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RECONFIGURING THE REAL:  
ART & AESTHETIC INNOVATION IN  
KAZUO ISHIGURO'S AXIOMATIC FICTIONS

HAZEL Y. L. TAN

## Abstract

This study approaches six of Ishiguro's novels — *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *The Unconsoled* (1995), *When We Were Orphans* (2000), and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) — through a treatment of these works as novelistic works of art. It derives its theoretical inspiration from aesthetic theories of art by Étienne Gilson, Graham Gordon, Peter Lamarque, Susanne Langer, and Noël Carroll, as well as concepts found within the disciplines of philosophy of mind (especially phenomenology), post-classical narratology (possible world theory applied to literary studies), and studies on memory as well as narrative immersion. The point of departure of this study lies in its drawing attention to and placing of greater focus on the artistic character of Ishiguro's style — an examination of the aesthetic construction of his novels through close readings of his novels and early short stories. The thesis focuses on the ways in which the narrative form, voice, and structuration of Ishiguro's works flaunt and flout the analytic unreal/real fictional paradox through a signposting of their fictionality, whilst paradoxically and simultaneously, producing an intensified feeling of the real through directed formal techniques. In so doing, my study also seeks to highlight a deceptive aspect of Ishiguro's seemingly transparent prose, to show how it harbours a subtle experimental dimension working at the formal level of his novels. The duplicitous nature of his prose, I postulate, is the source of their original quality.<sup>1</sup> What this results in consequently, the thesis postulates, is a mode of fiction that I term "axiomatic fiction" — fiction that deftly negotiates fictional self-consciousness at the same time that it works to maintain a seamless semblance of poetic illusion that is able to captivate and enthrall readers.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that my study aligns itself with criticism that has similarly noted this specific quality that underlies the aesthetics of Ishiguro's prose: Rebecca Karni has studied this quality of Ishiguro's prose in relation to how it speaks to an ethics of reading world literature (Karni 1), whilst Mike Petry has examined this quality in relation to the extent that Ishiguro may be situated within a postmodern framework (Petry 9).

MASTER OF ARTS BY RESEARCH IN ENGLISH STUDIES

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**RECONFIGURING THE REAL:  
ART & AESTHETIC INNOVATION IN  
KAZUO ISHIGURO'S AXIOMATIC FICTIONS**

Submitted by: HAZEL Y. L. TAN

Supervised by: PROFESSOR PATRICIA WAUGH

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Abbreviations for  
The works of Kazuo Ishiguro

Short Stories

“Strange”      “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness”

Novels

*PVOH*      *A Pale View of Hills*

*AFW*      *An Artist of the Floating World*

*ROTD*      *The Remains of the Day*

*UC*      *The Unconsoled*

*WWWO*      *When We Were Orphans*

*NLMG*      *Never Let Me Go*

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To God be all glory, for it is His light that illuminates all darkness.

*In loving memory of the best first dog anyone could have,  
who was stronger and much braver than I,  
Mocha.*

## INTRODUCTION

Central to novel reading and literary appreciation is the peculiar experience of being initiated into imaginary worlds, wrought together solely and merely by means of words. As we pay attention to the words on the pages of the novel, we listen intently to narrative voices, which transport us through our deliberate and purposeful imagining of the events and scenes in our mind's eye. More often than not, we get to know fictitious characters that inhabit these fictitious landscapes, finding ourselves feeling for them despite well knowing that as fictional beings inhabiting a fictional place, they occupy a different ontological plane from the world outside the novel (the world in which we, as readers outside the text, live). In novels where these imaginary people, landscapes and happenings take on the quality of the real and vividness in our minds, we glimpse of and marvel at the world-creating prowess of novels, in engaging our imagination and affecting our emotions through the production of contradictory states of reality and irreality simultaneously.

Modal logicians, analytic philosophers, cognitive narratologists and literary critics alike have extensively perused the paradoxical ontological status of fiction and its immersive qualities. As plausible as many of these theoretical discussions may be, they are mostly framed through a Platonic assumption on truth/falsehood in fiction, rather than the Aristotelian tradition that aspires towards a more descriptive poetics of the numerous ways in which the real/unreal aspect of fiction is able to engage the mind. Hence, as literary critic and philosopher Peter Lamarque observes,

a great deal has been written about fictional worlds, truth in fiction and the status of fictional characters but [...] what such attention to narrative misses is precisely what makes narratives a focus of aesthetics – namely, the modes by which the “world”, is presented [to

the mind] (Lamarque 197).

Indeed, whilst accounts that are framed through a Platonic lens do recognise the storyworld as a heterocosmic, autotelic world, more often than not, discussions often move on quickly to address questions of fictional reference in relation to more philosophical and linguistic concerns. In so doing, the artistic qualities that are unique to literary fiction — in particular, its ability to manufacture real/unreal states and straddle reality/irreality simultaneously — are not discerned and acknowledged as such.

Such a sentiment is, of course, not new, and this was already articulated in 1953 by the post-Kantian philosopher Susanne K. Langer in her seminal work, *Feeling and Form*, which focused on the development of a philosophical theory of art applied to the fine arts of literature, drama, dance, painting and architecture. As Langer observes, out of the other fine arts, literature is often “treated as something else [rather] than art” and despite it being “taught and studied more than any other” fine art, “its artistic character is more often avowed than really discerned and respected” (Langer 208). Langer attributes this to the deceptive aspect of literature’s medium as verbal art. Since

[literature’s] normal material is language, and language is, after all the medium of discourse, it is always possible to look at a literary work as an assertion of facts and opinions, that is, a discursive symbolism functioning in the usual communicative way (Langer 208).

Langer’s comments offer insight and an explanation of the tendency for scholarly criticism to focus on the truth/false value of fiction: a misunderstanding of the writer’s purpose in writing fiction and in turn, misrecognising literature’s aim as verbal art rather than plain, usual communicative discourse. Considered together,

Lamarque and Langer's remarks become particularly telling, as they both highlight this tendency for scholarly criticism to relegate an aesthetic focus on the text to peripheral discussion. In misrecognising fiction's nature as, first and foremost, art objects containing story worlds that are "designed with the function of engendering aesthetic experiences, perceptions and attitudes" (Carroll 20), Platonic accounts which peruse fiction in this manner tend to treat the novel's import — "symbolic forms" and "formulated feeling" — as happenings that correspond in our world and have historical significance and therefore contain actual commentary or communicate practical significance about the world outside the text (Langer 208). As a consequence, the inherent artistic virtue of novels as fiction rather than history, reportage, or truth, is able to offer to the human sensibility, is often overlooked.

Interestingly, though albeit counter-intuitively, this is a phenomenon also pervasive in literary criticism of fiction. In an issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* devoted to contemporary British fiction, Patricia Waugh and Jennifer Hodgson echo this sentiment, stating that:

though there is no necessary connection between the luminosity of events in history and the significance and value of artistic representation, literary critics seem curiously attached to this view of things. They are driven perhaps by different concerns from writers themselves, concerns to do with historical placing, cultural trajectories, political interventions, real or imagined, and less so with the nitty-gritty of that incredibly difficult task of imagining and making a world (Waugh and Hodgson 19).

Waugh and Hodgson's observation highlights the tendency for literary critics to engage in what Catherine Belsey has called "common-sense criticism", the reading

of literary works through an “expressive realist” lens (Belsey 7). As a critical position which fuses the Aristotelian concept of fictional worlds as heterocosms with the Romantic conviction that poetry, as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’, expresse[s] the perceptions and emotions of a person ‘possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, expressive realist readings tend to form interpretations of the text in question through a real-world, historical frame (Belsey 7)<sup>2</sup>. This is not to say that criticism based on such a frame is automatically rendered invalid, but rather, such readings take for granted that the historical reality as presented in the text directly corresponds with historical actuality outside the text. It presupposes that

[t]he novelist, whoever he is and wherever he is writing, is giving form to a story, giving form to his moral and metaphysical views, and giving form to his particular experience of sensations, people, places and society (Hardy 1 qtd. in Belsey 9).

Waugh and Hodgson’s comments, considered within the context of Belsey’s argument, thus draw attention to lacunae in current literary studies of contemporary British fiction, and by implication highlight an urgent need to place greater focus on examining the aesthetic dimensions of texts — in particular, the specific mechanics behind the laborious effort that an author exerts to create a fictional, artistic storyworld.

It is in this manner that the British-Japanese novelist and Nobel Laureate for Literature 2017, Kazuo Ishiguro, and his six novels to date — *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *The Unconsoled* (1995), *When We Were Orphans* (2000), and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) –

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<sup>2</sup> Belsey is quoting from William Wordsworth’s *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*.

– lend themselves as particularly appropriate works for this study.<sup>3</sup> While Ishiguro’s oeuvre has received a large amount of critical attention, his works are often read within a historical or “real world” frame. More troubling, perhaps, is that some of these critical accounts have tended to place overriding attention on his ethnic and racial identity as Japanese-British. As such, the focus of these critical pieces tends to be on the explication on the historical, cultural, and ethical implications of his novels in light of his biographical and cultural background. Furthermore, even if much current critical scholarship surrounding his work concurs on the virtuosic performances of his prose achievements, these accounts, as we shall see, often move quickly to address other aspects of his fiction — aspects that have minimal relation to the explication of the artistry of his prose.

## **I. Chapter Précis**

The point of departure of this study, therefore, lies in its drawing attention to and placing of a greater focus on the artistic character of Ishiguro’s style — an examination of the aesthetic construction of his novels through close readings of his novels and early short stories. I will focus on the ways in which the narrative form, voice, and structuration of Ishiguro’s works flaunt and flout the analytic unreal/real fictional paradox through a signposting of their fictionality, whilst paradoxically, and simultaneously, producing an intensified feeling of the real through directed formal techniques. In particular, the three aspects of his works I am most interested in are Ishiguro’s use of the first-person unreliable narrator, the presentation of memory, and his uniquely limpid prose style (which also affects how the two devices are presented). These techniques are devices employed to enable his novels to

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<sup>3</sup> Novel titles will be written in full at the beginning of each chapter, but I will use the following abbreviations for subsequent references to each novel respectively: *PVOH*, *AFW*, *ROTD*, *UC*, *WWWO*, and *NLMG*.

(re)configure the real or what is assumed to be primary reality. In so doing, my study also seeks to highlight a deceptive aspect of Ishiguro's seemingly transparent prose that harbours a subtle experimental dimension working at the formal level of his novels. The duplicitous nature of his prose, I postulate, is the source of their original quality.<sup>4</sup> It is this quality that enables his fiction to resist readings solely at the level of practical significance and meaning, that is, the reading of his texts through an “expressive realist” lens.

What Ishiguro's fictions “imitate”, the object of their mimesis, is the performative and compositional process of fiction and narrative telling itself, but in subtle and reticent ways. In the chapters that follow, I will also argue that his novels consistently return to and draw attention to their fictionality through oblique, experimental gestures that are truly and uniquely their own; at the same time, the argument will explore the ways in which these gestures develop and mature through the overall trajectory of his oeuvre. What this results in is a particular mode of fiction that I term “axiomatic fiction” — fictions that deftly negotiate fictional self-consciousness at the same time that they work to maintain the seamless semblance of the poetic illusion, which captivates and enthrals readers. Admittedly, while this brief definition of axiomatic fiction may seem to bear resemblance to the definition of metafiction — “fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh, *Metafiction 2*) — it is my contention that there are several subtle but important differences between these two that distinguishes

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<sup>4</sup> It is imperative to note that my study aligns itself with criticism that have similarly noted this specific quality that underlies the aesthetics of Ishiguro's prose: Rebecca Karni has studied this quality of Ishiguro's prose in relation to how it speaks to an ethics of reading world literature (Karni 1), whilst Mike Petry has examined this quality in relation to the extent that Ishiguro may be situated within a postmodern framework (Petry 9).



them, as Ishiguro himself demonstrates through his novels. Saliiently, Ishiguro's novels examine the intimate and complex relation between imaginary and real worlds and real and fictional minds that are negotiated by and through them. Central to this negotiation is a preoccupation with memory which, in its formal modes, shares many of the attributes of narrative organisation itself, including its propensity to confabulation which is arguably also the ontological ground of the fictional. Each of Ishiguro's novels singularly engage meticulously with the possibilities of unreliable narration in this regard in order to create aesthetic effects which foreground the relation between fiction-making and memory. Ultimately, my study posits that it is this original quality of his prose that marks his distinctive place within the canon of contemporary British literary fiction.

## **II. Reading Ishiguro's Fiction as Art<sup>5</sup>**

This study approaches Ishiguro's novels through an aesthetic lens: through a treatment of these works as novelistic works of art. It is thus worth deliberating over what such an endeavour entails. The most straightforward way of arriving at a preliminary answer — to begin to provide a working lens to be refined throughout the course of this thesis — is to consider, first and foremost, the nature of art. Naturally, this question of what art is must already implicate a wide range of aesthetic theories from different schools of thought. Of the various responses to this question, my thesis, which is concerned with the studying the fine art of literature, is fundamentally premised on the idea that one of the most telling hallmarks of art is the activity of making. As French philosopher and historian Étienne Gilson posits in his seminal work *The Arts of the Beautiful*, “from the beginning to the end, art is

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<sup>5</sup> This section is based on and is an extension of an aesthetic approach towards literary texts that I formulated based on aesthetic theories of art put forth by philosophers of art and literature – Étienne Gilson, Graham Gordon, Peter Lamarque, Susanne Langer, and Noël Carroll – in my final year undergraduate thesis at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (Tan 1).

bent upon making” (Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* 9). Further elaborating on this point, Gilson explains:

There is only art when the operation, essentially and in its very substance, does not consist in knowing or acting, but in making. This decision is based on the fact that, although it requires knowledge and action, man’s ability to make derives directly from his act of being. Man as capable of making (*homo faber*) is first a making being (*ens faber*), because his activity as a craftsman is like an outer manifestation of his act of existing (Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* 19).

The point that Gilson makes is that the nature of art is not the thing that is made, but rather, is itself, its intrinsic mode of making. Art therefore is the act and process of creativity, and this creativity is an outflow from a maker who shapes and processes his/her ideas. Gilson also distinguishes art from the order of knowledge and action; in contrast to these, within the context of the fine arts, the proper end of such making is “the making of beauty” – to “produce beautiful objects” (Gilson, *Forms and Substances in the Arts* 3). What is clear then is that, contrary to philosophical discussion and scientific discourse concerned with the pursuit of truth, art’s primary purpose is to “to be beautiful and to be contemplated as an end in itself” (Abrams and Harpham 4).

Recognising these innate qualities of art allows for a reorientation of discussions of fiction through an aesthetic lens. To view novelistic fiction as art is therefore to place at the forefront of our attention the notion that the literary work in question is a work of creativity that is produced and intended by a writer. By understanding this as “the universal aim of art” — that the writer “sets out to create,

rather than what he feels or wants to tell us” — we therefore avoid the possibility of being “misled by usages that have meanings in art quite different from their meanings in real discourse” (Langer 260). As entities based on creativity rather than on actuality, works of art necessarily distinguish themselves from utilitarian or functional objects. More than that, these observations applied to the context of this study, render clear that even though the basic building blocks of literary works are formed out of words – the same medium that common communication and practical discourse utilises — literary works which self-consciously reflect on or present themselves as “art” are not invested in the business of plain mimesis understood as the imitative representation of social or historical events that have occurred in the actual world that we live in. Rather, such works are concerned with the presentation of a storyworld curated and transposed by narrative semantics. Literature, as Noël Carroll aptly points out, “possesses aesthetic qualities in virtue of its perceptible properties — such as its sounds and rhythms” and more importantly “presents aesthetic properties through the organisation of its fictional worlds”.<sup>6</sup> To employ an aesthetic lens for this study is to pay attention to and to contemplate these aesthetic properties and formal relations that are present in each of Ishiguro’s novels, and to reflect on the nature of these aesthetic experiences, that is to say, comment upon the complexity of each of his unique storyworlds (Carroll 189).

Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading provides a useful starting point here, where she posits that there are two approaches to reading, namely,

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<sup>6</sup> According to Carroll, aesthetic experiences comprise a wide range of experiences that may be classified under these two main categories that are not necessarily mutually exclusive: experiencing “aesthetic properties” of the work of art, and the experiencing of “formal relations” (Carroll 203). While the former refers to experiencing different kinds of aesthetic properties such as “expressive properties” (emotional evoking properties such as “somber”, “melancholic”, “gay”) and “character properties” (tonal properties such as “bold”, “stately”, “pompous”), the latter refers to the appreciation of design within the artwork, that which also coincides with the aesthetic properties of what Carroll calls “Gesalt properties” (formal coherence such as “unified”, “balance”, “chaotic”, “tightly knit” (Carroll 190).

“efferent” and “aesthetic” reading, which sit on two opposite ends of a spectrum. Rosenblatt states that in the first type of transactional reading process, the reader’s attention is primarily focused on what will remain as a residue after the reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out (Rosenblatt 23). In other words, efferent reading is primarily a meaning-mining activity, where one skims the text with the end goal of taking away information to form an idea of the gist of the text. Such a process leaves out any apparent consideration for the prose style of and formal structures within the text. On the other hand, in the second type of reading transaction, “the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text” (Rosenblatt 25). In such a process, one is engaged in an exploration of the work such that it leads to introspection not only about the reading process itself, but also about oneself. Rather than treating meaning as a destination to arrive at as in efferent reading, an aesthetic reading encourages the relishing of the journey within the storyworld through self-consciously apprehending narrative semantics and formal structures that facilitate and make possible the encountering of aesthetic experiences.

As novelistic works of art do not seek primarily to correspond or to replicate actuality, it follows then that the storyworld that the literary work of art invokes is thus inexorably and unmistakably the creation of a new world that has no obvious connections with the world (outside the text) that we already know. This is not to say that only literary works of art that display fantastic elements may qualify as art, but rather, the storyworlds in these works tend to embed significant signs that signpost their distinctiveness from the world of actuality inhabited by the reader. As such, what the literary work of art consequently curates is a composition that evokes

an air of oddity, a sense of peculiarity and otherworldliness, even if the world produced is in some respects a familiar one: this is a common experience in our encounters with art works and difficult to define and explain. Despite this autotelic status of art, no work of art, of course, can totally separate itself from the familiar forms of life as we know it, for if this is the case, the writer of storyworld risks alienating his/her readers completely, barring entry into the world he or she has painstakingly built for another's appreciation. However, as Gilson proposes, "the fact remains that every ingredient entering the composition of a work of art, be it even truth, is there in the relation of matter to form" (Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* 15). When employing an aesthetic approach, it is imperative to realise that these familiar forms of life that may be present in the work do not actually represent discursive views or serve merely as social or historical commentary. As the post-Kantian art philosopher Clive Bell argues,

no [...] representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representation form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions (Bell 27).

Bell and Gilson's argument is that even if familiar forms of life figure in the storyworld of the text, an aesthetic approach to the text would recognise these forms as significant forms (to utilise Bell's term) that contribute more towards the overall formal construction of the text, rather than towards the matter of the text. Needless to say, an aesthetic lens based on the above propositions requires a bracketing of our

practical and utilitarian judgments and stance towards the work, so that we are able to properly contemplate the work before us.<sup>7</sup> Hence, while traditionally a discourse in aesthetics would consider and promote art as a form of knowledge and view it as providing access to either of the extremes of objective truth or subjective truth about the world around us or the world as seen through the author's eyes, the aesthetic lens that will be employed in this study views Ishiguro's works as ends in themselves that do not primarily contain practical significance about the historical events of the world and do not correspond to usual utilitarian means and meanings.<sup>8</sup> For, it is only then that

[a]rt transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life (Bell 27).

It is only by regarding the autotelic sphere of art as is, that aesthetic experiences that are unique to the work of art and which only art can provide may be accessed by the

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<sup>7</sup> The nature of this type of contemplation was first outlined by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) (Kant and Pluhar). Kant proposes that two components are needed in order for the response to the artefact to count as a purely aesthetic experience. The first being that of disinterested contemplation — a *special* kind of attention that a perceiver bestows upon an art object — attending to the artefact without seeking to approximate and reference it to “reality or the “external” ends of utility and morality” (Abrams and Harpham 4). The second is when this attention is directed to an artefact that pleases for its own sake, such that it in turn encourages its viewer to contemplate on the object with such an attitude. It is apparent then that there is thus a discursive relationship between these two components; one encourages the other but both are invested in the notion that neither the artefact nor the attention given to this artefact seeks (to express) practical significance. Thus, inasmuch as we contemplate the literary work of art in this manner, the work itself also facilitates and encourages such an approach towards it.

<sup>8</sup> This is an exercise that shares many similarities with the practice of phenomenological reduction, which was first developed by Edmund Husserl (Gallagher and Zahavi 21). A position also advocated by the art philosopher Noël Carroll, this practice requires one to suspend judgment about the natural world to focus our attention instead on the work of art and its accompanying aesthetic experiences. However, Carroll disavows the notion that this is a *special* kind of attention as Kant and post-Kantian philosophers claim. For him, the attention accorded to the art work is but a matter of “focusing attention in a certain way -- of limiting it in scope to the form of the work” (Carroll 189). He hence refuses to call what he terms “design appreciation” as “disinterested attention” (Carroll 189).

perceiver.

What consequently flows out of this approach is a focus on reading Ishiguro's novels *on their own terms*. It is in this way that, as much as I desire the single use of an aesthetic lens to read Ishiguro's works, I am aware that it likewise places limitations on my study of his novels, as an aesthetic response may not always seem the most appropriate response to every one or all aspects of his novels. To assume so is to limit the remit of art and consequently, our potential experiences of his novels whether as critics or non-professional readers. I would therefore align myself in opposition to any purist stance towards art appreciation — that every response that the artwork evokes must necessarily be purely and only an aesthetic response that all others are not worth exploring. Rather, I concur with the art philosopher Noël Carroll's view that the "aesthetic experience does not represent the only kind of legitimate response to art [that is] available to us" (Carroll 203). Amongst the different variety of experiences that may constitute as legitimate responses in the reading Ishiguro's novels as art, I am interested therefore in the cognitive experiences that his novels facilitate. In order to facilitate such a response, throughout the course of my study, I will draw theoretical inspiration from concepts found within the disciplines of philosophy of mind (especially phenomenology), post-classical narratology (in particular, possible world theory as applied to literary studies), and studies on memory as well as narrative immersion. Because many of Ishiguro's novels are invested in the depiction of an inner psyche and storyworld through a first-person unreliable narrator, psychological and psychoanalytic concepts such as narrative identity and self-deception will provide sources in the discussion of his novels. All of these tools will not only enable me to formulate a clear definition of what I have termed "axiomatic fiction" but also to reveal the ways in which

fiction-making seems deeply entwined with fundamental human cognitive capacities for world-making. In other words, it is my contention that Ishiguro's novels demonstrate through their axiomatic fictionality that the capacity for make-believe and our propensity for the appreciation of art and confabulation are a few of the many core qualities that we possess that contribute enormously to what it means to be as a human being living in a contemporary, post-war world.

### **III. Synopsis of Chapters**

With the exception of Chapter One, each of the following chapters will be devoted to examining formal features unique to each novel, that regulate our intellectual and emotional engagement through a negotiation of the real/unreal paradox. In order to trace the trajectory and development of Ishiguro's aesthetic methods in relation to the aforesaid, my study pursues these questions through examining Ishiguro's novels in a mostly chronological manner, with the exception of *UC*, which I leave to the penultimate chapter because this specific novel demonstrates a marked shift in style in relation to his oeuvre as a whole and it is the novel where Ishiguro's experimental gestures are most evidently manifest. Wherever possible, I have chosen to include the author's own comments on his work in interviews alongside my close-reading of his novels. The intention is not to establish Ishiguro as the final authority on the meaning of his novels or to bend the argument and/or discussion to fit his vision of his craft. Rather, Ishiguro often demonstrates himself to be a writer who is meticulous about his craft and highly lucid and aware of his aesthetic aims and methods in interviews. These comments are therefore invaluable to this study and allow for a more nuanced and insightful reading of his novels.

In Chapter One, I provide biographical details of the author, an overview of



critical reception to his novels, some notes on terminology and concepts that will be used throughout this study and close readings of one of his early short stories “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” (1981). I postulate that the exclusion of direct allusions to the atomic bomb and war imagery (these were present in “Strange”) in Ishiguro’s first two novels signifies a need to deviate from reading these works as strictly trauma narratives. Drawing on Ishiguro’s own comments on “Strange” to support this argument, I posit that a close examination of these two works will reveal three principle techniques that suggest that Ishiguro was experimenting with both of these short stories in efforts to reconfigure what is assumed to be primary reality, and is that which he later develops in his longer, novelistic works: 1) the device of memory; 2) a prose style that is seemingly transparent yet deceptive due to the ambiguity it exudes; 3) the characterisation of his unreliable, first person narrator related to a prose style that mediates them as naïve, ignorant, or wilfully self-deceptive. In so doing, I highlight elements of axiomatic fiction and offer a brief introduction to the concept.

Chapter Two examines Ishiguro’s first two novels, *PVOH* and *AFW*. Rather than placing the focus on the historic event of the Nagasaki bombing which forms the backdrop of these two novels, I focus on the ways in which Ishiguro utilises the techniques of unreliable narration and memory to reveal how his characters engage in continual self-deception in a bid to reinvent their pasts and consequently their self-identity. By portraying Etsuko and Ono as non-neutral individuals whose reality is shaped by their *perception* of the events that have happened in their lives, and as situated participants in an ongoing, open-ended, socio-historical drama, Ishiguro presents *PVOH* and *AFW* as exemplars of novelistic fiction that shares affinities with the branch of existential philosophy called phenomenology. Already in his early

works Ishiguro begins extending the possibilities of fiction and realism itself, presenting readers a phenomenological realism through painting a picture of a mind that invokes a world that is exclusive and unique.

Chapter Three examines Ishiguro's third and fifth novels, *ROTD* and *WWWO*. Present criticism on these two novels has so far tended to use the models of unreliability present within them to further philosophical, ethical, psychological discourses and/or narratological theory on the concepts of unreliable narration and self-deception. Instead, the focus in this chapter is on ways in which models of unreliability that reflect self-deception in *ROTD* and *WWWO* mirror the practice of make-believe, that is to say, fiction. In the first half of the chapter, I posit that as with his first two novels, Ishiguro manipulates elements both at the story and discourse level of Stevens and Banks' narratives in order to signpost instances of narratorial unreliability to the reader. The second half of the chapter examines the ways in which Stevens and Banks present the engagement of and with art through utilising their professions of butler and detective, respectively, as cover stories. In turn, this will reveal the ways in which they are active actors, obsessed more with composing a better version of themselves than with enacting their roles to perfection in accordance to the scripts that they craft. Consequently, Ishiguro's deft use of these techniques crafts a stylistic prose whose language exhibits, unabashedly, the world-making, compositional, and performative aspects of Stevens' and Banks' narration.

Chapter Four examines Ishiguro's fifth novel, *NLMG*. It begins by examining the question that has bothered non-professional readers and critics alike: why do Kathy and her close friends not look for options to liberate themselves from the regime that (mis)uses their bodies as hosts for organs that will go to diseased mortals? Following this question, I turn to an examination of whether Kathy is another

prototype of the self-deceived and/or ignorant narrator that has figured in Ishiguro's novels thus far. By reframing the novel as not science fiction, I turn to an examination of the role of language and discourse in *NLMG*, positing that Kathy's language and education at Hailsham is a metaphor that represents the dual and paradoxical ability of art to simultaneously serve consolatory yet disturbing purposes.

In Chapter Five, the concluding chapter, I turn to an examination of what critics consider to be Ishiguro's most radical novel: *UC*. I begin by with the basic questions surrounding the novel — who is Ryder? Where is he? And what is it he is doing? — for answers to these questions are not at all easy to arrive at. I do this by offering a brief survey of what critics have previously written about the novel's plot. Through a close reading of the novel, I examine the similarities as well as differences between *UC* and the rest of the novels in Ishiguro's oeuvre. Consequently, I posit that the techniques in *UC* are an amplified version of the axiomatic fictionality displayed in lesser, but more subtle degrees in his other novels; they are markers of axiomatic fictionality.

