

Self-deception as a coping mechanism in “An artist of the floating world” and “The Remains of the day.”

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The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of self-deception as an important psychological coping mechanism in the works of Kazuo Ishiguro in his novel *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989). This study examines how two men, one a retired Japanese war-propaganda painter (Masuji Ono) and the other an elderly English butler working for a Nazi sympathizer (Stevens), try to make sense of their pasts in order to avoid the overwhelming burden of guilt and remorse. Both protagonists, caught up in the turmoil of socio-political changes after World War II, employ very subjective, digressive, and unreliable first person voices to disguise their culpability in the terrible mistakes of history.

It is not their unreliability that is being maliciously exploited to deceive the reader, but rather it is their selective memory, strategic omissions, and rhetorical evasions that are necessary psychological defences in order to maintain an idealized self-image and to prevent absolute ego disintegration. This paper draws attention to the process of self-deception in both the English manor and the Japanese "floating world" by comparing their structures, revealing the similarities between the two cultures in the way self-deception works when people have to deal with their own devotion and the historical shame. In the end, this piece of research is a demonstration of Ishiguro's anatomy of denial, revealing the universal human vulnerability to systemic manipulation, as well as the agonizing need for consolation in illusions in late life.

Introduction

The combination of memory, a sense of personal responsibility, and historical trauma is the foundation of Kazuo Ishiguro's literary works. In his early works, such as *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Ishiguro creates highly personal, first-person psychological sketches of old men in the aftermath of World War II as they grapple with the end of their lives. The two characters—Japanese artist Masuji Ono, whose creative talent was put to use for imperialist military propaganda; and Stevens, a meticulous English butler whose loyalty to his master, Lord Darlington, places him unwittingly in the service of British appeasement of Nazi Germany—are both trapped by history. The socio-political systems that once gave them their identities, their moral realities and their rewards for their sacrifices have been broken and they have been exposed as unethical and destructive by the global community. Thus, these characters face a terrible truth: The life work they have followed with pride has directly helped to cause systemic evil and personal devastation.

To cope with this crushing realization, Ono and Stevens both resort to self-deception, not in order to deceive others, but as a psychological defense mechanism to protect the delicate structure of the self. The self-deception in these novels is presented here as an existential barrier against the absolute existential despair, cognitive dissonance and identity erasure. The protagonists' use of memory is not as a factual history, but as a malleable tool that can be rewritten, edited, and manipulated to accommodate a tolerable personal narrative amidst the painful transition between an old world order and a modern era that rejects it.

Ishiguro's genius is his use of the unreliable narrator, who is structurally evasive, speaks in a rambling way, and subtly adjusts the meaning of his words, revealing the inner contours of panic. This study explores both protagonists' attempts to manage the agonising ambivalence between public responsibility and private quest for self-respect by following these narrative aberrations. Ono tries to console himself by downplaying his betrayal of former students and exaggerating his historic importance to excuse his moral flaws, while Stevens tries to find refuge in a dogmatic, professional notion of "dignity" that exculpates him from intellectual and moral responsibility. In these parallel examinations, Ishiguro uncovers a way the denial system is so ingrained in the human condition, it goes beyond national and cultural paradigms. This journey is a ultimately tragic but very human one because the individual has concluded that he has lived his life in service of a historical fallacy.

Literature Review

This is an extensive field of study that is often discussed in relation to the unreliability of memory, the unreliability of narrative, and the trauma of the past in the context of the present. The critical landscape surrounding Kazuo Ishiguro's use of memory, narrative unreliability and trauma is vast, with scholars often focusing on how his characters reconstruct the past in order to ease present-day anxieties. Early scholarship pointed to Ishiguro's first-person narrators as being emotionally repressed and psychologically isolated. In line with this, Shaffer (1998) sets forth that Ishiguro's characters tend to have very limited self-perceptions that are meant to conceal their deeper fear of historical irrelevancy and moral inadequacy. This is also echoed by Jakubowska (2003) who states that the detached, quasi-autobiographical voice of Ishiguro's prose is not an absence of emotion, but rather a defensive tactic used to prevent too strong an

emotional reaction to overwhelming feelings of regret and grief.

The mechanisms of memory as a defensive mechanism play a key role in ongoing discussions of Ishiguro studies. The protagonists of both *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* actively try to shut out painful experiences in order to prevent psychological collapse, as a recent study on traumatic memory suggests ("The Extremities of Literature," 2024). In this study, I argue that memory in Ishiguro's novels is a "terribly treacherous terrain" in which characters intuitively navigate routes that systematically evade the nodes of their traumatic memories ("The Extremities of Literature," 2024). This is in line with the analysis of Groes and Matthews (2011) on the formal narrative strategies employed by Ishiguro, who focus on the non-linear progression of the narrative, the many digressions, and the self-corrective nature of the narrative's backward and forward movements, all of which echo the natural, defensive mechanisms of the brain in the face of cognitive dissonance.

