

## **The Interplay between Eros and Thanatos in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending***

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### **Abstract:**

The classical Freudian psychoanalysis enunciates the idea that the dual instincts, Eros and Thanatos, determine the phenomena of life. This paper attempts to analyse how these two instincts fight each other and how their interaction determines the course of the lives of the characters in the Booker-winning novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, by Julian Barnes. The analysis reveals that Thanatos dominates in the novel, often leading the characters to aggression, violence, self-destruction, and death.

### **Keywords:**

*The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Eros, Thanatos.

The terms, 'Eros' and 'Thanatos', originally come from Greek mythology: Eros is the god of love and desire, and Thanatos is the god of death. Sigmund Freud makes use of these mythical figures to name the life and death instincts that co-exist within the human psyche. All human instincts, according to Freud, fall into one of the two broad categories: Eros or the life instincts, and Thanatos or the death instincts. These two forces fight each other, and their conflict and interaction determine the development of individual life and culture.

Eros, the life instinct, deals with basic survival, pleasure, and reproduction. It thus appears as biological needs for human survival: food, shelter, clothing, sleep, and sex. It seeks to produce and preserve life. Eros is related to positive emotions such as love, cooperation, collaboration and all other human behaviours that support peaceful societies. The energy created by the life instinct is known as libido (Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* 23).

Thanatos, the death instinct, appears in opposition to Eros. It pushes a person towards extinction and an inanimate state. Thanatos is often associated with negative emotions like fear, hate and anger. This drive was initially described in Freud's book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which he proposes that "the goal of all life is death" (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings* 111). He also notes that people hold an unconscious desire to die and that this wish is largely tempered by the life instincts. Self-destructive behaviour is an expression of the energy created by the death instinct. When this energy is directed outward onto others, it becomes aggression and violence. Freud believed that Eros is stronger than Thanatos, thus empowering us to survive rather than to self-destruct.

Applying the Freudian psychoanalytical concept of Eros and Thanatos to *The Sense of an Ending*, it becomes obvious that these two instincts are entangled throughout the novel and their interplay is shown as one of the major ideas in the novel. *The Sense of an Ending* is

a Booker-winning novel written by Julian Barnes in 2011. The novel is narrated by Tony Webster, a retired man, who recalls his days with Adrian Finn at school. He reflects on the ways he and his friends have chosen and how that has altered their lives altogether. He attempts to find out why his intelligent friend, Adrian Finn, committed suicide.

The idea of the interplay between Eros and Thanatos first appears in the novel when Adrian speaks up in the English class. He opines that the poem they are reading is about “Eros and Thanatos ... the erotic principle, in any case, coming into conflict with the death principle” (Barnes 6). This loaded phrase signposts the main idea that pervades the novel.

Another incident that reflects the conflict between Eros and Thanatos is the suicide of Robson. Robson, a student of Science sixth form, commits suicide after getting his girlfriend pregnant. His libido drives him to seek pleasure and it strengthens instinct of Eros in him. As he satisfies his id, his superego comes into play. His sense of morality activates the death instinct and thus he commits suicide. In the case of Robson, “Thanatos wins again” (Barnes 13). His Thanatos has gained much prominence from his superego and this primal instinct has won the conflict. In other words, the sense of guilt has made him commit suicide. For Freud, the moral sense of guilt is the expression of tension between the ego and the superego, “From the point of view of morality, the control and restriction of instinct, it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the super-ego that it can be hyper-moral and then becomes as ruthless as only the id can be.” (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 40).

