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## **Modern and Postmodern Subject Positions: Unreliable Narrators in *The Good Soldier* and *The Sense of an Ending***

**Shahriar Khalili Mobarhan<sup>1</sup>, Nahid Fakhreshafaie<sup>2</sup>, Rahimeh Rouhparvar<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> M.A student, University of Torino

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English Studies, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English Studies, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman, Iran

**Email:** <sup>1</sup>Khalili\_Shahriar@yahoo.com, <sup>2</sup>n.shafaie@uk.ac.ir, <sup>3</sup>Roohparvar@uk.ac.ir

### **Abstract:**

The present study aims to study unreliable narrators in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. As Barnes prompts the reader to read his novel in the light of Ford's novel, a comparison between Barnes's unreliable narrator and Ford's unreliable narrator proves inevitable. This study examines the differences between the unreliable narrator of a modern novel and that of a postmodern novel to see if these differences could be accounted for by the fundamental differences between modernism and postmodernism. In order to see how subject positions reflect social orders, this study draws on the theoretical backgrounds of modernism and postmodernism and the debate between Habermas and Lyotard. It studies modernism in the light of fragmentation, scientific method the simultaneous rejection and invocation of the past and relates postmodernism to fluid identity, the uncertainty of history and anti-humanism. This study concludes that John Dowell

represents all the certainty of an individual who has a comfortable self- image and knows everything about himself, the people around him and the world in which he lives, while Tony Webster is a postmodern fractured character who is split between his younger self and older self, unable to tell fact from fiction. The postmodern unreliable narrator undermines the notion of personal and historical knowledge. In spite of all his defects and uncertainties, Tony Webster is more sympathetic than Dowell because he does not try to manipulate the reader. He does not want to record the past objectively, but reminds us that history is a construction.

**Keywords:** modernism, postmodernism, subject positions, unreliable narrator

## Introduction

The world of literature has always been peopled with different fallible narrators. These narrators are sometimes picaros and madmen, sometimes naïve characters or ghosts, and sometimes clowns and liars. Fallible narrators are either misguided characters who lie unintentionally or are deceptive characters who lie consciously. There are numerous fallible narrators in modernist literature: Jenny in *The Return of the Soldier*, Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, Nick Caraway in *The Great Gatsby*, Marlowe in *Heart of Darkness*, John Self in *Money*, Lou Ford in *The Killer Inside Me* and Chappy in *The End of Alice* are only a few examples. Fallible narrators are also extensively present in postmodern fiction: Examples include Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, Timothy Findley's *The Wars*, Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*, Nigel Williams' *Witchcraft*, Ian Pears' *An Instance of the Fingerpost* and Yan Martel's *Life of Pi* to name a few. Some critics distinguish between a fallible narrator and an untrustworthy narrator by referring to a fallible narrator as someone who is mistaken about her or his beliefs because of a mental problem or of an external factor. They define an untrustworthy narrator as someone whose unreliability is the result of a character trait like lying. In spite of this distinction, the present study refers to unreliable narrators as fallible narrators and studies the narrator for signs of a discrepancy between the narrator's action and speech, a possible contradiction in the narrative, the narrator's attempt to engage the reader's sympathy or an admission of memory loss.

This study aims to show that there is a strong link between the philosophical backgrounds of modernism and postmodernism and the fallible narrators related to each movement. To date Booth's definition of the unreliable narrator has remained unchallenged: "I have called a

narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not" (158-159). But it is not always easy to fix the definition of implied author. Truth is also manipulated in postmodern novels. As Nunning argues, the usage of formal properties like the unreliable narration "reflect both the understanding of reality and subjectivity and the moral concerns and unspoken epistemological assumptions of a given period" (Nunning 33). Monika Fludernik taps a similar critical vein when she finds a relation between narrative techniques and human cognition (49). To David Lodge, unreliable narrators are invented characters used to show the gap between appearance and reality (155), and Simon Maples maintains that because postmodern fiction treats history as fragmented, postmodern writers draw on literary devices such as unreliable narrators to challenge the historical truth of traditional fiction (101). Gunther Martens undermines the notion of unreliability when he suggests that unreliability is difficult to define because its opposite which is reliability does not have a specific definition (Martens 77).

