

Ethical Choices in *The Sense of an Ending*

Yu Ma^{a, *}, Chunna Lin^b

TianHe College of GuangDong Polytechnic Normal University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

^a1029831486@qq.com

^b118147963@qq.com

*Corresponding author

KeyWords: *The Sense of an Ending*; ethical literary criticism, ethical dilemma, ethical choice

Abstract: *The Sense of an Ending* is a story about the impact of ethical choices on people's life. The characters in the novel fall into the ethical dilemma due to the change of love, and the ethical choices they make in order to get rid of the ethical dilemma have a significant impact on their own or others' lives. Adrian even pays price of life because he breaks the ethical taboo. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, this paper analyzes the ethical relations of characters, interprets the ethical choices of characters, and discusses the ethical themes such as concealment, betrayal, suicide, forgiveness and responsibility.

1. Introduction

Julian Barnes, one of the eminent figure in contemporary British literature circles, won the Booker Prize for his *The Sense Of An Ending* in 2011 and won the David Cohen Lifetime Achievement Award for English Literature. The novel is divided into two parts: The first part is about that the sixty-year-old narrator Webster recalled his youth story in London 40 years ago; The second part jumped over 40 years, after the narrator retired, many external shocks - Adrian's diary, Veronica's mother Sara's bequest, a small sum of money - appeared one by one, and the narrator Webster began to verify and explore the memories of the past, and reconstructed the truth of 40 years ago.

Foreign scholars have studied his works from various perspectives. Compared with foreign countries, domestic scholars' research on Barnes is still insufficient. Most related research is limited to Barnes's view of history, post-modernity and new historicalism in works. Only seven domestic scholars published their thesis on *The Sense Of An Ending* from the perspective of ethics. Actually, the characters in this story meet with the difficult ethical choices and ethical self-examination. The ethical choices and the ethical relationship in *The Sense Of an Ending* is worth studying from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. In literary works, "ethical choices are often associated with ethical dilemmas, so ethical choices need to solve the ethical dilemmas" (Zhenzhao Nie 268). "Ethical dilemmas are difficult to make choices. Once a choice is made, the results are often tragic"(Zhenzhao Nie 268). Webster, Adrian, Veronica, and Sarah were all trapped in ethical dilemma, made their ethic choices and took on the consequences of their choices.

2. Ethical choices of main characters in *The Sense of an Ending*

2.1 Webster's ethical choice: hiding an evil self

Webster received a letter from his friend Adrian asking if he could be with his ex-girlfriend Veronica. Webster recalled that he was unwilling and shocked, he was annoyed with Veronica's behavior, but still pretended to show that he didn't mind at all, and after calmly wrote an appropriate reply. In Webster's memory, he was the victim of this series of events forty years ago. He still accepted it all generously until one day after forty years, he received the letter from Veronica's mother Sarah saying she left five hundred pounds and Adrian's diary to him. Sarah made a will before her death and the diary was kept by Veronica. Veronica didn't give Webster the whole diary of Adrian, but only one page of the diary and a copy of a letter which he wrote to Adrian more than 40 years ago. It was this letter that gave Webster a heavy blow, which opened the dust for

many years to remember the truth. The truth was that Webster wrote a letter of revenge with cruel words and suggested that Adrian go to Veronica's mother, Sarah, to prove that Veronica was a hypocritical woman. The letter directly caused Adrian to fall in love with Veronica's mother Sarah and Sarah was pregnant. The truth was that Webster sent a postcard of the Clifton Suspension Bridge as a holding response to this letter. The Clifton Suspension Bridge was synonymous with suicide because many people chose to commit suicide here. Adrian, a peerless talent, no doubt could feel the hint behind the card: death and sin. Adrian chose to commit suicide after Sarah had baby. According to ethical order, Adrian and Veronica were not obliged to get Webster's consent, because Veronica had terminated the relationship with Webster, but Webster thought Adrian violated the "morality of friends" between them, and Veronica also betrayed the "loyalty of love". Facing ex-girlfriend and good friend, Webster was sank in dilemma and he chose to curse them and their next generation. His ethical choice caused tragedy of Adrian. In the difficult choice, Webster chose curse and revenge, but in his memory, the letter which he wrote to Adrian was filled with blessings. In fact, this is an act of self-deception. Webster chose to deceive himself and conceal the evil self.

