

# Under the Magnifying Glass: Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*

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## 1. Pulp Fiction Revisited

Kazuo Ishiguro's bicultural background and life trajectory have long proven his free spirit, and herein lies the therapeutic core of his works. In 2008, the English author of Japanese origins was ranked 32nd on The Times' list of "The 50 Greatest British Writers Since 1945". Yet the proof that mankind has been taking his psycho-literary assessments into account since 1980, the starting point of his writing career, is the Nobel Prize in Literature that Ishiguro received in 2017 for being a writer "who, in novels of great emotional force, has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world" (Nobel Prize 2017).

Ishiguro's fifth book, *When We Were Orphans*, is a first-person detective novel that takes place in Shanghai and England while presenting the life of detective Christopher Banks, who wants to solve a personal case as the crowning of his successful career. Ishiguro admits in his interviews that he has used as his source of inspiration Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers' works, which constitute the Golden Age of the British detective fiction. Their popularity in the 1920s and 1930s stemmed from a cathartic need for unrealistic crime fiction after the horrors of the wars. According to Ishiguro, humans' unconscious longing for justice and order restoration has thus led to the emergence of all-powerful detectives that can solve the world's problems and heal all past traumas (Mudge 2000; Book Browse). Speaking about his fifth novel, Ishiguro indirectly refers to pulp fiction<sup>1</sup>, the low-quality literature found in pulp magazines issued in America between late 1890s and mid-1900s while in Britain from early 1900s to late 1930s. The term also designates the mass-market paperbacks after 1950, which were not necessarily pulps or cheap literature (Lopes 2009: 5). Pulp magazines contained a large variety of genre fiction: adventure, crime, fantasy, horror, humour, romance, science fiction, sports, war, westerns. Nowadays the term *pulp fiction* is mostly synonymous with hardboiled

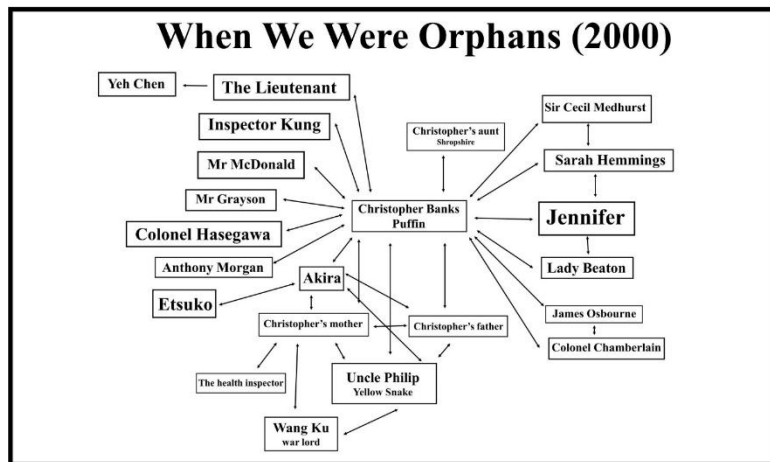
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<sup>1</sup> The pulps normally consisted of 128 pages of cheap wood pulp paper (hence their name) with irregular edges, each being 18 by 25 and 1.3 cm wide, high and thick, respectively. The high-quality paper was destined only to the magazines called the *glossies or slicks* (Agnew 2018: 6).

crime fiction, with detectives witnessing violence, horror and terror so often that they become cynical antiheroes (Agnew 2018: 23). The young Ishiguro was reading a lot of pulps, in their original and modern forms, which prompted the seasoned writer to create a crime novel as a nostalgic homage to the comic heroes of his childhood, although his protagonist could hardly be regarded as a hardboiled detective (Mudge 2000). Another source of inspiration for Ishiguro's fifth novel was his passion for Sherlock Holmes in his primary school years: "It was good fun, and it made me think of stories as effortless things. I think that stayed with me" (Hunnewell 2008). According to Katherine Stanton, however, the novel is "yet another study of a painfully deluded character who allows his work (and his childhood traumas) to sabotage any chance he has for love and romance, and thus for a truly meaningful life" (Stanton 2006: 79).

