



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 8.031 (SJIF 2025)

POST-TRUTH AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY IN JULIAN BARNES 'THE SENSE OF AN ENDING'

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DOI No. **03.2021-11278686**

DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2582/08.2025-95779152/IRJHIS2508019>

Abstract:

In the age of post-truth, Julian Barnes's "The Sense of an Ending" emerges as a prescient text interrogating the construction of personal and historical truth through memory. The novel's protagonist, Tony Webster, reconstructs his past from fragmented, unreliable recollections, challenging the possibility of objective history. Barnes's narrative blurs the lines between fact and interpretation, foregrounding how subjective experience and emotional filtering shape one's understanding of past events. This paper explores the role of post-truth in personal memory and collective history as dramatized in the novel, drawing on contemporary theory and critical voices to analyze Barnes's techniques. Through close reading, it unveils the interplay of memory, documentation, guilt, and narrative, revealing the protagonist's shifting grasp of reality as emblematic of a larger historical epistemic uncertainty. The research engages with narratology, philosophy of history, and reader-response theory, analyzing how textual gaps, contradictory testimony, and self-deception parallel challenges in modern historiography. Barnes's novel is positioned as both a case study and critique of post-truth culture, urging readers to question the veracity of their narratives and to contemplate the ethical stakes of historical self-construction.

Keywords: post-truth, memory, historiography, unreliable narrator, subjective history)

Introduction:

"The Sense of an Ending" (2011) by Julian Barnes serves as a profound meditation on memory, truth, and history, addressing themes that resonate deeply within the contemporary post-truth era. At its core, the novel explores the elusive nature of personal and collective memory and the ways in which history is recounted and reconstructed—not as fixed fact but as subjective narrative shaped by perspective, emotion, and power.

Post-truth, a term increasingly invoked in recent discourse, refers to a cultural and political

environment where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. According to Lee McIntyre (2018), post-truth signifies "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Earlier, Ralph Keyes (2004) highlighted how post-truth entails a societal condition in which traditional notions of truth give way to relativism, skepticism, and manipulation, creating fertile ground for misinformation and distrust. In this context, truth becomes mutable, vulnerable to distortion and selective remembrance.

Barnes's novel illustrates these concerns through the story of Tony Webster, whose attempts to piece together and make sense of his past reveal how memory is inherently unstable and prone to alteration. The narrative unfolds through Tony's reflections, fragmented recollections, and the letters and diaries that complicate his understanding of events and relationships. This process mirrors the post-truth condition by demonstrating that personal and historical truths are not absolute but are constructed, contested, and susceptible to reinterpretation. The novel's engagement with history also echoes post-truth anxieties. It emphasizes that history is often written by the victors and influenced by the selective memories of survivors, challenging the notion of an objective past. Barnes's articulation of history as "that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (P.17) encapsulates the fragility of truth itself. The novel thereby captures the uneasy coexistence of fact and fiction in both personal recollection and public record, embodying the broader cultural challenges posed by post-truth.

Post-Truth: Definitions and Theoretical Context:

The concept of "post-truth" signals a cultural moment where objective facts are routinely subordinated to emotional appeal and personal conviction. As Matthew d'Ancona (2017) asserts, the "post-truth" era is marked by "a decline in the value of truth as society's reserve currency," where public discourse is shaped more by emotions and personal beliefs than by verifiable facts. He describes this as an epistemological crisis that manifests when relativism masquerades as skepticism and "truth is out, emotion is in". Lee McIntyre (2018) defines post-truth as a condition "characterized by the subordination of facts to emotions and personal beliefs, often for political gain," highlighting how objective facts are "less influential than appeals to emotion and personal belief." (P.5) McIntyre connects this phenomenon to cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and notes the amplification of misinformation by social media and the decline of traditional media. Ralph Keyes, in *The Post-Truth Era*, contends that post-truth involves moving beyond factual accuracy into "the kingdom of the narration of truth," where embellished or "truer than truth" stories take precedence over strict exactitude. For Keyes, post-truth results in post-veracity, a general lack of trust, not in the content of claims but in their purposes and effects, as manipulation and creative storytelling become socially normalized.

