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Obsession and Male Relationships in the Works of Julian Barnes

Bachelor Thesis

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedl jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

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Jan Krčmář

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## I. Introduction

Critics and researchers agree that Julian Barnes' approach to the novel vary heavily throughout his body of work. Sebastian Groes and Peter Childs call him 'experimental'<sup>1</sup> while Richard Bradford labels him 'arguably the best-known practitioner of this curious compromise between the customary and the aberrant.'<sup>2</sup> Barnes' famous quote perhaps best outlines his work for an unfamiliar reader: 'In order to write, you have to convince yourself that it's a new departure not only for you, but for entire history of the novel.'<sup>3</sup> Despite his versatility, Julian Barnes very often explores the question of love in his works. In this thesis, I decided to narrow it down to non-romantic love between men, because in general, male friendship tends to be thought about as a less demanding type of relationship. I agree that friendship in which men see each other only from time to time is less demanding than a romantic relationship, mainly because there is not much to argue and disagree about when people see each other scarcely—the time together is usually filled with talking about what had happened during the time they had not seen one other. There are, however, much closer friendships, even between men. I think that those are not as easily maintained as some might think. Two *close* friends might share so much with each other, possibly even as much as a husband and wife. Therefore, a certain effort could be needed to retain this closeness.

The question of obsession will also be discussed. Every person is likely to have an obsession or a vice. Some are proud of it, but many successfully conceal from others as their obsession might be something unconventional or even illegal. To conceal it however, one must be able to control their emotions, otherwise they might end up losing a loved one, stealing something, or a similar harmful activity. Considering Barnes' versatility, it should be noteworthy to study obsessions of different characters in his works.

Certainly, one cannot address a single theme without venturing into another, closely related one, therefore other themes such as jealousy, sexuality, and cuckoldry will be discussed. In Barnes' coming-of-age debut novel *Metroland* (1980), which was awarded

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Groes and Peter Childs, "Julian Barnes and the Wisdom of Uncertainty," in *Contemporary Critical Perspectives – Julian Barnes*, edit. Sebastian Groes and Peter Childs (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now – Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Mira Stout, "Chameleon Novelist," *New York Times*, November 22, 1992, accessed July 28, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/02/25/specials/barnes-chameleon.html>.

Somerset Maugham Award, ‘youthful aspiration’<sup>4</sup> laced with obsession and subsequent compromise thereof will be explored as well as a thorough account of male friendship. Obsession accompanied by idiosyncratic jealousy is also the main theme of *Before She Met Me* (1982). Its protagonist displays not only a reasonable obsession with a loved one, but also a unique one with imaginary persons and actions. His struggle and subsequent inability to filter such undesirable emotions is met with a lax approach by his family and friends to resolve his problems. *Talking It Over* (1991) and its sequel *Love, etc.* (2000) give a detailed account of a love triangle which may be thought a conventional subject. However, the unconventional format of the books’ narration makes them well worth exploring. *Talking It Over* shows another description of male friendship which is subjected to the strength of carnal love. The damage done in the novel is then subsequently distributed among all parties of the love triangle in the sequel.

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<sup>4</sup> Shusha Guppy, “The Art of Fiction CLXV,” in *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, edit. Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 68-69.

## II. *Metroland*: A Vital Change or a Betrayal of Youthful Beliefs?

*Metroland* tells a story about two childhood friends Christopher and Toni who live for art and literature. As they grow to adulthood however, their beliefs and attitudes start to differ.

Two main protagonists are seemingly inseparable best friends whose main interest is art, more specifically books by Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Voltaire, and Verlaine. It is no coincidence that Barnes himself enjoyed such books in his school years, too.<sup>5</sup> Chris and Toni not only enjoy French authors, they are obsessed with them. As young boys, they are obsessed with things teenagers are usually obsessed with as well, but art is central in their life. They like to think of it as the centre of their universe.

Achieving the status of French flâneurs is the boys' main interest.<sup>6</sup> They live under the impression that worshiping art and applying their aesthetic theories whenever they get a chance will bring them this status. They visit galleries and libraries to 'take their inspiration from art and literature, and are drawn above all to French writers'<sup>7</sup> mainly for their 'combativeness' (M, 17). Many of the boys' arguments which are present in the first two parts of the novel are supported by a quote, preferably by a French author. The usage of their cultural knowledge in plain everyday situations shows almost religion-like status which art has for them:

'We agreed—indeed, no sane friend of ours would bother to argue—that Art was the most important thing in life, the constant to which one could be unfailingly devoted and which would never cease to reward; more crucially, it was the stuff whose effect on those exposed to it was ameliorative' (M, 31).

Peter Childs says that 'their belief, embedded in late-nineteenth century aesthetics, is that life is open to meaning, interpretation, and correspondences, provided it is

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Childs, *Contemporary British Novelists - Julian Barnes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Taunton, "The *Flâneur* and the Freeholder: Paris and London in Julian Barnes's *Metroland*," in *Contemporary Critical Perspectives - Julian Barnes*, edit. Sebastian Groes and Peter Childs (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Taunton, "The *Flâneur*," 12.

studied closely enough.’<sup>8</sup> They certainly engage in thorough studies of art and music: ‘For pictures, we thumbed in earplugs; while for music, we bound our eyes with a rigger sock’ (M, 32). They ‘are so appalled by the disjunction between life and art that they try to observe any influence that the latter has on the former.’<sup>9</sup> Another instance of their obsessive studies takes place on a beach where Chris spends time with a book by Baudelaire, in which the author says that ‘if you look at the sky through a straw [...] it looks a much richer shade of blue than if you look at a large patch of it’ (M, 15). This discovery is so important for Chris that he sends a postcard to Toni, explaining it. Due to his newfound sensitiveness to colours, he complains to Toni about the sodium streetlights which illuminate a strange orange glow which changes every colour to brownish orange: ‘they even fug up the spectrum’ (M, 15). At this point, the reader might think that the boys’ obsession with art and literature is ridiculous. Chris retrospectively confirms such thoughts by ironically pointing out that ‘they worried about large things in those days’ (M, 16). This foreshadows the third part of the book in which Christopher starts to care about more practical things while Toni stays true to their teenage beliefs.

Another of their obsessions is contempt for the middle class. Barnes shows their disrespect through what Caroline Holland calls ‘wonderful descriptions of their attempts to “épater la bourgeoisie,” or shock the establishment.’<sup>10</sup> For instance, they enter a ‘man shop’ and say that they wish to buy ‘one man and two small boys,’ (M, 20) thus “shocking” the shop assistant. Both Chris and Toni find equal satisfaction in such attempts, complementing each other. Not even Chris’ parents are spared from criticism and disrespect:

‘Every morning, at breakfast, I would gaze at my family. They were all still there, for a start—that was the first surprise. Why hadn’t some of them run off in the night, wounded beyond endurance by the emptiness I divined in their lives?’ (M, 42).

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<sup>8</sup> Childs, *Julian Barnes*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Holland, “Escape from Metroland,” in *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, edit. Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 7.

