

# The sense of an ending essay sample



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The novel, "The Sense of an Ending" is a story of Tony Webster's life that concludes in a revelation that, "There is great unrest" which is unsettling. The reevaluation of Tony's life depicts the philosophy of existentialism, especially in part one, who lives by the mindset of Eros and Thanatos and is a reoccurring theme throughout the novel bringing the novel much weight. The unreliability of Tony's narration is a microcosm of the post-modern movement which breaks the conventions of truthful accounts and adds another dimension to the novel which forces the reader to analyse the perceptions of the unreliable-first person narrator.

This ties in with the philosophical debate of lightness vs. weight as Tony's memory is often described as unreliable by himself and is a depiction of the nature of history as a whole looking at 'effect and cause' within Tony's life. This in depth re-evaluation adds weight to the events from the retrospection in 2011, adding intensity and emotion by the idea of eternal return - everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia or becomes permanently protuberant.

The philosophical question of Lightness vs. Weight. the book explores the themes of female characters which is explored in Shakespeare's sonnet cycle with his contrasting attitudes between The Dark Lady and The Fair Youth. In 'The Sense of an Ending' the debate is apparent through other themes such as; history, the nature and complexity of love, natural imagery and symbolism in the form of biblical connotations. Illuminating these ideas is the main concept of Kundera's book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* which focuses on Nietzsche's idea of eternal return - how could there ever

be a verdict on an singular historical event if there is no ‘corroboration’ to validate the result.

This is the problem Tony struggles with, not only is his history not repeated but his memory distorted as history ‘is the self-delusions of the defeated’ and the concept of eternal return lies heavy on our actions. However in the case of Tony, his lack of eternal return and unreliable memory has that lightness of ambiguity and in Kundera’s words ‘History is as light as Individual human life’. Although Tony’s memories are returned to him in the form of letters and Adrian’s diary, there are still inaccuracies displayed which completely throw the present Tony off-guard.

Asserting the theme is Shakespeare’s Sonnets which, also has biographical implications. Shakespeare was an actor as well as a playwright and poet- a dramatist who endeavoured hyperbole and this is, like Tony’s memories, self-delusion. For this reason Shakespeare’s sonnets can be placed anachronistically into a ‘post-modernist’ genre. This line of argument also touches upon the motif that the expectations of literature never live up to reality, ‘that was another of our fears: that life wouldn’t turn out to be like literature’.

Literature’s trivial nature is echoed through Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 which plays an elaborate mockery the Elizabethan conventions of love poetry that were modelled after the sonnets of Petrarch. This can be applied to Kundera’s idea of ‘kitsch’ – art, literature, music which are concepts formed from vanity and non-realism. In both Kundera’s and Barnes’ novels, romanticism is presented in scatological terms, ‘but they were just dry

wanks’ and ‘Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit’ which illustrates the debate of Lightness vs.

Weight. In a contextual sense the arts have been mass produced and consumer culture at its height in Tony’s 1960s England, this weightiness of the arts and literature is exemplified in Kundera’s context of Soviet occupation in Czechoslovakia, where all creative liberty was restricted and replaced with an influx of political propaganda and modified censored art. Thus the weight of art bears heavy on its people. However in Elizabethan England, art and literature were regarded as the highest form of pleasure.

The lightness and grandeur of literature is epitomised in the whole sequence of sonnets in a burst of desperation and expression, evident in Shakespeare’s literary devices. For example in Sonnet 147, catharsis of emotion is expressed through the chain of words that have been foregrounded; ‘disease’, ‘ill’, ‘love’ ‘unrest’ with emphasises on these words come the emphasis of desperation and poignancy these words highlight of the human condition. Ultimately, the authenticity and expression of literature and art sheds a lightness to its society by adding an abstract romanticism to all aspects of human life.

The argument that literature and art carry weight, as implied in Barnes’ novel, is plausible and hypocritical of Tony. This paradox is outlined by the cinematic imagery that opens and closes the novel ‘band of yelping students whose torchlight criss-crossed in the dark’ – Tony reflects back on that period of his life in an air of nostalgia and sentimentality and this duration of his life had much weight in his memory. The fact that Tony

remembers snippets of his time with Veronica unreliably verifies the psychoanalysis of Freud's theory of repressed memory.

In Barnes' novel, Tony sees clear edged women as an embodiment of lightness in 'The Sense of an Ending - as Margaret is believed to personify. To the narrator, Tony, there seems to be genuine feeling of love as depicted in page 73, "That's where we found the other person, and find them still" which contrasts with Veronicas 'mystery' and heaviness, "I hadn't known where I was with her, couldn't read her heart or mind or her motivation. But enigma is a puzzle you want to solve. "

Tony seems to have indecisive feelings towards Veronica but is also strongly influenced by Margaret's view, "Margaret used to say that there were two sorts of women: those with clear edges to them, and those who implied mystery. And that this was the first thing a man sensed, and the first thing that attracted him, or not. " The same philosophical question is present in the Unbearable light of being where Tomas is attracted to both lightness and heaviness of two women -his wife Tereza and his mistress Sabina.