The juxtaposition of the personal illusion and official history is a topic of interest for scholars who specialize in studying *An Artist of the Floating World*. As Masuji Ono's memories clash with the rapidly modernizing, postwar Japan, Lewis (2024) suggests that he is compelled to create an invented self-image that is a balance of guilt and an ironic longing for social status. Likewise, a Horneyan perspective on Ishiguro's work shows how characters suffering from enormous identity crises construct compensatory idealized selves in order to regain a sense of agency and internal coherence in a world that is unstable ("The Invented Self," 2026). For Ono, this idealized self enables him to rationalize his transformation from a great man of culture to a political pariah in terms of the "good faith errors" of a visionary who was simply "out of time."

The Remains of the Day is continually subject to critical analysis, which probes how Stevens avoids moral responsibility in his work. The unreliability of the novel's narrative is driven by a complete absence of emotional truth, as emphasised by an analysis of the novel by BPAS Journals, which focuses on Stevens' relationships with his father and Miss Kenton (2025). Stevens's selective memory and systematic omissions are a means of maintaining an idealized "butler persona" that emphasizes obedience over moral awareness (2025). A thorough research on denial in Ishiguro's Booker Prize winning novel, supports this interpretation, by arguing that Stevens' persistent adherence to the rules of professional decorum, leads him to deliberately ignore the Lord Darlington's fascist connections, and how an individual can choose to sacrifice personal integrity for the comfort of societal conformity and rigid functional definitions (ResearchGate, 2024). These eight scholarly readings demonstrate that self-deception in Ishiguro's novels is a multifaceted structural and necessary element that allows for the survival of the marginalized subjects in their own histories.

Theoretical Framework

This study combines Leon Festinger's classic psychological theory of cognitive dissonance with contemporary literary theories of narrative identity and the unreliable narrator, in order to fully understand how Masuji Ono and Stevens use this coping mechanism. Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that arises when a person has two or more conflicting beliefs, values, or ideas that are very strong and activate each other in opposing ways, especially when the behavioral history is dramatically counter to a new ethical reality (Festinger, 1957). The postwar world is an intolerable dissonance for both of Ishiguro's protagonists, whose notions of what is honorable, professional and patriotic are suddenly redefined as shameful, treasonous and morally bankrupt. The

human mind will not tolerate such a severe internal dissonance and will do everything possible to eliminate it by changing its memory, rationalizing its decisions, or simply ignoring disconfirming data (1957).

In a literary context, this psychological defense mechanism is expressed directly in the plot of the literary work (literary identity). The human person understands his/her life as a story, connects the many events in the story together, and gives them meaning and moral justification (Ricoeur, 1991). If history breaks this pattern, then the person has to be a creative editor of the script of his or her life. The unreliable narrator is used as a technique to accomplish this editing. The unreliable narrator in Ishiguro's work is not just a stylistic tool for creating dramatic irony, but is a literary representation of the text of trauma and defense. The character's speech patterns, including frequent interruptions, using defensive phrases like "it is true I may be mistaken," and suddenly changing subjects when talking about emotionally charged topics, show the exact limits of the psychological coping strategies that the character employs.

Moreover, this structure also includes Sigmund Freud's ideas of rationalization and reaction formation; that is, an attempt to transform unacceptable urges or terrible truths into very acceptable, socially constructed illusions (Freud, 1936). This paper, however, takes a different approach by employing these interwoven psychological and narrative lenses to focus on the usefulness of the characters' unreliable narration rather than their immoral characters. Self-deception is therefore not a flaw or a moral failing, but an important stabilizing mechanism that helps save the ego from being annihilated when it is required to review a life dedicated to a historical catastrophe.

Self Deception in An Artist of the Floating World.

An Artist of the Floating World is a complex defensive tapestry, woven by Masuji Ono around his self, to protect it from his involvement in Japan's terrible military history. The novel tells the story of Ono's memories as he traipses through his ruined home and a bustling urban landscape during the American occupation of Japan from 1948 to 1955. Ono's self-deception is structurally different as it is a double-edged sword: he at the same time magnifies his historical significance as a key cultural architect of the war and at the same time reduces the negative, real-world consequences of his actions on the other people around him. This paradox is a key part of his psychological coping strategy. It is shocking to acknowledge that his nationalistic propaganda art was a moral disaster; it's even more shocking to acknowledge that his art was ultimately insignificant, and his sacrifice was ultimately meaningless.