The present study takes advantage of the debate between modern and postmodern critics about the position of the subject. While some critics celebrate the subject's lack of a fixed identity as liberation, others lament the enslavement of the subject in the postmodern world. The fixed and pre-established structures of the modern culture and its elitist ideas are regarded as negative by some critics, while some critics glorify the fixed notions and confidence that modernism provides. This study intends to have a look at the critics on either side of the debate. Two critics take center stage with the debate between modernism and postmodernism: Habermas who reconstructs the modern enlightenment tradition by overcoming the dominant pessimism of late modernity and Lyotard who rejects metanarratives and believes in the abundance of micronarratives.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Theorizing the modern**

#### ***Scientific Method***

One of the main concerns of modernist thinkers, like T.S Eliot, was to find a methodology that could induct art and criticism of art into a scientific method. With regard to this perspective, any work of art was something that could be criticized objectively through a certain method, regardless of the feelings and emotions of the artist or the critic. The "close

attention to detail” as McFarlane argues, is one of the key aspects of this method, since it marked the close reading of literature, and the emergence of new criticism out of this scientific approach (McFarlane 82). According to Henderson science and scientific style was “a critical source for new ideas about modern style in both art and literature.” (394) The integration of criticism into science is very crucial, because the general climate of the modern period was that of rejecting the subjective and personal opinions of individuals, and moving more and more towards objectivity. It is of no surprise that this climate necessitated different forms of art and criticism to move towards a scientific approach. The scientific method led to new discoveries and gave rise to new questions. These epistemological questions about the nature of identity, society and life, surfaced in different forms of art and literature. As Levenson suggests, these notions are ostensibly discussed and argued in the works of many great thinkers of the time, including Nietzsche, Marx, Freud and Einstein (Levenson 3). It was precisely criticism that benefited most from this “modernization of arts” because it was able to propose ideas accepted as universal and “true”. William Nicholas also observes that “modernity itself is presumed to be a rival to traditional or authentic religion” (Nicholas 11). Lack of religious belief also contributes to the emphasis on scientific approach.

### ***History***

Modernism as a literary movement marked its existence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and dominated literature as well as fine arts well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Modernism broke away from old traditions and gave rise to new philosophical, economic, social and political notions. “Modernist writers were almost obsessively concerned with history in a double sense: they were concerned both about what was happening in their world and with the nature of understanding as such (Bell 14-15)”. This doubleness of history, as Curthoys and Docker also point out is an unresolved tension between art and science, reason and imagination, generality and particularity and myth and reality (9-11). The modern revaluation of history, undermines the power of history as scientific and factual, and takes into account the interpretive and subjective power of the agency behind the written history. Hence, the simultaneous rejection and invocation of the past by modernism.

### ***Fragmentation***

McFarlane argues that the fragmented system of thought in the modern philosophy enabled the thinkers to disintegrate the systems, types and absolutes of the previous decades, in order to re-establish new ideas that they saw fit to the new demands of modern society (McFarlane 80). The solid and homogeneous notion of self that was previously believed to be true can no

longer account for the needs of the modern man. The fragmented identity points to the many personas and selves that each human being can create. Many critics have associated modernism with the condition of fragmentation. (Berman,2; Hasak Lewy, 30; Kenuen, 272; Kovacs, 123; Malamud, 79; Suarez-toste, 161; Wollaeger, 124). Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Ford Madox Ford are prominent modernist writers engaged with the idea of representation and fragmentation of the self. As Brown argues, the “pluralist, heterogeneous and discontinuous” self can be detected in the works of all of these prominent writers (2). This fragmentation is a response to a universe which has become increasingly chaotic.

## **The Senses of Postmodernism**

### ***Fluid Identity***

Postmodernism rejects the main tenets of modernism like elitism, the distinction between high art and low art, Enlightenment rationality, and metanarratives. History which is what metanarrative is about, no longer explains human progress nor does it support the presumption that progress is the situation that confronts human subjects. Postmodern writers rewrite history in their own style in order to bold its inadequacies. The postmodern subject is no longer a unified whole, but is rather fragmented and constructed. Since the removal of the centers and the postmodern invitation for playfulness and fluidity, the identity of the subject is under question. The postmodern subject doesn't possess the certainties that the modern subject had, and as a result is not as confident as the modern subject. Hutcheon approves of the fluid identity of the postmodern subject when she argues that subjectivity is not based in eternal values (68), and McHale observes that the reason why different people have different accounts of the same story, is because of “each character's subjective domain” (McHale 101).