However in the case of Kundera's novel, lightness is depicted as infidelity and promiscuity and heaviness the burden of social conventions - marriage, family and a home which is the outcome and consequence of Tony's surface emotions towards Veronica during their time together - Tony was not deeply attached to Veronica so this led him to a life with Margaret. The lightness of no deep and meaningful human attachment is often an unfulfilled feeling.

Tony had obviously particularly no intimate bond with Veronica after sexual intimacy, "I was, presumably meant to feel closer to her, but didn't". This

concept is also alluded in Sonnet 129, “ A bliss in proof, but proved a very woe” where Shakespeare emphasises the revulsion he feels for sex with his mistress. The rhyming heroic couplet, highlighting especially “ well” and “ hell” imply the quick and trivial duration of a typical sexual encounter, the predatory chase and then the extreme guilt of the action.

This sonnet compares to sonnet 116 where the youth is unconditionally loved by the writer. The medial caesura in the second line intentionally focuses on ‘ love is not love’ this paradoxical statement on its own reflects the complexity and nature of love – like many other sonnets pure love is described as a hamartia or otherwise just lust, which is also destructive to human nature and integrity as illustrated with Tony’s relationship with both women.

Lust, associated with Tomas’ character, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* paradoxically can be mentally damaging as is seen in the promiscuous Sabina, “ her drama was a drama not of heaviness but of lightness” and progressively becomes empty and lonely with her way of life. The lightness appears in all three texts but in contrasting dimensions. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony’s companionship with Annie in the States is seen as an extreme example of lightness, “ to be friends and bed-companions, to laugh and drink and smoke a little dope together”, this form of liberty occurred and blossomed in the beat generation of the 60s.

The lightness and freedom Tony had experienced made way to disappointment and anti-climax in 2011 where his restlessness results him into seeking that excitement and lightness again with new encounters with

Veronica. This debate leads us further to a feminist critique of the men portrayed in all three texts. In particular Tony, whose teenage anticipation to drop his pen and be ‘ released into our lives’ never turned out the way he expected.

Arguably, men have picturesque vision of the world ahead of them, one of extreme lightness. It is the women that hold the suffering and responsibility, both Robson and Adrian kill themselves freeing themselves of the burden of family life. The vast use of imagery is also a prominent motif to illustrate the debate of lightness and weight. In Sonnet 116, the vast outdoor imagery of stars, lighthouses and sea reflects the freedom that love can experience.

The comparison of love to stars is essential – “ the star to every wandering bark”” the lightness and purpose that love brings, followed by “ Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken. ” The poet foregrounds this line to clarify that it cannot be certain what substance love consists of but can be measured by how much it elevates you. It can be argued that love is merely the perception of the ‘ light’; the lightness of beauty, kindness, euphoria and the happiness is only temporary – the star can only be seen in that altitude in the night when ships are lost and lonely.

Thus, love is the product of loneliness and desperation and therefore brings weight as a long-term effect. It is only required when one’s sense of integrity is broken. The initial impact of lightness is a free and liberal experience but in the debate of lightness vs. weight, when the lightness of love is eternally reoccurring and the effect brings pain and misery, in addition when the

situation inevitably changes and this is the very prominent structure of every Shakespearian tragedy and sonnet.

However, taking context into consideration. Shakespeare presents the theme of the complexity and nature of love, on the surface, as a promising and optimistic with a lack of realism. However there are undertones of subversive hints, if noting the historical setting of the sonnets – the ‘ Renaissance’ – the ‘ rebirth’ is an exciting and fascinating time in the history of England, especially in London thus adultery and unfaithfulness is as common as never before.

Arguably, the placement of the sonnet sandwiched in a debate of love furthers the unreliability of genuine nature of the poets statement. The symbolism of emotional elevation is also present in *The Sense of An Ending* through conventional human features such as the eyes, “ it’s still the eyes we look at, isn’t it? ”. The eyes are the embodiment of wisdom and clarity, the eyes see and perceive honesty. This part of the novel is very distinct from the rest of the novel as Tony’s tone and narrative style changes.

The list given to the reader of the events within the relationship of Tony and Margaret give an air of genuine unconditional love, ‘ the same eyes that were in the same head when we first met, slept together, married, honeymooned, joint-mortgaged, shopped, cooked, holidayed, loved one another and had a child together. ‘ These events contrary to the the events with Veronica can be relatively reliable as the ‘ effect’ of the cause is evident and can be corroborated by his child just as Adrian’s child corroborates Tony’s letter to Adrian and Veronica.



The structure of 'The Sense of an Ending' documents the narrator Tony's self-reflection in two parts. Towards the ending of the novel, the transition from spitefulness and revenge of the narrator turns into an understanding and philosophical revelation and arguably a sense of compassion for Veronica, dividing the two parts of the novel into lightness - no compassion and weight, Tony feels emotional empathy and guilt for Veronica. A shift in empathy for Veronica shows that the initial lightness he had with Veronica during the 60s had damaging consequences.

