nor does every adult invent new pasts for others. Nevertheless, Tony takes small observations about what has happened to him personally and converts them into general theories about humanity. He takes moments from the procession of his personal narrative and places them into an underlying structure that would be recognizable to nearly anyone.

Another example of the tension between diachronic and synchronic appears in one of Tony's classroom memories. Old Joe Hunt's history class discusses the "origin" of the First World War, creating a diachronic story that has a defined beginning by virtue of the term "origin" (11). The class talks about the typically accepted origin point of the war, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, arriving at the idea of a "chain of individual responsibilities" that followed this historical moment (11, 13). The image of the "chain" signifies a procession, fitting nicely into White's diachronic narrative model. The emphasis on distinct actions of individuals implies plot points (certainties) rather than structural arguments about human behavior. Metaphoric relationships, however, can point to generalities. This is why the concept of a "chain of responsibilities" is paradoxically both diachronic and synchronic. The actual image provided by the metaphor points toward a plotted sequence, but the fact that it's a metaphor in the first place indicates something more structural or theoretical. Once again, the distinction blurs between diachronic and synchronic.

Young Adrian Finn also sees the unstable and shifting nature of narrative modes. Joe Hunt calls on Adrian for his perspective on the origin of WWI, to which Adrian asks, "Isn't the whole business of ascribing responsibility a kind of cop-out?" (13). For the rest of the novel, the reader must wonder if the pursuit of definite origins is actually an evasion, a way of ignoring whatever occurred before the origin point. Adrian follows with: "We want to blame an individual so everyone else is exculpated. Or we blame a historical process as a way of exonerating individuals" (13). Blaming the individual fits the paradigm of the diachronic, processional narrative. The assignment of blame answers the question of "what happened," or more specifically "who did it?" It assumes a confirmed event or plot point that is sealed within its position in the march of history. On the other hand, blaming a historical process is a structural,

synchronic move. This type of blame takes up the idea that “history repeats itself” according to a known structure. The historical process point of view allows us to create theories and subsequently arguments about patterns human behavior.

However, Tony’s classmates evoke White’s third narrative mode, the impressionistic narrative, despite the fact that “back then, we were most of us absolutists. We liked Yes vs. No, Praise vs. Blame, Guilt vs. Innocence” (11). Although Tony’s friends typically deal in dichotomies, the history classroom points out that some distinctions might be irreducible to simple binaries. Adrian supposes that there could be no blame at all, neither on individuals nor processes, but that “it’s all anarchic chaos, with the same consequence” (13). The chaos view aligns best with the impressionistic narrative concept, organized neither by diachronic plot nor synchronic structure. Tony’s friend Colin shares the chaos view, claiming that “everything was down to chance, that the world existed in a state of perpetual chaos, and only some primitive storytelling instinct, itself doubtless a hangover from religion, retroactively imposed meaning on what might or might not have happened” (12). As a result, Colin argues for impressionistic narrative that humans forcibly organize. Colin’s view of forced organization bears traces of both the processional and structural views: the act of “imposing meaning” is structural, answering “what’s the point?” On the other hand, “what might or might not have happened” is a question of plot. Colin proposes religion as the origin for the human need to make narratives. While Tony never mentions religion in the novel, his fanaticism in hunting down memories and corroboration borders on the religious.

It appears that Tony uses all three of White’s types of narration in a meta-diachronic way: he first recalls impressions, which are reconstructed into a plot, which is subsequently interpreted to find structures that make an argument about the nature of humanity and memory. Tony uses

all three of these means of narration, but his actual *process* of reconstructing the past relies on a linear arrangement of these narrative types. However, his process is recursive: he doesn't simply recall every possible impression and then sequence them all at once. He repeats the process time and time again. New impressions are always unearthed while he plots and structures past experience. This lends a layer of meta-impressionistic narrative to the whole process because there is always an out-of-order, nonstructural aspect present.

### **Narrative Rationality**

White's theories illuminate a general idea of how Tony researches and narrates his past, but they don't form a complete picture. In Tony's experience, the broad term "narrative" includes at least three important subcategories: legal, historical, and literary. The synchronic/diachronic/impressionistic distinction is useful for thinking about narrative in a temporal sense. Law, history, and literature provide a vocabulary for situating social and political factors within time. Thinking about these societal narrative frames adds richness and lends purpose to the questions "what happened?" and "what's the point?"

In "Storytelling, Narrative Rationality, and Legal Persuasion," J. Christopher Rideout outlines some aspects of legal narratives. Using terminology similar to White's, Rideout agrees that the function of structural narrative is to persuade an audience, in this case a jury (56). Rideout argues that people understand structural narratives "innately," thereby making them more persuasive due to their apparent naturalness (55). This coincides with White's claim that a structural narrative makes general arguments about how people behave and the typical way that life unfolds. To explain why people are persuaded by structurally-oriented narratives, Rideout uses the term "narrative rationality," which he subdivides into the categories of "narrative



probability” and “narrative fidelity”<sup>4</sup> (63). Rideout states that probability is “formal,” while fidelity is “substantive” (55). In other words, narrative probability is a measure of what will most likely happen based on a known form or structure. Fidelity, on the other hand, is tied to the real evidence and material substance of what happened.

Of course, Tony uses both narrative probability and fidelity to reconstruct his past. His need for “corroboration” in the form of letters, e-mails, diaries, and personal testimonies from others falls under the category of narrative fidelity—these items are supposedly more “true” to the past than memory can ever be. For example, after the break-up with Veronica, Tony receives a letter from her mother. Tony realizes “I wish I’d kept that letter, because it would have been corroboration. Instead, the only evidence comes from my memory—of a carefree, rather dashing woman who broke an egg, cooked me another, and told me not to take any shit from her daughter” (43). Many of Tony’s memories are fragmentary, impressionistic images that he tries to string together into a diachronic narrative. He remembers some details—an egg here, an offhand statement there—but the picture is far from complete. Tony values corroborative material objects because they provide a definite sense of what happened. In other words, they can help establish plot points that help him to convince himself he has achieved a high level of narrative fidelity.

In another instance, Tony speaks with his ex-wife Margaret about Adrian’s diary. Tony has learned that the diary has been left to him, but Veronica chooses to withhold it. Without even knowing what could be in the diary, Tony knows why it is so important to obtain it: “the diary was evidence; it was—it might be—corroboration. It might disrupt the banal reiterations of memory. It might jump-start something—though I had no idea what” (85). Once again, Tony

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<sup>4</sup> Rideout borrows these terms from Walter Fisher’s *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

views a piece of writing as “corroboration.” It is worth noting that neither the diary nor the letter would help Tony confirm anything that he “witnessed” in the past. He would use each document to view the same shared past through the eyes of one of the other participants. Both objects would, nonetheless, assist Tony by adding new memories to the timeline of events that he reconstructs throughout the novel. By examining the story through multiple perspectives, Tony can enhance narrative fidelity by seeing overlaps between different points of view and seeing how the writing and correspondence confirms or denies what he already believes about the story.

If we assume that narrative fidelity aligns with processional narratives, or “what (actually) happened,” there might be some clue as to why Tony often falls back on a legal frame of reference for his experiences. The purpose of the court system is to determine what happened, who is guilty or responsible, and then close the case, effectively ending the narrative. The term “closed case” appears several times throughout *The Sense of an Ending*, but it is first used during a reunion between the original three school chums. One year after Adrian’s suicide, Tony meets Colin and Alex for drinks at a hotel. As they leave, Tony notices that

The shared memory of Adrian was not enough to hold us together. Perhaps the lack of mystery around his death meant that his case was more easily closed. We would remember him all our lives, of course. But his death was exemplary rather than “tragic”—as the Cambridge newspaper had routinely insisted—and so he retreated from us rather quickly, slotted into time and history. (58)

Several terms in this passage show the spirit of the diachronic narrative. The “absence of mystery” shows that the “what happened?” question has been at least partially answered. Tony notes that this lack of mystery leads to a “closed case,” reinforcing the feeling of a finished story with a known outcome. In response to the newspaper’s claims, Tony rejects the notion of a

“tragic” death, which be clichéd and therefore structural. It would take its place within the pattern of all deaths called tragic throughout all time. Instead, Adrian’s case is “exemplary,” representing an individual, idiosyncratic plot point. The fact that the newspaper “routinely insist[s]” also shows a structure because the paper takes this action more than once. However, Tony denies the structure. Moreover, Adrian’s death is “slotted into time and history” taking its place as a confirmed sequence of plot points along a chronological procession. Tony sees Adrian’s story as a “case.” Much of the terminology in the passage above aligns with the view that a legal narrative is “something that happened.” One role of the court is to define a beginning, middle, and end for the narrative. At this moment Tony doesn’t want to see Adrian’s death as part of a pattern, but as a unique moment appropriate to Adrian’s individuality.

