

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE: AN ISHIGURIAN WRINKLE IN TEMPORAL UNIVERSALITY

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Abstract

There are many unknowns in the long equation of life, yet it does not matter whether or not something is real as long it feels natural to a person or a whole group, community, or nation. There is no unanimously approved key decoder of the mind, neither in reality nor in fiction, yet the psychotherapeutic potential of good fiction can help readers change their lives for the better. The present paper provides an overview of Kazuo Ishiguro's novels to determine the distorted nature of time from a holistic perspective. Science has demonstrated that reality is, in truth, probabilistic: All systems are in superposition before being observed, which is to say, they all manifest themselves, at the same time, in all the states they can be in before an observer decides upon one of these states through his/her perception. Tapping into the vast realms of memory from a higher standpoint can strengthen and regulate the connection between time and physicality. As Ishiguro demonstrates in his novels, the human body can keep perfect time – time scarcity is only an illusion created by a timeless yearning for affection, compassion, and mutual appreciation. The primary purpose of the current paper is to show that, when embraced with an open heart, temporal distortion constitutes a recalibrating corollary of the human mind meant to preserve human sanity and orientate human choices, decisions, and actions in the right direction. Regarded as temporal literature, Kazuo Ishiguro's novels can thus help readers restore their temporality to its healthy distortion.

Keywords: temporal distortion, time, memory, psychotherapeutic literature, Kazuo Ishiguro

INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro's bicultural background and life trajectory have proven his free spirit, and herein lies the therapeutic core of his works. In 2008, the English author of Japanese origins was ranked 32nd on The Times' list of "The 50 Greatest British Writers Since 1945". Nevertheless, the proof that humankind has been taking his psycho-literary assessments into account since 1980, the starting point of his writing career, is the Nobel Prize in Literature Ishiguro received in 2017 for being a writer "who, in novels of great emotional force, has

uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world” (Nobel Prize, 2017).

Ishiguro does not care about the features that should make his stories stylistically plausible as long as there is a kernel of existential truth beneath their rough shell – and finding it is primarily the reader’s job. The hybrid nature of his novels allows him to explore delicate themes with such an emotional candor that it is hard not to accept their universal preponderance and let go of the denial or reactive mode that falsely ensures human survival (Birke, 2008). The human condition is riddled with weaknesses – if that is the perspective one decides to use in interpreting one’s existence. Ishiguro shares his perspective with the world: Only by accepting the limited nature of one’s being can one start living a genuine life while honoring the very imperfections that make one human. The author’s view is rooted deep within the ancient spiritual traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, yet it does not take a thorough study of these scriptures to understand – or rather feel – their enduring tenets.

All humans possess a natural acknowledgment of the existential laws, usually translated into the language of emotions, and Ishiguro masters especially this language, hence his recurrent interest in the fabric of memory and the past. Besides their literary analysis, based on the exploration of their themes, symbols, and motifs, Ishiguro’s novels have been largely dissected for cultural, psychological, historical, and imagological purposes. The ramifications of displacement and identity confusion have been unanimously connected to the workings of the human mind at both individual and collective levels (Chang, 2015). Love, duty, dignity, professionalism, friendship, repression, guilt, blame, unreliability, and resignation are decidedly recurrent Ishigurian themes, yet the deeper underlying concepts are the mind constructs and the duality of everything. Thus, whatever the interests of the novels, they implicitly beget their opposites: innocence and maturity; harshness and tenderness; justice and injustice; war and peace; forgiveness and vengeance; remembrance and forgetfulness; love and hatred; denial and acceptance; repression and liberation; illusion and truth; helplessness and self-sufficiency; memory and oblivion.

Many critical reviews focused on the English-Japanese nature of Ishiguro’s novels, visibly sewn into their historico-cultural fabric. However, the main territory for exploration remains the characters’ emotional perspectives on their past and present lives (Friedman, 1993).

It does not matter how long someone lives, but how intensely and genuinely they do it. This seems to be the pervading message of all Ishigurian novels, drawing an emotional line of demarcation between living and being alive, hence their distorted temporalities.

PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC TEMPORALITY

Insofar as humankind can conclude its deceiving perceptions and projections, the human mind is the only measure of all the manifestations of the Universe that can reach human existence. That being said, Ishiguro's odd narrative techniques seem the most appropriate to report on the many inner and outer realities of the human world.

Through life stages, individual and collective progression has known one consistent unit of measurement, though time's true nature still eludes human understanding. Due to entropy, the movement from order to disorder separates past from present and future, so the arrow of time is invariably orientated forward (Daub, 1970). In other words, besides clocks, change and transformation are the two widely acknowledged ways of recording the passage of time, yet the only form of temporality ever known to humankind is the distorted version created by the human mind.