## CHAPTER ONE: TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF AXIOMATIC FICTION

**1.1 Kazuo Ishiguro and His Worlds**

Kazuo Ishiguro, though of Japanese ancestry, is one of the most globally celebrated Anglophone contemporary fiction writers. In 1960, at the age of five, his father, an Oceanographer, hired by the British government to oversee research on storm-surge movements, relocated him, his sister, and mother who were all living in Nagasaki, Japan, to the town of Guildford, Surrey. He first encountered writing as an activity as a child in his grammar school for boys in Guildford, in the south of England, where he grew up. While he spoke English and performed English manners with his friends at school, on the street, or in the local stores, Ishiguro makes clear that at his parents' home, things were entirely different. There were different etiquettes to follow and he spoke Japanese with his family. He frequently received parcels from his grandfather in Japan, and these would contain Japanese books and materials that reminded him of the country that he and his family had left behind. This childhood experience enabled him to construct an image of Japan that he cherished through his coming of age years, albeit it originating in his childhood perspective. This experience turned out to be formative and pivotal to his career as a writer as he matured into an adult, for Ishiguro became acutely aware that this image of Japan that he had in his mind was not an accurate representation of his home country, but rather, was constructed out of a mix of “memory, imagination and speculation” (Ishiguro, *My Twentieth Century Evening and Other Small Breakthroughs* 6).

On realising that his Japan was “unique” and not anywhere that he could get to if he got on a plane, and driven by the fear that he would not be able to recall this place as time passes as its impression was becoming more faded in his mind,

Ishiguro turned to

getting it down on paper that world's special colours, etiquettes, its dignity, its shortcomings, everything [he]'d ever thought about the place, before they faded forever [...] so [he] could thereafter point to a book and say: "Yes, that's my Japan, inside there" (Ishiguro, *My Twentieth Century Evening and Other Small Breakthroughs* 6).

The consequent result of this endeavour was *PVOH* and subsequently, *AFW*, both of which are set in his birthplace, Nagasaki, Japan. These novels utilise first person, unreliable narrators (Etsuko Sheringham and Masuji Ono respectively) who look back upon their lives. As the focalisation of the storyworld is heavily dependent on the narrator's imagination, memories, perceptions, and emotions, and the particular period in which the story is being recounted and in which the events of the story took place, gaps in these narratives arise, resulting in a limitation of what we, as readers situated outside the text, can observe and know within these worlds. This use of the unreliable narrator and of memory remained with Ishiguro; his third novel, *ROTD*, features a similar narrator, Stevens, who reflects on his past in order to come to terms with the way he has lived his life. Picking up on the prominent use of the unreliable narrator and memory in his early novels, Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia Wong likewise comment on Ishiguro's first three novels as "a trilogy of aging protagonists reflecting upon disappointing pasts and disillusioning presents" (Ishiguro et al. xi).

Perhaps sensing that he had exhausted what he aimed to achieve with this technique after *Remains* won the Booker Prize in 1989, Ishiguro boldly shifted from this mode of presentation in his fourth novel, *UC*, by experimenting even more radically with unreliability, time and memory. Instead of a narrator who looks back

on his past, Ryder, in *UC*, is unable to project a sense of coherent selfhood and past or future and can only recall moments and fragments of his life as he moves through an ever-changing present. This fourth novel marked a shift in the style of Ishiguro's novels that followed after, as they go on to present different variations on and further innovations in these techniques. *WWWO* features Christopher, a detective, who looks upon the world around him from a distorted child-like perspective; *NLMG*'s Kathy is unable to see or deceives herself concerning the exploitative ethos underpinning the pastoralised images of Hailsham — a place where clones are being farmed to maturity so that they may later be harvested for their organs — as she reminisces about her past with her childhood friend, Ruth, and lover, Tommy.

## 1.2 Critical Responses to His Oeuvre

The extent of Ishiguro's success becomes apparent when we consider that his novels, originally written in English, have been translated into more than twenty-seven foreign languages.<sup>9</sup> Ishiguro's oeuvre has received a large amount of critical attention, and that has built steadily from the days when he first emerged onto the British literary scene with his debut novel, *PVOH*. Aided by Bill Buford's editorial piece in *Granta* Magazine in the Spring of 1983 — a year after *PVOH* was released — which featured him as one of the best young British novelists amongst twenty other up-and-coming British writers then, critics have ever since kept a watchful and keen eye on his works.<sup>10</sup> Most recently and notably, the achievement of his oeuvre has placed him alongside other literary giants including Doris Lessing, Orhan Pamuk, V. S. Naipaul, William Golding, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Samuel Beckett, to name a few, particularly after the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017. Commending Ishiguro as an exquisite novelist of “great integrity”, who, in his

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<sup>9</sup> See Shaffer's *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* (1998).

<sup>10</sup> See Bullford's Editorial “Dirty Realism” in *Granta* (1983).

originality, “does not look to the side” for his creative endeavours, the Swedish Academy argues that the worlds within his novels possess “great emotional force” that “has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection to the world” (Ishiguro, “The Nobel Prize in Literature 2017”). That there are special, artistic qualities that belie the apparently limpid quality of Ishiguro’s aesthetic universe is a sentiment that had already been pointed out by a number of literary critics.<sup>11</sup> Troublingly, however, as shall be seen, current scholarship has thus far almost exclusively concentrated on the explication of ethics, genre, post-colonialism, textualist deconstruction through post-structuralist perspectives in Ishiguro’s work rather than a greater focus being placed on examining the artistic qualities of his novels, specially through an aesthetic lens derived from aesthetic theories of art.<sup>12</sup> I posit that in addition to previous categorisations given by critics who try to place him as an international, modernist, late-modernist, post-modernist, or humanist writer, an even more exact and accurate picture of Ishiguro’s position as a writer may be obtained through an aesthetic lens. A brief survey of this criticism is useful in establishing the apparent difficulty in categorisation experienced by critics engaging with the complexity of Ishiguro’s craft as it develops through the trajectory of his career. Evidently present is a dogged insistence on reading his novels in light of his alterity and hybrid racial identity, and an account of this will follow as a prelude before an alternative critical frame for his writing is offered.

That Ishiguro set both of his first novels in Japan – the place of his birth –

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<sup>11</sup> See Lewis, Sim, Karni and Petry.

<sup>12</sup> Critics Chu-chueh Cheng, Brain W. Shaffer, Barry Lewis, Cynthia F. Wong, Wai-chew Sim, Matthew Beedham, and Yugin Teo have dedicated books and theses to the study of Ishiguro’s oeuvre. Notable critical collections of essays dedicated to various aspects of Ishiguro’s writing have likewise been compiled by editors Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes, as well as Groes and Barry Lewis. Ishiguro is often mentioned and discussed in critical collections examining the terrain of contemporary British fiction writers.

with the choice of the main protagonist as Japanese, coupled with his Japanese name – that fronts the covers of these books written in English – led critics immediately to associate his works with his Japanese ancestry. As Sim notes, “one of the salient features [of critical reception of Ishiguro’s early works] is its zeal for tracking the Japaneseness of his writing” (Sim 113). Francis King, for instance, proposed in *The Spectator* that *PVOH* is “typically Japanese in its compression, its reticence and in its exclusion of all details not absolutely central to its theme” (Francis 25 qtd. in Sim 113). Likewise, Peter J. Mallett remarks of the “gentle restraint of Japanese culture” present in *AFW* (Mallett 25 qtd. in Sim 113). In this similar vein, Bruce King postulates that Ishiguro’s “instincts are for the nuanced, the understated, elegant but significant gesture, similar to the deft brushwork of Japanese paintings” (King 207). This obsession with his Japanese ancestry subsequently also extended beyond scholarly criticism to the general public and media. “A large portion of the reading public and media”, Sim observes, “appeared to see him as a spokesman for Japanese culture, a native informant who could not only offer expert opinion on Japanese society and more, but also explain its assumed eccentricities and mysteries” (Sim 13). A memorable instance of this phenomenon would be when Ishiguro was rung up by *Channel 4 News* and asked to comment on trade issues that Japan was facing.<sup>13</sup>

To fend off these stereotypical responses and assumptions and such literalist interpretations, Ishiguro turned to writing and setting his third novel, *The Remains of the Day* (1989), in post-WWII England. At the heart of *ROTD* features its main protagonist, Stevens, a butler – one of the most stereotypical English stock characters. This move all the more surprised and excited critics, for as Shaffer and Wong suggest of the pervasive assessment then and perhaps still persisting even now,

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<sup>13</sup> (Bryson 44).



“how could a person with an Anglo-Japanese heritage such as his, write a novel about a butler who was ‘more English’ than even the English could conceive?” (Ishiguro et al. vii).<sup>14</sup> While implicit in this sentiment is the recognition of the mastery and artistry of Ishiguro’s prose techniques and praise of his sensitivity to cultural nuances, this is nonetheless a compliment that excludes and demarcates Ishiguro in terms of difference, signifying his status as an outsider rather than insider to British culture. Unable to reconcile this presumed discrepancy of a Japanese writer being able to express the cultural sensitivity of a culture that is supposed to be alien to him, critics continue – stubbornly and simplistically – to frame their reading of *ROTD* as intrinsically tied to Ishiguro’s racial identity as native Japanese.

Gabriele Annan, for instance, proposes that:

all three of Ishiguro’s novels are explanations, even indictments, of Japaneseness, and that applies equally to the third novel, *The Remains of the Day*, in which no Japanese character appears. He writes about guilt and shame incurred in the service of duty, loyalty and tradition. Characters who place too high – too Japanese – a price on these values are punished for it (Annan 3-4).

Mirroring Annan’s claims, Rocio Davis likewise posits that Ishiguro “revisions Japan in a novel that is not even set in Japan but has at its theme six unexceptional days in the life of that most English of characters, a butler” (Davis 144 qtd. in Sim 114). David Gurewich goes as far as comparing the

narrator’s description of the English countryside [...] to the Japanese criteria for beauty and his emphasis on ritual, duty and loyalty to the “prominent aspects of the Japanese collective psyche (Gurewich qtd.

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<sup>14</sup> In an interview with Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger, Ishiguro himself joked that *The Remains of the Day* “was *more English* than English” (Ishiguro et al. 73).

in Mesher 146).

That Ishiguro's presumably most British work was still painstakingly connected back to his Japanese identity and roots frustrated him; as he lamented in an interview with Bill Bryson, "I sometimes feel that if I had written a book like Kafka's *Trial*, people would say to me, what a strange judicial system the Japanese people have" (Bryson 44). As Ishiguro's own comment indicates, the tendency for critics who are interested in tracking the extent of Japaneseness in his fiction is to overlook other salient aspects of his works. This is not to say that interpretations of Ishiguro's texts in light of how Japanese they are, are thus invalid; rather, it is imperative to recognise that such readings should be augmented with a discussion and analysis of other aspects of his fictional works so to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of their aesthetic qualities.

More sophisticated analyses – trying to account for the difference that Ishiguro represents through this racial-ethnic identity - have opted for a postcolonial perspective, positioning Ishiguro as writing from the site of exile and difference, yet they too continue to read the novels as commentaries on Japanese or British society at a purported historical period gestured towards in the novel. Most notably in 1991, King in the same essay that notes the Japaneseness of Ishiguro's prose, groups Ishiguro alongside Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta and Timothy Mo, proposing him as part of the "New Internationalism" movement that was sweeping through the literary culture of Britain. Singling out these writers as approaching the themes of colonialism and cultural conflict differently from their position as outside-insiders, King posits that they "help map the post-colonial world by being part of more than one culture" (King 210). For King, Ishiguro's novels are deeply rooted in the branch of realism captured by the term "naturalism"; unlike

Rushdie's fabulist and postmodernist aesthetics, they "treat of the effect on individuals of Japan's defeat in the last world war" (King 210). In a similar vein, Pico Iyer argues that Ishiguro is part of the "World Fiction" movement alongside Salman Rushdie, squeezing him under the category of the postcolonial, despite the admittance that unlike other writers occupying this position, Ishiguro himself is not from a former colony. Nonetheless, for Iyer, Ishiguro qualifies because he represents "a paradigm of polycultural order [...] incarnating in his every sentence the effects of his mixed upbringing in England and Japan" (Iyer 54). Ishiguro himself disagrees with these groupings, postulating that his style is more the "antithesis of Rushdie and Mo" than likeness, for "[t]heir writing tends to have all these quirks that go where it explodes in all kinds of directions" (Ishiguro et al. 70). Recognising this, Cheng, who examines Ishiguro's aesthetics through the lens of postcolonial studies, has critiqued King and Iyer's arguments, positing that Ishiguro, "when grouped with Rushdie, Mo and Naipaul, [...] is assigned to a margin where the corresponding center remains elusive" (Cheng 12). Rather than the term "postcolonial", Cheng opts for a less specific term, "postwar" — a category of fiction after 1945 (Cheng 13). Though more appropriate than the former term, this latter term relinquishes definitive pretensions concerning how Ishiguro's oeuvre may exactly be characterised. Evident from this survey is how the postcolonial perspective remains but a lens to read Ishiguro's work, but cannot adequately account entirely for who he is as a writer.

Symptomatic of these accounts is not only the tendency for critics to read Ishiguro's work in light of his alterity, but also how this alterity, together with the locales that Ishiguro has chosen in his first three novels, work together, likewise, to encourage the association of his work with the tradition of realism. That his first

three novels have consistently been read as rooted in traditional realism and as commentary on the social reality outside of the text has led Ishiguro to aspire to find “some territory, somewhere between straight realism and that kind of out-and-out fabulism” (Ishiguro et al. 75). Fictional locations, setting is, therefore, as Ishiguro comments:

something I really struggle with as a writer, [...] it is this whole question about how to make a particular setting actually take off into the realm of metaphors so people don't think it is just about Japan or Britain, but also give it that sort of ability to take off as metaphor and parable” (Ishiguro et al. 75).

Unsatisfied with criticism that praised *ROTD* for its realism and realistic depiction of Englishness and completely missing the metaphorical/analogical implications of the book, Ishiguro made the aesthetic decision to remove locale in his fourth novel, *UC*, – setting it in an unnamed city somewhere in central Europe – in order to obstruct expressive-realist readings. His subsequent novels are likewise fashioned with indeterminate settings: most of the action in *WWWO* takes place in an ambiguous international settlement area in Shanghai, while *Never Let Me Go* is set in futuristic England.

This diverse repertoire has made it difficult to categorise Ishiguro as working strictly in either the categories of realism or non-realism, hence, in accounts of his prose, critics have tended to opt for a combination of terms to describe it. In a critical biography on Ishiguro in the British Council archive, James Proctor proposes that Ishiguro's early novels may be read as fundamentally seeped in the tradition of realism despite acknowledging that these novels are “not straightforward ‘historical’ novels”, while *UC* “represents a surprising and daring departure [...] bravely

break[ing] the conventions and themes of his earlier work” (Proctor). For Proctor, Ishiguro’s work after *UC*, “represents a return to realism and the prevailing theme of memory that characterises the earlier work” (Proctor). Likewise, Sim considers the first three novels as working within a “broadly psychological realist framework”, and *UC* and work after it as belonging of “fabulist construction” (Sim 56). Similarly, Brian Finney contends that Ishiguro’s novels, up to *WWWO*,

divide themselves between the first three, all pursuing a supposedly realist mode of narration, and the last two which have seemingly abandoned that surface appearance of realism for what might be termed a surrealist fictional mode (Finney 2).

Barry Lewis and Mike Petry have correspondingly noted an experimental dimension working at the formal level of Ishiguro’s novels and have located his work within the tradition of postmodernism (Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro* 14; Petry 9). Most saliently, Ishiguro has been identified by James Acheson and Frederick M. Holmes as one of those contemporary British fiction writers whose works “embody combinations of realism [...] postmodernism, and include other ‘-isms’ as well” (Acheson 1; Holmes 13). Holmes demarcates his position from the afore discussed critical positions in postulating that

the entire fictional worlds of Ishiguro’s first three novels – not just some of their characters – are located in the middle ground between a historically veridical realism and fabulism” rather than being “grounded in historical realism (Holmes 13).

According to him, Ishiguro’s novels — particularly his fifth novel — *WWWO*, “embodies within it elements of realism, expressionism, surrealism and modernism” (Holmes 20). More astutely, Linda Raphael locates Ishiguro’s novels as straddling

the lines between modernist and postmodernist fiction, arguing that these novels cover the preoccupations and the techniques of much late-twentieth century fiction (Raphael 168).

A significant point may be gleaned from the survey of these mixed critical accounts: that is, the inclination of critics to rely on the fixed categories of realism, modernism and postmodernism, even in the categorisation of work as unique as Ishiguro's. This resistance towards inventing new nomenclature in literary criticism is not unusual however. As Waugh asserts: "British fiction in the middle years of the twentieth century seemed so immovable, so implacable, so resistant to the naming and identifying of distinctively new movements" (Waugh, "Precarious Voices: Moderns, Moods and Moving Epochs" 191). A phenomenon first observed by Brian Richardson in 1997, Richardson postulated that

modern literary history – particularly the history of twentieth century fiction – is regularly abbreviated to an all-too-simple tale comprising of these three main periodising terms (Richardson 291).

Zadie Smith and Dominic Head similarly share these sentiments. Echoing David Lodge's view in his influential essay "The Novelist at Crossroads", they both highlight separately that "debates about the novel [...] have sometimes failed to register the degree of vigour and vitality, rooted in diversity," resulting often in merely a simple division between realism and experimentalism when it comes to assessing which category British novels after the high modernist era should be placed (Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads* 5; Head 225; Smith 89). Whilst critical accounts such as Holmes' have attempted a "mixing and meshing" of various categories and other variegated terms such as surrealism and expressionism to extend and "pluralise the original holy trinity of modernism, realism and postmodernism" in

describing Ishiguro's works, these terms nonetheless remain “convenient reach-me-downs” (Waugh, “Precarious Voices: Moderns, Moods and Moving Epochs” 194). This pervasive sense of the difficulty in categorising Ishiguro's novels was interestingly felt early on even by critics who reviewed his early novels which that were typically considered as the more *realist* novels in his oeuvre. Iyer argues that as with Rushdie's, Okri's and Mo's writing, Ishiguro's novels share with these a quality of "being indefinable", prompting him to the question: "Where are Ishiguro's precedents?" (Iyer 56). There is consequently a prevailing sense of an original quality arising from the artistic sensibilities of Ishiguro's fiction that has not been yet adequately accounted for, resulting in a need for an alternative framework.

### 1.3 Notes on Terminology

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong per se with relying on periodising terms that are familiar to critics in the discourse of literary criticism to describe Ishiguro's novels. Nonetheless, much of the confusion surrounding the categorisation of these works arises from the lack of clarification of the terms and the meanings that they subsequently evoke. As with the terms novel and fictionality, periodising terms such as realism, modernism, postmodernism, and their meanings are often taken for granted as so obvious and “definitive” in themselves that most critics have “tacitly agreed to leave [them] unexamined” (Gallagher 336). As a result, Waugh argues that

literary critics have barely attempted to investigate what mood or affect or structure of feeling mean, in all their complex detail, as factors shaping appropriate descriptions of a movement or an epoch as articulated through literary artefacts (Waugh, “Precarious Voices: Moderns, Moods and Moving Epochs” 191).

In order to examine, in greater detail, the *structure of feeling* that Ishiguro's fictions uniquely convey as literary artefacts, I revert to a simplistic binary categorisation of the novels as a starting point, before turning to define the terminology I will use throughout the course of this study. I do this by placing them into two main categories as previous critics have done, and then, proceed to clarify what these respective terms might signify within the context of this study. Ishiguro's novels may be split into two initial categories, with the fourth novel (*UC*) serving as a division between the more realist novels (*PVOH*, *AFW*, *ROTD*) and the more irrealist novels (*WWWO* and *NLMG*). As this study is concerned with the different kinds of fictional story-worlds in Ishiguro's novels, the corresponding words “fictional reality”, “fictional truth”, “real”, “irreal”, “actuality” are terms to be defined along with “story-world”.

To begin with, I derive and use the term “storyworld” from the cognitive narratologist and literary critic David Herman's definition. This term is to be distinguished from “story”, a common term used by structuralist narratologists (Seymour Chatman, for instance) to designate “what happened” — referring to the matter of narrative presentation, as opposed to “discourse” — the manner in which what happened is recounted (Herman, *Story Logic* 13). “Storyworld” corresponds in part to the definition of “discourse”, but more saliently, Herman uses the term to better capture the “world-creating power of narrative” and what he calls “the ecology of narrative interpretation” (Herman, *Story Logic* 13). This ecological system comprises of

not just what happened, — who did what to or with whom, for how long, how often and in what order — but also the surrounding context or environment embedding existents, their attributes, and the actions



and events in which they are more or less centrally involved (Herman, *Story Logic* 13–14).

In other words, “storyworld” not only gestures towards the complexity of structures within narratives, but also the multiple, integrative cognitive processes that readers go through in their understanding of any particular narrative.<sup>15</sup> It follows then that the concept of “fictional reality” is crucial. I use this term to refer to the cognitive stance that the narrative enables the reader to form within his/her mind based on his/her understanding of complex structures within the narrative. This is achieved through a deictic shift — what modal logician and possible-world theorist Marie-Laure Ryan posits to be a gesture of “fictional recentering”, where a reader’s mind travels from the actual world in which we live (the center of system of reality) to the fictional, possible world that is projected by the text (one of the many satellite worlds that surround the Actual World). As a consequence of this mind travelling, the alternative, fictional world is “placed at the center of the conceptual universe” (Ryan 26). Here, “characters become real for us, and the world they live in momentarily takes the place of the actual world” (Ryan 21).<sup>16</sup> Taking on the ontological status of “actual” through this process of fictional recentering, these characters and the events that happen to them as recounted by the narrator thus becomes what is true of that world. In this sense, the term “fictional truth” is reserved for that which is true in the fictional world (“a proposition that is fictional is

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<sup>15</sup> According to Herman, “recipients do not just attempt to piece together bits of action into a linear timeline but furthermore try to measure the significance of the timeline that emerges against other possible courses of development in the world in which narrated occurrences take place” (Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* 14).

<sup>16</sup> Possible-world theorists posit that modally, reality as we know it is made out of a *system* that consists of the actual world we live in with many other alternative possible-worlds surrounding it. The Actual World is the world in which we are located, and there is absolutely only one actual world (Ryan 1).

known as fictional truth”) (Walton 35). The words real, actual and true are thus not to be confused or regarded as synonymous and interchangeable.

Further, the word “real” — not to be used in accordance with its normative denotation as detailed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “having an objective existence; actually, existing physically as a thing [...] not imaginary” — refers to the degree of verisimilitude in the narrative: the lifelikeness or believability of a work of fiction that enables writers to present fictionalised reality as plausible in the actual world we reside in. Significantly, the post-structuralist and French critic Roland Barthes and the novelist Henry James considered this promotion of the feeling of the real in literary fiction to be a textual device that Barthes termed “effet de réel” or reality-effect, or for James, “solidity of specification”, the means by which literary texts might appear realistic or reflections of the actual world (Barthes 145–47; H. James 66). In other words, verisimilitude is the illusion that proceedings in the novel could be real or possible, such that a sense of textual credibility is curated. This credibility in turn facilitates what Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined, a “willing suspension of disbelief”, which enables the reader to be initiated and immersed into the story-world seamlessly.

How does a fictional world come across as “possible” i.e. plausible, and therefore appear as real such that an attitude of suspension of disbelief may be facilitated? According to modal logicians, in order for this to happen, accessibility is consequently a necessary condition (Kripke qtd. in Ryan 31)<sup>17</sup>. To put it another way, the facilitation of the “suppression of our occurrent disbelief in the story” is highly dependent on what principles and properties of the Actual World the story world

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<sup>17</sup> The basis of this notion is Aristotelian. To recall Aristotle’s words in *Poetics*, “It is not the poet’s business to tell what happened, but the kind of things that would happen — what is possible according to probability and necessity” (Aristotle and Heath 9,2).

adheres or relates (G. Currie 8; Ryan 31). Analytic philosopher Kendall Walton refers to these as “conditional principles of generation”, which determines how probable and therefore accessible a story world is, and subsequently allows for the successful initiation into the “game of make-believe” (Walton 69). Here, Ryan’s typology of accessibility relations becomes relevant not only in explaining what some of these principles are, but also further expand and qualify the loaded term “realist” and its antonym “irrealist” further. The typology is as follows:

A = inventory of properties (Does the Textual Actual World and Actual World have the same properties?)

B = identity of inventory (Is the Textual Actual World and Actual World furnished by the same objects?)

C = compatibility of inventory (Does Textual Actual World's inventory include all the members of Actual World?)

D = chronological compatibility (Does it take a temporal relocation for a member of Actual World to contemplate the entire history of Textual Actual World?)

E = physical compatibility (Does Textual Actual World and Actual World share natural laws?)

F = taxonomic compatibility (Do both worlds contain the same species, and are these characterised by the same properties?)

G = logical compatibility (Do both worlds respect the modal logic principles of noncontradiction? i.e. a proposition must be true or false, and not both at the same time)

H = analytical compatibility (Do they share analytical truths? Do objects that share the same designation have the same essential

properties?)

I = linguistic compatibility (Is the language described in Textual Actual World understandable in the Actual World?) (Ryan 32–34).

Adhering to and departing from these different typologies will result in different degrees of realism or irrealism in the texts, which translates also into generic differences. In the most general sense, a text is fictionally “realist” when it contains a higher degree of verisimilitude, whereby elements A through to I are adhered to, with the exception of B being departed from. Contrarily, texts that are fictionally “irrealist” contain a lesser degree of verisimilitude, resulting in different configurations of the "real" depending on which accessibility relations are adhered to or severed in regard to the text in question. Ryan's range of accessibility relations, that results in an expansion of the meanings of “realist” and "irrealist", accordingly allows for a more specific categorisation of Ishiguro's novels that advances the initial simplistic categorisation slightly.<sup>18</sup>

*PVOH*, *AFW*, and *ROTD* may be considered under the genre of “realistic and historic” fiction, whereby A is maintained as far as logically possible, but B is replaced by C. This becomes obvious when we consider that the Textual Actual World of these four texts contains individuals – Etsuko Sheringham, Masuji Ono, Stevens, and Christopher Banks - all whom have no counterpart in the Actual World. The Actual World is thus made a subset of the Textual Actual World — “all the propositions true in Actual World are also true in TAW, but the propositions concerning individuals specific to Textual Actual World are indeterminate in Actual World” (Ryan 36). In the context of these four texts, the story-worlds of Japan,

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that these genre names are lifted from Ryan’s typology accordingly and are to be considered in this context and attended to as such, with all its other usual common meanings and attached connotations and further implications disregarded.

England, Shanghai seemingly share the same inventory and geography as the Actual World and are verisimilar in terms of historical time. On the other hand, *UC* would be considered as under the domain of “fantastic realism”, as it adheres to relations from D onwards but severs A, B, C, E, and F through the use of an indeterminate setting, a labyrinthine-like landscape where rules governing geographical distance are flouted, defiance of natural laws and taxonomy (for instance, Ryder is able to hear in on conversations from a distance and read other people's minds). *NLMG* would fall under the category of “science fiction”; the cloning and rearing of the clones of Hailsham respect mathematical and natural laws, which results in the keeping of E, F, G, H, and I, with all the other relations severed.

While Ryan's typology of accessibility relations has helped to clear some of the confusion over the categorisation of Ishiguro's novels, this preceding catalogue is anything but definitive. This notion becomes particularly salient when we further consider deeply about how these novels configure the quality of the real in their own ways. In the next section, I provide a brief survey of the ways in which different literary periods configured this quality of the real through directed techniques that spoke uniquely of the particular epoch that they were in, before turning to an examination of Ishiguro's early short stories. Through an elucidation of the artistic qualities of these early works, which I posit are qualities that are continually refined by Ishiguro and evolve throughout the trajectory of his oeuvre, I propose that Ishiguro's fictions take their place among these different epochs and their configurations of the real in a category I call axiomatic fiction. As axiomatic fictions, they are works that fundamentally point to themselves as self-evidently fiction(al), inasmuch as they strive to point also towards an alternative and immersive possible world in equal measure.

### 1.3.1 Ishiguro's Axiomatic Fiction: A Phenomenological Realism

Though I have used the word “realism” according to the definitions that have been laid out for its corresponding adjectives “realist” and “irrealist”, it remains a highly complex term that requires further explicating to further demarcate the parameters of this study. The point of this section is to not go into a full on debate on what realism is or is not, but rather, it is to highlight that realism is not as simplistic as it is often presupposed to be. Looking back on classic accounts of realism such as those of Ian Watt is to see how over-generalised and even reductionist they now seem, but accounts such as Watt's crucially established assumptions concerning realism against which later writers revolted, especially in the name of postmodernism.

Simplistically, in the context of literary criticism, realism is a term typically used by critics in two dominant ways. It is imperative to note that the following two definitions presented represent what might be called classical accounts of realism, as presented by critics such as Ian Watt. Realism is broadly established first of all to designate:

a movement in the writing of novels during the nineteenth century that included Honoré de Balzac in France, George Eliot in England, and William Dean Howells in America (Abrams and Harpham 334),

and secondly, to refer to “a recurrent mode [of literary mimesis], in various eras and literary forms” that pertain to the “representing of human life and experience in literature” (Abrams and Harpham 334). Or, more succinctly in Lodge's words, “[l]iterary realism [...] depicts the individual experience of a common phenomenal world” (Lodge 5). In other words, realism in the latter sense may be thought of as an intended effect that a novel seeks to bequeath upon readers, such that

it represents life and the social world [contemporaneous to time outside the text], [...] evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen (Abrams and Harpham 334).

