A Study of Memory and Psychological Defense Mechanism in Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*

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ABSTRACT

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes portrays the mysterious workings of the human mind as it distorts facts towards the end of a self-image that one can live with. The protagonist in the novel deploys certain psychological defense mechanisms in order to protect himself from feelings of anxiety, only to experience even more profound anxiety due to his excessive use of them. The significance of the present paper lies in its novel view of the book. So far, the critique on the novel has mainly been focused on the workings of time on memory; however, the present paper investigates how psychological defense mechanisms blur the protagonist’s perception of reality and distort his memories. This paper also attempts to attract scholarly interest in the study of psychological defense mechanisms in the study of *The Sense of an Ending* which has so far been to the best of our knowledge overlooked.

KEYWORDS

Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, Memory, Defense Mechanism, Psychology

1. INTRODUCTION

*The Sense of an Ending*, which is divided into two parts, portrays a man in his sixties who is remembering or rather, constructing memories from his youth in the first part, and deconstructing the very same memories in the second part. Through his unreliable narrator, Julian Barnes (2011) poses questions regarding imperfections of memory and self-delusion. As Tony Webster, the narrator of the novella admits,

> 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. (p. 75)

Thus, the novella demonstrates the imperfections of memory and how the human mind distorts facts. Barnes indeed succeeds in creating a narrative which “underscores the ways people try to erase or edit their youthful follies and disappointments” (Kakutani, 2011, n. p.). As Tony later realizes, memories are tarnished with self-preserving interpretations, “How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts?” (Barnes, 2011, p. 89). This is, in W. Walter Menninger’s opinion, due to the fact that memory distortion corresponds to “an emotional need to preserve one’s self-esteem or protect the individual from emotional consequences of what actually happened” (p. 98). Therefore, our memories are not remembered objectively; they are rather constructed subjectively. Several factors affect our perceptions and memories, one of which is the application of psychological defense mechanisms. When applied wisely, psychological defense mechanisms protect the individual from unwanted emotions which threaten the individual’s well-being. They “allow individuals to reduce cognitive dissonance and to minimize sudden changes in internal and external environments” (Vaillant, 1994, p. 44). However, these mechanisms can be hazardous if an individual goes to extremes in applying them, in which case they downright distort his perception of reality.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony deploys certain psychological defense mechanisms which distort his account of reality. When faced with documentations from past, he realizes how distorted and fallacious his account of reality has been and he is forced to pass moral judgments on his own character which eventually makes him feel guilty and remorseful for the damage that he caused a long time ago, “Too much time has passed, too much damage has been done, for amends to be made” (Barnes, 2011, p. 93).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Unfortunately, *The Sense of an Ending* has not received the attention it deserves and most of the critiques on it have been limited to newspaper reviews.
Nonetheless, here are some sources we have found useful:

Liesl Schillinger (2011) in The New York Times points to a kind of social awkwardness present in The Sense of an Ending which is also present in a good number of other British works of fiction (“Julian Barnes and the Emotions of Englishmen”). The writer describes the novel as “a mystery of memory and missed opportunity” and also points to some of the protagonist’s negative attributes such as his passivity and self-centeredness.

In his review of the novel, Jeff Turrentine (2011) in The Washington Post points to the suspenseful nature of the story. He also points to the protagonist’s inability to understand his implication in the miseries inflicted on the people around him (“Book Review: The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes”).

Justine Jordan (n.d.) in The Guardian describes the novel as “a highly wrought meditation on ageing, memory and regret” (“The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes-review”). He points to some other books by Julian Barnes which also portray the imperfections of memory.

Anita Brookner (2011) in The Telegraph points to the theme of imperfections of memory in the novel. He also describes the story as a tragedy with Veronica being the victim (“The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes: review”).

3. METHODOLOGY

Although a significant novella about memory and its imperfections, the critique on The Sense of an Ending has so far been limited to insubstantial reviews. The present paper aims to render an in-depth, psychological analysis in order to illuminate the intricate workings of the protagonist’s mind. Accordingly, the psychological defense mechanisms deployed by the protagonist which blur his perception of reality and eventually inflict great pain on him will be investigated in light of psychological and psychiatric findings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Memory and History

In The Sense of an Ending, Julian Barnes tells the story of Tony Webster, an ordinary man in his sixties who has led a conventional life and is now basking in the idle days of retirement. This is all until he finds out that the mother of his college girlfriend, Veronica, has bequeathed him both £500 and the diary of his high school friend, Adrian. Startled by this unexpected call from the past, Tony is forced to go back in time and examine the course of his life.