Although the idea of fragmentation is present in both modern and postmodern philosophy, postmodern fragmented identity occurs in essentially different circumstances. In spite its fragmented nature, there is an essence to the identity of the modern subject. In postmodernism however, identity is decentered and fragmented because it is constructed in unstable relations of difference. Bertens considers commodification as the cause of the fragmentation of postmodern subject (“The Sociology”, 107). He also insists that language constitutes, rather than represents reality. The autonomous subject, he observes, has become a fragmented subject with multiple identities (Bertens “The Debate” 10).

Modernism not only considers a solid and fixed notion of identity for human beings, but also fixes them in certain positions. As May and Powell observe, advocates of modernism are also criticized for being gender-blind and for depending on the tradition of Enlightenment which has historically sided with men over women (174). Postmodernism is able to put aside all fixed ideas and invite the marginalized and neglected groups to become integral parts of the society and culture. Bertens believes that postmodernism is able to use this idea to break up the hegemonic unity of the modern society ("The Sociology", 108). After this break up, much space is freed for the members of the society that could not conform to social norms. James Peterson also argues that postmodern fragmentation stands against the mass culture of the modern period: postmodernism invites the "decentered" and "competing discourses" to join the conversation (147). Angela McRobbie highlights two perspectives on postmodern fragmentation: Jameson who laments the fragmentation of the postmodern subject and finds no cause for celebration in the schizophrenic postmodern consciousness and Stuart Hall who approves of fragmentation because of the opportunity it gives the subaltern subject to be foregrounded. (26)

### ***History as Narrative***

Postmodernism sees history as a form of master narrative that presents discrete, one-dimensional and over-simplified versions of reality. But as Lyotard insists, grand narratives which have legitimizing and unifying power have declined (Lyotard *Postmodern Condition* 38). Where Jameson insists that the "modernism debate is an excellent occasion for demonstrating this vocation of dialectical thinking and the originality with which it historicizes ethical categories...of the individual subject" (223), postmodern thinkers have no patience for history. History no longer carries the same scientific credit that was given to it in the modern period, and exists as a matter to be questioned, denied and criticized. *The Sense of an Ending* represents history as narratives and stories and suggests that history is accessible only through the narratives, we construct about it.

Postmodernism's concern with history is especially logical because history acts as what Hutcheon argues to be a form of "narrative" (5). This form of narrative, is pluralized and questioned through the usage of what she names "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 105). This act of pluralization undermines the unitary nature of history as a science in the modern period. Historiographic metafiction as a mode of writing not only questions the credibility and legitimizing power of history as metanarrative, but also enables the

postmodern philosophers and thinkers to undermine the liberal humanism of the previous decades. This attack on the liberal values, is essential in the postmodern outlook since it marks the postmodern break from the modern period. The debate is on the historical text itself and how it is seen as an object. Tholfsen argues that a historical text is another form of fiction (10), thus discrediting the authority of the historians.

### ***Anti-Humanism***

Postmodernism discards the liberal humanist belief that reason is the key to freedom, that morality is definite and that man is rational. As James Helgeson states, this movement marks the substitution of language for the writing subject, which means that the authorial agency is no longer accounted for, and the intentions of the author communicated through the narrator are not given the old modern credibility (Helgeson 3). The anti-humanist philosophy of postmodernism rejects the role of the author as a central structural entity. One critic mentions that with the postmodern perspective, “the Autonomy of the subject is an illusion” (Ferry xxiii). Davies also points out that each and every individual is “situated and legislated” in the system of the society, and the humanist notions are but an illusion (Davies 70).