Other than in their aesthetic, the boys take pride in their rootlessness. Barnes himself said that he ‘grew up in a place that looks like a settled community, but is in fact full of rootless people,’<sup>11</sup> thus hinting a slight autobiographical aspect. Chris freely admits that Toni ‘far outclassed him’ (M, 34) in this matter (his parents were Polish Jews) which suggests certain admiration and influence on Chris. Toni, who lives in the inner part of the city, wonders whether Chris gets bored while commuting the same journey to school every day. Chris takes it as a challenge: he takes his friend with him on his journey and shows him the masses of people at Wembley Park, astounding Toni: ‘Thousands of people down there, all within a few hundred yards of you; yet you’d never, in all probability, meet any of them’ (M, 67). After successfully proving Toni wrong about his journey to school, Chris mentions that ‘from then on, I was not only interested in my journey, but proud of it’ (M, 67). This shows further influence of Toni. Christopher’s rootlessness lies in his everyday travels, he calls it a ‘twice-daily metamorphosis:’ (M, 64) his identity changes from a home-ruled teenager to an unprincipled flâneur.<sup>12</sup>

The more usual thing to be obsessed with at the age of sixteen is sex and everything surrounding it. Information concerning this matter was ‘hard to come by, at least through the official channels’ (M, 25). This obsession is obviously shared among the majority of the boys in school and they work together to gain as much knowledge about the matter as possible. Asking their teacher questions like ‘When are we going to do human reproduction, sir, it’s on the syllabus?’ (M, 24) or visiting the Headmaster’s risky class which includes a brief session on marriage are the tricks of the boys. A more fundamental thing that puzzles them is the actual appearance of the woman’s body. Magazines, adverts for lingerie, and films are the usual materials that provide some insight. Chris’ “artistic balance” is shaken when his brother invites his new girlfriend to their house. Chris thinks of it as a ‘psychic blow’ without a warning (M, 70). The following quote of overwhelmed Chris displays his inexperience and puzzlement with women:

‘Suddenly, half an hour before dinner, there was this girl among us—shiny sort of dress, handbag, hair, eyes, lipstick; just like a woman in fact. And with my

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<sup>11</sup> Stout, “Chameleon Novelist.”

<sup>12</sup> Childs, *Julian Barnes*, 22.

brother! Tits? I asked myself in furtive panic. Well, you couldn't really see, not with that dress. But even so, a girl! My eyes stood out like chapel hatpegs' (M, 70).

His brother flaunts himself, belittling Chris for still being a child. Chris contemptuously stares at the girl, looking for imperfections on her legs. 'Not knowing what to look for didn't help' (M, 70). He then shares his upsetting experience with Toni.

Sexual obsession follows Chris further. In the second part of *Metroland*, when he is asked to describe his girlfriend (who is his first) to Marion, a girl he has met recently, he blushes as he is not able to describe her outside the 'privacy of orgasm' (M, 128). As Marion abruptly leaves the cafeteria, Chris' internal monologue proves him to be a prototypical teenager who thinks about sex most of the time:

'Nice tits, I murmured nudgingly to myself; though, to tell the truth, I didn't really know whether they were nice or nasty. Yes I did, of course I did. They were nice because they existed' (M, 129).

Having arrived in Paris, Chris retrospectively mentions how he discussed virginity with Toni. Chris has a typical teenage attitude to the matter, hardly being able to think of a woman he would not want to make love to. After successfully losing his virginity with his new girlfriend, Chris writes a boastful letter to Toni first thing in the morning. Toni's reply is encouraging, touching upon French literature as usual. This reply outlines their relationship in their early twenties when Toni's tone is still friendly. He even encourages Chris to 'have one for him' (M, 106).

Their relationship starts to change when Chris leaves for Paris to work on a part of his thesis which he exploited to secure an allowance for the visit. Despite Toni being his best friend, Chris goes to Paris partly due to his love for French culture, but mainly because he can live there alone, without anybody (even Toni) or anything distracting him from concentrating on himself. One could say that he goes there to find himself. His main hobby at the time as well as his field of study is literature therefore he spends a lot of time in the French National Library. He admits that a nearby bar 'competed with the library for my presence' (M, 94). While in the bar, he meets his first official girlfriend Annick. He manages to start a conversation with her because he is familiar with the book which Annick is reading. He anxiously mentions 'Christ, I don't normally

do this' (M, 95) suggesting that if it was not for the book she was reading, he would not even have tried to talk to her. Not only he successfully flirts with his future girlfriend because of his knowledge of French literature, but he saves himself from a faux pas on the next date as well: he cannot remember what Annick looks like so he comes up with a stylish solution. He selects a book with which he plans to be 'discovered' (M, 98) while he will be waiting for Annick. He will not have to look around for her at the café (likely overlooking her and embarrassing himself) as he will pretend to be reading. Therefore, she will have to approach him herself. Chris makes it look as if books (or art in general) was a solution for every problem or embarrassment, at least for him.

While visiting Musée Gustave Moreau, he meets a group of teenagers who later become his only friends in Paris. He eavesdrops on their conversation concerning paintings. Their attitude towards one of the paintings prompts him into confronting them. After that, they scornfully gaze at his hair, clothes, and most importantly at the book he is holding. Chris mentions for himself that 'it was Jean Giono's *Colline*, so I felt OK' (M, 118). He makes it clear that it is not his looks he cares about the most when he meets people, it is his books. When choosing the book that he will be pretending to read while waiting for Annick, he makes sure it is a title that will show off his literary taste—he uses books to define his aesthetic.

While in Paris, Chris writes 'lots of letters, some of them (to my parents) describing what I wasn't doing, and the longer, more cutely phrased ones to Toni describing what I was' (M, 93). Their relationship still somehow holds together, although the reader can feel that they are not so close anymore. It starts to change radically in the third part of the book when Chris settles back in London. He asks himself a key question: 'Life ended; but didn't art end too?' (M, 139). He retrospectively confirms that they endorsed preferring books over life, because of the fear that the ardour of art is the consequence of their shallow lives, thus hinting that he is not that person anymore.

The third part shows Christopher and Toni in their early thirties having very different lives. Chris is married to Marion (she is one of the three friends he met in Paris), has one child, a stable job, and ironically, a house on mortgage in Metroland, the same part of London where he grew up. Toni's scorn is quick: 'Wife, baby, reliable job, mortgage, *flower* garden, (he stressed it contemptuously) can't fool me' (M, 181). However, Chris does not seem to mind the dullness and stereotype which he embraced in his life, even though he would have hated it in the previous two parts of the novel. In addition, he starts to defend the suburban lifestyle from the criticism to which it has

been subjected.’<sup>13</sup> His way of life strongly reflects in the relationship with Toni. Chris foreshadowed this change while reading Toni’s reply to the letter which he sent him the morning after he had lost his virginity:

‘Toni and I were beginning to drift apart. The enemies who had given us common cause were no longer there; our adult enthusiasms were bound to be less congruent than our adolescent hates’ (M, 106).

Toni tries to remind Chris about their adolescent beliefs by refusing to come to Chris’ wedding feeling ‘unable on principle to attend’ (M, 148). Refusing to attend the best friend’s wedding because of one’s attitude towards marriage is a strong reaction. One might think Toni jealous, but this is not the case as he has a girlfriend. Given his attitude to marriage however, he will not propose to her anytime soon. There is yet another extreme: Toni and his girlfriend ‘believe in having separate friends’ (M, 154). When Marion invites Toni as well as his girlfriend, he still comes alone. Another disapproval from Toni occurs when Chris secures a job as a copywriter and surprisingly enjoys it. Chris reaches a point where he does not care much about his best friend’s opinions: ‘Toni’s scorn was neutralised by Marion’s approval’ (M, 150). Chris has his wife and *her* opinion matters the most now. He also reveals that ‘he fears her a little,’ (M, 152) which further shows that Toni’s teenage influence has changed into Marion’s adult influence. Chris and Toni do not see much of each other anymore, but Chris admits that they ‘are still nostalgic about each other’ (M, 154). Toni travels to Africa and America, engages in teaching philosophy and unsuccessfully publishes poetry and essays. Chris, on the other hand, works for a publishing house and participates in creation of all sorts of practical books which are critically acclaimed.

Chris seems to be so content in his life that he cannot be discouraged even by his wife’s adultery. They casually engage in a discussion on the subject when Marion unexpectedly, yet nonchalantly admits:

‘the answer is Yes I did once, and Yes it was only once, and No it didn’t make any difference to us at the time as we weren’t getting on perfectly anyway, and

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<sup>13</sup> Taunton, “The *Flâneur*,” 15.