This second definition of “realism” is precisely what the Hungarian philosopher and literary historian György Lukács refers to when he writes:

Realism is not one style amongst others, but rather, all writing must contain a certain degree of realism. All styles, even those seemingly most opposed to realism, originate in it, or are significantly related to it (Lukács qtd. in Boxall 15).

Within this context, realism, to paraphrase Lukács’ statement, is therefore one of the many modes by which the real is produced in fiction — that which enables the fictional story world to assume an air of reality and present itself as accessible for readerly immersion. More than that, the above quote highlights that the literary periods across history till the present are a reworking of the realist contract. At the most fundamental level, it may be argued that this contract is wrought and unwrought across literary time periods through a manipulation of the relations between surface and depth in their unique capturing and depicting of external and internal, introspective aspects of human experience.

In conventional modes of realism, those that began to develop in the eighteenth century, the real might be regarded as either reflective of the way the world is as an appearance or it might be premised upon the Platonic concept of mimesis – the imitation of pure reality (Plato’s ‘objective idealism’). To capture this sense of a higher external reality, fiction writers sought to hide the fictionality of their texts behind an effect or veil of verisimilitude. For the more detailed and

concrete seemed the storyworld and the characters, the greater the plausibility of the story. As Catherine Gallagher observes in “The Rise of Fictionality”,

the [realistic] novel [is a form] that [...] hide[s] its fictionality behind verisimilitude, [...] insisting on certain kinds of referentiality and even making extensive truth claims, [...] at once inventing [fictionality] as an ontological ground and placing severe constraints upon it  
(Gallagher 3).

To create the illusion that the novel is a mirror held up to reality, novels often adhered to the autobiographical “diary” format and favoured the use of the first-person narrator who was regarded as authentic if not infallible. The most influential example is Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). While written in the voice of the first-person narrator, the prose style that renders and conveys the (extra-)ordinary events that purportedly happened to Crusoe is reportorial and matter-of-fact so that it creates the illusion that reality is transparently available and objective; what the narrator observes of his or her external environment is reality and is therefore simply what we get.

As the social landscape in Britain changed with the advent of industrialisation, modernisation and commercialisation in the nineteenth century, so were the terms of this contract of the real altered accordingly. The novel that developed during the Victorian era created a more solidly realised realism that sought to build a consensual world out of the blending of different perspectives. As literary historian and writer Malcolm Bradbury notes,

its report grew ever more socially exploratory, analytic, scientific, attentive to the new laws of social evolution, the coming of new



classes and masses — and this was the tendency Zola called “Naturalism” (Bradbury 9).

Rather than shaping and presenting reality through the idealised frames of Romance or providential plotting, realistic fiction now sought to convey actual social conditions and “the very ordinary stuff of human experience” (Abrams and Harpham 334). Invested in the instruction of moral qualities in a time of rapid societal change, Victorian novels introduced third person omniscient narrators who possess authoritative voices that speak across the fictional storyworld and that of history and who narrate events that can be reconstituted into a chronological plot. The novels of Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, for instance, portrayed “realistically [...] the changing relations of poverty [...] explored religious duties, moral anxieties and social issues, told entertaining and moving stories” (Bradbury 13). Novels published during this period bore the recognition that an individual who experiences reality as is, is necessarily situated in a social environment that resides external to the introspective mind, and therefore artistic endeavours should prioritise the portrayal of this external environment through perceptual perspectives or narratorial description or dialogue, rather than the sustained interiority of private thought and feeling. It becomes thus easy to see how Watt conceived the notion in *The Rise of the Novel* that “modern realism [...] begins from the position that truth can be discovered through his senses [...] ha[ving] its origins in Descartes and Locke” (Watt 12).

What these traditional accounts of realism often neglect to highlight is that inasmuch as realist novels attempted to shield the notion of fictionality and irreality from their readers, novels written in those eras nonetheless evoked a sense that the story being told is not as transparent as it seems, and there is a sense of it being a

storyworld — being shaped, curated, an artifice — a central focus of later literary movements such as modernism and postmodernism. One prime example is none other than Defoe's novel. Even though critics consider this novel to be a "triumphant piece of verisimilitude", they have noted that Crusoe's journal presents inconsistencies and therefore instances of fictional irreality that are difficult to ignore (Hastings 161). For even though Crusoe admits that the idea of the journal came to him after ten days of inhabiting the island, he starts the journal on the date of his arrival. There is thus a sense that the events detailing his early days on the island are recalled from memory and imagination as well as perception. Most memorably, Crusoe, in Chapter 12, reveals that shortly after his fasting as a means of celebrating his one year on the island, runs out of ink and resolves to write only of the more remarkable events of his life, further undercutting the most fundamental premise of his narrative's verisimilitude, the reportage style of his journal. Other later examples include, for instance, the perfectly controlled opening to Eliot's *Middlemarch*, where the silhouette and beauty of Miss Brooke are compared to the figure of the Blessed Virgin in portraits done by Italian painters, highlighting an artificiality to her image or at least the attempt to convey it in prose. As such, it may be argued that while realist fiction is not invested in rendering fictional irreality and making it the central focus of its narrative (as is modernism or postmodernism), it nonetheless has a subtler awareness of the constructedness of the storyworld invoked than most critics would give credit for.

This notion is central to Ishiguro, whose novels undeniably incorporate realist techniques and present a less overtly fictional world than the postmodernist works of Borges, Calvino, Barth and Fowles, for example, albeit sharing common aims with these works — to reveal the complexities of fictional reality and thus of

fiction and reality themselves. In so doing, these works extend the possibilities of fiction and the novel in their potential to simultaneously evoke the contradictory states of reality and unreality within readers. Nobel Laureate and Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk phrases this eloquently in *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist* (2010):

to read a novel is to wonder constantly, even at moments when we lose ourselves most deeply in the book: how much of this is fantasy, and how much is real? A logical paradox exists between, on the one hand, the experience of losing oneself in the novel and naively thinking it is real, and, on the other, one's sentimental-reflective curiosity about the extent of fantasy it contains. But the inexhaustible power and vitality of the art of the novel stem from its unique logic and from its reliance on this type of conflict. Reading a novel means understanding the world via a non-Cartesian logic (Pamuk 205).

As this study progresses, it will become clear that Ishiguro's novels, which employ structures of *mise en abyme*, share with modernist novels their penchant for more experimental narrative forms that have abandoned "chronological plots, continuous narrative relayed by omniscient narrators, closed endings, unity of time and space" (Barry 79). Through the use of a highly unreliable, first person narrator, the novels also markedly portray that reality is shaped by the introspective "I" rather than an external entity that is "out-there" to grasp at, raising epistemological questions about fictional reality through accentuating the disconnect of the interior "I" with the reality external to it (Barry 79). His fictions place emphasis on *how* his narrators see rather than *what* his narrators' see, frequently also conflating these two experiences, bringing to mind the complexities that belie human imagination, perception and consequently emotional experience. Ishiguro's novels, also show themselves to be

deeply invested in the fabricating of worlds and configuration of fictional reality through being deeply intertwined with the enterprise and workings of memory. As such, they reveal, undeniably, a deep investment in subjectivism or the idea of worlds constituted experientially and a phenomenological sense of the mental and embodied constitution of the real. His later novels augment this further by turning to a combination of mild to moderate metafictional techniques, sharing with metafiction the aim of exhibiting “their own methods of construction [...] [to] not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, [but] also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (Waugh, *Metafiction 2*). While this is so, it is imperative to note however that this does not mean that Ishiguro’s novels can be considered as sufficiently metafiction, and therefore postmodernist literary works.

Ishiguro’s novels, I propose, are axiomatic fictions. On the spectrum that stretches from realism on the one hand, to postmodernism on the other, they may be placed somewhere between the movements of high modernism and postmodernism. In contradistinction to metafiction which focuses on an overt foregrounding of the artistic process of fiction to reveal the fictionality of the story world, axiomatic prose fiction aims towards an experimental, similarly self-conscious form that straddles the foregrounding of this artistic process in a more subtle, implicit manner. Instead of entirely rupturing the artistic semblance of verisimilitude and the real, these texts flaunt their fictionality through techniques that maintain the attention to the “otherness” quality of the story-world whilst facilitating an all-encompassing immersive experience in the reading of these texts. They are works that fundamentally point to themselves as self-evidently fictional inasmuch as they strive to also point to an alternative, possible world in equal measure. Rather than simply

the laying bare of fictional reality as constructed, or gesturing towards the possible fictional aspects of the actual world outside the text, axiomatic fiction alerts us to and retains fictionality at the forefront of our attention in order to reveal the ways in which fiction-making seems deeply interwoven with fundamental human cognitive capacities for world-making.<sup>19</sup> It is thus that I contend that Ishiguro's novels demonstrate through their axiomatic fictionality that the ability to make-believe and our propensity for the appreciation of art and confabulation are intertwined and are important aspects of the many core qualities that we possess that contribute tremendously to what it means to be a human being living in the contemporary, post-war world.

#### 1.4 “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness”: The Genesis of Axiomatic Fiction

In an interview with Sean Matthews, Ishiguro comments that as someone who does plenty of writing, he is not a very prolific writer, particularly considering the volume of what he actually writes, having published only seven novels since 1982 (Matthews 122). Some of these writings materialise in the short story form, and others, in the form of television scripts and plays, with a few of these being published.<sup>20</sup> In particular, Ishiguro highlights that he utilises the short story form as an experimental ground for some of the ideas that he has for his novels, experimenting with subject matter and themes he wishes to explore, before expanding these onto a larger scale in the novel form. These comments indicate the centrality of this formal aesthetic in relation to the rest of his fiction. Moreover, as

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<sup>19</sup> See: Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. 7. print, Hackett, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> A total of six individual short stories were published. The first three of these, “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness”, “Waiting for J” and “Getting Poisoned” were published in 1981 in *Introduction 7: Stories by New Writers* — an anthology series by Faber and Faber, that introduced and featured the works of promising writers. Two years later, “The Summer After the War” and “A Family Supper” appeared in *Granta 7* and *Firebird 2* respectively. In 2001, “A Village After Dark” appeared in *The New Yorker*. Ishiguro later published a short story collection, *Nocturnes: Five Short Stories of Music and Nightfall* in 2009.

Sim notes, “one salient feature of Ishiguro criticism is the paucity of attention to the work outside the novel genre-form” (Sim 90). Of the little attention accorded upon these two works (in comparison to significantly greater critical attention to his novelistic works), critics have often examined the ways in which these works provide “a useful window onto Ishiguro’s early attempts to deal with themes that would preoccupy his later work” (Viltos 178 qtd. in Shaffer, “Somewhere Just beneath the Surface of Things: Kazuo Ishiguro’s Short Fiction” 9). As such, these reasons make studying his short stories, and specifically, the earliest of these — “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” (1981) — a worthy endeavour.

In this section, I draw attention to the ways in which it anticipates and prefigures Ishiguro’s early novelistic works, dwelling on similarities and differences in terms of plot trajectories and thematic concerns. In so doing, I posit that “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” is more than an early sketch that represents or illuminates the genesis of his novelistic works. Rather, the raw but elaborate experiments with devices of memory showcase Ishiguro’s initial efforts in curating a *sui generis* way of reworking the contract of the real, or what is assumed to be primary reality. In so doing, I draw attention to the ways in which these techniques pan out in his novelistic works and reveal how his earlier and later works are more organically connected than is generally recognised.<sup>21</sup>

The interconnectedness in terms of plot trajectories, themes, and techniques sustained throughout Ishiguro’s oeuvre has led critics to consider “Strange” as primarily a sketch of his earlier novels. “Strange” features Michiko, a middle-aged Japanese widow, who resides in England. A visit from one of her two daughters,

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<sup>21</sup> Shaffer makes this same point, but relates this to an examination of Ishiguro’s two other short stories, “Waiting for J” and “A Village After Dark” and their representation of trauma.

Yasuko, stirs within her memories of the past, and in particular, that of a hometown friend whom she had named her daughter after. Although Michiko begins recounting the past with details of a difficult pregnancy when she was expecting Yasuko, her memories unravel to reveal her childhood days with her friend Yasuko in Nagasaki, a love interest they both share later in life, and her easy friendship with Yasuko's father Kinoshita-san. Intertwined with these emotional relationships are also events that "all took place during the last year of the war, during that hard dry summer" (Ishiguro, "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" 3, 14). As a result, the past that Michiko recounts largely surrounds the historic event of the dropping of the atomic bomb on her hometown, Nagasaki, and its aftermath and effects on her and her loved ones. Already, it is apparent that there are many similarities between this short story and Ishiguro's subsequent first novel in terms of plot and narrative structure. In *PVOH*, Etsuko replaces Michiko as the main protagonist. Like Michiko, she has two daughters — Keiko and Niki, the former being fully Japanese and ended her life by suicide, while the latter, who is Japanese-English, takes on the role of Yasuko. A visit from Niki stirs within her memories of an old friend and circumstances of the post war years; here, Sachiko succeeds Yasuko as the old friend that Etsuko centres her narrative around. Kinoshita-san is replaced by Ogata-san, who is not only a family friend of Etsuko's parents but also, Etsuko's father-in-law as she marries Jiro shortly after the war.

But as much as similarities, it is fruitful to dwell too on differences. One salient difference that arises between "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" and Ishiguro's first novel is that the short story makes more allusions to bombing incidents and the American bombing of Nagasaki that led to the end of the second world war than does the novel, which makes no explicit mention of it. In this sense,

as Sim has aptly observed, the short story is “in a sense the absent centre of the novel” (Sim 94). Furthermore, if these descriptions were “[things] that Ishiguro took out or rejected as an option for development in the longer work” (Sim 94), it may be argued that the artistic impetus behind involving something as monumental and earth shattering as the atomic bomb in this short story and his first and second novels may not be as straightforward as it seems. Indeed, it was hardly “the nuclear issue” that drove Ishiguro to set these works in his birthplace, Nagasaki. As he explains in an article in *The Guardian* in 1973:

For me, Nagasaki has never conjured up images of devastation and charred bodies. I was born in that city, nine years after the war, and [any] mention of [Nagasaki] brings to my mind fragmentary scenes from my early childhood -- the veranda of my grandfather’s house, a peeling film poster in an alley, a playground on a hot afternoon; I think of old colour slides and my mother’s recollections. It was the lure of these associations -- and not any interest in the nuclear issue - which first drew me to the writing of a [story] set in the Nagasaki of the early post-war years (subsequently published as [*PVOH*]). Before long, however, I found the atomic bomb, which fell on that city figuring larger and larger in everything I wrote. It [was hard not to believe] that the bomb would not have cast a heavy shadow over them (Ishiguro, “Bomb Culture” 9).

In other words, the inclusion of the atomic bomb was an unavoidable element in writing a story set in a city that had been largely devastated by it.

If the atomic bomb was not Ishiguro’s primary focus when he wrote the short story, it certainly helped his writing career gain traction at a time when the British



literary scene turned its interest on works with a global outlook (Ishiguro, “Bomb Culture” 9; Sim 95). *PVOH* and *AFW* gained “an easy kind of global significance”, due to the inclusion of a historical event that had impacted the whole world (Ishiguro, “Bomb Culture” 9). That Ishiguro was aware of this, and later still made the aesthetic decision to remove what little allusions he had made in the short story to the event in his later novelistic works, renders this aesthetic move all the more significant. It highlights the need to deviate from simplistic readings that consider these ‘Japanese’ works as trauma narratives invested solely in witnessing to the lived horrors of this event, and the subsequent traumas that plagued survivors. It is as though, with this aesthetic decision, Ishiguro signals to his readership not to accord too much significance to the subject of the atomic bomb in these texts: as with Michiko’s daughters’ lack of knowledge of their mother’s birthplace, Nagasaki is to be treated as simply “a place marked on the atlas, [Michiko’s and Ishiguro’s] hometown, a place where a bomb once dropped” (Ishiguro, “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” 2). Ishiguro’s own comments on the short story in an interview provide insight into what might be a more appropriate angle to adopt in reading his works which are set in Japan. Speaking to Sean Matthews, he reveals that he was principally devoted to the business of “pushing realism and finding alternatives to realism” (Matthews 248). These were concerns that he discussed with his mentor, Angela Carter, in the early days of their friendship and their discussions mainly revolved around:

how much one should satisfy realist concerns [...] how [to] move out of realism; how [one] is in a realist mode but perhaps not in a realist mode; what you could and couldn’t do, and to what extent an audience would follow you. To what extent it was okay to not satisfy

certain expectations, such as giving the back-story information (Matthews 248).

What is implied in this revelation here is Ishiguro's awareness for the need to reinvent a model of the real that is contemporaneous to this current epoch.

One of the ways in which these concerns manifest themselves in "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" is in Ishiguro's experimentalism with established devices for conveying memory, which he further developed in *PV OH*, and constantly refined and sustained in his subsequent novels. Framed through the multi-faceted prism of memory, "Strange" presents events in accordance with the way the unreliable, first person narrator recalls them and, in so doing, breaks up the convention of a chronological, linear timeline that guides the sequence of happenings, typical of traditional realist novels. In order to gain an understanding as to how this is not simply an ingenuous configuration of analepses and prolepses in narrative, it is first useful to gain a chronological understanding of the events that Michiko unravels on her trip down the memory lane. As aforementioned, Michiko's narrative begins with the recalling of a difficult pregnancy. The events that she recalls may be rearranged as follow (with the present time of the story world representing point Y on the timeline of the narrative; numerical numbers indicate the degree to which Michiko backtracks into the past; the higher the number, the further she backtracks into history):

Y: Michiko speaking from present time of narrative, recalling recounting her past to now grown up daughter, Yasuko, at the start of summer (three months ago)

(Y-1): Yasuko's three day visit at the start of the summer

(Y-2): The night her pain went away and she experienced a

supernatural force linking her daughter and her

(Y-3): Gave birth to Yasuko one year after arriving in England;

memories of Yasuko as a baby

(Y-4): Came to England, difficult pregnancy

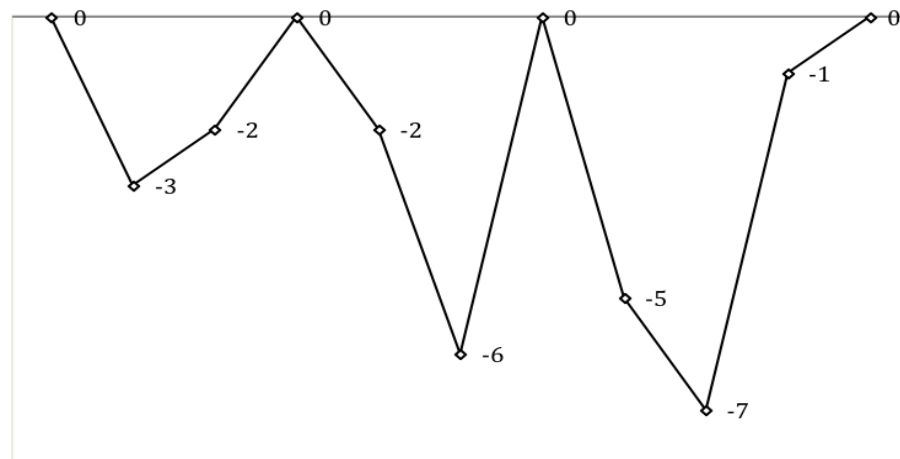
(Y-5): Nagasaki bombing, Yasuko's killed

(Y-6): Supernatural encounter in Shinkinggo Gardens with Yasuko

(Y-7): Childhood with Yasuko in Nagasaki

The complexity of this configuration of flashing backwards and forwards in narrative time is further unveiled when these events are once again rearranged in accordance to the way these events are recounted by Michiko. Adding a and p to indicate when an analepsis or a prolepsis is made, a historical timeline of the story would follow this sequence:

Y → a(Y-3) → p(Y-2) → p(Y) → a(Y-2) → a(Y-6) → p(Y) → a(Y-5)  
 → a(Y-7) → p(Y-1) → p(Y)



As a result of this highly complex structure of his narratives, they demand one's close attention; at the same time, their structuration alerts readers to the ways in which human memory is structurally similar to narrative itself and *is* narrative.

Yet Ishiguro manages to maintain the solidity of specification required for a fictional

work to come across as real through this very same device of memory. Despite the multiple prolepses and analepses, gaps and elisions that arise in Michiko's account of her past are explained away when one becomes aware that this is ironically the way memory works in real life: the past cannot be wholly remembered and only "a handful of scenes come back to [us] quite vividly" (Ishiguro, "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" 3). In spite of the disjointed, haphazard nature of memories and the ways these virtual events relate to each other sometimes by random associations, memory is often hardly felt to be so and instead exudes a sense of wholeness and order. This gives rise to the illusion that the past may therefore be surveyed, and some truth may therefore be accessible as a result of remembrance; but because memory is fluid and fallible, this truth becomes at the same time unverifiable. In this sense, through the device of memory, the text also demonstrates at the same time as it reminds readers that "reality" within the text and in our actual world is a product of what we manage to retain in our memories. What further complicates these notions, as can be glimpsed from "Strange", is that Michiko is, in fact, recounting her recounting of her past to her daughter, Yasuko, during the latter's visit at the "start of the summer" (Ishiguro, "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" 1). If art is twice removed from reality, as Plato has argued, it seems then that Michiko's narrative is at several removes from the reality of the events she recounts. Hence, not only does this complex configuration of narration through the device of memory remind readers of the highly constructed nature of human memory, it also brings to mind how memory is itself *narrative* and akin to *fiction*. Ishiguro's fictions therefore dissolve the contradiction between the experiential and the aesthetic in demonstrating that implicated in our experience of the world itself are these very aesthetic processes and elements.

This experimental effort in creating a narrative that incorporates within itself the texture of memory also results in direct impact on the characterisation of the first-person narrator: the indeterminate nature of the memory inevitably bequeaths upon its teller a heightened quality of unreliability. As Michiko herself admits, after a lengthy recall of her childhood with Yasuko, that “these things are years in the past now and there must be much [she has] forgotten” (Ishiguro, “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” 3). The specific events that she recounts are therefore that which make up reality, and this is a quality that binds Ishiguro’s fictions together: there is no distinguishing between *story* and *discourse* in these works — the story and the telling are conflated; they are one and the same. Michiko is the prototype of the unreliable narrator that later figures in all of Ishiguro’s novels -- this is a narrator that is afflicted with a certain degree of blindness due to the inability to see beyond their own repository of memories, imagination, and emotional experiences, and thus amplifying their ability to engage in self-deception. His fictions therefore construct themselves in opposition to the assumption, on which traditional realist fiction rests - - that is, to quote Lodge,

that there is a common phenomenal world that may be reliably described by the methods of empirical history, located where the private worlds that each individual creates and inhabits partially overlaps (Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* 50).

The resistance to this view is demonstrated in majority of Ishiguro’s novels through his reticent prose style.

In the next chapter, I assert that there is an eloquence in Ishiguro's prose that arises from the various absences curated by gaps, elisions, silences and the unsaid. This works together with the non-linear narrative structure of the novels, as well as

the literary devices of memory and unreliable narration, to render evident self-deception to be at the heart of the stories that Etsuko and Ono tell. Consequently, Ishiguro likewise renders axiomatic the fictionality of the narratives of the lives that his protagonists purport to have led and live.

CHAPTER TWO: ELOQUENT RETICENCE AND DECEPTIVE SELF-  
 PORTRAITS IN *A PALE VIEW OF HILLS* AND *AN ARTIST OF THE*  
*FLOATING WORLD*

Kazuo Ishiguro's prose style has, since his early novels, been recognised by critics unanimously as possessing eloquence by virtue of its reticence. The eloquence of his works is further demonstrated through his masterful employment of the techniques of understatement, ambiguity, and irony. Tensions, emotional intensity and various atmospheric effects are created through that which is left out, and in so doing Ishiguro curates a “language that hides, rather than language that gropes after something just beyond its diction” (Ishiguro et al. 51). The resultant effect is a highly controlled blank prose style that has earned itself the adjectives of tight, clipped, and controlled. A strong enigmatic sense that fictional truth about characters, their emotions, and happenings in the novel lie “somewhere just beneath the surface of things” is also often described by those familiar with his work (Ishiguro, “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” 21; Shaffer, “Somewhere Just beneath the Surface of Things: Kazuo Ishiguro’s Short Fiction” 10). Salman Rushdie perhaps aptly sums up the prevailing sentiment; in praise of the eloquence of *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Rushdie observes that “just below the understatement of the novel's surface is a turbulence as immense as it is slow” (Rushdie 244). Considering that *ROTD* is the novel that Ishiguro himself acknowledges as the culmination of his technical, experimental efforts from his first and second novels, Rushdie’s comment is thus also highly applicable to *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986). Indeed, Barry Lewis observes that in these two novels, Ishiguro's narrators are unhurried in their telling as they meander through the vagaries of memory. This in turn allows for pacing of the narrative to create “atmospheric

nuances” — qualities Ishiguro himself admires in the 1968 Japanese Nobel Prize winner Yasunari Kawabata’s plotless, slowly paced novels, *Snow Country* (1935) and *Thousand Cranes* (1955) (Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro* 19).

Despite these literary merits of Ishiguro’s early novels, there is still a prevailing tendency for critics to appropriate his racial-ethnic identity and Japanese/Eastern culture to account for the prose style, literary techniques and themes of his works. As Rebecca Karni observes, readers have “typically interpreted these narrative gaps, ambiguities, and *aporias* mimetically as representing [...] a cultural characteristic” (Karni 19). For instance, even though Gabriele Annan, like Rushdie and Lewis, posits that Ishiguro’s prose style is “accurate, unhurried, fastidious and noiseless [...] [such that] a hush seems to lie over it, compounded of the mystery of discretion”, Annan quickly attributes its “elegant bareness” as “inevitably remind[ing] one of Japanese painting” (Annan 1). In a similar vein, Anthony Thwaite also notices this mysterious quality produced by Ishiguro’s prose. Going a step further than Annan in that he describes this quality as an effect of the appropriation of Japanese art, Thwaite argues that Ishiguro’s prose curates an atmosphere that takes on the Japanese “quality of *yugen* — that is, a suggestive indefiniteness full of mystery and depth” (Thwaite 33). Another critic who has adopted a similar approach is Gregory Mason. In his essay on the influence of Japanese Cinema on *PVOH* and *AFW*, Mason identifies the intricately crafted mood in *PVOH* and *AFW* as akin to “*mono no aware*” (Mason 47). Translated as “the sadness of things” or “sensitivity to things”, it is an atmosphere typically found in the *shomin-geki* genre or domestic drama of Japanese cinema.<sup>22</sup> What it denotes is a

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<sup>22</sup> Ishiguro himself describes the *shomin-geki* as such: “a profound, respectable genre, and distinctively Japanese. It’s concerned with ordinary people in everyday life, and it has that sort of pace: a pace which reflects the monotony and melancholy of everyday life” (Tookey 34 qtd. in Mason



pervasive Japanese sensitivity to the deep poignancy that inhabits [...] objects, which embody or reflect life's transience — be they cherry blossoms, curling smoke, or any items of sentimental value (Mason 47).

Kana Oyabu places emphasis on the macro, extending the argument to address Eastern culture in general. For Oyabu, the taciturn narratorial voice in Ishiguro's early novels is reminiscent of Eastern metaphysics; contrary to the West, it offers a different representation of speech and silence, and consequently also differing meanings behind expression and non-expression, where "silence" is more empowering than "expression" (Oyabu 261 qtd. in Sim 106). In other words, whilst a larger picture concerning the artistic qualities of Ishiguro's prose is taken into consideration, Oyabu's argument merely advances the debate within similar confines.

These examples illustrate that even though there may admittedly be other aspects of the prose that critics touch upon in their discussion of *PVOH* and *AFW*, it is evident that reading these novels primarily through an "expressive-realist" lens seems to be the dominant approach. As Karni aptly posits, an "essentialist rhetoric thus characterises much critique of Ishiguro's works" (Karni 19). Going hand in hand with such an approach, as a consequence, is a focus on thematic content rather than the formal qualities of these works.<sup>23</sup> In response to such critical limitation, this chapter attempts to re-orientate discussion of the eloquence and reticence of *PVOH* and *AFW* by according greater attention to their formal and artistic qualities and will

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46). Mason also notes that "an elegaic mood often prevails in this genre, and certain images recur characteristically. Passing trains conjure a sense of dislocation and longing. This exoticism is offset, in turn, by an equally powerful domestic image on the landscape" (Mason 46).