Modernism believes that there “exists a real” to be represented. This is why the modernist mode of narration in novels is called representational or mimetic. Mimesis, an originally Greek word, means imitation and is specifically attributed to the modern mode of representation because it means that art tries to imitate life. Crisis of representation has emerged with the loss or absence of the referent. When the real is not what it used to be, and when the boundaries that would restrict the artists are wiped out, utmost freedom and fluidity is given to the artist to represent the world in the way that he wants to, not the way it is “naturally” supposed to be. This exact artistic and stylistic freedom is the fundamental feature of postmodern philosophy that distinguishes the postmodern artists from modernist writers. Regarding postmodernism as the natural consequence of modernism, Fokkema relates the freedom of postmodern writers to epistemological doubts and existential beliefs of modernists (Fokkema 8).

### **The Modern –Postmodern Debate**

Habermas believes that postmodernism contradicts itself through self-reference and argues that postmodernists presuppose concepts they try to undermine. He reconstructs the project of modernity through his “theory of communicative action” and defines communicative action as “that form of social interaction in which the plans of action of different actors are co-

ordinated through an exchange of communicative acts, that is, through a use of language oriented towards reaching understanding” (1981: 44). Habermas sees language as a way of retrieving the project of modernity. He is interested in the social use of language in order to reach understanding. For Habermas, communicative action is action which depends on the hearer’s response to the validity claim of the speaker. There are three types of validity claims raised by a speaker: claim to the truth of the utterance, claim to the rightness of the speech act and a claim to the truthfulness of the speaker. As Pensky observes, these linguistic structures establish a normative understanding of the society (25-27). His conception of society, Habermas observes, is used “to make possible a conceptualization of the social-life context that is tailored to the paradoxes of modernity (1981; xl).

When Habermas published this “theory of communicative action”, Lyotard objected that society has entered the postmodern condition and that modernism has become outdated. Lyotard objects to “the use of the term modern to designate any that legitimates itself with reference to a meta discourse making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectic of the spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject or the creation of wealth (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* xxiii). Lyotard defines postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” and understands metanarratives as all-inclusive stories about humanity and history that legitimize knowledge and dominant cultural practices. Lyotard rejects language games of science and metaphysics and asks for a plurality of language games. David Kolb explains that what Lyotard wants is not playing new games which will lead to smaller domineering societies. He insists that Lyotard asks for “divergence and creativity... secession not consensus”. In the event of distortion of communication, new ways of communication should be invented (47). Lyotard expresses his concern about plurality of language games and the justice consequent upon this plurality thus: “The question we now face is that of a plurality, the idea of a justice that ...would be that of a plurality and it would be a plurality of language-games...Every one of us belongs to several minorities (territories of language)... and not one of them prevails. It is only then that we can say that the society is just” (Lyotard, *Gaming* 95).

Postmodernists object to the modernist concept of objective truth and the existence of meaning and rationality. According to Jeff Lewis, many critics point out that postmodernism’s main objection is to truth claims of science (226). Postmodernism is skeptical towards truth claims and objective reality, hence the association of postmodernism with relativism. In addition, postmodernism emphasizes fragmentation and decentralization.



As Leitch observes, “postmodern modes of cultural criticism frequently focus on marginal groups, popular arts, multiple subject positions, minority education, operations of power and knowledge, and historical contradictions...” (133). Postmodernists also consider reality not as something given and fixed but as simulation. As Woods explains, in Baudrillard’s conception of postmodernity, signs bear no relation to reality and simulations are dominant and more real than reality. This results in the disappearance of the experience of reality (26). Postmodernists also value diversity and difference above homogeneity. Referring to Lyotard, Ozumba stresses that he “prefers dissensus over consensus, diversity and dissent over conformity and heterogeneity, and the incommensurable over homogeneity and universality” (164).

### **The Unreliable narrator of *The Good Soldier***

McFarlane argues that the fragmented system of thought in the modern philosophy enabled the thinkers to disintegrate the systems, types and absolutes of the previous decades, in order to re-establish new ideas that they saw fit to the demands of modern society (McFarlane 80). The solid and homogeneous notion of self that was previously believed to be true can no longer account for the needs of the modern man. Many critics have associated modernism with the condition of fragmentation. (Berman, 2; Hasak Lewy, 30; Kenuen, 272; Kovacs, 123; Malamud, 79; Suarez-toste, 161; Wollaeger, 124). Brown states that the “pluralist, heterogeneous and discontinuous” self can be detected in the works of Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Ford Madox Ford (2) and mentions *The Good Soldier* as one of the main modernist novels of the time that is able to produce a “discourse of dissolving self” (19). Brown maintains that Dowell’s manner of narration shows a “disintegrated” and “dissociated” self since his whole life has been shaken by the events around him and these events have forced him to psychologically break into different personas (20).

