

# An Abundance of Truths:

How Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* and *The Only Story* prove that postmodernism is not dead.

BA Thesis

Puk van der Zanden

BA werkstuk Engelse Letterkunde (Engelse Taal en Cultuur)

Supervisor: Usha Wilbers

June 30, 2021

ENGELSE TAAL EN CULTUUR

Teacher who will receive this document: Usha Wilbers

Title of document: An Abundance of Truths: How Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* and *The Only Story* prove that postmodernism is not dead.

Name of course: BA werkstuk Engelse Letterkunde

Date of submission: 30/06/2021

Please read the Faculty's Declaration concerning Fraud and Plagiarism preceding this cover sheet. By signing this cover sheet, you also acknowledge your knowledge of and agreement with its terms.

The work submitted here is the sole responsibility of the undersigned, who has neither committed plagiarism nor colluded in its production.

Signed

Name of student: Puk van der Zanden

Student number:

## **Abstract**

There has been a decline in the use of postmodern themes and aspects since the 2000's. According to critics the postmodern values no longer corresponded with those of society. However, does this mean that postmodernism is now no longer a practiced art movement? Julian Barnes is a well-known British author who often incorporated postmodern themes and techniques to his writing. Though postmodernism is often claimed to be a dead movement, Barnes is still using postmodern aspects in his more recent novels. In this thesis *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) and *The Only Story* (2019) will be discussed and analysed to show that postmodernism remains a relevant art movement in literature. This thesis aims to contribute to the discussion regarding the proclaimed end of postmodernism.

Key words:

Postmodernism, metamodernism, Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), *The Only Story* (2019)

## Table of contents

Introduction .....	5
Chapter 1: theoretical framework .....	8
Chapter 2: <i>The Sense of an Ending</i> .....	12
Chapter 3: <i>The Only Story</i> .....	18
Conclusion .....	23
Bibliography .....	25

## Introduction

The end of postmodernism has been predicted since the 1980's by artists, historians and critics. The social forces that once drove this art movement now seem to be weakened due to the changing values of society.<sup>1</sup> Postmodernism is known for its rejection of grand narratives, especially history, and general scepticism of reason as the postmodernists argue that there is no universal truth. The movement is represented in literature by the use of fragmented narratives and the embracement of absurd and meaningless confusion. Such reoccurring themes and writing styles that once portrayed a chaotic post-war world now seem to be becoming irrelevant to our current society as the metamodernist art movement is on the rise. Metamodernism seems to portray the new societal values of authenticity and sincerity that postmodernism disregarded.

However, is it really the case that postmodernism is ending now that metamodernism is coming to light? Author Nick Bentley states that postmodernism has ended because perhaps its main ideas had become widely accepted by the public, thus achieving any goal it might have had.<sup>2</sup> But would that not mean that postmodernism became a permanent part of our society and it therefore never really ended? Some argue that postmodernism had an abrupt ending due to material events, such as financial crises and digital revolutions.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, with the rejection of authenticity and having confusion and scepticism as its focal point, postmodernism played a large role in the lead up to the so-called "post-truth era." The post-truth era is a philosophical and political concept that was largely unknown before 2016, but has since then exploded into media and public discourse. It refers to the digital age we live in today where there is a thin line between fact and fiction, with large amounts fake news as a result. The excessive abundance of fake news full of dishonesty and cynicism means that the public opinion is not as much influenced by objective facts as it is by personal beliefs and emotions.<sup>4</sup> This ties in with postmodernism as it reflects the postmodernist ideal of questioning grand narratives. Questioning concepts such as history and science was one of the forces that drove postmodernism and this is also evident in the post-truth era. This era also

---

<sup>1</sup> Alison Gibbons, "Postmodernism is dead. What comes next?" The Times Literary Supplement Limited, The TLS, Accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/>

<sup>2</sup> Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson, *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, no.1 (2010): 2, Accessed March 9, 2021. DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677

<sup>4</sup> Stephan Lewandowsky, et al, "Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and coping with the post-truth era," *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* (2017): 2, Accessed March 8, 2021. DOI: 10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.08

conforms to the idea that there is not a universal truth, which was a prominent train of thought in the postmodern movement. All in all, since the post-truth era still has a prominent influence on our current society and judging by the fact that postmodernism had a large influence on the post-truth era, this means that postmodern beliefs are still present in contemporary society.

We can come to the same conclusion of the remaining relevance of postmodernism when looking at the rise of metamodernism, as metamodernism can be said to be a combination of modernism and postmodernism. It appears to be a balance between the modern hope and postmodern disappointment.<sup>5</sup> The modernist ideal of authenticity is also making a comeback in metamodernism, and though this is a theme that directly opposes the postmodern mindset it can be argued that that is exactly why relates to postmodernism. Paul Giles, professor of English at the University of Sydney, states that the comeback of authenticity can be seen as a rejection of postmodern ideas, when in reality the ‘new’ authenticity is more so shaped by postmodern scepticism regarding grand narratives.<sup>6</sup> The mere idea of postmodernism inherently being part of metamodernism suggests that postmodern beliefs and ideals are still apparent in today’s society.

