



---

**EXISTENTIAL PROGRESSION AND THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS IN  
JULIAN BARNES' *THE SENSE OF AN ENDING***

- *Dr. Pew Maji*

**ABSTRACT**

Use of Greek mythology in literature has been a common practice with writers preferring to use it as a literary technique. It evokes popularity and draws familiarity with the readers. The allusions and images impart visual images to the readers and assist in equating similarity to the characters in a fictitious setup. Julian Barnes' Booker-winning novel, *The Sense of an Ending* brings forth the representation of the Greek myths in a profound way in the narrative. The present research aims to analyze the novel from the point of view of existentialism and Greek mythology, especially the 'Myth of Sisyphus'.

**KEYWORDS**

Myth of Sisyphus, Camus, existentialism, death, suicide

## RESEARCH PAPER

Greek mythology has its association with the *Bible* and existentialism since its development from 700s B.C. Albert Camus is a religious thinker, a poet-mystic who had philosophized the 'Myth of Sisyphus' in a varied, rhetoric and abundant style. Sisyphus is labeled as the 'hero of absurdism'. The Greek myths had always been used in literature as a literary technique. 'Absurdism' to speak as a philosophy has originated out of the fundamental discord between the elements of the Universe. In this quest, an individual may find one of the possible solutions in the form of suicide, surrender to the religious, spiritual or abstract belief in a transcendental realm. Many well-known writers have been using existentialism and absurdism in their writings to emphasize the freedom, existence, and choice of the characters of their fiction. Julian Barnes, noted British novelist and writer has many novels to his credit. Shortlisted twice for the Booker Prize, Barnes finally achieved the award in 2011 with *The Sense of an Ending*. Credited with novels like *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *The Porcupine* (1992), *England, England* (1998), *Arthur & George* (2005), *The Noise of Time* (2016), and the recent *The Only Story* (2018), his narratives depict themes of love, affection, relationship, jealousy, hate, death and all the emotions as well as feelings involved in a human life. His works highlight his skillful depiction of the philosophy of existentialism and alienation in the Modern world.

Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* breaks in the question of existentialist attitude and a man's futile search for meaning in his mortal life. The novelist had worked hard on the existential progression of the characters in this outstanding novel. Using the philosophy of 'absurd' and 'myths' in narratives had always involved intricate mechanism and Barnes' Booker-winning *The Sense of an Ending* reveals a crystalline truth about the meaninglessness of human life. Conforming to Mary Magoulick, in her essay, *What is Myth?*, "As stories (or narratives), myths articulate how characters undergo or enact an ordered sequence of events." The use of myths in narrative exhibits a sense of distinctiveness to the characters and aids the readers to develop a better sense of understanding with the plot. They further aid in the personification of the subject matter and offer explanations of the mysterious facts of the Universe. In this acclaimed novel, Barnes has highlighted the fruitless, nihilistic existence of the characters with the use of the Greek myths. Barnes had always written his novels based on Greek myths and is known for his clarity of thoughts, the frankness of ideas and decency of language. His usage of the Greek myths in narratives provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of human relationships. Like his previous novels, Barnes' *The Sense of an*

*Ending* also presents a kaleidoscopic view of intricate mortal relations. As a novelist, he had always focused on the narrative techniques infused with the Greek myths compared to the content to reproduce existentialistic and sensitive issues of absurd mortal life.

Using Greek myths in literature has always been a topic of discussion for many researchers. There are different points of view towards the rich heritage and effectiveness of Greek myths in narratives. Nevertheless, all the previous researchers had found a consensus regarding the treatment of myths, especially the Greek myths in narratives. Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* is termed as "A Philosophical Suicide" (Florian Markowetz, 2012). It highlights the psychological mechanism of the Greek myths or drives of 'Eros' and 'Thanatos' better known as 'life-instincts' and 'death-instincts' (Wenquan, 2015). The novel further exhibits "the direct mention of Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* in the immortalized quote *suicide [is] the only true philosophical question*" (Michael Stoddard, 2018). Analyzing the novel with a deeper viewpoint showcases the rare threads of existentialist outlook used by the noted novelist to highlight the absurd crisis developed in a man's peaceful life.