The characters' interconnection, with their introspective storylines, are arranged in no chronological order in Ishiguro's detective novel, like the pieces of an unfinished puzzle. The protagonist is a sensitive, often delusional adult, who cannot see himself for who he really is. The novel therefore constitutes not only a memento of the old pulp magazines but also the author's trademark depiction of the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful of the human mind.



Christopher Banks is a successful detective in the 1930s, although Ishiguro only mentions his numerous solved crimes. Instead, he presents Banks' obsession with his parents' disappearance back in the international settlement of Shanghai, when he was only a child. Such is his desire to find his parents, after more than twenty years, that he goes back to a place torn between a current war and another yet to come, both bloody and cruel. By intensely personalizing historic events, as he does in all his previous novels, the British-Japanese author writes another historiographical metafiction, which comes in line with Linda Hutcheon's definition: "[...] novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon 1988: 5). While the historical background acquires bitter notes in *The Remains of the Day*, as the Nazis' rise to power still looms large in the collective subconscious of the humankind, Ishiguro's fifth novel aims more in the psychological direction of *The Unconsoled*. Ryder

thinks that his concert will finally put him in the right place in his parents' eyes, for the simple fact that they have agreed to come and see him play. Therefore, not only will his concert restore the unnamed European city to its former cultural glory, the basis of its whole welfare, but it will also finally create a happy family portrait within his mind, one he will be able to live with from that moment on. Likewise, Christopher Banks considers himself an important instrument in the worldwide endeavour to stop a looming war as well as the ongoing one while finding his parents and extracting them from their dreadful status quo (Mudge 2000).

The emotional logic behind the protagonist's behaviour could thus be regarded as a literary case of the Dunning–Kruger effect. Not only Christopher Banks, but also Ryder in *The Unconsoled* and Masuji Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* seem to present themselves as more important than they actually are in others' eyes, a conscious or unconscious act whose level of inoffensiveness cannot be easily assessed (Fairbanks 2013: 605; Walkowitz 2001: 1052). As a cognitive bias, the Dunning–Kruger effect indicates the humans have a natural tendency to see themselves better than they actually are at doing specific things, not because of a big ego, but due to an innate inability to assess themselves correctly (Kruger, Dunning 1999). In other words, it is quite normal to love oneself more than others do, even when the reverse is overtly expressed: lack of self-appreciation or the inability to see one's true value. Both over- and under-estimation should therefore be fairly acknowledged in order to be addressed properly and non-judgmentally. This is one of the reasons Christopher Banks cannot be the hardboiled, reason-oriented detective that he describes himself to be, as though he had stepped down directly from a pulp fiction magazine. Perhaps that is why the author only mentions his many solved cases without offering any single Sherlock-Holmes-like instrument of his success. Instead, the reader is presented with his unrealistic way of trying to track his parents down after so long a period that not even the most seasoned detective will manage to find clues easily. This can only validate others' image of Banks as "such an odd bird at school" while disproving his self-image as a perfectly normal boy (Ishiguro 2001: 7). According to Dunning and Kruger, humans cannot excel at metacognition<sup>2</sup> due to their strong emotional ties with their own individuality, even when they criticise themselves. In many cases, it hurts to analyse oneself objectively, so one prefers to live in a world of make-belief, overestimating one's abilities and failing to learn and develop, as the double curse of this cognitive bias (Kruger, Dunning 1999: 1132).

Ishiguro never judges his characters' irrational attempts to deal with the harsh reality. Through his unreliable narrators, the writer only wants to emphasise the important role of emotions in the decision-making process, even when humans consciously devote themselves to reason-based deductions (Mudge 2000). Christopher's childhood takes a great part of the novel, being instrumental in the reader's understanding of the detective's later obsession. As a boy, the protagonist lives with his parents in China, in the first decade of the 20th century. He leads a happy, careless life in the International Settlement of Shanghai until his parents disappear mysteriously, one after the other. Consequently, the nine-year-old

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<sup>2</sup> Metacognition is the capacity to evaluate ourselves correctly (Metcalf, Shimamura 1994: 2).

