

## Misunderstanding in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* : What Does Brodsky's Loss of Leg Imply?

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# Misunderstanding in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* —What Does Brodsky's Loss of Leg Imply?

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## Introduction

Although Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, he grew up in England. Because of his peculiar background, many scholars have highlighted some of his identity issues, such as his sense of loss or the urge of belonging to “home” in his work. However, few of them focus on physical amputation or misunderstandings between characters in his novels; such as, Brodsky's loss of leg or the misunderstanding between a parent and a child.

In this paper, I would like to study Ishiguro's fourth novel, *The Unconsoled* (1995), which is written as if the story is playing out in a dream. Gary Adelman says, “Ishiguro combines the fantastic realism of a dream narrative with the staginess of a theatrical farce. [...] Every encounter is Ryder encountering ego projections of himself.” (167) Barry Lewis states, “They[characters] are simply the manifest symptoms of a latent anxiety. [...] Each of the musicians of the town—Stephan, Hoffman, Christoff and Brodsky—represents displaced versions of Ryder as he has been in the past or as he may be in the future.” (111) In an interview, Ishiguro said that *The Unconsoled* “is a biography of a person, but instead of using memory and flashback, you have him wandering about in this dream world where he bumps into earlier, or later, versions of himself.” (Jaggy, 114) or “I wanted to have someone just turn up in some landscape where he would meet people who are not literally parts of himself but are echoes of his past, harbingers of his future and projections of his fears about what he might become.” (Steinberg, 105-06) Ishiguro positively supports the idea of characters in the story are the displaced versions of Ryder. Considering these statements, I will examine what Ishiguro implies in the word “misunderstanding,” which is sometimes italicized for emphasis. In particular, I will focus on the “misunderstanding” between a parent and a child; such as, that of Gustav and Sophie and that of Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman and their son Stephan, to consider Ryder's psychological wound. Furthermore, I would like to study on how Ryder's psychological wound relates to the amputation of Brodsky's left leg since he is said to be Ryder's future projection.

## 1. Misunderstanding

The story starts with the protagonist Ryder, a renowned pianist, being invited to

play in a recital entitled "Thursday Night" in an unknown city in Europe. He encounters many people in the city and tries to solve their problems. In the end, he does not play at the recital, nor does he solve any problems and leaves the city.

Gary Adelman describes *The Unconsoled* as "Mr. Ryder's Comedy Company of the Psyche." (167) I agree with the observations that the story progresses in a strange way or the conversations between characters sometimes sound theatrical. A strange and trivial act by Gustav creates a "misunderstanding" between him and his daughter, Sophie. Gustav tries to seek reconciliation and speak to Sophie before he dies but his wish is never granted. Gustav reminisces about the time the misunderstanding began and says, "We were *very* close when she was small. This understanding only started when she was eight years old. [...] Incidentally, sir, this understanding of ours, it wasn't something I originally imagined going on for very long." (82; Ishiguro's emphasis) The "understanding" Gustav refers in the dialogue is a "tacit understanding" with Sophie, whereby they do not speak to each other directly. It started with a frivolous act conducted by Gustav. One day, Gustav is helping his wife put up a kitchen shelf. Sophie follows Gustav asking him questions. Gustav ignores Sophie completely. He recalls and says, "[I]t wasn't easy for me, sir. Oh, goodness me, it wasn't easy at all, I loved my little girl more than anything in the world, but I told myself I had to be strong. Three days, I said to myself, three days would be sufficient." (82) However, despite his expectation, Sophie ignores him back. It is obvious that Sophie's ignoring of Gustav is because she wants his attention, but he does not recognize his child's intention. Instead, Gustav says to himself, "[I]f that's how she wants to behave, let her see where it leads." (83) Gustav never reveals why he maintained his silence in the first place. Then, when Sophie is eleven years old, another incident worsens their already entangled relationship.

Sophie has a little hamster named Ulrich. She thinks it has disappeared, so she searches everywhere with her parents' help. When her mother goes out, Gustav goes into his room and starts listening to the radio. After a while, Gustav notices Sophie crying. He thinks Sophie has found Ulrich's remains and is about to leave his room. Then, having second thoughts, he does not. He thinks to himself that he will leave the room once Sophie calls for him or knocks on the door, but she never does. When his wife comes home and asks him what has happened, he pretends that he does not know anything and tells his wife that he has been listening to a radio concert. However, Sophie knows that her father was listening to her crying. Gustav recalls, "[A]fter that, our understanding became, well, cemented, and even in these present circumstances it doesn't seem to me appropriate I should suddenly break such a long-standing

arrangement.” (85) In other words, they both lost an “opportunity” to reconcile. After this, they never get to communicate well, even as Gustav lies dying in his bed.

