



## Exploring the path to death through Barnes's older characters: Between irony and melancholic meditation

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims at analysing four of Julian Barnes's novels with protagonists either entering or in their old age in order to discern to what extent conceptions of ageing, old age and death are depicted in Barnes's fiction and develop throughout his writing career. Barnes's memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2008) will also be central in the discussion, since, in it, the author reflects on conceptions of old age and death from different philosophers and authors intermingling them with his own personal experience and that of his family, specially his parents. For Barnes, death represents another part of life, even though he himself has confessed to have been obsessed with death since his early adolescence. On the other hand, in Barnes's novels, and from the point of view of his protagonists, ageing and old age is not that different from other life stages, since, one's essence does not change throughout one's life course. By resorting to irony and imbuing the narrative voice of his novels with what he calls melancholic meditation, Barnes approaches the reader to the experience of ageing, old age and death pointing to the fact that existential questions and life concerns are intrinsic to human beings rather than to specific ages.

### Introduction

After almost three decades of fiction and journalistic writing, Julian Barnes's works have been widely analysed for his constant narrative experimentation as well as for the recurrent exploration of a number of topics present in his novels and short story collections; namely, the unreliability of memory and history and the position of art and love against the inevitability of death. In terms of form, Barnes's works have been described as replete with intertextuality, a characteristic that Frederick M. Holmes attributes to the author setting the focus on “the impossibility of complete artistic originality” (2009: 14), together with his constant questioning of truth and reality as absolutes, something that Barnes achieves through his use of “metafictional games” (Holmes, 2009: 15). With both his narrative experimentation and constant revision of topics, Barnes's fictional writing allows the reader to glimpse into the life and inner thoughts of his protagonists from the perspective of old age in order to prove that old age is neither associated to decline nor to wisdom. As Barnes states in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, “I have always mistrusted the solution that old age brings serenity. The old are just as tormented as the young” (Barnes, 2009: 175). In Barnes's novels and short stories, characters in their old age provide a pragmatic view not only into the circumstances that have guided their life course, but also into the extent to which human beings are ultimately the result of the time and place they inhabit.

This article will focus on Barnes's four novels with protagonists in their old age; namely, the two novels with narrators who tell their stories from their mid-sixties, just after retirement, as is the case of Geoffrey Braithwaite and Tony Webster in *Flaubert's Parrot* (Barnes, 1984) and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) respectively; and the two novels in which their main protagonists, both of them female, reach their old age. This is the case of Jean Serjeant in *Staring at the Sun* (Barnes, 1986), who reaches her hundredth birthday in the third and last part of the novel, and the case of Martha Cochrane in *England, England* (Barnes, 1998), who is described as an “old maid” (1998: 259) in her nineties in the last part of the novel. This division, which will guide the structure of the article, responds to the structure and narrative voice of the novels as well as to the ages from which the main characters tell their stories. Whereas in *Flaubert's Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending* the narrators recount their stories from their mid-sixties in order to make sense of some of the decisions they had made in their younger years, *Staring at the Sun* and *England, England* are organised in chronological order – with the first part of the novels corresponding to childhood and early adulthood, the middle part to middle-age and the last part dedicated to old age. Moreover, Barnes's memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (2009) will also be central in the discussion of the four novels considered here. Barnes wrote *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* when he was in his early sixties. In it, he reflects on his intimate and, at the same time, controversial relationship with death through the

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combination of episodes of his own life, his parents' older age and dying process, relating his own and his family's experience to a number of philosophers and artists who have written about life and death throughout history. This article will aim at revising the way in which conceptions of ageing, old age and death are portrayed and to what extent they are challenged in Barnes's fiction with a focus on the novels aforementioned. The voice of the older character is conveyed through the use of the first-person (in *Flaubert's Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending*) and third-person indirect discourse (in *England, England* and *Staring at the Sun*). The combination of these narrative voices allows the insertion of irony and humour in the discussion of matters that have increasingly been dealt with as serious and even taboo.

What lies at the core of Barnes's fiction has been discussed by the same author in a number of interviews and by some academics who have studied his works, who actually agree on defining Barnes's works as combining irony with melancholic meditation (Paterman, 2002: 3). In this respect, Holmes includes a quote to one of Julian Barnes's interviews conducted by Rudolf Freiburg in which the author admits that "there is probably a pervasive melancholy in a lot of what I write. I think that this partly comes from the objective assessment of the human condition, the inevitability of extinction – and also from an objective look at how people's lives turn out and how rarely achievement matches intention" (Holmes, 2009: 19). In his monograph on Julian Barnes published in 2011, and after revising previous critical work on the author's oeuvre, Peter Childs defines Barnes's fictional work: "as a balance of moral comedy and sceptical nostalgia in portraits of a fallen human condition" (Childs, 2011: 11). For Merritt Moseley, Barnes is "a modern liberal thinker, aware of complexity" who "writes books richer in the exploration of serious ideas than in the delivery of finality and doctrinaire answers" (Moseley, 1997: 16). In her review of *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Kate Saunders sees Barnes's works as "deeply concerned with the state of being alive; of having a pulse and five senses; of being a living piece of solid flesh" (Saunders, 2011: 1). Thus, as these critics have already argued and the author himself has stated, Barnes's fiction and memoirs do not aim to provide answers to specific questions but, rather, to bring to the surface concerns and topics which are not usually part of conversation, with old age and death among them. Moreover, Barnes's works acknowledge the impossibility of reaching a truthful version of either public history or individual memory. It is in this sense that Barnes considers that literature is "the best way of telling the truth; it's a process of producing grand, beautiful, well-ordered lies that tell more truth than any assemblage of facts" (Guppy, 2000: 1).