Christopher is forced to return to England, where he will stay with his aunt, or in boarding schools during his schoolyears. According to Ishiguro, the protagonist possesses an unusual talent for solving hopeless cases, an ability that distinguishes him from the other detectives, hence his notoriety in the field. Being too absorbed in his work, Banks gives little importance to his love life and therefore seems attracted to the beautiful Sarah only because she is also parentless. He seeks, instead, to hone his parenting skills as he adopts an orphan girl, Jennifer. In 1937, at the peak of his career, Banks decides to return to China and solve the case of his life: his parents' disappearance. By this point, readers will have begun asking themselves why the famous detective has waited for about thirty years to take such a momentous decision. A more realistic obsession would have had him return to Shanghai as soon as he had become a detective, since it was his parents' disappearance that had motivated him to choose this career in the first place. Ignoring his remorse for abandoning his daughter, Banks has himself believe that even Jennifer will want him to go and save the world by finding his missing mother and father, which only proves "the limits of Christopher's limited psyche" (Jaffe 2001).

True to his unreliable sense of perception, Banks conveys his investigation in Shanghai as a twisted mashup of imaginary and real while being constantly torn between further pursuing his mission and abandoning it. The city is devastated by the Second Sino-Japanese War<sup>3</sup>, and the corruption of the Chinese officials clashes painfully with the detective's unrealistic expectations. Apart from helping a badly wounded Japanese soldier in Shanghai because he recognises him as his old friend Akira, Christopher surprisingly runs into his friend Sarah Hemmings, who is unhappily married to an older opium-addicted gambler. The episode vaguely reminds of the troubled relationship between Estella Havisham and Pip in *Great Expectations*, and a later reference to Dickens' masterpiece is Christopher's discovering the unexpected identity of his secret benefactor, who has supported him financially throughout school, like the escaped convict Magwitch (Auerbach 1975: 395–419). After a romantic kiss, Miss Hemmings asks Christopher to come with her to Macao as she wants to escape from her harmful marriage. The detective readily decides to abandon his mission, an atypical move for the highly-reputed professional he claims to be. Later on, he chooses to follow one last lead before turning a new page in his life, thus proving himself an irrational decision maker once again. As expected, Banks cannot keep his promise, so Sarah will leave alone, never to see him again. When asked why he has the detective do this, Ishiguro gets evasive: "Without psychoanalysing myself, I can't say why. You should never believe an author if he tells you why he has certain recurring themes" (Hunnewell 2008). Although he cannot find his parents, Banks discovers that the man he used to call uncle in early childhood is responsible for his mother's disappearance, being a Communist double agent known as Yellow Snake. When Banks finds Uncle Philip, he finally learns what happened back in the late 1910s.

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<sup>3</sup> The Second Sino-Japanese War (July 7, 1937 – September 2, 1945) is also known as the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. It is considered to have started much earlier, when the Japanese invaded Manchuria in 1931, and also to have been the outset of WWII. In the war, China received help from the Soviet Union and the USA, hence the Pearl Harbour tragedy in 1941 (River 2018: 21–24).