In all his novels, Ishiguro conveys temporal experiences underlying personal accounts of historical events. Time is directly dependent on memory – only through recollection can one keep track of one's experiences in relation to one's environment and social interactions. The more unreliable the act of remembering, the more distorted one's timeline (Rovelli, 2018). However, Ishiguro intends to help the reader accept, once and for all, that no form of remembering can ever be wholly accurate, stemming as it does from the vastness of the emotional realms. As to the universal time distortions, they are painfully hard to perceive due to the limitations of the conscious mind. Einstein's theories of general and special relativity can indeed prove, at a theoretical level, the existence of a fourth, spacetime dimension. At the same time, the principles of quantum mechanics indicate that the basis of all existence is the same, only the complexity of the systems differs, from the constituents of a remote star to the microbiology of an insect and the sophistication of the human body (Mermin, 2009). Thus, the unreliability of recollection is the most personal act of perceiving time, in all its internal and external manifestations, and can therefore be considered the foundation of human identity.

Even the factual reportage of historical events is tinged with the subjectivity of those who first recorded them: “Memory is the raw material of history” (Le Goff, 1992).

Ishiguro writes sincerely about the inextricable relation between personal and collective time as a reflection of the mind’s capacity to record, store and retrieve ever-changing versions of daily happenings (Bower, 2000). Human existence is entirely dependent on the distorted interplay of these two constructs. The only thing humans can do to sprinkle their lives with purpose is to fill their lungs with the beauty of temporal imperfection while ridding it of its hurtful thorns (Peake, 2011).

Ishiguro’s novels can thus be regarded as practical guides to humankind’s search not so much for truth as for closure and peace with its chimeric yet legitimate perception of its past. Small worlds try to fit into big histories ever so gracefully, yet each time the reader comes to realize that such enclosures will never happen due to the shifty nature of human perception. In hindsight, everyone is smarter, wiser, and more knowledgeable; nevertheless, life is an entropic phenomenon, so the arrow of time has only one direction: onwards (Rifkin and Howard, 1980). The act of back shadowing can thus only bring resentment, grudge, and pain if done judgmentally. Ishiguro is fully aware of this psychological risk, so he imbues his characters with a form of misleading detachment: Is it indicative of past traumas or a sign of self-preservation?

Besides the personal and historical aspects of temporal distortion in Ishiguro’s novels, human interconnection gives time an intergenerational interpretation, proving the intrinsic value of bounded rationality and the ramifications of all human choices, decisions, and actions, big and small (Simon, 2008; Gigerenzer and Brighton, 2009). These aspects turn events and situations into traumas, which are then recollected in a post-traumatic fashion, enlarging the unhealthy aspect of time distortion. When nostalgia and melancholy become pathological, the identity of the characters suffers painful mutations, which, in turn, lead to repression and denial (Caruth, 1995). On the one hand, the illusion of reality is the intrinsic capacity of the human mind to manifest itself in physical form what it can perceive neutrally. On the other, the impaired perception of what stems from the emotional display of human experience. The latter pervades all of Ishiguro’s novels as his characters experience oppressive illusions of their past identities.

All Ishigurian themes are backed up by science, so much so that his narratives are anything but shallow linguistic shapes without universal substance or real-life usage. Ryder's multitasking obsession in *The Unconsoled* can only prove the opposite: All human beings are doomed to disharmony since no one can consistently follow a harmonizing matrix, hence the necessity of learning the Taoist principle of *wu wei*, or the art of doing nothing against the natural course of existence (Wei, 2004). Furthermore, *Never Let Me Go* teaches the reader the balance between controlling and letting go as presented in a world furtively indulging the benefits of repetitiveness. Only through empathy, tolerance, kindness, love, affection, compassion, and appreciation can humans stop judging and start seeing the world through others' eyes is the message of *The Buried Giant*.

Ishiguro's characters and real-life people share the same perceptual principles and belief systems that reflect a healthy or unhealthy image of time. The intellectual act of processing the data offered by the environment is quite tiring, hence prone to error. Humans possess the same sophisticated machine – the brain – yet there are no two minds alike, and Ishiguro is not afraid to show the diversity of the human being through examples of identity platitude.

Memory is an unreliable thing, Ishiguro's characters prove, directly or indirectly. Instead of analyzing the two types of deception deriving from a faulty mind – self-deception and deception of the other – the reader should make peace with the fact that the intellect will always work with limited information, mostly of conscious nature. Thus, in the eventuality of temporary or lasting memory loss, the intellect becomes helpless, so it will resort to distortion to fill in the gaps. The subconscious memory is still active all this time, yet the conscious mind is unable to retrieve it on command. That is why the unreliability of Ishiguro's characters may be the most human aspect of their identities.