Metamodernism is still a young and argued academic concept. Yet, a fair amount of research articles debating the new concept have been written about the topic and its correlations with postmodernism. When looking at articles specifically about the end of postmodernism, it has to be pointed out that most articles share somewhat the same opinion. Namely, that postmodernism is ending or that it already ended many years ago. This thesis, however, will try to look at the end of postmodernism from another perspective. It will be questioned whether postmodernism has actually ended or is currently ending due to the rise of metamodernism. To research this topic two of author Julian Barnes’ novels will be analysed and compared. These are *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) and *The Only Story* (2018). Both novels share the similar themes of love, time, and memory and have a similar plot, which is why it will be interesting to compare these two specific novels as such grand narratives are often a focal point in postmodern writings. The question this thesis will therefore try to answer is whether the two mentioned novels written by Julian Barnes contradict the predicted demise of postmodernism when looking at the attitude towards the grand narratives of history,

---

<sup>5</sup> Dali Kadagishvili, “Metamodernism as we perceive it (quick review),” *European Scientific Journal* 2 (2013): 564, accessed March 23, 2021. file:///C:/Users/Puk%20van%20der%20Zanden/Downloads/2400-Article%20Text-7181-1-10-20140114.pdf

<sup>6</sup> Paul Giles, et al, “The Pathos of Authenticity. American passions of the real,” *Journal of American Studies* 44, no.4 (2010): 18, accessed March 8, 2021, <http://dx.doi.org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/S0021875810001799>

memory and truth, as well as the use of postmodern writing techniques. This thesis will uncover how postmodernism continues to coexist next to modernism in the works of Barnes and how this shows that metamodernism does not necessarily mean the end of postmodernism, which critics have been predicting for so long. Therefore, this research will show that Barnes' novels *The Sense of an Ending* and *The Only Story* provide evidence for the continuation of postmodernism. It will show that postmodernism has not completely ended due to the rise of metamodernism and still coexists next to modernism in these novels.

The thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter will delve deeper into the proclaimed end of postmodernism. In the second and third chapter the novels *The Sense of an Ending* and *The Only Story* will be discussed, respectively, with regards to history, memory and truth and postmodern writing techniques.

## Chapter 1: theoretical framework

This chapter will discuss the ongoing debate about the end of postmodernism. It will focus on how this debate started and the current discussion on postmodernism. As argued in the introductory chapter, critics have seen the end of postmodernism coming since the 1980's, but what made postmodernism seem so susceptible to ending from so early on? Many critics, such as Ali Rattansi and Linda Hutcheon, seem to agree that postmodernism had inherent issues within their set of ideals and values. This is why critics predicted the end of postmodernism; in their eyes the art movement no longer gave an accurate representation of society. One postmodern value that seems to come forth most often is the idea of moral relativism, especially concerning history and science. Postmodernists discard the thought of a historical and scientific consensus. Linda Hutcheon, a Canadian academic who works in the field of literary theory and criticism, states that there is a general agreement that postmodernism is ahistorical, meaning it lacks historical perspective. According to Hutcheon, this statement is often used as an attack against contemporary art and, therefore, postmodernism. The remark can be used against the art movement as since the 1980's history has once again become a cultural issue.<sup>7</sup> With the ahistorical element, which postmodernism praises, Hutcheon argued that postmodernism was already falling outside of the standards of society in the 1980's, which means that in her eyes the movement no longer represented society's values and was therefore destined to end. In the same article Hutcheon mentions an important quote: "Novelists and playwrights, natural scientists and social scientists, poets, prophets, pundits, and philosophers of many persuasions have manifested an intense hostility to historical thought. Many of our contemporaries are extraordinarily reluctant to acknowledge the reality of past time and prior events, and stubbornly resistant to all arguments for the possibility or utility of historical knowledge." This was said by German historian Fritz Fischer in 1970. Hutcheon states that the problematizing challenges of the ahistorical theme in postmodernism is so prominent that it forced critics to take notice<sup>8</sup>, and the quote is an example of this. Much like the quote, it would often be argued by critics that history is of great importance and cannot simply be denied. The rejection of historical thought was (and still is) seen as a genuine problem of postmodernism. A problem that has to come to an end according to Hutcheon, because the way the postmodernists view the grand narrative of history no longer

---

<sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "The Postmodern Problematizing of History," *English Studies in Canada*, XIV, no.4 (1988): 365. Accessed March 2, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "The Postmodern Problematizing of History," *English Studies in Canada*, XIV, no.4 (1988): 366. Accessed March 2, 2021.



aligns with the societal view on history. All in all, the argument that postmodernist ideals are not an accurate representation of society was one of the reasons as to why critics such as Hutcheon and Fischer could see the end of postmodernism coming. Not only did they see the art movement ending in the foreseeable future because of its lack of representative value, but due to the, in their eyes, ‘problematic nature’ of the postmodern values caused by moral relativism they viewed the end of postmodernism as something that had to be achieved. Postmodernism was a problem to society that had to be solved.

Though postmodernism received criticism from early on, the 1980’s was not the end for the art movement. In fact, the 1990’s can be referred to as a period of popular postmodernism. In this period postmodernism became part of mainstream culture, which mainly expressed itself through film, e.g. *The Truman Show* (1998) and *The Matrix* (1999), and literature. It was a decade where many postmodern writers, including Julian Barnes, established themselves as the new literary establishment in Britain. They stood at the front of contemporary fiction as postmodern ideals became dominant literary practices.<sup>9</sup> Though the ‘90s proved to be profitable for the postmodern writers, things changed in the 2000’s when writers became disinterested in the often repeated postmodern writing style. Since writers started going into other directions with their work this meant that there was a decline in the number of postmodern writers and written works.<sup>10</sup> Still, this did not mean the definitive end of postmodernism. Some writers would stay true to the postmodern ideals and though many others would no longer identify as postmodernists specifically, they would often keep postmodern characteristics in their works. As author Nick Bentley mentioned in the introduction to their book about contemporary British fiction, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the ideas of postmodernism had become widely accepted, meaning that postmodernism is engrained in society and therefore also in the works of contemporary writers.<sup>11</sup>

According to Bentley, Hubble and Wilson another reason for the seeming end of postmodernism is the return to modernist ideals. Writers such as Ian McEwan and Zadie Smith consciously apply modernist styles of writing in their works. For example, the use of interior monologues and intertextuality.<sup>12</sup> Authors David James and Urmila Seshagiri wrote

---

<sup>9</sup> Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson, *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 14-15.