As is always the case with Ishiguro's novels, the disclosure is an unheroic display of unfortunate events: On the one hand, young Christopher's father decided to abandon his family and run away with his mistress to Hong Kong, then moved to Singapore, where he died of typhoid fever. On the other hand, his mother was forcefully made the concubine of Wang Ku, in revenge for having insulted the round-faced opium warlord in public. Once again, Ishiguro depicts life-like situations that lack the impressiveness of what makes a good movie ending. To further aggravate his mental crisis at finding the inglorious truth, the protagonist learns from Philip that the person who funded his studies was none other than Wang Ku. At this point, readers will ask themselves yet more questions about the incongruity of the events: How did the money reach Banks? Was his aunt involved too? If so, why did she not tell the young Christopher that his mother was still alive? Why did the adult Christopher never ask himself how his aunt was able to pay for his education? And, ultimately, why did his mother not try to reconnect with him? Banks chooses not to punish Philip for his horrible deed, although the latter insists while offering the detective a gun to shoot him with. In 1953, Banks goes to Hong Kong, where he finds his mother in a mental hospital and asks for her forgiveness. It remains unclear whether or not she recognizes the detective by his nickname: "Did you say forgive Puffin? Whatever for?" (Ishiguro 2001: 308). The end of his mission brings an unexpected dimension to his old wound: All that time, Christopher has not been an unfortunate orphan but an abandoned child. However, the detective finds a sense of closure in pursuing his mission as such: "There is nothing for it but to try and see through our missions to the end, as best we can, for until we do so, we will be permitted no calm" (*ibidem*: 310).

Although quite unconvincing, the protagonist's final words seem indicative of his willingness to let go of the past: "[...] I want something else now, something warm and sheltering, something I can turn to, regardless of what I do, regardless of who I become" (*ibidem*: 316). On the other hand, Banks' new attitude may result from Ishiguro's decision to throw out 110 pages in order to preserve the unreliability of his protagonist: "In doing so it seemed to increase the possibility that it was all in Christopher's head anyway. Was he really someone solving these crimes or was it just another projection of his strange view of the world" (Blake)? As always, it is up to readers to decide if Christopher Banks proves to be "the most brilliant investigative mind in England" (Ishiguro 2001: 34). Narrative confusion is what makes Ishiguro a successful writer of highly-interactive novels: His readers will invariably feel the compulsion to reread entire passages, if not the whole book, hoping to find clues they may have missed the first time.

## **2. Parentless**

According to Puchner, "[t]he search for parents resonates powerfully with Ishiguro's recurring fascination with the figure of the orphan, most explicitly in" Ishiguro's fifth novel, considered a failure of the genre by some critics: "Plot and suspense are sacrificed to the psychology of the main character" (Mudge 2000). "The single problem with the book is the prose, which, for the first time, is so lacking in local colour as to be entirely inappropriate to the task in hand" (Hensher

2000). Yet the writer is highly praised by others for conveying the mind's doings according to different temporal rules and structures beyond a chronological plot. And it is precisely this form of intuitive writing about human interconnection that makes the British author of Japanese origins a natural-born therapist (Adams 2005). Ishiguro's inspiration for Christopher stems from the natural ability of children to deny their trauma. As such, Christopher's

strategy is to hold on the view that he was fine at school, he didn't miss his parents, he was looking forward to returning to England, and so on. He refuses to see the trauma and difficulties. A number of times he denies point blank some characters' assertions because he cannot incorporate them into his world view (Blake).