Another of Ishiguro’s examples of “misunderstanding” between parents and child occurs between Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman and their son Stephan. In this instance, the “misunderstanding” between them concerns Stephan’s talent as a pianist.

Stephan is not confident in his ability as a pianist and there is a scene in the book where he confesses as much to Ryder. According to Stephan, he started taking piano lessons when he was four years old. The relationship with his parents was good at the time, especially with his mother who was keen on Stephan’s education. However, when Stephan was nine years old, she fell out with his piano teacher and thus, she stopped giving him lessons. Stephan later recalls the impact saying, “I’d lost those crucial two years. The years between ten and twelve, [...] I don’t think my parents really appreciated how damaging those two years would be.” (74) In addition, he thinks it was around this time that his parents stopped talking to each other and blames himself for this saying, “[T]his change must have dated back to when I’d lost Mrs Tilkowski[the piano teacher].” (73) However, Stephan never asks his parents about the true cause of their quarrel. On the contrary, he starts to practice the piano diligently, hoping this would encourage them to reconcile.

With Stephan’s enthusiastic practice, Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman begin to think he is gifted. They suggest Stephan should enter a piano competition and his mother works hard to achieve this. However, at the competition, they listen to Stephan’s performance from the beginning to the end, for the first time, and are devastated. He tells Ryder that “[T]hey first realized how short of the mark I was. They listened very carefully to my playing—it was probably the first time they *really* listened—and they realised I’d only humiliate myself and the family by entering[the program].” (74; Ishiguro’s emphasis) In particular, Mrs. Hoffman is the more disappointed and considers all she has done for Stephan was “a big waste.” (75) She even stopped going out. Seeing his parents’ reaction, Stephan thinks he has no talent. After this, they completely stop listening to Stephan’s piano-playing. Ryder assures Mr. Hoffman that Stephan has great potential, saying, “Mr Hoffman, Stephan is a very gifted young man ...,” (354) but Hoffman does not listen to this advice. In fact, as noted later in the book, Stephan plays as an opening act in front of the audience at “Thursday Night” and receives thunderous applause. However, although Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman came to the premises, they left without listening to Stephan’s performance. Consequently, Stephan’s parents’ “misunderstanding,” regarding their son’s competence as a pianist, has not changed. Carlos Villar Flor states, “[H]e[Ryder], like Stephan, or Boris, must

have been severely hurt in his childhood by being a witness of constant parental fighting and by suffering a subsequent neglect.” (166) It could be opined that parents not recognizing or admitting a child’s talent could be embraced by the term “a subsequent neglect.” When considering the two “misunderstandings” between Gustav and Sophie and Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman and Stephan, it is clear that the parents have not engaged in conversations with the child to disentangle the “misunderstandings” that have developed. To make matters worse, the “misunderstanding” gradually erodes the child’s mind and later in life becomes an “understanding” between parents and the child not to speak each other directly. The complicated relationship is never ameliorated but instead, develops into traumatic psychological wounds and a number of ensuing difficulties. For example, Sophie cannot converse properly with her father even when he is dying and Stephan closes the opening act without winning his parents’ recognition.

## 2. Amputation

The main reasons for Ryder visiting the anonymous EU city was to deliver his speech and give a piano recital at the “Thursday Night” event and to reunite with his wife, Sophie[Gustav’s daughter], and their son, Boris. How the relationship between Ryder and Sophie developed or how well they know each other are not written in the novel. However, when Ryder first meets Sophie he shows awkwardness and says to himself, “[S]he was somewhat more than attractive than I had expected.” (32) Furthermore, when Sophie introduces Ryder to Boris, she says, “He’s a special friend.” (32) This gives the impression that their relationship is far more than casual. We can assume that something within this relationship contributed to Ryder being away from home. Ching-chih Wang describes Ryder as an orphan saying, “The house, a symbol for settlement, familial affiliation and community connection, is never found. An orphan like Ryder, who gets lost in the maze of the traumatic past, is destined to wander around.” (102) Being a renowned pianist, Ryder cannot stop travelling around the world. There is a scene where Ryder explains to Boris the reason why he is always absent from home.

