

Characteristic Self-Deceit

The characterisation of self-reflection in Barnes and Flanagan

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Characterisation is considered a crucial component of literary merit, and hence of a prize-winning novel. A well-realised primary character becomes the connection between a reader and the world of the novel; and a layered, believable, *interesting* character becomes the reader's reason to continue reading. Characters are the component of a novel which readers, whether critical or popular, can relate to; and hence an important feature of prize-winning. In 'literary fiction', characterisation is considered especially important, held above plot as a keystone to the quality of a text. William Cole describes character as 'everything in literary fiction', suggesting 'The character will be adopted by the reader, and the characters will drive the momentum of the plot' (Cole); Derek Flynn likewise argues that plot is unimportant when compared to character (Flynn). Plot is important – but it is generally considered important primarily as it relates to characterisation, presenting situations in which the character is developed or revealed further.

This essay will examine characterisation in two novels: Julian Barnes' *The Sense of An Ending* and Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. It will scrutinize the characters of Tony Webster and Tenji Nakamura, and how they are drawn to life by the strokes of the author.

Tony Webster is of course the protagonist of his novel, while Nakamura for the most part plays the role of the antagonist to Dorrigo Evans' protagonist. However, there are certain parallels between Nakamura and Tony. Both characters have lived out the latter parts of their lives in relative peace, only to have that peace collapse around them as they are forced to reassess the past and their respective roles in it.

Since *Ending* is narrated from the first person by Tony himself, he is mostly portrayed through indirect characterisation with hints embedded in his writing. Nakamura's story, on the other

hand, is given in third-person, and he is hence characterised using a combination of direct and indirect methods. In *Ending*, the reader, with the truth hidden by careful omission, is making the same journey of discovery as Tony. In *Narrow Road*, by contrast, the reader knows about the horrible things Nakamura has done, and is simply witnessing his self-reflection in dawning horror. While the unreliable narrator is used to conceal Tony's story, Nakamura's story is laid bare from the start, hidden only to himself; and the reader is left to wait for him to realise the truth of his past.

Both *Narrow Road* and *The Sense of an Ending* are named after other literary works, both esteemed in their respective literary canons. Matsuo Bashō's *Oku no Hosomichi* (sometimes translated as 'The Narrow Road to the Deep North') is important to the character of Nakamura, who reveres Japanese literature and sees the great work as a symbol of his nation's spirit, for which his life is lived. As a journey of self-discovery, it is grimly reflected in Nakamura's own near-deathbed self-discoveries (Bashō and Chilcott).

The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction, by Frank Kermode, concerns itself deeply with the individual's struggle to make sense of its life and place itself in the history of the world. No doubt this is relevant to Tony's character: Barnes' work is chiefly about Tony's re-examination of his past and the consequences of his actions. Holmes describes Tony as an unreliable narrator, rendered so by his "misapprehension" of the past (Holmes 28). His series of realisations and revelations, closing the "temporal gap between the original apprehension of what the situation signifies and the final understanding that its significance was other" as described by Kermode (qtd. in Holmes 28), cause a radical shift in his perceptions of the events of his past and his own role in it. Indeed, we learn a great deal about Tony from how he perceives himself. The novel's first-person narration means that everything that is omitted or included is a form of characterisation, revealing more either about how Tony sees the past or how he wants it to be seen.

We see an important example of Tony's unreliability in his initial account of a letter sent in response to Adrian's news, a letter which eventuates as the novel's central plot point. "As far as I remember, I told him pretty much what I thought of their joint moral scruples... Then I wished him good luck, burnt his letter in an empty grate (melodramatic, I agree, but I plead youth as a mitigating circumstance), and decided that the two of them were now out of my life forever." (Barnes 43)

Tony here severely underplays the deeply acerbic bitterness of his letter, revealed in full later in the novel. He makes himself out as more or less reasonable, if slightly jaded. He uses a high diction ("mitigating circumstance") to make himself appear more rational (and intelligent) than in reality. His plea of "youth" echoes a general sentiment that any slight rashness, such as the burning of the letter, should be forgiven. He also implies that some time ("When, at last, I replied to it properly...") has passed before his response, leading the reader to assume that it was written with a clearer head. He does not lie, but the mildness of his language here is in total contrast with the actual letter, making its eventual revelation much more shocking to the reader. Tony is characterised as someone lying not only to his audience, but to himself. His elision of the content of his letter stands out here; it is already apparent that something is missing (highlighted by the almost politically evasive "As far as I remember"), whether forgotten or deliberately excluded. We receive a glimpse of Tony's characteristic (perhaps unconscious) re-evaluation of the past to suit his self-image.