Edward Lobb also places the novel in its modernist context, arguing that *The Good Soldier* is an analysis of the breakup of the world that the characters inhabit. The characters are caught in conflicting social and personal roles and lack identity. Ford shows that Dowell is not the only character who does not know the meaning of the story he tells; other characters share this lack of awareness. This reveals the modern man’s sense of fragmentation and formlessness. The significance of the novel lies in the way in which it shows how relativism dominates modern consciousness (Lobb, 36-53). In a much earlier critical study, Robert Green emphasizes the relativism of the novel but also attracts attention to the relativity in form:

“Irresolution, intellectual and moral relativism dominate *The Good Soldier*, a novel whose form renders it impossible to elicit any clear-cut authorial ideology...*The Good Soldier* discourages empathy” (Green, 93). This form is evidently seen in the manner of narration, constant change in time-line, and Dowell’s commentary on the events as well as his analysis of other characters’ behavior. Randall Stevenson makes a similar comment about the manipulation of time in modernist fiction when he says that “modernist fiction ... resists as far as possible the arrangement of ‘events in their time sequence’” (87). To Eyal Segal Dowell’s unreliability is “compositional unreliability”. He attributes the disorderly and rambling narration to Dowell who communicates directly with the addressee and the organized and structured form to Ford, the writer who communicates indirectly with the reader (64). As David James indicates, J.M. Coetzee appreciated *The Good Soldier* because of the total control Ford Madox Ford’s narrator has on the reader’s understanding of the events (102).

The events of *The Good Soldier* happen before the beginning of the World War I and focus on the lives of the English Edward Ashburnham and his wife Leonora, as well as the American John Dowell and his wife, Florence. Dowell recounts the story through flashbacks, jumping from one timeline to another complicating the situation and giving out too much information about things that he could not have possibly seen or heard. This manipulation keeps the reader busy figuring out the time and place of each event, while Dowell presents himself as a naïve and gullible person. Although critics like Chatman argue that Dowell is a gullible narrator, one could argue that he is manipulative rather than sympathetic. The presence of the addressee who is not a character in the novel makes it easier for him to manipulate the reader. By appealing to the sentiments of the readers, he is able to present himself as sympathetic and naïve, while he is actually disingenuous. He keeps praising his wife and adoring her while he lets the reader notice that she is not honest and reliable. “I don’t believe that for one minute she was out of my sight” (Ford 6), Dowell recounts, but immediately contradicts himself by stating that Florence “found time to carry on the protracted negotiations which she did carry on between Edward Ashburnham and his wife” (Ford 6), which gives the reader a hint of her unfaithfulness. An apparently honest narrator, Dowell confides in the reader about his wife’s heart problem and the restrictions on their lives consequent upon her health problem. At the end of the novel, he is in possession of his wife’s money and property, although he had attributed love of money to Florence. He had already mentioned money as Florence’s main goal for marrying him. Early in the novel, he shows that money is an important factor in

woman's charm when he is describing Leonora: "Leonora was extraordinarily fair and so extraordinarily the real thing that she seemed too good to be true. You don't, I mean, as a rule, get it all so superlatively together. To be the county family, to look the county family, to be so appropriately and perfectly wealthy. (Ford 6). But the reader gradually loses sympathy with him because of his constant manipulation of the time of the events and never-ending pretense at being a simpleton. Dowell clearly understands his place in this universe, and he is standing on solid ground. This resoluteness, results in his manipulative manner that enables him to lie to the readers. The text, however, provides clue about his unreliability. He mentions Florence's affairs with other men, especially Edward, but presents himself as the victim and a passive observer. Dowell presents himself as innocent, and insists that he had nothing to do with all that happened. But the actual outcome of the story brings Dowell's narration under erasure. Florence and Edward, who were having an affair, are dead and we only have Dowell's account to believe that it was due to suicide.