<sup>23</sup> A case in point would be Cynthia F. Wong, who argues that Ishiguro's works are "eloquent expressions of people struggling with the silence of pain and the awkward stutters of confusion and loss". Her book length study, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (2000), examines "his subtle and ironic portrayals of people in 'emotional bereavement'" at the same time as it "situates Ishiguro as a 'new international novelist' by looking at his construction of personal and political histories".

examine these novels by drawing on concepts of eloquence, “lightness” and “exactitude” as put forth by Denis Donoghue, Louise Glück and Italo Calvino. In particular, I focus on the explication of one of the forms of eloquence — the unsaid (including *litote* or understatement) — and elucidate the ways in which Ishiguro harnesses the qualities of “lightness” and “exactitude” to augment its effects at both the levels of story (what is told) and discourse (how it is told) in *PVOH* and *AFW* respectively (Chatman 19).

### **2.1 Tellingly not Telling: Etsuko and Ono’s Reticence as an Eloquence of Least Means**

Under the gaze of a less discerning reader, the eloquence of Ishiguro’s first two novels is most likely to go unnoticed, particularly if one considers an eloquent event to consist primarily of “a flare of expression, an excess or superabundance of its qualities” (Donoghue 3). Narrated by Etsuko Sheringham and Masuji Ono, *PVOH* and *AFW* proceed at a slow, meandering pace as these two middle-aged protagonists weave in and out of the narratives’ past and present to take their respective trips down memory lane. Etsuko’s memory lane leads from England in the present to pre and post-WWII Nagasaki. The various landmarks that her mind turns over repeatedly are memories of her loved ones from these two distinct periods of her life. They are: her first daughter, Keiko, who took her own life shortly after their move to England; her second daughter, Niki, who has come to visit her in the country; her ex-husband, Jiro, and father-in-law, family friend, Ogata-san; and a mysterious mother-daughter duo Sachiko and Mariko, whose identities are never fully resolved. On the other hand, Ono’s route takes him across four periods: namely October 1948, April 1949, November 1949, and June 1950. The specific memories that he recollects in each of these periods are moments he spends tending to his house and garden, his

first daughter and grandson, Setsuko and Ichiro; the trajectory of his career as an artist; the Migi-Hidari, an old pleasure district; and his second daughter's Noriko's marriage negotiations. In no way either do Estuko and Ono give any indication that they are speaking of events of a spectacular nature. From these passages, it seems that there is none of the "thrilling [...] audacity" that an overt, "excessive" eloquence commands: neither Etsuko or Ono's voice or the story world takes on the qualities of the "prophetic, magical, [and/or] sublime" at any point (Donoghue 3). Their speech, full of reticence and hesitations, comes across as straightforwardly blank, bland, banal and mundane, like the events they speak of and the conversations they have with the other characters.

Commenting on this aspect of Ishiguro's prose, Rod Usher has gone as far as to claim that Ishiguro's prose style is "fascinatingly boring" (Usher 17). Usher's oxymoronic characterisation of Ishiguro's prose style may be read in two ways: firstly, that the reticence of the prose renders the narrative so bland that one is completely put off by it; secondly, that Ishiguro is fascinatingly good at his craft in making his novels bespeak the essential things that are beneath an emotionally distant, drained, and flattened prose. The first notion has been expressed by an early reviewer of *PVOH*. Despite declaring his admiration of the novel for its vague, enigmatic qualities, Paul Bailey nonetheless feels that "at some point [he] could have done with something as crude as a fact" (Bailey 183). The second notion is one that Usher himself endorses. Indeed, in "Disruption, Hesitation, Silence", the American poet Louise Glück speaks of a form of eloquence that is derived primarily from harnessing the prowess of the unsaid. For her, the unsaid,

exerts great power: [so much so that] often I wish that an entire poem  
may be written in this vocabulary. It is analogous to the unseen; for

example, to the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied: another time, a world in which they were whole, or were able to have been whole, is implied (Glück 74–75).

As one of the hallmarks of eloquence, the unsaid possesses the ability to allude to, and gesture towards, missing part(s) of a whole that remains to be glimpsed. It is therefore not mere silence that points towards radical absence or nothingness. It is also not that which is not said because there is nothing to say or reveal. Rather, the unsaid is a kind of silence that is eloquent inasmuch as it is deliberate. It possesses eloquence because of its commitment to absence(s) that paradoxically and inevitably point(s) to presence(s). Denis Donoghue refers therefore to this same form of eloquence as embodying the sense of “like something almost being said”. For Donoghue, the unsaid draws attention to the notion that what is being “said verbally is only part of what, in principle, might be said” (Donoghue 93). As the aforementioned critics in the previous section have pointed out, the eloquence of *PVOH* and *AFW* is “eloquence of least means, as in the shock of understatement, where one’s excitement arises from the surprise of finding something said so barely yet so definitely” (Donoghue 3). Silences and gaps may abound in both of these novels, but that does not necessarily mean that these works are completely silent on matters of significance.

The extent of understatement — what the novels say, and/or paradoxically gesture towards what they pointedly do not say — in Ishiguro’s prose may be gauged even in a short piece such as “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness”, the short story that preceded *PVOH*. By comparing descriptions that reference events and the

impact of war in “Strange”, *PVOH* and *AFW*, this section will provide insights into Ishiguro’s methods, into what Calvino refers to as “lightness” and “exactitude”, qualities so evident in the crafting of his prose. In contradistinction to the bold and direct treatment of this subject in “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness”, in *Pale*, Etsuko makes only three brief allusions to the bomb, and these are spoken about in an apathetic and almost sterile tone. In order to foreground the stark quality of descriptions and evocation of emotions in these works, I analyse two sample passages from the short story and the novel. In the first of these passages, Michiko recounts eavesdropping on a conversation shared between two men regarding a recent bombing incident when she “was on the tram going home”:

A lone plane, it seemed, had carried out an air-raid that evening, dropping a single bomb somewhere to the east of the city. [...] When the man left the tram, I noticed his shirt-sleeve flapping empty and useless. A chill went through me as I sat there in that car.

We talked about it, Yasuko and I, about the air-raid I had mistaken for hail [...] Yasuko had been nearer to the spot where the bomb had dropped, yet she had not even heard hail on the roof.

“It seems no one was hurt,” I said to her.

“I heard differently Michiko-Chan. One little boy was killed. A boy of four years old.”

“One bomb and one little boy gone,” I said, trying to sound matter-of-fact.

“No one else was hurt,” she continued, “and hardly anything damaged. But the little boy’s head was blown clean off him. They say his mother ran down the street holding his body, shouting for a doctor.”

I laughed a little. “I can imagine her, running and shouting for a doctor.”

Yasuko smiled, but her eyes were sad and empty. “Yes, she thought she must find a doctor quickly or her little boy might die” (Ishiguro, “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” 5–6).

Despite Michiko’s attempts to “sound matter-of-fact”, emotions are felt even as they are unspoken, surging through the dialogic exchange like a powerful current by virtue of Michiko’s visceral description of these events. The powerful images that come through are those of the man’s “shirt-sleeve flapping empty and useless”, and the boy’s head being “blown clean off him” (Ishiguro, “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” 5). This first image gains its poetic impetus through the clear and vivid image of a shirt sleeve flapping in the wind. This specific portion of the garment has lost its purpose — previously made to wrap around and clothe one’s arm, it can now no longer do that because that specific body part is gone. The focus of Michiko’s gaze on just this portion of the garment isolates the image perfectly and brings to mind the sense of loss; it is an acute reminder of that which once was and no longer is. Furthermore, the repetitive use of adjectives one after another — “empty” and “useless” that denote similar meanings — of being hollow, and having no purpose or value — further augments this sense of loss, hinting strongly of an irreversible absence (Ishiguro, “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” 5). The air raids not only take away parts of one’s bodies, but they also affect one’s ability to function to full potential. Consequently, this reinforces the emotional effect of the loss that Michiko feels. That Michiko “laughed a little” at the horribly and tragically ironic situation of the little boy’s mother who “ran down the street, holding his [already dead] body, shouting for a doctor” renders this portrait of loss even more poignant (Ishiguro, “A

Strange and Sometimes Sadness” 6). Michiko’s laugh itself is ironic, since the nature of the situation being spoken about is that of tragedy rather than comedy. Its inappropriateness proposes Michiko’s own inability to respond to the situation, which hints at her disbelief and inability to internalise the tragedy that has taken place. The laugh is also indicative of her way of coping with the shock and painful realisation that comes with seeing the tragedy for what it truly is: bombs arbitrarily taking away such young and innocent lives.

On the other hand, this passage, which is where Etsuko makes first mention of the war taking place around them, takes on an almost sterilised tone:

The worst days were over by then. American soldiers were as numerous as ever — for there was fighting in Korea — but in Nagasaki, after what had gone before, those were days of calm and relief. The world had a feeling of change about it.

My husband and I lived in an area to the east of the city, a short tram journey from the centre of town. A river ran near us, and I was once told that before the war a small village had grown up on the riverbank. But the bomb had fallen and afterwards all that remained were charred ruins. Rebuilding had got under way and in time four concrete buildings had been erected, each containing forty or so separate apartments. Of the four, our block had been built last and it marked the point where the rebuilding programme had come to a halt; between us and the river lay an expanse of wasteground, several acres of dried mud and ditches [...] From time to time officials were seen to be seen pacing out measurements or scribbling down notes, but the

months went by and nothing was done (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 11).

Commenting on the eloquence of this passage, Lewis has rightly pointed out that it is a wonderful paragraph, mainly because of its unwavering ordinariness. It reads almost as if it were an extract from an estate agent's memo. The devastation caused by the bomb is mentioned with the same equanimity as the fecklessness of the town-planning committee (Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro* 38).

In effect, Etsuko does not say anything about the “worse days” of the war, except that “they were [already] over by then” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 11). Unlike “Strange”, where Michiko blatantly speaks of the damage to human lives and the loss arising from these, in no way does Etsuko explicitly highlight the idea that lives were claimed by the war occurring around them. The entire occurrence of war and its accompanying events and impact on the lives of people living in Nagasaki is condensed into one single sentence: “the bomb had fallen and afterwards all that remained were charred ruins” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 11). Etsuko then moves the focus of the passage to material, non-living objects. Through speaking of a tram line, a river and a small village that nested on its riverbank, Etsuko masks the horror of the war by transposing an image of a peaceful, tranquil image of civilisation upon the mind's eye of the reader. Even though this was an image that occupied the landscape before the war, the lack of description of the war allows for this serene image to acquire a sense of immediacy and thus have a longer hold on consciousness. The focus in the passage is on material, non-living objects: the destruction of buildings and houses, but even this notion is condensed into two words: “charred ruins” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 11). Etsuko's overwhelming focus in



describing the rebuilding programme” suggests that these ruins are those of houses made out of brick and mortar, rather than homes that provided shelter for living beings made out of flesh and blood.

Similarly, in *AFW*, mentions of destruction and damage caused by the war and the bombing are transposed onto descriptions of non-living objects. In particular, Ono speaks of the destruction of the war through the damage that it inflicted on the residence he acquired:

The house had received its fair share of the war damage. Akira Sugimura had built an eastern wing to the house, comprising three large rooms, connected to the main body of the house by a long corridor running down one side of the garden. [...] The corridor was, in any case, one of the most appealing features of the house; in the afternoon, its entire length would be crossed by the lights and shades of the foliage outside, so that one felt one was walking through a garden tunnel. The bulk of the bomb damage had been to this section of the house, and as we surveyed it from the garden I could see Miss Sugimura was close to tears (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 11).

Again, as with the passage in *PVOH*, Ono evades talking about the war when he turns his attention to offering grandiose and majestic descriptions of the interiors of his residence. These take on a serene quality as Ono describes light that filters through the foliage and seeps through into the long corridor, transforming it into a “garden tunnel” (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 11). The colours in this scene — green, from the foliage, orange, from the glow of the afternoon sun — further heightens this sense of tranquillity and peacefulness. The dissociation from

the tragedy and its after effects is intensified as the entire fact of the matter is made to relate solely to Ono's perception that the previous mistress of the house is beset with misery due to losing this beautiful part of the building. Rather than offering a description of the lives of many others residing elsewhere in the city that may have succumbed to the bombing, the tragedy of the matter is contained and preserved within the the private interiors of the house, and misplaced onto the private emotions of Sugimura's daughter.

From these passages, it becomes clear that one of the ways in which Ishiguro's prose acquires its limpidity is through the employment of a simple, plain language that is unladen with excessive adjectives. As demonstrated in the three passages above, Ishiguro tends to use simple imagery whose effect is to project clear images that can be reconstructed with visual intensity in the mind's eye of the reader. The images that Ishiguro chooses exert emotional force because they are rid of excessive detail. For instance, in "Strange", the image of the man's shirt sleeve flapping in the wind is stunning by virtue of its simplicity: one is not told the colour of the shirt, whether it has prints, its texture, or whether the sleeve is short or long. In *PVOH*, one is not told the direction in which the river flows, its current, and what sort of small village once nested on its banks. Likewise in *AFW*, the details of the three large rooms and the long corridor are not specified. What occurs at the stylistic level of Ishiguro's prose is what Calvino has referred to as a "lightening of language whereby meaning is conveyed through a verbal texture that seems "weightless" (Calvino 16). By not overloading the reader with details, Ishiguro acquires a lightness in language through "a process in which subtle and imperceptible elements are at work" whereby these descriptions attain "a high degree of abstraction" (Calvino 17). This is a process that not only takes place at the level of individual

images and imagery that Ishiguro employs, but also at the level of setting and landscape.

A further and closer examination of the various details that Etsuko and Ono offer about their abodes supports this argument. In *PVOH* as with *AFW*, Etsuko and Ono do not speak of definite details outlining the setting and backdrops of the novels any more than that it is set in Nagasaki, Japan. The location of Etsuko and Ono's houses, as can be seen in the aforementioned quotations, are indeterminate. Etsuko lives in one of the units in a block of apartments that overlooks a wasteland, the river, and the little cottage by the river in the foreground of her line of sight, against the backdrop of a pale view of the hills of Inasa. One only knows where Ono's home is through a glimpse of its roof from "the bridge of hesitation" (a location that itself exemplifies the quality of vagueness); no other more specific identifiable traits are given about the roof of the house except for a stark image of this roof sitting in between "two ginkgo trees" (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 7). In other words, the Japanese settings of the novel merely curate the sense that these texts may be anchored in actuality, but, in fact, these have been entirely transposed into fictional settings through the narrators' reticence. As Mike Petry observes,

these and other descriptions of post-war Nagasaki are not to be understood as useful insights into an actual phase of history. They are filtered through [the respective narrators'] memory and how that filter works is the much more important issue that [these] novels [are] concerned with (Petry 29).

This calls for a revision of the preliminary categorisation of these novels according to Ryan's typology of accessibility relations: *PVOH* and *AFW* belong in the category of "realistic and historical" fiction that flouts the expectation that these geographical

locations in the Textual Actual World share the same actual geographical coordinates of Japan in the Actual World. Additionally, by being pointedly untelling, these novels paradoxically draw attention to the paucity of the details of their past that Etsuko and Ono supplies readers. In so doing, the limpidity of the prose paradoxically hints that there remains much to be unravelled.

## **2.2 Silences That Speak: Etsuko And Ono's Self-(Deceptive)Portraits**

How then, does Ishiguro's reticent and limpid prose come across as not merely silent, but as comprising silences that speak more eloquently than words? Revisiting the main central images in the quoted passages of *PVOH* and *AFW* might enable us to understand a little more about the aesthetics of Ishiguro's prose. Even though the images of the wasteground and Ono's residence figure at the start of the narrative, a reader soon realises that these are images that Etsuko and Ono repeatedly return to *ad infinitum* to the point of obsession in their narratives. Etsuko, for one, refers to this wasteground several times throughout the novel. She mentions seeing a large American car "bumping its way over it" twice (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 12, 156). The wasteground is also the backdrop for her multiple encounters with Mariko and walks with Sachiko (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 15, 39, 99, 172). Etsuko also mentions several times that the wasteground is not a pleasant place (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 11, 99). In *AFW*, on the other hand, Ono repeatedly returns to the image of his house such that most of the events that he recounts in the narrative are those of which occur in this residence.

In other words, one of the ways Ishiguro enables his reticent prose — which does not reveal much at the story level of these narratives — to speak, is through the narrators' repetitive and obsessive returns to specific imagery interspersed across the discourse level. This technique importantly contributes to the effect of stylistic

“lightness”. Through these repetitions, these images are transformed into “visual image[s] that acquire emblematic value” such that their meanings “are impressed” upon the reader “by their verbal implications, rather than by their actual words” (Calvino 17). Indeed, by constantly describing the wasteground in images that convey and connote its unpleasantness — “the earth lay dried and cracked”, “the ground bred all manner of insects”, “dried mud and ditches” — the wasteground harnesses emblematic value through cryptic hints that there is much more that causes it to be so unfruitful and unpleasant. Ken Eckert suggests that while ostensibly, it seems to be the poor drainage and mosquitoes that causes it to be so unpleasant,

the history of the abandoned space is never explained, suggesting the worst — that it was abandoned because of flattened buildings or dead bodies. The wasteground is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, signifying shards of a dead or morally discredited empire, but it also symbolises a past that is pushed down and continues to bubble up (Eckert 81).

The past that refuses to be laid to rest, the past that resists the reticence of Ishiguro’s narrators, is precisely the site of the atrocity of war that is never alluded to or spoken of. For Ono, it is later revealed that the house that he acquired from Sugimura was bought “for a nominal sum -- a figure probably not even half the property’s true value at that time” (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 7). This is not because he was an applicant “of good character and achievement” as he suggests, but rather, because of the fear-inducing effect of his association with Japanese militarism (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 8). By manipulating these elements at the discourse level of these narratives, Ishiguro thus renders apparent the self-deceptive aspects of Etsuko and Ono’s stories and thereby presents the story world of the

narrative in a highly relativised fashion. In the following sub sections, I consider, even more closely, the ways in which elements at the discourse level of each of these novels enable both narrators to paradoxically reveal — despite their seemingly transparent voices — that which they wish to hide through holding their silence.

### **2.2.1 Etsuko's Guilt: Doppelgänger Mothers in *A Pale View Of Hills***

Silences are pervasive in *Pale*, and the matter that Etsuko is most unreservedly silent about apart from the historical incident of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and its impact on her life, are the reasons she thinks are behind her firstborn, Keiko's death. Even though the details of Keiko's death are mentioned two pages into the novel, Etsuko supplies the details of her death through invoking a summary of what newspapers had reported on the specific incident:

Keiko, unlike Niki, was pure Japanese, and more than one newspaper was quick to pick up on this fact. The English are found of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide, as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was all they reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 10).

Even though Etsuko seems to express displeasure over the way the newspapers had reported Keiko's death — by attributing her suicide to her ethnicity as though being Japanese was enough reason for death by suicide — the irony of this passage lies in that Etsuko herself is completely silent about who Keiko was as a person, except that “she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 10). This is the most intriguing silence of *PVOH*, and it is the focus of this sub-section. I posit that Ishiguro transforms Etsuko's silence so that it speaks of her guilt as a mother by combining three elements that work in tandem with each other

at the discourse level: a narrative structure that coils deftly in and out of past and present, the use of a doppelgänger configuration, and the employment of repetitive imagery that Etsuko obsessively and repeatedly returns to in the telling of her past.

Following in the footsteps of “Strange”, Etsuko’s story begins in present narrative time, as she recalls a visit from her daughter Niki, who had paid her a visit earlier in the year “in April, when the days were still cold and drizzly” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 9). Etsuko, like Michiko in “Strange”, dives into the recent past from this point in present narrative time, only to move back and forth between different periods of time in her life, following where her memories lead her. In particular, Etsuko weaves in and out of the recent past of Niki’s visit and her present life in England, to a period of time marked by a friendship with a woman named Sachiko, and her daughter, Mariko, “one summer many years ago”, in Nagasaki (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 11). I have outlined in the introductory chapter that the prolepses and analepses that Ishiguro’s narrators make in their narratives are much more complex than they may appear. In *PVOH* however, this narrative is rendered even more complex through the use of a doppelgänger configuration, that is to say, the literary technique of doubling. As Lewis observes, the novel has an “extremely accomplished structure for a first novel. It tells two main stories, one of which is nested within the other” (Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro* 20). In order to glimpse the complexity of the *mise en abyme* of *PVOH*, it is therefore useful to begin by separating the two main strands of narrative, and in order to provide a chronological summary of the events, and then to turn to consider the ways in which events in the inner frame story are braided with the outer narrative.

The outer frame of the narrative is present narrative time set in England, and Etsuko is a Japanese widow who lives in a country house alone. She recalls a visit

from her second daughter Niki, who travelled from London to stay with her for a few days a few months ago. Both of them struggle in their attempts to come to terms with the recent death and suicide of a family member, Keiko, who had hung herself in her room in Manchester. Etsuko and Niki spend time sitting and standing in front of the windows facing the garden of the English house; it is where they have their conversations and it is through these that Etsuko recounts much of the inner frame story to Niki. Over the course of Niki's stay, the pair make frequent trips to the park. On one of these walks, they meet Mrs Waters, a past family acquaintance; when she asks after Keiko, Etsuko hides the truth about Keiko's death from her (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 50–52). Etsuko also speaks of recurring dreams about a little girl that she and Niki had watched playing in the park on the second day of Niki's visit. But the dream takes on a more sinister quality as the narrative progresses, as it wakes Etsuko up in the small hours of the night on the fourth day of Niki's visit (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 53–54). This eeriness is heightened as Etsuko follows up with an image of Keiko hanging for days on end in her room in Manchester after mentioning her dream about the girl they watched playing on the swing in the park (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 54). The house too takes on an increasingly sinister atmosphere, as both mother and daughter each experience a frightening moment in regards to hearing sounds, real or imagined, coming out from Keiko's room on the fifth day of Niki's visit (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 88). The tension that comes with the running themes of ghosts and suicide finally subsides, with Etsuko and Niki having a conversation of how Niki's friend admires Etsuko for her courage in leaving her life in Japan to come to live in England (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 176–77). Niki also briefly accords blame for Keiko's death to Niki's father, Mr Sheringham. This outer frame finally ends with Etsuko dwelling on the matter of



selling the house. On the other hand, in the inner dimension of the story world, Etsuko, heavily pregnant with Keiko, finds her family and herself attempting to rebuild their lives after the war. She lives with Jiro, her first husband, who is also Japanese, in one of the units in a rebuilding project. During the course of this fateful summer, Etsuko befriends Sachiko, and subsequently gets to know her daughter Mariko. Etsuko recalls encounters with Sachiko where she shows concern over Mariko, the first of which involves her telling Sachiko that Mariko seems to have been in a fight and subsequently, asking after the girl's education and wellbeing when Sachiko speaks of moving to America with her lover, Frank. Etsuko also recalls an outing with Sachiko and Mariko to the hills of Inasa, a day which she describes as one of her happier memories of her time in Nagasaki (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 103).

As evident from these outlines, the themes that run through the outer frame story are those pertaining to suicide, recent and earlier, unpleasant memories as well as ghosts that haunt from the traumatising past. Similar themes likewise run within the inner frame of the narrative: there is an eerie woman who Mariko constantly alludes to seeing, and a series of child murders that Etsuko speak of as happening in the neighbourhood. In order for a more streamlined discussion, it is worth focusing on the specific images between inner and outer frame narratives that Etsuko constantly revisits that are of similar nature. Two of the most striking images from the outer frame narrative that Etsuko constantly ponders are the images of Keiko hanging from the ceiling in her room for days on end, and the image of the little girl on the swing that she and Niki had watched playing during their visit to the park (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 47, 54, 96). The two images that find resonance with these in the inner frame narrative are that of the rope that Mariko constantly suggests

is tied around Etsuko's foot during their encounters with each other, as well as the images of hanging children from trees (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 83–84, 100, 156). Of all of these images, it is most appropriate to begin with the image of Keiko's suicide, given that the focus of this section is devoted to finding out more about the circumstances surrounding it. On the matter, Etsuko says:

I never saw Keiko's room in Manchester, the room in which she died. It may seem morbid of a mother to have such thoughts, but on hearing of her suicide, the first thought that ran through my mind — before I registered even the shock — was to wonder how long she had been there like that before they had found her [...] I have found myself continually bringing to mind that picture — of my daughter hanging in her room for days on end. The horror of the image has never diminished, but it has long ceased to be a morbid matter; as with a wound on one's own body, it is possible to develop an intimacy with the most disturbing of things (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 54).

Even though Etsuko believes that the matter of Keiko's death has “ceased to be a morbid matter”, her words suggest otherwise. Her admission that this is an image that she brings “continually to her mind” reflects that of its unwaveringness and refusal to leave her consciousness. By calling it “a wound on one's own body” and by suggesting that it is possible to develop “intimacy” with it, Etsuko's words itself bespeak the very definition of trauma itself. As Cathy Caruth notes, trauma is the

repeated infliction of a wound [...] referring to an injury inflicted on a body. In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term trauma is

understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind  
(Caruth 3).

Despite her reticence, the underpinnings of her words on the issue suggest that she is obviously haunted by this image of Keiko's death, despite what she asserts to be the case.

With this revelation, it is now apt to consider the rest of the images that she ponders upon, and these too may be understood as different iterations and echoes of the matter of Keiko's suicide. For trauma, as Caruth posits,

describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearances of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (Caruth 11).

Etsuko does not hallucinate, but she does have recurring dreams that are so disturbing they cause her to rouse from her sleep in the small hours of the night. Even though she repeatedly asserts that she doubts "even then as to [the dream's] innocence" when she first had it, she insists that "the dream had to do not so much with the little girl" at the park but rather to do with her "recalling Sachiko a few days ago" (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 54). Yet her recalling of the event of Keiko's death is that which precedes this assertion, and the sequence of which the images appear thus casts doubt once again on the truthfulness of her narrative. By ordering the images in this manner, the narrative suggests that, contrary to what Etsuko posits again, her dreams have everything to do with Keiko's suicide. Besides, there is an instance in the inner frame narrative where she goes through something similar to the experience of what Caruth posits of traumatic recall: "with no apparent provocation, that chilling image intruded into my thoughts, and I came away from the window

with a troubled feeling” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 157). The chilling image that Etsuko refers to is “the tragedy of the little girl found hanging from a tree” which “much more so than earlier child murders — had made a shocked impression on the neighbourhood” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 157). This image subsequently causes Etsuko to rush out of the house in search of Mariko to ensure and ascertain her safety. Considering also, Etsuko’s previous revelation to Niki at the end of Part I of the novel, that “the little girl isn’t on a swing at all”, “it seemed like that at first”, “but it’s not a swing she’s on” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 96), the narrative seems to confirm that these different images of swings and of hanging, are all similarly related to Keiko in spite of what Etsuko claims. Her daughter’s death was evidently a traumatic event for her, and like all trauma, is indicative of her inability to fully comprehend and internalise what has happened. There is also the possibility that Etsuko is not only befuddled by Keiko’s suicide, but also blames herself for what has happened.

The official account of where the blame lies, according to Niki, is that Niki’s father, who was not Keiko’s “real father”, “should have looked after her a bit more [...] he ignored her most of the time. It wasn’t fair really” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 175). Even though Etsuko offers this information for consideration as one of the plausible reasons for the tragedy, the doppelgänger configuration of various women in the narrative suggests otherwise. This notion becomes even more apparent taking into consideration that Etsuko’s encounters with Mariko take on an increasingly troubling and eerie quality as the narrative advances. Even though the first encounter with Mariko seems fairly neutral, the second instance onwards takes on a disturbing quality, presenting the moment as a case of mistaken identity. Etsuko recalls speaking to Mariko near the riverbank, but in her second encounter with

Mariko, the child tells Sachiko that a woman across the river — who she insists adamantly twice, as not being Etsuko — invited her back to her home. When Etsuko tries to correct her that Etsuko was the woman that the child met, Mariko alludes to another woman who had visited her when her mother was away from the cottage (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 18–20). Mariko’s insistence puzzles Etsuko, and when asked, Sachiko dismisses Mariko’s assertions as make-believe: “a little game Mariko likes to play when she means to be difficult” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 43). However, this first mention of the presence of another woman apart from Sachiko and Etsuko burgeons into multiple doppelgänger configurations, as Sachiko later changes the story and alludes to two other women that she and her daughter encountered when they were living in Tokyo (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 73). One of them is a deranged mother who slits her throat and drowns her own baby in a river, and the other is a woman who Mariko believes to have been staring at the mother-daughter pair when they took shelter in an abandoned building shortly after the infanticide encounter (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 74–75). The doubling technique takes on another level of complexity as Sachiko enacts the infanticide scene by attempting to drowning Mariko’s kittens in the river. In no way does the narrative confirm each and every one of these women’s existences as real, but these images of deranged, selfish, murderous, and uncaring profiles are superimposed upon each other, creating a portrait of a mother who is pictured as vile.