<sup>10</sup> Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson, *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, 19.

an article about narratives of metamodernism and said the following about the current rise of modernism: ‘‘At a moment when postmodern disenchantment no longer dominates critical discourse or creative practice, the central experiments and debates of twentieth-century modernist culture have acquired new relevance to the moving horizon of contemporary literature.’’<sup>13</sup> This demonstrates how the re-emergence of modernism can be seen as a reaction to the postmodernist movement. Authors try to go back to the ideals of modernism where there is a larger focus on the themes such as hope and individualism that postmodernism abandoned. Though this does again show that there is a general decline in the use of postmodern ideals, the return of modernism does not necessarily mean the end of postmodernism. Instead we can see the movements merging in metamodernism.

So far it has been established that the end of postmodernism has been foreseen since the 1980’s due to its abundance of moral relativism. And though postmodernism was revitalized in the 1990s, it was quickly followed by a re-emerging interest in modernism, which we now see in metamodernism. This leaves us to wonder how postmodernism and its predicted end is perceived in current times. Much like in the 1980s critics think lowly of postmodernism as to them it does more harm than good, especially with regards to moral relativism as this led to the post truth era. Yet in this day and age the main argument against postmodernism puts more focus on the influence of postmodernism on the post-truth era and how the art movement assisted the post-truth era into coming to existence. American writer and literary theorist Ihab Hassan states that ‘‘if truth is dead, everything is permitted,’’ and in his opinion this has to change. Hassan agrees with the postmodernist idea that we no longer share an absolute or foundational truth, but he does not want this absence of universal truth to license self-deception and tendentiousness.<sup>14</sup> In his conclusion he finally asks for postmodernists to ‘‘rub their eyes, without undue reflexivity, and without prejudice to Creation.’’<sup>15</sup> His words show that it is the opinion of several critics that postmodernists have a negative influence as their notion of truth leads to self-deception. Hassan wants postmodernists to ‘‘rub their eyes,’’ which indicates that he thinks postmodernists do not see the world in the correct way.

---

<sup>13</sup> David James and Urmila Seshagiri, ‘‘Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution,’’ *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (2014): 87-88. Accessed April 6, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Ihab Hassan, ‘‘Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Truth’’ *MODERN GREEK STUDIES* 11, (2003): 307-308. Accessed April 3, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Ihab Hassan, ‘‘Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Truth’’ *MODERN GREEK STUDIES* 11, (2003): 314. Accessed April 3, 2021.

Another critic that argued the negative impact of postmodernism on the notion of truth is philosopher Rebecca Goldstein. During an interview with The Institute of Art and Ideas she argues that postmodernism has led to the post-truth world today and continues to state: “I think that this (postmodernist view of science) had a very, to my mind, deleterious effect and prepared the way for thinking there is no truth and also for mistrusting experts. For some truths, not all truths, but for some truths we need experts.”<sup>16</sup> Much like Hassan Goldstein argues that postmodernists have a wrong perception of the notion of truth and so the art movement is inherently flawed. Both critics demonstrate how in this day and age postmodernism is seen as the originator of the post-truth era, and since the post-truth era is widely perceived as a negative phase of society, this negativity flows over into the present and ongoing negative perception of postmodernism.

All in all, it can be said that the reputation of postmodernism has been going downhill since the 2000's. Though in the '80s the moral relativism already worried some critics, the rise of the post-truth era again sparked feelings of disdain towards the postmodern movement to the extent where critics are actively advocating for the end of postmodernism. However, even though postmodernism has been a heavily criticized art movement for the past few decades and is still being criticized till this day, this thesis will show that postmodernism has not yet come to the expected end. As stated by Bentley Hubble and Wilson, postmodernism has become an engrained part of society, so does that not mean postmodernism will not simply end? The two novels of author Julian Barnes that will be discussed illustrate that postmodernism is still relevant and that postmodern aspects can continue to co-exist next to the returning interest in modernism.

---

<sup>16</sup> The Institute of Art and Ideas. “The Problem with the Postmodern | Rebecca Goldstein.” *Youtube* video, 02:50-03:11. May 7, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La7VhaPGVG8>

## Chapter 2: *The Sense of an Ending*

This chapter will focus on the novel *The Sense of an Ending*, which was first published in 2011, and argues that it still contains plenty of postmodern themes and styles despite the supposed demise of postmodernism. The novel follows the story of Tony Webster, a man in his sixties, who looks back onto his life. The novel starts with Tony recalling his college years, focusing on his friends and his romantic relationship with Veronica. When later in life he receives a letter from Veronica's late mother he is forced to reconnect with Veronica and confront his past.