The text gives the reader a hint about Dowell's real character when he describes his wife the way Robert Browning's Duke describes his wife in "My Last Duchess". Dowell makes a comment about Florence which hints at her unfaithfulness, just like Browning's poem: "For whose benefit did she do it? For that of the bath attendant? of the passersby? I don't know. Anyhow, it can't have been for me, for never, in all the years of her life, never on any possible occasion, or in any other place did she so smile to me, mockingly, invitingly. Ah, she was a riddle; but then, all other women are riddles" (Ford 15). The speaker of the poem, describes a portrait of his late wife and especially her looks with the same attitude stating: "Sir, 'twas not / Her husband's presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess' cheek" (Browning, lines 13-15). The Duke draws attention to his wife's behavior which he finds annoying: "Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt, / Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without / Much the same smile?" (Browning, lines 43-45). Later on, there are clear signs that the speaker has killed his wife, while he is in the process of marrying a new young lady: "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together." (Browning, lines 45-46). This hint makes the reader understand that Dowell must have played a great role in the incidents that led to Florence's death. Attracting attention to the similarity between Dowell and Browning's The Duke, Frank G. Nigro asks if Dowell has killed Florence and Ashburnham (383).

At times, Dowell's assertions go beyond the restricted knowledge of a first person narrator, giving him the proportions of an omniscient narrator. Dowell wants the audience to believe he knows nothing about Florence's fake heart problem, her affair with Jimmy and also her affair

with Edward. But he gives so much information about his wife and Edward that he goes beyond the restricted scope of a first person narrator. This technique empowers Dowell to manipulate and deceive his audience, but it also indicates that he knows more than he wants to exhibit. In one scene, when Dowell is describing the interaction between Edward and Nancy, he cannot stop himself from commenting on what went on in Nancy's head: "The girl, at least, regarded him as firmly anchored to his Leonora. She had not the slightest inkling of any infidelities" (Ford 72).

The mode of narration in *The Good Soldier* is diegetic, which is telling rather than showing. Luc Herman argues that the narrator "colors" the events of the story, and these events are no longer directly accessible for the readers (14). The result of this kind of narration, is the power that it bestows upon the narrator. He is the sole source of information, therefore his ellipsis and comments can mislead the reader. In this kind of text, Herman argues, the narrator actually reveals himself to the reader and is able to come between the narrated scenes and the audience (15). This revelation has the power of gaining the reader's trust. The amount of time that is given to action, is another measure that Luc Herman uses in order to distinguish between diegetic and mimetic narration (14). In mimetic mode, events are shown and much action is played in front of the audience. For instance, conversations between the characters are quoted by the narrator, and the events happen at the present time in front of the reader. In this manner, the narrator steps behind the written text and tries his best to hide himself. But Dowell gives the impression that he is directly talking to the reader, and makes his presence obvious. The reason for this effect, is Dowell's role as an interlocutor who is talking to a person whose voice we don't hear.

### **The Fallible Narrator of *The Sense of an Ending***

Tony Webster represents a very interesting case of unreliability. Apparently, he is not different from other unreliable narrators: Like other unreliable narrators, he tells a story full of lies. Webster recalls that Adrian had sent him a letter informing him about his relation with Veronica: "What he said was that he and Veronica were already going out together, a state of affairs that would doubtless come to my attention sooner or later; and so it seemed better that I heard about it from him." (Barnes 40) Webster says that although he and Veronica had broken up, he didn't like the idea but didn't object and wrote back, "everything is jolly fine by me, old bean" (Barnes 41). When the story shifts to the present time, Tony is able to read the letter he had sent to Adrian and realizes that the long letter contains very harsh and bitter

words about Veronica. Webster realizes how different the real letter is from what he believed it to be: “How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life. Told to others, but – mainly – to ourselves (Barnes 89). Webster has already said that his memory can sometimes betray him. When he reads the letter decades after he wrote it, he is shocked to find out that his attitude was harsh and insulting . He realizes that this very letter could have had led Adianne to suicide. “At first, I thought mainly about me, and how – what – I’d been: chippy, jealous and malign. Also about my attempt to undermine their relationship.” (Barnes 91). Through this realization, he is able to make a greater conclusion about the nature of his own life and subsequently, human life: “My younger self had come back to shock my older self with what that self had been, or was, or was sometimes capable of being. And only recently I’d been going on about how the witnesses to our lives decrease, and with them our essential corroboration” (Barnes 92).