The novel alludes to this portrait as belonging to Etsuko by allowing two points of the outer and inner frame narrative to come together. This only happens twice, resulting in further instability in the version of fictional truth that Etsuko recounts. Towards the end of the inner frame tale, Etsuko once again encounters Mariko by the riverbank as the little girl has run out of the cottage. Everything about

the scene is familiar, since this imagery is that which Etsuko has repeatedly returned to throughout the course of her recounting. The exception lies in the fact that this time, Mariko voices her displeasure towards a man who “pisses like a pig” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 172). Recalling that the child has referred to Sachiko’s lover, Frank, in this manner before, one is led to think that she is likewise referring again to her mother’s lover. Except, Etsuko responds unusually; coaxing the child, she tells her “if you don’t like it there, *we* can always come back” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 173).<sup>24</sup> All of these different superimpositions of women, an insecure mother (Etsuko), a deranged mother (the ‘other’ woman), and a selfish, self-serving mother (Sachiko) culminates with the conflation of the pronouns “I” (as in Etsuko) and “you” (as in Mariko) into *we*. The two strands of the narrative come together again, point for point, in the scene where Etsuko hands over a picture from an old calendar of “a view of the harbour in Nagasaki” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 182):

“What was special about it?” said Niki.

“Special?”

“About the day you spent at the harbour.”

“Oh, there was nothing special about it. I was just remembering it, that’s all. Keiko was happy that day. We rode on the cable-cars” [...]

“It’s just a happy memory, that’s all” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 182).

Where previously the different identities of the other women were conflated, this time, the two different sets of mother-daughter duos are conflated. Keiko and Mariko are superimposed on top of one another, giving rise to the fictional possibility that

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<sup>24</sup> Italics and emphasis, mine.

they are one and the same. The enigmatic identities, like the presence of the other women in the narrative, are never truly resolved. But the conflation of the outer and inner strands of Etsuko's narrative, coupled with the *doppelgänger* of different types of mothers, as well as Etsuko's obsessive return to the imagery of the rope, the swing, and the movement of hanging, is enough in offering a myriad of possibilities to alternative accounts of the fictional reality Etsuko speaks of. As Petry argues,

too many things resemble each other, and precisely because of this, *PVOH* withdraws itself from an interpretation that aims at a final truth. Yet it is precisely this kind of mirroring and projecting of images that makes this novel a successful piece of writing and an extremely satisfying read (Petry 53).

Etsuko's self-portrait is multi-faceted, and the materials she employs are her feelings of guilt towards Keiko, and an evasion of the shame that accompanies her complex feelings. There are competing versions of the kind of mother she is to Keiko, as well as competing interpretations as to why Keiko took her life. To its very end, the novel remains silent on what might be the most accurate version of fictional truth. But its *mise en abyme* structure reveals the different, contradictory even, but nonetheless plausible versions of the person of Etsuko: she is altogether and at once a good, insecure, deranged, uncaring and selfish mother, and the reasons behind Keiko's death shift in accordance with which part of her portrait is illuminated.

### **2.2.2 Ono's Shame: An Artist's Use of Chiaroscuro in the Floating World of Memory**

Etsuko of *PVOH* is the first Ishiguro prototype of an unreliable, first person narrator, who, through narrating her past, attempts to reconstruct it, and/so to justify her past actions. The main strategy of the narrative, as Ishiguro himself reveals, is

that of “how someone ends up talking about things they cannot face directly through other people’s stories” (Ishiguro et al. 5). By utilising the overt technique of conflating the *mise en abyme* structure of the novel, resulting in what David Lodge has termed “narrative short circuit”, Ishiguro reveals the palimpsestic qualities of Etsuko’s narrative, unveiling the multiple levels of self-deception beneath it (Erhard Reckwitz qtd. in Petry 51). Indeed, Ishiguro admits he “was trying to explore that type of language, how people use the language of self-deception and self-protection” (Ishiguro et al. 5). This sentiment that self-deception is an inherent aspect of human sensibility and nature is one that the painter Masuji Ono, the main protagonist of *AFW*, also expresses.

Ono addresses this topic most directly in the passage where he discusses Yasunari Nakahara’s — whom he also affectionately calls “the Tortoise” — self-portrait. Assessing the degree of truthfulness in Nakahara’s portrayal of himself in his self-portrait, Ono highlights that there is a unavoidable pitfall when artists paint their self-portraits:

I cannot recall any colleague who could paint a self-portrait with absolute honesty; however accurately one may fill in the surface details of one’s mirror reflection, the personality represented rarely comes near the truth as others would see it (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 67).

In other words, Ono is saying that there is a tendency for artists to engage in a little self-deception, as they paint their self-portraits, projecting an idealised, rather than accurate representation of themselves. But Ono’s comments are particularly intriguing, because they display self-reflexive tendencies in more than the ways just mentioned. On top of echoing Ishiguro’s own thoughts on self-deception as intrinsic



to human nature, they can be taken to offer specific directions for reading the novel. His remarks bring to the forefront of the reader's attention that he, like the Tortoise, is engaging in the practice of self-portrait, except in another medium. Ono's remarks also highlight that no matter how realistic or plausible a painter's self-portrait may come across, it is nonetheless made up, fictional; there is always a delicate balance of the real/unreal at play. He may just be like Ishiguro's first narrator, Etsuko, who engages in "a little game of make-believe" in the telling of her story. Yet, the way in which fictional truth is revealed to be highly manipulated and distorted by the narrators' delusions and confabulatory efforts differs significantly from *PVOH* to *AFW*. In this sense, the art of self-portraiture — which is essentially concerned with the exploration and portrayal of the self that may be re-presented as an image for another to ponder — has much in common with literary works of art. Bearing in mind Ishiguro's desire to write a novel that is distinctly different from other "forms" such as "cinema and television" (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* x), an exploration of the ways in which *AFW* shares similarities as well as differentiates itself from other forms of artistic mediums is appropriate.

In this sub-section, I highlight that as well as the qualities of lightness and exactitude, Ono's prose also acquires its eloquence due to the dual function of a language that portrays an ostensibly transparent storyworld that is simultaneously and systematically being undermined by Ono's hesitations, digressions and inconsistencies at the story level of the narrative. Working at the formal or discourse level of the narrative, I propose, is the technique of chiaroscuro which serves to further reveal the unreality — i.e. fictional quality — of the self-portrait Ono has drawn of himself. In so doing, *AFW* demonstrates that the uniqueness of the novel lies not only in its multifariousness in terms of form, but its ability to extend the

potency of these techniques.

To grasp the eloquence of Ono's narrative curated by the elements of lightness and exactitude, the reader only has to return to Ono's description of the Tortoise's portrait. According to Ono, the Tortoise has drawn himself as:

a thin young man with spectacles, sitting in his shirt-sleeves in a cramped, shadowy room, surrounded by easels and rickety furniture, his face caught on one sight of the lighting coming from the window. The earnestness and timidity written on the face are certainly true to the man I remember, and in this respect, the Tortoise has been remarkably honest; looking at the portrait, you would probably take him to be the sort you could confidently elbow aside for an empty tram seat [...] if the Tortoise's modesty forbade him to disguise his timid nature, it did not prevent him attributing to himself a kind of lofty intellectual air – which I for one have no recollection of (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 67).

This passage is, to my mind, remarkable for a few more reasons. Firstly, there is that clarity and limpidity in Ono's words as his diction paints a vague yet immediate image of "the Tortoise" in one's consciousness — an evident quality of Ishiguro's prose already highlighted. Ono does not offer any description regarding facial features of the Tortoise that would actually allow one to fill in a more exact sketch of his face. He also does not offer information about the colours that the Tortoise employed in the painting of the Tortoise's self-portrait. Rather, what he offers only, are outlines of his face, and accompanying these are interpretations of what Ono himself perceives and makes of the portrait. These together enable the portrait to produce a superficial sense of exactness and thereby allow for a projection of an

immediate image of the Tortoise in a reader's mind's eye. By withholding other potentially important information about the self-portrait that may enable the reader to arrive at his/her own conclusion in regards to the Tortoise's personality, Ono further compounds the force and influence of his view by deliberately not offering analysis of the more important aspects of the self-portrait: the lighting, objects, and colours. This gives a sense of the potency of Ono's narrative in its ability to shape the reader's perception and consequently understanding of events in *AFW*.

But it is common knowledge surely, lighting, objects and colours in an artist's self-portraiture convey important information that may allow the viewer to attain a more accurate interpretation of the work. As with a literary work of art, these elements serve as different layers of meaning to be deciphered. Ono describes only one aspect of the painting, offering the reader a thin sketch of the Tortoise, despite/or resulting in the clarity of the image projected in the reader's and his interlocutor's mind's eye. Ono's comments are insightful; to his knowledge, he claims, there are two fundamental levels of meaning in an artist's self-portrait. The first level of meaning is produced by the way that the artist desires to be seen by the perceiver of the portrait, and what he believes to be true about himself. This leads the artist to curate his portrait to exude a particular mood: accordingly, that which will convey what he believes to be representative of himself. On another level of meaning, the perceiver in possession of "insider" information, sees through the artist's antics, and understands that there is more or less to "the personality represented" in the painting (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 67).

Transposing these insights onto *AFW*, the first level of meaning in Ono's narrative is easily derived from what Ono tells the reader. He portrays himself as an honourable figure of certain societal standing and importance. He does this through

sketching, in great detail, his career trajectory: an aspiring artist who became an artist of the floating world, in spite of vehement objections from his father, eventually becoming someone who “rises above the sway of things”, leaving his first two mentors, as he subsequently takes on the very important role of an artist who paints propagandistic and nationalistic artwork for Japan. Ono definitely comes across as being proud of the way he has lived his life, for he speaks with an air of someone who has believed he has accomplished great things in his life. This is evident when we consider what he says about his retirement:

it is one of the enjoyments of retirement that you are able to drift through the day at your own pace, easy in the knowledge that you have put hard work and achievement behind you (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 40).

In no obvious sense therefore, does Ono directly give away that these assertions are part of a confabulatory effort, and are not grounded in that which is real.

Moreover, the realistic quality of Ono’s account is further accentuated by his providing concrete descriptions of major events, demonstrating his great attention to detail. It is in this manner that the reader may be further misled to consider his narrative as realistic and therefore truthful. Lewis has observed that like *PVOH*, *AFW* “is grounded in an accurate environment historically”; the proof that he cites is the description of the *miai* as the family plans for her wedding (Lewis 51). True to an aspect of this tradition in Japan in the actual world outside of the text, Ono worries about the prospective family hiring a private investigator who may look into his past.<sup>25</sup> Coupled with the use of historically verifiable details, the novel also employs the use of the technique of chiaroscuro to further augment its realistic-ness. Ono

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<sup>25</sup> According to Lewis, “it is traditional for those involved in a possible matrimonial match to hire private investigators to assess the credentials of the couple concerned and their families” (Lewis 51).

frequently speaks of lighting in the various scenes he recalls, which can serve to evoke or enhance particular moods within the reader. In so doing, he persuades the reader to receive the narrative as it is intended. Some of these scenes come across as possessing great dramatic force, such that the happenings that Ono recounts seem to be enacted on stage, as a kind of performance.

One of the most dramatic scenes in the novel features Ono and his father in the reception room of his father's abode, "the room [...] lit by a single tall candle [...] in the centre of the floor" (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 41). Because of the single naked flame in a very dark room, Ono recounts that "the brightness of the candle would put the rest of the room into shadow" and therefore, "only vaguely would I be able to discern past my father's shoulder the Buddhist altar by the far wall" (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 42). The lighting in this scene accentuates the proportions of his father, making him seem much bigger than Ono. Besides, that there is a figure of divinity that frames this already amplified perspective of the figure of his father, renders all the more obvious the feelings of intimidation Ono might have felt in being in that room with him. Hence, when Ono realises that the "smell of burning around the house" can only imply that his father had destroyed his paintings, his declaration to his mother that "the only thing Father's succeeded in kindling is my ambition" allows him to paint a more convincing picture of himself as strong-willed, resilient, and resolved. In so doing, Ono adds on to his resumé of honourable, patriotic painter.

Ono's exposé, however, comes in the form of his hesitations, digressions and inconsistencies at the story level of the narrative. Ono mixes up conversations exchanged with other characters in the novel. In one instance, he posits that it is Miyake, Noriko's previous prospective marriage partner, who has made the remark

that “it’s a cowardice that [...] men [who led Japan to war and casualty] refuse to admit to their mistakes [...] it must be the greatest cowardice of all” (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 56). But shortly after, he backtracks on his claim and corrects his memory, though not definitively:

Perhaps I am getting his words confused with the sort of thing Suichi will come out and say. It is quite possible; I had after all come to regard Miyake as my prospective son-in-law, and I may indeed have somehow associated him with my actual son-in-law (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 56).

Whether these are Suichi/Miyake’s words the narrative does not ultimately make clear, but they illuminate a fundamental sense of fictional irreality to the events and dialogues Ono recalls. This sense of fictional irreality is further accentuated when further discrepancies arise in the narrative through dialogues with other characters. This is especially in instances where the character Ono is conversing with reveals something unexpected or contrary to the image Ono has been building up for himself. One of the most striking examples come in the form of Ono’s encounter with Enchi, his ex-pupil Kuroda’s mentee during Ono’s visits to old acquaintances to inform them of possible visitations from investigators due to Noriko’s marriage. Enchi reveals that Ono played a significant role in Kuroda’s suffering and imprisonment after being apprehended by authorities for painting works that were considered to be “offensive material” and “unpatriotic trash”. This revelation is only later confirmed by Ono:

I had no idea [...] something like this would happen. I merely suggested to the committee that someone come around and give Mr Kuroda a talking-to for his own good” (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the*

*Floating World* 183).

But Ono's denial that he was ignorant of what would follow after his alerting the authorities about Kuroda is hardly believable when the reader considers this: he was then "a member of the Cultural Committee of the Interior Department [and] an official adviser to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities" (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 182). These slip ups in his narrative render evident the extent of the unreliability of (his) memory, and therefore, the fictionality of it all.

Ono's own confirmation of Enchi's version of fictional truth only comes after much digression. Indeed, Ono frequently digresses from the actual point that he wants to make. From the beginning of his narrative in the section "November 1949", he sets out to "recall the events of the day last month when Setsuko was down on her short visit" but he beats around the bush for over fifty pages before speaking of the specific conversation they shared (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 132, 184). When Ono finally gets to this conversation with Setsuko, it is revealed that the family "was extremely puzzled by Father's behaviour [at Noriko's *miai*], where Ono had apologised for what he believed to be misendeavours in his career as a nationalistic painter (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 191). Ono expresses surprise at Setsuko's claim that "no one was at all sure what Father meant by it all", as he believed that "it was [Setsuko] who suggested [he] take 'precautionary steps' so that [they] didn't slip up with the Saitos as [they] did with the Miyakes" (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 191). The discrepancy arises out of Ono's misremembering, and the novel hints at this as a deliberate effort to misremember — a self-protective measure that allows Ono to maintain his delusionary beliefs that shields him from the complex feelings of guilt (towards Kuroda and others like him) and shame (for living a life that is not as honourable as he had hoped it to be).

Ono tries hard to keep this part of his portrait in the shadows: contrary to what Setsuko claims of him as just “a painter” whose “work had hardly to do with these larger matters of which we were speaking”, he “was a great painter” that served the country in a tremendous way (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 193). In spite of these inaccuracies in his narrative, Ono is accurate about one thing: “I have never at any point in my life been very aware of my own social standing” — indeed, Ono is in the dark concerning these matters; he is unable to see that as a painter, he is not held in such “high esteem” as he reckons (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 19). Setsuko tries to illuminate his vision by refocusing his degree of responsibility in the war: she tells him that he should not consider himself and his paintings as on par with “Mr Naguchi [...] whose songs came to have enormous prevalence at every level of the war effort” (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 192). But her comments fall on deaf ears, as Ono continues to practice selective seeing: he still believes that “my daughter was in much error over much of what she asserted that morning [...] there can be no doubt that Setsuko is mistaken” (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 194).

Such incidents in the novel bring to attention the duality of the prose language in *AFW*. Ono interprets his endeavours positively; he is motivated to do so in an act of self-preservation, to justify how his past hard work and dedication to his career has been in the service of a good and magnificent cause. But the language, despite Ono’s positive encoding, can yield the opposite. Ono has seen himself to be someone who is courageous, not easily swayed by common consensus, and as possessing insight into moving to innovative new ground. One who is unlike what the “wandering priests” have told his parents when he was a child: with “a weak streak that would give him a tendency towards slothfulness and deceit” (Ishiguro, *An*



*Artist of the Floating World* 45). On the contrary, judging by the spate of events in Ono's career, with him leaving behind two masters, Ono is likewise portrayed as someone who has his head in the clouds, as well as a fickle, ungrateful and disloyal traitor who does not give due respect to those who have trained him in his art form. There is thus a duality too, to the reality that Ono attempts to portray and re-present. This sense of a dual reality is further accentuated with Ono's shuttling back and forth to several scenes from his past, a mixing of the components of memory, imagination, and perception from the painter's palette. Told through the prism of memory, Ishiguro highlights the similarity between unreliable novelistic fiction and the construction of selves through memory (an innately narrative mode): there are little to no facts at all in both; both are fictional and constructed with a subjective perspective rather than objectivity, debunking the myth of absolute knowledge as an entity out there to be grasped. The real is presented as or *is* fictional.

Indeed, Ishiguro himself admits that this is one of the main techniques he employed in *AFW*, moving "from one passage to the next according to the narrator's thought associations and drifting memories" (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* xi). The intent behind this was to enable the novel to "produce richness on the page and offer inner movements impossible to capture on a screen" (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* xi). Lewis has examined this particular technique, positing how this imbues the novel with a fluidity that can be captured through a discussion of the novel's cinematic qualities.<sup>26</sup> Art, as *AFW* demonstrates, and as we shall see in the following chapters, is central subject matter in Ishiguro's later novels. As Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes observe:

Art truly matters in Ishiguro's work. His characters' experience of

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<sup>26</sup> See: Lewis 61-72.

music, painting or writing consistently brings into focus the moral, emotional or political questions they face. Art is often the determining feature of his characters' self-conception: one thinks of Ono's painting in *AFW*; Ryder's piano in *UC*; the clones' work for Madame's gallery in *NLMG* [...] music, film and the novel or visual arts commonly serves to open up meanings of his work (Matthews and Groes, 'Introduction: "Your Words Open Windows for Me": The Art of Kazuo Ishiguro' 5).

Even though Ishiguro himself claims that he is not interested in metafiction, in the writing about writers or the nature of fiction, his novels certainly possess intertextual nuances as they involve other artistic processes and invoke other forms of art.<sup>27</sup> In the following chapters, I discuss the progress of Ishiguro's fictions, as they become less realistic and more insistently axiomatic in their fictionality, with this notion in mind.

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<sup>27</sup> (Ishiguro et al. 13)

CHAPTER THREE: THE ART OF BUTLERING AND DETECTING:  
 PERFORMING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES IN *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*  
 (1989) AND *WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS* (2000)

Ishiguro's third and fifth novels, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *When We Were Orphans* (2000), have been considered as representing different phases in his oeuvre. Having come before and after Ishiguro's most stylistically radical novel, *The Unconsoled* (1995), *ROTD* presents a culmination of realist techniques that were experimented with in his first two novels — techniques that were employed towards the aim of pushing the boundaries of realist conventions — whilst *WWWO* demonstrates irrealist techniques reminiscent of those utilised in *UC*. Hence Hélène Machinal argues, “*WWWO* marks a dramatic change in Ishiguro's fiction, a change at least as radical and dynamic, if less overt, as the one signalled by the immediately preceding novel, *UC*” (Machinal 80). Indeed, this change is “radical and dynamic” in part because *WWWO* also demonstrates a return to techniques developed in earlier part of Ishiguro's career, blending these with more fabulist methods in order to reconfigure methods that manufacture the real. Both novels therefore represent milestones achieved in Ishiguro's writing career. The stylistic similarities as well as differences between these novels therefore make for a fruitful discussion on the ways Ishiguro's prose style has developed since his first two novels. Moreover, since the novels span eleven years from each other, studying them together allows for a more comprehensive understanding in regard to the development of artistry in Ishiguro's fictions.

As with Ishiguro's other novels which utilise the first-person, unreliable narrator, much scholarly ink has been spilled over the presentation and utilisation of the technique of unreliability in *ROTD* and *WWWO*. Most notably, James Phelan and

Mary Patricia Martin considers Stevens of *ROTD*:

as a character [...] [who] is so complexly reliable and unreliable that Ishiguro places the authorial audience in a very challenging and ethical position [...] Stevens' narration is so richly layered that existing accounts of unreliability cannot do either him or Ishiguro justice (Phelan and Martin 89).

Kathleen Wall, in a similar vein, posits that the novel:

asks us to formulate new paradigms of unreliability for the narrator, whose split subjectivity, rather than moral blindness or intellectual bias, gives rise to unreliable narration (Wall 23).

Phelan's account places greater emphasis on the reader's activity and eventually moves towards an ethics of reading, whereas Wall's account utilises a more formal model in her discussion and gradually moves towards an exploration of the relation between contemporary notions of subjectivity and unreliability as portrayed in *ROTD*. On the other hand, Zuzana Fonioková, in a study on unreliable and unnatural narration in Ishiguro, updates readings on *WWWO* through drawing attention to Banks' narrative as possessing not only hallmarks of unreliability but also of unnatural narration (Fonioková 9–10). According to her:

although unreliable narration does not apply to all parts of the narrative [...] the narrative's subjective perspective is [...] exposed by unnatural narration and metaphorical elements (Fonioková 128).

In other words, both the elements of unreliable narration and unnatural narration work together in *WWWO* to expose the fictionality of the narrator's version of events, and in doing so, provide clues such that readers are able to construct a better understanding of fictional reality in *WWWO*.

From this brief survey, it is clear that criticism on this aspect of the novels tends to highlight how the model of unreliability being utilised presents challenges to current narrative theories on unreliable narration, and such critics often call for, or attempt to update, existing theories and definitions through narrative and reader-response theories. In other words, current critical analyses about unreliability in *ROTD* and *WWWO* may be divided into two camps of thought. The first analyses the model of unreliability in order to pose questions about traditional accounts of narratorial unreliability and to make a case for new taxonomies of unreliable narrators/narration, as well as lay out attempts to resolving these challenges and questions. The second examines unreliability in the novels and how the novels facilitate the production and understanding of psychological concepts approached through practices of unreliability, such as emotional repression or self-deception. In particular, unreliability in these novels is a narrative technique employed in the illumination of philosophical or ethical thinking about the practice of self-deception (and related psychological concepts) and the nature of the self-deceived.

In this chapter, however, rather than attempting to use these novels to further philosophical, ethical, psychological discourse, and/or narratological theory on the concepts of unreliable narration and self-deception, I examine the ways in which the models of unreliability that reflect self-deception in *ROTD* and *WWWO* mirror the practice of make-believe, that is to say, fiction-making. I posit that as with his first two novels, Ishiguro manipulates elements both at the story and discourse level of Stevens and Banks' narratives in order to signpost instances of narratorial unreliability to the reader. Like Wall, I postulate that Stevens and Banks are (models of) unreliable narrators who, unlike traditional unreliable narrators, derive their unreliability from a "split subjective" — a lack of coherence of the self, because of

their efforts in self-deception, which simultaneously also sustains these efforts (Wall 23). The self-deceived narrator, who may differ from or encompass all of the qualities of the naïve, benighted, and/or egoistic narrator, complicates more straightforward attributes previously designated to the traditional unreliable narrator, such as moral blindness, ignorance, and/or intellectual bias. More than that, the use of the self-deceived narrator saturates the fictional reality of the storyworld with an ironic instability, unveiling its ontological status as an artifice.

Further framing my reading of *ROTD* and *WWWO* is a return to Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes' postulation that Ishiguro's narrators typically and consistently engage with art (Matthews and Groes, "Introduction: 'Your Words Open Windows for Me': The Art of Kazuo Ishiguro" 5). In comparison to Ishiguro's other characters who practice the arts as a profession or as a hobby — Etsuko who plays the violin, Ogata-san and Ono who paints, Mariko and Ichiro who draws, Ryder and Brodsky who play the piano, or the clones at Hailsham who make art to prove they have souls — Stevens and Banks, one a butler and the other a detective, seem a little out of place. However, paying close attention to patterns of unreliability in *ROTD* and to the presence of familiar literary tropes of the detective in *WWWO* will reveal the ways in which Matthews and Groes' assertion still applies to these novels, albeit in subtler ways than in Ishiguro's other works. Such an analysis will reveal the ways in which their professions act as their cover story: they are active actors, obsessed more with composing a better version of themselves than with enacting their roles to perfection in accordance to the scripts that they craft. They do this in order to evade the unpleasant emotions that come when regret and loss are faced up to or acknowledged. Consequently, Ishiguro's deft use of these techniques crafts stylistic proeses whose language exhibits, unabashedly, the world-making,

compositional, and performative aspects of Stevens' and Banks' narration.

### **3.1 (Un)reliable accounts of unreliability: Booth, Chatman, and Rimmon-Kenan vs Wall and Phelan and Martin**

The seasoned reader familiar with Ishiguro's novels would hardly find Stevens and Christopher Banks alien or their methods of narration alarmingly new, for like Etsuko of *PVOH*, and Ono of *AFW*, these narrators, now aged, look back upon their past in order to examine certain aspects of it, especially those life events that are tainted with regret and loss, that inevitably have an impact on their present lives now. Both novels utilise the diary format, and accordingly, an unreliable first-person narrator-character, a common feature of Ishiguro's novels. It is important to note, however, that the selection of Stevens and Banks as narrators of *ROTD* and *WWWO* and their characterisation as self-deceived narrators comes not by coincidence but very much as a deliberate aesthetic decision made in the crafting of the novels. As Ishiguro reveals in an interview with Christopher Bigsby:

The narrator you choose has a very significant impact on the texture of the narrative. I have to write in [a] way [that befits] [...] the narrator and the subject matter I have chosen" (Ishiguro et al. 23).

All of Ishiguro's unreliable narrators are engaged in their own little games of make-believe through the practice of self-deception. However, in comparison to other protagonists in his oeuvre, Stevens is arguably one of the most repressed narrators, and Banks, the least sane of them all. Comparing Stevens to Ono, Graham Swift notes:

Stevens is a much less self-knowing and more pathetic character [than Ono]. He seems to have this terrible blindness about his own experience. The only thing, which redeems him, is this enormous

importance he attaches to dignity (Ishiguro et al. 37).

Underscoring Swift's observation is the notion that Ishiguro's narrators are not in any way "cut from the same cloth" of narratorial unreliability and self-deception (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 19).

In order to understand the ways in which Stevens and Banks differ from each other as self-deceived unreliable narrators, it is vital to turn to examining the specific hallmarks of unreliability manifest at the story and discourse levels of *ROTD* and *WWWO*, and to what degree these manifest differently in the novels. Since the task at hand is to also consider how the model of unreliability demonstrated in Ishiguro's novels creates greater ironic instability than traditional methods of unreliability utilised in conventional realist novels, it is useful to begin with a perusal of the definition of unreliability in traditional narratological accounts, before moving on to an explication of the newer models proposed by Phelan and Martin and Wall.

The most influential and earliest account of the concept of unreliability in fiction originates in Wayne C. Booth. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Booth coined the term "unreliable narrator" to differentiate it from the reliable narrator. According to him,

a narrator is reliable when he speaks or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms) and unreliable when he does not (Booth 158–59).

Booth's definition denotes that unreliability in narration occurs as a result of the tension between expectations and reality, arising out of an ironic distance between the implied author's account of facts and values regarding events and existents in the storyworld, and the fictional reality as portrayed according to the narrator's words.



Booth also proposes that often unreliability is “a matter of inconstancy; the narrator is mistaken, or believes himself to have qualities, which the [implied] author denies him” (Booth 159). Whatever these norms and values are concerning the implied author and the narrator, the reader is expected to intuit them via heavy textual inference, so that the “communion and even [...] deep collusion” between the implied author and the audience behind the narrator’s back may be discovered (Booth 307). Thus, Seymour Chatman argues:

unreliable narration is [...] an ironic form [...] the reader senses a discrepancy between a reasonable construction story and the account given by the narrator. Two sets of norms conflict, and the covert set, once recognised, must win. The implied author has established a secret communication with the implied reader (Chatman 233).