Firstly, it must be noted that the novel displays postmodern aspects from the very beginning. The first line directs the audience to the theme of moral relativism: "I remember, in no particular order:." <sup>17</sup> It contains the postmodern writing feature of stating something and then undermining it. This feature can be connected to the postmodern idea that there are no universal truths. Much like the truth, statements can be made but also undermined. The given quote also already indicates that Tony is presenting himself as an unreliable narrator. He says he remembers, but already points to the fact that his memories are disorganised. Tony mentions this even more explicitly a few lines further by stating: "(...) what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed." <sup>18</sup> Next to the confused time line of his memories, the audience now also knows that Tony does not know the entire truth and that even his recollection of the story might be flawed. It is therefore up to the reader to decide to what extent Tony's narrative can be trusted.

The first page of the novel also contains a list of Tony's memories, which all share a general theme of water. This brings us to the recurring motif of water in the novel, which seems to symbolise the fluidity of time. The idea that time is fluid is a popular idea amongst postmodernists, as it is part of the general postmodern ideal that everyone experiences their own reality and everything accepted as reality is merely a representation of it. This means that there is no way of actually knowing reality as it really is, if there actually even is one fixed reality. Rejection of strict rules that create our world is a fundamental postmodern principle. The world appears differently to all of us and therefore set structures, such as time, are relative to each person. That is to say that time is fluid and not set in stone as it differs for

---

<sup>17</sup> Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Vintage, 2012), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 3.

everyone.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the novel water is used to symbolically express the postmodern idea of time being fluid. As previously mentioned, the first example of this can be found on the first page of the novel. Tony lists certain memories that all share the theme of water or fluids in various ways. For example, there are mentions of sperm, steam, rivers and bathwater. All these mentioned memories incorporate liquids and this could implicate that memories are fluid and therefore relative to each person. This idea is amplified by Tony stating that he remembers these moments, but “in no particular order.” This is concrete evidence, given by Tony, that memories are fickle and that the perception of time in one’s mind can change over time. This list and said statement are therefore directly correlated to the postmodern idea that time is fluid. Another example that proves this point is the way the mentioned liquids in the list are described. For instance, the river is described as “rushing nonsensically upstream,”<sup>20</sup> which gives the impression that the water cannot be taken hold of as it is “rushing” and that the way it moves simply does not make sense. The bathwater is said to be “behind a locked door.”<sup>21</sup> This implicates that the water (and so also memories and time) are part of the subconscious and cannot be controlled. Humans will never be able to reach behind this locked door get a hold of time. Both given examples of the descriptions of water could therefore also be applied to the way postmodernists view the concepts of memory and time. It cannot be controlled and does not move in the same repeating pattern for everyone. It is part of everybody’s subconscious and so one cannot get a hold of time.

Another major symbol in the novel that connects water to memory and time is that of the Severn Bore. This is a tidal bore, which means that the incoming tide forms a wave that travels in the opposite direction of the river. Tony, his at the time girlfriend Veronica and Tony’s friends from college witnessed the Severn Bore one night Bristol. While watching the wave move against the natural direction of the river Tony realises that time seems to be reversing itself. He describes the moment as “unsettling because it looked and felt quietly wrong, as if some small lever of the universe had been pressed, and here, just for these minutes, nature was reversed, and time with it.”<sup>22</sup> Tony explains that in this particular moment the laws of time no longer seem to apply. Previous to watching the bore he even mentions that the river is “flowing gently down to the sea as all good rivers do.”<sup>23</sup> This

---

<sup>19</sup> Tatyana Fedosova, “Reflection of Time in Postmodern Literature,” *Athens Journal of Philology* 2, no. 2 (2015): 79, doi: 10.30958/ajp.2-2-1

<sup>20</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 35.

indicates that when the river follows its regular pattern it is obeying the conventional laws of nature and time. Yet, the Severn Bore literally reverses these laws and can therefore be seen as a symbol for the postmodern thought that time and history are relative and that it does not follow a single structure as societal norms dictate. Though, the irony must be noted in the following quote: ‘‘The local news used to print a timetable, indicating where best to catch it and when’’.<sup>24</sup> This indicates that even these special moments of a reversal of time are structurally timed by nature. Still, this does not take away the effect the tidal bore has on Tony. The feeling that nature and time were reversed is something that seemed to stick with Tony until his elderly years. Therefore, the Severn Bore is a symbol for the fluidity of time.

In addition to the symbolism of water, the narrator also explicitly mentions the postmodern idea that time is relative. He states: ‘‘And yet it takes only the smallest pleasure or pain to teach us time’s malleability. Some emotions speed it up, others slow it down; occasionally it seems to go missing – until the eventual point when it really does go missing, never to return.’’<sup>25</sup> Here Tony first explicitly introduces his audience to the idea that time is relative. He states that he is aware that people experience particular moments differently as people’s emotions differ in every situation. This can also be read as an affirmation that Tony is an unreliable narrator. Tony shows that he knows memories of a particular moment vary, depending on how everyone who experienced that moment felt. Therefore, he knows his own memories do not show the reader the entire story, but merely the story from his personal perspective.