Tony Webster, the narrator, constantly argues about the inadequacy of memory and questions its credibility: “what you end up remembering isn’t always the same as what you have witnessed” (Barnes 1). Webster’s realization of the fallibility of memory echoes David Shields’ view of memory: “Anything possessed by memory is fiction (57). Although Webster is unreliable, his unreliability is not deliberate or manipulative. Throughout the story he doesn’t try to complicate the story nor does he jump from one timeline to the other to mislead the reader. Unlike Dowell, he does not use flowery language. Moreover, he constantly reminds us that his memory may be faulty, and that old age and his style of living have made him static. His realization is that that life is just a story and that this narrative is subject to error and mistake. This enables him to reflect on his life and analyze his character. The text does not give him an authoritative position. As a postmodern fallible narrator, Webster problematizes the idea of secure knowledge. According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodern fiction rejects the idea of true historical knowledge: “The postmodern... reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge. And the implication is that there can be no single essentialized, transcendent concept of “genuine historicity” (as Frederic Jameson *desires*), no matter what the nostalgia for such an entity. (89) Commenting on the impossibility of historical accuracy, Baysar Taniyan also observes that *The Sense of an Ending* is “an essay on the compelling task of relating historical knowledge through inadequate and deceptive documentation and that this

novel...denies the existence of any kind of reliable narrator (54). Baysar sees Webster as a representative postmodern narrator who “highlights his own defects, partiality and situatedness, all of which are defining characteristics of a postmodern historiographer” (55).

### **Untold Stories**

Webster refrains from describing some major events. Although some critics like Piciuccio believe that what Tony “omits, shuns, ignores, or forgets in the course of his monologue...occupy the very core of the narration” (45), and thus conclude that he is a liar, one could argue that these omissions are because of lapses of memory which he admits at the beginning of the story: “It strikes me that this may be one of the differences between youth and age: when we are young, we invent different futures for ourselves; when we are old, we invent different pasts for others.” (Barnes 75). Admitting the damage, Webster even warns against his own kind:

I certainly believe we all suffer damage, one way or another...And then there is the question, on which so much depends, of how we react to the damage: whether we admit it or repress it, and how this affects our dealings with others. Some admit the damage, and try to mitigate it; some spend their lives trying to help others who are damaged; and then there are those whose main concern is to avoid further damage to themselves, at whatever cost. And those are the ones who are ruthless, and the ones to be careful of. (Barnes 43)

Webster does not blame anyone for what happened between him, Veronica and Adrian. He is honest, constantly reminding us of the failures of memory: “We live with such easy assumptions, don’t we? For instance, that memory equals events plus time. But it’s all much odder than this. Who was it said that memory is what we thought we’d forgotten? And it ought to be obvious to us that time doesn’t act as a fixative, rather as a solvent (Barnes 59). Not only does he refuse to blame any one, he accepts responsibility for his actions, feeling guilt and remorse:

And no, it wasn’t shame I now felt, or guilt, but something rarer in my life and stronger than both: remorse. A feeling which is more complicated, curdled, and primeval. Whose chief characteristic is that nothing can be done about it: too much time has passed, too much damage has been done, for amends to be made. Even so, forty years on, I sent Veronica an email apologizing for my letter. (Barnes 93)

The untold stories are not only “untold” for the readers, but absent from Webster’s mind.