Tony is keen to satisfy his id at all times. His relationship with Veronica is an indication of his tendency to satisfy his Eros. Meanwhile, the same relationship gives space for the expression of his Thanatos. His relationship with Veronica also becomes physical but he avoids her later. Thus, the conflict between Eros and Thanatos in the psyche of Tony is exhibited. Tony’s Eros drives him to love Veronica and his Thanatos pulls him apart to avoid and hate her. It is this conflict that leads to the separation of Tony and Veronica. Even after many years of his separation from Veronica, Tony is still attracted to her. He himself admits:

Another thing I realized: there was a mistake, or a statistical anomaly, in Margaret’s theory of clear edged versus mysterious woman; or rather in the second part of it, about men being attracted to either one sort or the other. I’d been attracted to both Veronica and Margaret. (Barnes 92)

Veronica appears as a mysterious woman to Tony. That is one of the reasons for which he loves and hates her. He always looks at her as a manipulative woman who has wreaked havoc in his personal life. Veronica’s impression on his psyche is much deeper than that of Margaret. For Tony, Margaret is a simple woman with no air of mystery and That is what makes him marry her. Yet, theirs is not a successful marriage. Tony takes up a brief fling with Annie. It is purely a manifestation of his Eros and he never desires to develop it into a serious relationship. He neither strictly adheres himself to morality nor sticks himself to the societal norms and hence there is a little projection of his superego. Tony’s mind oscillates between Eros and Thanatos, that is, the instinct of love and death. Tony regards himself to be easy-going and thus he sustains his life. Eros or the life instinct is strong in Tony and hence he never winds up his life feeling guilty of his acts. This attitude

distinguishes him from Adrian. In spite of all his failing relationships, Tony is driven by his life instinct to endure his life. He is not completely prompted by his Thanatos and that is why he manages to survive through all his obstacles. His accumulation of the death instinct never reaches the critical point as in the case of Adrian. Tony's life instinct drives him to survive and he even mentions:

And that's life, isn't it? Some achievements and some disappointments ... Not that I would have missed my own life for anything, you understand, I survived. 'He survived to tell the tale' – that's what people say, don't they? (Barnes 56)

Indeed, Tony channelizes his instincts into something useful and creative at least after his retirement. It psychologically represents the re-channelization of his libido, the psychic energy of Eros which was active in his youth. He says, "A while ago, I volunteered to run the library at the local hospital; I go round the wards delivering, collecting, recommending. It gets me out, and it's good to do something useful" (Barnes 55–56).

Thanatos is an impulse in human beings which yearns for a return to an inorganic state of death. This impulse is seen very explicitly in Tony. Though he takes pride as a survivor, he yearns to return to an inorganic state of death and he envies Adrian with regard to that. "He felt life more clearly too-even, perhaps especially, when he came to decide that it wasn't worth the candle" (Barnes 99).

Though Tony has controlled his death instincts, his life is not an exalted one as he himself frequently mentions the discontentment in his life:

And so, for the first time, I began to feel more general remorse – a feeling somewhere between self-pity and self-hatred – about my whole life. All of it. I had lost the friends of my youth. I had lost the love of my wife. I had abandoned the ambitions I had entertained. I had wanted life not to bother me too much, and had succeeded – and how pitiful that was. (Barnes 100)

The conflict between Eros and Thanatos is subtle in Tony and it is not apparent. In the battle between the two opposing forces, he tries to sustain his life but fails to fulfil all the wishes of his primal drives. As a result, he is dissatisfied with his life. The other instance where the destructive impulses of Tony can be seen is in his letter to Adrian, in which he has made his effort to demean both Adrian and Veronica. In that letter, Tony has urges Adrian to consult Veronica's mother to learn about her true colours. Tony's anguish is that his letter might have been a key reason for Adrian's suicide. Hence this letter can be perceived as a revelation of the aggressive instinct of Tony. As Freud states in *The Ego and the Id*, Thanatos gives rise to aggression and if it does not become self-destructive, it is expressed in other forms:

The activity of the dangerous death-instincts within the individual organism is dealt with in various ways; in part they are rendered harmless by being fused with erotic components, in part, they are diverted towards the external world in the form of aggression, while for the most part they undoubtedly continue their inner work unhindered. (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 40)

