And the word echoes: A taxonomy of repetitions in the sense of an ending

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'Repetition', as a literary technique, was effectively applied in Julian Barnes’ The Sense of an Ending. It was used to explain the imperfection and subjectivity of both memory and history, and to show the richness of human emotions that cannot be generalized by any universal philosophy. However, this particular technique has not been sufficiently explored by researchers. Regarding this, the study offers a taxonomy of the literary repetitions in the book to illustrate how they further its theme. These repetitions were mainly classified into three categories: the repetitive emergence of same scenes, the similar scenes with significant variations, and the identical sentences with different meanings. The study aim is to explain how they have echoed through the whole story, and implied the obsession, the misinterpretation, and the consequences.

Key words: Julian Barnes, the sense of an ending, literary repetition.

INTRODUCTION

In his monograph on Julian Barnes, Childs (2011) pointed out that “Ironic comedy and false memory are two of the poles around which Julian Barnes’s work revolves”. Correspondingly, Barnes’s latest prize-winning novel, The Sense of an Ending (Barnes, 2012), is recognized as a story reflecting on the damage made by individuals’ fallible memory. This reflection is achieved through various strategies, such as the narrator’s self-contradiction and the detection of the truth. One of the most evident and powerful literary techniques among these is repetition. In this book, not only words and sentences are repeatedly mentioned, but also scenes and discussions. The repetition forces readers to examine the story back and forth, creating an echoing effect within the narration. From the writer’s perspective, this is not an unintentional move. ‘Repetition’ itself, with its recollection and reoccurrence, can remind readers of the notion of ‘memory.’ Also, the variances in the repetitions can represent the inevitable deviation of human memory from the past experiences. A taxonomic analysis of repetitions will be made to illustrate how this particular strategy furthers the theme of ‘memory’ in the novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This novel is relatively new; it was published and awarded the Man Booker Prize in 2011. Although it is not yet included in many monographs on Julian Barnes, it
has gained extensive attention, and is already referenced and analyzed cross-disciplinarily in the academy. On account of its insight on memory and history, Booth (2013) referred to the novel to explaining that, "Memory has emerged as a key concept in history. It is not an objective, static record to be called. It is always fragmentary and provisional, dynamic and ongoing". The narrative form of the book is also widely debated. Nie (2013) argues that Tony Webster can be viewed as an unreliable narrator who misleads the readers in the story, because of the contradictory facts he tells and the attribution errors from his own point of view. This evidence can be found not only in the major incidents, but also in subtle details, such as words and scene repetitions. Thus, as one of the most important clues, the repetitions will be analyzed to illustrate the defects of Webster's narration, and the essence of memory implied by the story.

Analysis

The opening passage of the book forms the first category of repetition: the reoccurrence of similar scenes. The novel starts with a list of items with concrete and vivid descriptions, and all of these items can be found again in later scenarios. The list itself does not make sense due to the lack of context, but all of the sentences included are well explained later in the book. To be more specific, “a shiny inner wrist” (3) refers to Webster's teenage habit of “wearing the watches with the face on the inside of the wrist” (6); “steam rising from a wet sink” (3) refers to the time when Webster went to visit Veronica's family, and Veronica’s mother was cooking in the house (29); and “a river rushing nonsensically upstream” refers to the Severn Bore Webster witnessed on an unforgettable night (35).

With many more incidents like those mentioned earlier, the list consists of the key aspects of young Webster's life: his friendship with Adrian, the love affair between him and Veronica, the unpleasant visit to Veronica's family and the odd attitude of Veronica's mother. Regarding the hidden consequences revealed at the end of the book (about the complicated relationship of Adrian, Veronica and her mother), these are all valuable threads of truth. More importantly, by accumulating the pieces of memories in the beginning of the book, it tells the readers almost explicitly that the overwhelming theme of this novel is ‘memory.’ In the way it is narrated in the book, when a man looks back on his life, he sees not the complete and specific stories with clear loves and hates, but a series of fragmental impressions, with much blank space and ambiguity.

As Brockmeier (2015) once described, “Literature does more than merely represent memories and processes of remembering and forgetting it; it gives shape and meaning to them.” This list of memory is vivid and substantial, and full of sensational feelings, including images (“a shiny inner wrist”), temperature (“hot frying pan”) and movements (“a river rushing upstream”). These feelings make the novel no longer feel like someone else’s story, but a series of scenes that can be related to anyone who reads it. It calls upon the reader's sympathy, and guides the reader into the subconscious of the character. These repetitive scenes are clues and indicators, and, after reading the book, the readers would feel the same as Webster does when they try to recall the story. Therefore, the repetition of scenes foregrounds the concept of “memory,” implies the main theme of the novel, and helps the readers better understand both the protagonist's mindset and the theme of memory in the book.

Secondly, apart from the opening, other scenes in the book seem to be repetitive, but are actually different in many crucial facts. As an example, in young Webster's mind, Veronica is a superficial and snobbish girl who had treated him unfairly during their days together. He states that Veronica does not dance (21), and she has only given him a “proper” goodnight kiss when he was staying in her house (29). However, when older Webster recalls the past, the scenes are in different versions. This time, he remembers that Veronica had once danced to his pop song (29); and during the evening he stayed with her family, she whispered to his ear to let him “sleep the sleep of the wicked” (132). Many similar instances can be found, such as his sexual intercourse with Veronica and his view on her family. In young Webster's mind, it is after they broke up that Veronica offered him sex (36). However, he recalled that, “In my mind, it was the beginning of the end of our relationship” (35). Meanwhile, he is also aware of the fact that Veronica may feel that “after she slept with me, I broke up with her” (44). This suggests that the so-called “break up” has not reached a mutual consent, and Veronica may have done this in order to maintain their relationship. All of these contradictions suggest that Webster’s memory is not as trustworthy, and cannot be taken as the “truth.” It can be pure illusions, which defame Veronica to defend him in the righteous stance.

