

**Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation**

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**In the Vortex of the Mind**

**Patterns of Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels**

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## I. Preliminaries to the Research, Topic and Objectives

I set out to examine the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro, the contemporary British author of Japanese origins. Kazuo Ishiguro is an internationally renowned writer, whose works have been translated into almost 40 languages. Active in various fields, he has written screenplays and lyrics; however, is mostly known for his fiction. Ishiguro started his career with promising short stories (“Strange and Sometimes Sadness”, “Waiting for J”, “Getting Poisoned”, “A Family Supper”), and in 1982 he published his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, followed by two other novels in the same decade, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989). The latter was awarded with various prizes, notably The Man Booker Prize. The novels, possibly because of the author’s origins and the Japanese settings of the first two works, were interpreted in the foreground of Japanese traditions and Western stereotypes of Japan. Partially for this reason his next novel *The Unconsoled* (1995) explored new and surreal territories, becoming Ishiguro’s most fervently debated work. The next two novels *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) returned to less controversial grounds. Ishiguro’s next published work was, for the first time in his career, a collection of loosely connected short stories *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* in 2009. His latest novel to date is *The Buried Giant* (2015), published a decade after the previous novel.

Ishiguro’s narrators remember, and in this process they recall various stages of their life. Notably they are either elderly or have come to a certain point when they feel the need to look back. The reader can follow the narrators decades back into their youth and adult years, to events of importance; learn about parents, children and friends; and find traces of traumas half hidden, half uncovered. However, despite the long reminiscing all stories remain (or become) fragmented, the whole story is never told. The narrators turn and fix the reader’s gaze on events, sometimes only to avert it from others. Memory, the phrase “I remember” opens certain recesses of the mind and shuts down others. In a way the principal entity of Ishiguro’s seven novels to date is memory; through the narrators he weaves intricate patterns of memory, recalling, revealing, shaping and concealing the past.

Instead of following a *chronological* order, the narratives jump back and forth in time, mixing the various layers of the past. Recalling the events is never simple, memories lead to other points of the past which are, in turn, explained with other memories. The structure becomes confusing, the narrators often return to the same event several times before it is fully unfolded, or sometimes it remains open, unsettled. This layering of time is similar to “the

Chinese box structure” which then “gradually comes to mirror both the recesses of the past as well as the recesses of [the] mind”<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, memories are often reshaped in the course of the narratives, but due to the structure the subtle manipulation of recalled events, characters and intentions can easily go unnoticed.

The motto of the dissertation summarizes the essence of the way the narrators remember; “a first-person narrative is, after all, a confession; and the one who has something to confess has something to conceal. And the one who has the word “I” at his disposal has the quickest device for concealing himself”<sup>2</sup>. This is my basic assumption, the narrators tell their story to reveal (confess) and to conceal; and the best way to do that is to direct the narrative, shed light on certain events, only to cast others in darkness.

The aim of the dissertation is to examine the narrative depiction of the workings of the memory, and the possibilities and patterns of manipulating memories in Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels. I examine the structure of the narratives in order to discover patterns of memory and remembering, how certain parts and characters in the narrators’ story are told and others completely or partially hidden. My research aim is to establish models that enable the analysis of the structure, the narrative techniques, the connections among memories and hidden details. I examine what constitutes memory and memory recall in order to understand the dynamics of revealing and concealing. Based on these I intend to propose motivations on the narrators’ part to recall and frequently reshape their past.

## II. Approach and Method

My research concentrates on the first six, as their first person narrators create a natural connection and thread to follow the development of Ishiguro’s narrative technique.

Examining the shifting nature of the narrators’ memory pattern is not an easy endeavour. The narrative structure is complexly layered; yet analyzing the texts in a two-dimensional level-upon-level structure would simplify the system and ignore the intricate patterns of memory writing. In order to successfully grasp these patterns and interpret them I left the traditional fields of literary analysis and turned to areas of art and science, utilizing images by Escher and concepts of Hofstadter.

The Dutch artist, Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898–1972) bent and distorted reality in his lithographs, playing with the concepts of up and down, background and foreground. His

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<sup>1</sup> Porée, Marc (1999), *Kazuo Ishiguro: The Remains of the Day*. Paris: Didier Erudition, 1999, p. 36

<sup>2</sup> Cavell, Stanley (1976), *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 107

works often show geometrical shapes, everyday and impossible objects, for instance, the Penrose triangle or the Necker cube, investigating cyclical recurrence and the relativity of perception. Escher managed to depict ideas so complex that a number of scholars used his works to illustrate scientific concepts of various areas, such as physics, geology, crystallography, chemistry and quantum mechanics. Following their footsteps, I utilized his lithographs as visual representations to illustrate certain patterns of memory discussed in the analysis.

