

THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF MEMORY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TIME IN THE WORKS OF KAZUO ISHIGURO

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Abstract. Memory and psychological time play a central role in Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction. Rather than presenting the past as a fixed and objective reality, Ishiguro shows how characters reconstruct their past through personal memories, emotions, omissions, and changing interpretations. As a result, the boundary between past and present becomes psychologically unstable. This thesis examines the narrative function of memory and psychological time in Ishiguro's fiction, with particular attention to *'The Remains of the Day'*, *'A Pale View of Hills'*, and *'Never Let Me Go'*. The analysis shows that memory is not simply a way of recalling past events. It is a narrative mechanism through which characters construct their identities, justify their decisions, and gradually confront suppressed emotions. Psychological time also allows Ishiguro to connect different stages of a character's life and to reveal meanings that are not immediately available to the narrator. Thus, memory and psychological time contribute significantly to characterization, unreliable narration, emotional depth, and the reader's interpretation of the past.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, memory, psychological time, narrative, characterization, unreliable narration, identity, retrospection

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro is widely recognized for his subtle exploration of memory, identity, loss, and the relationship between the past and the present. His novels often focus on narrators who look back on their lives and attempt to understand important events from a later point in time. However, their memories are rarely complete or completely reliable. They may forget certain details, avoid painful experiences, reinterpret the past, or give greater importance to some events than to others. In this way, memory becomes an important part of the narrative structure.

One of the distinctive features of Ishiguro's fiction is the close relationship between memory and psychological time. Chronological time follows the sequence of events, while psychological time is shaped by a character's emotions, memories, regrets, and personal experiences. A single event from the past may occupy many pages because it remains emotionally important, while several years may be summarized in only a few sentences. This difference between chronological and psychological time allows Ishiguro to represent the inner world of his characters.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how memory and psychological time function as narrative devices in Ishiguro's fiction. Particular attention is given to '*The Remains of the Day*' (1989), '*A Pale View of Hills*' (1982), and '*Never Let Me Go*' (2005). These novels demonstrate different ways in which memory structures narration and reveals the psychological complexity of the characters.

Memory as a Narrative Structure

In Ishiguro's novels, memory is closely connected with the way a story is told. His characters frequently narrate their experiences retrospectively, looking back at events that happened many years earlier. This retrospective structure creates a distance between the time of the events and the time of narration.

This distance is important because the narrator does not necessarily understand the past in the same way as the person who originally experienced it. The meaning of an event may change over time. A character may initially consider an experience unimportant but later recognize its emotional significance. Therefore, memory becomes a process of reinterpretation rather than simple recollection.

In '*The Remains of the Day*', for example, Stevens remembers his years as a butler at Darlington Hall while travelling through England in 1956. His journey in the present provides the narrative framework for memories of his professional life, Lord Darlington, his father, and Miss Kenton. The past is gradually reconstructed through Stevens's reflections. However, his memories are influenced by his professional values and his strong belief in dignity and duty. Consequently, the reader gradually recognizes meanings that Stevens himself does not fully acknowledge.

This narrative technique demonstrates that memory can reveal psychological truth indirectly. What the narrator remembers is important, but what he avoids or fails to recognize can be equally significant.

Psychological Time and the Inner World

Psychological time differs from chronological time because it reflects the way individuals experience time internally. Human beings do not remember their lives as a simple sequence of dates and events. Some moments remain emotionally powerful for many years, while other periods become almost forgotten.

Ishiguro uses this feature of human memory to create psychologically complex narratives. His characters move between past and present, but these movements are not always presented in a clear chronological order. Instead, memories appear when something in the present activates them.

In '*The Remains of the Day*', Stevens's journey through the English countryside constantly brings the past into the present. His physical movement through space becomes a movement through memory. The present journey therefore has a double function: it is both a physical journey and a psychological journey into Stevens's past.

The same principle can be observed in '*A Pale View of Hills*'. Etsuko's memories of post-war Nagasaki are presented from a later period of her life in England. The relationship between past and present is complex because her memories are selective and sometimes uncertain. The narrative does not provide a completely stable version of past events. Instead, the reader must consider how memory, emotional distance, and personal experience shape Etsuko's narrative.

Memory, Identity, and Self-Understanding

Memory also plays an important role in the construction of identity. People often understand themselves through the stories they tell about their past. Ishiguro's characters are particularly dependent on such personal narratives because they use the past to explain who they are and why they have made certain choices.