According to a dictionary definition, an orphan's parents have either died or abandoned him. A more detailed legal definition includes the words loss, death, disappearance, separation, abandonment and desertion in describing the condition of a parentless child (McIntosh 2013:1085). A popular characterisation refers only to the condition of a child with dead parents. In Ishiguro's novel "the precise status of orphanhood remains unclear. Facing the world as an orphan may not mean simply being an orphan, just as the title [...] suggests an odd temporality according to which being an orphan is a thing of the past (Puchner 2008: 43). The protagonist wants to find his parents while seeing himself as an orphan. Even when he finds his mother, later on, Banks still identifies himself as an orphan. "Being an orphan is thus a state that is more expansive than simply having lost one's parents, and it includes the search for 'the shadows of vanished parents', even if those parents are not, strictly speaking, dead" (*ibidem*). Before learning the painful truth, Christopher has the attitude of a winner, turning the worst of his fate into a valuable life lesson. He becomes a reputable detective and adopts an orphan girl because he can empathise with her parentless situation. In other words, Christopher does not fall prey to the *why-me* mindset: "[detectives] tend to be earnest, often reclusive individuals who are dedicated to their work and have little inclination to mingle with one another, let alone with 'society' at large" (Ishiguro 2001: 18). At first, Christopher's brave attitude as an orphan turned successful in life seems quite credible. Being raised by his aunt in Shropshire and having enough money to pursue his studies at Cambridge certainly helps in establishing some comfort in his mind, compared to the fate of institutionalized orphans, whose only privilege may be to live with one or several pairs of foster parents. However, a difference starts contouring in time, between Christopher's own description of himself and his image in others' eyes, although Christopher is the only narrator. When he accidentally meets James Osbourne, an old friend from his school days at Cambridge, the latter recalls young Christopher's obsession with his colleague's well-connectedness while describing Christopher as a strange boy (*ibidem*: 23). The detective, meanwhile, has a completely different image of himself back in school, as a perfectly adapted boy, learning to fit in almost immediately, by instinct alone: "During even my earliest weeks at St Dunstan's [boarding school], I do not believe I did anything to cause myself embarrassment" (*ibidem*: 24). The concept of well-connectedness indeed appears to have fascinated young Christopher enough to have insisted on knowing what it meant, yet not in the obsessive way his colleague recalls, rather as the

rightful interest in the mind of a boy who grew up parentless: “[James] was in some mysterious way connected to various of the higher walks of life, even though he looked and behaved no differently from the rest of us. [...] One simply knows people. One has parents, uncles, family friends” (*ibidem*). The adult Christopher is willing to reveal his true reason for wanting to know the meaning of well-connectedness. His disclosure indicates his true image in school, as a secluded and shy boy, afraid and unable to make healthy ties with his colleagues due to his trauma of having lost his parents in dubious circumstances:

As I would often point out to my companions, at a boarding school like ours, we had all learned to get on without parents, and my position was not as unique as all that. Nevertheless, now I look back on it, it seems probable that at least some of my fascination with Osbourne's 'well connectedness' had to do with what I then perceived to be my complete lack of connection with the world beyond St Dunstan's. That I would, when the time came, forge such connections for myself and make my way, I had no doubts. But it is possible I believed I would learn from Osbourne something crucial, something of the way such things worked (*ibidem*: 26).

Young Christopher's intentions and behaviour cannot match seamlessly so long as the solitary boy is in unconscious denial, away even from his only relative alive, his aunt. His pained subconscious prompts him to keep his intention of becoming a detective secret from his colleagues. Moreover, he refuses to take part in a detective game played at school just because he used to play it with his Japanese friend Akira in Shanghai, shortly after his father's disappearance:

I certainly realised quickly enough that it would not do for me to indulge openly – as I had been doing routinely in Shanghai – my ideas on crime and its detection. So much so that even when during my third year there was a series of thefts, and the entire school was enjoying playing at detectives, I carefully refrained from joining in in all but a nominal way (*ibidem*: 32).

As is often the case with emotions, it is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify and label them on a regular basis, and most times people are unable to acknowledge the gravity of certain traumatic events, hence the inefficiency of their conscious or unconscious coping strategies. Accordingly, Ishiguro aptly introduces linguistic devices meant to absolve the adult Banks of failing to report events as they were: “It is possible I believed ...” or “My guess is that ...” or “It was on this occasion, I am sure ...” or even “As I say, I am sure these impressions are not accurate, but that is how the evening remains in my mind” (*ibidem*: 54). According to Caporale Bizzini, “Akira's unlikely presence” during Banks' search for his parents in Shanghai “provides both a guide to the past and a door to the present. Through him, Banks discovers that the past he remembers is a lie that has only ever been real in his mind” (Caporale Bizzini 2013: 73). In a 1997 case study on the psychological impact of orphanhood on 193 children with ages between 6 and 20, who lived in a district from Uganda, the results indicate how powerful the effects of being parentless really are on the psyche of the surviving children, regardless of age. The scope of the study was to assist adoptive parents and educational establishments in offering appropriate support to children who suffered the loss of both parents due to long-term sickness or sudden death. Most helpers are well-intentioned and yet they