Ono's defense mechanism is always activated by his family's never-ending attempts to arrange a marriage between his younger daughter, Noriko, and a man who will marry her. The traditional Japanese practice of marriage negotiations involves a great deal of background checking, and Ono starts to realize that his reputation as an influential state-sanctioned propaganda artist is a bad social liability and may jeopardize his daughter's future. Ono's memory is forced to edit and omit in radical ways to deal with the growing anxiety. One of the main examples is in his discussion about betraying his favourite student Kuroda. Ono casually says that he only acted in good faith and helped Kuroda stray from the "unpatriotic" Western styles of art. He minimizes his reporting Kuroda to the Special Higher Police that resulted in Kuroda's brutal imprisonment and systematic destruction of his artwork. In his narration of this occasion, Ono's prose is very passive, employing passive verbs and anecdotes about the aesthetics of the old pleasure quarters in order to make his personal culpability difficult to understand.

Ono's Complicity in Pre-War Militarism] |

▼ ▼

[Inflation of Status] [Minimization of Harm]

"I was a major figure" "I acted in good faith" | |

▼

[Structural Self-Deception]

(Preserves Ego / Staves off

Existential Despair)

The novel's setting also reflects Ono's psychological disintegration. The 'Floating World' is an expression of the ephemeral and dreamlike character of geisha and artist districts, and a metaphor of Ono's unreliable and unstable consciousness. He often remembers the Migi-Hidari, a bar that used to treat him with utmost reverence, and in whose presence his sycophantic students were. Ono places his life in this lost place, hyper-masculine in the era of wartime nationalism, to temporarily stave off the Americanized democratic reality of the world in which he was raised. Even when he is required to make a formal marriage meeting and confesses his past mistakes in public, and does so with a secret pride in his own self, "there is a consolation... to be gained... if one has failed only where others have not had the courage or will to try. In this complex process of self-rationalization, Ono uses his moral failure as a mask for artistic courage: how a failure of history could be a failure of self.

Self deception is present in the book The Remains of the Day

The book The Remains of the day contains self Deception.

The most basic difference between Ono and Stevens is that while the former is historically self-inflated, the latter is historically self-effacing and fully abdicates his moral responsibility. The story of Stevens is a journal of the six-day journey that he made through the English countryside in 1956 driving his new car. The more he moves away from the walls of his very real and tangible home, the harder it is to maintain the spatial boundaries which held his suppressed emotions. Stevens' coping strategy is built on his multiple layers of a definition of dignity that is obsessed with. Stevens's butler is to have an indomitable power to give up his will, his feelings, and his reason for the will of a "great" master. To give blind professional servitude the status of a supreme moral virtue, Stevens constructs an intangible psychological barrier that will completely free him of any personal responsibility for the geopolitical agenda of his employer, Lord Darlington.

Stevens' own personal tragedy of this self-deception is tested when he remembers the international diplomatic summits that were held in Darlington Hall during the 1920s and 1930s. He does not recall Lord Darlington as the anti-Semitic, Nazi sympathizing, puppet master of the "German" government, but as a chivalrous and honorable English gentleman, whose desire to help a defeated Germany was driven by the Treaty of Versailles. Undeniable evidence of Darlington's moral flaws such as a young Jewish maid being fired for her faith, the count orders him to do, into his soul: a supreme test of his professional "dignity". He overrules his personal values and the vehement objections of the housekeeper, Miss Kenton, that it isn't his business to be concerned about the ethics of the ruling class. He believes that his responsibility is only to craft a perfect family environment for great men to do history.

[Historic Reality: Lord Darlington's Folly] | ▼

[Stevens's Defense: The Ideal of "Dignity"] |

_____ |
_____ | ▼ ▼

[Intellectual Abdication] [Emotional Repression]

"Not my place to judge" Denial of love for Miss Kenton |
_____ |
_____ | ▼

[Total Psychological Shield]

(Protects a life spent serving a disgraced master)

Miss Kenton's romantic feelings for him are completely denied by Stevens, and the depth of his self-deception is just as devastating in his private life. When a conversation, for example, with her, comes close to slipping into his professional veneer, Stevens quickly moves back into an analysis of staffing plans, silver polishing schedules, or abstract philosophy of service. This emotional paralysis culminates in his own father's death from a stroke, which occurs in his own home, while he is still serving cocktails to foreign diplomats, justifying his coldness as the result of a professional sense of decorum.

At the end of his journey he meets an older Miss Kenton, and she makes it clear that she used to love him and imagine a life with him – the walls of his story crumble for the moment. He adds, "at that moment my heart was breaking", but in a few sentences, he puts his mind at ease again, by shifting his attention to the "bantering" with his new American employer. This pivot is telling evidence that self-deception is an absolute necessity for Stevens, and that he could not and would not abandon it at this late stage, as it would mean

admitting that he gave up his family, his opportunity for love and his moral agency for an absolute lie.