The idea that Tony is an unreliable narrator is further expanded throughout the novel. Unreliable narration is often used as a tool by postmodernists<sup>26</sup> as a way to convey the postmodern idea that there is no universal truth. This is no different for Julian Barnes. Everyone can be unreliable in their own terms as memories can be deceitful. This then also ties into the idea of moral relativism, especially concerning history, because the written accounts of historical moments can also be flawed as the memory of one person cannot tell the full story. As for *The Sense of an Ending*, from the beginning it is made very clear that Tony cannot be fully trusted regarding the truth behind his story. Tony, being the narrator,

---

<sup>24</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Shelby Armstrong, ‘‘The Problem of the Human Narrator,’’ *Journal of Modern Literature* 32, no. 4 (2009): 142, [https://www-jstor-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/stable/pdf/10.2979/jmodelite.32.4.141.pdf?ab\\_segments=0%252FSYC-5770%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3A88ff0189644cea859e0442282c486e02](https://www-jstor-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/stable/pdf/10.2979/jmodelite.32.4.141.pdf?ab_segments=0%252FSYC-5770%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3A88ff0189644cea859e0442282c486e02)

will often explicitly mention that what he is telling is a recollection from his own memory and he is aware that memories can change over time. An example of this is when he meets up with Veronica, forty years after last seeing her. Veronica asks him to tell her his life story and Tony starts this off by telling the audience the following: ‘‘I told her the story of my life. The version I tell myself.’’<sup>27</sup> Much like the first line of the novel, this quote is postmodern in the way that it will make a statement (‘‘the story of my life’’) and then proceed to undermine this by adding that this is the version Tony tells himself, meaning there is not simply one story of his life. Showing that Tony knows there are multiple versions of every story means that he is aware how the memories of multiple people can differ depending on how they experienced the situation.

However, it can be argued that the unreliable narration of Tony can be found more so in the way he narrates the story and handles all of his recollections instead of his own explicit mentions that his memories can be flawed. For example, Tony will often turn back to Adrian’s or his old history teacher Old Joe Hunt’s views on history: ‘‘Old Joe Hunt said when arguing with Adrian: that mental states can be inferred from actions. That’s in history – Henry VIII and all that. Whereas in the private life, I think the converse is true: that you can infer past actions from current mental states.’’<sup>28</sup> This quote states that someone’s psychological condition can give an indication of that person’s past. It is almost as if these views are mentioned to warn the reader that this is also the case for the story he is currently telling. It suggests that based on Tony’s current state the reader should be able to deduct that Tony is not telling his entire truth. The mental state that could be referred to here is that of denial. This is another example of how the unreliable narration comes forth through the way Tony tells the story and deals with his memories. The most prominent example in the novel where he seems to be in denial of what really happened is that of his visit to Veronica’s family. Tony knows his memories can be faulty and this results in the audience second-guessing his recollections. This is also the case for this specific memory. Tony describes his weekend with his in-law family and while doing so he sometimes ends up with scenarios that can come across as peculiar towards the reader. For example, one morning Tony wakes up and finds himself alone with her, as Veronica and the rest of the family are out for a walk. Tony mentions that Veronica told her family he was not coming along for the walk as he wanted to have a lay in. However, there is no way to actually know if it was truly Veronica who said

---

<sup>27</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 116.

<sup>28</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 44.

this. To the audience there is a possibility that the mother came up with this idea, simply because she wanted to spend time alone with Tony. More evidence for this argument can be found in the novel when Tony leaves the Ford household. When he is waving goodbye Sarah ‘‘responded, though not the way people normally do, with a raised palm, but with a sort of horizontal gesture at waist level.’’<sup>29</sup> As this is a rather mysterious and odd way of saying goodbye it could indicate that the two of them has something secret going on. The audience will realise that if this happened that there is a reasonable chance Sarah and Adrian also had sexual intercourse when Veronica and Adrian were a couple and that therefore Sarah could very well be the mother of young Adrian. The reason Tony never explicitly mentions he had sexual intercourse with Sarah is because he has repressed those memories, which according to research is natural human behaviour. American psychologist Daniel L. Schacter researched memory all his life and he found that many times we distort our memories. We tend to reconstruct our experiences by attributing to them emotions or knowledge we acquire after the event.<sup>30</sup> This recreating is exactly what Tony does to his memory of the weekend in order to keep himself from feeling ashamed and eventually to prevent anyone from getting hurt. This memory was quite the opposite to a perfect scenario, so he moulded it in such a way to make it less painful.

In the final parts of the novel Veronica takes Tony to a pub for him to meet a man. It is not clearly explained to Tony who this man is and so he is trying to figure out who he is and why Veronica brought Tony to meet him. The conclusion he reaches is that this is the son of his old friend Adrian and Sarah. Veronica and Adrian dated for a while until Adrian committed suicide, which would make sense according to Tony if Adrian and Sarah had sexual intercourse that resulted in a pregnancy. Though Tony is of the opinion that he has the situation figured out he does not once consider that young Adrian could be his own son, even though his memories show plenty of evidence that him and Veronica’s mother could have had sexual intercourse. This means that, much like the start of the novel, the novel also ends with the postmodern writing feature of stating something and then undermining it. It could even be argued that this entire novel is a statement, with an undermining ending. As mentioned, Tony keeps stating that his memory cannot be fully trusted: ‘‘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

---

<sup>29</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Maricel Oró Piqueras, ‘‘Memory revisited in Julian Barnes’ *The Sense of an Ending*,’’ *Coolabah*, no. 13 (2014): 90. Accessed April 25, 2021.



was happening at the time.’’<sup>31</sup> This quote illustrates that Tony knows details of memories can get lost. Yet, at the end of the novel he is certain that he solved the mystery of who young Adrian is, without considering that his memory could have failed him and that he might be wrong. Therefore, he constantly makes a statement about memory being an unreliable tool, and yet at the end of the novel he undermines this statement completely.