Further refining Booth’s and Chatman’s definition, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan proposes that such instances arise when:

[narrative] facts [that is to say, events] contradict the narrator’s views [...] when the outcome of the action proves the narrator wrong [...] when the views of other characters consistently clash with the narrator’s [...] when the narrator’s language contains internal contradictions, double-edged images (Rimmon-Kenan 101 qtd. in Wall 19).

Rimmon-Kenan’s account highlights how there are two layers of activity occurring simultaneously at the layer of the storyworld and in the actual world where readers reside: underlying his statement is the notion that the narrator *performs* various actions when he is being unreliable, and the reader is supposed to see through that it is all an *act* — to identify irony as a result of the narrator’s performance, and then

arrive at a more accurate interpretation of truth. Rimmon-Kenan, however, does acknowledge the inadequacies with Booth and Chatman's accounts, recognising that "the values (or 'normal') of the implied author are notoriously difficult to arrive at" (Rimmon-Kenan 101 qtd. in Wall 19).

Wall and Phelan and Martin take issue with these older models of unreliability. Wall considers Booth, Chatman, and Rimmon-Kenan's accounts to be inaccurate, as these typically locate "the telling conflict as [fundamentally] one between story and discourse, events calling into question what we are told about them" (Wall 19). In a similar vein, Phelan and Martin pinpoint a narrowness to Booth's definition, such that "critics restrict their use of "unreliable" only to refer to narrators who are untrustworthy reporters of events, while others use it to mean unreliable in any way" (Phelan and Martin 94). In their account, they thus further specify the *types* and *conditions* of unreliability, through using the metaphor of axes:

unreliable reporting occurs along the axis of facts/events; unreliable evaluating occurs along the axis of knowledge/perception; unreliable reading occurs along the axis of ethics/evaluation (Phelan and Martin 94).

Moreover, they also specify the three main roles that narrators perform "simultaneously, sequentially, or intermittently" as "reporting, interpreting and evaluating" (Phelan and Martin 50). By specifying these roles, Phelan and Martin are able to specify too, in what way narrators may deviate from the implied author's views on their roles as reporters, interpreters, and/or evaluators. This detailed taxonomy thus enables Booth's original concept of unreliability to be broadened. Refining Booth's definition, they propose that

a homodiegetic narrator is "unreliable" when he or she offers an

account of some event, person, thought, thing, or other object in the narrative world that deviates from the account the implied author would offer (to be more rigorous, though, alas, more convoluted, we could say “deviates from the account the authorial audience infers the implied author would offer, excepting the point that the implied author knows that the narrator is a fictional construct”) (Phelan and Martin 94).

The orientation of Phelan and Martin’s account, like Booth’s, is nonetheless rhetorical, in that it focuses on the relations between the implied author, the narrator, and the reader, and the various activities they *perform* and *participate* in. But the last qualification in the above quotation, albeit a little convoluted, surely demonstrates the contemporaneity of their definition: “excepting the point that the implied author knows that the narrator is a fictional construct” (Phelan and Martin 94). It denotes an awareness of how the profile and characterisation of the implied author and the unreliable narrator has changed and diversified since the advent of post-structuralism.

Wall’s account also similarly demonstrates sensitivity to the changes modernist and postmodernist thought has effected concerning the profile of the unreliable narrator. She points out that a rhetorical account such as Booth’s and Chatman’s “casts literature in the restrictive role of exploring ‘norms and values’” – a role that is now eschewed by postmodernist thought (Wall 19-20). Implicitly, this inevitably situates the implied author as “a social, moral or aesthetic arbiter” of what these norms and values might be and is a reflection of outdated humanist values (Wall 20). What traditional or rhetorical accounts thus further imply, Wall highlights, is the inaccurate presupposition that the narrator is a “rational, self-present subject of humanism”, who “occupies a world in which language is a transparent medium

capable of reflecting a real world” (Wall 21). For there are now recognised to be more complex variations of unreliable narrators who pointedly declare their unreliability through admitting their digressions, inconsistencies, and hesitations. What is signposted is an awareness of the self as fluid, constantly being revised and re-enacted with the renewed utterance of each word, in comparison to the idea of the self as a fixed, knowable essence that may be grasped. Wall proposes therefore that rather than trying to locate deviations between the implied author and the narrator, focus should instead be accorded to the organising force of the narrative – the discourse itself, or what Roger Fowler has called “mind-style” (Wall 21). For, “discourse [...] gives us clues to habitual ways of thinking or of framing thoughts about the [story world] that might indicate biases or predispositions” (Wall 19). A narrator’s speech thus not only consists of his/her interpretations of events, but also contains verbal tics that indicate that these interpretations are being coloured by the narrator’s imagination, perception, and emotions.

To summarise, Phelan and Martins’ update of Booth’s original concept of unreliability provides a better means of examining unreliability in *ROTD* and *WWWO*. Rather than a focus on a taxonomy of different types of unreliable narrators, their focus on the different markers of unreliability allows for a better means of examining and gauging the different facets of an unreliable narrator’s personality and characterisation. Implicit in their approach is the acknowledgement that more complex versions of unreliable narrators exist, and such a narrator may be simultaneously or concurrently self-deceived, benighted, and ignorant altogether. Complementarily, Wall’s account augments Phelan and Martins’ model in its claims that unreliability may be located at the discourse level itself, beyond any inherently critical process of the implied author and the authorial audience “silently nudging

one another in the ribs at the folly and delusion of the narrator” (Wall 21). In other words, Wall’s postulation is that the stylistic level of the narratives themselves can illuminate the complexity of the profile and personality of the narrator whose verbal habits reveal how perception may be coloured by imagination and emotions. Such instances reveal how fictional truth in the storyworld is coloured by subjectivity, and they therefore signpost the fictionality of the narrative that is being told. In the following sub-sections, I utilise these critical insights in order to detect the ways in which Ishiguro manipulates the story and discourse levels in *ROTD* and *WWWO* respectively and to create markers of unreliability. Aware that Phelan and Martins’ and Wall’s updating of the concept of unreliability has leant heavily on their close reading of *ROTD*, my reading of *ROTD* will be focused more on *WWWO*, but in order to illuminate more precisely the intricate artistry of both novels. These various instances of unreliability work not only to undermine the stability of fictional truth in these narratives, revealing Stevens as self-deceived butler and Banks as delusional detective, but more pertinently, they serve to saturate the narratives with an ironic distance that signposts the mythical fictionality of the events and existents of the storyworld.

### **3.2 The Unimaginable Smallness of the Self-Deceived Butler and Delusional Detective**

At first glance, *ROTD* and *WWWO* come across as sufficiently realistic novels: the former is set in England, while the latter is set in England and Shanghai. Nothing seems odd about Stevens and Banks at first: their narratives mainly revolve around the topic of their vocations. Like Ono, they have devoted most of their lives to a profession of their choice. We find that unlike Ono, however, who became a painter rather than an accountant against his father’s wishes, Stevens reveals that he

has followed in his father's footsteps as a butler who has spent his youth serving tables "in houses where the greatest ladies and gentlemen of the land gathered", in a time where butlers were aplenty (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 4). Still a butler at Darlington Hall, previous residence of the late Lord Darlington, Stevens now serves an American employer, Mr Farraday, who has bought the manor. Steven's narrative is set in the present of post-WWII England, where he speaks in great detail about his current work responsibilities and compares them with those that he has had to manage in the past. Fuelled by a letter he received from his ex-colleague Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper at the manor, Stevens decides to take up Mr Farraday's suggestion to go on a road trip around the country in his employer's Ford. His "expedition" takes him "through much of the finest countryside of England to the West Country" for a period of six days (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 3). But even though Stevens travels through the physical landscape of England for merely six days, the introspective journey inwards that he embarks on spans several decades (if one is to include the anecdotes he includes about his father and the butlering profession). He dwells rather obsessively too, on the notions of what it means to possess "greatness" and live with "dignity" as a butler, qualities he reveals that his colleagues have long debated (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 28, 33). The events that he tends to recall are those where he considers himself to have most exemplified these qualities.

Banks, on the other hand, reveals, like Ono, that the profession that he has chosen – being a detective – is a notion and ambition that he has harboured since childhood. Born in Shanghai and raised in the international settlement part of the city for a short while before finding himself orphaned at an early age (having lost his parents to kidnappers), Banks, in present narrative time resides in London as a

renowned detective who has solved many challenging cases. He mingles with high society, making connections in order to find out more about his parents' disappearance more than twenty years ago. Having received intelligence about his parents, Banks undertakes a journey back to Shanghai in the hope that he might be able to rescue them from their kidnappers. He arrives back in Shanghai optimistic that he may be able to revisit the earlier, happier years of his childhood, only to find the country now war-torn by the Sino-Japanese occupation. Banks believes firmly that it is only by rescuing his kidnapped parents that he will be able to stop the war on both fronts and makes it his mission to find the house in which the kidnappers have purportedly imprisoned them. Like Stevens, who struggles with the emotions he feels for Miss Kenton, Banks struggles too, caught between his perceived professional duty and his personal feelings for Sarah Hemmings, eventually choosing the former over the latter.

The general plotlines of the novels are, ostensibly, so rooted in the real that reading Ishiguro's responses in his interviews with Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger and Brian W. Shaffer on *ROTD* and *WWWO* can be puzzling. In the interview with Vorda and Herzinger, Ishiguro, who was asked if he sees his prose style in *ROTD* as "having elements of the more traditional twentieth century writers such as W. Somerset Maugham, E. M. Forster, Evelyn Waugh, and Joyce Cary", replies:

not really [...] with the *ROTD* it's like a pastiche where I've tried to create a mythical England. [The novel] is more English than English. Yet I think there's a big difference from the tones of the world in *ROTD* and the worlds created by those writers you mentioned because in my case there is an ironic distance (Ishiguro et al. 73).

Speaking to Shaffer, Ishiguro continues in this line of thought about *WWWO*:

The story is told in the context of a *superficially* realistic thriller. We have a literal plot here; we are dealing with things that actually happened to Christopher Banks, the protagonist. [...] I had to make a decision before I even started work on the novel as to what extent the setting would be a strange, unrealistic world and to what extent it would be closer to realism (Ishiguro et al. 163).

To comprehend Ishiguro's positioning of *ROTD* and *WWWO* as more non-realist than realist novels, one needs to only look at their blatant unreliability, for Ishiguro's employment and manipulation of markers of unreliability enables him to create greater ironic instability than conventionally realist novels. This is not to say that Ishiguro abandons well-established methods altogether to imbue his novels with irony, but rather, he invents various configurations of markers of unreliability that enable him to achieve greater aesthetic effects that clearly distance these novels from conventional realism.

### 3.2.1 Markers of Unreliability in *ROTD*

Indeed, Ishiguro begins with a rather basic configuration of unreliability at the beginning of both *ROTD* and *WWWO*. As with *PVOH* and *AFW*, Stevens' and Banks' unreliability is rendered salient through the ways in which their narrative repeatedly undermines the portraits that these narrators have painted of themselves at the beginning of their narratives. Stevens and Banks both paint fairly well-meaning portraits of themselves: they are both dedicated to their work, and to the causes behind their work. They are so professional that some point later in their narratives, they demonstrate their dedication by abandoning altogether the women they love. Stevens, in fact, gives a portrait of himself as such a dedicated butler that even in the face of heartbreak he tells his heartbreaker, Miss Kenton, that "I am not awaited by



emptiness. If only I were. But oh no, there's work, work, and more work" (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 249). Banks, on the other hand, tells Sarah to wait for him, while he goes in search of a "blind Yeh Chen[‘s]" house in the middle of their elopement (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 224). Nothing, it seems, can distract them from serving out their duties of butler and detective.

For Stevens, this statement rings particularly true, especially when the reader considers his extensive discussions on greatness and dignity. Stevens launches into a philosophical discussion on the virtue of greatness, just one day into his motoring trip. Having left Darlington Hall behind as the manor disappears altogether in the rear-view mirror of Mr Farraday's Ford, he recalls cruising alongside "that marvellous view [...] of the rolling English countryside" (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 28). The picturesque English landscape, he reckons, "possesses a quality, that the landscapes of the other nations, however, more superficially dramatic, inevitably fail to possess" (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 28). This quality, Steven explains, is:

a calmness of [its own] beauty, its sense of restraint. It is as though the land knows of its own beauty, of its own greatness, and feels no need to shout it. In comparison, the sorts of sights offered in places such places as Africa and America, though undoubtedly very exciting, would, I am sure, strike the objective viewer as inferior on account of their unseemly demonstrativeness (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 29).

This moment, though seemingly innocuous, is actually an instance of misreading. Stevens' misreading arises from his faulty perception that the "objective viewer" must share the same view of the English landscape as he does. This is obvious since

early on in his narrative, Stevens reveals that he has spent much of his life within the very walls of Darlington Hall. He has, in actual fact, only “see[n] the best of England within these very walls” (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 4).

Moreover, even though Stevens compares this landscape to literature he has read and uses this as evidence to support his claims about the second-to-none grandeur and marvelousness of the English landscape, his argument does not hold water. This is clear when we consider that one of the books he refers to — Mrs Jane Symmons’ *The Wonder of England* — was written in the 1930s, almost twenty years ago before Stevens’ embarked on his journey, and before war had broken out in Europe. Additionally, Stevens references the *National Geographic Magazine* in alluding to other landscapes from other parts of the world. But the photographs depicted in these magazines are not *actual* landscapes in themselves – they are *representations*, framed through the perspective of a camera lens. In other words, someone else – another human consciousness —has deemed the landscape beautiful enough to be captured on camera and published in a magazine. Stevens’ insistence on his sincere belief in his own aesthetic taste as indicative of moral judgement conveys his naivete, ignorance and blindness. He fails to see that as he has spent most of his life confined within Darlington Hall, he has never travelled, certainly not outside of Europe, and to all the other places he feels are less beautiful than England. All he has are internalised images — representations — and not reality.

Phelan and Martin have similarly identified this as an instance of narratorial unreliability occurring along the axis of knowledge/perception. According to them, Stevens’ “misreading [here] is also a sign of a mistaken value system that finds “unobtrusiveness” to be one of the greatest virtues”; this is in fact, also simultaneously a moment of misregarding (Phelan and Martin 95). Indeed, as

Stevens carries on with his discussion on greatness, extending it to a further discussion centering on the question of what makes a great butler, it is clear just how far he places the utmost value on restraint and sees it as a virtue. So much so that he believes that exercising restraint means the desirability of and the ability to refrain from expressing emotion. He believes sincerely that denying personal feelings is that which accords the butler “dignity” (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 33). He supports his claim with reference to The Hayes Society, a powerful and prestigious organisation for butlers that only “admit[ted] butlers of the very first rank” (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 33). Of all the criteria that the society has set out, Stevens focuses in on this as the most important: “the applicant be possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position” (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 33). To further demonstrate the validity of his claim, he takes to recounting anecdotes of butlers whom, he feels, have best demonstrated his idea of “dignity”: the butler “who failed to panic on discovering a tiger under the dining table” and his own father, who, as a butler, denied his “utmost loathing” towards a general, and served the man who led Stevens’ own brother to “perish in a particularly infamous [war] manoeuvre” (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 41). These anecdotes lead Stevens to conclude that dignity is “a butler’s ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits” (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 43). Contrarily, butlers who do not possess this value of dignity are “lesser butlers” who “will abandon their professional being for the private one at the least provocation” (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 43).

As a result of his misreading, Stevens goes on to further commit more acts of narratorial unreliability. Another instance of misreading occurs when he claims that:

it is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants. [...]

Continental are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race is capable of. Continentals – and by and large the Celts, as you will no doubt agree — are as a rule unable to control themselves in moments of strong emotion and are thus unable to maintain all professional demeanour other than in the least challenging of situations (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 44).

Stevens does not realise that these comments are obnoxious and inappropriate as they expose his racism, and also his ideas of class, in the sincerely held but mistaken belief that being a great butler is also synonymous with being an Englishman. It is from this instance of misreading that Stevens' narrative portrays the parochiality of his worldview which, in turn, provokes scepticism in the reader as to the validity of his subsequent claims. It encodes Stevens' as a really ignorant butler and the concept of dignity, which Stevens' entire narrative hinges upon, consequently becomes a tool that systematically unravels the (un)reliability of his narrative. Because Stevens' notion of dignity is the ability to cast off the emotional arena, his personal life and self, the events that he recalls are, not surprisingly, those where he has experienced great personal loss in the emotional arena of his life with his father and Miss Kenton but where that loss has barely been registered as an affective force in his life. As Mike Petry argues, "whenever his Stevens' professional self succeeds, his personal self breaks down" (Petry 115). Examining these instances, one finds a series of misreporting, misreading, underreporting, misregarding, and underreading events produced singularly or concurrently as a result of Stevens' misevaluation of the concept of dignity.

Indeed, this is where unreliability in *ROTD* begins to take on a more complex

configuration. Ishiguro layers the different markers of unreliability on top of one another or disguises them with other markers altogether. When we examine Stevens' recounting of the international war conference of 1923, which coincides with the evening he lost his father and failed to stay by his bedside in his last moments, we observe an instance of gross misregarding. Making the statement that "for all its sad associations, whenever I recall that evening today, I find I do so with a large sense of triumph" (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 115), Stevens demonstrates that he does not see that he has utterly failed in playing the role of a loving or even dutiful son to his father and has in fact been absolutely callous towards him. This moment also constitutes an instance of underreporting, for in spite of Stevens' assertions that this is a triumphant milestone of his career, he defers the revelation of the true associations of this particular conference — one that represents Lord Darlington's disgrace as a Nazi sympathiser. This then becomes an instance of further misregarding as Stevens' fails to see that what he considers to be a triumph is what the world he inhabits would consider as gross indecency.

In a similar vein, Stevens' also performs simultaneous instances of misreporting, misevaluating, and underregarding in his interactions with Miss Kenton. Particularly on the night where he stands outside of her door, listening in on her crying after she has learned of her aunt's death, he commits the act of misreporting, as he cannot fathom why the thought of her crying "provoked a strange feeling within me, causing me to stand there hovering in the corridor for a few moments" (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 186). Stevens later corrects his memory of when this moment, where he felt this "strange feeling" arise within him, occurred and recalibrates it as occurring after he learnt of Miss Kenton's proposal from Mr Benn. The misreporting again disavows any emotion attached to himself

and projects it entirely onto Miss Kenton herself. In other words, Stevens' misreporting occurs alongside misreading: he refuses or at least delays acknowledging that he has any complicity in the losses he faces in the personal arena of his life. Stevens' backtracking of the placement of the events he recalls highlights an uncanny knowingness on his part concerning which routes to take down the memory lane that will allow him to portray himself in the light in which he wants to be portrayed. The narrative thus slowly peels away Stevens' image as a completely innocuous and naïve narrator, revealing him as a narrator who possesses more self-knowledge and yet also lack of self-knowledge at a deeper level than the surface of his narrative portrays.

Another tactic Ishiguro employs to expose Stevens' complicity in the way his life has turned out is through Stevens' attempts to disguise his underreporting under the cover of misreporting and underreading. This is most apparent when he recounts the moments where he has somehow let slip of his emotions. At Weymouth, when he finally meets Miss Kenton and is forced to face the fact that his adherence to his mistaken views on dignity has caused him to lose her forever, he does not give an indication himself that this revelation has caused him to cry. Rather, it is only through the stranger who Stevens' converses with that we learn of his weeping (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 255). Similarly, during the night of the conference, Stevens does not admit that he has been crying because he is trying so hard to defend his professional role even when his father is on his deathbed. Twice at the international conference, Stevens is stopped by Mr Cardinal and Lord Darlington in the midst of his work. Both of these characters enquire after his well-being:

“Stevens, are you alright?”

“Yes, sir. Perfectly.”

“You look as though you’re crying.”

I laughed and taking out a handkerchief, quickly wiped my face. “I’m very sorry, sir. The strains of a hard day” (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 110).

These instances may easily come across to us as ordinary instances of misreporting and underreading as Stevens’ endeavour to hide the fact that he has been crying from the reader indicates that, at some level, he does not know that he is crying or why he is crying. Yet, when Stevens tries to brush away these observations made by the other characters, by attributing this evidence of emotion to the “strains of a hard day”, he shatters the illusion that he is misreporting or underreading but, instead, is underreporting. The moment he tries to brush away personal emotions, attributing them to the strains of professional duty, one is reminded of Stevens’ unwavering commitment to his ideal of dignity. One is also reminded that his entire monologue is motivated by his desire to portray himself in a good light in accordance with these principles of public duty and devotion to his perceived vocation. Disguising his underreporting as misreporting and underreading allows Stevens to feign ignorance and consequently to absolve himself of all personal responsibilities concerning the wreckage that he has caused in his personal life. These various instances of unreliability layered one on top of another present Stevens still as a narrator who at least part knowingly participates in the practice of self-deception. It is as if he has built a character mantle for himself and is determined to inhabit it as completely as he can and with disregard for any shifts in his projection of his own narrative arc — a point to which I return in Section 3.3.

### **3.2.2 Markers of Unreliability in *WWWO***

Whilst in *ROTD*, Ishiguro configures a more complex model of unreliable

narration at the story level by superimposing, layering, disguising, the different markers of unreliability, this is done to a lesser degree in *WWWO*. Indeed, it may be argued that Ishiguro concocts a more basic form of unreliable narration (at least, at the story level) to cast Banks as the central object of irony. The narrative begins in a similar way to *ROTD*. As with Stevens, who begins his narrative by setting up the premise to portray himself as a great butler, Banks likewise begins by setting himself up as a great detective. Banks reveals that he begins this “diary” shortly after the success of the “famous” Mannering case, which casts him immediately in the role of a competent detective (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 23). The materials that he utilises further to paint a favourable self-portrait of himself consist also of his orphaned past, his school years, and the reasons behind his move from Cambridge to London.

By telling us that he moved “despite his aunt’s wishes” after he “decided his future lay in the capital” of England, Banks effectively portrays himself as someone who is sure of his bearings: he has a mind of his own and knows what he wants out of life in spite of the loss of his parents at a young age. Recounting how he came to the decision, he reveals that he “enjoyed the London parks [...] indulged in entire afternoons strolling the streets of Kensington” (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 3). Ordinarily, these statements may lead the reader to believe that Banks is in awe of the beauty of London itself, and that it was the beautiful city that attracted him to move there. But the beauty that Banks refers to is not that of the city itself. When he pauses “once in a while to admire” England, he reveals that he admires instead “how [...] even in the midst of such a great city, creepers and ivy are to be found clinging to the fronts of fine houses” (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 3). The shift in focus of the object of beauty from the city itself, to “creepers and ivy [...] clinging to the



front of fine houses” — an imagery representing evil also at the fringe of society — thus further accentuates Banks’ image as a detective who is committed to solving crime and tackling evil.

However, this is where markers of unreliability at the story level of the novel begin to perforate Banks’ portrait of himself as great detective. As Fonioková observes,

Banks’ unreliability as a narrator is fairly traditional in this part of the novel and concerns mostly his incorrect or insufficient interpretations (misreadings and underreadings). The most obvious gap between the narrator’s beliefs and the indirectly imparted state of affairs involves Banks’ image of his past self — as a child that has just lost his parents (Fonioková 131).

Indeed, there exist various discrepancies between Banks’ portrayal of himself as a child versus what other characters in these scenes reveal about him through their conversations with him. The first of such discrepancies that reveals Banks’ underreadings about his early life, is manifested in a conversation that he has with his old schoolfriend James Osbourne. While Banks claims that his “lack of parents -- indeed, of my close kin in England except my aunt in Shropshire – had by then long ceased to be of any great inconvenience to me”, his schoolmate reveals that Banks was in fact, a rather “odd bird” at school, who “interrogated” him “mercilessly” about his “well connectedness” (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 6-7). Banks expresses puzzlement at Osbourne’s version of events, insisting that from what he remembers, he “only once brought it up with him personally” on the matter of his connections (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 6). But his account of Osbourne reply betrays him, for the tonal qualities that belie Osbourne’s “oh, do knock it off”,

suggests his annoyance towards Banks. The exclamation at the beginning of his reply hints at disapprobation and implies there is something pathological in the dogged insistence of Banks' behaviour.

The act of remembering, or memory as an act of re-collection, of gathering together and re-shaping the past, is that which Banks relies upon to sustain his self-image, his cover story as a person who grew up well and fulfilled his ambition of becoming a detective despite his circumstances. He cleaves to his memories and dishes these out to smooth out discrepancies presented by other characters in their interactions with him. In this instance with Osbourne, he tries to prove the validity of his version of fictional truth by offering his memory of how he "blended perfectly into English school life" (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 7). But memory is unreliable; it is often coloured by perception, emotions and imagination both in the present of recollection and at the time of the events. But Banks' underestimates this confabulatory aspect of memory: because he fails to see at all the unreliability of his memory that renders it unsuitable to serve as evidence to supplement his version of fictional truth, he inevitably intensifies its unreliability with further acts of misremembering.

Another notable moment in the novel is when Banks is told he has to go to England to live with his aunt following the disappearance of his parents. When Banks encounters the same Colonel, who accompanied him on his voyage, he expresses irritation at the latter's "cheerful anecdotes" which harboured "an emerging picture of Banks" to which Banks' "took exception" (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 28). He denies the Colonel's repeated insinuations that the young Banks had, back then, "gone about the ship withdrawn and moody, liable to burst into tears at the slightest thing" (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 28). He insists,

that according to his “own, quite clear memory” that he “adapted very ably to the changed realities of his circumstances” and was quite “positively excited about life aboard the ship, as well as the prospect of the future that lay before me” (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 28). Banks then reveals that he believes back then as a child that “there would always be other adults I would come to love and trust” (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 27). He recalls the scene of “a number of ladies on the voyage” who had heard of what had happened to him and “who for a time, came fussing around me with pitying expressions” as evidence (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 27). But Banks’ proceeds to commit further acts of misreporting and underreading here. That the ladies onboard the ship had come around to offer their care and comfort to him probably suggests that he had indeed, behaved like a “snivelling little squirt” to warrant such level of attention from them (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 29). This therefore reveals Banks’ as a benighted narrator who, like Ono and Stevens, is blind to his own faults and does not see how his way of viewing the world is not as accurate as he supposes it to be.

By just focusing on the elements at the story level of *WWWO*, Banks ostensibly is unlike Stevens: he does not seem to realise the importance of which scenes to include or avoid so as to not undermine his own account of events. He seemingly does not possess an awareness, as in the case of Stevens, of which memories to select in order to preserve his self-image. In comparison to Stevens then, Banks appears not to be repressed or to be engaged in a practice of self-deception so that he comes across as more truly ignorant about the inconsistencies of his own memories. He also seems to not be able to tell reality from fiction, truth from delusion. However, examining the discourse level of the novel will prove that, contrary to what the narrative superficially suggests about the kind of narrator Banks

is, Banks has in fact much more in common with Stevens than might be assumed. In particular, an examination of Banks' narrative voice reveals his delusionary focalisation of the events and existents of the storyworld. At the same time, such an analysis also reveals the verbal habits and tics that enable Banks to sustain and project his self-image and cover story as detective.

### 3.3 Role-Playing Sherlock: The Remains of Banks' Dignity in *WWO*

Banks' voice, like that of other Ishiguro narrators — Stevens in *ROTD* in particular — haunts readers long after the close of the novel's pages.<sup>28</sup> There is an odd quality to the voices of Ishiguro's narrators, and for Banks, this oddness manifests early on in the narrative. One of the earliest instances in which the oddness in Banks' voice is discernible in *WWO* is when he chances upon Sir Cecil, who has spent some time in Shanghai, during the event of the Meredith Foundation dinner. Though from Banks' perspective, the encounter and conversation that they have comes across as normal and natural, there is something odd about the way Banks' speaks about Akira unbeknownst to him. In response to Sir Cecil's suggestion that Akira might have left Shanghai and returned, since many years has passed since the time of Banks' childhood, Banks adamantly insists that "Akira was very fond of Shanghai [...] he was never determined to return to Japan. No, I'm sure he will still be there" (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 46). As Banks reveals later through recounting his childhood memories with Akira, his view that Akira could never leave

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<sup>28</sup> One of the most well-known commentaries on the disposition and quality of Stevens' speech hails from literary critic David Lodge, who calls the butler out on the undeniable oddness of his speech. According to Lodge, "Stevens speaks, or writes, in a fussily precise, stiffly formal style — butlerspeak, in a word. Viewed objectively, the style has no literary merit whatsoever. It is completely lacking in wit, sensuousness and originality" (Lodge 155). David James has examined, more closely, this quality to Stevens' speech, in what is to my mind, one of the most intriguing essays in regard to *ROTD*. James posits that Ishiguro's writing is "characterised by an aesthetic integrity, a kind of stylistic modesty [...] alternate phases of distance and immersion characterise the reader's experience of memory in this novel. Ishiguro compels us to coordinate the pleasure of being absorbed in the story with awareness of the artifice that this is the story's style, drawing attention to alternative forms of engaging critically and affectively with the register of Stevens' perpetual retrospection" (D. James 54).