No I don't particularly regret it, and No you haven't met or heard of him' (M, 176).

This is one of the most striking and unanticipated confessions in the book. Chris however, manages to get over it surprisingly quickly, that very night in fact. He does not know what to feel, but in the end states that jealousy, anger, and petulance can wait for later (M, 176). Regardless of the fact that the couple has a baby, Chris must be very complacent in his bourgeois marriage to get over such a shock so quickly. Toni, on the other hand, does not seem complacent. He sarcastically pities himself while arguing with Chris about the state of literature. He pathetically asks: 'why the *fuck* don't people buy my fucking books?' (M, 159). He then sympathetically inquires why Chris has not written anything. Chris keeps his plans for a book about history of transport around London for himself, possibly to avoid another argument.

In the end, Christopher turns out to be an example of what he hated as a boy. His love for books stays, but rather than writing poetry or essays as he would have preferred as a teenager, he successfully co-writes practical books. In contrast, Toni engages in philosophy and poetry, albeit unsuccessfully. Love, truth, and art are recurrent values highlighted in Barnes' works, but their effectiveness is a matter of concern.<sup>14</sup> Interest in art helps Christopher constantly in his life: he finds his wife, makes friends, earns a living. On the other hand, he does not go over the top with it, his artistic teenage self evolves into a more practical one, proved very useful in life by his achievements. His content in adult life is undeniable, Childs aptly calls it 'life-learned "happiness."' <sup>15</sup> Barnes shows that we do not have to discard our childhood dreams and beliefs, but the ability to adapt is fundamental for success in life. Although the book takes place in the second half of the twentieth century, the notion of adaptability is justified now more than ever. Toni's aim to stay true to his teenage self does not seem to make him happy in the eyes of the reader. He surely can be referred to as highly unconventional, but is that the central thing in life? Attending events alone when his girlfriend is invited too or residing 'in the least fashionable part of the borough of Kensington he could find' (M, 154) does not sound very attractive. Barnes' complex account of the relationship between Chris and Toni shows how central having similar beliefs might prove in a

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<sup>14</sup> Childs, *Julian Barnes*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

friendship. Once such beliefs and attitudes start to differ, the estrangement is perhaps inevitable. In this instance, it is Chris' change of attitude towards art and life which is parallel to the change of the relationship with Toni.

### III. *Before She Met Me: Retrospective Jealousy*

In Barnes' second novel, obsession with sex is taken to another level. *Metroland*'s Chris is obsessed with sex, but that is nothing to be surprised about considering his age when the obsession is in its strongest. Graham, the protagonist of *Before She Met Me* on the other hand, continually descends into the depths of severe sexual jealousy. He is not obsessed with sex per se, what has the biggest impact on him is the sexuality surrounding his second wife's past life.

Not only is he obsessed with her as a person, but with her former acting career and her on and off-screen lovers as well. Chris' obsession with sex is justified not only by his age but by him being a virgin for a certain time in the novel as well. Graham's obsession is almost impossible to justify as he himself acknowledges that everything he is obsessed with and jealous about happened in the past. Another inversion between the two novels is the cuckoldry. Marion is in fact unfaithful, but Chris is almost indifferent when she tells him. Graham's second wife Ann on the other hand, does not commit adultery during her marriage to Graham. Although he knows this, he could not be further from indifference. One might conclude that Chris is a cuckold, who does not feel like one whereas Graham is not, but acts as if he was a victim of infidelity every other day. However, the characters show similarity as well: Chris is not able to tell the difference between art and life during his childhood and adolescence. Graham too, is unable to tell such a difference, although in a more specific way—between films and reality.

Graham knows about Ann's past lovers before him and does not mind for a certain time. He escapes from a stale marriage with his first wife Barbara after starting an affair with Ann, an acquaintance of his friend Jack. Barbara is a hard-to-argue-with lady who scolds Graham in front of their daughter Alice every time she has a chance. The narrator makes Graham much more likeable than Barbara, portraying her as a very unpleasant, even cunning person:

'While I was asleep she used to pull out the sheets and blankets from her side of the bed and push them over to mine, and then give me all the eiderdown as well, and then pretend to wake up and bollock me for stealing all the bedclothes' (BS, 111).

Such instances of her behaviour are evenly spread throughout the novel and make the reader sympathise with Graham. Paradoxically, it is Barbara who sparks the obsession and jealousy in Graham. She makes him and Alice go watch a film in which Alice's school is supposedly featured. When Graham sees his new wife on the screen in a sex scene instead of his daughter's school, he realises it is a trap. Barbara deceived him in a successful attempt to make Alice dislike Ann and potentially even her father for running away with her. Alice says that Ann was 'rubbish', to which Graham replies that 'she was only acting' (BS, 35). Later in the novel, his reply turns out to be ironic, as he becomes unable to tell the difference between on and off-screen actions himself. Visual images as opposed to words make up one of the important clashes of the novel. That very night, Graham transforms from a "words man" to a "pictures man." Being an academic, he has been affected by words ever since and has not been fond of cinema at all (BS, 131). Now, it turns around: Graham becomes addicted to watching films with Ann in them, watching the same films numerous times a week, rescheduling his classes, and driving to cinemas even outside of London to catch them. His obsession with Ann's roles and especially her male co-stars starts to develop. He endlessly questions Ann about her film partners and demands to know whether she slept with them only on-screen or off-screen as well. The reader realises that the obsession is getting increasingly serious when the narrator reveals Graham's shocking dreams about Ann's partners humiliating Graham, then about him taking his revenge on them.

Barnes revisits his two men scenario in *Before She Met Me* as well. Graham starts to visit his friend Jack, a novelist, to get advice on his situation. The narrator does not say much about the relationship of the two men before the events of the book. Surely, they are close, although not nearly as close as Chris and Toni in *Metroland* or Stuart and Oliver in *Talking It Over*. Both men read a lot, which might be why Graham starts visiting Jack in the first place, feeling sympathy. However, an interest in books is probably the only thing they have in common: Jack is an eccentric womanizer whereas Graham is a quiet academic, lacking experience with women.

During the first visit to Jack's flat, Graham delineates his thoughts about Ann in a monologue, which perfectly demonstrates the obsession with his wife and the perverseness of his mind:

'I scrape my plate off into the kitchen bin, and then I suddenly find myself eating whatever she left on hers. [...] And then I go back and sit down opposite

her, and I find myself thinking about our stomachs, about how whatever I've just eaten might easily have been inside her, but's inside me instead. [...] And I'll tell you another thing. Sometimes she gets up in the night and has a pee, [...] she misses the bowl with the piece of paper she dries herself with. And I'll go in there in the morning [...] I sort of look at it and I feel ... soft' (BS, 57).

As Graham tells Jack about his obsessions, he tries to teach him his ways of dealing with jealousy. Being a playboy with many past affairs, his advice is to sleep with a married woman or at least take up masturbation. Graham disapproves of Jack's advice to engage in a fling, but does take up masturbation after some time. The narrator makes it clear that Jack is not always to be trusted: 'Though always frank, the novelist was never wholly sincere' (BS, 53). After some time, Jack, although unwillingly, is not only a confidant to Graham, but to Ann as well. The reader learns that Jack and Ann had a brief affair once. Ann grows more apprehensive about Graham's feelings and visits Jack to tell him about her decision that the affair never took place. The second important clash of the novel—the past and the present is highlighted here, as Ann decides to adjust the past to facilitate her present situation.

