

# The Evanescence of a Life Remembered: Ishiguro's Stories

By Mukesh Williams



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In his novels Kazuo Ishiguro mixes memory and desire to energize a slow, repetitive cycle of emotions and relationships spinning in time and space, at times capturing the gossamer evanescence of a life remembered. His early writings about Nagasaki, Japan and Guildford, England are emotionally intense attempts to find his roots or retrieve a vanished era. The urgency to immortalize a personalized world and at the same time to transcend it, creates a sense of desperation and gloominess that is almost palpable in his fiction. His landscapes are richly constructed of old and new communities where ogres and phantoms float over icy fogs, creating a surreal landscape. His crisp clear prose makes his work immediately accessible to his readers. He takes a sweeping view of social structures that control society and at the same time provides minutiae of human interaction to control his theme and vision. Since the 1950s the Western fascination to understand the mentalities and emotions of the past in the lives of people, as epitomized in the Annales school of Fernand Braudel and Lucien Febvre, gives a new impetus to the writings of Ishiguro. He weaves a pattern of man's relationship to his environment, imagining a slow repetitive cycle of emotions and connecting them to the ebb and flow of hegemonic economic systems, dysfunctional societies and clashing civilizations. He stands as a beacon of hope in a world fractured by divisive politics and ideologies. Ishiguro believes that he is writing international novels which can pull out the sympathies of a cosmopolitan reader and bind the world together in a common emotional response. Ishiguro hopes, after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017, that this recognition will remind our tired world to go beyond "far right ideologies and tribal nationalism" and "struggle together" as human beings.

Together with his readers, Ishiguro understands that the world is divided by reprehensible assumptions and enormous inequalities and yet he hopes that literature, which communicates feelings, can break these dark walls and bring together a divided world. After all, the Nobel Prize in Literature was given to him for uncovering "the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world". Writer and readers agree that the world we inhabit is highly contested and divided by an immeasurable gulf often hard to bridge. And yet Ishiguro hopes that literature can bring people together by representing their mentalities and hidden intentions.

## Deceitful Memory & the Games It Plays on People

Memory often plays tricks with his characters but memory is all that they have, to reconstruct the past which is almost lost. The web of meaning that emerges when memory interacts with the present often leads to deception, remorse and guilt. His novels of the 1980s — *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989) — explore the ways human beings remember and reconstruct their past. In the first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* the eventful life of an aging Japanese woman Etsuko is contrasted with her present life in the English countryside. She remembers her daughters Niki and Keiko and her two marriages. Memories of Nagasaki, Etsuko's meeting with egocentric Sachiko and her deranged daughter Mariko bring out selfishness in human relationships. Sachiko leaves her mentally disturbed daughter wandering in the woods and makes no effort to send her to school. Etsuko, on the other hand, is haunted by the suicide of her daughter Keiko and feels guilt for bringing her to England knowing that Keiko "wouldn't be happy over here". The relationship between Sachiko and Mariko is a foil to that between Etsuko and Keiko revealing the selfishness of both mothers. Etsuko uses the story of Sachiko to understand her own guilt in the death of her daughter. Ishiguro sees this "narrative strategy" as a way to use someone else's story to talk about "things they cannot face directly". Here the writer explores "the language of self-deception and self-protection" to show the debasement and callousness of human nature. But at times self-deception can also end in self-realization and atonement.

An old, reputed painter, Masuji Ono is a slippery story teller in *An Artist of the Floating World*. Early in the novel the reader is alerted to his unreliability and self-deception. Ono is nostalgic for the nationalistic rhetoric of pre-World War II Japan and cannot understand the imposition of an American democracy on the nation. He finds it difficult to comprehend the aspirations of the new generation of Japanese trying to make a "better go of things". His nationalistic feelings propel him to make a "grand contribution" through his art to the people of Japan. Though he behaves humbly in public, he is full of himself. It is easier to understand Ono not through the narration of actual events, of buying a house or finding a husband for his daughter, but through his digressions where he reveals himself. He does not understand why war criminals were compelled to commit suicide but buys the nationalistic rhetoric of

honor in fighting for your country. Soon we come to understand that he does not recognize his own complicity in the war. When he does understand his “shortcomings” it is too late as the new generation does not even know him. He is surprised by the bitter truth his friend tells him — “No one cares now what the likes of you and me once did.” But Ono still clings to his old notions. He still believes that it is better to take “some bold steps” than to never put “one’s convictions to the test” through sheer “lack of will and courage”. The reader finally comes to understand that Ono has not understood the crimes he has committed.