Shanghai because he never wanted to actually stems from a pact that they made as *children*. Banks' inability to see his conversation with Akira for what it is — *childish talk* — even after he has become an adult, suggests that he remains stuck in the past. Contrary to what Banks would have readers believe, Banks, as Ishiguro himself posits,

still lives in the childhood vision of the world that's frozen since the time that he lost his parents when he was a little boy; it's remained arrested at that point and is applied to the adult world that he encounters (Ishiguro et al. 164).

Banks' speech therefore reveals how he erroneously interprets or colours the description of the storyworlds around him, and how these are being coloured by the traumatic events of his past, of having lost his parents at a tender young age, in spite of what he would have readers believe. There is thus an artificiality to his voice that is difficult to ignore.

But this is not the complete explanation of the unnatural quality of Banks' voice — there is more. As Banks opens his narrative, there is an unmistakable similarity between his narrative and that of the renowned English detective, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. That the novel thus “directly invokes the narratological tradition and expectations of classic detective fiction and above all the familiar figure of Sherlock Holmes” does not go unnoticed for many readers (Machinal 80). Machinal's article on *WWWO* is particularly astute here, offering a detailed account of the ways in which the novel sets up generic and formal expectations and then shatters them and in so doing “exposes the ideological implications of the whole genre of the turn-of-the-century detective story” (Machinal 79). Indeed, as Machinal posits,

in the opening section allusions to the canonical texts of Arthur Conan Doyle are legion [...] address, décor, and geography of Bank's lodgings, 14b Bedford Gardens, closely recall 221b Baker Street and the nineteenth-century London of Sherlock Holmes (Machinal 80).

Indeed, Banks' invokes too, a phantom of Sherlock's housekeeper, Mrs Hudson, through mentioning a landlady who "furnished the place in a tasteful manner that evoked an unhurried Victorian past" (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 3). Banks is visited too by Osbourne with whom "he engages in a discussion" and the conversation that they have regarding "the activities of the workers' union [...] the long and enjoyable debate on German philosophy [...] ostentatiously evokes Holmes' intellectual *brio*" (Machinal 81). In this instance, Banks too, casts Osbourne as Dr Watson. There is thus a theatricality that underpins Bank's language register, signalling a performative aspect to his actions in the events he recounts.

In other words, Banks' language register reveals that he is not just plainly *being* a detective; rather, he is in fact, performing, role-playing the character of a famous detective. This notion that Banks and the other characters in the novel are involved in a performance is further supported by events that Banks' recalls at the story level of his narrative. As children, Banks and Akira are befuddled and preoccupied with the question of what it means to be more English or Japanese, and believe that being one or the other is the means by which they might please their parents, and not have to leave Shanghai (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 76). They also roleplay detective Inspector Kung, the kidnapper, and kidnapped when Banks' father goes missing (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* 113). Most notably, when Banks shares a kiss with Sarah, all he can think about is how "we were kissing [...] just like a couple on the cinema screen" (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans*

237). Machinal proposes that this moment represents an instance where Banks' "thoughts [...] turn immediately to his imaginary audience", indicating that he is highly aware that he is enacting a performance (Machinal 85). This notion provides a means to decipher what occurs in the more non-realist latter half of the novel when the external landscape loses more and more of its solidity and turns less verisimilar in relation to the historical world that readers inhabit. Whether Banks is hallucinating or has gone insane in the latter half of the novel are no longer central questions; they are displaced by the reality that Banks' image as a detective is built on his parochial vision of the events that has happened in his life thus far. As Machinal notes,

as the search for his parents reaches its climax in the Chinese quarter, the suggestion that they might be held prisoner in a house opposite the residence of the blind actor Yeh Chen implies Banks' own status and abilities are perhaps an illusion, that his own insight and vision is restricted, and his role a mere performance (Machinal 85).

It is in this manner that Banks' own language registers, and his own voice undermines his own self-portrait as great detective, revealing his profession to be a coping mechanism that he utilises in order to deal with the loss of his parents, much like the enactive games Akira and he play as children in hope that it would bring his father back home.

I have, in this chapter, focused on the ways in which markers of unreliability both at the story and discourse level at *ROTD* and *WWWO* work to unveil the ways in which Stevens' and Banks' professions serve as their cover stories. These professional roles provide both narrators with opportunities to enact and re-enact parts of their lives where they have experienced intense or great emotional loss. Stevens' prevarications in his recounting of past events that have occurred to him in

his narrative, as well as Banks' play with language registers reveal the performative aspects of their narratives and consequently, their lives. They are active and albeit become habitual and therefore unconscious, self-conscious actors, obsessed with composing a better version of themselves, and then enacting these roles to perfection in accordance to the very scripts they craft. Consequently, Ishiguro's deft use of these techniques crafts a stylised prose whose language exhibits, unabashedly, the world-making, compositional, and performative aspects of Stevens' and Banks' narration.



CHAPTER FOUR: LIKE BEING IN A NOVEL: ART, AFFECT, AND  
DISCOURSE IN *NEVER LET ME GO* (2005)

Five years after the critical success of *When We Were Orphans* (2000) comes Ishiguro's sixth novel, *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Critics, in reviews of *WWWO*, have been quick to applaud it for its return to more verisimilar settings in the first half of the novel, balancing out its insidious irrealist turn in the latter half of the novel. Ishiguro's fifth work has thus often been seen to redeem the mixed reception surrounding his fourth and most radically stylistic novel, *The Unconsoled* (1990), which features a completely, baffling non-verisimilar or irrealist storyworld. In comparison to these two novels, and equally representing a new milestone in Ishiguro's writing career, the aesthetic innovation of the storyworld in *NLMG* can be seen as one that straddles both the verisimilar and non-verisimilar qualities of its predecessors, albeit representing a significant recalibration of the realist/irrealist aspects of the storyworld.

Following the epigraph that declares that the novel is set in England in the late 1990s, the voice that greets readers belongs to Kathy H. In comparison to Ishiguro's other middle-aged narrators, Kathy is thirty-one, an age that is commonly considered to be a kind of 'prime' in a human lifespan. Like Stevens and Banks, she quickly introduces her professional occupation: she is a "carer [...] for over eleven years" now (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 3). She recounts her childhood at Hailsham, where she and her friends Tommy and Ruth have been privileged enough to receive their education as "students" (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 4). Revelling in these nostalgic memories, she reveals that the education they received at the institution is deeply steeped in the arts and art-making. All of this seems rooted in a realist setting, and the storyworld ostensibly shares many similarities with the kind of actual world

in which readers might be located. However, as the narrative proceeds forwards as Kathy further rewinds and replays aspects of her past, this ostensibly recognisable setting of “England, late 1990s” is unveiled as existing in an alternative dimension. It is a fictional England in a parallel world, with an entirely different history from the England of the actual world. Kathy’s England is one where technological advancements in the twentieth century after the two world wars have centered on breakthroughs in biotechnology, rather than discoveries being made in the realm of nuclear technology. Though a delayed revelation, Kathy and her friends, Tommy and Ruth, as well as most of the other “people” she recalls are revealed to be clones. They are representative of their society’s success in scientific endeavours to replicate, farm and harvest spare organ parts — a medical cure for a society previously afflicted with the incurable ailment: cancer.

This chapter begins by examining the perennial question in reading this novel that has plagued and bothered non-professional readers and critics alike: why do Kathy and her clone friends not look for options to escape? In other words, why do they passively, day after day, for the past thirty years of their lives, persist in their roles, living as part of a horrible regime which mercilessly misuses them as hosts for fresh, healthy organs to be harvested to service other diseased mortal beings. It follows then that the succeeding question is: is Kathy yet another prototype of the self-deceived and/or ignorant narrator that Ishiguro has consistently presented in his past five novels up till *NLMG*? If so, what role does such a narrator serve in the configuration of this novel’s axiomatic fictionality? In order to arrive at answers to these questions, I will begin by setting out an argument that the novel is not science fiction, in spite of the scientific discourses and topics it obviously implicates with the themes of organ farming and donations, as well as clones. Reframing the question of

what kind of novel *NLMG* is not, provides a natural transition to looking at what the novel *is* or might be. I will examine the characterisation of the clones (in particular, Kathy) in tandem with the wider environment in which they are placed — Hailsham, the Cottages, and eventually wider England itself. Examining the language — and in particular, the euphemisms — that Kathy employs in her narrative sheds light on and reveals the ways in which Kathy is both complicit with and non-complicit with the regime for the course of her life and therefore accepting at some level of her fate, of what happens to her eventually. More pertinent is the question of what Kathy’s language and education at Hailsham seems to metaphorically represent about art: its dual and paradoxical ability to simultaneously serve consolatory yet disturbing purposes. Present criticism has largely focused on Kathy’s passivity and Ishiguro’s alternative England as demonstrating that a society built on empathy and art may or may not necessarily lead to a more humane and others-serving society. I wish rather to highlight as well how Kathy’s passivity emphasises her ontological status and her role as a *character* and her neatly mapped out life as akin to a *novel’s plot trajectory* that as a character she is condemned to follow. It is in this manner thus that Ishiguro renders most apparent the axiomatic fictionality of *NLMG* and turns the reader’s attention inwards to reflect similarly on the axiomatic fictionality of his or her own life.

#### **4.1 Not a Science Fiction Novel**

It is not difficult to see why *NLMG* is often read as a novel belonging under the genre of science fiction when the novel’s protagonist and her friends are clones living in an alternative England. Critic Lev Grossman, for instance, in *Time* magazine’s “All-Time 100 Novels” writes of the novel as “an improbable masterpiece, a *science fiction horror story* written as high tragedy by a master

literary stylist” (Grossman 66).<sup>29</sup> This generic categorisation is not invalid per se, considering the action and contexts described in the novel. Kathy and her friends are clones who are commodities in an organ farming and donations’ programme in a world that thrives on extending human mortality through biotechnologies. Their teachers, or “guardians” to use Kathy’s term, are fearful of them, and regard them with pity as well as contempt for what they are. Grossman goes as far as to claim that Kathy, Tommy and Ruth are not aware of the knowledge of what is to come in their futures, and that once they “learn the secret, it is already far, far too late for them to save themselves” (Grossman 66). Grossman’s superficial summary of the novel indeed ticks most of the boxes with regard to conventional definitions of science fiction: it is about an imagined, alternative world, consisting of “an imagined reality that is radically different in its nature and functioning from the world of our ordinary experience” (Abrams and Harpham 356). It also represents “an explicit attempt to render plausible the fictional world by reference to known or imagined scientific principles, or to project an advance in technology” (Abrams and Harpham 357). Yet a closer look at the boxes that are left unticked and a closer look at the other elements in the novel will illuminate how *NLMG*’s peddling in scientific discourse remains merely superficial, and therefore, represents its departure from mainstream science fiction. For one, even though *NLMG* seemingly matches this definition in its central theme of cloning, it is important to note also that the settings in science fiction novels or narratives tend to be on “another planet, or this earth, *projected into the future*” (Abrams and Harpham 356).<sup>30</sup> Even though *NLMG* projects an alternative, imagined England as in science fiction classics like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931), George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949),

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<sup>29</sup> Italics for emphasis, mine.

<sup>30</sup> Italics for emphasis, mine.

and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), unlike these novels, it is set in a *not too distant past* that is a kind of imaginary parallel world rather than in the *future*. As Liani Lochner posits, referring to the aforementioned classic science fiction novels:

Whereas the age of literary dystopia is to caution against false optimism and the devastating effects of a scientific “utopia” by projecting present development imaginatively into the future [...] Ishiguro deliberately avoids this paradigm by setting his novel in the recent past (Lochner 225-26).

Moreover, Grossman is incorrect in stating that Kathy, Tommy and Ruth are not aware of the knowledge of what is to come in their future, for they have always been “told” about their involvement in the donations programme that will begin when they come of age, in talks given at Hailsham (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 81).

In comparison to classic science fiction novels, *NLMG* departs from the usual themes of staging an uprising, revolt and escape. The aesthetic decision to set the novel in a not too distant past rather than future, coupled with the usual themes pertaining to clones being held in captivity, therefore implies that Ishiguro possibly invokes this subject matter for another purpose than to situate his novel within a particular genre. Indeed, this notion is supported by Ishiguro's own comments in interviews about the novel. As he tells Karen Grigsby Bates:

I am probably less excited when people come and say “oh, this is a chilling warning about the way we're going with cloning and biotechnology.” That's fine, I am perfectly open to people reading it that way, but if that's what they got out of it, then I feel that the inner heart of the book has been missed (Ishiguro et al. 202).

He further elaborates on what he considers to be “the inner heart of the book” in another interview with John Freeman for the *New Zealand Herald*:

When I am writing fiction I don't think in terms of genre at all. I write a completely different way. It starts with ideas. [...] the book's premise [of the compression of the life span of the clones is] a metaphor for how we all live [...] I just concertina-ed the life span through [the device of clones]. A normal life span is between sixty to eighty-five years; [as clones,] these people artificially have that period shortened [...] basically they face the same questions we all face [...] what really matters if you know that this is going to happen to you? [...] What are the things you hold on to, what are the things you want to set right before you go? What do you regret? What are the consolations? [...] What is all the education and culture for if you are going to check out? (Ishiguro et al. 196-97).

In other words, as Barry Lewis posits, “*NLMG* is not hard-core sci-fi, but rather a tale that borrows certain themes and trappings of the genre to explore perennial issues about the human condition” (Lewis, “The Concertina Effect: Unfolding Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*” 200). Adjusting this misconception with regard to the type of novel *NLMG* is therefore allows for a more accurate understanding of its artistic aims, and provides a better means of answering the central question pertaining to the clones' passivity towards the desirability of freedom.

#### **4.1.1 “It's what we are *supposed* to be doing isn't it?”: The Clones' Undesired Freedom in *NLMG***

From the beginning of the narrative, Kathy's mind is continually directed towards her childhood at Hailsham, her brief stint at the Cottages upon graduating

from boarding school, as well as moments in her life that have led her to the present time in the narrative where she is at the ripe old age of thirty-one. Her age is *ripe* because her friends have mostly completed their course as donors, and from the beginning of the narrative, she sets out that “they want me to go on [being a carer] for another eight months, till the end of this year” (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 3). Though unbeknownst to the reader at this point in the narrative, Kathy is in fact saying that unlike her friends, her impending transition from carer to donor is long overdue and now imminent. Her words demonstrate how she is fully aware of her fate, yet she persists, day after day, driving across the country to different recovery centres to nurse other donors. Yet all Kathy wants to do as her impending suffering and death looms is to

stop and think and remember [...] to re order all these old memories, get straight all the things that had happened between me and Tommy and Ruth [...] and just how much of what occurred later come out of our time at Hailsham” (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 37).

The notion of escape does not cross Kathy’s mind, not even when she and her friends come across opportunities to liberate themselves.

Indeed, not once or twice, but countless times in *NLMG* do the clones get opportunities of freedom; but Kathy and her friends’ minds are hardly tuned to the notion of escape. One of the most prominent and evocative scenes in the novel that demonstrates the extent to which freedom is undesired is where Kathy, Tommy and Ruth embark on a road trip to visit “the boat” (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 216):

[T]he thin woods we’d come through had ended, and now in front of us there was open marshland as far as we could see. The pale sky looked vast and you could see it reflected ever so often in the patches

of water breaking up the land. Not so long ago, the woods must have extended further, because you could see here and there ghostly dead trunks poking out of the soil, most of them broken off only a few feet up. And beyond the dead trunks, maybe sixty yards away, was the boat, sitting beached in the marshes under the weak sun.

“Oh, it’s just like my friend said it was,” Ruth said. “It’s really beautiful.”

We were surrounded by the silence and when we started to move towards the boat, you could hear the squelch under our shoes. Before long, I noticed my feet sinking beneath the tufts of grass, and called out: “Okay, this is as far as we can go”

[...]

[W]e gazed at the beached boat [...] its paint was cracking, and [...] the timber frames of the little cabin were crumbling away. It had once been painted a sky blue, but now looked almost white under the sky (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 220).

Ruth’s declaration of the beauty of the boat is followed by Tommy’s comment that “maybe this is what Hailsham looks like now”, which sparks the trio off into a conversation pertaining to the fate of Hailsham and other Hailsham students, Meg B. and Chrissie, after its closure (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 221-22). Speaking of these students leads the trio conveniently to the topic of donations, which leads Ruth into an outburst regarding Tommy’s presupposition about how Rodney felt about Chrissie’s death: “it wasn’t him on that table, trying to cling onto life. How would he know?” (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 222). The irony is stark here: despite Ruth’s rage at the cruelty of the donations’ programme and the suffering it has caused her



and their friends, and despite their discussing the gruesome and morbid details of the deaths of people that they have known, the trio merely go on “gazing at the boat” passively, admiring its beauty, whilst failing to recognise it as a vessel — an object of utility — a means for them to escape and obtain a chance at normal life. Needless to say, they do not eventually get on the boat or move nearer to it — their feet sinking into soft marsh is enough deterrence. Tommy completely misrecognises what the boat offers them: he thinks it a “pity” that they “can’t go closer to the boat” because it is not “dry” enough, but even if they had intended to get nearer to the boat, the conversation so far implies that is because they merely wish to admire its interior (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 223). The real “pity” is how they lack instrumentally or utilitarian modes of reasoning. Their relation to the boat is one of aesthetic detachment not one which sees in the boat an affordance, a means to enable actions to facilitate escape.

What is implied in the scene above is that Kathy and her friends value their education and time at Hailsham tremendously. Looking at the boat docked in the marshes, Tommy automatically associates the scene before him with what Hailsham may look like now since its closure: “I always see Hailsham being like this now. No logic to it. In fact, this is pretty close to the picture in my head” (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 220-21). Ruth too, makes a similar association:

I know the whole place had been shut down, but there I was, in Room 14, and I was looking out of the window and everything outside was flooded. Just like a giant lake. And I could see rubbish floating by under my window, empty drink cartons, everything. But there wasn’t any sense of panic or anything like that. It was nice and tranquil, just like it is here (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 221).

Tommy and Ruth's comments indicate a nostalgic longing in relation to Hailsham, as well as the positive feelings that they associate with the place. It is as though their memories of Hailsham and their time there conquers all other thoughts that they might be thinking instead. This notion finds resonance in the way Kathy glorifies being a Hailsham student. Speaking of a donor for whom she was caring, due to complete soon, she says:

He wanted not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham just like it had been his childhood [...] that was when I first understood, really understood, *just how lucky we'd been* – Tommy, Ruth and me, all the rest of us" (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 5-6).<sup>31</sup>

There is thus a strong intimation that Kathy and her friends' lack of agency arises out of the education they have received at Hailsham. Indeed, having been at Hailsham since their conception, the institution has played a major role in their upbringing and education about the wider world beyond the school grounds. Since young, they have been taught that when they come of age, they will leave Hailsham for the Cottages because their fate in life is to serve a medical purpose. Their occupations have also been set for them: at some point when they feel ready enough, they will leave the Cottages to undergo training to become "carers". Then when "they", that is, the powers that be above them, summon them to be "donors", they will make the transition from carers to donors to fulfil their function of donating their organs (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 80).

Contrary to this "mechanistic and materialistic determinism" that pervades the scientific world they inhabit and reduces "the human to the body and its parts", it is intriguing to find that the education that the clones have received is one that is

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<sup>31</sup> Italics for emphasis, mine.

deeply steeped in the arts (Lochner 228). In other words, they are hardly taught or inculcated with the same instrumentalist, mechanistic, and objectivist values as the humans who inhabit the wider world around them beyond places where they are permitted to go to — Hailsham, the Cottages, and the recovery centres. At Hailsham, the students are expected to make art and to be creative as a mark of academic achievement rather than standardised testing or quantifiable grades. The centrality of art-making and its equivalence to academic achievement can be glimpsed in Kathy's revelation that "how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected had to do with how good you were at 'creating'" (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 15-6). Four times a year the students are expected to hand in their art for display at the "Exchanges", where their work is exhibited for sale: this includes "paintings, drawings, [and] pottery" (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 16). They are also taught a literary curriculum and schooled in the reading of Victorian novels. Even as they leave Hailsham to proceed to the Cottages, instead of equipping them with pragmatic and/or practical skills that will help them to assimilate comfortably into society, the guardians instead prepare them by "trying to help each of us choose a topic that would absorb us properly for anything up to two years" (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 113). The arts education that the clones receive at Hailsham, therefore, effectively blocks them from mechanistic and instrumentalist ways of thinking. The extent of the influence and success of this can be glimpsed in Kathy's admittance that on her long drives around the country, all she finds herself thinking about sometimes is "my essay, the one I was supposed to be writing back then, [on Victorian novels] when we were at the Cottages" (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 113). The essay, which "no one [then] believed was really important" intrudes into Kathy's thoughts as she is driving (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 113). It occupies her consciousness to such a

great extent that it blocks her from seeing even that she is in a vehicle, something that might provide her with an opportunity to escape and gain her freedom.

Lochner therefore proposes that as Kathy and her friends' "acquiescence to their own exploitation can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*" (Lochner 228). According to Bourdieu, "consciousness is generated through a dialectical relation between the individual and his or her social context" (Bourdieu qtd. in Lochner 228). Kathy's conditions of existence (her arts education) create "durable, transposable dispositions" which structure "future actions and decisions in differing social contexts" without it "being in any way the product of obedience to rules [...] [or] the product [of] the organising action of a conductor" (Bourdieu qtd. in Lochner 228). As Kathy and Tommy seek out Madame and Miss Emily on the matter of a deferral, their former guardians reveal that the role of Hailsham and the arts education is to shield them from "the worst of those horrors" concerning the donations programme (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 256). In other words, their arts education has in fact, served a consolatory purpose rather than a practical purpose. In shielding them from the horrors that come with understanding the stark reality of donations, it has supplied them with the myth that they have all led good and significantly better lives than the other clones that have not been given the privilege to be at Hailsham (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 256). Whilst Lochner has argued that the focus of the novel lies in its emphasis on "the role of scientific discourse in the processes by which a culture, on the one hand, creates and sustains belief in itself, and on the other, interpolates individuals as subjects in the dominant ideology", I align my views rather with Anne Whitehead who argues that the novel, in maintaining the tension between "the clones' preternaturally calm resignation to their physical fate and their concurrent desire to live", focuses instead on the ways in

which the arts can potentially serve both consolatory and disturbing purposes (Lochner 228; Whitehead 57). I explore this claim more fully in the following two sections, and particularly, in section 4.3.

#### **4.2 Affect(less) Language and Discourse in *NLMG***

Central to Kathy's arts education at Hailsham is the way in which language is manipulated to reframe the wider world in which these clones are placed, presenting the harsh cruel world that they actually inhabit in a more palatable manner. This notion is most salient when we consider Kathy's use of euphemisms that have been inculcated within her consciousness since her time at Hailsham. Hailsham employs the use of four euphemisms to replace the word "clone": "student" for when they are still at Hailsham, "veteran" to refer to seniors at the Cottages (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 3, 153). The other two euphemisms are coded in professional and medicalised terms whereby the evocation of these discourses in accordance to these terms that mask the harsh cruel realities of what awaits Kathy and her friends. As Whitehead notes, the word "carer",

designates a category of labour [...] slid[ing] between paid employment and the work of those obliged through familial responsibility to look after those who can no longer meet their own needs" (Whitehead 59).

Indeed, "carer" stands for the initiation of the clones into the process of donating their organs. The harsh reality that they are made to care for dying friends — in other words, watch on helplessly as their friends fight for their lives — is masked by the discourse of professionalism that Kathy invokes through the euphemism of "carer" (Whitehead 59). In a similar vein, the connotation that belies the word "donor" suggests an act of selflessness: it is a form of charity, of good will towards others for

their benefit. The use of this word substitutes for the end process of the clones' lives that encodes their suffering, bleeding, and dying as a selfless act done out of their goodwill; this is rather than unveil the selfishness of a society that has created them solely for their organs. By invoking this term, borrowed from medical discourse, Kathy effectively neutralises the notion that the clones are sufferers under an instrumentalised regime. Kathy is also influenced herself by the neutral tones of these euphemisms, and this is encoded in her desire to do well at the various stages of her life as a clone.

In the beginning of her narrative, she boasts of being an excellent carer: "I do know for a fact that they've been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have too. My donors have always tended to do better than expected" (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 3). On top of the discourses of professionalism and medicine, Kathy therefore also implicates the discourse of competency in her narrative. However, unlike Stevens or Banks, who wilfully utilise the discourse of professionalism to mask their efforts in self-deception, Kathy's narrative refuses to reveal whether she willingly participates in a form of self-deception, or is genuinely ignorant and/or naïve. At a certain level, her cheerful optimism towards her closed future indicates that she sees, yet also does not perceive fully, her plight:

I won't be a carer anymore come end of the year, and though I think I've got a lot out of it, I have to admit I'll welcome the chance to rest — to stop, think and remember (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 36).

Not being a carer any longer certainly means that Kathy will move on to become a donor, but that she thinks that it is a chance to "rest — to stop think and remember" suggests that she does not fully understand the complete reality of being a donor, despite being a carer for so long (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 36). The contradictory

impulses in the quote above therefore indicates her total indoctrination under an instrumentalist regime. Kathy's ignorance, her naivety, stems from the societal structures that have brought her into being. Her arts education, which has schooled her in non-instrumentalist ways of thinking — in beauty and empathy — has only shaped her to give more empathy, to be selfless without any reasonable notion of self-care.

More pertinent is how this tension between the affective and non-affective modes of being and thinking is likewise echoed and reflected through the utilisation of the various discourses Kathy invokes. As Whitehead observes, Kathy's narrative draw[s] out the inherent tensions and ambivalences that reside within [these euphemisms], between discourses of competency and professionalism, on the one hand, and languages of affect and feeling on the other (Whitehead 60).

It is in this manner that the narrative is able to engage readers to care about Kathy, to be moved about their plight in spite of Kathy's language which is tonally flat and ridden of affect. Through the utilisation of discourses that are recognisable to the reader, the novel encodes a similarity with and therefore establishes resonance between the reader's own experiences and Kathy's experience as a clone. One of the most salient of these in the novel is the way in which Kathy talks about Hailsham and the Cottages. In her descriptions of these places, Kathy involves the discourses of friendship, and of love. The petty schoolgirl fights, those between English boys and girls, and the structured curriculum of Hailsham, project a recognisable version of a boarding school that has resonances with Eton College, except that Hailsham is co-educational. Her description of the Cottages on the other hand, as Mark Currie

argues, is “a kind of transitional institution clearly imaged as a university” (M. Currie 102):

If one mentions the Cottages today, I think of easy-going days drifting in and out of each other’s rooms, the languid way the afternoon would fold into evening then into night. I think of my pile of old paperbacks, their pages gone wobbly, like they’d once belonged to the sea. I think about how I read them, lying on my front in the grass on warm afternoons [...] I think about the mornings waking up in my room at the top of the Black Barn to the voices of students outside in the field, arguing about poetry or philosophy; or the long winters, the breakfasts in the steamed up kitchens, meandering discussions around the table about Kafka or Picasso (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 117).

The familiarity of these discourses and images therefore forces the reader to hold in their minds on the one hand, the irreality of Kathy’s situation as a clone — it is obviously fictional, it is something that has not happened in the actual world in which we live — and on the other, establishes the feeling that what is happening to Kathy could be real because there is a resonance that can be felt between her experience and ours.

Part of the delicate balance of reality and irreality in this novel also relies heavily, in part, on how human-like Kathy seems to be, in comparison to other conceptions of clones in literature or popular culture. Kathy’s speech may be affectless, but she most definitely can feel and express her feelings. Indeed, Tommy, Ruth, and Kathy, all at some point, are given a scene where they demonstrate their sadness, anger, and frustration. Whitehead has argued that:



Ishiguro leaves us with little doubt that the clones have much more human feeling than those who brought them into being, and who impose the system of donation upon them. [...] it is not only in their affective capacities and commitments that the clones reveal affinities to the human, but more particularly, in the stories that they tell – narratives which are in turn underpinned by their affective drives and desire (Whitehead 68).