In the process of completing the puzzle of his past, Tony has to face unresolved issues which he has completely banished from his consciousness. He has to find answers to unresolved questions in his past, questions that he thought he had solid answers for. However, Tony finds it utterly difficult to make sense of his past. He is fairly aware that his memories are tampered with through the years and are not reliable; history is after all “that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation” (Barnes, 2011, p. 17). Therefore, he pesters Veronica to hand over Adrian’s diary, hoping that its contents might shed light on the dark holes in his past.

Tony is aware that his account of reality is tarnished with fallacy. He admits that it is not possible to remember the past as it really happened, “What you end up remembering isn’t always the same as what you have witnessed” (Barnes, 2011, p. 4). As an unreliable narrator, Tony is sincere in that he knows what he remembers is probably tarnished by fallacy and self-serving adjustments. “How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts?” (Barnes, 2011, p. 89). What he does not know, however, is the extent that he has unconsciously tampered with reality. As mentioned by the psychologist Elizabeth Loftus (1991), our memories are stored in densely packed mental drawers in our brain, “They are also constantly being emptied out, scattered about, and then stuffed back into place” (p. 27). As we remember our memories, we add little details and delete “confusing or extraneous elements” (Loftus, 1991, p. 27). What we end up remembering, then, may be very different from what actually has happened. Remembering the past events is not simply an act of recalling memories, it is rather a process of reconstructing memories (Lynn Hasher and Mary Griffin, 1978, p. 318-330).

As human beings, we are prone to “replace reality with wishful thinking” in order to create a self-image that we can live with (Menninger, 1995, p. 105). Jon Allen agrees that in remembering past events, our memory reconstructs memories in order to preserve our “self-concept at the time” (1995, p. 102). According to W.
Walter Menninger (1995), our memories are not completely reliable and what we remember may be “more wishful thinking than true reality” (p. 104). In his book on imperfections of memory, Goleman (1998) refers to the “double jeopardy” of memory. Memory is attention in the past tense: what you remember now is what you noticed before. Memory is in double jeopardy, for apart from an initial skew in what is noticed, there can be later biases in what is recalled. (p. 95)

Goleman (1998) emphasizes that information is not simply transmitted as it passes through the mind, it is rather transformed. As he reaffirms, “The mind takes in, uses, and stores information while it is prone to bias by the trade-off between anxiety and attention” (p. 58). Anxiety is of key importance in this process; our mind alters disturbing pieces of information which may create anxiety. To do so, it deploys psychological defense mechanisms.

In The Sense of an Ending, Tony’s excessive use of certain psychological defense mechanisms distorts his memories harshly. In the following parts, the authors will try to give a clear picture of how he deploys these mechanisms in the course of remembering his past, and how the maladaptive use of these mechanisms leads to great feelings of anxiety in him. Freud who first introduced these mechanisms calls them “ego mechanisms of defense,” however, they are also called “adaptive mechanisms” and “defense mechanisms” by other psychologists and psychiatrists. Drawing on the work of George E. Vaillant (1977) and George E. Vaillant (1994), these mechanisms will likewise be referred to as “defense mechanisms”.

4.2 Memory and Psychological Defense Mechanisms

As Vaillant (1994) points out, defense mechanisms can “alter our perception of any or all of the following: subject (self), object (other), idea, or feeling” (p. 44). Generally, defense mechanisms are used by the mind in order to “make life tolerable” (Vaillant, 1977, p. 16), and they also account for self-preserving interpretations and biased remembering of the past. According to W. Walter. Menninger (1995), defense mechanisms make us “remember the past events unreliably” (p. 97). They allow us to remember a past that does not wound our self-image, “What you remember is consistent with what should have happened in light of your current self-portrait” (Allen, 1995, p. 102). It should be noted that defense mechanisms are not always harmful. In fact, in most cases, these adaptive defenses are necessary for keeping one healthy. As stated by Vaillant (1977), “healthy” defense mechanisms “contribute to the continued development of the individual” (p. 86). He further explains that mature defenses are generally adaptive whereas immature defenses are generally maladaptive. In his opinion, defense mechanisms can be maladaptive in the following circumstances:

If a defense is used in a rigid, inflexible way, if it is motivated more by past needs than by present and future reality, if it too severely distorts the present situation, if it abolishes rather than limits gratification, or if it damns rather than rechannels the expression of feelings, then it is likely to be maladaptive. (p. 85)

In The Sense of an Ending, Tony deploys “immature” and “neurotic” defense mechanisms as he tries to make sense of his past. As it turns out by the end of the novel, the defense mechanisms deployed by him are maladaptive. These mechanisms suit to justify his past for him and make it bearable for him to deal with his present, distort the past so strongly that his present is influenced, and are repressive in nature.