Ann slowly starts to acknowledge Graham's never-ending, almost insane obsession with her former lovers. When Graham is unable to recall whether she slept with one of her on-screen partners in real life as well, it makes him 'feel keenly alive' (BS, 103). However, as soon as he gets home, he strongly demands her to tell him. Ann is annoyed: 'Graham would provoke in her the disgusted pity she now felt' (BS, 105). While they plan their vacation, Graham looks at the map, crossing out places she has been to with other men, deeming them "unsafe." As India and some other parts of the world are safe, he starts to be interested in them to such an extent that he obtains knowledge about Indian politics, (BS, 65) a matter in which he would not have been interested in at all had it not been for his jealousy. Studying Ann's travel maps, he thinks them threatening because of their personality to Ann (BS, 64). Such thinking shows further evidence of his hopeless jealousy.

Their vacation in France is the last instance of Graham being relatively free of jealousy. What makes his mind clear of Ann's former partners is mainly the fact that there was nobody 'who had ever seen Ann walking side by side with someone that wasn't him' (BS, 65) around the places they visit during the vacation. At this point, the reader is able to anticipate that Graham's mind cannot stay clear for very long. During

one of many detailed dreams he had before the vacation he saw his wife in a sex scene with four men. It seemed as if she was in a carwash, each of the men being one mower (BS, 101). As they drive back from the airport, they pass a garage with a “carwash” sign. Graham knows that he is back in it (BS, 123). This little sign which has no connection to his wife or any kind of adultery whatsoever is the only thing that it takes for him to fall. Another instance of his already pathological jealousy is his interrogation about Buck Skelton, one of Ann’s on-screen partners. When Graham learns that Ann did not sleep with him off-screen, it makes him genuinely happy. Afterwards, they make love and Ann realises that if she in fact slept with Skelton back then, they would not be making love now (BS, 96). Instead, Graham would be weeping on the other side of the bed.

Graham also invents almost a farcical game which demonstrates the ongoing change from a conventional academic to a husband drowning in retrospective jealousy:

‘He had to find the books on Ann’s shelves which had been given her by other people. If he didn’t find one such book in four tries, he lost the game. If he got one on fourth go, he had another turn; if he got one after only two gos, he saved himself two gos, and so had six chances in the next round’ (BS, 67).

Although inventing a silly game is a conscious activity, albeit highly unnatural for an academic, having dreams is not. His dreams feature humiliating scenes such as Buck Skelton relaxing by the pool, boldly telling Graham how he made love to Ann while he shines his shoes (BS, 89). The second kind of dreams consists of revenge upon the rivals. For instance, Graham sits in a bulldozer parked at the end of a tunnel while Buck drives his car into it at full speed, unable to see it in time (BS, 95). These dreams show the state of Graham’s mind and his pathological jealousy, because one does not choose their dreams consciously. What is more, these dreams do not end with waking up, they continue throughout the day.<sup>16</sup>

The couple’s evenings are routine. Graham spends time in his workroom before coming downstairs and making two drinks (for himself and Ann), then they usually watch television. This is the better scenario. The worse one is when he makes only one

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<sup>16</sup> Vanessa Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 25.

drink—for himself. Then he rails at her, ‘repeating strings of names and recounting his horrible dreams: dreams of adultery, mutilation, and revenge’ (BS, 148). To break this evening routine, Ann decides that they should invite some friends over. Surprisingly many people come, including Jack. Ann is a good hostess, making sure everybody’s glass is full. As she approaches Jack, who is entertaining two models, he caresses her bottom, then tries to kiss her, although friendly. Ann tells him that his behaviour is a bit over the top and he acknowledges (BS, 153). Unfortunately, Graham sees everything. He starts to drink more and Ann has to abruptly end the party and lock her husband outside the house to avoid a faux pas. Consequently, Graham throws a garden fork through a window to get back into the house (BS, 156). Up until now, Graham has only been jealous because of the past. He never says a word against Ann and acknowledges that she does nothing wrong, everything that spurs his jealousy took place before she met him. The party scene shows that Graham is a jealous person even in the present. What is more, the two phenomena—past/present and on-screen/off-screen start to blur in his mind (BS, 102). His profession of a history professor makes his obsession with past more convincing: historians worship the past, looking into it constantly during their work. However, both the narrator and Jack hint that Graham’s behaviour is far beyond normal. Vanessa Guignery goes as far as to state that his jealousy ‘turns into a disease of the mind.’<sup>17</sup>

Ann is disgusted with Graham’s behaviour up to a point when she ironically hints that they should use a technique with a sack filled with chicken blood which was used in brothels to make clients think that they had slept with a virgin. After this desperate mockery, Ann ceases to think about solutions to Graham’s problems or about them getting better. She lives day by day, trying to remember the good times as the present gets worse (BS, 183). The consumption of alcohol also plays a role: as Graham’s obsession strengthens, so do his drinks. During her visit to rewrite the past, Ann confesses to Jack about Graham worsening and drinking more often than before (BS, 74). Jack gently suggests that Graham might not be completely sane, but Ann takes Jack’s suggestions with a grain of salt. She is too sure that Graham ‘wasn’t either of those things—an alcoholic or a potential suicide.’ (BS, 135). She gets through the bad times day after day hoping that it will itself out. It never does and two lives are lost.

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<sup>17</sup> Guignery, *Julian Barnes*, 21.

Graham, paranoid and determined to find proof of Ann's adultery with Jack, looks through his novels. Unable to tell facts from fiction and past from present, everything he sees fits into his picture of Ann's adultery. After skimming through the books, he concludes that the affair started before they were even married and has been going on since. Upon finding his "evidence," he visits Jack for the last time. The murder he commits was foreshadowed throughout the book numerous times by Graham buying a knife in France or chopping the chicken in a very specific way with it. With Jack lying stabbed to death on the floor, Graham sips his coffee. Ann, afraid of what happened to him, visits the flat. Graham ties her hands behind her back to make her see his suicide without a means to intervene. He stabs his throat twice, bleeding out quickly. Whether he planned it this way to attack Ann emotionally or acted spontaneously is not clear.<sup>18</sup>

What makes Barnes' account of jealousy unusual is the fact that it is retrospective. Neither of the spouses were unfaithful in any way. Ann made it clear that she is not affected by her previous career at all, almost denouncing it. She even mocked some of Graham's imaginary rivals. The fact that he was not very handsome or experienced with women whereas Ann was both likely helped to undermine his sanity. The lesson which reflects in the events of the book is that people such as Graham should seek professional help, and if they refuse, they should be forced to seek it by their family or friends—Ann in this case. The story demonstrates how difficult, as Peter Childs put it, 'it can be to control primitive but unwanted emotions.'<sup>19</sup> Ann failed to see the seriousness of Graham's behaviour, Jack's remark about a therapist went almost unnoticed by her (BS, 148). The question which would then arise is whether a therapist would divert Graham from his path of murder and suicide. One can only speculate.

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<sup>18</sup> Guignery, *Julian Barnes*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Childs, *Julian Barnes*, 34.

#### IV. *Talking It Over* and *Love, etc.*: Best Friends Turned Rivals

##### A. *Talking It Over*

*Talking It Over* tells a story of a vicious love triangle using three narrators: Stuart Hughes, Oliver Russell, and Gillian Wyatt. By taking irregular turns, each of them tells their version of the story to the reader, sometimes even involving him in their monologues. From time to time, there might be yet another point of view of Gillian's mother, a mutual friend, or a shop assistant. Most of the time the protagonists are not aware of what the others said. This format leaves the reader with three versions of one story. The changing mental state of the protagonists should be taken into account as well as the subsequent unreliability. The relationship between the two male protagonists of the novel, Stuart and Oliver undergoes a change as well, although a more radical one than that of Chris and Toni. The book's pattern is that of a reversal: both men gradually move from their initial position to that of the rival with Gillian being the static centre.<sup>20</sup>

Right at the beginning of the book, Stuart acknowledges that he is not as clever or witty as Oliver. He later uses an apt metaphor to define himself and Oliver involving cuckoo clocks with a good and a bad-weather weathermen mechanism inside: only one can go out and see the sunshine while the other has to stay in. 'That's how it's always been with Oliver and me' (TO, 69). They have known each other since school days and Oliver has always been superior to Stuart at school: 'When he wanted to beat me, he beat me. Well, not just me, everyone' (TO, 16). At this point, Stuart speaks quite highly of Oliver, saying that he 'impresses people' (TO, 26). The field in which Stuart dominates is finance. Both characters separately agree that the first thing they said to each other was Oliver asking Stuart to lend him money. They have been close friends since, although Stuart says that it may come as a surprise, due to their different personalities:

I've always thought you are what you are and you shouldn't pretend to be anyone else. But Oliver used to correct me and explain that you are whoever it is you're pretending to be' (TO, 25-26).