lack the informational background that can provide them with more tools for building a healthy empathetic relationship with the orphaned children. No one can truly replace lost parents, but children who suffered such traumatic losses can be scarred for life if they do not find proper emotional support along the way. The study focused on identifying the psycho-social issues that prevented helpers, such as teachers, community workers or guardians, from providing the attention the children needed, both individually and collectively. Great emphasis was placed both on how the children were able to deal with their environment while changing their behaviour accordingly and on their personal evaluation of such behaviour. A three-phase life assessment was taken into consideration, with parents being healthy, then ill, then dead. At learning of their parents' sickness, children exhibited emotions such as hopelessness, sadness and helplessness. Most of those adopted felt anger and depression, although they were less depressed than the ones who only lost their mothers or had to live alone. The findings also indicate that the latter category placed a larger focus on their environment than the children who lost their fathers (Sengendo, Nambi 1997: 105–124).

In the light of such discoveries, readers can assume that Christopher Banks displays cumulative effects of his parents' disappearance. At the age of nine, he could have unconsciously taken the blame of having lost both his parents, and the sharp contrast with his pampered life up to that point would have rendered him vulnerable and unprepared to deal with the psycho-physiological dimension of his orphan status. The author does not specify what kind of guardian his aunt has been to him or whether she was trained in any way to identify his real needs and counsel him properly before she sent him to the boarding school. On the surface, young Christopher may not have suffered any type of intentional abuse, yet readers can deduce that his notorious success as a detective stems from his childhood trauma, which has rendered him emotionally unstable and quite incapable of establishing healthy social ties. There are only two ways for children to deal with a traumatic event such as the loss of one or both parents: They can turn it either into an asset or into a liability that will shape the rest of their life. The situation is all the more difficult when the capacity of the individuals and institutions involved to diagnose and empathise with such traumas may differ from or clash with each other.

The detective's case was not the most unfortunate, the author wants readers to believe. Young Christopher had a caring aunt and money to continue his studies and pursue his dream. This outlet will have him move through life motivated, light-hearted and, many-times, with childish gusto. However, it does not need a trained psychologist to notice that Christopher Banks is in emotional pain, which decides the way he reacts or responds to his ever-changing environment. His unreliability as a narrator indicates that he has failed, along the way, to assess the extent and implications of his childhood trauma, hence his double nature. On the other hand, Banks intends "to do justice to the past, as well as to connect the past to the present in meaningful ways", in accordance with Walter Benjamin and Hanna Arendt's theories of storytelling (De Valk). By adopting Jennifer, the detective wants to transgress his orphan status, although the author states that adopted orphans unintentionally may not be allowed to feel free: "the first big attempt an orphan would make to rewrite his past would be to try to heal it by helping another orphan.



The result can be that the child is not allowed to exist in his or her own right” (Blake). Jennifer’s unforced positivity resembles Ishiguro’s description of his own father as an untypical Japanese, with an easy-going attitude towards the harshness of life: “My father wasn’t typically Japanese at all because he grew up in Shanghai. He had a Chinese characteristic, which was that when something bad happened, he smiled” (Hunnewell 2008). When Jennifer’s trunk is lost by the travel agency, she does not seem too affected by the lack of her only material possessions in comparison to the loss of what truly matters: “It’s all right. I’m not upset. After all, they were just things. When you’ve lost your mother and your father, you can’t care so much about things, can you” (Ishiguro 2001: 53)? Christopher notices her maturity with regard to the whole event:

Almost everyone to whom I introduced Jennifer remarked on how self-possessed she appeared for one who had experienced such tragedy. Indeed, she did have a remarkably assured manner, and in particular a capacity to make light of setbacks which might have brought other girls her age to tears. A good example of this was her reaction concerning her trunk (*ibidem*).