*The Remains of the Day* (1989) is quite different. It carries the message of seizing the moment, *carpe diem*, what remains of life. The novel shares many qualities with cultures that are born of restraint; both English and Japanese readers love it. The chief butler at an English aristocrat’s country home, Mr. Stevens is not a simple man. He is reticent, professional and decorous but lacks the courage to respond to the love that housekeeper Miss Kenton has for him. Since he tells the story he fools the reader into believing that Miss Kenton’s marriage is collapsing. He hides himself in his admiration for Lord Darlington, his former employer and a Nazi sympathizer. He also talks of the immaculate dignity of his father who was also a butler, his inability to recognize the significance of moments, and finally of Miss Kenton’s wasteful desire to return to Darlington Hall, but he is unwilling to accept the fact that he should have acted when he was expected to:

But what is the sense in forever speculating what might have happened had such and such a moment turned out differently? One could presumably drive oneself to distraction in this way. In any case, while it is all very well to talk of “turning points”, one can surely only recognize such moments in retrospect. Naturally, when one looks back to such instances today, they may indeed take the appearance of being crucial, precious moments in one’s life; but of course, at the time, this was not the impression one had. Rather, it was as though one had available a never-ending number of days, months, years in which to sort out the vagaries of one’s relationship with Miss Kenton; an infinite number of further opportunities in which to remedy the effect of this or that misunderstanding. There was surely nothing to indicate at the time that such evidently small incidents would render whole dreams forever irredeemable.

Mr. Stevens is full of excuses. He hides his shortcomings in admiring the beauty of a culture built on restraint. To exonerate himself, he speculates upon wrong choices, “crucial moments”, “turning points”, missed opportunities and misunderstanding that he

has no control over. At last the reader comes to understand through Miss Kenton’s letter that Mr. Stevens is veering off at a tangent only to hide his own feelings and mistakes. Here we see sexual repression at its height, preventing human beings from pursuing their happiness. He is too pompous and inhibited and symptomatic of those mysterious unreliable narrators who say one thing and do another.

In the end, however, Mr. Stevens finds out that they both love each other but it is too late. Miss Kenton is married and has a grown-up daughter, Catherine, who is expecting a child. Mr. Stevens cries and says his “heart is breaking”. He realizes that his taciturn behavior has not been to his advantage and whatever remains of the day he must choose to spend wisely. As Miss Kenton leaves by bus, he finds his way to the seaside town of Weymouth where he sits on a pier and cries. Mr. Stevens talks to a stranger sitting on a bench, telling him that he continues to make more and more mistakes as days go by. The stranger advises him not to look back at the past or blame himself.

Perhaps, then, there is something to his advice that I should cease looking back so much, that I should adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day.

Mr. Stevens resolves to work with greater zeal and hone his bantering skills to serve his new American employer Mr. Farraday better.

Ishiguro both lampoons and finds significance in the life of an English butler. Obviously, Ishiguro is heir to a tradition of literary butlers immortalized by P.G. Wodehouse, butlers like Reginald and Sebastian Beach, those shadowy figures who stoically hide secrets, are circumspect and feel their lives are not worth recording. The writer’s tongue-in-cheek prose tells us that the English are heir to a tradition of restraint embodied in the profession of a butler. Here is an interesting paragraph from the novel:

It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants. I tend to believe this is true. Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race are 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 a strong emotion, and are thus unable to maintain a professional demeanour other than in the least challenging of situations. If I may return to my earlier metaphor — you will excuse my putting it so coarsely — they are like a man who will,

at the slightest provocation, tear off his suit and his shirt and run about screaming. In a word “dignity” is beyond such persons. We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman.