Ishiguro's recurrent interest in the manifold manifestations of memory will never become tiring, no matter how many books on this subject he is determined to write. Memory is one of the most fascinating things of the human condition, related to the spacetime dimension. Apart from the mental construct, a type of memory embedded in the human cells allowed humans to become what they are today through evolution (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968).

By the emphasis he places on it, Ishiguro proves the important role played by identity in the process of human becoming.

DISCUSSION

All data is sieved through the identity filter. A nationalistic identity will dictate people to fight for the wrong causes, like Wistan and Sir Gawain in *The Buried Giant* (2015), or to paint militaristic messages, like Ono, in *An Artist of the Floating World* (1989). These characters learn, in different ways, that people do not love or respect each other for what they are but for what they create. Furthermore, what they create does not come from what they are (Saxons, Britons, or their parents' blood) but from what they have decided to be. Thus, a small sense of self will invariably lead to unhealthy temporal distortion, hence the need for a higher identity (Annan, 1989). Witnessing delusional destinies, one will take one's cue from the characters' attempts to transcend their traumatized identities, thereby willing to rid oneself of whatever burdens one has been carrying consciously or unconsciously. Only a bird's eye view on human existence can lift the human condition by the possibility of accessing large storage of subconscious memory, which underlies the very process of evolution. A higher implication of the memory-loss theme in Ishiguro's novels is the subtle reference to the memory-free nature of pure intelligence or consciousness. Once freed from the boundaries set by one's memory-based identity, one can internalize the reality of human interconnection and cooperation (Tolle, 2004).

Ryder's trials and tribulations prove that the sense of identity is not lost in a dream or a dream-like state. However, there is no self in death, hence Keiko's desperate need to get rid of her uprooted identity in *A Pale View of Hills* (1990) – or even Jennifer's orphaned self in *When We Were Orphans* (2001). However, the latter's attempt to commit suicide is only obliquely referred to (Drag, 2013).

Identity can create either a virtuous or a vicious circle: it is the mind that creates it, and it is also the mind that enhances, downsizes, or alters it completely. Thoughts, emotions, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, choices, decisions, and actions are born from one's sense of identity, which gives individual meaning to every aspect of the outside world, from a stone to the remotest star. Through the similar fates of his characters, Ishiguro proves that all human

experience is based on one's identity, which, in turn, is based on memory and time perception (Whitehead, 2004).

In *The Unconsoled* (2013), Ryder shows high stress levels because he cannot exercise a higher dimension of his intelligence for all his artistic mastery, hence his choice fatigue. Overusing his mental body, he wears himself out, and that can only prove that the secrets of the mind cannot be probed into with the intellect alone (Adelman, 2001). Ishiguro makes this the underlying motive behind his characters' apparent resignation, meant to teach the reader the fine art of accepting that which cannot be experienced or controlled. Humans' higher identity can only be accepted.

Masterfully enough, Ishiguro uses intricate twists of phrase to render simple emotions, proving that, although the language is an intellectual tool, it can speak from and to the heart. The subjective experience of consciousness can never be reached by the human intellect, hungry as it is for clear-cut interpretations and definitions, which only work in opposites. Ishiguro teaches the reader to surrender to the cosmic intelligence that resides within their subconscious by accepting the limitations of the human condition. It is the only pathway to cleansing the mind of all the faulty concepts, beliefs, and views that distort the universal relation between the human mind and the spacetime dimension. Only in a state of openness can one experience the indescribable nature of universal consciousness.

Thus, instead of getting saddened by the characters' fates, the reader will see that Ishiguro wants them to take joy in knowing that existence has no meaning as such, nor can it be intellectually understood. Humans' sole limitless purpose is to live the highest phenomenon of all, which can never be defined appropriately. Human nature is appropriately equipped to experience life in its purest form for all its limitations, without trying to measure its manifestations in artificial enclosures to understand them. If humans allow it, they can lose their sense of intellectual identity, thus becoming boundless and free from all social constraints that lead to wars and traumas. The magic mist in *The Buried Giant* alludes to the possibility of accessing higher dimensions because it lies in the power of the human race to cease all conflicts and forget past strife as soon as it has become aware that survival has never been its ultimate goal. A false sense of threat created by a defensive identity injects the human heart with venom (Borowska-Szerszun, 2016).

For all social interconnection and conformity, life is an individual experience that can find meaning only from within. Kathy H. in *Never Let Me Go* (2010) has lost her friends and will soon complete, and yet nobody can take away her memories of Hailsham. Her inner world is limitless and does not need the approval of society to feel real – or human for that matter. Ruth completes without having fully learned how to respond, instead of reacting, to her environment. The reaction is primordial, reptilian; response is the conscious choice of assuming a higher identity.