The detective speaks about his experience as an orphan boy, with a trunk of his own as his most treasured possession, in order to prompt his daughter to open up and admit her sadness at having lost her things. Jennifer, however, still maintains a positive attitude: “I was upset. But I’m not any more. You have to look forward in life” (*ibidem*). Ishiguro seems to have borrowed Jennifer’s character from the poem *Little Orphant Annie* written in 1885 and adapted for a comic strip with the same name in 1924 (Riley 1889: 111–113). Both the poem and the cartooned adaptation show the adventures of an orphan girl who is eventually adopted by a good man. In the course of time, the subject has been used for many film adaptations as well as a Broadway musical<sup>4</sup>, but Ishiguro may have used the latter for portraying his optimistic orphan girl, given his interest in the pulp magazines issued between the wars.

Unlike Jennifer, the orphan Sarah Hemmings wants to micromanage every aspect of her life as a result of her emotional scars, so she becomes aggressively eager to move up the social ladder and make a difference in the world by marrying a very influential man:

When I marry, it will be to someone who’ll really contribute. I mean to humanity, to a better world. Is that such an awful ambition? I don’t come to places like this in search of famous men [...]. I come in search of distinguished ones. [...] I won’t accept it’s my fate to waste my life on some pleasant, polite, morally worthless man (Ishiguro 2001: 78).

When her marriage fails, Sarah wants to change her mindset and start a new life, with Christopher by her side:

All I know is that I’ve wasted all these years looking for something, a sort of trophy I’d get only if I really, really did enough to deserve it. But I don’t want it anymore, I want something else now, something warm and sheltering, something I can turn to, regardless of what I do, regardless of who I become. Something that will

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<sup>4</sup> The most revelatory song about institutionalized orphans’ hard life in the 1977 musical *Annie* is the song “It’s a Hard Knock Life”, music by Charles Strouse, lyrics by Martin Charnin (Haun 2012).

just be there, always, like tomorrow's sky. That's what I want now, and I think it's what you should want too. But it will be too late soon. We'll become too set to change. If we don't take our chance now, another may never come for either of us (*ibidem*: 187).

As expected, the detective wavers between two emotional states when remembering Sarah's invitation. On the one hand, he remembers himself being taken aback by her impulsive proposal; on the other hand, his hindsight perspective prompts him to feel some kind of liberation, in line with his pursuit for closure regarding his own family matters:

I suppose I was surprised when I heard her utter these words; but what I remember now, overwhelming anything else, was an almost tangible sense of relief. Indeed, for a second or two I experienced the sort of giddiness one might when coming suddenly out into the light and fresh air after being trapped a long time in some dark chamber. It was as though this suggestion of hers – which for all I knew she had thrown out on an impulse – carried with it a huge authority, something that brought me a kind of dispensation I had never dared hope for (*ibidem*: 276).

Another reason that Christopher, Jennifer and Sarah respond differently to their environment is the life script they each have written. According to psychology<sup>5</sup>, “a life plan is made in childhood, reinforced by parents, justified by subsequent events and culminating in a chosen alternative” (Berne 1961: 117). The three Ishigurian characters wrote their life scripts based on modelling, attributions, suggestions and injunctions. These four factors form the basis for early education in any family, since all children learn by emulating others, taking into account what others want from them, what is indirectly stated and what is ordered or forbidden (*ibidem*: 125). The three orphans in Ishiguro's book have started writing their existential plans since the day they were born. The foundational pattern would have been completed by the age of seven, then upgraded during adolescence, thereby influencing their whole adult life. As products of their life scripts, Ishiguro's characters behave in accordance with all those that had an impact on the first seven years of their lives, primarily their family members. The fact that the detective wants the Japanese soldier to be Akira indicates how strong an impact his childhood friend had on Christopher's life script. The novelist Anaïs Nin says that “we don't see things as they are, we see them as we are”<sup>6</sup>. This indicates the numberless ways an event can be interpreted, depending on the many individualities perceiving it and therefore how important life scripts are in shaping the images either characters or real people have of themselves as opposed to how others see them, including readers. Accordingly, Banks believes that he can find his parents, after all those years, because his image of Shanghai remains connected to his parents' disappearance. Readers can thus see his unreliability as a normal consequence of his