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<sup>20</sup> Merritt Moseley, *Understanding Julian Barnes* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 140.

Stuart subtly admits that he does not mind being an outsider. ‘They’ve made it clear to me that I’ll never be a high-flier [...] and that’s all right by me,’ (TO, 53) he says about his job in a bank. Another instance of his self-acknowledged mediocrity becomes visible when he speaks about his relationship with Gillian: ‘the princess kissed the frog and he didn’t turn into a handsome prince but that was all right because she liked him as a frog’ (TO, 56).

Oliver is the exact opposite of Stuart. He has a university degree, is well-read, his speech is flashy, although highly sarcastic with allusions to almost an unrealistic number of different realms. In contrast with Stuart, Oliver does not speak as warmly about his friend. He keeps a somewhat sneering tone: ‘He [Stuart] looks *amicable* enough, but he somehow needs *work*’ (TO, 21) and maintains this tone throughout most of the story. Oliver’s charisma and Stuart’s sense of materialism stay unchanged in their adult lives. Stuart is clumsy with ladies due to his lack of charm so Oliver helped him by taking him on double dates providing women while Stuart provided money. How much help Oliver really was is questionable: Stuart concludes that all of the dates were ‘complete disasters’ (TO, 54) while Oliver says that both girls always showed interest only in him, with Stuart ‘in the corner’ (TO, 32). He uses his ‘innate sense of intellectual superiority’<sup>21</sup> to make Stuart look pathetic. Oliver belittles his friend almost every time he gets a chance subtly making fun of him for his inexperience with women or disparaging his job: ‘you really do have to be a winklebrain to get rejected from there [the bank for which Stuart works]’ (TO, 33). Later in the novel, this remark becomes retrospectively ironic as Stuart never loses his job, but Oliver does. He teaches foreign students English at a private school. One of his students, a Spanish girl, requires private tutoring during which he mistakenly thinks that she is making advances to him and tries to kiss her. The girl’s father who turns out to be a politician makes a call and Oliver is out.

A breakthrough for Stuart comes when he meets Gillian, a social worker turned art restorer. It is hard not to notice that Stuart’s traits are very similar to those of Graham at this point in the book. Both are clumsy with women, have a stable job, and are somewhat quiet. For Graham, meeting Ann is a new starting point in life. The same can be said about Stuart, he goes as far as to divide his life into ‘then and now’: ‘Gillian

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<sup>21</sup> Childs, *Julian Barnes*, 89-90.

came along, and everything starts here. [...] It's *now* now; it's not *then* any more' (TO, 55). One is not surprised when Stuart reveals that he met Gillian under a bit embarrassing circumstances—a singles gathering for which he had paid in advance. After dating for some time, they decide to keep the circumstances of their meeting a secret, especially from Oliver. They make up a story of them meeting in a wine bar instead. Stuart takes Gillian to Oliver's flat to introduce her. The evening goes well and after leaving, Gillian says to Stuart that his friend is 'rather good-looking' (TO, 40). This remark does not look like much, but proves significant later. All three of them spent a happy summer together and make great friends. On one occasion during the summer, as the trio is spending their leisure time on a beach, Oliver seems suddenly unstable. He has 'a crying fit' (TO, 51) while watching the happy couple. He unconvincingly claims that it was not significant, but after they drive him home, he collapses on his bed and bursts into tears (TO, 51). This sudden depression does not seem significant, but proves to foreshadow Oliver's psyche in the sequel *Love, etc.* It also suggests that Oliver realised that his life might not be as fulfilling as he thought—he sees how Stuart's love for Gillian changed him from an insecure young man to a very complacent one. The scene on the beach also corresponds with Stuart's opinion which he reveals after realising that Oliver might be having an affair with Gillian: 'I've never believed he's *actually* been in love. [...] he reminded me of those people who are always claiming to have the flu when all they've got is a heavy cold. [...] I hope Oliver hasn't got the flu' (TO, 128). When Oliver saw the effect which true love has on Stuart, he could have realised that he had never felt it. This is also supported by the fact that he is willing to change his bohemian character (which he apparently was not willing to change before) in favour of appealing to Gillian when he falls in love with her later in the novel.

Gillian, the centre of the men's romantic interests, is rather a conventional woman who does not have a 'confessional nature' (TO, 18). Her father left the family when she was thirteen, after fifteen years of marriage to Mme Wyatt, Gillian's mother. He was a teacher who eloped with one of his pupils. Oliver has a theory that girls who have been abandoned by their fathers at such young age tend to start affairs with older men to substitute their fathers. According to him, Stuart is the 'youngest old man she could find,' (TO, 49) talking down on his friend again. Even if he speaks warmly of Stuart, he uses a slightly mocking tone:

‘Don’t you underestimate my friend, by the way. He comes on a bit slow, sometimes, and the old turbine up top doesn’t always chug away like a Lamborghini, bet he gets there, he gets there. And sometimes even sooner than I do’ (TO, 34).

Despite the tone he uses when he speaks about Stuart to the reader, their relationship is very close. Oliver is not hostile, he is merely very sarcastic. To be fair, there are instances, however scarce, where he speaks kindly and without scorn about his friend: ‘[...] Stuart’s my friend. My oldest friend. I love him, that Stuart. And we go way back—way, way back’ (TO, 34). Also, after Stuart meets Gillian, Oliver seems genuinely happy for him (TO, 36).

The trio spend the summer together mainly because Stuart invites Oliver to go out with them. Gillian does not agree with Stuart’s cheerful opinion about the summer with Oliver. Although she agrees that it would not be good for the two of them to be alone all the time, and that she likes Oliver, she hints that he was a third wheel (TO, 45). Stuart and Gillian seem happy together and they decide to wed. A short time after the wedding, all three characters reveal their feelings. Stuart’s revelation is the most obvious: ‘I’m happy, yes I’m happy. It finally worked out for me. It’s *now now*’ (TO, 52). Gillian does not share much of Stuart’s enthusiasm and her announcement seems somewhat unconvincing: ‘I fell in love, and Stuart is a good person, a kind person, and he loves me. I’m married now’ (TO, 52). Oliver’s confession is the most striking—he realises that he loves Gillian (TO, 52).

The men’s relationship starts to change from this point. Although Oliver keeps his feelings for himself, he starts to think of Stuart as his rival who ‘ends his happiness’ whenever he comes home to Gillian (TO, 128). The freshly married couple casts off for their honeymoon and Oliver desperately desires to know the destination. He begs Stuart to tell him, trying various Stuart-like destinations, but is not successful. Next, he tries Mme Wyatt, still, no one tells him. During the honeymoon, Oliver becomes desperate and increasingly on edge. His state of mind suggests that he is heavily obsessed with Gillian. Merritt Moseley corroborates: ‘during Gillian’s absence he has fallen apart.’<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Moseley, *Understanding*, 138.