On the other hand, Tommy has enough time to feel that he is not ill – or different – if he has who to share his suffering with. Tommy's failed attempts to show his creativity during his childhood, only to find his creative voice during his young adulthood, proves that intellectual memory cannot produce something that has not been lived first. When Tommy's identity rises to a much higher level, he can express it artistically, too (Barrow, 2005). Ultimately, Ishiguro teaches his readership that nothing external can label one's experiences as good or bad since freedom comes only from within. A worldview based on this universal tenet can heal traumas, end wars, and return human identity to its cosmic nature. Moreover, the realities of globalization and the invisible hand would take lasting shapes as they would come naturally, not being enforced on the multitude for the wrong reasons (Smith, 2009).

All events can have traumatic connotations, so the only solution is to make one's inner world so beautiful that no external turmoil can trouble it. Stevens' heightened sense of suppression in *The Remains of the Day* (1989) teaches the reader the willingness to open themselves to the inner joys to acquire human dignity in all its manifestations. Steven decides to serve blindly and thus deprives himself of the pleasure of living intensively rather than extensively; the butler creates a grotesquely augmented version of the goal-oriented professional, whose one aim is to achieve performance at the cost of their personal life. Engaging oneself in an endless rat race can only bring misery. The only solution is to live authentically, and the rest will come by itself as a beneficial consequence of a fulfilled existence.

Although not overtly expressed in his novels, Kazuo Ishiguro teaches the reader how to become meditative through the conscious decision to hone their physical, mental, and emotional body to genuine imperfection. All characters have traumatic lives as a result of

having failed to make a clear distinction between their true selves and their human condition. Suffering can end only when one can fully embrace the imperfections of their human condition, thus rising beyond their limitations. Fear of suffering begets suffering. When the avenues of the mind are choked with mental and emotional traffic, one needs to abandon oneself to walk fearlessly through life. The evening becomes the best time of the day only when one has deeply lived the morning and the afternoon of one's life. As Stevens comes to realize in the end, he has wasted most of his life – so the only sensible thing to do is start learning the art of bantering.

CONCLUSION

Ishiguro's overt and covert messages will always be there to assimilate whenever the reader is ready for them. Tapping into the vast realms of memory from a higher standpoint can strengthen and regulate the connection between time and physicality. The human body can keep perfect time – it is humankind that fails to read it correctly, both individually and collectively. Time scarcity is only an illusion created by a timeless yearning for affection, compassion, and mutual appreciation.

Science has demonstrated that reality is, in truth, probabilistic: All systems are in superposition before being observed, which is to say, they all manifest themselves, at the same time, in all the states they can be in before an observer decides upon one of these states through their perception (Carroll, 2010). Furthermore, all these states happen in parallel worlds that can somehow get entangled through the interaction of all systems, which can give further credit to the chaos theory and the butterfly effect, through the domino effect of all choices and decisions, no matter how insignificant they appear to be. From an eternalist point of view, past, present and future are all real and continuous interplay, which prioritizes the interconnection of systems and their change with respect to each other, rather than to time (Poidevin, 2003). That makes it possible for the past to directly influence the future, which has also been scientifically proved, however mind-blowing it sounds. Subatomic systems can be both particles and waves before being observed, assuming one of the two states will be measured. Nevertheless, when their observing is cleverly delayed – that is, done after they have been tricked into making their choice, with the help of two detectors and a quantum eraser – they still behave as if measured before they made their choice decision. It is as though they can adjust their initial choice in accordance with the future observation (Fearn, 2015).

Temporally speaking, this may imply that effect can change the cause and that future messages can go back in time to change the past. Existentially speaking, this only reiterates that everything, from events to people, is vibrationally interconnected, and causes and effects are just prior and later states of one continuous happening. Yet the more significant conclusion may be that the nature of the observer is so special that it makes a vibrational dent in the object of observation – and that may be the observer’s consciousness, the most difficult entity to accept scientifically, although it undoubtedly pervades every human being, and beyond.

Their scientific nature cannot belittle the importance of time perception for all the sounding nature of these temporal tenets. On the contrary, as the delayed choice quantum eraser experiment demonstrates, they can only emphasize the impact of the observer on his or her world, including personal and collective time. One does not have to be a physicist to intuit the laws that govern the Universe and, implicitly, the human world.

Do all minds suffer from distorted temporality?

Yes, they do.

Is it a disease?

No, it is not, when embraced with an open heart. Rather the opposite: a self-preservation technique; a recalibrating corollary of the human mind meant preserving human sanity and orientating human choices, decisions, and actions in the right direction.

Directly or indirectly, Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels help the reader restore their temporality to its healthy distortion.

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