### Ageing, old age and death: from taboo to irony

Old age and death have become taboo topics in Western societies, particularly with the proliferation and establishment of consumer culture. The wide offer of products and techniques available in the market imply that the ageing body can be constantly monitored and serviced in order to conceal the signs of ageing (Blaikie, 1999: 25). In fact, social gerontologists Bryan S. Turner (Turner, 1995) and Elizabeth Hallam establish a very close relationship between keeping a healthy and youthful body, the concept of identity and self-identity, and death. As Hallam states "when emphasis is placed upon control and the regulation of the body as a prerequisite for the maintenance of self-identity, the dying body and the dead body acquire terrifying qualities" (Hallam, 1999: 21). In other words, both the ageing body and death become vivid reminders of frailty and mortality, words that, as Norbert Elias argued in his *The Loneliness of the Dying* (Elias, 1985), are increasingly made invisible in advanced societies. As Elias states, "life grows longer, death is further postponed. The sight of dying and dead people is no longer commonplace. It is easier in the normal course of life to forget death" (1985: 8). In this state of affairs, we tend to forget that we are actually mortal and, according to Elias, it is more difficult for us to both understand the ageing process and give solace to those close to death. For Glennys Howarth, the advancement of medicine and technology

have even set death further away not only from our day-to-day reality, but mainly from our condition as mortal beings; in other words, "[t]he promise of control over mortality is extended in the shape of medical advances and risk-aversion strategies" (Howarth, 2006: 257).

Death, understood as the culmination of the process from the time we are born to the time we die, is one of the recurrent topics in Julian Barnes's works. As Barnes has confessed in different interviews and in his memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, he has been concerned by death from a very young age. In his memoir, Barnes combines episodes of his family and his own life with writings of philosophers and thinkers who have theorised about death – and life, which is actually indissoluble from death – such as Gustave Flaubert, one of the most influential authors in Barnes's writing. One of Barnes's observations in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* is precisely the fact that contemporary relationship to death – and also ageing – is problematic, in tune with Elias's and Howarth's arguments. Barnes refers to Michel de Montaigne's work and explains that whereas in Montaigne's times to die of "extreme old age" was something "rare, singular and extraordinary", "nowadays we assume it is our right" (2009: 40); and refers to both Montaigne and Philippe Ariès, a twentieth-century French philosopher, as stating that the only way to "defeat death" (2009: 41) is both to have it in mind and talk about it, something that is not quite present in nowadays society. For Barnes, having death present and actually talking about it is a way of learning about both life and death since, as he himself quotes from Flaubert "everything must be learned, from speaking to dying" (2009: 98). However, as Barnes explains in his memoirs and, as it can be discerned from his novels, being an agnostic, he misses the "the underlying sense of purpose" (2009: 53) fulfilled by religious belief. Through his writing, Barnes reflects on death, but also on the sense and purpose of life, both topics very much present in the four novels with older protagonists and narrators that will be considered here. As Barnes explains, his concern for death has always been present in his life, regardless of his age. That is why in Barnes novels old age is not that different from any other life stage since, each of them, has its positive and negative side with specific wishes, hopes and concerns. In his works, as Frank Kermode states in one of his interviews with the writer, Barnes represents old age from multiple perspectives, as he actually does with most of his recurrent topics: "sometimes comical, sometimes curious, and sometimes notable for the purity with which the prose matches the seriousness of the themes" (Kermode, 2004: 1).

The four protagonists considered here – Geoffrey Braithwaite and Tony Webster in *Flaubert's Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending*, and Jean Serjeant and Martha Cochrane in *Staring at the Sun* and *England, England* – reflect on the options and choices they have made during their lives, at the same time as they observe and analyse the relationships they have established with their closer ones to try to find a sense to their existence. Thus, memory and the re-telling and reconstruction of the past become key concepts in the four novels at the same time as humour and irony are recurrent resources. However, memory and history turn out to be unreliable tools to reconstruct one's past and find a trustworthy meaning to our collective and our individual story; thus, the four characters find it difficult to discern their own 'truth'. As Geoffrey Braithwaite states in *Flaubert's Parrot*, "I'm not surprised some people prefer books. Books make sense of life" (1984: 86). A common characteristic in the four older protagonists is the acceptance of the fact that reality can only be partially grasped, thus, accepting uncertainty as part of a human life. However, in the novels considered here there is also the acknowledgement that "love and life fail but there is much that is beautiful and amusing in the mismatch between human beings' reach and grasp", as Childs (2011: 6) states in his monograph when referring to the author's fictional works. As it is present in the collection of stories *The Lemon Table*, in which each story features a main character in their old age, getting to one's sixties, seventies and eighties neither guarantees wisdom nor tameness. In other words, it is precisely this uncertainty that proves to be one of the attractiveness of being alive and getting to a very old age, if lucky.

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