Comparative Analysis / Synthesis

A comparative evaluation of Masuji Ono and Stevens reveals that while their cultural environments, social roles, and narrative styles differ significantly, their reliance on self-deception as a vital psychological coping mechanism follows an identical functional architecture. Both characters are victims of a specific form of historical blindness, having anchored their entire identities to a social hierarchy that was ultimately undone by World War II.

To understand how Kazuo Ishiguro maps the psychological architecture of denial across distinct cultural environments, it is necessary to synthesize the contrasting behavioral axes upon which Masuji Ono and Stevens construct their illusions. While both protagonists utilize highly subjective, first-person retrospective narrations to navigate the traumatic wake of World War II, they do so from opposite ideological poles. Ono's coping strategy relies entirely on an axis of historical self-inflation; he processes his moral guilt regarding the betrayal of his pupil, Kuroda, by exaggerating his creative agency, choosing to view his wartime nationalistic propaganda as a profound, visionary error executed by a courageous cultural leader.

Conversely, Stevens's defensive framework operates on a matching axis of radical self-effacement; he reconciles his complicity in Lord Darlington's fascist alliances by entirely abdicating his intellectual and moral autonomy, retreating behind a rigid, performance-driven mask of professional "dignity." Furthermore, their avenues of emotional insulation are directly tied to their physical settings. Ono seeks a psychological sanctuary within the transient, nostalgic memories of the pre-war "floating world" pleasure districts, whereas Stevens finds a defensive

shield within the highly insular, structured domestic routines of Darlington Hall. Ultimately, while Ono uses his narrative to claim a tragic historical importance, Stevens edits his memories to claim a comforting personal irrelevance, proving that self-deception can identical wrap the human psyche in either the garments of pride or the armor of submission.

Ono lives in a collectivist society in Japan, where a radical and forced democratization is taking place, and Stevens lives in a rigid class society of a declining British Empire. This difference directly influences the taste of their self-deceptions. Ono's defense mechanism involves him having to believe that he had some sort of agency, that he did something, that he had some choice, even if he ended up in trouble. Stevens's defense is the denial of personal agency, however; he must feel that his decisions were never relevant, that he was simply a puppet in the hands of a higher social class.

Ishiguro deftly combines these two psychological approaches with a similar narrative style. The novels are both written in a non-linear format, that of a retrospective diary, which lets the characters take the lead in what is revealed. Both narrators have a very strong habit of introducing a very painful or incriminating memory, but then aborting the thought line by abruptly switching to a trivial aesthetic discussion. For example, as Ono starts to talk about the sad destruction of Kuroda, he turns to a lengthy explanation of the particular techniques for brush strokes he learned from his former master, Mori-san. Likewise, upon his return to the agonising recollection of Miss Kenton crying in her parlor, Stevens suddenly launches into a lengthy lecture on how to manage an estate's silver.

In addition, both characters use physical space as a geographical extension of both internal denials. The old, ostentatious walls of Darlington Hall serve as a microcosm to the obsolescent, war-torn pleasure

district of Tokyo; the characters in both locales are their own private worlds where the harsh and ever-changing worldly evaluations of their modern surroundings can be temporarily suspended. Through these two characters Ishiguro shows that self-deception is not a culture-specific phenomenon, but a universal survival tactic. When the mind is faced with an unacceptable reality, it will create whatever narrative illusions are required to maintain the core integrity and purpose of the mind.

Conclusion

In the extraordinary and empathetic novels *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro reveals the intricate workings of denial. Ishiguro shows through Masuji Ono that self-deception is no simple intellectual mistake or moral sin, but a very clever and necessary psychological adaptation that people use to cope with the knowledge of their own historical complicity and personal losses. When history moves quickly and one's own values and beliefs that have been the foundation of one's life turn out to be harmful illusions, the human psyche naturally engages in creative and reconstructive memory to prevent the emergence of absolute despair and ego destruction.

Ono tries to elevate his standing in history to make himself feel important, Stevens tries to pass off his moral responsibility onto a professional obligation to protect a tolerable version of himself. Ishiguro is not harsh with his characters for their delusions, but rather encourages the reader to enter their world and feel the vulnerability, fear, and need of dignity that underlie their defense mechanisms. As in the world we live in, where good intentions often lead people astray by grand political programs and social systems, Ishiguro's novels remind us of the fragility of human certainty. Finally, both texts demonstrate that, when a life has ended, and what one has done cannot be undone, self-deception is the last, sad

refuge of the human mind, a comfort needed in the face of the silent silence of the day.

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