Sometimes, corroboration is simply not available and the gaps must be filled in with assumptions based on narrative probability. When Tony “remembers” the image of “bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door,” he confesses that this is something he has remembered but not necessarily witnessed (3). This “memory” is a creation of narrative probability. In this instance Tony “sees” an established structure, or stock image for what a bathtub suicide would most likely look like. The idea of “probability” might be contested in that it implies a universality or almost unrealistic uniform quality to human experience. Rideout is aware of this problem, and he approaches it by addressing the debate over whether narrative is psychologically innate or something that is a social construct and a product of language.

Since Tony frames his narratives in terms of the social constructs of history, law, and literature, it will be useful to view *The Sense of an Ending* with the “exogenous” view that defines narrative as socially constructed and externally supported (Rideout 58). Rideout avoids taking a side on whether narratives come from within or without, but he offers the following to

explain the latter view: narratives might be “almost universal perhaps as a consequence of the fact that humans experience social reality temporally or of the fact that the human life cycle itself contains the elements of a narrative structure—a beginning, middle, and end, to which we assign meaning” (58). Although we may all live different “social realities” which lack a sense of universality, the unifying force that creates the need for narrative is the experience of time passing. Frank Kermode echoes this idea with the assertion that “at some very low level, we all share certain fictions about time, and they testify to the continuity of what is called human nature, however conscious some, as against others, may become of the fictive qualities of these fictions” (44). So, the sense of universality implied by “narrative probability” can be partly explained by the fictions and narratives that we all must hold to some extent as a result of Time.

Rideout notes that Walter Fisher uses the terms “narrative probability” and “coherence” almost interchangeably. Although he accepts the synonym, Rideout claims that “coherence” is too general and must be broken down into the attributes of “consistency” and “completeness” (64). Consistency refers to how well the elements of a story seem to fit together—in Tony’s case, do all of his memories and evidence actually seem like part of the same story? Rideout also asserts that the elements of the tale, of course, can’t contradict each other (65). As Tony pieces together the past, he encounters competing evidence and must select the information that doesn’t contradict the story he has built up so far. Rideout provides an intuitive definition of a “complete” story—one that “contains all of its expected parts” (65). Given the title of Barnes’ book, it seems that Tony is searching for an ending, which would presuppose a beginning and middle as the “expected parts.” Tony’s legal, literary, and historical frameworks for seeing the world also supply their own categories of “expected parts” if Tony is to tell a complete story in any of those frames. Rideout sees consistency and coherence in terms of rhetoric and persuasion,

stating that a consistent and complete story is easier for an audience or jury to accept. Using Rideout's lens that he borrows from Fisher, any audience of *The Sense of an Ending* should ask if Tony's story is consistent and complete, and whether or not the answer has any impact on how convincing the story is. Furthermore, what is Tony's story trying to convince us of in the first place?

In his discussion of narrative probability, Rideout also talks about how well a given narrative "corresponds" to a "stock stories" that are based upon "cultural archetypes" (67-68). Since they are archetypal, stock stories can be seen as structural, making them correspond with White's synchronic or argumentative narrative. A stock (structural) story makes an argument for "what 'could' happen, what 'typically' happens, not to what actually happened" (Rideout 67). Stock stories remain in the realm of the probable rather than the actual. Tony might use models of history or literature that he learned in school as stock patterns for the way he remembers his life. As a schoolchild, he and his friends indeed have grandiose aspirations to live historical or literary lives, to fit the stock story of a literary figure or historical hero. In giving a historical or literary framework to his own life, it seems that Tony to some extent would be escaping the material realities of what really happened. Rideout notes that "stock stories contain standard models for human action but also allow generalizations about the meaning of those actions" (68).

Although Rideout tests his terminology on actual court cases, his general principles are still applicable to fiction. Other scholars examine more directly the relationship between legal systems and literary fiction. In *Law and Literature*, Ian Ward draws from Richard Weisberg's analysis of *The Stranger* to understand a potential function of legal situations represented in literature. Ward notes how Weisberg's work proposes that the "intensity" of a courtroom scene, for example, "furnishes a particular powerful parable that can be used to describe the human

condition” (143). A legal story written with sparse dramatic detail, Ward argues, invites the reader to fill in details on his or her own. This type of participatory reader experience not only draws the reader in as a “juror” for the events of the story, but also allows the reader to become a part of the events by filling in “more and more of him - or herself to the story,” thereby experiencing the intensity of the human condition alongside the character in question (143). In this view, the reader becomes both the juror and the defendant, allowing for a deeper sympathy with the character and enabling for the reader a deeper examination of the self.

*The Sense of an Ending* fits this paradigm—it is sparse, intense, and leaves many holes that lead to “what ifs.” I later argue that Tony Webster puts himself on imaginary trial during several critical moments in the novel. As the action of the trial unfolds inside his head, Tony plays the dual role of both jury and defendant. The reader participates in this same paradox as he or she accompanies Tony through the detective game of viewing evidence and corroboration. We get to see the same letters and emails that Tony does and draw our own conclusions. Lacking a full account of the evidence, the reader, as Ward proposes, must “add more of himself to the story,” resulting in the reader’s own feelings of “guilt and despair” which give way to a sense of responsibility (143). The assignment of responsibility weighs heavily on Tony’s mind as he traces the events that lead to Adrian’s suicide. The “chain of individual responsibility” that Adrian associates with the history-writing process is equally at home in the courtroom.

### **Kermode’s Literature and Historiography**

Like Hayden White, Frank Kermode analyzes the narrative crossroads between literature and historiography. Kermode’s work comes in to play when we think about Tony Webster’s fixation on literary fiction. Tony sees an idealized version of human experience that would have

attributes similar to a protagonist in literary fiction. Tony's theory of what literature is must be unearthed because one of the ways he constructs his own personal narrative is on literary grounds. On literary fictions, Kermode claims:

Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. (39)

Rather than seeing literature as fiction, Tony fits it into the category of myth. Often when the reader sees the word "Literature" through Tony's point of view, it begins with a capital letter (16). This stylistic detail gives the sense that literature is stable, absolute. It is an institution. Tony's view on the stability of literature is revealed by his claim that "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" (16). Tony's belief in a "real literature" limits what literature can and can't be, thereby turning it into stable myth rather than changing fiction. Even his insistence upon a "character developed over time" is a myth that absolutely denies the possibility of a character that fails to change over time. Tony provides a list of appropriate topics<sup>5</sup> for literature, all of which he classifies as "real, true, important things" (16). His thoughts are colored by a narrow view of what is possible in literature. Tony sees novels as objects constructed according to a set of formulae that guarantee their status as "real literature." This is supported by Kermode's claim that "Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were" (39). The construction of literature is ritualistic for Tony. His interest in the thought of "Life like

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<sup>5</sup> These topics are "love, sex, morality, friendship, happiness, suffering, betrayal, adultery, good and evil, heroes and villains, guilt and innocence, ambition, power, justice, revolution, war, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, the individual against society, success and failure, murder, suicide, death, God. And barn owls" (16).

Literature” (16) suggests we should make note of any ritualistic behaviors that Tony exhibits during the construction of his own narrative.

Kermode also claims that “Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time [...] fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now” (39). In Tony’s case, it seems that these two temporal zones can’t exist in a separated state. Part of his project involves making sense of the past in order to provide a clearer picture of the present state of things. Within the first pages of the novel, it is clear that Kermode would call Tony’s “lost order of time” unstable. Although there appears to be an unchanging mythological backdrop of the past that Tony believes in to a degree, the stability of memory is constantly shaken as new information comes to light. Just as diachronic and synchronic narration merge and overlap, so do myth and fiction. The conflict between different storytelling modes always applies tension and pressure to Tony’s ability to construct narrative. Often, the theoretical lines drawn between different narrative approaches become blurred or forgotten.