Barnes's Novel in Post-Truth Context:

Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* epitomizes the blurred boundaries between fact and emotional conviction that define the post-truth era. The novel's narrator, Tony Webster, is candid about the fallibility and selectivity of memory, openly questioning not only the accuracy of his recollections but the very possibility of historical objectivity. He admits: "Memory can always throw up surprises as a lawyer's letter is about to prove... what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed." (P.10) This ambiguity between fact and fiction places, as Hutcheon theorizes, historiographic metafiction is a genre that "blends historical facts with metafictional elements, self-consciously drawing attention to its own status as a constructed narrative." (P.5) Such works challenge the traditional "objectivity" of history writing, highlighting the subjective and often unreliable process by which both personal and collective histories are constructed. Barnes foregrounds the act of storytelling and the constructedness of personal and historical truths, making the reader aware of the limitations and prejudices shaping seemingly factual accounts. A critic, Jerome Bruner's insights on narrative identity illuminate these dynamics further. Bruner argues that "self-construction is preeminently a metacognitive pursuit"—we shape the stories of who we are by actively organizing memory and experience into coherent, if selective, narratives. These self-narratives do not passively record reality but instead "impose bold and imaginative metastructures on local details," achieving meaningful coherence at the cost of fidelity to factual events. Barnes's Tony, in the act of retelling his past, exemplifies Bruner's understanding that "we impose order, sense, and continuity on our experiences by narrativizing them," even as the accuracy of those narratives may be deeply compromised.

The novel's memory functions not as a transparent archive of past events but as a constructed, fluid narrative subject to constant revision and manipulation. This is made clear early in the novel through Tony Webster's revealing admission: "what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed" (P.3). This statement encapsulates the novel's central theme of memory's unreliability, marking memory as an inherently subjective reconstruction rather than an objective record. Tony acknowledges that memory is a creative act, editorial and selective, shaped by personal desires, fears, and the need for self-protection. The narrative itself is fragmented, reflecting the disjointed nature of memory. Tony pieces together his personal history in uneven, episodic jumps rather than a linear chronology, which mirrors the way memories are often recalled—not as sequential facts but as emotionally charged scenes isolated by time and significance. This fragmentation implies that memory is not a faithful replay of events but a piecemeal construction subject to omission and emphasis. Tony's selective memory acts as a self-protective mechanism, filtering out painful or inconvenient truths that threaten his self-image or emotional stability. He consciously edits and reshapes the narrative to sustain a more palatable version of his past. This idea

resonates with Alison Lee's observation that "Memory in Barnes becomes a personal history re-edited with every retelling" (Lee 154). Each recollection is not simply a retrieval of fixed data but an active re-creation that alters the original event's emotional and factual contours. Memory here is dynamic, fluctuating with the passage of time and the teller's psychological needs, calling into question the very possibility of stable self-knowledge.

Tony's reliability as a narrator is deeply compromised by this process. A clear example surfaces when he recalls a youthful conversation with a friend, stating, "This is my best memory of their exchange. We finished school, promised lifelong friendship, and went our separate ways" (P. 21). The phrase "my best memory" signals that Tony is aware of his role in selectively crafting his past, choosing the version that best suits his desires at that moment. It reveals a tension between the "best memory" and actual events, highlighting that the narrative he presents is filtered through subjective longing and constructed idealism rather than straightforward fact. The novel persistently questions Tony's capacity for honest self-examination, as his selective recollections and rationalizations serve to shield him from guilt and uncomfortable truths. His narration is imbued with self-deception, as he unconsciously edits his story for coherence and self-justification. This makes him an unreliable narrator, compelling readers to read between the lines and question the integrity of the narrated reality.