One prominent example that Whitehead raises to support her point is the notional myth of the “possibles” (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 154). The theory of “possibles” comes from the notion that every clone is made from an original. Implicit in Kathy’s endeavour to look for her “possible” in trashy porn magazines, and the trip that she and her friends undertake to Norfolk to find Ruth’s “possible”, is therefore the sense of the clones’ “desire for a sense of origin and belonging”; it represents and “powerfully encapsulates the clones’ reaching toward relationality with ordinary people, and they accordingly give rise to a reciprocal echo in us” (Whitehead 68, 70). Indeed, another instance that is brought to mind is the way in which Kathy sincerely believes that Tommy and her art can save them. For Kathy and Tommy, who buy into the Romantic myth that art is an “expression of their ‘souls’ or innermost selves”, art reveals *who* they are and their desire to use their art to prove that they have souls just like the ordinary human being represents, too, this sense of a “reaching toward relationality with ordinary people” (Whitehead 70).

Further complicating Kathy’s ontological status as human-like clone is her occasional use of the second-person address. Though not a technique foreign to Ishiguro’s novels, as Ono, Stevens and Banks have utilised this function in their narratives, the “you” that Kathy refers to is characterised in many senses, based on

her own experiences as a clone. When utilising the second-person address, Kathy often begins with statements such as “I don’t know if you had ‘collections’ where you were” or “I’m sure somewhere in your childhood, you too had an experience like ours that day, similar if not in the actual details, then inside, in the feelings” (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 36, 38). In other words, the “you” that Kathy refers to in the narrative — the implied reader — is someone just like her, who is a clone, who is most likely not from Hailsham. Ishiguro has mentioned that the use of the second person addressee is a technique he utilises to “strengthen the mental landscape mapped out entirely by what [his narrator] was conscious of” and that the reader that he “intended obviously isn’t the “you” that [his narrator] refers to” (Ishiguro et al. 9). Rather, the resultant effect of this device is to create the sense that the reader “is actually eavesdropping on [his narrator] being intimate with somebody in his [or her] own town” (Ishiguro et al. 9). In other words, Kathy’s ontology as human-like clone speaking addressing a “you” that is in more than less ways similar to her serves to intensify the experience of the simultaneous states of reality and irreality in the text. By drawing on the reader’s familiarity with and ability to identify such parallels between the alternative England and England in which readers reside and by characterising Kathy as much more human-like than clone-like, Ishiguro therefore effectively directs our attention and affect to Kathy’s plight: we feel like we care for and understand her plight better than she does herself.

#### **4.3 “But Why Did You Have To Do That, Miss Emily? Did Someone Think We Didn’t Have Souls?”: The Consolatory Yet Disturbing (Mis)Uses Of Art In *NLMG***

At the height of the confrontation between Miss Emily and Madame as Kathy and Tommy go to them seeking a deferral, Kathy searches for answers in regards to

Madame's gallery and the arts education that Hailsham has provided her and her friends:

Why did we do all of that work in the first place? Why train us, encourage us, make us produce all of that? If we're just going to give donations any way, then die, why all those lessons? Why all those books and discussions? (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 254).

The purpose of her education at Hailsham, it is then revealed, is part of a "small and very vocal movement", who "wanted to demonstrate to the world that if students were reared in human, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being" (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 256). In other words, there is a further metaphorical dimension to Kathy's education at Hailsham: it is representation of the use and/or misuse of art. The clones, as Miss Emily and Madame reveal, are given an arts education because these two believed in the prowess of art to cultivate sensitive, and intelligent souls within creatures such as Kathy. An arts education was a means of bettering the quality of their lives as well as a convenient means of distraction for them. That Kathy's essay frequently pops into her mind in a rather intrusive manner whenever her thoughts drift off to contemplate her future as a donor shows the effectiveness of her education over her consciousness, for instance (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 113-4). As her guardians propose, it has shielded her from the horrors of being "reared" or having to live "in deplorable conditions" and at least delayed the very worst of the horrors to come in her life (Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* 255).

Hailsham therefore operates on the assumption that art or a humanities education can cultivate empathy within individuals, and this is a notion that has been advocated by both medical and literary critics alike (Whitehead 55). Referring to

Martha Nussbaum's defense of literature as "central to the functioning of a healthy democratic society, [...] because they underpin skills of reasoning, argument, and critique, and [...] cultivate imaginative, caring and empathic citizens", Whitehead observes that the medical humanities have likewise made the same argument in regards to the positive effects of literature, in that reading literature "make[s] better health-care professionals by widening perspectives and developing the sensibilities" (Whitehead 54). But whilst the clones' humanities education has indeed made them better and more empathetic carers, and has likewise served as a consolatory purpose for them in reassuring them that they have been given a better quality of life than the clones who were not given the opportunity to be at Hailsham, *NLMG* highlights that there is great potential nonetheless for an art and humanities' vision like Nussbaum's to be misused when such notions are entrenched within a wider instrumentalist, capitalist societal structure.<sup>32</sup> As Whitehead further proposes, *NLMG* demonstrates that "a profit-driven culture of "care" disconcertingly underpins, legitimates, and makes possible the creation of the "donation" system itself (Whitehead 56). Kathy and her friends have been schooled into becoming empathetic carers and this has prevented them from seeing the true reality of their plight: as much as they desire to connect with an original, to be human-like, they can never be, for their capitalist society reduces them to mere creatures who, upon command, can unzip themselves and present their organs for the betterment of others — humans who are a class above them because they have not been made in a laboratory. This is the disturbing quality of art that the novel presents, in its ability to conceal, to become a means of commodification of bodies and human lives.

The novel drives home this point, and makes it relatable to the reader, I posit,

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<sup>32</sup> Terry Eagleton makes a similar argument in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990).

through the notion that Kathy's passivity — her thoughts always tuned towards art and never towards escape — emphasises her ontology and her role as not only human-like clone, but as a character. Just as a character in a novel's plot, her life is mapped out. Her life is one that is lived backwards rather than forward towards an open, inconclusive future. Unlike other novels whereby the reader is often left wondering what goes on for characters after the close of the novel's pages, the reader knows for sure that Kathy is on her way to being a donor, where she will "face her death" just like her friends, by donating all her viable organs. The fact that she never once deviates from this trajectory that has been set out for her further augments the fictional quality to her life. It is in this manner that Ishiguro renders most apparent the axiomatic fictionality of *NLMG* and turns the reader's attention inwards to reflect similarly on the axiomatic fictionality of our own lives. In many ways, the novel calls on the reader to reflect and consider the various ways in which he/she is entrenched in wider societal structures that have had a deterministic effect on the way that their lives have turned out.

## CONCLUSION

In *Kazuo Ishiguro: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (Kazuo Ishiguro 2009), the Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami pens a moving and astute foreword to introduce Ishiguro's work. Murakami pinpoints Ishiguro's most outstanding feature as the fact that:

all of his novels are so different; from one to the next, they are put together in different ways, and point in different directions. In structure and style, each is clearly meant to stand apart from the others. Yet each also bears Ishiguro's unmistakable imprint, and each forms a small yet wonderfully distinct universe in itself.

When all those little universes are brought together (of course this only happens in the reader's head), a far broader universe - the sum of all of Ishiguro's novels - takes vivid shape. In this sense, his novels occupy a vertical, diachronic dimension and a horizontal, synchronic dimension at once. It is this aspect of Ishiguro that strikes me most powerfully. Each of his novels may mark a step forward in an evolutionary process. Yet the specifics of whether that process exists, or what it may or may not involve, interests me far less than the manner in which all the works are bound together. That, I feel, is what makes Ishiguro so special, and so unlike most other writers (Murakami, *Kazuo Ishiguro* 2009).

Indeed, as I have outlined in the thesis in the past few chapters, Ishiguro's novels are unique in their own ways, and hold within them storyworlds that are distinct from one novel to the next. The manner in which I have proposed that his works are bound together is a quality that I have termed axiomatic fiction: the ability of his novels simultaneously to produce and facilitate the contradictory states of reality and

irreality within the reader's experience of reading his novels. They are fictions that deftly negotiate fictional self-consciousness at the same time that they work to maintain the seamless semblance of the poetic illusion, that which captivates and enthrals readers.

Murakami speaks of "the manner in which all the works are bound together" and perhaps, in reference to this notion, I propose that it is *The Unconsoled* (1989), which as a single text also, does this binding of all the various themes that have played out in Ishiguro's oeuvre. It is for this reason that I have left analysing this novel to the last and concluding chapter, for it provides a means to sum up all of the thematic concerns, as well as techniques that Ishiguro has widely experimented with in his other novels. As the fourth novel in his oeuvre, *UC* can thus be considered to be a culmination of his first three novels, even as it marks a dramatic change stylistically, inasmuch too as it also foreshadows his later works. Out of all of Ishiguro's novels, *UC* is perhaps the most difficult to summarise due to the indeterminate settings and the complex and indeterminate ontological status of the main protagonist, Ryder, both of which in turns result in a fictional instability in the truth of the events he narrates. As A. Harris Fairbanks observes, "critics have found it notoriously difficult to formulate even the most basic description of the plot without distorting it" (Fairbanks 603). As a means of arriving at a more accurate picture of what goes on in *UC*, a survey of current criticism that has discussed the novel's plot may be useful. What is manifest is a consensus that the *UC* is a drastically different book, particularly in terms of style, from Ishiguro's other novels. Whilst admitting that the novel marks a definite shift in style in Ishiguro's oeuvre, however, I posit that a closer look at the novel unveils more similarities than differences between *UC* and the rest of the novels in his oeuvre. In particular, the

techniques utilised in *UC* might be viewed as amplified versions of the self-consciousness and experimental dimensions of his work that plays out subtly in his other novels. I thus turn my attention first to the ways in which *UC* flouts traditional realist conventions and reconfigures these conventions to create that sense of axiomatic fictionality.

### 5.1 Indeterminate Settings, Indeterminate Ontology in *UC*

The questions that revolve around *UC* are basic — who is Ryder? Where is he? And what is he doing? — yet answers to these questions are not easy to arrive at. Present scholarship on the novel has sought to describe the novel and to recall Fairbanks' observation: it is “notoriously difficult to formulate [...] [a] basic description of the plot without distorting it” (Fairbanks 603). The “distortion” that Fairbanks speaks of, or what I would call a detail that often undercuts or short-circuits the rest of the plot description, often has to do with the vexed question of answering the cumbersome yet necessary question of who Ryder is. Gary Adelman, for instance, writes that Ryder is “the author-chief actor in the dream narrative, [who] arrives in a small city, perhaps in Germany to play a concert” (Adelman 167).

Natalie Reitano proposes that “Ryder is beset by an amnesia he barely acknowledges” (Reitano 361). Barry Lewis, in a similar vein, argues that Ryder is:

an internationally acclaimed concert pianist, [who is also] the victim of an inexplicable amnesia. He arrives on a Tuesday at an unnamed town, somewhere in the heart of Europe, without a schedule. But this is not just another venue on his tour: it is the home of his partner, Sophie, and child, Boris, facts that have curiously slipped his mind (Lewis 104).

Fairbanks pinpoints inaccuracies in the conceptions above, citing that these descriptors need further qualification. Indeed, “if Ryder is simply a victim of



amnesia, why does Sophie's father, Gustav, not recognise him?", the question that I would follow up with is: is Gustav beset by a similar condition too? (Fairbanks 608).

Fairbanks then gives an attempt at formulating his own views. He posits that

the events [that occur in *UC*] are not those of a proper dream to be related to some ulterior reality; rather, they belong to a world in which events and the main's character's psychological reaction operate as they do in a dream, but which is itself the ultimate reality (Fairbanks 604).

In other words, Fairbanks is proposing that Ryder is not living in a dream, or anyone else's dream, but rather the ontological setting of the novel is itself a dreamworld that resembles the inner workings of a dream (Fairbanks 605).

Whether Ryder is in a dream, lives in a dreamworld, or is beset by an amnesia, the narrative does not let up and give easy answers. Despite the split camps on the question of who Ryder is, critics generally concur with the view that the novel signals a marked stylistic departure from Ishiguro's first three novels and remains his most radical work even after the publications of his fifth and sixth novels. Richard Rorty's comments perfectly sum up the prevailing view on this matter:

[*UC*] has little in common with its predecessors. There is still a first-person narrator, but he is not engaged in redesccribing his own life.

Indeed, he has almost no long term memory. He can barely impose a minimal coherence on the events of the previous hour. The action of the novel does not take place against a background of real history. The unnamed town to which the narrator [...] pays a four day visit is unlocatable in space or time (Rorty 13).

As such, because of this prevailing view, many critics focus on discussion of the differences between *UC* and the rest of the novels in Ishiguro's oeuvre, therefore

neglecting the similarities between them. As Brian W. Shaffer and Mike Petry astutely observe, “reviewers who stress *UC*’s break with its author’s earlier fiction [...] often overlook those characteristics that the novel shares with the earlier works” (Shaffer, *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* 91; Petry 129). Shaffer goes on to deliberate on the resemblances between *UC* and Ishiguro’s first three novels:

We encounter again a first-person narrator who paradoxically conceals yet at the same time reveals elements of his past life and present reality [...] the themes of guilt and humiliation persist, as do the means of negotiating them: excessive flattery, elisions, voluntary and involuntary amnesia. Like *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *UC* concerns the problematic position of the artist in society, even though Ryder is a distinguished pianist rather than painter, like Ono, of uncertain stature. Like *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *UC* interrogates ‘professionalism’ as well as the myriad shortcomings that often hide behind professionalism — though the ‘workaholic’ in the fourth novel is ‘the finest pianist in the world’ rather than a butler. Like *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *UC* explores child abuse and the various emotional aftershocks that commonly follow it into adulthood; indeed, in both mood and theme, Ishiguro’s first novel is perhaps closest to his first [...] Concrete facts are even more conspicuously absent, even more difficult to discern, in Ishiguro’s [...] latest novel (Shaffer 91-92 qtd. in Petry 130).

Indeed, to follow through with Shaffer’s discussion on the similarities between *UC* and Ishiguro’s other novels, *When We Were Orphans* (2000) — especially in its latter half — evidently shares with *UC* the same indeterminate settings. When the narrative takes a turn down the path of irreality, *WWWO* throws up similar questions

that *UC* throws up: Who is detective Banks and is he hallucinating? On the other hand, Ishiguro's plunge into an alternative England so as to push his settings to take on metaphorical significance in *Never Let Me Go* (2005) resonates with his earlier, more drastic endeavour undertaken in *UC*. Both Banks and Kathy also share Ryder's propensity towards blindness in regard to their own situation. By pivoting *UC* against the rest of Ishiguro's novels, I propose that a more accurate picture of Ryder's situation and the events in the storyworld may be obtained. Rather than give a summary of the novel before beginning my analysis as in previous chapters, I wish to provide this summary alongside the highlighting of several techniques that present themselves as ostensibly and markedly different from the techniques in his previous novels, before turning to address the ways in which those that manifest in *UC* are, in effect, simply amplified versions of those in his other novels. They are markers of axiomatic fictionality.

### **5.1.1 Who is Ryder? Where is he? What is it he is doing?**

Upon opening the pages of the novel, the reader is introduced to a scene familiar to them: it is ostensibly more realist than irrealist. Ryder tells us that he has just been dropped off by a taxi driver in front of a hotel. He enters "a reasonably spacious" lobby and finds that there is no one around; it is "deserted" (*UC* 3). As he turns to survey his surroundings, he notes that "the ceiling was low and had a definite sag, creating a slightly claustrophobic mood and despite the sunshine outside the light was gloomy" (*UC* 3). No sooner does he turn to do this, a "young man in uniform", the receptionist, appears to attend to him (*UC* 3). It is obvious then that Ryder has just arrived at a hotel. He does not reveal what city he is in nor what hotel he is staying at. The receptionist apologises for not recognising him. It is established from this point on that Ryder is someone who is famous. As the receptionist

mentions the hotel manager, Mr Hoffman, and makes references to a certain Mr Brodsky who has been practicing the piano diligently, Ryder neither confirms nor denies recognition of these names: “I thought about the name, and it meant nothing to me” (*UC* 4). He acknowledges, however, that he has no clue about what is happening on “Thursday Night” and is far too tired to “summon the energy to enquire into [its] precise nature” (*UC* 4). Up until this point, the narrative seems fairly rooted in the real: Ryder is someone who is famous, and has arrived at an unnamed hotel in an unnamed city and has no recognition of names being mentioned to him in conversation, despite these being mentioned in a way that implies that he *must* have come across these people before. He meets Gustav, the porter of the hotel, who carries his suitcases for him as they await the elevator. The elevator opens, and they enter. As Petry has noticed, there is a little asterisk that marks the end of the second page in the novel, which has occurred in every single edition of the *UC* (Petry 130). It is therefore tempting, as Petry argues, to:

read the book as if after this asterisk, after the first two pages of the text, the ‘rules’ and ‘laws’ of the novel’s world radically part company with that of what is generally referred to as ‘reality’ (Petry 130).

Indeed, the narrative takes an unrealistic turn after this typographical mark.

The first stylistic innovation that *UC* introduces to the reader is the stretching of or conflation of time beyond its reasonable limits. The reader would expect that an elevator ride would take no more than one to two minutes, but as Gustav and Ryder ride the elevator in an indeterminate location, their conversation within the confines of the elevator goes on for at least nine pages. Ryder advises the old porter to put the bags down, on seeing that his face “growing red with effort”, but the porter begins a monologue on the history of the hotel they are in, the history of portering, the hard

strains of the job, and the difficulties that underpin being a porter, and last but not least, revealing that holding bags up and never putting them down is what is required to “impress on the guests something of the true nature of our work” (*UC* 8). Judging by the extent to which he takes pride in his work and values professionalism, stretching himself beyond the limits of his physique, Gustav seems to be an apparition or reiteration of Stevens the butler, or Ono the painter, a more comical variation. Later in the novel, as he performs the Porters’ Dance in the square to the rallying crowd cheering him on to carry more and more suitcases, Gustav takes on too, a semblance of Stevens’ father, who refuses to give up his commitment to work even as his health fails (*UC* 400-405). Embedded within this cheerful yet tragic picture of the porter trying to meet the demands of the crowd — in order to fulfil his inner belief on what it means to be a dignified porter — is a metaphor for hubris and what such professional overreaching does to those who are deeply entrenched in its ideology of professionalism. Gustav, like Stevens Senior, succumbs eventually to a physical death; their deaths signifying just how parochial the human vision is, especially for the person who is so besotted with working hard. The tragedy, echoed in all of Ishiguro’s other novels, is the notion that one works hard to serve others, and despite trying one’s best to lead life in the best way possible, all that remains at the end of the day is the notion that, even though personal sacrifices have sometimes been made, these values have been misplaced, or they simply never amounted to much anyway in the end even if other aspects of existence have been neglected.

Shortly after the introduction of the notion that time does not operate in the same manner in the *UC* as in his other novels and as in the actual world of readers, *UC* swiftly introduces yet another: a distortion of space/place. Gustav pauses in the midst of his monologue and refers to a certain Miss Hilde Stratmann, and as Ryder

turns to the spot where Gustav is gazing, he realises “with a start that we were not alone in the elevator” (*UC* 9). It is as though Gustav summoned an apparition of Miss Stratmann with just a look, or just by thinking about her. Whether Gustav has superpowers or not is not of central importance here, but this instance is a clear indication that the storyworld of *UC* also does not operate in accordance with the rules that govern space. Indeed, as the novel proceeds, and as the reader follows Ryder through the various roads, buildings, and places that he traverses, this notion is constantly being played out. As Ryder weaves through the hotel to the Old Town to the café where Gustav has directed him, he looks for “someone likely to be the porter’s daughter” (*UC* 31). As he enters the café he is greeted with waves by Sophie and Boris, both of whom he also fails recognise. It is suggested however, through Ryder’s gradual discernment, that he has had an argument about a house with Sophie over the phone before, that Sophie is his partner, and that Boris is, accordingly, his partner’s son/step-son (*UC* 35).

One of the most disconcerting moments of this disregard for unity of space occurs right after this meeting, as the trio set off to where Boris wants to go. Boris speaks of finding “Number Nine”, a miniature football player that he has left behind at the “old house” (*UC* 41). Ryder once again does not remember at first, but after Boris’ insistence intimations of “Number Nine”, he begins to recall (*UC* 41). That he forgets and then remembers therefore suggests that he is not beset with an amnesia, but that there is an arbitrary quality in his recalling abilities — a point to which I return to later. Boris and Ryder set off, following after Sophie, who begins walking by keeping a steady pace, but the physical landscape itself seems to stretch itself longer and longer, maintaining an ever-widening distance between them and Sophie. As Ryder says, “it seemed to take an inordinate time for us to reach the corner

ourselves. Once we finally turned it, I saw to my annoyance that Sophie had gained even further on us” (UC 40). Likewise, with the scene in the elevator, a random character suddenly appears: Geoffery Saunders, Ryder’s friend from school, “fell in step alongside them”, accompanying them on their journey to wherever they are going (UC 44). It is clear at this point then the landscape of the *UC* morphs, but such a distortion of landscape, I posit, is not random, and this becomes clear when we return to examining the notion of an arbitrary quality underpinning Ryder’s recall function.

Indeed, one of the other instances that demonstrates the arbitrary nature of Ryder’s ability to recall takes place in the moments where the present scene gives way to a superimposition of Ryder’s childhood memories. As Ryder dozes off and wakes up with a start in the hotel, he stares at the ceiling and

went on scrutinising [it] for some time [...] [and there was a] sense of recognition growing stronger by the second [...] that I [...] was in the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt’s house on the borders of England and Wales. I looked again around the room, then, lowering myself back down, started once more at the ceiling. It had been recently re-plastered and re-painted, its dimensions had been enlarged, the cornices had been removed, the decorations around the light fitting had entirely been altered. But it was unmistakably the same ceiling I had so often stared up at from my narrow creaking bed of those days (UC 16).

Then, turning to the floor, Ryder reflects:

*I could remember* how once that same area of floor had been covered by a worn green mat, where several times a week I would set out in careful

formations my plastic soldiers [...] I let my fingers brush against the hotel rug, and as I did so a memory came back to me of one afternoon when I had been lost within my world of plastic soldiers and a furious row had broken out downstairs [...] Near the centre of the green mat had been a torn patch that had always been a source of much irritation to me [...] But that afternoon [...] it occurred to [...] me that this tear could be used as a sort of bus terrain for my soldiers to cross. This discovery – that the blemish that had always threatened to undermine my imaginary world could in fact be incorporated in it — had been one of some excitement for me (UC 16).<sup>33</sup>

Once again, there is a distortion of time and space in this scene: it is an impossible notion that the hotel bedroom that Ryder temporarily resides in used to belong to him as a child, and it is clear from Ryder's description of how the room has changed that so much has changed that in any case it would render it unrecognisable to him in actual fact. This scene therefore is suggestive of the ways in which Ryder might hypothetically impose his imagination and map it out onto the external surroundings around him. That Ryder realises that even an imperfect detail that can threaten to undermine the imaginary, fictional world that he inhabits, therefore suggests his complicity in regard to how his external surroundings are skewed in accordance with the states of presence of his consciousness: that the intensive attention focussed on processes of the imagination may supplant and blot out the processes of external perception. This theory follows along the same thread as Ishiguro's comments on the people Ryder meets in the *UC*:

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<sup>33</sup> Italics for emphasis, mine.



Ryder appropriates the people he encounters to work out parts of his life and his past [...] wandering around in this dream world where he bumps into earlier, or later, versions of himself (Ishiguro et al. 114).

In a similar vein then, Ryder appropriates his settings, reshapes them to fit his vision of what he wants to perceive and maps this out onto the external landscape around him. In a sense, the settings of the *UC* can therefore be considered to be a labyrinthine model of Ryder's mind: rather than a landscape, it is a mindscape.

Ryder's ability to incorporate memory — fragments from his past — into the present, making it part of present experience in the storyworld for the reader, is representative also of the ways in which Ishiguro's other narrators accomplish this too, in less overt ways. As Ishiguro's narrators, Etsuko, Ono, Stevens, Banks, and Kathy rewind the tapes of their lives and examine the several different aspects of their past, they too, are reliving memories, making them present to the reader as well as to themselves. Like Ryder, they alter the unpleasant and shameful aspects of their past so as to confabulate better versions of themselves and they present these self-deceiving portraits to the reader. All of them are aware of the fiction-making aspect of human experience, the propensity for one to turn towards confabulation as consolation for a past that cannot be redeemed except in the form of memory. Yet, even as these narrators go through their memories and revisit these past events, there is still a huge sense that they do not know themselves any better than readers do.

This notion that Ishiguro disrupts the Cartesian view that there is no one who knows one better than oneself plays out in the *UC* too, through the characterisation of Ryder as an intermittent omniscient narrator. Ryder can hear conversations going on within Miss Collins' house despite sitting in a car that is parked outside the building; he can hear the conversations that go on between the journalist and the photographer who

takes him to the Sattler monument for his picture (*UC* 167, 327). He is some sort of mind reader, but as Ishiguro himself proposes, Ryder “is omniscient in some ways, but he is incredibly restricted in others. He might have access to other people’s memories but sometimes he can’t even remember very basic things” (Ishiguro et al. 122). Indeed, this voluntary amnesia is a condition that underpins all of Ishiguro’s self-deceptive narrators. They all selectively remember, not remember, or misremember, in order to shape reality in accordance to their fancies. This (ir)reality is often concocted out of a mix of imagination and perception as coloured by emotions being felt by the narrator at a particular point in time. Indeed, it is in this manner that Ishiguro’s fictions demonstrate the unique capacity of novels to represent intimate portraits of human interiority by simulating the experience for the reader of what it means for one mind to encounter and seem to ‘enter’ the private space of other minds. In aestheticising memory through his unreliable narrators’ telling of their pasts - simultaneously revealing and hiding their perception, imagination, knowledge, and emotions — these novels hold up a mirror to minds and the interiors of life and remind us of the consolatory yet disturbing quality of art and narrative to provide consolation whilst at the same time conflating and disturbing the categories of order/disorder, perception/delusion and the boundaries between reality/fiction.

## **5.2 A Final Note on Ishiguro’s Unconsoled Narrators**

Towards the end of *UC*, Ryder gets on a train which runs on around the unnamed city he is visiting. Despite not managing to fulfil his duties during the course of his stay — he does not eventually give the performance that he was supposed to give, and he gives a speech to an empty auditorium — Ryder gets himself some breakfast, jostling with other passengers on the tram who are getting

their own breakfast too. He notes: “the atmosphere was extremely cordial, with people passing things to one another and exchanging cheerful remarks” (*UC* 534). As he begins serving himself breakfast, and within the time span that he fills up his coffee cup “to the brim”, he imagines this scenario:

I began to picture myself already back in my seat, exchanging pleasant talk with the electrician, glancing out between mouthfuls at the early-morning streets. The electrician was in many ways the ideal person for me to talk to at this moment. He was clearly kind-hearted, but at the same time careful not to be intrusive. I could see him now, still eating his croissant, obviously in no hurry to get off the tram. In fact, he looked set to go on sitting there for a long time to come. And with the tram running a continuous circuit, if the two of us were enjoying our conversation, he was just the sort to delay getting off until the next time his stop came around. The buffet too was clearly here to stay for some time yet, so that we would be able to break off from our conversation every now and then to replenish our plates. [...] We would shake hands and wish each other a good day [...] and I would go off to join the crowd of cheerful passengers gathering around the exit [...] Then as the tram came to a halt, I would perhaps give the electrician one last wave and disembark, secure in the knowledge that I could look forward to Helsinki with pride and confidence (*UC* 534-35).

Ryder imagines an infinitely convivial atmosphere where he is able to sit down, take his time, and eat his breakfast, without rushing for the plane that he needs to catch to Helsinki. He is in actual fact, cheering himself up. The novel’s ending resonates with all of Ishiguro’s other novels — there is a prevailing tendency for his narrators to

cheer themselves up towards the end of their narrative, to give themselves a consolatory pat on the back, and this, despite how tragically or disappointingly life has turned out for them.

Their consolation lies ultimately in words, in the redemptive quality of stories and the human mind to transform absence and the intangible into a presence that feels tactile and therefore real. The axiomatic fictionality of Ishiguro's novels, therefore, in their ability to disrupt and blur the lines between what is considered to be real or fictional, reality or irreality, highlights the disturbing yet consolatory function of art and gestures towards an innately human propensity to tend towards world-making. The point that his novels make, as axiomatic fictions, is precisely that this propensity and our contradictory drives for wholeness and order also inevitably render humans vulnerable to delusional perception and ideation. His fictions thus offer a compelling image of the self: ruled by states of minds and the society that shapes it, this self strives to impose and find coherence, even as it disintegrates. At the same time, these aspects of human experience suggest why novels might be therapeutic, for in allowing the self to mind-read other minds, they also offer insight into the ways in which we escape solipsism, ways in which we might expand those capacities, ultimately showing us a way out of the parochial or closed singularity of the individual life.

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