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Citation

Huai-Yuang Huang, E. (2024). Experiences that Matter: Evaluating and Remembering in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*. *Leiden Elective Academic Periodical*, (4), 47-60. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3764627>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

REVIEW

Experiences that Matter: Evaluating and Remembering in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

Eloise Huai-Yung Huang

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *An Artist of the Floating World* tells the story of its first-person narrator Masuji Ono, a propaganda artist who had once achieved a high social status by painting war posters for Japan's imperialist regime.¹ Reminiscing while trying to make sense of past encounters and achievements in the years after World War II, Ono recounts in a confessional monologue his struggles to perceive the downfall of his social reputation and renavigate his interpersonal relationships. His past life became a shameful taboo associated with values that people either want to condemn or to forget. Ishiguro's artistic "unreliable" narrative style in the novel has especially been pointed out in scholarly discussions as a valuable entry point into examining the different ways in which the human mind negotiates reality, self-perceived truth, and affective experiences. The narrative, characterized by Ono's non-chronological recollections of past events, frequent memory lapses, and deliberate emphasis or avoidance of certain details, emerges as a polished but censored account of the protagonist's past that borders on both remembrance and fictionalization.

Scholars of Ishiguro's works often read *An Artist of the Floating World* as Ono's memoir or autobiography, where a subjective version of the past is articulated with the narrator's intention to present an idealized self-image, thereby identifying

¹ Ishiguro, *An Artist*.

Ono's account as his active reconstruction of the past and an idealistic self.² Yugin Teo and Wojciech Drag, examining Ono's narrated memories in their respective studies, read the protagonist's act of remembering as not just an attempt to articulate his loss, but also an insistence on seeking meaning and validity in his past actions against dismissals by others who hold dominant values in his present political and social reality.³ The emotional dynamic behind Ono's yearning for a meaning to his life is further analyzed by Cynthia F. Wong, who claims that Ono's tendency towards self-deception and emotional repression stems from a desperate anxiety to "salvage his own dignity" through reconstructing himself as a successful figure, which in turn makes him largely blind to the perspectives of others.⁴ These readings show that first, to Ono, the memories he narrates come to represent values to which he attaches and with which he hopes to define his life and existence. Second, Ono's affective responses and sentiments, such as pride, shame, and fear, accompanying or evoked by the memories, seem to have an undermining power in shaping what he remembers and values despite often being neglected or suppressed by him.

Inspired by these previous studies of *An Artist*, this review comments the emotions and affective experiences in Ono's memories, and how they demonstrate the value of personal memories, by exploring the tensions between one's pursuit of ideals and the more immediate experiences that affect them. I argue that the novel, juxtaposing the act of remembering with evaluations of "what matters," demonstrates how some personal experiences are more likely than others to be deemed valid and offered their own space within a society based on the values these memories represent. Ono's emotions and sensorial responses are considered in this article as an entry point to analyzing the complex materiality of memory depicted in the novel, constituting both information and affects perceived and sensed by an individual. These helps reveal the gap between presumed values and immediate, bodily

² Teo, *Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory*, 67; Drag, *Revisiting Loss*, 32-5; Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, 39-41.

³ Teo, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, 120-121; Drag, *Revisiting Loss*, 37-8.

⁴ Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, 45. See also Wong "Emotional Upheaval," 203.

experiences, as well as the distance between one's perception and another's. Focusing on human affects as an aspect of memory and experience, as the review will further demonstrate, highlights one's connection with one's surroundings and helps to create shared experiences through which social boundaries and prejudices can potentially be overcome.

Being Somebody Who Matters: Ono's Life Narrative and Attachment to Values

In this section, I start with a close reading of Ono's self-narratives to illustrate the old artist's attachment to values that signify an individualist greatness and social influence with which he wishes to identify his life and memories. Ono's desire for a place in the society and a meaning to his life underlie his reconstruction of his past encounters and achievements, where being remembered is considered a form of being important.