The inherent instability of historical truth is powerfully underscored by the statement: "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (P.17). This insight highlights the complex interplay between subjective memory and objective evidence, suggesting that history—both personal and collective—is always a provisional construction, suspended between elusive recollections and incomplete records. The physical documents such as letters and diaries are presented as tangible attempts to anchor truth, yet their failure to provide clarity exposes history's fragility. The letter from Adrian's mother and the diary that Tony later discovers serve as key pieces of "evidence" meant to authenticate or correct memories. Instead of resolving past ambiguities, these documents deepen the mystery and ambiguity. The letter's tone and its partial disclosure provoke more questions than answers, showing how testimony can be partial, selective, or intentionally misleading. Similarly, the diary, far from offering a clear, unassailable narrative, is itself a mediated, authored text—framed by Adrian's perspective and emotional investment. This mediation reveals how even documentary evidence is subject to the author's biases, silences, and narrative choices.

The failure of these documents to provide closure deeply aligns with Frank Kermode's theory of narrative endings and closure. Kermode argues in *The Sense of an Ending* (his theoretical work, not the novel) that humans inherently seek "ending" as a way to impose meaning and coherence on their experience, to move from "chaos to cosmos." Endings confer a sense of order and

definitive interpretation, mitigating the anxiety of unresolved or fragmented experience. Yet Kermode also stresses the impossibility of complete closure, as any ending is provisional and constructed retrospectively. The “end” narratively transforms chaos into order but never eradicates the underlying complexity or uncertainty. Barnes’s novel dramatizes this tension through Tony’s encounter with documents that both promise and deny closure. The letter and diary function as narrative devices that frustrate the possibility of definitive historical truth, reminding readers that personal and historical narratives are contingent, shaped by gaps, silences, and contradictions. As Tony tries to make sense of the past, these textual artifacts highlight the discordance between lived experience and recorded testimony. They illustrate Kermode’s paradox: the desire for closure in history is eternally thwarted by the mutable, mediated nature of memory and documentation.

The novel serves as a profound exploration of memory’s fluidity and the ethical quandaries inherent in rewriting one’s personal history. Tony Webster’s narrative demonstrates how the process of remembering is not merely an innocent recollection of facts but often an unconscious and self-serving reconstruction shaped by present emotional needs and psychological defenses. By selectively editing his memories, Tony protects his self-image and avoids confronting uncomfortable truths—a pattern that reveals the ethical complications of post-truth memory. Tony’s rewriting of events is largely unconscious; he is not a manipulative deceiver but rather a human subject grappling with the inconsistencies and gaps in his recollection. For example, his selective forgetting and rationalizations serve as defense mechanisms that shield him from guilt and remorse. This tendency illustrates how memories, particularly traumatic or shameful ones, are often edited or suppressed to preserve a coherent sense of self. The narrative’s unfolding demonstrates that Tony’s constructed past aligns more with his desired identity than with objective reality.

Barnes uses this dynamic to caution readers about the broader cultural and ethical implications of substituting comfortable fiction for uncomfortable fact. The novel’s post-truth context suggests that when individual and collective memories prioritize emotional satisfaction over factual accuracy, the integrity of history itself is compromised. This is not just an epistemological dilemma but a moral issue: rewriting history to suit contemporaneous needs can perpetuate denial, injustice, and misunderstanding. A reviewer, Brian Finney elucidates this concern, noting that “Barnes’s fiction demonstrates how we perpetually rewrite our past in order to accommodate present needs” (Finney 212). This insight captures the novel’s central tension between fluid memory and ethical responsibility. The act of rewriting is portrayed as a universal human impulse, but Barnes problematizes this impulse by exposing its consequences: distortions of truth that can harm others and erode the possibility of genuine accountability. Tony’s retrospective narrative, fraught with omissions and self-deceptions, becomes a microcosm of post-truth culture’s moral failures. Through Tony’s unreliable narration, Barnes critiques the seductive appeal of comforting narratives that

obscure difficult realities. The novel invites readers to reflect critically on their own memories and the stories they tell themselves about the past. It foregrounds the ethical challenge of striving for honesty in personal and historical accounts, advocating for the courage to confront uncomfortable facts rather than retreating into self-serving fictions.

Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* has elicited extensive critical analysis for its intricate exploration of memory, the nature of history, and the unreliability of narrative voice. Critics consistently emphasize how the novel interrogates not only what we remember but the mechanisms through which memory and history are constructed and how unreliable narrators challenge fixed truths. As Gekoski insightfully observes, "Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* interrogates not only what we know but how we claim to know it, exposing the ethical fissures in personal and collective reminiscence" (Gekoski 294). This points to the novel's ethical concerns regarding memory's dual role as both preservative and distortive. A critical analysis published in *ScienceDirect* frames the narrative voice as paradigmatic of postmodernist concerns about the plurality and contingency of truth, emphasizing how Barnes destabilizes a singular historical reality through Tony's subjective account and fragmented memory. The study notes that the novel exposes the "post-truth condition" wherein "truth becomes a negotiable construct shaped by emotion, bias, and selective recollection," thereby problematizing the very notion of reliable testimony in history and personal identity.

The statement, "What was the line Adrian used to quote? 'History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation'" (P. 85), lays bare the novel's skeptical stance toward historical truth. This line acknowledges that history is never purely objective; it emerges from an uneasy negotiation between flawed human memory and incomplete or biased records. Adrian's quoted epigram draws attention to the provisional and constructed nature of all historical narratives, emphasizing that history is less about certainty and more about compromise. Subjectivity is central here—the "imperfections of memory" acknowledge the individual's limited and personal perspective, while "inadequacies of documentation" highlight the external constraints and partiality inherent in recorded evidence. This tension reverberates throughout the novel, framing history as a contested space shaped by interpretation rather than definitive facts.

The question posed later—"How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts?" (P.150)—directly addresses the unreliability of memory and the human tendency toward self-editing. The rhetorical questions emphasize that memory is not a transparent recounting but an act of continuous revision influenced by present needs and desires. The verbs "adjust," "embellish," and "make sly cuts" suggest conscious or unconscious manipulations that shape narratives to preserve self-esteem or emotional comfort. Barnes foregrounds the idea that our autobiographical stories are mutable performances rather than fixed truths, which problematizes the

narrator's—and by extension, everyone's—claim to authentic knowledge of their past. The confession, “All I could plead was that I had been its author then, but was not its author now” (P.154), poignantly captures the theme of remorse intertwined with revision. Tony admits accountability for past actions and the narratives built around them, yet he simultaneously distances his present self from that authored past. This duality conveys a profound awareness of self-transformation and the ethical implications of memory. It communicates the tension between the permanence of one's past deeds and the fluidity of interpretation and responsibility over time, highlighting how personal narrative is an evolving construct subject to re-evaluation and repentance. In the wake of events such as Brexit, where political discourse was rife with contested facts and emotive rhetoric, *The Sense of an Ending* anticipates the societal tendency to favor comforting narratives over uncomfortable realities. The novel's protagonist, Tony, exemplifies how individuals rewrite their pasts to reconcile present identities, paralleling how public discourse reshapes or denies evidence to sustain partisan beliefs. The rise of digital media exacerbates this phenomenon by amplifying misinformation, echo chambers, and selective attention—conditions that undermine collective trust in historical truth and expert knowledge. The novel masterfully dramatizes the slipperiness of historical knowing, revealing how memory and documentation are inevitably fragmented, subjective, and prone to distortion. Through Tony's unreliable narration and the novel's ambiguous narrative closure, Barnes exposes the fragile boundary between fact and fiction, challenging readers to question the certainty of both personal and collective histories.

In the post-truth age, this dramatization underscores an ethical imperative: to confront inconvenient truths—about our past actions, memories, and identities—rather than retreat into comforting fictions. Such honesty fosters accountability, deepens self-understanding, and resists the relativism that threatens public discourse and historical integrity. Future research could further explore the interplay between narrative form and post-truth epistemologies, examining how literary techniques—like historiographic metafiction and unreliable narration—mediate memory and truth. Investigating these intersections promises richer insights into literature's role in negotiating truth, identity, and ethics today.

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