Tony, however, is not aware of the great extent that he has tempered with reality. Psychological defense mechanisms work at an almost unconscious level. They are neither “conscious avoidance of problems,” nor do they entail “willpower.” “They rather facilitate a far subtler and almost entirely unconscious processes” (Vaillant, 1977, p. 8). Almost oblivious to the tricky workings of his mind, Tony is manipulated by the tricks his mind plays in order to avoid anxiety.

Tony has unconsciously tried to hide some truths from his past. As he tries to shed light on the dark holes in his past, it becomes evident that he has censored and distorted some facts throughout his life. When he first mentions Veronica to his ex-wife after many years, his wife flippantly says, “The Fruitcake? Is she back in business after all these years? You were well out of
that, Tony” (Barnes, 2011, p. 70). Tony has always described Veronica as a manipulative, condescending, poisonous woman. However, his account of his relationship with her is suspiciously too one-sided to be credible for the reader. We cannot help but wonder whether Veronica truly deserves to be thought of as an evil, manipulative, poisonous woman! In fact, in retelling the past, Tony has projected certain negative attributes to Veronica’s character.

Two defense mechanisms have been detected in Tony’s attempts to remember the past; “projection” and “repression.” Projection as introduced by Vaillant (1977) belongs to the category of “Immature Mechanisms” and involves “Attributing one’s own unacknowledged feelings to others” (p. 384). In brief, in projection, “I hate him changes to he hates me” (Goleman, 1998, p. 121). Repression belongs to the category of “Neurotic Defenses” and includes “seemingly inexplicable naiveté and memory lapse” (Vaillant, 1977, p. 385). Goleman (1998) describes repression as “the defense wherein one forgets, then forgets one has forgotten” (p. 119). Individuals mostly use repression in order to forget disturbing memories. How these two mechanisms work to alter Tony’s perception of reality is going to be explained in detail in the following section.

4.3 Projection

According to Goleman (1998), projection includes two parts: denial and displacement. First, the person denies the existence of a distressing feeling and banishes it from his awareness; then, he pins it to another person: “my anger toward him evaporates, to be mysteriously replaced by his anger toward me” (p. 121).

Tony mainly uses projection as he remembers his relationship with Veronica. As mentioned earlier, Tony’s account of their relationship seems to be too one-sided to be credible. As readers, we perceive Veronica as brighter and more knowledgeable than Tony. She has read more than he has, has better taste in arts and altogether is mature than he is. Being aware of her intellectual superiority, Tony becomes an “injustice collector” which, to paraphrase Vaillant’s words, is a characteristic of the person who uses projection (1977, p. 162), the one who, in Mary Ellen O’Toole’s opinion, “nurses resentment over real or perceived injustices and no matter how much time has passed, the Injustice Collector will never forget or forgive those wrongs or the people he or she believes are responsible” (2014, p. 162). Similarly, Tony reads too much into Veronica’s words and perceives them as condescending and he resents her for what he perceives to be “a sense of intellectual superiority” in her (Barnes, 2011, p. 91). Another good example is when in a fragment of his memories, he remembers Veronica going through his record collection. Knowing that Veronica has a better taste in music than he does, he is anxious that she might disapprove of his musical taste. He then sinks into a defensive mode: “You like this stuff?” she asked neutrally. ‘Good to dance to,’ I replied, a little defensively” (Barnes, 2011, p. 21). Later on, he feels intimidated when he sees Veronica’s bookshelf for the first time, “They seemed to be an organic continuation of her mind and personality, whereas mine struck me as functionally separate, straining to describe a character I hoped to grow into. This disparity threw me into a slight panic” (Barnes, 2011, p. 24).