Readers' first impression of Ono is most likely as a "refined," politely-spoken and humble narrator, who often calmly states that he is "very lax in considering the matter of status."⁵ However, through the old artist's stroll down his memory lane, the narrative soon implies that being someone "respected and influential" has been Ono's biggest goal from the start, as he is shown constantly emphasizing with satisfaction the respect and honor he had once commanded.⁶ Reminiscing about past events in a "boastful and self-congratulatory" way, Ono seems to be actively attaching meanings of greatness to the narrative of his past life.⁷ The artist defines great influential figures as people who "never follow the crowd blindly" and "endeavor to rise above the mediocre" by "tak[ing] chances in the name of ambition or for the sake of a principle they claim to believe in." This is shown in Ono's admiration for the famous architect and urban planner Akira Sugimura, whose ambitions in urban planning he describes as those "of one man to stamp his mark for ever on the character of the city."⁸ The ideal image calls to mind

⁵ Wong, "Emotional Upheaval," 203; Ishiguro, *An Artist*, 19.

⁶ Ishiguro, *An Artist*, 7, 19, 25.

⁷ Drag, *Revisiting Loss*, 38.

⁸ Ishiguro, *An Artist*, 73, 133, 159, 204.

classical humanist or individualist heroism, where a person is considered powerful as a leader who constantly advances human progress by acting according to a grand ideal instead of being influenced by others' opinions or the environment. Ono's aspiration to leave his mark in history, like Sugimura with his urban plans, is also juxtaposed with his desires to occupy a 'high' social position and be remembered by others.

To Ono, there always seems to be one ideal that is both worthy of being pursued and the right path to follow, and only an influential figure of importance can tell right from wrong. Describing himself as an idealistic leading figure of this kind, Ono is careful to portray himself always as the first and only individual to make a specific life choice for the high ideal embedded in it. For him, these choices include rejecting his father's family business to take up art as a career, his artistic affiliation first with the commercial Takeda firm and subsequent apprenticeship under the famous painter Seiji Moriyama (Mori-san), and his later political involvement with the imperialist regime.

During each stage of his career, Ono attaches a grand goal as the motivation behind his choices and moves, such as pursuing "true" art instead of commercial art by starting his apprenticeship under Mori-san, and "produc[ing] paintings of genuine importance" by venturing into making art with new, radical political themes.⁹ In actuality, Ono's decisions are driven not by a genuine belief in the respective ideals themselves, but by his fetish for the "idea" of these ideals, as well as his desire to portray himself as important by claiming them as his motives. A notable example can be seen in how Ono describes Migi-Hidari, the pleasure district he helped establish early in 1933 and one of his proudest achievements, which Ono describes to officials as a celebration of "the new patriotic spirit emerging in Japan." Despite making this nationalist claim to the officials and expressing his satisfaction in seeing the project born out of an ambitious-sounding ideal, Ono's enthusiasm lies mostly in how his participation in the project shows his place as a reputable artist during the time. He recounts in detail how the officials agreed to the district's development plan because of his persuasive letter, and how

⁹ *Id.*, 71, 163. Italics in original.

the owner of the district thanked him by reserving for him a private table of his choice.¹⁰ Ono's attitude further reveals his elitist belief system in which some individuals have a clearer view than average and some perspectives are essentially greater than others. Such beliefs are also evident in Ono's faintly contemptuous attitude towards his old colleague 'the Tortoise,' whom he refers to as his follower. In the last section of this article, I will return to Ono's elitism again.

Ono's belief in and appreciation for grand ideals is challenged when what he wants to believe does not align with what he actually experiences after the war, since the war sacrifices his son Kenji, and destroys Ono's favorite Migi-Hidari district, while the failure and rising criticisms of the imperialist project force him to retire. As someone who greatly values his social status and reputation, Ono finds nothing more distressing than this blow to his self-image when he becomes known as a disgraced war criminal. He thus tries to hide away his past self by refusing to discuss or admit his role in bringing about the devastating consequences of war, allowing him to continue believing that he is still seen as an influential and respected artist. For example, after his controversial reputation likely resulted in the failure of his daughter Noriko's marriage negotiation with the Miyake family, Ono is shown first feigning ignorance, and then persuading himself that the Miyakes have withdrawn because of the mismatched family status between the bride and groom. Ono assumes that the fiancé's family must be confused by his approval of Noriko's marriage to someone from a humbler family.¹¹ Having lost his previous social position and feeling his past self being rejected by the present society, Ono's existence in the society after the war is characterized by strong senses of precarity and loneliness even as he refuses to discuss it.