The remarkable thinker, Douglas R. Hofstadter (1945–) conducted researches in the field of mathematics and cognitive sciences. In *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, or *GEB* for short (first published in 1979), he weaved ideas from mathematics, music and art together, concentrating on the theories and theorems of the Austrian logician and mathematician Kurt Gödel, the canons and fugues of the composer Johann Sebastian Bach and the lithographs of the graphic artist Escher. Hofstadter's ultimate quest was to understand the essence of the "I" which then in turn could lead to developments of Artificial Intelligence (AI). His concept of the *strange loop* is central to my interpretation of memory patterns in Ishiguro's novels. When analyzing recurring systems, Hofstadter concluded that "the *Strange Loop* phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started."<sup>3</sup> It can be illustrated with Escher's *Print Gallery*, where after producing a set of steps the cycle returns to the starting point, but descending one level deeper in the world of the picture. The figures' gaze in the image is directed towards the movement of the loop, leading the (external) observer's eye to wander along the loop endlessly. It is similar to a spiral, moving in the same course but ever rising (or descending), never returning to exactly the same spot. Hofstadter added later,

"strange loop" is [...] not a physical circuit but an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling-around, there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive "upward" shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one's sense of departing ever further from one's origin, one winds up, to one's

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<sup>3</sup> Hofstadter, Douglas R. (2000), *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. 20th Anniv. Ed., London: Penguin, p. 15

shock, exactly where one had started out. In short, a strange loop is a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop.<sup>4</sup>

A similar system can be discovered in Ishiguro's novels as the narrators attempt to map out their past, to lose or not lose the threads. I found that their mind and memory, and their representation, the narrative technique mirror some of the processes Hofstadter discusses. His strange loops and recursive systems appeared to correspond with the elaborately confusing yet structured ways the narrators recall their stories.

My main framework and basis of analysis is the Ishiguro–Escher–Hofstadter triangle. In the dissertation I intended to explore whether and to what extent Hofstadter's concepts Escher's images can be used to construct the models that can grasp the patterns of memories, and answer the research questions. However, I found that other theories are necessary to interpret the some related aspects. Gerard Genette's narrative discourse provided efficient tools to identify the layers of the embedded memory structure. Additionally, trauma or traces of past trauma are often part of the narratives. In order to investigate their implications I utilized trauma studies, notably Cathy Caruth's works.

In the analysis I grouped Ishiguro's novels along the chronological line of their publications. Although there are overarching themes and a clear trajectory in Ishiguro's evolving style and interest; certain novels' narrative techniques are more closely related. The groups were formed based on the common characteristics. The first three novels written in the same decade, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989) bear strong resemblances to each other, therefore I analyzed them together. The three elderly narrators immerse in their past to find causes and reasons, to justify their actions or the lack of them. The second group consists of a single novel, *The Unconsoled*. This work stands apart in Ishiguro's *oeuvre* from various aspects. Instead of the usual pattern of the narrator recalling past events, the narrator of this story seems to be constantly lost in an unidentified European city. I examine three aspects, space, time and characters, in my attempt to find order in this nightmarish chaos and to map out the narrator's thinking. This is the part where I apply Hofstadter's loop theory most extensively on various clusters of space, time and characters.

After the puzzlement around *The Unconsoled*, the next novel *When We Were Orphans* (2000) seems to return to calmer and less confusing territories, similarly to the following work,

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<sup>4</sup> Hofstadter, Douglas R. (2008), *I Am A Strange Loop*. New York: Basic Books, pp 101-102

*Never Let Me Go* (2005). The intricate time structure and the elaborate shifting of time layers are typical for both narratives, not found in previous works; therefore I analyze them together.

The main body of my research ends here. Ishiguro's next published work was a collection of short stories, *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009). The stories are interconnected and the topic of memory and the past are always touched upon, yet analysing those in the same way as I did with the novels would not be possible and beneficial.

Before the final conclusion I briefly turn to Ishiguro's latest novel to date, *The Buried Giant* (2015). The novel utilizes the tropes of different genres, again, but this time without a first person narrator, therefore the narrative cannot and should not be analyzed along the same lines explored in my research. Nevertheless, the central role of memory is retained, even expanded by venturing to territories of collective memory, besides keeping the interest in individual memory as well.