The conflict between Eros and Thanatos in Adrian is also explicitly shown in *The Sense of an Ending*. He is one of the major characters in this novel and the entire plot is woven around his suicide. He is popular among his friends for his keen intellect. Since the beginning of the novel, he speculates more about death. In accordance with Robson's suicide, he opines over the concept of Thanatos or death, "The only *true* one. The fundamental one on which all others depend" (Barnes 14). Thus, Thanatos is given a much valid prominence in this novel. Adrian is from a broken family and his mother has left his father who raises both Adrian and his sister. Yet the family circumstances do not appear to disturb the psychological and mental stability of Adrian on the outset:

His mother had walked out years before, leaving his dad to cope with Adrian and his sister. This was long before the term 'single-parent family' came into use back then it was 'a broken home', and Adrian was the only person we knew who came from one. This ought to have given him a whole store tank of existential rage, but somehow it didn't; he said he loved his mother and respected his father. (Barnes 8)

Adrian comes in contact with Veronica and they fall in love with each other after Veronica's separation from Tony. When everyone assumes that he is happy with her, Tony receives news that Adrian committed suicide. Adrian is also much driven by his Eros and that makes him come into a sexual relationship with Sarah. His primal instinct leads him to get into such a relationship that hurts his principle of morality. The pleasure-seeking instinct in him exhibits the Freudian theory of Eros. Adrian is stimulated to satisfy his Id and here comes the role of his Superego. His unrestricted satisfaction of Id paves way for the conflict of his Eros and Thanatos. This idea has been expressed by Freud in his *Civilization and its Discontents*:

Our possibilities of happiness are already restricted by our constitution. Unhappiness is much less difficult to experience .... An unrestricted satisfaction of every need presents itself as the most enticing method of conducting one's life, but it means putting enjoyment before the caution, and soon brings its own punishment .... Happiness, in the reduced sense in which we recognize it as possible, is a problem of the economics of the individual's libido. (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 23–24)

The reason for Adrian's suicide is not explicitly presented in the novel. But it could be understood that he committed suicide as he felt guilty of his sexual encounter with a mother-like woman, Sarah and impregnating her. Sarah gives birth to a mentally impaired son due to her conception at the late age. The fragment from Adrian's diary exhibits an equation that logically represents the human relations and in it, Adrian remarks:

To what extent might human relationships be expressed in a mathematical or logical formula? And if so, what signs must be placed between the integers? .... Thus an entirely failed relationship might be expressed in terms of both loss/minus and division/reduction, showing a total of zero; whereas an entirely successful one can be represented by both addition and multiplication. (Barnes 85)

Adrian's suicide ensues from his psychological conflict between Eros and Thanatos. He is completely driven by his death instinct that finds its manifestation through his act of self-destruction. Thanatos wins over Eros and the whole novel lays much stress on the power of Thanatos over Eros. Even Tony might have been involved in some kind of sexual encounter with Sarah and the memory of which might have been suppressed by the psyche of Tony as he often affirms himself to be an unreliable narrator. This idea is also hinted in the novel when Tony remembers the strange expression on the face of Sarah. However, Thanatos does not take an upper hand in Tony as he has no concept of morality and he never feels any guilt. Sarah gives the money as compensation for the damage he has suffered and she is more sexually competitive to her daughter in winning over her lovers. She allows full dominance to her Eros but suppresses her Thanatos. The whole plot of the novel revolves around the eternal conflict of the two primal drives. In that conflict, Thanatos often wins and remains dominant at several occasions in the novel.

Finally, as Maji comments, "Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* illuminates the mechanism of the two instincts of 'Eros' and 'Thanatos', their interdependence and their untidy collisions in the form of human struggle" (Maji 236). While Eros thrives in Tony Webster, Sarah, and Veronica, Thanatos dominates the psyche of Adrian and Robson. Though the entire plot of *The Sense of an Ending* emphasises the unending fight between Eros and Thanatos, Thanatos appears to be more powerful in the novel. The conflict between the two enables us, the readers, to make sense of the ending – of both Adrian and the novel.

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