His obsession consists of two parts. The obvious one is with the object of his love. Oliver thinks about the day he fell in love with her—the day of her wedding:

‘She was all pale green and chestnut, with an emerald blaze at her throat; I roamed her face, from the bursting curve of her forehead to the plum-dent of her chin; her cheeks, so often pallid, were brushed with the pink of a Tiepolo dawn [...] her mouth was besieged by a half-smile which seemed to last and last; her eyes were her lustrous dowry. I *roamed* her face, do you hear?’ (TO, 63).

The second part of his obsession is Gillian spending time with Stuart which Oliver cannot stand, along with not knowing their whereabouts: ‘I suddenly felt that I couldn’t bear it, not knowing where they were going to be for the next three and a half weeks’ (TO, 65). Having received a postcard from the couple, he works out when they would be coming back, calls major airlines to determine which flight they would be on, and goes to meet them at the airport. He needs to see her as soon as possible and perhaps wants to shorten the time she is alone with Stuart to minimum as well. Extremely nervous, he decides to spend time at the airport’s bar. He is in a terrible state when the couple arrives and they do not even recognise him at first. What is more, they later describe his welcome as pathetic. A similar event further displays his struggle during the time Gillian is with Stuart, not to mention outside the country: the couple spontaneously decide to head off for a long weekend in France. Upon revelation of this plan, Oliver panics. Stuart is not able to connect the dots yet, he still thinks that Oliver is fragile at the moment, mainly because of losing his job. Oliver demands to know details about the weekend—where are they staying or which ferry are they taking (TO, 99). Again, Stuart does not find any of this suspicious, further proving his naivety. The reader is told by Gillian that as they were getting back to England on a ferry, Oliver was on the very same vessel. The reader is not told how could Oliver be aware of their whereabouts, Moseley says that he must have followed them the whole weekend.<sup>23</sup> Her claim is reasonable as neither of the couple says anything about telling someone else where they are going—they are not sure themselves in the first place.

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<sup>23</sup> Moseley, *Understanding*, 139.

Having lost his job (due to the issue with the Spanish girl) does not help Oliver's cause. For his personality's sake, he first says that he resigned, but Stuart knows better and confronts him about his "resignation." Oliver confesses that he got fired for 'sexual harassment.' He breaks down and bursts into tears upon which Stuart writes a large cheque for him (TO, 72). During this time, Oliver is oblivious about the outside world, because of the obsession with Gillian. He even becomes naïve, which seemed the least likely trait for him up to this point in the novel:

'What has to happen is this. Gillian has to realise she loves me. Stuart has to realise she loves me. Stuart has to step down. Oliver has to step up. Nobody must get hurt. Gillian and Oliver must live happily ever after. Stuart must be their best friend' (TO, 80).

On the one hand, Stuart knows Oliver well (e.g. he knew that Oliver did not resign straight away), on the other, he still cannot see the pattern in Oliver's behaviour and remains unaware of his feelings for his wife. His naivety or simply the fact that Stuart still thinks of Oliver as his best friend may be to blame. That is why he still cares for him and tries to help his situation (e.g. the cheque). This is backed up by Gillian, who remarks that 'He's terribly bothered about Oliver at the moment' (TO, 76). She then talks about Oliver meeting them at the airport in an annoyed tone, she says he was 'looking like death' and was 'pathetic.' Furthermore, she complains about Stuart giving him money (TO, 77). Her feelings towards Oliver do not suggest that she is likely to fall for him. Oliver, determined to make his feelings known to Gillian, spends Stuart's money on a huge bouquet of flowers for her. Unfortunately for him, Stuart sees him in the florist's and naturally inquires about the flowers. Oliver, terribly embarrassed, makes up a story on the spur of the moment about the Spanish girl living nearby and him going to see her. Although the story does not sound very convincing, Stuart believes it, possibly blinded by his cheerfulness in the first months of his marriage. Oliver has a chance to confess, but he decides not to and keeps his friend in the dark. Later, he boasts to the reader about how he fooled Stuart. One could certainly call him manipulative and unworthy of Stuart's friendship—buying flowers for the best friend's wife using best friend's money while lying about the whole thing to him does not sound like friendship. It can be blamed on his feelings which now seem to be dedicated only to Gillian therefore he might have none left for his best friend. Also, it can be blamed on

Oliver's personality—the mocking tone Oliver has used to speak about Stuart so far is in favour of the latter option.

Oliver's newfound love not only changes his relationship with Stuart, it changes him as a person as well. He is determined to reinvent himself to make Gillian fall in love with him. He lives up, at least partly, to this resolution: he gives up his smoking habit and gets a new job. However, he secures the job mainly because he needs a means to fund his plan to win Gillian. He rents a flat across the street from the couple's house, only to watch them closely. He starts to call Gillian every day, right when he sees Stuart on the corner coming home from work. The only thing he says to her is that he loves her. When he requests to see her work in her studio which she has inside the house, still oblivious Stuart agrees, even suggesting that it would be good for Oliver to have somebody to talk to, provided the state he is in. Gillian does not say anything to Stuart about Oliver presenting her with flowers or following them on the ferry and lets Oliver see her work quite often. She begins to confess to the reader that even though she puts the phone down on Oliver every time he says that he loves her, she still feels guilty, because she finds Oliver attractive (BS, 110). The insignificant little remark from their first meeting suddenly becomes very significant. Gillian also hints that she is able to work perfectly well with Oliver in the studio whereas with Stuart she could not. After some time, she stops putting the phone down too. The reader starts to realise that she is falling for Oliver: 'Despite the fact that I love Stuart, I seem to be falling in love with Oliver' (TO, 135).

Stuart realises that something is wrong when he sees Oliver entering his newly rented flat. After Stuart confronts him, Oliver finally reveals his feelings. As a response, Stuart head butts him. Their relationship goes the obvious way: Oliver is Stuart's rival now. Stuart, heart-broken, calls Oliver a coward, starts to binge drink and develops a smoking habit, all of which is understandable. He generously grants Gillian a divorce, only because of his feelings for her. Should he consider Oliver, he would not have granted it for as long as the law had allowed—he has no feelings left for his former best friend. Soon after the divorce, Oliver marries Gillian. The following statement demonstrates Oliver's nonchalant attitude towards the whole thing:

'It's tough, and I'm sorry as hell it had to be Stuart. I've probably lost a friend, my oldest friend. But I had no choice, not really. No-one ever does, not without

being a completely different person. Blame whoever invented the universe if you want to blame someone, but don't blame me' (TO, 179)

After the wedding, Stuart leaves for United States, disillusioned. He lives a reserved life, pays for sex, and does not let people too close as a result of his painful experience. After he starts sending flowers to Gillian, she and Oliver leave London for France. Although Gillian has a child with Oliver, she does not seem genuinely happy: 'Love, respect, fancy. I thought I'd got all three with Stuart. I thought I'd got all three with Oliver. But maybe three's not possible' (TO, 230). Even though Oliver has a job teaching English in France, she sees him 'fundamentally lazy,' like most men (TO, 225). Shortly after his breakup with Gillian, Stuart was very unstable. He said that Gillian betrayed him not only by falling in love with Oliver, but also by revealing the true circumstances of their meeting to Oliver. A while later he said that it was not her fault, that it was his because he did not make her happy enough (TO, 194). While living in the States, he finally resolves that it was not his fault indeed, and declares that 'It's not over. [...] Something's got to be done' (TO, 223). He decides to go to France and confront them two years after the divorce. This is the point where the men's reversal around Gillian completes: Stuart rents an apartment under a false name in a hotel across the street from their house, precisely like Oliver did two years ago. 'I stand at the window. I watch and wait,' (TO, 241) he says, the exact same words as Oliver's.