Tony’s hope to see his life in novelistic terms might stem from what Kermode calls “the tension or dissonance between paradigmatic form and contingent reality” (128). Tony’s reality is messy, uncertain, and filled with gaps and missing pieces. The freedom to choose how to go about making sense of things can be a source of endless anxiety as one chooses which evidence to accept, whose account to listen to, and how to put the pieces of a life story together into a meaningful whole. Kermode reminds us of the obvious point that literature diverges from reality because this freedom is missing: “... in the novel, there can be no just representation of this, for if the man were entirely free he might simply walk out of the story” (138). Since Tony tends to view literature as stable and mythological, the feeling of leading a novelistic life would entail a strangely comforting limitation on personal choices. Tony could simply act how his ideal



protagonist would act. A life trajectory fitted to the framework of what *should* happen in a novel would be less vulnerable to what Kermode calls “contingent reality.” A paradigmatic and structured existence could help to eliminate the anxiety caused by daily contingencies.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes proposes that one of the main functions of myth is to “transform history into Nature” (116). By applying the language of myth to an event, the historical event appears natural and unavoidable. Barthes claims that in doing so, we allow ourselves to “rationalize” what has happened (117). This is part of Tony Webster’s project. He aims to rationalize what has happened as he makes sense of the tangled web of the past. Tony wants to arrange the past into a reasonable sequence that a sensible person could accept. When one considers Tony’s interest in living a literary life alongside Barthes’ assertion that “Literature is a mythical system,” it becomes evident that Tony hopes to mythologize his past—that is to say, take his own personal history and make it seem naturally and unavoidably literary (Barthes 122).

According to Barthes, one quality of literature is that it is “at the very start mythified (therefore made innocent) by its being fiction” (133). This partially explains the youthful interest of Tony and his friends in leading literary lives (or at least Tony remembering himself thinking that way): youth is associated with innocence. *The Sense of an Ending* could be a coming-of-age story after all, one whose protagonist reflects on the period of his life when innocence is lost on many fronts. By mythologizing his personal history, Tony makes the events appear “natural” while preserving their innocence at the same time. Despite the filter of innocence, however, Tony’s narrative project carries with it substantial risk if we continue to view it in Barthesian terms. Barthes warns that “the mythologist is condemned to live in a theoretical sociality” and that “his connection with the world is of the order of sarcasm” (147). By turning history into

literature and subsequently into myth, Tony builds a layer between himself and reality. Even in the most strictly literal sense, the reader notices how isolated Tony becomes in his single-minded mission to determine what happened. In Barthian terms, Tony's actions represent the "poetization" of reality that occurs when one turns history into an "impenetrable" mythology (149).

For Tony, literature supplies a sense of security and certainty about how life's questions and problems are supposed to resolve themselves. He recalls thinking as a youth that "I shall live as people in novels live and have lived. Which ones I was not sure, only that passion and danger, ecstasy and despair (but then more ecstasy) would be in attendance" (102). This connects to his idea of "real literature," in which every event and each emotion felt should be of gravity and importance. All of the feelings "in attendance" are literary clichés that are supposed to make a character's trials and tribulations meaningful. Tony's parenthetical aside regarding more ecstasy shows a desire to write the feelings of his own life, the impulse to think "but then I will feel this next." As an adult, he reflects more cautiously on these literary aspirations, viewing them as times when his "mind would make itself drunk with images of adventurousness" (102). The image of drunkenness suggests a raving fantasy world or detachment from reality that may end up having little correspondence to life. The pull of adventure is a hallmark of youth that, from Tony's perspective, fades as the realities of adult life settle in. Tony realizes that "There was a moment in my later twenties when I admitted that my adventurousness had long since petered out. I would never do those things adolescence had dreamt about. Instead, I mowed my lawn, I took holidays, I had my life" (102). If Tony himself hints that the aspiration to lead a literary life is nothing but a useful fantasy, the reader must question how realistic it is for him to piece together his life story exactly the way he does in the novel.

Shortly after meeting Adrian, Tony finds out that Adrian's mom has left his father. Tony thinks that "our house, as far as I could tell, contained no mysteries, to my shame and disappointment" (17). From a young age, Tony views a life without mystery and secrets as boring. There must be a code to crack in order for a life to be interesting and novelistic. He goes on to think, "in a novel, Adrian wouldn't just have accepted things as they were put to him" (17). In order to validate one's existence and live a worthwhile life, one must actively seek and decode mysteries, or "go off on a Quest to Discover the Truth" as Tony puts it. The capitalization here indicates that Tony retrospectively sees his youthful self viewing life in terms of big themes and grand, sweeping ideas. One of Tony's existential problems is that a life without mystery is non-literary and, therefore, boring. Sometimes people force a sense of mystery onto events that might not be so mysterious. Once this occurs, the next problem becomes which methodology should one use to solve the enigma and get to the bottom of the mystery? Tony's approach is to work within the tradition of the detective novel, which for him includes operating within the framework of an imagined courtroom testimony.

In his own book *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode addresses the significance of the second hand. He claims that "the clock's *tick-tock* I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form" (45). This gives a clue about what makes the second hand so "plausible" for Tony Webster. In Kermode's view, *tick* automatically creates the sense that *tock* is on the way, regardless of the fiction that we maintain as the length of time that goes between them (45-46). There is a feeling of progress toward an inevitable future resolution. Tony needs to be able to look back and locate the *tick* at the beginning of the story to be able to look toward a future *tock*, the sense of closure and security that he hopes have after completing his Quest for Ultimate Truth. Remembering that "tick" should in theory lead toward

a certain “tock” gives one the feeling of being in the midst of a diachronic narrative. Is Kermode’s “form” similar to the “mould” that Tony speaks of on the first page of the novel, giving us a stable, closed narrative with beginning and end? Or, on the other hand, is it more of a structure or pattern for Tony’s story that can be more readily understood synchronically?

Kermode distinguishes between *chronos*, fluid, moving time; and *kairos*, a distinct moment of crisis, fulfillment, or meaning (47). All of the clues that Tony picks up and evidence that he seeks come from kairotic moments—starting with the list of images that he remembers to begin the novel. These are all moments of personal crisis or change, images which incidentally involve fluids, tying them to distinct moments within the flowing time of *chronos*. When Tony tries to determine key moments in the past that may have set off unstoppable chains of events, he retroactively imposes a sense of *kairos* on these plot points that he finds. Tony seems most interested in what Kermode calls Tillich’s “idiosyncratic” understanding of *kairos*—a “‘moment of crisis,’ or, more obscurely, ‘the fate of time’” (47). “Fate” is an apt word here, as are all of the many episodes that Tony recalls that slowly build toward something critical and inevitable. Kairotic moments become anchors for him to link different stages of the story to; they are crisis moments that push the action of the story forward. As a part of his sleuthing game, Tony forces memories into the concept of “key moments” that give reasons for and add significance to what happened to Adrian, Veronica, and the other companions of his youth. Tony seeks reasons for his own ending with Veronica as well as Adrian’s death. He ultimately wishes to come to a “sense of an ending” of his own in which he will be satisfied with the answers to all of his questions. This is why key moments are so critical to him: as Kermode states, “*kairos* is the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with meaning derived from its relation to the end” (47). Kermode’s interpretation of *kairos* seems to challenge the easy distinction between White’s

questions “what happened?” and “what’s the point?” As Tony’s thoughts and actions demonstrate over the course of the novel, diachronic and synchronic narratives can’t be so easily separated into two distinct categories. Events can be chronological signposts telling what happened while also carrying great significance and meaning.

The reader must consider that Tony might misidentify the proper kairotic moments on which to anchor his story. Kermode notes that when we write history, “everything is relevant if its relevance can be invented” (56). An image such as Veronica dancing to the stack of 45s may be of no particular importance, but Tony ascribes meaning to it because it is among the small number details available to him. When Tony reads Veronica’s email explaining her father’s death some thirty-five years ago, he looks for “traps, ambiguities, implied insults. There were none—unless straightforwardness itself can be a trap. It was an ordinary, sad story—all too familiar—and simply told” (121-122). In this moment, Tony diagnoses the problem with his own detective hunt. A cynic might say that Tony’s final thought about the email could be a tagline for *The Sense of an Ending* itself, fulfilling his childhood fear that “Life wouldn’t turn out to be like Literature” but instead a sad, familiar, and simple story.

## Chapter 2: Discussion

“But what helps? What do we need to know? Not everything. Everything confuses. Directness also confuses” (102).