### **III. Achievements**

Memory, remembering and forgetting are central themes in Ishiguro's novels. I set out to analyze the intricate system of the narratives, the techniques to reveal and conceal the past; and to find models to describe the various patterns of memory. My assumption that Hofstadter's concepts and Escher's lithographs can provide adequate tools to analyze the narratives and find underlying mechanisms, proved right. Moreover, Escher's images exceeded their original purpose of mere visual illustrations, and in several cases became driving force and starting point of the interpretation and analysis of certain patterns. The Ishiguro–Escher–Hofstadter triangle enabled manifold approach to the narratives.

Examining the structure of remembering in the narratives I discovered the patterns discussed by Hofstadter. The narrators recall an event, leave it unfinished to recall another one (creating embedded structures), and later on return to it, often in different context; but this time omitting certain details, shifting emphasis, adding new aspects, characters, perhaps changing others (time, location); this is a process of manipulation, recreating and shaping the past. As a result the significance and interpretation of some events and actions may change, taking the reader's understanding to a new level.

After introducing my research framework in the first chapter I analyzed the time layers of the three narratives of *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, *The Remains of the Day*, calling it an embedded structure. Starting with the surface I concluded that the formal features of the narratives, the rigid division into sections and diary entries not only

contradict the content, but also create false expectations in the reader. Then I examined the narratives' switches between time layers, when and how they happen, whether the narrators are able to pick up the lost threads. Focusing on the nature of remembering, I investigated their nature relying on Genette's typology of narrative discourse. A typical feature of the narratives is the postponement of certain recollections (completing analepses of the internal homodiegetic category<sup>5</sup>). The nature of the memories, which the narrators only reluctantly present after much delay and long detours is usually trying, painful or embarrassing for some reason. Additionally, the narrative frequently returns to certain memories (repeating analepses) to provide further details and an interpretation with hindsight, to add emphasis by calling them turning points, but also to correct and modify some characteristics that were misremembered previously, such as the date or the participants of an event. This leads to confusion, and suspicion not only of the narrators' ability to remember, but also their motivation. Furthermore, by returning the certain events, the narrator can distract attention from others, and leave some recollections unfinished or omit them completely. This naturally leads to the analysis of the gaps.

In the second part of the chapter I concentrated on the omissions of the narratives. Based on Escher's *Mosaic II*, I suggest that by examining the gaps of the narratives, new pieces of information, new stories and hints to the narrator's emotional status can be discovered. Analysing the absence of certain memories and using theories of trauma narrative by Caruth, it can be concluded that experiencing the traumatic event does not result in comprehending, "knowing" it. This paradox creates a strong tension in the narrative, clearly discernible in the novels, especially in Etsuko's (*PVH*) and Ono's (*AFW*) stories. However, it cannot be concluded with certainty that they are unable to "know". The narrators make efforts to suppress certain memories, though these poignant avoidances are telling signs that raise suspicion. As an additional element to the analysis of trauma narratives, I examined the visual images in the narratives. Furthermore, I analyzed the omissions from other aspects as well, concluding that the absence of certain characters (mainly family members) and life experiences, such as love or sexuality, also creates gaps, covering emotional turmoil. The gaps are so extensive that it is a logical step to take a closer look at the (very few) characters presented in the narratives whether they provide more information on the narrators. Lastly, using Hofstadter's *Strange Loop* concept, I argued that the recollections take on a spiral-like

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<sup>5</sup> Genette, Gérard (1983). *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, p 51.

structure that enables the narrators to express their deepest thoughts and anxieties. The three novels are slightly different in respect of the focus on the spiral phenomenon. I demonstrated that the *strange loop* structure is used to manage guilt in the wake of a daughter's suicide in *A Pale View of Hills*. In *An Artist of the Floating World* the narrator part in the spiral of an oppressive hierarchy system by repeating the father's and teacher's dominant and aggressive behaviour, forming his own loop. Finally, the narrator's recall of the father's professional and physical decline is driven by the fear of his own ageing in *The Remains of the Day*. The uncertainty in the source of certain phrases is a recurring element in all three narratives. Shifting and interchangeability of situations and people create a sense of evasiveness, and strengthens the *strange loop* phenomenon. It is no longer important who said something, life events, as history, repeat themselves in every generation.