In conclusion, *The Sense of an Ending* has been shown to obtain a significant amount of postmodern features. The most prominent feature is that of truth. Through Tony’s narration Barnes manages to convince the idea that no one is ever certain about the truth, which raises the postmodern question of whether there even is one truth to all aspects of life. Barnes achieves this through the use of unreliable narration. Furthermore, the novel also incorporates the postmodern moral relativity concerning time. The reoccurring metaphor of water and explicit mentions by Tony confirm the postmodern idea that time is relative. Therefore, postmodernism is of great importance to the novel as its features help progress the narrative.

---

<sup>31</sup> Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 41.

### Chapter 3: *The Only Story*

The third and final chapter will discuss Julian Barnes' novel *The Only Story* (2019). This novel's story can, to some extent, be seen as similar to that of *The Sense of an Ending*. Much like the formerly discussed novel, *The Only Story* is narrated by an elderly man, who looks back on his life with a focus on his love life. The narrator of this novel is Paul and when he was nineteen years of age he fell in love with Susan Macleod, a married 48-year-old woman who has two daughters that are older than Paul himself. The novel tells the story of their relationship and the different stages it goes through. Throughout the novel, by reviewing his relationship with Susan, Paul tries to answer philosophical questions about the meaning of life and love.

The way that the concept of love is represented and discussed in the novel is an example of the postmodern aspect of moral relativism in *The Only Story*. Throughout his life, Paul attempts to find a universal truth for love. He has a notebook in which he gathers different quotes whenever he hears a new theory on love. Some of the quotes that Paul decides to write down in his notebook are those of well-known texts, such as: 'It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.'<sup>32</sup> This quote originates from the famous poem 'In Memoriam' by Alfred Tennyson. The incorporation of such quotes provides the novel with a level of intertextuality, which is another characteristic that is associated with postmodern writing as mentioned by Bentley, Hubble and Wilson in the first chapter. Furthermore, Linda Hutcheon stated the term 'postmodernism' should best be reserved for fiction that echoes texts of the past.<sup>33</sup> Barnes echoes texts like 'In Memoriam' by including its quotes, which, according to Hutcheon, means that it can be referred to as postmodern.

As mentioned, Paul uses a notebook to gather quotes on love. If, for any reason, throughout his love life Paul no longer agrees with the statement he will cross it out, meaning it is no longer true for him. He writes about the tradition saying that 'usually, this left him with only two or three temporary truths. Temporary, because the next time round, he would probably cross those out as well, leaving a different two or three now standing.'<sup>34</sup> This quote indicates that for the concept of love there is not simply one truth. Though it can be

---

<sup>32</sup> Julian Barnes, *The Only Story* (London: Vintage, 2019), 165.

<sup>33</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History," *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Eds. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, 3. <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/10252/1/TSpace0167.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Barnes, *The Only Story*, 161.

experienced in similar ways, everyone will have different experiences in regard to love. It even states that individual truths can change over time, meaning everyone has multiple truths in terms of love throughout their lifetime. This general theme in the novel correlates to the moral relativism of postmodernism; the larger concept of love does not have one true reality. Realities can vary, depending who experiences them. Paul eventually comes to the conclusion that love itself cannot be defined. He states: ‘‘Perhaps love could never be captured in a definition; it could only ever be captured in a story.’’<sup>35</sup> It can be argued that this message is exactly what the entire novel is trying to convey. After all, that is what the novel does; capturing the love story between Paul and Susan, without trying to make it feel universal and applicable to everyone. This is their personal love story.

What correlates with the postmodern ideal of moral relativism in relation to the depiction of love is the title of the novel itself. At first glance the title represents the idea that there is only one story and therefore only one truth. This opposes the previously discussed depiction of love in the novel and the postmodern ideal of moral relativism. The title completely discards the idea that different people can have different experiences of the same reality. Yet, throughout the novel the narrator makes it clear to the audience that in reality quite the opposite is true. Joan, Susan’s long-time friend that Paul occasionally visits, is the first to explicitly mention that ‘‘everyone has their love story. Everyone.’’<sup>36</sup> Later, she even indicates that each person has their own separate love story, meaning that even two people in the same relationship will experience different realities. This relates back to Paul’s conclusion that there is not one truth that applies to every single love story. He expands on this idea and states: ‘‘I have seen too many examples of lovers who, far from living in the truth, dwelt in some fantasy land where self-delusion and self-aggrandizement reigned, with reality nowhere to be found.’’<sup>37</sup> Paul proposes the idea that love and reality do not even seem to exist in the same realm for some people. In his eyes lovers appear to be living in their own world and so truth does not even play a part in their stories. Truth and reality do not apply to them. This again shows the idea of the moral relativism of love that the novel also conveyed through the previously discussed use of the notebook. Next to the fact that it shows this postmodern ideal, it is also an example of the same postmodern writing feature found on the first page in *The Sense of an Ending*; Paul makes a statement and then undermines it. He makes the statement

---

<sup>35</sup> Barnes, *The Only Story*, 206

<sup>36</sup> Barnes, *The Only Story*, 36.

<sup>37</sup> Barnes, *The Only Story*, 134.

that there is only one story in the title of the novel. However, the novel is written in such a way that it undermines its own title.

Overall, Paul seems to be careful about the range of people he uses when talking about lovers. He is aware that everyone has different experiences and yet he states: ‘‘But perhaps this is an illusion all lovers have about themselves: they escape both category and description.’’<sup>38</sup> This is the only assumption made by Paul in which he dares to look at all lovers in the same way. And even then, he is second-guessing himself. It remains an assumption, not a statement.