In order to maintain his self-image as an idealist despite his downfall, as well as to protect his past life from being rendered meaningless in the changed social atmosphere, Ono tries to portray himself as a good-willed tragic hero who has only chosen the wrong path of imperialism with the "best" intentions for his country.

¹⁰ *Id.*, 63-5.

¹¹ *Id.*, 18-9.

Reframing his past deeds as a brave endeavor seems to self-deceptively secured the artist's life meaning from historical blame and found a way out for his personal reputation. Doing so, however, also ignores the great suffering caused by all these political ideals he falsely proclaimed. The story implies that Ono himself remains aware of this conflict between following ideals and acknowledging lived experience, but is inclined to choose the ideals over what he experiences in reality to fulfill his desired self-image and validate his past. An example of this takes place during Kenji's funeral, when Ono confronts his depressed son-in-law Suichi, who refuses to celebrate Kenji's sacrifice as a patriotic act while "those who sent the likes of Kenji out there to die these brave deaths" continue to live.¹² Here Ono justifies the death of Kenji and numerous others with a grand ideal, instead of registering the actual events and experiencing the hurt and grief like Suichi. It is left ambiguous whether Ono's quick acceptance of Kenji's death derives from his self-deception as a former imperialist promoter or his self-protective mechanism against grief and guilt. Whatever the case, the incident demonstrates how grand ideals often remain insufficient in justifying loss and suffering on a personal or intimate scale, while Ono's belief forces him to maintain an attachment to such ideals to prove his own self-importance.

A Matter of 'Fact'?: Neglected Experiences and Perceived Truth

Following the previous explanations of Ono's attachment to grand ideals and value of life, this section examines Ono's failure to fully access the emotions and affective experiences of self and others, as shown in his blindness to others' perspectives while he avoids his own experiences of pain and loss. I will analyze two significant events in the story—his visit to his former apprentice Kuroda's place and his confession speech during Noriko's marriage negotiation—where Ono's ignorant and self-deceptive omission of painful experiences skews his understanding of the situation surrounding him. The constant memory lapses in Ono's narrative show that his emotions and effective experiences complicate his perceived truth.

¹² *Id.*, 58.

Noriko's new marriage negotiation with the Saito family serves as an immediate and emergent demand for Ono's attention toward reality. According to social conventions, Noriko and Ono must present themselves as respectively a suitable bride and a respectable head of a family during an upcoming *miiai* (marriage negotiation meeting between the two families) in order to secure the daughter's marriage to young Saito. At the suggestion of his older daughter Setsuko, Ono attempts to dispel any potential doubts about his reputation as a respectable family head by visiting several old acquaintances. Among them is the wronged Kuroda, whom Ono (during wartime the "official adviser to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities") turned in as a traitor accused of advocating unpatriotic ideologies through art.¹³

According to the values Ono tries to associate himself with, confessing and apologizing are actions understood as expressions of vulnerability, where an individual admits their limit or mistake through a ritual of self-shaming. Up until this point, Ono has refused to express any feelings of regret or to partake in any act of confession or self-shaming, constructing himself as a respectful and influential figure who should always be the one to grant pardons instead of receiving them. However, Ono for the first time faces direct humiliation, ironically because of his ignorant dismissal of another's pain, when he tries to smooth over his past betrayal of Kuroda. Omitting the troubling story of this betrayal like it never happened, Ono shows up at Kuroda's mansion with the proud air of a respected master in front of Kuroda's young apprentice Enchi, despite having come to ask for a favor. After Enchi realizes Ono's identity and tactfully asks him to give up waiting to meet Kuroda, Ono assertively claims that Enchi is too young to understand his long relationship with Kuroda, and that the young man should not "jump to conclusions about matters" without knowing "the full details," a remark that infuriates the young apprentice and leads him to usher Ono out of the mansion:

"It is clearly you who are ignorant of the full details.
Or else how would you dare come here like this?"