*-Flaubert's Parrot*

### Historiography in the classroom

Somewhere during his early school days, Tony picks up the habit of taking big H Historical principles that would be used to study governments, nations, or wars, and applying these principles to the more quotidian personal histories of people around him. Similar to the way that Tony views life through the lens of literature, he uses this historical view to add meaning to the everyday events that happen to him and his friends. Viewing life as a personal history adds gravity to what at first glance might seem insignificant. Old Joe Hunt wraps up the semester by posing the question “What is History?” to the class. Adrian answers that “History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation” (18).<sup>6</sup> It is an abstract, one-size-fits-all answer that arguably represents the thesis of the entire novel. When Hunt asks Adrian to apply his theory by providing a concrete example, Adrian cites the recent suicide of their classmate Robson, noting that “It’s a historical event, sir, if a minor one. But recent. So it ought to easily be understood as history” (19). Tony Webster will spend the whole novel taking Adrian’s approach to personal history. Themes and structures learned in school and applied to “capital-H History” are transferred to the more pedestrian exploits of Tony and his friends. The novel tests line between major and minor historical events,

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<sup>6</sup> See *Flaubert's Parrot* for the metaphor of biography and history as a fishing net that catches some details and misses others, while the fisherman also chooses to throw some back (38). *FP* also compares the elusiveness of the past to a “greased piglet” (14).

exploring the divide between what counts as history and what doesn't. Seeing everyday life as history is a way to reassert that it really happened and legitimize the significance of the quotidian.

Adrian debates Joe Hunt on the importance of “direct evidence” (19) and “Robson’s testimony” (20) if someone in the future were to write Robson’s history. Old Joe Hunt counters that Robson “may well have kept a diary, or written letters, made phone calls whose contents are remembered” (20). This foreshadows the exact conflict that Tony will deal with as he pieces things together throughout the novel. Obviously lacking a personal testimony from Adrian, Tony can only go with documentation left behind coupled with the memories of whomever else is still around. The abstract classroom discussion regarding how historiography is performed will continue to inform the way Tony uses personal historiography decades later.

In his adult life, Tony notes that

I’ve followed all the official history that’s happened in my own lifetime—the fall of Communism, Mrs. Thatcher, 9/11, global warming—with the normal mixture of fear, anxiety, and cautious optimism. But I’ve never felt the same about it—I’ve never quite trusted it—as I do the events in Greece and Rome, or the British Empire, or the Russian Revolution. Perhaps I just feel safer with the history that’s been more or less agreed upon. Or perhaps it’s that same paradox again: history that happens underneath our noses ought to be the clearest, and yet it’s the most deliquescent. (66)<sup>7</sup>

Just as Tony believes in a “real literature,”<sup>8</sup> he also believes in an “official history.” To him, real literature addresses themes of substantial philosophical weight. Judging from the historical events he chooses, “official” history to him is simply the most commonly mentioned and

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<sup>7</sup> Compare this to a line from *Flaubert’s Parrot*: “Or is it just that the past seems to contain more local colour than the present?” (15)

<sup>8</sup> See my page 14.

mainstream events that even the most casual follower of world news would know. Nothing on his list risks being buried beneath the sands of time, at least not during his lifetime. This is all front-page stuff that will doubtlessly fill the pages of history texts read by the generation after Tony. He even identifies a “normal” reaction to these events, a response that would seem to come from a supposedly balanced person who chooses not to react too radically in the direction of either hope or fear. However, he doesn’t “trust” these recent events as much as events he would have read about in a history book. The historical episodes that he might have read about during his schooldays have a deeper permanence, or what Tony identifies as a sense of being “agreed upon.” The system of historiography is among the primary tools that Tony uses to legitimize and confirm the content of his memories. Ironically, the events from recent history that Tony mentions are also “agreed upon” in a way. The news writers, the public, and the politicians agree to make these the events that occupy the consciousness of the common citizen. The “paradox” that Tony identifies relates to his idea of corroboration. Older, “agreed upon” history receives more support from published corroboration, whereas the events of more recent history seem more likely to be distorted by subjectivity. Of course, as Tony learns in Joe Hunt’s class, even published history results from the subjective state of the historian, so maybe Tony’s paradox doesn’t hold up after all. Maybe all events, regardless of era, should be hard to trust.

### **The fantasy space of the trial**

The history-writing tradition is only one of the molds that Tony employs for constructing his story. Law is another. Tony often enters “the fantasy space of the trial,” a psychological zone that acts as a lens for the interpretation of events and what they might mean.<sup>9</sup> Like literature, the

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<sup>9</sup> See my pg. 14 for Ian Ward’s discussion of how readers themselves might psychologically enter courtroom scenes depicted in literature.



law carries a sense of legitimacy and institutional authority that can reassure us as we navigate a confusing world. When inside the fantasy space of the trial, a literary character imagines being before an imaginary judge or jury. Mentally entering an imaginary courtroom serves several functions. 1) Whatever is thought by the character gains credibility by virtue of the fact that it exists within a well-established social and legal institution. 2) The character's thoughts begin to resemble a testimony or confession. With this, the thoughts shed their interiority as they are projected outside to an imaginary audience. 3) The character's thoughts take on more certainty as elements of a known, plotted story, since a legal case has a beginning, middle, and end.

Tony Webster enters the "fantasy space of the trial" at several key moments in the novel. These moments are signaled linguistically by legally-charged words that he uses to think about his situation. Tony has an unusual fixation on "corroboration."<sup>10</sup> Barnes forces the reader to notice the word through sheer force of repetition. Other words such as "proof," "confirmation," or "verification" could have been used in its place, but those terms lack the strong legal sense of "corroboration." This is not the only term floating through the book that has a pronounced legal undertone. I have already noted Adrian's choice of the word "testimony" when he talks about Robson's suicide (20). More than any other character in the novel, Tony uses an assortment of noticeably legal terminology that mentally positions him within the fantasy space of the trial.

When Tony meets with Alex to learn the details of Tony's death, he sees a newspaper clipping that sends him into this mental space:

Alex showed me a clipping from the *Cambridge Evening News*. "Tragic Death of 'Promising' Young Man." They probably kept that headline permanently set up in type. The verdict of the coroner's inquest had been that Adrian Finn (22) had killed himself

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<sup>10</sup> See my pg. 9 for J. Christopher Rideout's ideas on narrative rationality.

“while the balance of his mind was disturbed.” I would have sworn on oath that Adrian’s was the one mind which would never lose its balance. (53-54)

Tony is irritated that such a generic headline would be used for his unique friend Adrian. A permanently set headline fits into the synchronic paradigm of history. From the point of view of the news, a death like Adrian’s fits into a pattern. The structure that contains such an event will be repeated in the future, so the headline type must remain set. Moreover, including Adrian’s age in parentheses reproduces the journalistic formatting that Tony sees with his own eyes. It adds to the clinical, impersonal way that the newspaper represents Adrian. Tony’s response to his feelings on this matter is to “swear on oath,” but he notes that

[...] in the law’s view, if you killed yourself you were by definition mad, at least at the time you were committing the act. The law, and society, and religion all said it was impossible to be sane, healthy, and kill yourself. (54)

The law is a structure used to make sense of a confusing world. It often defines abstract notions such as “madness.” In this passage, Tony compares law to society and religion, other artificial structures that humankind uses to ascribe meaning and frame complex situations. He notes that the issue of suicide is a convergence point where all three of these structures agree. This convergence reminds us of Tony’s syncretic approach to legal, historical, and literary narrative strategies. It is also similar to Tony’s blending of diachronic, synchronic, and impressionistic narrative approaches.

Tony relies on “corroboration” heavily throughout *The Sense of an Ending*. At the beginning of part Two, Tony notes that “as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been” (65). His sense of identity destabilizes as the supporting cast of his life begins to disappear. Corroboration is

essential for positively defining the self and the past against a backdrop of uncertainty. Adding to this unease, Tony claims that “Even if you have assiduously kept records—in words, sounds, pictures—you may find that you have attended to the wrong kind of record-keeping” (65).

Despite our confidence in apparently objective forms of documentation, we must recognize that to document is to make choices about what should and shouldn’t be recorded. The choice of what to document and how to do results from a subjective state of mind.

Before meeting with adult Veronica for the second time in the retirement phase of the novel, Tony sees a girl on the train moving her head to music inaudible to everyone else (124). It triggers a memory of young Veronica dancing to a 45 in Tony’s room. He tells Veronica about the memory, and to Tony’s surprise, she says “I wonder why you remembered that” (126). Tony understands this as a “moment of corroboration” which gives him a “return of confidence” (126). The fact that Veronica also apparently remembers this event brings the event closer to something witnessed in Tony’s mind. While he may lack full confidence in his own memory, the idea that somebody else remembers it too gives Tony an increased feeling that it really happened. In the line following Tony’s return to confidence, he notes that “she was more smartly dressed this time; her hair was under control and seemed less grey” (126). It appears Veronica’s credibility has increased in Tony’s eyes due to her mode of dress. He is more inclined to believe her because she is dressed better this time, perhaps like someone making an appearance in court. Her hair looks closer to how it did during their youth, supporting Tony’s feeling that she is the same person who was there to experience the event in the past.