Another postmodern feature that *The Only Story* and *The Sense of an Ending* share is the narration by an unreliable narrator. Though there is generally less focus on this fact in *The Only Story*, it is still an important feature to the novel. Paul recollects his story entirely from memory, which suggests that there is a possibility of it being faulty. He is aware of this himself and mentions this early on as a way of warning the reader: ‘‘You understand, I hope, that I’m telling you everything as I remember it? I never kept a diary, and most of the participants in my story – my story! my life! – are either dead or far dispersed. So I’m not necessarily putting it down in the order that it happened.’’<sup>39</sup> He indicates that he tells his story in the way he remembers, which shows his comprehension of the how the human memory can wane over time. The reader is aware that his story might not be exactly true, but as mentioned by Paul: ‘‘This is mine.’’<sup>40</sup> He knows others may have perceived things differently, but this is Paul’s version of the story. Paul also made sure to mention that he does ‘‘not necessarily put it down in the order that it happened,’’ which gives this novel the postmodern characteristic of a fragmented narrative. Postmodern novels are known for incorporating a fragmented narrative and that is exactly the way Paul narrates his story. One of Paul’s memories can trigger another one of his memories, and so he will then go on to tell that part of the story. Other times an arbitrary memory might appear in his mind and so Paul will tell the audience, whether it is of great importance to the plot or not. The novel is therefore compiled of loose memories that are, in the larger perspective, told in chronological order. Still, the story contains plenty of unchronological memories and flashbacks which gives the novel a fragmented form. James and Seshagiri state that fragmentation of the narrative is a benchmark for postmodern

---

<sup>38</sup> Barnes, *The Only Story*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Barnes, *The Only Story*, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Barnes, *The Only Story*, 3.

literature<sup>41</sup> as postmodernists stepped away from traditional writing forms. James and Seshagiri's statement supports this thesis' claim that *The Only Story* can be read as a postmodern text.

We also see a representation of Paul's disorganized memory in the way the novel is structured. The story has no specific chapters. In terms of structure it merely consists of three parts that represent the stages of Paul's life and his relationship with Susan. The first part is the start of their romantic relationship while the second part concerns Paul and Susan's cohabitation. The third part is about the end of their relationship in which they no longer live together. They still share a bond, but Susan's alcoholism makes it difficult for them to live in the same house. This method of structuring is another way of representing that the story is written from memory. As mentioned, Paul will often jump from one memory to another, so the unstructured parts represent his unstructured mind. This is therefore also another way to convey that the author is an unreliable narrator, which is a postmodern characteristic. The fact that the novel lacks structure shows how fickle and unsteady the human memory can become over time.

Next to the fact that the three unstructured parts represent the human memory, all parts also bring a different perspective to the novel. The first part is narrated entirely from the first person perspective. What is noticeable in this first part is that there are no negative memories about Paul and Susan's relationship. The negative memories start to appear in the second part of the novel. Next to these negative memories there are also moments throughout the second part where Paul tells the story from a second person perspective. This perspective shows up in chunks and is not consistent, but it can be connected to the type of memories Paul describes during these moments. The perspective seems to shift during the memories that had the largest negative impact on Paul. For example, the first time the second perspective is used is during an argument about Paul wanting to pay Susan rent. This is also the first time Susan is visibly angry at Paul. The second shift of perspective is when Paul sees Susan as a woman damaged by her past for the very first time: "You realize that, even if she is the free spirit you imagined her to be, she is also a damaged free spirit."<sup>42</sup> Both these memories bring a negativity to the relationship that Paul has never experienced or considered before. The third part of the novel is about the end of the romantic relationship between Paul and Susan. This

---

<sup>41</sup> David James and Urmila Seshagiri, "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution," *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (2014): 93. Accessed April 6, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Barnes, *The Only Story*, 107.

part of the novel is primarily written in the third person perspective and most, if not all, shared memories have a negative tone. It can be argued that Paul mentally distanced himself from such memories as they were too difficult for him to cope with. This would explain why he does not use the first person perspective he initially started out using. Distancing himself through the change in perspective can also be directly connected to his relationship with Susan. The more they grew apart, the more Paul fell out of touch with himself. When he moves to the second person perspective he is still talking to himself, but he ends up referring to himself in the third person. This is the moment Paul and Susan ended their romantic relationship and so Paul has distanced himself completely. He writes the third part as if he were talking about another man. The use of different perspectives throughout the novel shows the postmodern characteristic of fragmentation and discontinuity. Postmodern literature also often features the theme of alienation, and the change in perspectives can also be said to represent exactly that. Paul gets alienated from himself as he loses Susan, which eventually results in him referring to himself in the third person and disconnecting from his memories.

All in all, it can be said that postmodernism is a prominent feature in *The Only Story*. The novel includes the themes of moral relativism, which is a distinguished characteristic of postmodern writing. The topic of love that is often discussed by Paul is an example of how Barnes translates the idea that there is no truth in grand narratives. Furthermore, Barnes also included the postmodern thought that memory cannot be trusted. This can be seen in this novel through the use of an unreliable narrator and the unchronological structure of the narrative. Therefore, the postmodern features used in the novel are noteworthy as they are a large part of the thought process of the main character.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to answer the question on whether the novels *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) and *The Only Story* (2019) written by Julian Barnes contradict the predicted demise of postmodernism when looking at the attitude towards the grand narratives of history, memory and truth, as well as the use of postmodern writing techniques. In order to answer the question the two novels were analysed and connected to postmodern theory.