Stevens is a clear example. For much of his life, he defines himself through his profession. He believes that a great butler should maintain dignity, emotional control, and complete loyalty to his employer. His memories therefore support a particular image of himself. He remembers his professional achievements and presents his relationship with Lord Darlington as evidence of his commitment to duty.

However, as the narrative develops, the limitations of this self-image become increasingly visible. His memories of Miss Kenton, his father, and Lord Darlington reveal emotional conflicts that his professional language cannot completely conceal. The past therefore becomes a means of questioning his identity.

This suggests that memory in Ishiguro's fiction has a double function. It can protect a character from painful truths, but it can also gradually expose those truths. The process of remembering becomes a process of self-discovery.

Memory and Unreliable Narration

Another important narrative function of memory is its connection with unreliable narration. Ishiguro's narrators are not necessarily unreliable because they deliberately lie. Their unreliability often results from limited self-awareness, selective memory, emotional repression, and the desire to create a coherent image of themselves.

Stevens's narration in '*The Remains of the Day*' illustrates this particularly well. He speaks confidently about professionalism and dignity, but his memories sometimes contradict the image he creates. His emotional attachment to Miss Kenton, for example, becomes visible through details that he himself treats as professional matters.

The gap between Stevens's interpretation and the reader's interpretation is therefore central to the novel. The reader is encouraged to look beyond the narrator's explicit statements and examine what his memories reveal indirectly.

Memory consequently becomes a source of narrative ambiguity. It does not simply provide information about the past; it also reveals the psychological limitations of the person who remembers.

Memory, Silence, and Suppressed Experience

Ishiguro frequently connects memory with silence. Important emotional experiences are often not described directly. Instead, they appear through pauses, omissions, changes of subject, indirect statements, or seemingly insignificant details.

This technique is especially effective because psychological experience is not always expressed openly. Characters may be unable or unwilling to articulate painful emotions. As a result, the reader must reconstruct the emotional meaning behind their words.

In *'The Remains of the Day'*, Stevens rarely expresses his feelings directly. His emotional attachment to Miss Kenton is communicated through memories of conversations, small gestures, and moments that he describes in restrained professional language. The emotional importance of these memories becomes clearer to the reader than to Stevens himself.

In this sense, silence becomes part of the psychological representation. What remains unspoken is not an absence of meaning. Instead, it creates a narrative space in which the reader can recognize suppressed emotions.

The Past as a Continuing Presence

One of the most important features of Ishiguro's treatment of psychological time is that the past does not remain completely in the past. Earlier experiences continue to influence the characters' present identities and emotions.

In *'Never Let Me Go'*, Kathy's retrospective narration demonstrates this relationship between past and present. As she remembers her childhood at Hailsham and her later experiences, the past gradually acquires a deeper emotional meaning. Her memories are personal, but they also reveal the social and existential conditions of the world in which she lives.

Kathy does not narrate her life as a simple chronological history. Instead, she moves between different memories, allowing particular people, places, and experiences to return repeatedly. This structure reflects the natural workings of memory and creates a strong sense of psychological continuity.

The past, therefore, functions as a continuing presence. It shapes how the characters understand themselves and their relationships with others.

Conclusion

Memory and psychological time are fundamental narrative elements in Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction. His novels demonstrate that the past is not a fixed collection of events that can be remembered objectively. Instead, it is continuously reconstructed through personal emotions, selective memory, silence, and changing self-understanding.

Through retrospective narration, Ishiguro creates a complex relationship between the time of experience and the time of narration. Psychological time allows emotionally

significant moments to remain active in the present, while memory provides a narrative structure through which characters construct and reconsider their identities.

In ‘*The Remains of the Day*’, Stevens’s memories reveal the conflict between professional duty and personal emotion. In ‘*A Pale View of Hills*’, memory creates uncertainty and connects personal experience with the psychological consequences of the past. In ‘*Never Let Me Go*’, retrospective memory gives ordinary experiences a deeper existential meaning.

Thus, memory and psychological time in Ishiguro’s fiction perform several interconnected functions: they structure the narrative, deepen characterization, create unreliable narration, reveal suppressed emotions, and encourage the reader to distinguish between what the narrator says and what the narrative actually suggests. Ishiguro’s treatment of time ultimately shows that remembering the past is also a way of negotiating identity, loss, and self-understanding.

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