Despite Tony’s surge in confidence, one must consider Veronica’s statement in light of the coy and evasive manner in which she usually interacts with him. She avoids following her sparse statement with any sort of explanation. There is the possibility of an implied parenthetical

“I wonder why [you think] you remembered that” when she speaks to Tony. As we read on the first page of the novel, there is a difference between witnessing and remembering. The list of images Tony “remembers” includes the bathwater in which Adrian kills himself, although Tony was, of course, not actually there to see it. Tony is reassured by Veronica’s “corroboration,” but it might not be as plausible as he thinks. Here, Veronica might criticize Tony’s ability to remember accurately in the first place.

While the repetition of terms like “corroboration” positions Tony within a type of ongoing trial, there are other times when he specifically envisions himself before a court. Tony’s trip to Veronica’s family home provides material for both concrete memories and future speculation about what might have happened there. An awkward dinner table scene reminds the reader of Tony’s two main forms of constructing meaning and forming the narrative of his experience. As Mr. and Mrs. Ford ask Tony questions, he feels as if he is being “examined” for his “credentials,” “as if I were before a court of inquiry” (30). All of this loaded language demonstrates that Tony is within the psychological fantasy space of the trial. Moments of external pressure from others are projected into imaginary courtroom spaces that instill the scene with a feeling of persecution or prosecution. Before arriving at the house, Tony is concerned that his large suitcase will make him “look like a potential burglar” (28). Veronica’s father takes Tony’s luggage into the house “as if responding to the distant laws of hospitality” (29). Tony regards Veronica’s brother as the “appointed judge” of whether or not Tony is a suitable boyfriend (47). The terms “burglar,” “laws,” and “judge” seem coincidental enough; however, their proximity to one another within this passage calls attention to them. These terms must be seen alongside the large quantity of other legal vocabulary in the novel. After the family dinner, Veronica and Tony go to separate bedrooms; Veronica doesn’t give Tony a goodnight kiss. He

then reflects on how things might have gone differently “had we been in a novel” (30). This episode includes two of the main ways Tony uses structures of meaning: the law and literary fiction. He can’t go long without using both of these lenses to frame the events of his life.

Tony also envisions himself on trial as he recalls his breakup with Veronica. She breaks it off because she feels that the relationship isn’t “heading” anywhere (37). In other words, their connection has lost its sense of direction and failed to continue along its plot trajectory. Tony asks “Does it have to head somewhere?” to which Veronica replies “Isn’t that what relationships do?” before telling him “I don’t stagnate” (37). Veronica wants the plot of the relationship to remain in motion and Tony prevents this from happening. She wants the relationship to reach another stage, which in itself could be a miniature ending. The structure would include the end of dating, the end of engagement, and so forth. Recalling the end of the conversation, Tony thinks

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? If asked in a court of law what happened and what was said, I could only attest to the words “heading,” “stagnating,” and “peaceable.” ... I’d also swear to the truth of the biscuit tin; it was burgundy red, with the Queen’s smiling profile on it.” (38)

Many terms in this passage indicate the continued obsession with chronology and identifying specific beginnings and ends. As with most of the details that Tony recalls, there is a strong undercurrent of blame, guilt, and responsibility—just as when the beginning of WWI as discussed in Tony’s childhood classroom, blame must be assigned to whomever initiated the beginning of the end. In this scene, there is an overlap between legal plots and personal history-writing. Tony definitively remembers “heading” and “stagnating,” which indicate starting and

stopping, a plot lurching into motion and then coming to a halt. Tony would attest to them, demonstrating the absolute importance of plots and chronology in the courtroom.

Several scenes after the breakup suggest that Tony's experience with Veronica pushes him toward the legalistic way of looking back on his life and assembling his narrative. Once she breaks up with Tony, Veronica starts dating Adrian. Adrian writes to Tony asking for his approval of the arrangement, to which Tony obliges but writes back cautioning that Adrian must be careful because Veronica surely "suffered damage a long way back" (46). Tony burns Adrian's letter, admitting that the action is "melodramatic, I agree, but I plead youth as a mitigating circumstance" (46). The multiple senses of the word "damage" position us once again in the realm of legality, but more importantly Tony frames his immaturity as a "mitigating circumstance."<sup>11</sup> If he pleads youth as a mitigating circumstance in his life in general, guilt and responsibility are shifted away from him. In Tony's mind, any problems are a result of someone else's preexisting damages and not his own actions.

Reflecting on the possible source of Veronica's damage, Tony admits that "I have no evidence, anecdotal or documentary. But I remember what Old Joe Hunt said when arguing with Adrian: that mental states can be inferred from actions" (48). Once again there is a clear link between legal narratives and personal historiography. By talking about evidence in the context of Hunt's history class, Tony reinforces the link between history and law. Tony doesn't specifically exclude himself from his theory about personal damage. He concedes that "You might even ask me to apply my 'theory' to myself and explain what damage I had suffered a long way back and what its consequences might be: for instance, how it might affect my reliability and truthfulness. I'm not sure I could answer this, to be honest" (49). Explicitly legal terminology is not as present

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<sup>11</sup> According to the Farlex online legal dictionary, "mitigating circumstances may be considered to reduce damage awards or the extent of the defendant's liability."

in this passage as some of the others I've pointed out. However, Tony's consideration of reliability, truthfulness, and honesty positions him psychologically within a courtroom. Here, he blends the persona of the defendant with that of the unreliable narrator. This creates a link between Tony's legalistic and literary narrative modes.

After Veronica meets with Tony and claims to have burned Adrian's diary, she hands him an envelope.<sup>12</sup> This envelope contains a photocopy of a malicious letter Tony wrote to Veronica and Adrian after being told about their relationship (106). Decades later, Tony is a bit disgusted by the vitriol he expressed during his youth, thinking "All I could plead was that I had been its author then, but was not its author now. Indeed, I didn't recognize that part of myself from which the letter came. But perhaps this was simply further self-deception" (107). The deliberate choice of the word "plead" shows Tony once again putting himself on trial. The insistence on authorship and how an author changes over time adds the literary dimension to Tony's statement. Also, the phrase "recognizing that part of myself" places Tony outside of his own actions, as if he is evaluating himself as a character in the story that he crafts.

Both of the episodes involving a burnt document involve Tony "pleading" something, as if before a court of law. In fact, Tony predictably frames everything that Veronica does to the diary as a crime: "First theft, then arson, I thought, with a spurt of anger. But I told myself to keep treating her like an insurance company" (101). The deliberate choice of the terms "theft" and "arson" indicate the increasing impossibility of Tony seeing any type of documentation or correspondence outside of a legal framework. He also can't help but "treat her like an insurance company," keeping their discourse in a cool, bureaucratic, and ultimately legal mode. Once he returns home from their meeting, Tony reasons, "I thought her quite capable of arson to punish

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<sup>12</sup> For another instance of Barnes using this motif, see the episode in *Flaubert's Parrot* in which Ed Winterton claims to have burnt a collection of Flaubert's secret and unpublished love letters (46).

me for ancient wrongs and failings” (103). Not only does he define Veronica’s action using a legal term (one that is somewhat hyperbolic for the actual deed itself), but he also views her crime as a “punishment” doled out to him for his own crime. They are now legal opponents rather than simply former lovers.

The psychological fantasy space of the trial is by no means a Tony Webster idiosyncrasy. Another literary figure who imaginatively places himself before judgment is Alexander Portnoy. The motif of guilt in *Portnoy’s Complaint* can be traced as a catalyst for Alex’s entry into this fantasy space. After either biting his mother or kicking her in the shin (he can’t remember which but it could be both), Alexander is berated by his parents for refusing to apologize. Recalling the episode, adult Alex thinks “Alexander Portnoy, aged five, you are hereby sentenced to hang by your neck until you are dead for refusing to say sorry to you mother” (Roth 123). Although five-year old Alex probably wouldn’t have conceived the event in terms of sentencing and hanging at the time (*King Lear* is alluded to in the same paragraph), his adult self relies on the vocabulary of legal punishment in his memory of what happened. He retroactively imposes the fantasy of the trial on an event from his early childhood. His parents are more concerned with hearing an apology than what the actual crime was. As in *The Sense of an Ending*, (taking) responsibility is paramount.