¹³ *Id.*, 182.

For instance, sir, I take it you never knew about Mr Kuroda's shoulder? He was in great pain, but the warders conveniently forgot to report the injury and it was not attended to until the end of the war. But of course, they remembered it well enough whenever they decided to give him another beating. Traitor. That's what they called him."¹⁴

Here, Enchi is not accusing Ono of being shameless for his unjust betrayal of Kuroda. He is mainly criticized in the passage for his proud attitude as he shows up at Kuroda's mansion, expecting himself to be welcomed not just as a friend but as a senior and guiding figure to be respected. Enchi's account of Kuroda's sufferings in the passage shows how disrespectful and hurtful the young man found Ono's feigned ignorance of his own deeds. It also stresses that Ono would never be able to acknowledge, let alone to empathize with, the traumatic experience that Kuroda has undergone. Ono's failed attempt to see Kuroda in person further suggests that Kuroda and Enchi would not easily forgive him for his deeds. But it is also important to note that Enchi is affected more by Ono's failure to acknowledge Kuroda's suffering than the question of any confessions or apologies. The disturbing exchange with Enchi "cast[s] something of a shadow over" Ono's mood and evokes in him the uneasy feeling of a gap between the story he tells himself and what happens in reality.¹⁵

On a surface level, the visit to Kuroda's and the later accounts of Noriko's *miai* with the Saitos seem to show how, after sensing his downgraded social position, Ono tries to actively tackle the emergent, real-life problems that he and his family face. However, as Wong persuasively points out, Ono is not fully focused on reconciling with Kuroda or even securing Noriko's marriage; instead, he is mostly preoccupied by his own emotions of potential anxiety, guilt, and shame, and by his precarious reputation.¹⁶ Ono's attempts to conceal this inner instability are implied in several

¹⁴ *Id.*, 112-113.

¹⁵ *Id.*, 114.

¹⁶ Wong, "Emotional Upheaval," 204.

incidents such as when he repeatedly denies having dwelled on a distant memory of seeing a frail Kuroda after his betrayal, and when he projects his anxiety on his daughters after his failed negotiation with Kuroda and before the *miai*.¹⁷ He is unable to interpret his daughters' words without understanding them in terms of his fall from grace, while his own efforts to discern others' motives and disguise his emotions at the *miai* ironically drive him to see the Saito family as hostile and accusive towards him.¹⁸ As I will show in the last section of this article, underlying Ono's careful (if not bordering on neurotic or paranoid) suspicion and desperate suppression of emotions is a desperate denial of having failed and wasted away his life, and a fear of being forgotten.

Instead of trying to recognize his own vulnerability or empathize with the feelings of others more accurately, Ono self-deceptively adopts the confession genre as a matter of formality at the *miai* to explain himself. During the prior preparations and the earliest part of the *miai*, characters frequently use phrases like "preparing [one's] appearance" or "[being] presentable" which illustrate a sense of performance or theatricality of the conventions in traditional marriage negotiations. As Ono observes all the attendees at the event, he first tries to persuade himself into believing that Noriko's unusual nervousness is normal behavior, until he suddenly realizes how in the previous *miai* his daughter had been nonchalantly "mock[ing] the formality of the occasion."¹⁹ Either a realization of his daughter's dire situation at the moment, or the revelation that one can simply give a performance for an occasion or a self-image, prompts Ono to give his significant speech of confession at the Saito's sudden mentioning of Kuroda's name:

There are some who would say it is people like myself who are responsible for the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours. As far as I am concerned, I freely admit I made many mistakes. I accept . . . that mine was part of an influence that

¹⁷ Ishiguro, *An Artist*, 78, 114.

¹⁸ Wong, "Emotional Upheaval," 202-3; Ishiguro, *An Artist*, 115, 117.