You see, it would be so easy just to miss it. To say one time, no, I won’t go, I’ll just rest. Then only later, I’ll discover that was the one, the very very important one. And you see, once you miss it, there’s no going back, it would be too late. It won’t matter how hard I travel afterwards, it won’t matter, it would be too late, and all these years I’ve spent would have been for nothing. (218)

Ryder never explains what he means by “too late.” However, it is clear that he is obsessed with the idea of missing some kind of opportunity. Sophie implores Ryder to spend more time with Boris, as his childhood days are limited. “He’s growing so fast, [...] Soon he’ll be grown. We don’t have much time. [...] This is his childhood, now, slipping away. Soon he’ll be grown and he’ll never have known anything better.” (250) Ryder knows, from his own experience, the importance of childhood days but he prioritizes his job. Why is he so afraid of missing the “opportunity”? Ryder’s past warrants closer inspection to discover the clue and consider why Ryder projects his future on Brodsky.

Ryder often reminisces about his childhood days and remembers his parents’ quarrels. One of the important tokens from Ryder’s childhood days is a family car that he accidentally finds during an outing with Sophie and Boris. The car is abandoned in the bushes and is covered with cobwebs. He looks at the car and says, “I could remember it parked in the drive of our little cottage in Worcestershire, its paint and metal work gleaming, and my gazing at it for minutes at a time, feeling immensely proud.” (261) He remembers that he used to play inside the car and how comfortable it was on a rainy day. However, when his memory focuses on playing inside the car with his plastic soldiers, he becomes uneasy. The traumatic memory of the occasions when his mother tells Ryder not to slam the car door or otherwise she will “skin me[Ryder] alive” (261) returns. Ryder recalls the memory as follows:

[T]his threat had been issued at a point when a door was actually ajar, leaving me in a quandary as to whether I should leave it open [...] or whether I should risk shutting it as quietly as possible. This dilemma would torment me throughout the remainder of my time playing with the car, thoroughly poisoning my enjoyment. (262)

His mother’s abusive words “skin alive” remained starkly in little Ryder’s head. The cobwebbed family car indicates that Ryder has sealed or left happy memories of his family untouched for a long time. In other words, it is inevitable that Ryder cannot establish a firm tie with his family[Sophie and Boris] because he had such a frail relationship with his own father and mother.

Barry Lewis states, “Brodsky is also a kind of Captain Ahab, appearing in the novel at a late stage (Chapter 22) after much rumour and anticipation.” (113) The reason Lewis mentions Captain Ahab here is probably because the captain losing his

leg in pursuit of the whale is seen as similar to Brodsky losing his leg in the accident and failing to win back Miss Collins's heart. Miss Collins is Brodsky's former wife and he is repeatedly pressing her to come back to him, but she rejects him. To examine this further, it is important to consider how Ryder projects his future on Brodsky.

The story confirms that Ryder is travelling all over the world as a renowned pianist and no one can stop him from doing so. Stephan, who is considered an embodiment of young Ryder, is misunderstood and neglected by his parents who erroneously conclude he has no talent as a pianist. This could provide Ryder's motivation to embark on such trips. He wants to prove to his parents that he does have a talent. In addition, to stay in the forefront of the music industry, Ryder needs to be constantly creating music. He reveals his feelings to Boris saying, "I'd like nothing better than to stay home with you and Mother, [...] But you see it's not so simple. I have to keep going on these trips because, you see, you can never tell when it's going to come along." (217) He also says that people should not be lazy and should keep travelling: "They spend year after year travelling and they start to get tired, perhaps a little lazy. But that's often just when it comes along. And they miss it. And, you know, they regret it for the rest of their lives." (218) It is obvious that Ryder is obsessed with the idea that he cannot stop travelling, but he never reveals, in detail, the result of his travelling. He fears that if he stops performing, he will miss something important. Brodsky was once a renowned music conductor, but now he is simply a lonely old drunkard. People of the town see him simply as a nuisance.<sup>1</sup> This is the reason why many scholars state that Brodsky is the embodiment of Ryder's future anxiety.