Tony later learns of Adrian's suicide, grieves briefly, and the story moves on. Several decades of Tony's life are contracted to a couple of pages (Barnes 54-56); the birth, marriage and children of his daughter become little more than a footnote. Although he justifies this by claiming they are unimportant to the story he is telling, it seems an odd omission. Almost the entire point of the novel is the undue stress placed by Tony on certain events while diminishing the importance of others. This may be another example. Greaney comments "Webster's autobiographical narrative thus envisages its subject as a quiet paragon of suburban harmlessness whose adult life, in its nondescript averageness, has disqualified itself from novelistic representation" (Greaney 232). It seems that Tony deliberately stresses the "harmlessness" of his life, as though playing character witness to himself.

Until the events in his middle ages, Tony seems content to remain comfortably ignorant. After some back-and-forth with Veronica upon her mother's death, during which Tony remains bemusedly self-righteous in the face of the hostility towards him, she sends him the original letter penned by him (Barnes 95). As much a surprise to Tony as to the reader, the letter is gleefully packed with insults, vulgarities and obscenities, charged with sexual frustration, jealousy and bitterness. The pure vitriol it spouts contrasts acutely with the mildness implied previously.

Tony is constructed over the course of the novel as a self-deceiving man of middling intelligence, ascribing noble qualities to himself and imploring the reader to see him as actually a pretty good guy. The reader is undeceived. Many of his observations about himself are unintentionally steeped in irony: "...as he puts it in one of his endless perambulations round the point, [he] can 'only be straightforward.'" (Dyer). Tony is a skilfully crafted character set up to inadvertently reveal his own flaws to the reader, a curiously layered characterisation that certainly contributes to the novel's prize-winning quality.

Ley comments on the strength of Flanagan's characterisation, which manages to respect the suffering of the prisoners while avoiding idealisation (Ley). He also remarks on the characterisation of the Japanese characters, who are superficially the antagonists of the novel: "...the Japanese soldiers are themselves powerless, in the sense that they are subject to a strictly enforced hierarchy and an ideology of unquestioning obedience." (Ley)

Tenji Nakamura, one such Japanese character, is first presented as an antagonist, an obstacle to Evans (Flanagan 76). But between them there is a grudging respect, an understanding that both are doing what seems to them necessary. Nakamura's philosophy, preposterous and cruel to a western reader, is nonetheless a fundamental part of himself. He, likewise, finds the Australian way of seeing things incomprehensible. He is characterised directly through Dorrigo:

"And Dorrigo Evans understood that for the railway to be built, that railway that was the only reason for the immense suffering of hundreds of thousands of human beings at that very

moment – for that senseless line of embankments and cuttings and corpses, of gouged earth and massed dirt and blasted rock and more corpses, of bamboo trestling and teetering bridges and teak sleepers and ever more corpses, of innumerable dog spikes and inexorable iron lines, of corpse after corpse after corpse after corpse – for *that* railway to exist, he understood Darky Gardiner must be punished. At that moment he admired the terrible will of Nakamura – admired it more even than he despaired of the beating of Darky Gardiner – the grim strength, the righteous obedience to codes of honour that allowed no doubt.”

Corpse is repeated over and over, hammering home the deadly consequences of Nakamura’s will, in an extended, complex sentence composed of numerous images, symbolising the complexity of Nakamura’s character and of the situation the two men find themselves in. The mechanical, inexorable push of the Japanese Empire, of which both men feel the force, is emphasised in this section’s imagery, as well as the tenuity of its overextended reach (“bamboo trestling and teetering bridges”). Despite Nakamura’s horrible deeds, the reader is drawn to understand his position. We see that although he has committed atrocities, he has committed them in accordance with his strict internal rules, from which no deviation is possible. Nonetheless we wish him to understand *our* position, the position of the Western reader who recoils at his cruelty.

From the end of the war on, Nakamura’s life is shown to the reader in leaps and bounds, indirectly characterised by the narration of his actions. A picture is built up of Nakamura as one incapable of believing any evil of the great nation to which he pledged his life. ‘The will of the Emperor’, which must be obeyed at all cost, is repeatedly evoked as a symbol of divine authority. And despite the intransigence of his philosophy, he proves to be quite flexible in confirming it. The terrible acts described in tribunals must be fabrications; and if not fabrications then they must have been justified. No evil can be done in the Emperor’s name; especially not by Tenji Nakamura, who is a good man.