### *B. Love, etc.*

The sequel of *Talking It Over* maintains the same format of three main narrators. Additionally, Stuart's second wife, Gillian's daughters, or her assistant provide their occasional points of view. Oliver's sudden and strong obsession with Gillian in the previous novel turns into Stuart's milder, but very persistent one. The events of the book take place ten years after *Talking It Over*.

Stuart is now an accomplished entrepreneur. While in the United States, he left his job in a bank and established a restaurant with a friend. Even though it did well, he sold his half to the friend and started his own which was also a success. His interest took him to organic food distribution and he started a company called The Green Grocer. After a vacation in the United Kingdom, he decided to move back and proceed with his business in his mother country. Gillian, not displaying many changes to her personality, is now an established art restorer back in London. She has expanded her career and employs Ellie, an assistant. With Oliver at home, she provides most of the money for the family. Oliver took to screenwriting, but has not seen much success. They have two daughters now and live in a mediocre neighbourhood.

Ten years earlier when Gillian and Oliver lived in France, her neighbour, the owner of the hotel, told her that she hosts a Canadian called Uges (Stuart's surname is Hughes). Gillian instantly knew that it was Stuart, spying on them. After him sending her flowers to London and now tracking them down in France, she realised that he needed closure (LO, 18). Therefore, she planned to stage an elaborate scene. By confronting Oliver about a random girl whom he taught, she had been working up his anger for a couple of days. As Oliver was walking to his car one morning to go to work, she kept yelling at him up to the point when he hit her with the car keys twice in the face and furiously drove off. After witnessing this incident, Stuart went back to the States, Gillian and Oliver back to London, not seeing Stuart for ten years. Stuart later declares:

'I don't know what I'd expected to find when I went to see them—I don't know what I did find—but it didn't help. Did it make matters worse: It certainly didn't make them any better, I think it was the baby that did me in. Without the baby, I might have got something out of it' (LO, 12).

Stuart decides to get in touch with Oliver and invites him for a drink. They seem to get on fine, Oliver retained the same flashy tone in his speech, and thinks of Stuart as an old friend. Stuart does not protest, but makes clear to the reader that it is *not* the same for him, he ‘feels quite different now’ (LO, 46). Due to Stuart’s success and rich experience he does not seem as inferior to Oliver as he seemed in the previous novel. The reader can easily notice that Oliver’s bohemian charm has been wearing off. After the drink with Oliver, Stuart visits Gillian’s household. His disapproval is clear—he does not like the fact that they live only in the bottom half of a small house, the neighbourhood does not look appealing, and the schools around are far from the best. During the dinner, both Gillian and Oliver notice that Stuart has changed. Gillian notices his weight loss and declares that he seems ‘more relaxed’ (LO, 57) with which Oliver agrees.

Stuart has a plan to make the couple move into his house, the one where he lived with Gillian during their marriage: ‘I have to persuade Oliver that it’s largely for Gill’s benefit, and Gill that it’s largely for Oliver’s. And both that it’s better for the kids’ (LO, 82). He argues that they need more space with two kids, and that the schools are better in the neighbourhood. The question which arises is why is he doing this for them after what they did to him. The reader can see that Stuart is far more successful than Oliver which facilitates his change into a self-confident man who surely does not need Oliver’s help with women anymore (he casually dates Ellie, Gillian’s assistant). He effortlessly makes himself look far more mature than Oliver. With Stuart making clear that he does not think of Oliver as a friend anymore, one can see that if anybody, it is Gillian and her daughters who he cares about. Later in the novel, he confesses that he is one of those people who can love only once, (LO, 133) suggesting that he still loves Gillian. Apart from providing the house, he also employs Oliver in his firm as a van driver, but clarifies: ‘What I’m doing is for those two girls. And for Gill. So it doesn’t really matter what Oliver thinks or says. As long as he does what’s best for them’ (LO, 110). It is now clear that he helps Oliver only because he is a father and a husband of the family Stuart seems to care about and wants him to behave accordingly. However, the employment of Oliver can have another, subtler or even revengeful reason—getting Oliver out of the house in order to be alone with Gillian. Although Stuart does not say anything about it, he makes himself busy with putting up shelves and fixing things in the new house for Gillian while Oliver is at work. Also, Stuart says that Oliver is not favoured by his co-workers and that it is the reason why he started ‘sending him on

longer trips' (LO, 122). It can be argued that he does this to get Oliver out of the house for longer periods of time. Julian Barnes himself said in an interview that 'as the book proceeds he [Stuart] turns out to be less and less a voice on whom we can rely.'<sup>24</sup> Early after starting work for The Green Grocer, Oliver's van develops a dent. What is more, Oliver acts, according to Stuart, a bit bossy in a situation where he obviously should not—withdrawing his salary. Stuart will not have any of it: 'just fuck off, OK?' Then, he tries to hurt Oliver by revealing that he saw him hit Gillian when they lived in France (LO, 123). It is now clear that the former best friends will stay only *former*. Oliver later realises that Gillian must have known that Stuart had been watching and therefore had manipulated him.

Oliver gradually falls into a deep depression, subsequently stops going to work, and his wit and cleverness go downhill: 'Stuart bores me. Gillian bores me. I bore me. [...] I used to think there was some point to being me. Now I'm not so convinced any more. I feel bloated and stupid' (LO, 178). Other than him being a good father, Gillian does not say many positive things about him either: she is 'the breadwinner' (LO, 22) most of the time, she has to run the household so that Oliver can 'rattle about inside without coming to much harm' (he has already suffered from depression prior to the events of the novel) (LO, 72), and admits that they are worse off (LO, 57).

The elusiveness of Stuart's motives for his philanthropy is further blurred at the climax of the novel. After dinner at the house, Oliver retreats to his bed, the girls go to sleep as well, and Stuart finds himself alone with Gillian, drinking wine. What happens afterwards depends on to whom the reader trusts. Gillian first claims that she willingly slept with Stuart which Stuart confirms in his account of the event. Suddenly, she denies her previous account and thoroughly discloses that Stuart forced himself onto her: 'Yes, I do consider it to have been rape' (LO, 186). What is more, she is pregnant with Stuart's child.

The friendship between Stuart and Oliver was unbalanced indeed. Stuart explicitly said so himself and Oliver's comments involving Stuart do not display much friendliness. However, for both parties to confirm that there has been a camaraderie since childhood, stable feelings must have been involved during the relationship. Oliver's sneering tone is likely used only with the reader, not with Stuart present,

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<sup>24</sup> Jerry Brotton, "Let's Talk about *Love, etc.*", *Amazon.co.uk* (Sept. 2000), quoted in Vanessa Guignery, *The Fiction of Julian Barnes* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 78.

otherwise he would not have invited Oliver to spend a summer with him and Gillian. This invitation, along with the invitation for the wedding, proved to be the decline of Stuart, as Oliver fell in love with Gillian at the wedding. Stuart expresses concern and provides a helping hand for Oliver, but his friend is not so generous. He does not consider going away or any other means to avoid Gillian immediately after developing his feelings for her, knowing she is the wife of his best friend. It could be argued that love, possibly even first love, is stronger than friendship as well as could be argued against it, especially when the best friend's spouse is involved. Oliver's probably "unconscious decision" to steal Gillian from Stuart leads to irreversible consequences. Although the heartbreak seems almost beneficial for Stuart, as he is a more accomplished person ten years later, the climax of *Love, etc.* shows him as possible rapist and Oliver as a depressed cuckold. The metaphor with the weatherman clocks which Stuart used in *Talking It Over* works steadily throughout the novels.

## V. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to study obsession and male relationships in four selected works of Julian Barnes. The versatility for which Barnes is known is based on forms of his writing. He has used both first and third person narratives as well as a form similar to a television play, using numerous narrators, thus creating more than one version of a story. Despite this versatility, the themes he explores recur. Apart from the questions of love, art, and life which are present in majority of his works, certain kinds of obsessions are often present as well.

