

Never Letting Go: Ways of (Mis)remembering and Forgetting in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels

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Drag, Wojciech. *Revisiting Loss: Memory, Trauma and Nostalgia in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014. 211 pages. ISBN 1-4438-6057-3. Hb. £47.99.

The human psyche is a wonderfully complex and paradoxical machine. No one knows this better than Kazuo Ishiguro, who is deeply interested in the ways human beings handle traumas and in the narratability of certain experiences. *Revisiting Loss: Memory, Trauma and Nostalgia in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro* by Wojciech Drag approaches Ishiguro's oeuvre from this very intricate perspective. Drag's academic interests include contemporary British fiction and experimental fiction in Britain and the US; he has published articles on various writers such as John Banville, J. M. Coetzee, as well as Ishiguro, investigating how memory, (often repressed) emotions, and traumas influence meaning-making in narratives. He wrote his doctoral thesis on the relationship between memory and loss in Ishiguro's novels. This volume is a sensitive analysis of the equally sensitive issue central to most of Ishiguro's works, namely, the intricately interwoven phenomena of trauma and loss. The monograph investigates the far-reaching and shattering effects traumatic experiences have on the narrators of the examined novels, the ways in which those events affect the narrators' identity-construction, and how they recount, and many times falsify, their past experiences. Drag's very logically structured and reader-friendly work contains mainly comparative analyses which build—among others—on Frederick C. Bartlett's, Daniel L. Schachter's, and Sigmund Freud's theories which demonstrate that traumatized humans unconsciously try to modify and reconstruct past experiences and losses to lessen the severe tension caused by repression. The volume's introduction provides a detailed and straightforward delineation of the history of psychological, psychoanalytical, and memory studies, which the book builds upon and whose terminology it makes use of. Furthermore, at the beginning of each main chapter, Drag offers a summary of the theoretical approach applied in the analysis of the novels under scrutiny and thus even the less scholarly devotees of Ishiguro can understand the terms and concepts that appear throughout his work.

The inherent quality of memory to forget and/or misremember painful events in order to make the experience more palatable leads to serious

omissions and a resulting narrative unreliability in Ishiguro's novels, which requires careful close reading to reveal the underlying mechanisms and emotional barriers that shape the characters' lives and pasts. The strength of the monograph lies in the subtle connections Drag unveils among Ishiguro's novels, the narrators, their narrative strategies, emotional struggles, and their numerous, at times different, and occasionally similar, modes of dealing with trauma. The comparative analyses of the novels follow a relatively chronological order. For example, in the first two chapters, Drag analyses two novels from Ishiguro's early career—*An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989)—comparing them mainly from the perspective of war traumas which affect both Ono, the narrator of *An Artist of the Floating World*, and Stevens, the gentleman narrator of *The Remains of the Day*. Both repress their emotions in order to bear the burden of their own personal traumas; what is more, they both look at the past as an Edenic period, which provided a stable social position for them with clear codes of conduct, whose solid social and behavioral patterns later became disrupted and made hazy by war. Drag emphasizes that a serious sense of dislocation is detectable in both narrations, since these narrators can no longer understand the world they live in, and their emotional attachment to the past makes it impossible for them to realize that they should also adapt to the changing world they live in. The second chapter takes the analysis a step further and explores the different genres the narrators use to shape and also to manipulate their narratives in order to create a narrative identity to rely on in the confusing and disrupted new world.

The three main parts of the volume each highlight one aspect of the psyche's struggle with trauma and loss. The first part tackles the therapeutic desire of the narrators to constantly retell their stories and the narrative techniques and strategies employed in the process of meaning-making. Part 2 focuses specifically on how most of the narrators of these novels tend to misremember or completely forget a traumatic event, yet, at the same time, they share a painful need to constantly remember and be reminded, since the emotional repressions make it impossible for them to forget. Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), depicts the personal dimensions of post-atomic-war trauma, made even more tangible by tragic personal loss in the suicide of the narrator's, Etsuko's, daughter. Drag's close reading of the novel's unreliable narrative highlights that the numerous omissions, misleading pieces of information, and "creative misrememberings" (104), which make it so difficult to comprehend both the narrator's motivations and the plot, are the very signs of Etsuko's repressed guilt. As Drag points out,