*The Sense of an Ending* reveals a distinct storyline with the narrative divided into two parts. The novel is a tragic memoir exhibiting a complex, yet heart-warming chronicle of four friends. The narrative mainly focuses on the narrator-protagonist, Tony Webster and his involvement with his close friend Adrian Finn as well as his ex-girlfriend, Veronica Ford. The protagonist, Tony's sense of insecurity raises the vulnerability of his relationships, be it Veronica or his wife. The story opens depicting Tony in his retired and peaceful life. He is divorced from his wife but still maintaining a friendly relationship with her. With the arrival of a mysterious 'letter' from his ex-girlfriend Veronica's mother, Mrs. Sarah Ford and an unexpected 'inheritance' from her changes the situation. A part of the inheritance comprises his old-school friend's 'diary' which instigates Tony Webster to embark on a soul-searching journey of the past. With the past, the memories come back in fragments and scatter the colourful present. These fragmented units, anecdotes and recollections of the past incidences with images of amusement pile up and recreate the reasons for being in the present situation which shatters Tony's self-esteem to a blow. The peaceful situation of the present changes when he comes to know about his friend, Adrian Finn's suicide. Tony is bewildered and confused on hearing the death of Adrian and blames himself responsible for this unfortunate death. His decision to reinvent the past is actually his soul-searching journey to the by-gone days to find the reason of Adrian's death and to get rid of the 'guilt', his 'original sin', hanging on his heart.

In his philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus justifies the human mind's dilemma to feel lost in his meaningless world. His comparison of man's meaningless life with that of Man's existence on Earth. Sisyphus was condemned by 'Mercury' to "ceaselessly" repeat the same meaningless task of rolling a rock up the mountain and only to push it down again. He was condemned to repeat this task forever till eternity.

"...rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight."

It was sentenced to him as "there is no dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor." Sisyphus, the 'absurd hero' has become a literary icon and doomed to eternity. As Camus states, "The absurd man says yes and his efforts will henceforth be ceasing." Absurd exists as man exists. Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical work, *The Sickness Unto Death*, published with the pseudonym, *Anti-Climacus*, brings to light man's despair and realization of the original sin (the Christian concept of 'Sin'). Kierkegaard is concerned with man's failure to have faith in God and eternity. His theo-philosophical approach to Christian existentialism brings the argument that "the Universe is fundamentally paradoxical" with its ultimate paradox being the transcendental union of God and humans. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes reflects the 'Myth of Sisyphus' with the activities of the different characters in the narrative. The fiction presents the absurdism and the Greek philosophy of 'Myth of Sisyphus'. The absurdism of the characters and their relentless search for happiness as well as meaning in their lives metes out an amorphous chaos of the Universe. The presentation of Adrian Finn's "Roman death" is a perfect example of usage of the Greek myths in the storyline.

Man's refusal to embrace and accept disharmony and conflict intensifies his endless struggle with inner peace. This existentialist perspective sheds light on the different characters of Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*. The title of the novel explains everything with 'the sense of an ending'. In the myth, Sisyphus is doomed to conduct the mundane task of pushing the rock and back again till eternity, similarly, in the novel, all the characters are stuck in the 'circle of life' that looks unfulfilling. Tony Webster's revisiting the past and searching for his friend Adrian's letter reinforces his alienation from the society. His reinventing the past and searching for the events happened in the bygone days of his life is similar to Camus' philosophy of search for a meaningful life. Tony's idea of mindfulness is restored at the end of the novel with the discovery of the identity of Adrian and Veronica's mother, Mrs. Sarah Ford's son, Adrian Junior. His attitude can be analyzed with his 'Sisyphean' statement:

“I had wanted life not to bother me too much, and had succeeded – and how pitiful that was”.

Contrast to Tony, Adrian's character is:

“He had a better mind and a more rigorous temperament than me; he thought logically, and then acted on the conclusion of logical thought”.