Tony’s stay at Veronica’s parents’ suburban house is also full of incidents where he projects his “unacknowledged feelings” unto other people. Tony describes the whole weekend as utterly distressing. From the very beginning, he is distressed and shows signs of paranoia, “On the train down from Charing Cross, I worried that my suitcase—the only one I owned—was so large it made me look like a potential burglar” (Barnes, 2011, p. 26). Having this fear in mind, when Veronica’s father jokes about how heavy his suitcase is, Tony becomes upset and instantly perceives him as “gross” (Barnes, 2011, p. 26). Through dinner, he is uncomfortable and feels like the whole family is jokingly scrutinizing him. The following morning, when Veronica and his father and brother return from a walk, they politely ask Tony if he has slept well, which he interprets as “it seemed like this stuff?” she asked neutrally. ‘Good to dance to,’ I replied, a little defensively” (Barnes, 2011, p. 21). Later on, he feels intimidated when he sees Veronica’s bookshelf for the first time, “They seemed to be an organic continuation of her mind and personality, whereas mine struck me as functionally separate, straining to describe a character I hoped to grow into. This disparity threw me into a slight panic” (Barnes, 2011, p. 24).

Tony’s account of their relationship with Veronica seems to be too one-sided to be credible for the reader. We cannot help but wonder whether Veronica truly deserves to be thought of as an evil, manipulative, poisonous woman! In fact, in retelling the past, Tony has projected certain negative attributes to Veronica’s character.

Although Tony is an unreliable narrator, he is a sincere one. In fact, he is fairly aware that his account of the past is not entirely true. He admits that he has probably been paranoiac in perceiving Veronica and her family as condescending. “Perhaps this was mere paranoia” (Barnes, 2011, p. 26), he thinks to himself as he remembers his memories of them. He also admits that what he originally perceived as contemptuous behavior on Veronica’s brother’s part, might have simply been lack of interest:
I now admit, what he actually felt towards me back then might have been just an amused lack of interest. Here comes my sister’s latest—well, there was one before him, and there’ll doubtless be another along soon. (Barnes, 2011, p. 100)

He is also aware that “insecurity” might have been the cause of these self-serving misinterpretations, Veronica, despite having invited me down, seemed at first to withdraw into her family and join in their examination of me—though whether this was the cause, or the consequence, of my insecurity, I can’t from here determine. (Barnes, 2011, p. 27)

Belonging to the middle class in his adolescence, he felt insecure. He remembers himself “ill at ease among a posher and more socially skilled family” (Barnes, 2011, p. 42). There are no hints to tell us that Veronica’s father looked down upon him and yet, Tony says he “couldn’t tell if he was being all mainly, or treating me as lower-class scum” (Barnes, 2011, p. 27). Later, he hints that he resented Veronica’s brother for his belonging to a superior class, “I’d always assumed that birth and education had given him an advantage over me that he’d effortlessly maintained until the present day” (Barnes, 2011, p. 74).

People with a high self-esteem “are able to tolerate stress without becoming excessively anxious” (Epstein, 1980, p. 57). In distressing situations, these people are able to overcome their anxiety and disappointment quickly. On the other hand, people with a low self-esteem “are prone to oversensitivity to failure, all are too ready to feel rejected, and take a long while to get over disappointment” (Epstein, 1980, p. 57). Tony who suffers from insecurity and a low self-esteem, feels rejected by both Veronica and her family whom he thinks are superior to him, and by assuming that they are contemptuously arrogant people, “refuses responsibility for his own feelings” (Vaillant, 1977, p. 161) and ascribes them to Veronica and her family.

There are other characteristics of immature defense mechanisms traceable in Tony’s behavior, particularly those related to projection. According to Vaillant (1977), people who use immature mechanisms of defense are not “likeable” (p. 160). These people “remain poorly understood” (p. 158) because nobody really likes them. Moreover, Vaillant (1977) writes that the interpersonal relationships of individuals who depend on immature defense mechanisms tend to be “perpetually murky and entangled” (p. 160). Hence, it is hard to sympathize with Tony or to like him because of his passivity and feeling of insecurity. He has not been able to develop fulfilling relationships throughout his life. After some brief relationships with girls and a longer one with Veronica which ended in bitter terms, he married Margaret who later left him for another man. He has also failed to develop a close relationship with his only daughter who barely keeps in touch with him. Vaillant (1977) finds the roots of the problem in “projection, [which] makes it impossible for the individual to see the truth, and if we distort our outer worlds too much, we become difficult to love” (p. 163); “no one is harder to reason with than the person who projects blame; and no one is more reluctant to accept love or more eager to dispense hate than the paranoid” (p. 162). He concludes that these people often fear love as much as hate. Likewise, a factor which leads to the disastrous ending of Tony’s relationship with Veronica is his fear of intimacy. Although pushed by his sex drive, Tony is relieved that they do not “go the whole way” in their relationship, mostly due to his “fear of an overwhelming closeness I couldn’t handle” (Barnes, 2011, p. 111). Later, he becomes disturbed when Veronica asks him where their relationship is heading. He tries to evade the question which makes Veronica call him a coward: “You’re quite cowardly, aren’t you, Tony?” (Barnes, 2011, p. 34). Tony tries to absolve himself by saying that he is just “peaceable,” which only makes Veronica scoff at him, “well, I wouldn’t want to disturb your self-image” (Barnes, 2011, p. 34). Later on, Tony marries Margaret, “Then I met Margaret; we married, and three years later Susie was born” (Barnes, 2011, p. 53). But nowhere in the novel does Tony speak passionately about Margaret. It seems too “neutral” to evoke either fear or hate or love in him. Even when she leaves him for another man, he serenely reflects, “after a dozen years Margaret took up with a fellow who ran a restaurant. I didn’t much like him—or his food, for that matter” (Barnes, 2011, p. 53). This passivity which Tony calls “being peaceable” and Veronica scorns as “cowardice” is another characteristic of the individuals who use projection as a mechanism of defense, and in Vaillant’s
opinion, “no defense is so highly correlated with the traits of self-doubt, pessimism, and passivity” (1977, p. 163) as projection. Tony later admits, “I had wanted life not to bother me too much, and had succeeded - and how pitiful that was” (Barnes, 2011, p. 94). The passivity which comes along with projection has made Tony’s life pitiful, and it is a pity that he has to learn it when it is too late.