The reason for him to do so is to free himself from the responsibility that he should take. By picturing Veronica as a girl with boredom and vanity, who would neither dance nor flirt, he can convince himself that she is the one to blame in their failure of romance. However, this is not to say that Webster is cheating on the readers with an evil intention. It is possible that he is just deceiving himself in order to feel better. Barnes (2009) once explained this mental state as “fabulation," which means, "convincing ourselves of a coherence between things that are largely true and things that are wholly imagined" (63). This psychological movement may account for his unreliable memory, and may explain the actual reason behind his consistent resentment towards Veronica. By putting all of the blame on Veronica, he can persuade himself to believe that he has not done anything wrong, and hold his position on moral high ground.
As Currie (2013) stated, “it is particularly in focalization that narrative can stage these perspectives of greater or less certainty, greater or less degree of objectivity” (101). This theory can be well applied to this book. It is repetition that focalizes the readers’ attention on Webster’s inconsistent narration, and leads the readers to question the essence of memory: is it the honest representation of truth, or is it just the story people make up and convince themselves to believe? Through this, readers can comprehend the deeper meaning of the book, which is the fallibility of individual’s memory. In most cases, memory is full of ambiguity. People tend to shift the story into a way they prefer, so that they can earn some comfort from the unchangeable past. Therefore, these contradictions in the repetitive scenes can reveal the unreliability of Webster’s narration, and imply the significance of the novel’s theme.

Similar phrases and sentences, which are attached to different meanings, also appear repeatedly in the book. One of the most evident repetitions is the definition of “history.” Back in the school days, when Webster is asked to define history, he said, “History is the lies of victors.” (16) However, his teacher added that, “It is also the self delusion of the defeated.” (16) This statement appeared again after Webster met Veronica in his older age, and acknowledged the bitterness he showed to her when they were young. Hereby, he admitted that he might have made up stories to deceive himself and feel at ease without any sympathy or guilt, forgetting about her and instead living a new life. As a defater of life, he finally admits that his version of “history” is nothing more than “the self-delusions of the defeated” (122). This view on “history” is also applicable in the concept of “memory.” With the illustration of “the self-delusion” by Webster’s own experience, readers understand the nature of memory, which is full of self-interpretation and fallibility.

Another example can be found in the arithmetic philosophy that Webster and his friends invented as an annotation of Robson’s suicide: “He, being about to cause an increase of one in the human population, had decided it was his ethical duty to keep the planet’s numbers constant” (14). Ironically, after Webster learned that Adrian, the man he had worshipped since adolescence, also committed suicide because of the pregnancy of his woman, he realized that it is “no more than a version of Robson” (141). This repetition shocked him, and evoked his sympathy for life. When he first made this formula, he considered Robson and his girlfriend nothing more than a sacrifice of the philosophy of life, whereas his best friend Adrian’s death is a powerful reminder: reminding him that the people involved in the accident are all individuals with their own thoughts and lives, and have suffered pain and shame that no one else could understand. The formula has made their story into a simple statement of truth, but underneath it all, there are loves and hates, as well as joys and pains, that cannot be told in this way. Different from the philosophical sense of life, this is how “memory” works.

**DISCUSSION**

As the character Adrian stated, “history is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation” (17). This book shows the unreliability of individual narration. What used to be considered as “history” may be just an edited version of one’s memory, with illusions and reality blended together. Most of the time, it is too hard to tell the difference, because the past has passed and solid evidence can rarely be found. It is a universal philosophy that everyone has a different version of the same story, and no one can represent the absolute objectivity. Therefore, we find a joke of generalizing historical events into one sentence, “there is unrest” (5), which is used again at the end of the book: “And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest” (150). This joke seems to be unserious, but it is the only fair explanation of the whole story. It is unbiased, and leaves sufficient space for an individual’s interpretation. The word “unrest” first appeared at the beginning of the book, and once again at the end. It echoes through the whole story, and implies the obsession, the misinterpretation, and the damage of all the unfortunate consequences.

**Conclusion**

This study has offered a taxonomy analysis of repetitions to illustrate the fallibility of memory in The Sense of an Ending. These repetitions can be classified into three categories: the repetitive emergence of scenes (particularly referring to the beginning of the book), the similarity of scenes with significant variations and the repetition of sentences with different meanings. All of these repetitions explain the imperfection and subjectivity of both memory and history, and show the richness of human emotions, such as urges and regrets that cannot be generalized by any universal philosophy. According to Groes and Childs (2011), apart from the ingenious stories, Barnes’s writing shows a skillful “wisdom of uncertainty” (3). As the way memory is pictured in the book, this uncertainty the imagery space for readers, constituting an irresistible attraction to the story. The story itself is neither heroic nor romantic, but its affection has shown the obsession and confusion that every, and any, individual may be susceptible to experiencing.

**Conflict of Interests**

The author have not declared any conflict of interests.

**REFERENCES**