her apparent emotional indifference to the personal as well as historical tragedies is destabilized by her narrative slips into nostalgia and her tendency to project her sense of guilt on to different characters (101). The second chapter in part 2 investigates an artist's struggle with his past in *The Unconsoled* (1995). Similarly to Etsuko, Ryder also distances himself from the traumatic past, his emotional repressions give way to repetition compulsion, expressed by the dream-like texture of the whole narration. Drag starts his evaluation by locating the origins of Ryder's perennial traumatic rupture in his childhood and then analyses the reasons for his later compulsion to embody his own wound. An intimate bond develops between Ryder and his loss, its constant pain is to be nurtured and kept alive, because the fear of letting go of this "old friend" would mean the ultimate loss of control. Drag shows how the repressed trauma defines all of Ryder's relationships: his family and friends also appear unable to handle traumas, "their unprocessed ruptures are remarkably alike, and take the form of emotional frigidity" (121), which is how they all preserve the traumatic past in the present.

The fear of letting go is central to all Ishiguro's novels, especially to those Drag analyses in the final part, which centers on the notion of nostalgia. Ishiguro's relatively recent works, *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005), both show how memory misrepresents the past as a safe haven compared to what came afterwards. Christopher Banks, the London detective narrator of *When We Were Orphans*, becomes, as he experiences it, separated from Shanghai and with it from his idyllic childhood, whereas Kathy H., the narrator of *Never Let Me Go*, feels the same nostalgic longing for the institution created for clone donors, Hailsham. Drag's analysis builds on the observation that etymologically "the Greek words *nostos* and *algos* signify both a 'return home' and 'pain' [also translated as 'longing']" (Drag 136). The painful sense of the impossibility to return home is what surrounds these characters and all their actions. Drag shows that in both novels, there is an infantile quest to revisit the scenes of the past idyll. The two novels read well together, they echo similar issues; in a sense, the title "When We Were Orphans" is fitting for either novel, in which the narrator and her friends are also denied families, the safety net that could provide them with a firm sense of self. In lieu of a family, the children of Hailsham derive a sense of belonging to a community, due to the privilege—as they are made to believe—of being Hailsham students. What Shanghai is for Banks, Hailsham is for Kathy—even though the name suggests its sham and constructed nature—still it is an "urplace," as Edward S. Casey observes, it is a "primal place, a place of origin, an

exemplar against which all subsequent places are implicitly to be measured” (qtd. in Drag 169).

In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy H. obtains a Judy Bridgewater (fictional) tape, *Songs After Dark*, at a Hailsham Sale. As Drag points out, one of the songs entitled “Never Let Me Go” becomes a crucially significant symbol in the novel (170). Kathy’s interpretation of the lyrics as being about an infertile woman who cannot give birth reverberates with the Hailsham students’ belief that they are unable to bear children. The reason why the song affects Kathy lies in her hidden identification with the woman’s predicament described in the song. “The woman’s fear of losing her miraculously delivered baby may be interpreted as an expression of the little girl’s premonition of the losses to come” (Drag 170). Later on, the tape disappears, and in Drag’s reading, this experience for Kathy becomes a metaphor for her mourning process and epitomizes the central idea of loss in the novel (171). Hailsham students believe that Norfolk is a “lost corner” where all lost items can be found, getting hold of the tape, however, proves impossible. The metaphor of losing the tape could also serve as a *mise en abyme* for the whole monograph: in the concluding remarks, entitled “Toward Letting Go?” Drag shows the subtle connections between several characters in Ishiguro’s works, regarding their hopeless, nevertheless, constant and necessary, search for the past, memories, people, and places to cling to. Trauma, loss, and nostalgia are constitutive of Ishiguro’s novels, since these experiences and emotions shape the characters’ lives and narrations and induce the Bartlettian principle of “effort after meaning” (192), that is, a desire to make the experience of the past enduring. Traumatic experiences trigger the numerous self-deceptions and memory biases that are detectable in the narratives, through which the characters aim to preserve something of their pasts. On the whole, Wojciech Drag’s monograph is an informative and thorough work on the nature of trauma and its (un)narratability, while it is also a sensitive analysis of the intricate connections between Ishiguro’s novels and the untold signs of loss.

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