4.4 Repression

Another defense mechanism deployed by Tony is repression. Repression belongs to the category of neurotic defenses which according to Vaillant (1977) are deployed to deal with “acute conflict” (p. 84). Vaillant (1977) describes repression as “the prototype of all the adaptive mechanisms” which allows a person to forget what he cannot bear (p. 128). In the novel, Tony reveals his character through what he says and what he does not say. He uses projection as he tells his memories of Veronica, and at the same time admits that he has tried to repress his bitter memories of her: “As I mentioned, I have a certain instinct for self-preservation. I successfully put Veronica out of my mind, out of my history” (Barnes, 2011, p. 61). The act of repression, as the speech made by Tony shows, involves failure or success, depending probably on the depth of repression. Tony is indicative of the significance and depth of his repression and his psychic or neurotic status. This is best given proof when Tony marries Margaret; he chooses not to mention Veronica at all. He does so because he perceives his time with Veronica as utterly bitter and something to completely shut out of memory, “I viewed my time with Veronica as a failure—her contempt, my humiliation—and expunged it from the record” (Barnes, 2011, p. 65). But it is evident that every repression has its own expire date and the return of the repressed will sooner or later happen; after a year or two, he decides to “clear off the past” and tell Margaret “the truth” (Barnes, 2011, p. 66). Even then, he does not give an honest account of his relationship with Veronica, “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” (Barnes, 2011, p. 65). According to Vaillant (1977), after years of using defense mechanisms, one internalizes his own distorted interpretation of events, “the distortions produced by adaptive mechanisms may become part of the individual’s world view” (p. 22). Eventually, “the altered truth becomes subjectively true” (p. 22).

Similarly, Tony has internalized his “version” of truth and cannot determine which parts of his memories are tarnished with fallacy.

Tony does not blame Veronica only for the “unfair” way he thinks she has treated him. He also holds her accountable for the suicide of his high school friend, Adrian, who happened to date Veronica after Tony broke up with her, “If there was one woman in the entire world a man could fall in love with and still think life worth refusing, it was Veronica” (Barnes, 2011, p. 50). Tony’s complete unawareness of his own faults makes for the climatic, startling revelation in the novel, one which leaves Tony, as well as the reader, completely baffled. This is where the real unconscious repression has happened: Tony forgets, and forgets that he has forgotten.