This self-deception and concealment is due to his feeling of inferiority. He was not good at communicating with people. When chatting with girls in college, he was always "stricken" and "stressful". When he was less than 30 years old, he admitted that "My adventurous spirit has long since disappeared, and I will never do those things that I fantasize during adolescence" (Julian Barnes 93). But Webster thought himself as a winner of life. He wrote a curse letter because he did not want to admit that he was a complete loser in this romantic relationship. In Webster's mind, "Forty years ago, the Ford family was closer to the upper class than the Webster family" (Julian Barnes 73). Webster was in a relatively inferior state in his love with Veronica so that he felt Veronica always controlled him, her father scorned him, and her brother Jack examined him arrogantly, only her mother seemed to like him. People living in a long-term environment full of discrimination and negative will tend to suffer from incalculable trauma, which fundamentally destroys people's self-confidence and self-worth. The frustrations encountered in youth often make it difficult for people to extricate themselves for a period of time. In such a gloomy period, the dark side of a person will be greatly exposed and spread. As the pain and distress of the past faded over time, people often began to beautify their past experiences, gradually numb themselves in the absence of frank self-reports. Just as Webster began to explore his long-lost memory when he was old, he began to face himself truthfully, and when he accepted the cruel reality, he had the sense of an ending. This kind of ending was not the end of life, or the end of things, but the end of the past self. In Webster's ethical choice, he chose to believe what he thought and let his guesses diverge, making this guess more real. He didn't deal with the love with Veronica and the friendship with Adrian. He escaped from the true self, which caused Adrian's suicide. Webster was a person with weak ethical awareness when he was young. His ethical awareness got recovery because of the clear truth and the elderly age.

2.2 Adrian's ethical choice: committing suicide

Adrian's romantic relationships with good friend's ex-girlfriend Veronica and Veronica's mother Sarah made him trapped into the dilemma of ethical identity. "In the process of reading literature, we will find that almost all ethical problems are often related to ethical identity" (Zhenzhao Nie 21). When Adrian was in love with Veronica, his identity was Sarah's "son-in-law", and if he got married with Sarah, his identity was Veronica's "stepfather". Since identity is associated with ethics, changes in identity can easily lead to ethical dilemma and conflict. Adrian was facing ethical dilemma and huge psychological pressure because of changes in his ethical identity. On the one hand, he was in love with his friend's ex-girlfriend's with the pressure of "moral concerns", on the other hand, he fell in love with his girlfriend's mother with the pressure of "ethical taboo". To some extent, the love between Adrian and Sarah is an act of incest. In human culture, incest is strictly forbidden and will be punished severely. The "link" and "responsibility" that Adrian emphasized in his diary were the complex ethical relationship and corresponding ethical responsibilities of Webster, Adrian, Sarah and Veronica. The relationship between them became so complex because Adrian and

Sarah had broken the love order and family order. The ethical relationship between them constituted Adrian's inner entangled network, which eventually led Adrian to choose suicide as a relief and a punishment.

It seemed that Adrian's suicide was impulsive, and it was an irresponsible behavior, and to some extent, a departure from ethical responsibility. Suicide tends to be regarded as an irrational behavior. "The verdict of the coroner's inquest had been that Adrian Finn had killed himself 'while the balance of his mind was disturbed'" (Julian Barnes 49). But in Adrian's own view, his suicide just followed his own principle. Adrian was a man of faith, just as Webster said, "He gave the impression that he believed in things" (Julian Barnes 7). "Adrian, however, pushed us to believe in the application of thought to life, in the notion that principles should guide actions" (Julian Barnes 7). His principle about love also could be known in a class discussion. When the students were discussing a poem in the middle school, Adrian thought that the poem was about love and death, the love principle, in any case, coming into conflict with the death principle. He believed in that love could cause death if love principle had conflict with death principle. He believed in this principle and used the principle to guide his action. From this perspective, Adrian's suicide is a well-thought-out and the result of his rational will. Adrian's love experience made him live in moral condemnation and extreme pain. There was no other way for him to get rid of the great pain, and only suicide could punish and rescue himself. Death relieved him of his child-rearing duties, which seemed to make him irresponsible. Adrian himself came from "a broken home". "His mother had walked out years before, leaving his dad to cope with Adrian and his sister"(Julian Barnes 8). "This ought to have given him a whole storetank of existential rage, but somehow it didn't; he said he loved his mother and respected his father"(Julian Barnes 9). From this, we can see his understanding of family that children will love their parents even if they are not with them when they grow up. So, he didn't think that absence of him would affect the growth of his child or cause him to lose the love from the child. Adrian's suicide was also in this respect a rational action, so that he behaved rationally when he committed suicide: He cut his wrists diagonally in his bathroom to make sure of death. And he had written a notice to the bathroom door reading 'DO NOT ENTER-CALL POLICE- ADRIAN'. "'He took his own life' is the phrase; but Adrian also took charge of his own life, he took command of it, he took it in his hands - and then out of them?" (Julian Barnes 88). In order to take charge of his own life, Adrian had to relieve himself from ethical dilemma through taking his own life.