¹⁹ Ishiguro, *An Artist*, 115-7, 119.

resulted in untold suffering for our own people . . .
As you see, Dr Saito, I admit this quite readily. All I
can say is that at the time I acted in good faith . . .
But as you can see, I am not now afraid to admit I
was mistaken.²⁰

On one reading, it could be argued that Ono uses confession to finally admit his feelings about his displacement and decrease in reputation, and that the confession allows him to resituate or reconnect himself with the prevailing beliefs of the present society. A closer look at the passage above, however, reveals how Ono still stresses his influences in a way that even suggests a sense of pride more than guilt or remorse. Ono's presentation of beliefs and confession are intended to be actions according to social norms, like the displays for first impressions in a *miiai*, while the self-portrait Ono is trying to paint is that of a respected and courageous figure who does not try to "avoid responsibility for his past deeds."²¹ What remains even more ironic is how by "admitting" his wrong, Ono expresses neither a personal vulnerability nor a redressing for the sufferings of the likes of the wronged Kuroda and the sacrificed Kenji. Instead, passively suppressing the negative emotions and refusing to unpack them, the disgraced artist desperately manages to re-empower himself through a re-association with grand values, without being aware of his own biased perception of his environment caused by his negligence of affective experiences.

The Fear of Being Forgotten and Shared Experiences

In this final section, I analyze Ono's recollections of some past conversations, trauma, and confusions, which are often embedded in and stimulated by his sensorial encounters with scenes and objects. I will first analyze how silence in *An Artist* is depicted as a gesture of disapproval, rejection, or exclusion through a refusal to communicate or understand an alternative perspective. Second, I will analyze how a fear of being forgotten, juxtaposed with the idea of being deemed unworthy of the future world, can be detected in

²⁰ *Id.*, 123-4.

²¹ *Id.*, 124.

Ono's attempts to gain control over memory through re-narrating his past. Finally, I will dive into a traumatic scene of Ono's sensorial experience, discussing how tapping into the immediate bodily and psychological experiences may have brought Ono closer to understanding others.

In one peculiar scene in the novel, Ono has a conversation with his elder daughter Setsuko about the confession speech, which he has prided himself on ever since the success of the *miai*, only to be met with Setsuko's confusion as she does not remember advising her father anything before the *miai*, much to Ono's astonishment and irritation. Moreover, rebutting Ono's self-likening to a famous songwriter who committed suicide to take responsibility for his wartime commitments, Setsuko 'reassures' the old artist that he should not have to take responsibilities like that, since "Father's work had hardly to do with these larger matters of which we are speaking. Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing he has done some great wrong."²² The scene presents a possibility of Ono failing again to remember events as they have been, while implying the condition that Ono fears the most: to have failed in his artistic career, to have been mediocre. In this scene, having one's past experience forgotten means that the memory has been denied importance and worthiness of remembering. At the same time, willing silences or forgetfulness like what Setsuko employs can serve as a refusal to respond. In this sense, Ishiguro portrays silence and forgetfulness as alternative tactics people employ when dealing with disagreements which, as mild or ambiguous as they may seem, often serve as significant factors that can foretell the breakdown and outcome of a negotiation.

Some of the most notable depictions of silence and unreliable memories take place in accounts of Ono's days at Mori-san's villa, where questions, suspicions and doubts all melt together within the silent and incomprehensible spaces between conflicts of aesthetics, styles, and accusations of loyalty. For example, during Ono's days as an artist apprentice, Mori-san and the fellow apprentices often work with different kinds of silence which maintain the social norms and orders of Mori-san's villa—from deliberately remaining silent in

²² *Id.*, 190-3.