Brodsky first appears in the novel when he attends a memorial party for his deceased dog, Bruno. Ryder sees him and says, "[T]here was again something odd angled about his whole posture." (140) Ryder mentions Brodsky awkwardly inclines to his left. This is probably because Brodsky is wearing an artificial left leg, having lost his limb in a railway accident when he was a little boy. Brodsky confesses:

All my life, [...] I've been without that leg. How long ago was it now? You start to forget, once you get to this sort of age. You don't even mind it any more. It gets to be like an old friend, a wound. Of course, it troubles you from time to time, but I've lived with it so long. It must have happened when I was a child. A railway accident, maybe. (464)

However, in the latter half of the novel, Brodsky is involved in a car accident while riding a bicycle. A surgeon who happens to be there cuts his trapped left leg with a saw.

Brodsky jibes, "That fool of a doctor, he didn't realize. I was all caught in that bicycle but it was just the artificial leg, the one that was trapped." (464) Furthermore, Brodsky appears on stage to conduct an orchestra, using an ironing board as a crutch at "Thursday Night." Why did Brodsky lose his left leg twice? What is Ishiguro's intention? There must be a meaning for having Brodsky's leg amputated twice if he is to portray Ryder's future anxiety.

When, at the podium, Brodsky raises his baton, the venue is tense with high-spirited anticipation. However, soon after the opening, the audience begins to show unease at Brodsky's expression of music. The musicians start to look anxious and finally become disgusted. Ryder thinks he should go on stage to stop the performance and ponders what to do. At that moment, Brodsky loses his balance and ascends "a few inches into the air then crashed down across the front of the stage, taking the podium rail, the ironing board, the score, the music stand, all with him." (496) As a result of this event, the orchestra performance is called off and Ryder never gets to play his piano. Ryder was hoping to see his parents at the concert, but they didn't come. Nothing was solved, after all.

Brodsky's wounds could be compared with Ryder's psychological wounds, received in the past, in his private and public life. Moreover, the amputation of Brodsky's left leg could be a display of Ryder's desire. Ostensibly, Ryder knows he has to continue going on musical trips to maintain his position as a pianist, but deep inside he wants to destroy everything he has accomplished and end the trips. Therefore, one can picture Brodsky as Ryder's unconscious desire and not directly related to future anxiety.

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, the meaning of "misunderstandings" of the two groups (parents and children) and Brodsky's loss of his left leg in the novel, *The Unconsoled*, have been considered. Conflict between parents and children are common in real life. However, the novel shows that if a problem arises between a father, mother (or both) and a child and the parent shows indifference or leaves the problem unsolved over time, it becomes a traumatic psychological wound for the child. This is apparent in Sophie's case—she cannot converse with her father, even as he is dying in bed—and with Stephan's parent's underestimation of their son's musical competence. This "misunderstanding," however, as represented in the novel, gives Ryder a motive to remain active as a renowned pianist. He keeps going on recital trips, hoping that one day his parents will attend and witness him being praised by the audience. The "opportunity" Ryder does

not want to miss is to convince his parents that he is a respected pianist. However, Ryder never mentions his parents are already dead. (Gallix 7) He does not want to admit the fact and pretends to everyone that they are going to materialize at “Thursday Night.” Ryder knows that his “opportunity” has long passed and that he will never resolve the “misunderstanding.”

Equally, the amputation of Brodsky’s left leg seems grotesque, in a way, and is a problem that a musician never wants to reveal while on stage. However, considering Ryder’s state of mind as a musician, he cannot stop the trips and nothing can prevent him from moving on. On the other hand, he carries a traumatic psychological wound that sometimes rises to the surface of his consciousness, thereby destroying his efforts and best intentions. He subconsciously knows that he has lost his opportunity for good and that nothing will heal his wound: he must deal with this for the rest of his life. At the end of the novel, Sophie says to Boris, “He’ll never be one of us. You’ve got to understand that, Boris. He’ll never love you like a real father.” (532) Ryder becomes tearful and leaves Boris and Sophie behind. These trips are not Ryder’s agony; he continues with these trips because he is the agony himself. Indeed, the only solace Ryder can claim is through continuing to play the piano.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a scene that people throw a party for Brodsky who lost his dog, Bruno, and Ryder—the evening’s great surprise. However, Ryder realizes that the occasion was not a cocktail party, but that in fact people are waiting to be called into dinner. The Countess holds it up because Brodsky’s lateness, and people start to get irritated. “Very soon, every sort of wild rumour had begun to circulate around the room. Brodsky had been discovered, utterly drunk, cradling his dog’s corpse. Brodsky had been found lying in a puddle in the street outside, talking gibberish. Brodsky, overcome with grief, had tried to kill himself by drinking paraffin.” (126) People used to have respect to Brodsky but not after being labeled as a drunkard.

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