2.3 Veronica's ethical choice: forgiving and undertaking

Veronica fell in love with Webster when they were university students. They had "infra-sex" like many lovers at that time. But, after they broke up, Veronica came to Webster and slept with him. Webster thought Veronica was not a virgin from "a little experienced sex behavior", so he came to a decision to end the love between them, and they never met with each other for forty years. After breaking up with Webster, Veronica fell in love with Webster's good friend, Adrian. In Webster's memory, Veronica was a slutty, snobbish woman. He thought she left him in order to be with Adrian because Adrian were soon to have BA degree of Cambridge University. Forty years later, after he reread the letter, he began re-examining his younger self. He came to realize that the version of his relationship with Veronica was about "the young heart betrayed, the young body toyed with, the young social being condescended to"(Julian Barnes 122). This made him remember the words from his history teacher: "History is also the self-delusions of the defeated"(Julian Barnes 16). In fact, Veronica was a woman who had great courage to love. She loved Webster even if Her family economic condition was better than Webster's. She had the first "full-sex" with Webster after breaking up because she thought she still loved him. She left Webster because she recognized Webster's hypocritical and cowardly nature. She fell in love with Adrian because she thought Adrian was an intelligent and excellent person. She, together with Adrian wrote a letter to tell Webster that they fell in love, which just showed she was frank with love and respectful for the friendship of Webster and Adrian. From her attitude toward love, Veronica was rational and followed her heart.

Veronica suffered big betrayal from her mother Sarah and Adrian because they fell in love. The worse is that Adrian and Sarah's child was as weak as Webster's cursed, so she lived in the shadow of her mother's sexual scandal and Webster's cursing. When she met with Webster forty years later, she didn't curse him, only said to him: "You just don't get it...You never did, and you never will" (Julian Barnes 131). She chose tolerance and forgiveness in the face of great pain. After Adrian's suicide and Sarah's death, the child became an orphan, leaving a big problem to her. "Little Adrian" was her younger brother and also the child of her mother and her ex-boyfriend. She was trapped into ethical dilemma: Let "Little Adrian" alone or look after him? If she chose to let the child alone, she wouldn't take on a sister's duty. If she chose to look after the child, it seemed her broken heart was hard to heal. In the difficult choice, Veronica followed the inside of her heart again and made a rational choice. She bravely shouldered the responsibility of a sister to look after her brother, which showed her care and sympathy for weak people. Veronica chose to raise her younger brother in such an ethical dilemma, and she has never married for life, which reflected her ethical value.

3. Conclusion

The Sense of an Ending revolves around three love stories which drive readers to reflect on ethical taboos, ethical awareness, ethical dilemma, ethical identity, ethical choices and ethical order. When the truth comes out, memory is just a form of self-deception aimed to hide an evil self. Webster's weak ethical awareness led him to make wrong choice which resulted in Adrian's tragedy. Although he realized his mistakes forty years later, he couldn't forgive himself and lived in the shadow of regret in the rest of life. Adrian's love affair was a disregard of ethical taboos, and the change of his ethical identity led to ethical dilemma. His suicide is not only an ethical choice to escape the ethical dilemma, but also a maintenance of the ethical order. In the process of maintaining ethical order or reconstructing ethical awareness, it is possible to pay the price of life or lifelong regret. Finishing reading the novel, readers will be aware that people need self-examination in our life.

References

- [1] Zhenzhao Nei, *A Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Wuhan: Central China normal university press, 2014.
- [2] Julian Barnes. *The Sense OfAn Ending*. London: Vintage Books, 2012.
- [3] Lianqiao, Zhang, Ethical Introspection in *The Sense of an Ending*, *Foreign Literature Studies*, vol. 3, pp.70-76, 2015.
- [4] Zhenzhao Nei, Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundamentals and Terms, *Foreign Literature studies* vol. 1, pp.12-22, 2015.
- [5] Yili Tang, "My Hero Was a Coward": Ethical Choices in Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time*, *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, vol. 3, pp.119-126, 2017.
- [6] Bo, Chen, Ethics of Memory Narrative in *The Sense of an Ending*, *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, vol. 1, pp.96-103, 2018.
- [7] Yiping, Wang, Julian Barnes and the New Historidsm Theories: On the Man Booker Prize Winning Novel *The Sense of an Ending*, *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, vol. 1, pp.92-96, 2015.
- [8] Childs Peter. *Julian Barnes: Contemporary British Novelists*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2011.
- [9] Merritt Moseley. *Understanding Julian Barnes*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997.
- [10] Pateman Matthew. *Julian Barnes*. Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002.