Ishiguro explains that the three essential qualities of a butler, that only the English possess, are “emotional restraint”, “dignity” and “a professional demeanour”. Ishiguro confessed in an interview that he was “consciously trying to write for an international audience” about the private lives of English butlers.

### An Ephemeral Remembrance

In 1995 Ishiguro wrote a lengthy novel, *The Unconsoled*, running into 535 pages, which covers three days in the life of a man, a stream of consciousness technique, perfected by James Joyce. Ishiguro attempts to capture the thoughts and reactions of his character in a continuous flow of feeling but fails. Ryder is a famous pianist who goes to a European city to perform but gets caught in a web of appointments and cannot control his schedule. Ishiguro repeats, circles and delays to create utmost confusion. It was a confusing novel for critics who either saw it as terrible or a masterpiece. Right from the beginning there is absence of recognition — the porter fails to recognize Ryder. Ryder is a poignant and unpredictable narrator. In one scene he complains of Miss Stratmann not giving him a copy of his schedule — “the fault was hers” — but shortly afterwards reads the same schedule on a flight, “making careful study”. Just like Ryder, we are perplexed by the world he creates. The reader wonders what is happening to the small boy Boris who is always lost in cafes or hotel rooms. It is a puzzling novel which can be explained by Ishiguro’s technique of using appropriation which he describes as characters representing Ryder’s different stages of life. Perhaps the story is capturing the psychological world of Ryder, full of impressions, memories and episodes. Can Boris be his childlike self or conductor Brodsky his older self? We really do not know. The novel does not leave anything behind. Nothing is resolved. Everything is moving as if in a dream. It leaves you exhausted if trying to remember and failing to remember.

### Intrigue & Dystopia

In two other novels — *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) — Ishiguro weaves tales of memory, intrigue and dystopia inhabited by warlords and clones who are keenly aware of

their destinies. *When We Were Orphans* is a Dickensian novel of longings and delays. Christopher Banks is an English boy who grows up to become a detective in England during the 1930s. However, he fails to solve a crime in the past or find his parents. He believes that they have vanished after angering a Shanghai warlord Wang Ku. He returns to Shanghai 20 years later during the Sino-Japanese War to discover the fate of his parents. As he discovers the unheroic past of his parents he feels that he has completed his mission satisfactorily. The novel presents a maze of memories and how they shape the present. Though Christopher’s job as a detective is a lonely one, he hopes to marry Jennifer and raise a family. Some critics feel that Ishiguro’s prose is circumlocutious and hard to read.

*Never Let Me Go* presents a dystopian society of clones whose organs are harvested early in life and follows the life of a 32-year-old female clone, Kathy H., who spends her life at a boarding school with friends Ruth and Tommy and ends up as a donor. We come to know about Hailsham, which emerges as a dark place full of surprises. Kathy has a cassette tape of songs by Judy Bridgewater and her favorite song is “Never Let Me Go”. The story ends tragically with all becoming donors. Obviously in both novels Ishiguro underscores the importance of human relationship within a family and in society to escape the morbidity and sadness of life.

### Medieval Legends & Prehistory

In *The Buried Giant* (2015) Ishiguro explores the murky depths of primordial memory, prehistory, and medieval legends but wonders if they can be retrieved through language and become a literary artifact. There is a desperation and gloominess in a landscape where fog hangs like ogres over “rivers and marshes”. Here old men and women live their lives waiting for the end, like the gloomy elderly couple Axl and Beatrice. They try to convince the boatman to take them to the island of the dead to meet their long-forgotten son. Just below the surface of their lived life, history is replete with slaughter and mayhem. Though the Saxons and Britons live peacefully, memory is fresh with wounds and maggots of the past. Both individual and collective amnesia confronting death is writ large over the fictional nation of Britain — “You’ve long set your heart against it, Axl, I know. But it’s time now to think on it anew. There’s a journey we must go on, and no more delay.” But only one person at a time can go in the boat to the island. Axl is doubtful how the boatman can decide so easily who to take. The boatman replies in Chapter Two:

A couple may claim to be bonded by love, but we boatmen may see instead resentment, anger, even hatred. Or a great barrenness. Sometimes a fear of loneliness and nothing more.