Eventually, happily married and with children, he lives free of consequences, just as Tony did. He refuses to believe accusations of evil acts committed by others in the service of Japan; and when he is presented with evidence that these acts certainly did take place, as with the firsthand account of the surgeon who took part in the live vivisection of an American airman (Flanagan 370), he readjusts his worldview to allow those acts as justified (similar, perhaps, to the manner in which ardent supporters on either end of the political spectrum will overlook unscrupulous drone strikes or vitriolic racism so long as their candidate generally acts 'for the greater good').

"And while it meant that all the Americans said was true, and that he, Nakamura, had been wrong, the reasons for which it had been done made such complete sense to Nakamura that he felt there was nothing remarkable about this story of a man being cut up while alive and fully conscious" (Flanagan 370-371). Here the Western perspective is acknowledged in the irony of this statement, emphasised by the understated choice of "remarkable". The narrator concedes that there is indeed something wrong with such actions, but explains that Nakamura does not.

Nakamura simply cannot comprehend the accusations levelled against him or the Japanese army. He believes he has acted as a soldier should. It appears that Nakamura can never see things from the perspective of those he has oppressed, can never comprehend the Western version of morality, no matter how we want him to understand the horror he has wrought, and that he will die without realising the deep truth of his actions. Until, that is, his fateful visit to an old military companion, Tomokawa.

The catalyst is the painted postcard, an object of beauty created by an Australian prisoner-of-war long forgotten by Nakamura and falsely attributed to him by Tomokawa's wife. "But something in his memory of the POW painting portraits of him and his men that day in Siam troubled him, but why it did so, he had no idea," (Flanagan 405). The long-dead POW, previously conceived of by Nakamura as nothing more than vermin, and treated as such, is subtly humanised and begins to undermine Nakamura's self-righteousness.

It is through Tomokawa's alternate version of events, war crimes in China recounted as fondly remembered hijinks ("And when I think about all that we did with the chinks in Manchukuo... And the fun we had with their women!" (Flanagan 406)), that Nakamura's carefully constructed justifications finally come tumbling down. Tomokawa does not play the role of accuser, but rather a sympathiser; as demonstrated earlier in the novel by Choi Sang-min's trial (Flanagan 338), accusations and shaming do little to shift the firmly-entrenched self-image of the self-righteous, acting only to embed it further. Tomokawa, however, as a former accomplice stating plainly what Nakamura has hidden from himself for so long, has a deep impact: "...he had discovered in himself an almost inexhaustible capacity to stifle pity, to be playful with cruelty in a way he found to be frankly pleasurable, for no human life could be worth anything next to his cosmic goodness. For a moment, as he was being eaten by Tomokawa's oppressive armchair, he wondered: what if this had all been a mask for the most terrible evil?" (Flanagan 409). We have "terrible evil" juxtaposed with "cosmic goodness", the perception of a Western reader balanced against Nakamura's understanding of himself; the visual image of "eaten by Tomokawa's oppressive armchair" becomes a metaphor, for the truth enveloping and smothering him. Finally, Nakamura receives a glimpse of himself from the eyes of the reader.

Nakamura's dark epiphany is ultimately satisfying; although Nakamura has escaped institutional justice, he is left to punish himself. And yet, we somehow feel sorry for him. The truth does not set Nakamura free. If anything, ignorance was the freeing force in his life. Revelation drives him only to despair and self-hatred in the final days of his life (although we are not treated to such an aftermath in *Ending*, we might assume the same is true to a lesser of Tony Webster).

As *The Economist* asserts, "Mr Flanagan's Japanese camp commander is a tyrant and a drug addict. But he is also a patriot, a loving father and, ultimately, a survivor" (The Economist). It is this remarkable subtlety of characterisation, the ability to show us the great evil a character has performed and then to still make us see him as a human being, that distinguishes *Narrow Road's* literary merit.

Author Walter Van Tilburg Clark has been quoted: “The only final test, it seems to me, of literary merit, is the power to endure... Aside from this test of durability, I think the test of literary merit must be, to my mind, first, the sincerity of the writer.” (qtd. in Morgan and Peters 224) Lacking a test of durability for either of these texts, we can at least examine the sincerity of Barnes and Flanagan; and one marker of sincerity is the depth to which they present their characters. Nobody in *Narrow Road* can be deemed a ‘flat’ character; almost every named person in the novel, no matter how despicable, is given a backstory, believable motivations, and sympathetic traits, and has their future trajectory traced to logical conclusion. And although *Ending* does not explore all its characters to the same degree (one might argue that Veronica or Brother Jack come across as flat), it makes up for this with the depths to which it plumbs its protagonist’s soul. The sincerity and skill with which the authors’ characters are portrayed contribute powerfully to the literary quality of their novels and the attainment of their respective prizes.

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