During a psychoanalytic session, Portnoy confuses different types of authority figures, thinking “Doctor, Your Honor, whatever your name is [...]” as he tells his psychoanalyst his thoughts. It appears that speaking to any sort of authority figure takes on the feeling of giving testimony. If Portnoy were Catholic, he might have a similar attitude toward priests. The imaginary sentence to hang as well as the confusion of who “Your Honor” is both point back to the need to accept responsibility.



At the end of the book, as Portnoy is fiercely thrashed and berated by his new acquaintance Naomi, he most explicitly enters the fantasy of the trial, in a scene in which the “judge” uses a similar rhetorical approach to shut down the defendant: for “crimes too numerous to mention,” Alex is “sentenced to a terrible case of impotence” (272). Portnoy imagines himself responding, to which the screaming judge explodes “don’t bullshit me with legalisms, Portnoy. You knew right from wrong. You knew you were degrading another human being” (272). Compare this to one of Tony’s fantasy episodes in which the judge accuses him of inventing a suppressed memory about a night beside a river with Veronica: “oh please, Mr. Webster, spare us your sentimental lucubrations. This is a court of law, which deals with fact” (131). Although Portnoy is told to drop the “legalisms” and Tony is told to stop being so sentimental, the imaginary judge in both cases limits the type of vocabulary and argumentation that the defendants are allowed to use. The court acts as an arbiter of what is linguistically possible.

### **Writing Letters, Writing Narrative**

Whether in the form of diary, note, letter, or e-mail, writing is a constant theme in Barnes’s novel. There is an epistolary dimension to the literary life about which Tony fantasizes. Also, the examples of correspondence in the novel help to blur the lines between legal, historical, and literary narratives. As a source of proof or documentation, correspondence fits into Tony’s legal-historical point of view. Tony’s focus on tone and vocabulary places his correspondence in a literary context. The lingering uncertainty over whether any piece of correspondence is simply something that happened or something meaningful blurs the distinction between diachronic and synchronic narratives. A fragmentary, incomplete piece of correspondence, like the single diary pages Veronica sends to Tony, can be seen as impressionistic in White’s schema.

The first mention of a character's personal writing occurs after Robson's suicide. Tony claims that "As for his suicide note, which according to rumor (Brown again) had read 'Sorry, mum,' we felt that it had missed a powerful educative opportunity" (15). Although Tony and his friends lack the hard proof of holding the physical document, they proceed to analyze it as a text. Tony finds its contents lacking and seems to think Robson could have been a bit more opportunistic since his suicide would lend gravity to his final words. Tony thinks "His action had been unphilosophical, self-indulgent, and inartistic: in other words, wrong" (15). He thinks a suicide note should have some of the same artistic qualities that he would hope to see in a good piece of literature. For Tony it is a piece of evidence, but it should also be philosophical and artistic. This demonstrates the tendency to merge the literary and the legal. Robson's supposed final statement, "Sorry, mum," can be taken as both an apology and a confession of guilt and responsibility. Thinking of the note in terms of guilt, responsibility, and evidence helps to position it within the landscape of legality that dominates so much of the novel. This early episode sets the tone for the way that Tony will view other pieces of correspondence from a legal perspective.

During his final year of college, Tony receives a letter from Adrian essentially requesting his blessing to date Veronica. Tony decides he "liked the hypocrisy of a letter whose point was not just to tell me something I might not have found out anyway (or not for quite a while)" (45). He views it as a slap in the face and unnecessary. However, he admits that "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" (45). This admission reinforces the complex relationship between event, documentation, interpretation, and memory. Event and documentation fit into the processional narrative structure, interpretation into the structural, and

memory into the impressionistic. As documentation is lost or discarded, Tony must rely on memory. He not only attempts to remember the content of the letter but also to remember how he was feeling about that content during a particular time. Even if Tony could see the letter again before his eyes, it still might raise the problem of what Adrian himself calls the “inadequacies of documentation” (18). There is such a wide range of human error and imperfection that even written documentation, in all its apparent stability, becomes questionable as a real indicator of what happened in the past.

Tony responds to Adrian’s letter with a postcard that has strong undertones of law, history, and literature. He writes, “Being in the receipt of your epistle of the 21<sup>st</sup>, the undersigned begs to present his compliments and wishes to record that everything is jolly fine by me, old bean” (45). The official, formal sound of the message, with words like “receipt,” “undersigned,” and “record” reminds the reader of the legal vocabulary on which Tony so often relies. The antiquated sound of the sentence structure is reminiscent of a historical document that would have been written before Tony and Adrian’s era. Finally, the contrived artificiality of the language points more subtly toward literature—the language has a very constructed sound to it as it wears its artifice on its sleeve. Tony’s careful choice of the word “epistle” has historical implications and also reinforces my claim that Barnes’s book has some elements of an epistolary novel.

Tony is aware of how changes in communication technology shape our consciousness. A pronounced contrast in the novel is the shift from handwritten correspondence to e-mail and other digital forms of communication. Prior to this, Tony “depend[s] on the rudimentary communications system known as the postcard” when he travels to the United States after college (49). He notes that his parents had no choice but to send him away without having the

ability to check on him all the time. He compares the slowness of conventional mail to the world of “mobile phones, email, and Skype” that he lives in when the novel takes place (49). Email, with its potential for instant gratification, allows Tony’s later communications with Veronica and her brother to be more obsessive. He even admits, “I wanted her to think I might be waiting whenever she clicked on her inbox” (98). Letters are a form of personal presence and testimony. Email takes this a step further in this case by making Tony feel that he can always be there, always lurking. He becomes persistent and unavoidable, forcibly planting himself in the consciousness of those with whom he corresponds.

There is an instance of persistent letter-writing in the novel that shows Tony’s general reluctance to give up once he has his mind set on settling an issue. When Tony reflects on his incessant emails to Veronica about Adrian’s diary, he compares this situation to a confrontation with an insurance company that occurred when he was married to Margaret. Tony’s insurance company attributes cracks in the foundation of their house to a lime tree that is in the front yard, and they propose the solution of removing the tree (92). Based on the “principle of not kowtowing to unseen bureaucrats” (92), Tony begins a long and painful series of letters to the insurance company that raises new and irritating questions each time, essentially holding up the process of removing the tree. He wants to come across as a “pedantic, unignorable bore,” causing the company to realize “it would make bean-counting sense for them to just close the case” (93).<sup>13</sup> This incident reinforces the link in Tony’s mind between correspondence and legality. He sees his letters as part of a building case file. His approach to dealing with this legal structure is to be relentless and “pedantic.” Tony recalls this episode to draw a parallel to his strategy for emailing Veronica: “I was determined to be polite, unoffendable, persistent, boring, friendly [...] I would wear her down with niceness, and I would get Adrian’s diary” (91). In both cases, he has

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<sup>13</sup> See also p. 11 for a discussion of “closing the case.”

a goal in mind that lies at the end of a long bureaucratic tunnel. He operates within the rules of a legal system, but he games the system by overusing correspondence and overwhelming the person on the receiving end. Tony takes actions that are allowable within a system, but pushes them to an annoying limit to wear down both the insurance company and, later, Veronica in order to get what he wants. He sees the end of the debate with the insurance company as “closing the case.” Since he makes an analogy between the lime tree episode and badgering Veronica for Adrian’s diary, we can say that he would view the reception of the diary as “closing the case” as well.

Although Tony never obtains the full diary, Veronica does send him the teaser of a single photocopied page that clearly comes from the middle of a long section. Adrian tries to figure out if the dynamics of human relationships can be modeled mathematically (94). This is another instance in which a character in the novel uses artificial structures or institutions to frame a narrative of human events. Adrian, more mathematically inclined than Tony, uses an equation rather than law. His diary entry is, however, a thought experiment and he acknowledges that human relationships might need to be “expressed in notations which are logically improbable and mathematically insoluble” (94). Adrian tests a structural approach to forming a narrative while recognizing the limitations of the approach at the same time. Therefore, Tony’s approach to narrative, while not explicitly mathematical, might be subject to the same scrutiny. Law, history, and literature may all have foundations that are more shakable than Tony realizes. At the end of the diary page that Tony receives, Adrian writes “Or we might try to draw the responsibility more narrowly and apportion it more exactly. And not use equations and integers but instead express matters in traditional narrative terminology. So, for instance, if Tony...” (95). This is all that Tony gets to see. We can see that even in the midst of his thought experiment,

Adrian retains some faith in returning to “traditional narrative terminology.” However, the attempt to use math in the first place reminds us that we must evaluate the usefulness and accuracy of any structure to which narrative might be molded.