In the next chapter I focused only on *The Unconsoled*. Based on Hofstadter's *strange loop* concept I identified three areas to analyze, almost as the three dimensions of a story: space, time and characters. First I examined spatial loops, where distances shrink and lengthen according to Ryder, the narrator's needs, passages open up and lead back to the story's central location, the hotel, thus creating loops; and circular tracks the narrator seems to follow. I suggested that another spatial loop forms overarching time, when places from earlier and childhood memories seem to merge into the narrator's present location. Time shows a similar flexibility, usually in Ryder's favour, allowing him to wander far and meet various people, unnoticed by others waiting for him. Additionally, vivid childhood memories intrude every now and then in his daily routine, forcing him to relive traumatic experiences with his parents. Third, I examined the numerous characters, what role they play in the story and the narrator's life, and propose another, more intricate type of strange loops. Some male characters function as his doubles; the Ghosts of Ryder Past, a lonely little boy, a talented young man not recognized by his parents; the Present, a discredited musician; and the Future, an abandoned alcoholic conductor. The first two characters can be interpreted as embodiments of his memories, the latter two as his fears. Additionally, the narration depicts a number of dysfunctional relationships, parent-child and man-woman, all resembling certain stages in the narrator's life. Finally, I identified a group of characters calling them shadow characters since their only *raison d'être* seems to be to encourage, sooth, punish or humiliate Ryder. As shown, the narrative is multilayered and highly complex, one struggles to interpret it in the framework of reality. Therefore a number of critics suggested a dream scenario and Freud's dream concept. Along this line yet taking a step further I propose that what one sees



is in fact the depiction of a single mind and its workings. The characters, though seemingly numerous and different, are not individuals but composites of “real” images, memories, fears and possibilities. The location, time, characters form strange loops but the entire work can be interpreted as a highly complex strange loop: a human mind.

I began the analysis of the third group of novels, *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* with the examination of form and genre. The parallel presence of elements typical for various genres creates the possibility of a multilayered interpretation. However, the genre-based expectations are emptied and deformed, and I suggested that this is largely performed by the power of memory and its workings in both narrators’ story. The examination of these genres’ appearance in the novels led me to the question on the effect of memory and what role it plays in the narrators’ life. Having already established the habit of Ishiguro’s narrators, and the normal working of the mind that it manipulates memories consciously and unconsciously, it was natural to ask the question how much retrograde these memories are. I identified the concept with Hofstadter’s *Tangled Hierarchies* and illustrate the idea with Escher’s *Drawing Hands* when suggesting that the adult narrators might recreate or even create memories that meet their needs to provide consolation for their current situation. Therefore memory is a twofold power; first it destroys genre stereotypes and the narrators’ expectations regarding their past and future, and second it creates a narrative. In this process the manipulation of time is a helpful tool, I examine the complicated time structure of both novels, suggesting that, in a way similar to *The Unconsoled*, time and the handling of time create strange loops that enable the narrators to hide and diminish events.

In the penultimate chapter I briefly turned to *The Buried Giant*, highlighting some aspects related to memory and remembering. Here it is not the act of remembering, reliving and reshaping the past that takes a central role, but the absence, the lack of memories. Personal oblivion is expanded to a grander scale, when hazy and lost memories characterize not only the elderly, but an entire country. As this amnesia does not characterise a single person, but a territory, the individual’s inner mindscape becomes the outer landscape, like a Klein’s bottle. Forgetting has an agent that ensures peaceful life of tribes previously entangled in bloody conflicts against each other. This way memory attains moral significance, when the ambiguous principle of “forget and forgive” ensures peace and prosperity for communities.

In the concluding chapter I shortly discussed two overarching themes of Ishiguro's novels, the problem of parents and their looming shadow in the narratives, and the journey as driving force in the narrators' life and remembering.

Examining the structure and the patterns of memories, I demonstrated that the narratives (memory, mind) are characterized by countless dynamic strange loops forming in the course of the recall. These complex movements and shapes constitute memory; where memories are not static entities but connecting, merging, interacting threads in constant whirling, in the vortex of the mind. Hofstadter wrote in his introductory chapter that when writing *GEB* he soon realized that "Gödel, Escher and Bach were only shadows cast in different directions by some central solid essence"<sup>6</sup>. Analyzing the novels showed that Ishiguro is another brilliant shadow cast in yet another direction.

#### **IV. Relevant Publications**

"In the Vortex of the Mind: Interpreting *The Unconsoled* by Kazuo Ishiguro", *Conference proceedings of the 11th HUSSE conference*, L'Harmattan, Budapest, 2014.

"In the Vortex of the Past: Patterns of Remembering in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels", in Yildiz-Bagce, Abaci (et al.), *19th METU British Novelists Conference Proceedings on Kazuo Ishiguro's Work*, METU, Ankara, 2012.

"Kazuo Ishiguro's Early Short-Stories as Predecessors of the Novels", in Földvály, K., Almási, Zs., Schandl, V. (eds.), *HUSSE10–LitCult*, Debrecen, HUSSE, 2011.  
<http://mek.oszk.hu/10100/10171>

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<sup>6</sup> Hofstadter, *GEB*, 26.