The analysis of *The Sense of an Ending* has shown that particularly the postmodern scepticism towards the grand narratives of memory, history and truth is an important theme in the novel. Tony's unreliable narration conveys the idea that memory cannot always be trusted. Next to this, it also shows that the truth can vary for different people as Tony believes to know the truth at the end of the novel, but the audience is aware that the reality might be different. *The Only Story* also features the scepticism towards a universal truth, but in this instance this postmodern idea is uncovered through the theme of love. Paul concludes at the end of the novel that there is no universal truth regarding love. As argued by Fischer and Hutcheon in the first chapter, moral relativism is one of the most substantial factors of postmodernism and the analyses of the novels have proven this to also be a large focal point of Barnes' works. Much like *The Sense of an Ending*, *The Only Story* also covers the postmodern thought of the unreliability of memory through the use of unreliable narration and an unchronological structure, which also conveys the postmodern idea of the relativity of truth. Though the two novels seem to incorporate similar themes and techniques, *The Sense of an Ending* includes an extra postmodern idea. Namely, the idea that time is relative. This is shown in the novel through the use of the water metaphor and the explicit mentions made by Tony.

It can be said that the postmodern themes found in both novels are not merely Barnes' literary writing style, but they create the essence of the story. Without the focus on moral relativism the narratives would no longer be the same as both novels have memory and truth as a thematic focal point. Therefore, postmodern themes drive the narrative. Barnes actively applied postmodern elements and themes to his novels in order to make the audience aware that truth, memory and history are all capricious terms. Even though Bentley, Hubble and Wilson suggested there was a large decline in the use of postmodern elements since the 2000's, the examined postmodern themes, ideals and writing techniques in the analyses of the novels show that the art movement remains a prominent feature in Barnes' writing. This

means that though there has been a certain decline, postmodernism has persisted and is still a movement that writers make use of. All in all, it can be concluded that Barnes' novels *The Sense of an Ending* and *The Only Story* provide evidence for the theory that postmodernism has not ended and is still part of the current art scene. The two novels therefore contradict the end of postmodernism that critics such as Rattansi and Hutcheon predicted.

Though this research has shown that postmodernism is still a relevant art movement in terms of literature, the question remains on whether postmodernism is still a pertinent movement with regard to society. Even though it still exists in art, the essence of postmodern ideals might no longer be corresponding to everyday life. In further research it would perhaps be of interest to analyse whether the postmodern ideals are still shared with mainstream society instead of merely focusing on the movement in the art industry.



## Bibliography

Armstrong, Shelby. "The Problem of the Human Narrator." *Journal of Modern Literature* 32, no. 4 (2009): 141-143. [https://www-jstor-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/stable/pdf/10.2979/jmodelite.32.4.141.pdf?ab\\_segments=0%252FSYC-5770%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3A88ff0189644cea859e0442282c486e02](https://www-jstor-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/stable/pdf/10.2979/jmodelite.32.4.141.pdf?ab_segments=0%252FSYC-5770%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3A88ff0189644cea859e0442282c486e02)

Barnes, Julian. *The Only Story*. London: Vintage, 2019.

Barnes, Julian. *The Sense of an Ending*. London: Vintage, 2012.

Bentley, Nick, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson. *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

Fedosova, Tatyana. "Reflection of Time in Postmodern Literature." *Athens Journal of Philology* 2, no. 2 (2015): 77-88. doi: 10.30958/ajp.2-2-1

Gibbons, Alison. "Postmodernism is dead. What comes next?" The Times Literary Supplement Limited. The TLS. Accessed March 8, 2021. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/>

Giles, Paul, et al. "The Pathos of Authenticity. American passions of the real." *Journal of American Studies* 44, no.4 (2010): 0-804, accessed March 8, 2021. <http://dx.doi.org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/S0021875810001799>

Hassan, Ihab. "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Truth." *MODERN GREEK STUDIES* 11, (2003): 298-316. Accessed April 3, 2021.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Eds. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. 3-32. Accessed June 28, 2021. <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/10252/1/TSpace0167.pdf>

Hutcheon, Linda. "The Postmodern Problematizing of History." *English Studies in Canada, XIV*, no.4 (1988): 365-382. Accessed March 2, 2021.

James, David, and Urmila Seshagiri. "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution." *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (2014): 87-100. Accessed April 6, 2021.

Kadagishvili, Dali. "Metamodernism as we perceive it (quick review)." *European Scientific Journal* 2 (2013): 559-565, accessed March 23, 2021.

file:///C:/Users/Puk%20van%20der%20Zanden/Downloads/2400-Article%20Text-7181-1-10-20140114.pdf

Lewandowsky, Stephan, et al. "Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and coping with the post-truth era." *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* (2017): 1-57, accessed March 8, 2021. DOI: 10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.08

Piqueras, Maricel Oró. "Memory revisited in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*," *Coolabah*, no. 13 (2014): 87-95.

file:///C:/Users/Puk%20van%20der%20Zanden/Downloads/15527-30559-1-SM%20(1).pdf

The Institute of Art and Ideas. "The Problem with the Postmodern | Rebecca Goldstein." *Youtube* video, 03:35. May 7, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La7VhaPGVG8>

Vermeulen, Timotheus and Van den Akker, Robin. "Notes on Metamodernism." *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, no.1 (2010): 1-14, accessed March 9, 2021. DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677