### Chapter 3: Conclusion

I never even managed to become anything: neither wicked nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man; neither a hero nor an insect” (5).

-Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*

One needs turn no further than *Flaubert’s Parrot* to both deepen an understanding of *The Sense of an Ending* and to get an idea of how Barnes’ more recent work fits into his general aesthetic. Barnes’ earlier protagonist Geoffrey Braithwaite also works on a project that fights against the fragmentation and frustrating unknowability of the past. Many of the same problems regarding proof and certainty haunt both novels. As Braithwaite conducts his biographical exploration of Flaubert, he ponders the classic debate regarding the separation of author from text. He is particularly fascinated by the biographer or historian’s obsession with the possessions left behind by an author: “The image, the face, the signature; the 93 percent copper statue and the Nadar photograph; the scrap of clothing and the lock of hair. What makes us randy for relics? Don’t we believe the words enough? Do we think the leavings of a life contain some ancillary truth?” (12). This recalls Tony’s desire for corroboration that will be his “ancillary truth” to back up what he remembers. Tony relics are all about the words—the personal items that are truly valuable to him as sources of truth are the letters, notes, and e-mails that feature the written

word. Indeed, Tony cares about the “leavings of a life,” but they must be the sort of leavings that contain text, his preferred form of corroboration.

There are other times in *Flaubert's Parrot* where Braithwaite's biographical project might cause the reader to recall Tony Webster's various “projects” upon which he embarks. Realizing that “I am now older than Flaubert ever was,” Braithwaite wonders

Is it ever the right time to die? ... Is it better not to have the dreams, the work, and then the desolation of uncompleted work? Perhaps ... we should prefer the consolation of non-fulfillment ... the pleasure of anticipation, and then, years later, not the memory of deeds but the memory of past anticipations? Wouldn't that keep it all cleaner and less painful?  
(22)

When Tony imagines his daughter Susie thinking about his countless unfinished projects, he gives himself the consolation that at least these activities keep the brain engaged. For Tony, there seems to be more satisfaction in process than in final product. Braithwaite asks many of the same questions that float through Tony's head about processes and endpoints. Tony, too, is interested in the reduction of past harm and damage, a clean and tidy version of the past free of end products that are ultimately failures. He wants to remember the process of “getting there” as painless, regardless of whether or not an ending is even available. Although Tony does eventually uncover the “meaning” of the mystery involving Veronica's family and Adrian, it is encircled by a feeling of non-fulfillment. This revelation doesn't carry with it the satisfaction or serenity that Tony hoped it would. We arrive at the end of the novel without a sense of anything being neatly tied up and settled: “There is great unrest” (163) is all we are left with. The only consolation that Tony can take is from the heuristic process of his detective game. The case is never truly closed. The “memory of past anticipations,” as Geoffrey Braithwaite puts it, has a

greater potential for remaining pleasant because anticipation precedes disappointment. Choosing to only remember the anticipation and not the unfulfilling result will keep the past “cleaner and less painful.”

Concerning suffering, Braithwaite cites Flaubert’s line: “If you participate in life, you don’t see it clearly: you suffer from it too much or enjoy it too much. The artist, to my way of thinking, is a monstrosity, something outside nature” (49-50). This might point us toward another rationale for why Tony constructs his narrative using the systems of law, history, and literature that are available to him. By using these systems to frame his narrative, he is able to step outside his own life and become like a nonparticipant in his own past. These structures might offer him a way to distance himself from the events and reduce the pain associated with his memories. Suffering and enjoyment are flattened out as he takes a colder, more clinical approach to seeing things “objectively.” Tony paints with the broad strokes of law, history, or fiction; his art is to contain the events. He wishes to settle the past and give himself the closure and finality that come with no longer being a participant.

The use of a system such as law, literature, or history requires a particular reading or interpretation of the events that follows a set of established conventions. When *Flaubert’s Parrot’s* Geoffrey Braithwaite complains about how much he hates critics and their tendency to over-read texts, he wonders, “... is there a perfect reader somewhere, a total reader? ... My reading might be pointless in terms of the history of literary criticism; but it’s not pointless in terms of pleasure” (75). As Tony pushes toward the “sense of an ending,” he is aware of the problematic nature and potential impossibility of a “total reading” or a “total reader.” Even the apparently solid systems and frameworks that Tony operates within are incurably subjective and can never offer the true security and finality that ideal versions of these systems would.



We must wonder why Tony chooses to begin the narrative where he does. Why is “school where it all began,” as Tony puts it? (5). The first memory Tony thinks about is when Adrian entered his group of friends. This tells us that what we are reading is presumably in part Adrian’s story. However, *The Sense of an Ending* is not just one person’s story. It is the story of a network of relationships: Tony and his school friends, Tony and Veronica, Adrian and Veronica, the relationship between Tony and his memories, and so forth. Although we read multiple stories, the title of the novel uses a definite article and speaks of one ending—but whose ending is it? This ending is the convergence point where all of these individual stories have more or less wrapped themselves up and come to an end as a whole. The shifting connections between all of these different stories have stabilized, Tony’s questions are answered to his satisfaction, and change is over. On the final page of the novel, Tony thinks, “You get towards the end of life—no, not life itself, but of something else: the end of any likelihood of change in that life” (163). This is one of the sources of the “sense” of an ending. Although the world still changes around Tony and other people’s stories continue to swirl and metamorphose around him, his set of stories has begun to settle. The meaning of the stories has become more stable in Tony’s mind and the shifting connections between the different stories has stopped changing.

Thinking about the way a previously shifting story can begin to settle in, Tony ponders, “... 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” (104). Here, Tony shows his awareness of the idea of ownership when it comes to narratives. When we tell a story, to whom does it truly belong? To some extent, all stories, like history, begin with a sort of collective ownership in the sense that readers or listeners

can “challenge the account.”<sup>14</sup> Depending on who is around to corroborate different details of the narrative, depending on what evidence is available at any given time, the entire shape of the story can change shortly after its inception. Even if one individual authors a story, this person must always operate in the context of a sea of other authors. In this passage, Tony also draws a hard line between what events really are and how they are represented through the mimetic system of narrative. There is the life and there is the life story, but they are fundamentally unable to overlap and match up perfectly.

Narrative is, of course, always an act of imperfect representation. In thinking about whom this representation is meant to convince, Tony comes to a lonely realization regarding audience. Maybe all life stories start off as products for an audience to interpret or consume. As time moves forward the original audience, spectators to the life that became the narrative, starts to die off. The story is told only to the self once there is nobody left with whom to argue the details. Tony is aware that he tells different intertwining and sometimes competing stories. He even apologizes to the reader at times when he realizes that he has wandered off track. When he thinks about his American girlfriend from his trip overseas, he thinks “Annie was part of my story, but not of this story” (50). As he crafts a narrative, Tony remembers all kinds of impressions and details. There is occasional confusion about to which story they really belong. Does the “Story of Tony” include beneath its umbrella the stories of his relationships with others, or is it something different altogether?

Long after his aspirations to lead a literary life have faded, Tony still identifies himself as a writer. In describing the origins of his marriage to Margaret, he remembers, “I did a slightly odd thing when I first met Margaret. I wrote Veronica out of my life story” (76). He acknowledges that regardless of what factually happened, he is the author of how the story is

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<sup>14</sup> See my pg. 21 for a discussion of history being “agreed upon.”

presented to others. It's hard to imagine that Tony sincerely views this erasure as "odd," because throughout the novel he is aware of the artificial and limited nature of narrative. His use of the qualifier "life" shows once more that he consciously tells multiple stories all at once. There is his life story, but it is interwoven with smaller diverging stories that he tells at the same time. He goes on to realize

The odder part was that it was easy to give this version of my history because that's what I'd been telling myself anyway. I viewed my time with Veronica as a failure—her contempt, my humiliation—and expunged it from the record. I had kept no letters, and only a single photograph, which I hadn't looked at in ages. (76)

Tony knows that telling one's life story to oneself is quite a bit different than presenting it to an external audience. Having already succeeded at deceiving himself, it makes it that much more convenient to pass the incomplete story along to others. The feeling of failure points toward the sense of loss and incompleteness that Tony battles at every step of his storytelling process. This passage is another moment in which storytelling, history, and law are brought together. A tampered-with and partial "life story" becomes a "version of history." Of course, Tony can't go long without framing the events in his life legally—he doesn't "forget to mention" or "avoid talking about" Veronica—he intentionally frames this omission as "expunging her from the record." Immediately after using this legal terminology, he talks about letters and photographs, which are always important physical documents for Tony when he tries to assemble what he sees as corroboration.