Abiding love that has endured the years — that we only see rarely. When we do, we're only too glad to ferry the couple together. Good lady, I've already said more than I should.

It is hard to find “abiding love” in long years of relationship and when it happens it transcends life and death. Relationships in our world are filled with resentment, anger and hatred. Such knowledge as the boatman or the scribe possess is rarely shared with ordinary mortals.

### Ishiguro & Nagasaki

Ishiguro is enamored of memories of Nagasaki and introduces them in his novels with dexterity and intensity. He was born in Nagasaki in 1954 and migrated to Britain with his father at the age of five. Suddenly Ishiguro discovers a new passion in his theme-writing about Nagasaki. In his Nobel lecture and interviews he tells us that when he started writing about Nagasaki he felt a “new and urgent intensity” about Japan as if “something unlocked”.

Japan has a significant role to play in Ishiguro's fiction. In *When We Were Orphans* the shifting loyalties to Japan of different generations loom large over the novel. We see young Akira “obsessed with the prowess of his race” but does not want to return. He wants to remain in Shanghai while his sister and parents miss Nagasaki and wish to return to the city. The constant tug-o-war between a foreign land and Japan are unmistakable in Ishiguro. Akira assesses the situation of staying in Shanghai or returning to Nagasaki. He worries that if he misbehaves or lags in schoolwork it would be like a “small tear in a kimono sleeve” producing serious consequences.

Ishiguro remembers the upbringing and language of his mother in prewar Japan and the changes that were wrought on Japanese society during her lifetime. He also tells us that his mother was hurt by flying debris in the wake of the American bombing of Nagasaki and felt fearful uncertainty in dark underground tunnels. In a *Paris Review* interview, he tells us:

My mother's very much a Japanese lady of her generation. She has a certain kind of manners — prefeminist Japanese by today's standards. When I see old Japanese movies, I recognize a lot of the women behaving and speaking exactly like my mother does. Japanese women traditionally used a slightly different formal language from men, and these days that's gotten much more mixed up. When my mother visited Japan in the eighties, she said she was stunned that young girls were using male language.

His mother felt the changes in Japanese society when Japanese girls started using “male language”.

Ishiguro continues to keep in touch with the city of his birth. Upon receiving a congratulatory note from Nagasaki Mayor Tomohisa Taue about the Nobel Prize, Ishiguro wrote to him on Nov. 14, 2017:

When I go to Stockholm next month, and deliver my official Nobel Lecture at the Swedish Academy a few days before I receive the prize, I plan to talk in some detail about how Nagasaki, and my memories of Nagasaki, were the foundations of my writing career. You are correct in what you say; what I always remembered as “Japan” when I was growing up in England was Nagasaki. I knew no other Japan! I still feel a special emotion just to hear the word Nagasaki.

### An International Writer

Ishiguro remarks that when he narrates his story in “terms of Japan” “everything that looked parochial and small... reverberate[s]” internationally. He states:

I am a writer who wishes to write international novels. What is an “international” novel? I believe it to be one, quite simply, that contains a vision of life that is of importance to people of varied backgrounds around the world. It may concern characters who jet across continents, but may just as easily be set firmly in one small locality.

Ishiguro believes that an “international novel” must share the lived experiences of people of “varied backgrounds” and evoke sympathy in a cosmopolitan reader. He weaves a pattern of relationships, integrating them with lived experiences and environment. He brings out the joys, sorrows and pretensions of individuals in fiction that the global reader, located in any culture, can understand and respond to sympathetically. Ishiguro believes that even though we are transient beings we must “think beyond our dividing walls” to “inspire and give hope”. **JS**

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