Tony tells us that a while after he broke up with Veronica, he received a letter from Adrian, informing him that he had been going out with Veronica for a while. According to what Tony remembers, in the letter Adrian mentions that he is writing to Tony out of courtesy and that he would stop dating Veronica if Tony does not approve of it. Tony remembers being extremely furious. As usual, he holds Veronica accountable, thinking that she must have persuaded Adrian to write the letter out of contempt and in order to hurt him. However, as Tony remembers, he overcomes his anger, “I took the nearest postcard to hand—one of the Clifton Suspension Bridge—and wrote words like: ‘Being in receipt of your epistle of the 21st, the undersigned begs to present his compliments and wishes to record that everything is jolly fine by me, old bean'” (Barnes, 2011, p. 41). Years later, after Tony badgers Veronica for days to hand over Adrian’s diary, she gives him a copy of the letter that he wrote to Adrian and her some forty years ago. The content of the letter which is nothing like what Tony remembers turns out to be shockingly poisonous. In the letter, he wishes for them to “get so involved that the mutual damage will be permanent” and to experience “a lifetime of bitterness;” he trashes Veronica harshly and tells Adrian that her own mother warned him against her. He also mocks both Adrian and Veronica for what he perceives as a sense of “social superiority” and “intellectual superiority” in them. After calling them all sorts of contemptuous names, at the end of his letter he writes, “Compliments of the season to you, and may the acid rain fall on your joint and anointed heads” (Barnes, 2011, p. 89, 91).
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The horror of this letter is especially accentuated when we realize that it had terrible consequences. In a part of his letter, Tony wishes for Adrian and Veronica to have a child together because he believes in “time’s revenge” (Barnes, 2011, p. 90). What happens afterwards is even more dreadful. Adrian and Veronica fall apart, Adrian gets involved with Veronica’s mother who gets pregnant with his child and gives birth to a mentally defective child, and eventually, devastated by all this, the young Adrian commits suicide.

We cannot say for sure why the young Tony repressed the memory of writing the letter. Whether it was out of guilt or grudge, it remains a mystery. We are certain, however, what the result of such repression is: after years of projecting blame on other people, he becomes aware of his own dark side and becomes consumed by a feeling of remorse.

As Vaillant (1977) puts it, although they are adaptive in nature, defense mechanisms are sometimes used for “self-defeat” as well (p. 128). They can be maladaptive if, for instance, they “dam rather than rechannel the expression of feelings” (p. 85). That is exactly what happens with Tony. Instead of using suppression which belongs to the category of “mature mechanisms,” he deploys repression which belongs to the category of “neurotic defenses.” There is a fine line between repression and suppression. Whereas repression includes a complete avoiding of certain feelings, in suppression the individual simply postpones those feelings in order to deal with them later. In repression, the individual “forgets and forgets that he has forgotten,” in suppression, however, “one says, ‘I will think about it tomorrow;’ and the next day one remembers to think about it” (Vaillant, 1977, 386). By using repression, Tony manages to avoid disturbing feelings for many years, only to come face to face with them when he is old, when it is too late to compensate for the wrongs he has done.

In The Sense of an Ending, Tony is forced to go back in the course of time and examine his life. He is fairly aware of the fact that his memories are not totally reliable and he tries to gain access to some corroboration which might help him figure out his past. However, unable to determine which parts of his memories are tampered with, he mixes truth with falsehood in retelling the past. Although he wishes to find answers to some unresolved questions in his past, his perception of reality has been too distorted and blurred by his excessive use of defense mechanisms. He is a human being after all, and according to W. Walter. Menninger (1995), we all are victims of our human frailties and limitations, “We search for the truth, but only half-heartedly, when we fear the truth may not be in our best interests. So we are inconsistent and self-serving in our recollections, despite our best intentions to be otherwise” (p. 105).

Psychological defense mechanisms allow individuals to protect themselves against feelings of anxiety. However, they can be maladaptive as well. The wrong choice of defense mechanisms will lead to even more anxiety. Vaillant (1994) believes that the way we respond to stress determines our mental health: “It is often not just life stress but also the patient’s idiosyncratic response to life stress that leads to psychopathology” (p. 44). In the case of Tony Webster, although he does not show evidence of psychopathology, his use of immature and neurotic defense mechanisms to deal with anxiety leads to greater feelings of guilt and anxiety in him. He wonders “what else have I done wrong?” (Julian Barnes, 2011, p. 142). But he knows that it is too late for him to “change, or mend anything now” (Barnes, 2011, p. 142). Overwhelmed by a strong feeling of remorse, all he feels now is great uneasiness, “there is unrest. There is great unrest” (Barnes, 2011, p. 142).

5. CONCLUSION

Julian Barnes’s The Sense of an Ending is a notable example of how the imperfections of memory and the self-delusion resulted from psychological defense mechanisms can sabotage one’s life. Tony Webster often tends to take the reliability of his memories for granted. He builds his whole future based on how he defines his past, oblivious to the fact that “our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our
life. Told to others, but—mainly—to ourselves” (Barnes, 2011, p. 89). And then, there are moments when his crystal clear self-image suddenly begins to become blurry and the firm foundation of his life starts to wobble. In either case, however, what makes his conscience to remain somewhat stable is the defense mechanism that he consciously or subconsciously deploys.

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