Perhaps one way of approaching Tony's relentless pursuit of narrative is that the process is more important than the product. In the description of his life after the divorce from Margaret, we read "Also, in my more emptied life, I came up with various ideas which I termed 'projects,'

perhaps to make them sound feasible. None of them came to anything. Well, that's no matter; or any part of my story" (59). It's reasonable to think that the pursuit of Adrian's diary along with the badgering of Veronica and Brother Jack is another project that Tony takes on to occupy his time. He does refer to himself as "a man who found comfort in his own doggedness" when he thinks about his email exchanges with Veronica (97). It seems that he might get more entertainment from the commitment to the process itself rather than the end result of the pursuit. In a period of limited contact with Veronica, Tony recalls that he "restrung my blind, descaled the kettle, mended the split in an old pair of jeans" (128). Much of what he does is geared toward passing the time with projects that may not "come to anything" as he puts it.

As I have shown, Tony structures and stabilizes his stories by using legal, historical, and literary narrative strategies. There are other smaller strategies at play, such as the reliance on written correspondence, that help to unite these strategies. A letter can serve the triple function of legal corroboration, historical documentation, and the basis of an epistolary novel. Even something as simple as the act of letter-writing can be regarded as a socially supported institution. So, why does Tony need these narrative techniques? The journey to tell the story that makes up *The Sense of an Ending* is a fusion of various structures and systems available to him. Finding out what can be true within any story involves excluding what is false. As Foucault states, "the will to truth, like other systems of exclusion, relies on institutional support (pedagogy, the book system, publishing, libraries, laboratories)" (11). Recognizing the difficulty of establishing any sort of truth without a predetermined structure, Tony taps into these "institutions of support" to give him a framework for his story. These structures make it easier to figure out what is missing and find the appropriate information to fit into place. In *The*

*Experience of Nothingness*, Michael Novak echoes Foucault's statement about the exclusionary properties of truth:

The decision to choose scientific methods and, in particular behavioral methods as a way of life is first of all to *select* certain features of human life (clarity, quantifiability, function, instrumentality) from among others. It is secondly, to *evade* other sorts of questions and values, and thus to rig the meaning of 'fact'." (18)

For Tony, there is nothing mandatory or inevitable about the narrative strategies he uses to reassemble the past. Novak would say that he chooses these methods as a way of selecting data for his story. In effect, Tony's tendency to privilege the values of legality, history, and literature excludes other values and thus delimits what fact is allowed to be within his storytelling approach.

Noticing and documenting Tony's approach to coping with narrative uncertainty is one thing, but the recognition that such a mental space exists raises a number of questions. What is its origin? What is its appeal as a way of seeing the world? Much of Tony's process appears to be geared toward reconciling instability and uncertainty. He isn't blind to the limits of memory, nor is he unaware of the ultimately flawed nature of the narrative systems that people use to tell the stories of their lives every day. Memory always involves a sense of loss; something always must be missing from the picture. Storytelling, too, is a selective process. There's no reasonable way to include everything. Every single detail carries with it the implication of the details that have left out by choice or accident. In the second section of the book, Tony thinks about another type of loss, reflecting that "when you are young, you think you can predict the likely pains and bleaknesses that age might bring. You imagine yourself being lonely, divorced, widowed; children growing away from you, friends dying" (65). Law, history, and literature are structures

of relative stability that help to offset the sensation of this loss. These systems that Tony puts his faith into help to buffer against the looming sense of loss that he has experienced from the time of his youth.

When Tony speaks to his solicitor Mr. Gunnell about Veronica's choice to withhold the diary, Gunnell provides the legal definition of "theft": "an intention permanently to deprive the owner of the thing stolen" (78). This moment is a microcosm of one of Tony's overarching obsessions through the course of the novel: he thinks about loss all the time, more specifically the possibility of being deprived permanently. "Where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation," as Adrian would put it (65), is also a crossroads for all sorts of other loss, incompleteness, and impermanence. Among Tony's nagging anxieties is the fear of permanent loss, a loss that offers no possibility of filling in the blanks and picking up the pieces once again.

By the end of the novel, the question remains open about how the reader should regard Tony. He is neither overwhelmingly admirable, nor undeniably bad. Though he self-identifies as pedantic and boring, there's nothing sinister enough about him to make him a villain. The worst thing that he does to the reader's knowledge is to send the malicious letter to Adrian and Veronica at the beginning of their relationship (104). However, Tony isn't exactly a hero either. His isolation and occasional appearance of being at odds with society might call to the reader's mind the thought from *Notes from Underground's* nameless protagonist that "I never even managed to become anything: neither wicked nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man; neither a hero nor an insect" (5). Tony is stuck somewhere in the middle, showing no qualities that push him convincingly in the direction of either hero or insect. At this point in his life he is quite alone and he even admits to the fact that he may have given up to some degree and

condemned himself to a death-in-life sentence. He laments, “I thought of the things that had happened to me over the year, and of how little I had made happen” (157). Similarly, he notes that he “had neither won nor lost, but just let life happen to him” (155). He borrows Veronica’s accusation that “he never got it” (158) when he envisions what might appear on his tombstone. All in all, this doesn’t paint a very admirable portrait of a Tony. So, is Tony’s story of any consequence? Can we ascribe meaning to what he does and firmly state that anything he has done matters? We might look to Dostoevsky again for a possible answer to these questions. At the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha says

People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some beautiful, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, then he is saved for his whole life. And if we have only one good memory left in our heart even that may serve someday as our salvation. (645)

Alyosha’s advice to the youth of his town might serve as a way to rescue Tony from his own self-accusations of irrelevance and failure to take action. Although he doesn’t do much or seem to matter much, he continues learning.

The novel begins with a scene from Tony’s grammar school education. It ends with him knowing things he didn’t know before about himself and about the past he shares with his friends. Tony uses his memories, regardless of how clear or unclear they may be, as the source of a puzzle. The very act of solving the puzzle, of playing the detective, is a heuristic process that helps the mind to grow and remain sharp as the passage of time wears at the edges of thought and memory. Tony envisions his daughter Susie thinking, “he’s retired now, still fossicking around with those mysterious ‘projects’ of his, doubt he’ll ever finish anything, but at least it keeps the brain active” (67-8). Even if Tony’s storytelling project has no true external purpose—

for example, obtaining the diary, or convincing someone else that everything happened the way Tony perceives it—he benefits from keeping his brain engaged. It doesn't matter whether or not he finishes the project. The act of doing itself is the reason and the reward. The OED defines fossicking as searching for gold or other precious materials, or even “scanning an area for fragments overlooked by others” (“Fossick”). Barnes makes no mistake in choosing this particular term. Tony's process of piecing together the past involves looking for valuable information that may have been ignored by others who make up a part of the story.

We might question what it is exactly that we are supposed to learn from Tony—but within that very question is the word that is the key to an answer. Tony never stops learning about himself and about the world around him. Although his pursuit of the truth may be a pastime, he keeps his mind active by attempting to solve an enigma. There is still some greater understanding being built here, a step or two closer to figuring out what makes people tick and how the pains of the human condition can be assuaged. The novel closes with the lines “There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest” (163). These lines bring the narrative full circle and act as a refrain back to what was said in Old Joe Hunt's history class. As long as the mind is at a state of unrest, new questions will surface and new knowledge will accumulate.

Perhaps there is something in Tony's struggle that most readers can relate to on some essential level, regardless of age or nationality. Everyone wants to “get it” and few people can say they take a legitimate joy in being confused or deceived. The inevitable failings of memory and shakiness of supposedly objective forms of documentation will impact every human being at some time or another. What we seek in a world that is often bewildering and confusing is something to hold on to, something on which to anchor our experience and legitimize what we



live through. Everyone might not use the same structures that Tony does to help make sense of the human condition. Tony uses law, literature, and history as filters through which to understand his experience; others might turn to religion, visual art, music, education, or any number of other constructs. These frames and devices can make it easier to sort and organize the constant stream of contradictory data that enters our consciousness. If we believe White, Rideout, and Kermode, there is something naturally appealing to us about creating coherent narratives to order experience. All Tony wants is a story that makes his experience make sense to him, which is a desire he shares with the rest of humankind.

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