## **The Postmodernity of Webster's Character**

The freedom and fluidity that is evident in Webster's character reveals to us how different he is from the fixed character of Dowell. Tony Webster is unreliable, but open to his own faults and ready to accept his mistakes. Representing the postmodern fragmented identity, Webster admits his feeling of guilt and remorse, and does not play the victim. As Bran Nichol observes, subjectivity in postmodernism is not stable but is constantly changing, so a postmodern character is not fixed and unchanging like a portrait, but is rather a combination of contrasting and complementing characters (118). Webster's world is a postmodern one, where the firm and immovable universals don't apply anymore. As a result, he embraces scrutiny more towards his own character, rather than projecting it towards other characters: "We thought we were being mature when we were only being safe. We imagined we were being responsible but were only being cowardly. What we called realism turned out to be a way of avoiding things rather than facing them. Time ... give us enough time and our best-supported decisions will seem wobbly, our certainties whimsical" (Barnes 87). In a world filled with ontological questions, Webster represents the freedom, fluidity and uncertainty of the postmodern man. Where Dowell, as a modern subject, takes pride in his solid personality and acknowledges universal truths, Webster questions his identity and seems lost in the universe in which everything is in constant flux. Like Webster, Dowell is fragmented, but where Dowell is able to find a core at the heart of his personality, Webster seems to be permanently tormented by the clash between his younger and his older self.

The ontological set of questions mark the mindset of the postmodern man. On the surface this deprives the postmodern subject of the surefooted situation that was given to the modern subject, but fundamentally provides him with freedom and fluidity. Webster reflects this postmodern condition by constantly interpreting his actions and criticizing his own character. The universal truths and structures that played an important role in the modern period, no longer apply to this postmodern world. The postmodern subject's knowledge of these changes necessitates an ever critical eye towards the pre-established notions about the universe and human subjects. This is precisely in accordance with the anti-humanist philosophy of postmodernism. Anthony Webster represents this postmodern condition with his fluidity and development of character. Never throughout the whole story is Webster sure of his actions and personality, and instead of providing analytics about other characters he constantly looks at his own life with a critical eye. Webster is not manipulative or deceitful because he knows that truth is subjective and that meanings are not fixed and universal. As a result, when certain

information is revealed that his account of the story is subject to criticism, he is shocked like the readers and instead of trying to deceive the audience, starts analyzing his own character and mentioning his own mistakes. In the second part of the story which happens in the present time, every new evidence about the past that is revealed makes Webster critical of his own capacities and character. He is able to realize how memory can be deceiving and how people create different stories for their pasts. He realizes that most of his problems are the result of his attempts to stay away from trouble. As he admits his memory loss, he is able to develop from a jealous and hard-headed youngster to a more refined and mature adult.

In *The Good Soldier*, Dowell mainly dwells in the past, and narrates past events in a crumbled manner to the audience. The reader suspects a discrepancy between his action and speech, and realizes a possible contradiction in the narrative. While narrating the events, Dowell bombards the reader with comments and analytics that leave his own character out of the story. This, removes Dowell from the picture so he can engage the reader's sympathy. Webster, on the contrary, does not hold the higher position of a character narrator and loses his status as the source of information. Where Dowell criticizes other characters, Webster has this power to become one of the characters that need to be criticized, both by the readers and himself.

## **Conclusion**

John Dowell is a modern unreliable narrator, whereas Tony Webster is a postmodern unreliable narrator. This difference lies mainly in their attitude towards themselves and their universes. Dowell represents the modern humanist and essentialist philosophy, but Tony Webster reflects the postmodern condition. Where the modern subject position is fixed with certain centers and structures, his notion of self and identity is also fixed and unchanging. The same idea is present in Dowell's attitude throughout the novel as the essential and absolute truths don't change from the beginning of the story to the end. *The Sense of an Ending*, indebted to *The Good Soldier*, showcases the same perspective. The anti-humanist and postmodern perspective enables Tony Webster and the novel to grow in an ever-developing manner, rejecting the fixed and universal meanings that stand as the pillars and centers of the social structures.



Dowell's manipulative method of narration forces the reader to doubt the validity of his story. At some point in the novel the reader starts to realize that Dowell might be a cold-blooded murderer. Webster on the other hand, shows no signs of manipulation and deceitfulness although he is an unreliable narrator. He is more straightforward, and his manner of narration does not complicate the story. The reader can sympathize with him, because he represents a fragmented and flawed human subject. Webster, rather than posing himself as the victim, is able to look at his own life and decisions in a critical manner and offer meaningful interpretations on the subject of his life. Whereas Dowell lies to the reader, Webster lies to himself.

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