Søren Kierkegaard's psychological works reconnoitered the feelings and emotions of individuals who face ultimate situations and life choices. To analyze the storyline of *The Sense of an Ending* from Kierkegaard's philosophy, the characteristic traits of the different characters become clear to us. Adrian's fascination of Albert Camus and his philosophy is contradictory to his suicide. He had been the philosopher of the group of four friends who relied on him. Apparently, his strong philosophical attitude seemed self-contradictory to his suicide. The suicide seemed an unfathomable circumstance which is built up by Barnes to accentuate the incongruous component in the plot. Adrian Finn's 'suicide' is represented as an interior restoration and artistic catharsis following his illicit affair with Veronica's mother, Mrs. Sarah Ford. Tony's search for the reason of Adrian's 'suicide' and the 'letter' drives the story forward as the intricacies of this novel unfold layer by layer. Like the 'Myth of Sisyphus', the conflict in the novel occurs when there is a difference in what a man desires and what he gets in the Universe. It is enlightenment, order versus abstraction and chaos. The inability to accept the absurd life brings pain, sufferings, and frustrations in the Universe and in the life of a man. Adrian Finn's decision to end his life is the result of “paralysis of will” which occurs when a man loses his ability to think for a higher purpose and accept the reality like 'Sisyphus'. Finn's 'Roman' suicide in a bathtub depicts man's futile attempt to attain enlightenment and order. The situation is presented as an illustration of Adrian's absurd struggle against destiny and order. When challenged with a meaningless existence, man intends to embrace an easy escape in the form of suicide. Compared to religion, nationalism, patriotism, and fanaticism, suicide is an easy escape to avoid, than defying the constant confrontation of absurdness of a mundane life. According to Camus, for Sisyphus “the struggle itself is enough to fill the heart with happiness” and a similar circumstance proves the crucial element to Adrian's suicide:

“the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart.”

Camus' suggestion that Sisyphus is happy in his absurd task “because of his capacity to be free”. “He is free not by escaping his task but by accepting the absurdity in it”. Sisyphus escapes the absurdism by creating his own freedom and meaning in his task.

In the novel, the enigmatic silence on Veronica's part towards Tom reflects her skeptic attitude and absurd hesitation to reveal the truth of Adrian Finn's relationship with her mother and consequently the birth of their mentally challenged son, Junior Adrian. Adrian's "Roman Death" (suicide) owes to his failure to take the commitment of his actions. His relationship with Veronica's mother and the consequential pregnancy are irrational. When Adrian had asked Tony's approval to pursue a relationship with Veronica, his objective was not to offend Tony's sentimentalities. In answer to the letter, Tony recommended him to seek Veronica's mother, Mrs. Ford's advice. The recommendation script with Adrian ending up having an affair with the mother instead of the daughter. With this part of the storyline, Barnes had tried to draw the Greek myth of 'Oedipus Complex' as Adrian falls in love with the mother instead of the daughter. Consequently, the illogical and illicit affair resulted in a pregnancy which makes Adrian accept the responsibility of his own actions and finally committing suicide thus rejecting his own freedom.

".....A responsible agent, determining in its own development through the acts of will". Nevertheless, Adrian's suicide is designated by Tony as a superior act over the meaninglessness of life. ".....the superiority of the intervening act over the unworthy passivity of merely letting life happen to you (.....) An implicit criticism of everybody else".

Existentialism being a vital theme in Barnes' subject matters delineates the existential crisis and nothingness of human life. The novel, *The Sense of an Ending* all the more depicts the use of mythical representation to personify the existentialist yet vital elements of a man's endless struggle in this Universe and denotes a symbolic meaning to it. All the characters of the novel appropriately depict the 'Sisyphean' philosophy of caught in the absurd and a meaningless circle of life.

## WORKS CITED

- Barnes, Julian. *The Sense of an Ending*. New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 2011.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage, 1955.
- Childs, P. *Julian Barnes*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011.
- Magoulick, Mary. "What is Myth?". <http://faculty.gcsu.edu/custom-website/mary-magoulick/defmyth.htm>.
- Peat, F. David. *From Certainty to Uncertainty: The Story of Science and Ideas in the Twentieth Century*. Washington: Joseph Henry Press, 2002.
- Richard, Gladys A. "Literary Types and Dissemination of Myths", *The Journal of American Folklore*. American Folklore Society: Vol.34, No. 133,(Jul.-Sep., 1921), pp. 269-307.
- Stoddard, Michael. "Fatalistic Folly: The Predetermined Ending of *The Sense of an Ending*". [http://www.academia.edu/11432239/Fatalistic\\_Folly\\_The\\_Predetermined\\_Ending\\_of\\_The\\_Sense\\_of\\_an\\_Ending?auto=download](http://www.academia.edu/11432239/Fatalistic_Folly_The_Predetermined_Ending_of_The_Sense_of_an_Ending?auto=download).
- Wenquen, W.Q. "On the Motif of Death in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*." *Canadian Social Science*, 11(3), 87-95, 2015. Web. 13 March 2018.

---

## ABOUT THE RESEARCHER



**Dr. Pew Maji**

**Assistant Professor**

**University of Hafr Al Batin**

**Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

**Email: [dr.pewmaji@gmail.com](mailto:dr.pewmaji@gmail.com)**