The obsessions present in *Metroland* can be called healthy—none of them does any harm. The obsession with sex is understandable during adolescence. Besides, there are hardly any teenagers who have not been obsessed with sex at some point. The ones who are obsessed with literature and art are much scarcer. Chris and Toni's teenage beliefs are portrayed almost as a creed with rules for what is considered shocking for the bourgeoisie and what is not. For Toni, the impact of art and culture is long-lived, but does not seem to help him financially or mentally. For people like Toni, Chris is defeated and compromised, but he feels complacent and at ease with himself nonetheless. *Metroland* laid foundations for boyhood relationships which are revisited in later works as well. Chris and Toni show that male friendship is not something which once started, goes on forever effortlessly. Although it is not as strong as a marriage or a romantic relationship, it also requires personal contact and common ground. Chris and Toni at least kept in touch, and can still call each other friends, although not as close as they once were. In Barnes' Man-Booker prize winning novel *The Sense of An Ending*, boyhood friends have similar relationship as Chris and Toni, but break off all contact in adulthood and the friendship is lost. *Metroland* protagonists' common ground begins to fade when Chris starts to drift away from their flamboyant beliefs towards a middle-class life. He replaces unconventional Toni for conventional Marion and great literature for practical books. In Toni's eyes, Chris is a loser, for he compromised his beliefs and succumbed to a middle-class lifestyle, for the bourgeoisie on the other hand, he is a winner.

A harmless sexual obsession from *Metroland* turns into a hostile jealousy in *Before She Met Me*. Graham gradually loses control of his emotions which eventually become stronger than him. Although he knows that Ann is not an adulteress, it does not help

him at all. Neither does visiting his eccentric friend Jack. Graham and Jack's relationship is not described in such detail as friendships in other works are, but the pattern is similar to that of *Talking It Over* and *Love, etc.*—they start as friends and end up as rivals. Graham drowns in the past, reschedules his classes, has ridiculous dreams, and keeps detailed records of Ann's film partners, all for no plausible reason—everything happened in the past and Ann has not seen any of them for years. The book ascribes how dangerous can obsessive jealousy be for an individual who cannot or is not willing to seek help elsewhere.

*Talking It Over* and *Love, etc.* is also a story of friends turned rivals. Although Stuart and Oliver seem unlikely to be friends, they grew up together like Christopher and Toni. They managed to stay friends throughout adolescence to adulthood. Their friendship declines when Oliver falls in love with Gillian. He steals Gillian from Stuart who then resolves to exile in the United States. Barnes called Stuart 'a damaged survivor.'<sup>25</sup> He struggles to trust people, but comes back ten years later as a successful entrepreneur who has reinvented himself. He uses his newfound self-confidence to establish himself in the lives of his former friend and wife once again. If his motives were to help somebody other than himself, it was Gillian and her daughters, but certainly not Oliver. The betrayal by his loved ones changed him forever. By the end of the novel, it is obvious that the friendship with Oliver ended the day he stole his wife and cannot be revived even after ten years during which Oliver unsurprisingly turned out to be a failure.

Julian Barnes' works hint that everything needs a limit. Surely, there are worse things to be obsessed about than sex, art, or a person. After all, any harmless obsession can become harmful, but as long as one is able to control their emotions and think rationally, it is much less likely that their case will end up like Graham's—in tragedy, or in some harmful activity. Barnes said that 'love that gets out of hand can easily turn into madness.'<sup>26</sup> It could be rephrased to say that every emotion that is not under control can turn into madness.

His accounts of male relationships support my theory that it takes more than three beers every other Friday night to retain a close friendship. Chris started to drift away

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<sup>25</sup> Brotton, "*Love, etc.*," 78.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick McGrath, "Julian Barnes," in *Conversations with Julian Barnes*, edit. Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 19.

from Toni due to alternation of his beliefs. Despite this, they can still be called friends as they see each other, although less often. To conclude, it could be said that the time spent together might be even more important than common ground and similar beliefs. One should properly value a life-long friendship and should try to keep in touch even if the attitudes change, because so much has been shared among two close friends. If only Oliver valued his friendship with Stuart more, he could have found a way to avoid Gillian, find someone else, and perhaps his decline at the end of *Love, etc.* would have been avoided.

## Resumé

Cílem této práce bylo zkoumat posedlost a vztahy mezi muži ve čtyřech dílech Juliana Barnese. Posedlosti v díle *Metroland* lze nazvat neškodnými, sexuální posedlost bývá v dospívání běžná. Těžko by se hledal adolescent, který by tuto posedlost nikdy nezažil. Toni zůstane věrný literatuře a umění i v dospělosti, Chris sice nepřestane tyto hodnoty uznávat, ale stane se jedním z těch, kteří ho v mládí odrazovali. Se svým životem je ale spokojený. Vztah Chrise a Toniho dokazuje, že mužské přátelství není vůbec lehké udržet. Nebývá sice tak silné jako manželství nebo partnerský vztah, také ale vyžaduje společný čas a podobné názory.

Posedlost v *Before She Met Me* už se neškodnou zdaleka nazvat nedá. Graham postupně ztrácí kontrolu nad jeho emocemi, které se stanou silnější než on a vyústí až k vraždě. Přestože ví, že vše se stalo předtím, než ho Anna poznala a je mu v jejich vztahu věrná, utápí se v minulosti. Kniha popisuje, jak nebezpečná může posedlost žárlivostí být pro samotného člověka bez cizí pomoci.

*Jak to vlastně bylo?* a *Láska, atd.* je také příběh o přátelích od dětství, ze kterých se stanou rivalové. Jejich přátelství vydrželo až do dospělosti. Pak ale Stuart potkal Gillian, do které se Oliver zamiloval na její svatbě se Stuartem. Oliver Gillian přebral a Stuart se poté rozhodl přestěhovat do „vyhnanství“ ve Spojených státech. Za deset let se vrátí jako úspěšný podnikatel a zařadí se zpět do života jeho bývalého přítele a manželky s nejasným cílem. Zrada od jeho nejbližších ho ale změní nadobro, přátelství s Oliverem opravdu skončilo v den, kdy přebral Gillian a nemůže být obnoveno ani po dlouhých deseti letech.

Díla Juliana Barnese naznačují, že vše potřebuje limit. Každá posedlost se může obrátit v zákeřnou, ale pokud je člověk schopný kontrolovat své emoce a racionálně myslet, měl by být schopný vyhnout se tragédii. Barnesovi popisy mužských vztahů ukazují, že blízké kamarádství není tak lehké udržet, jak se může zdát. Člověk by si měl vážit životního přátelství a snažit se zůstat v kontaktu, i když se společné názory začnou rozcházet.

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## Annotation

Author:	Jan Krčmář
Department:	Department of English and American Studies
Title of thesis:	Obsession and Male Relationships in the Works of Julian Barnes
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## Anotace

Autor:	Jan Krčmář
Katedra:	Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky
Název práce:	Posedlost a mužské vztahy v dílech Juliana Barnese
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Klíčová slova:	Julian Barnes, současná britská literatura, mužské vztahy, posedlost, žárlivost, nevěra
Abstrakt:	Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá posedlostí a vztahy mužů ve čtyřech dílech Juliana Barnese. Témata blíže související s hlavními budou také prodiskutována. Julian Barnes je znám rozdílným přístupem ke každému dílu, avšak tato práce se bude snažit porovnat vybraná témata, které se stabilně vyskytují v jeho dílech. Vybraná díla obsahují <i>Metroland</i> ; <i>Before She Met Me</i> ; <i>Jak to vlastně bylo?</i> ; <i>Láska, atd.</i>