order to present a convention of politeness as natural, to constructing a social emotion of shame through dismissal of the individual voice.²³ A notable incident illustrates how a gifted pupil comes to be accused of being a traitor by fellow pupils after his art style deliberately departs from Mori-san's teachings. People come to avoid that pupil and exclude him from the community by staying silent and averting their eyes whenever he talks. Ono's recollection also contains various blanks and haziness in details, which add another layer of ignorance and denial as he claims to have already forgotten or deems it unnecessary to retrieve the memory.²⁴ We later get a closer, first-person perspective of an accused traitor in the villa when Ono faces the same silent treatment. Despite trying to convey the motives behind his new aesthetic approach in face of an alarmed and hostile Tortoise ("Tortoise, look at my painting. Let me explain to you what I'm trying to do") and the solemn Mori-san ("I would beg you to look once more at my new paintings and reconsider them. Perhaps . . . Sensei will allow me when we return to explain my intentions in each picture"), Ono is answered twice with silence and avoidance.²⁵ These responses imply an almost unconditional refusal, denying even the possibility for the two sides to communicate before leading to the relationship's breakup. Juxtaposing an artist's artistic expression through painting styles with an individual's expression of ideas and opinions, the novel illustrates how frictions between people with different perspectives trigger unrepairable clashes simply a refusal to communicate, and how willful silence can be a passive expression of ignorance.

It is, then, important to return to Ono's unrealistic elitist beliefs, which foreclose the possibility for him to acknowledge the importance of others' voices and experiences, or to imagine a future where everyone's experience is equally important. Beneath the artist's desperate attempts to portray himself as an influential figure worthy of being remembered is a fear of being forgotten by time and deemed unimportant. According to Ono's belief system, this outcome can result from expressing an ideal that is deemed 'flawed.'

²³ Wright, "No Homelike Place," 74-5.

²⁴ Ishiguro, *An Artist*, 142-3.

²⁵ *Id.*, 163, 179-80.

Ono's two traumatic memories illustrate a fear of having one's view dismissed and forgotten, describing how his paintings were destroyed: first by his father to stop him from becoming a painter, then by Mori-san in accusation of him breaking away from his teachings.²⁶ A similar mindset is shown in Ono's rumination on how it is hard for a teacher like Mori-san to accept being surpassed by their pupil. The narrative then implies that Ono himself was also driven by the same fear of being deemed wrong and outdated to sacrifice the paintings of his own gifted pupil Kuroda to the imperial officials.²⁷

This brings us to the effect of immediate, sensorial experiences in fostering reconciliation. I read Ono's troubling memory of the police investigation at Kuroda's mansion as the most potentially cathartic moment for the character, especially in combination with his memories of Mori-san and his father. Right after the recollection of his last words with Mori-san, a conversation that ended with the master confiscating his 'traitor' paintings and him leaving the villa, Ono's narrative jumps to his memory of arriving at Kuroda's place after turning him in, only to find the police officials burning Kuroda's 'offensive' paintings.²⁸ The traumatic smell of burning at Kuroda's also reminds Ono of how his father collected and burned his paintings.²⁹ The repeated image of paintings lost or destroyed implies a concept of oppressed individual voices and irretrievable memories, while Ono's trauma from losing his paintings, along with his guilt of betraying Kuroda, allows him to connect with both Kuroda's sufferings and Mori-san's regretful "arrogance and possessiveness" towards his pupils.³⁰ Ono may not have fully understood what it means to empathize, but he is shown in this scene as starting to feel the suffering experience of others in a similar way to his own. This is also when Ono is shown to be seriously sensing his limitedness as a human being, as he regretfully comments on how a teacher (like Mori-san or himself) should not

²⁶ *Id.*, 43-4; 179-80.

²⁷ *Id.*, 142.

²⁸ *Id.*, 180-3.

²⁹ *Id.*, 43-4.

³⁰ *Id.*, 181.

be controlling or possessing his students' works or beliefs. This heartfelt recognition does more to enable Ono to tap into another person's feelings than his earlier performance of self-abasement. He finally sees past his idea of the ideal and starts connecting to real-life affective experiences. Instead of passively ignoring existing differences and experiences to avoid conflicts from happening, or trying to cast away a dark past through forcing silence or forgetting, Ono stubbornly narrates his past life and the ideals attached to it in attempt to resist the threat of being forgotten, as if asking the readers to bear witness of his perceived reality.³¹ His story suggests that each memory can matter when one notices the frictions between narratives and different versions of truth, registers personal experiences, and approaches conflicts with an awareness of individual suffering and limits.

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³¹ Teo, *Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory*, 67, 124.