If, for example, Tony had engaged with Veronica on a more deeper level of understanding with a heavier relationship then Tony would not have been so embittered by Veronica and the chain of events that followed - Adrian's affair with Sara, Sara's pregnancy and Adrian's suicide would not have occurred. This is similar to the change experienced by Tomas in the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, his failure to succumb to sexual temptation of other women that causes his wife to suffer deeply.

In both texts the men change to a state of lightness to a state of heaviness. This differs from Shakespeare's 'persona' in Sonnet 27 as he's suffering from sleep deprivation from being far away from his beloved Youth. The weight of this relationship has a tremendous impact on the persona's psyche however it can be argued that this deep and weighty attachment is beneficial to maintain high morale in a time of despair.

On the other hand, it can be argued that both Barnes' novel and Sonnet 27 are retrospective stream of consciousness that are perceiving their own memories or thoughts in either nostalgia or a yearning for lightness of their

love. When Tony reflects back on his life in his late teens and early twenties he uses parallel phrases, ' I thought' before each fragment of each event six times. The ' I ' suggests that only Tony could perceive these events the way he remembers them and in reality they could arguably have been mere fragments of his imagination that have exaggerated and morphed the memories as time has gone on.

Another parallel phrase is ' I thought of a young woman dancing, for once in her life' is an example of how his memory is unreliable but has unfolded just before his conclusion but can also be seen as interpretation of his uncorroborated memory as more pleasing than his true memory. This links with the line ' presents thy shadow to my sightless view'. The image is not read but conjured up by his sickness of isolation and tired frustration.

Conversely, the long travelling on horseback, ' travel tired' tends to catalyse vulnerability and results in a deeper need for a compassion for emotional stability like Tony's dependency on Margaret.

This is a justification to the argument that the weight of love is a virtue and an essential component of happiness. In Elizabethan England, religion is a prominent and heavy aspect of society and is deeply rooted within Sonnet 146. The use of negative metaphors, " sinful earth", " outward walls" elicits strong protestant assert that would have conquered every person's mind in everyday life. The sonnet has a focus on spending masses amounts of money on the exterior of the body, when it is the soul that needs caring for.

This can be applied to Tony's comment, " Humber Super Snipe - those were the words that eased off the tongue as smoothly as ' the Father, the son and

the Holy Ghost'. Humber Super Snipe". The repetition of Humber Super Snipe places emphasis on the commercialisation of religion and the attitude towards religion is far more liberal in 1960 England than it was in the mid-16th century. The sibilance of ' Super Snipe' can imply the death of social traditions such as religion and a revival of liberty that much of the 1960s consisted of.

On the other hand, biblical connotations are present in the embodiment of Adrian. Tony regards Adrian as a Christ-like figure and some critics may argue he reflects the Jungian archetype of " The Saviour". Tony often believes that Adrian is of a higher level, both intellectually and emotionally, " he saw, though, felt and acted more clearly than the rest of us", and pursues him like apostle, his ability that leads him to " see what Adrian was talking about" comes as an epiphany to Tony just as Jesus' disciples document his parables and experiences.

This type of devotion is present in Sonnet 27 with a strong resonance of secular religious devotion rather than divine. The noun phrase, " zealous pilgrimage" elicits an awe-inspiring, sacred journey making the sonnet a more compelling one, as to compare a journey of thought to another person to a literal pilgrimage would be undermining religion in Elizabethan England. The following archaic form of the lexis " thee" validates the value and Godliness of the person the persona is referring to. This subverts the religious intention of pilgrimage to a journey of love. Barnes' novel and Sonnet 27, prove to be a Godless depiction.

This is also exemplified in the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, where one side of the street is the ‘almighty lightness’ of the Cathedral which is juxtaposed by the brothel across the street full of prostitutes – “bored cats” illustrating the sexual imperatives of men. In this sense, a patriarchal tone can be implemented in all three texts – the weight of men and their complexities are blasphemies and are destructive to the light of God and Salvation. Adrian – the embodiment of Christ – had fallen in the action of his suicide after committing adultery which inflicted suffering on Veronica and indirectly to his son.

Tony was a catalyst to the union of Sara Ford and Adrian therefore also part of of this feminist theory. Overall, the philosophical debate of Lightness and Weight is depicted in ‘The Sense of An Ending’ in the forms of corroboration of history, Veronica and Margaret, the heaviness and lightness of Art and Literature, the use of imagery and biblical symbolism. Shakespeare illuminates this theme by the complexity and nature of love, ‘lust and love’, imagery and and again biblical symbolism. The concept of lightness and weight was taken from Kundera’s book focusing on the philosophy of what is the best way of life.

To live in a sense of lightness – liberty and free spirit or be weighed down by emotions and desire. Overall, it seems Tony wishes he had followed the philosophy of heaviness with Veronica as his consequences of his lightness had a huge impact – the effect being Adrian’s suicide and Shakespeare wanting to follow the philosophy of lightness, he wants to be as free and promiscuous as the *The Fair Youth* and *The Dark Lady* but is burdened by his emotions and desperation for the overwhelming bond of love.