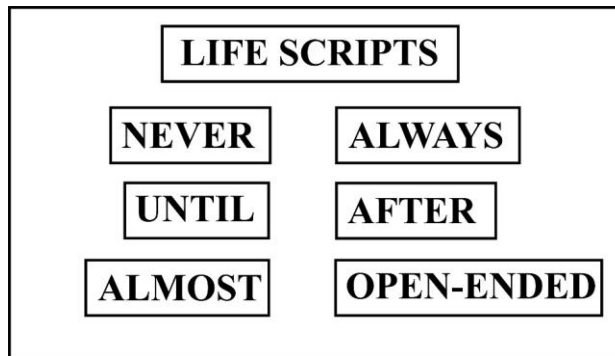
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<sup>5</sup> Eric Berne is the creator of transactional analysis, which mainly deals with human interactions seen as regular transactions between individuals (Berne 1961: 117).

<sup>6</sup> The quotation appears in Nin's work *Seduction of the Minotaur*, in a form that attests its origins from the Talmud: “Lillian was reminded of the talmudic words: ‘We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are’” (Nin 1961: 124). While the writer uses the quote to prove the difference in perception of two characters, Lillian and Jay, the Judaic version referred to the interpretation of dreams (Amlen 2017).

traumatic childhood. All of Christopher's choices, decisions and interpretations are therefore linked to his life script, and the same goes with all the other characters'.

According to Berne, there are six models underlying people's life scripts:



The *Never* pattern is used by the people who do not believe that they can ever have or do what they want. The *Always* pattern creates the life script of the people who cannot learn from their own mistakes while they keep wondering "Why always me?" The *Until* model is inherent in the people who believe that the success of their actions is conditioned by other actions, which they should do first. The *After* pattern is used by those who think that they will always pay for their present happiness. The *Almost* pattern underlies the life scripts of those who always fail to achieve something by one inch, so to speak. And even if they succeed, they do not let themselves be content with the results and instead plunge into a new commitment. The *Open-Ended* model characterises those people who cannot get satisfaction from any expected results, so they feel a sense of loss at all times (*ibidem*: 135).

For all intents and purposes, Christopher Banks uses the *Until* pattern, since he believes he cannot find his peace, nor can he feel fulfilled as a detective until he solves his parents' case. According to Holmes, "Banks' unreliable perceptions had their origins in the trauma that left him an orphan as a child" (Holmes 2005: 17). Although she uses the same *Until* model, Sarah's life script is not as empowering as Christopher's. On the contrary, she seems to have written a sad one, such as "I won't find peace *until* I marry someone influential to contribute to the world's welfare as well as mine." She thus mistakenly believes that her happiness solely depends on the success of her marriage due to the author's failure to make her views more significant:

She doesn't have as central a position in the book as I would have liked. I'm interested in her character; underneath her ghastly addiction to famous high-achievers is a more sympathetic motive. Given the way her world is ordered, the best way she can act at that time is to marry and support someone who she thinks is a great person. I wanted Sarah to be the one who says you can't be forever trying to rewrite something in the past. I wanted her to realise that you have to get on with your life. She wants Christopher to take a similar view but he can't (Blake).

Jennifer, meanwhile, is still writing her *Until* life script, which appears healthier than the previous two, since she may think, "I won't find peace *until* I leave all sorrow behind and start looking forward". Her later attempt to commit

suicide thus makes no sense to readers, and Ishiguro admits that her story has been chopped off for technical reasons and therefore Jennifer, for all her initial optimism, will still give augmented connotations to all forms of abandonment she will suffer throughout her adult life:

Just as with Sarah, Jennifer's story didn't get in there in full. Christopher's attempt to rewrite the past doesn't work; his compulsion to go back to Shanghai is too great. So Jennifer ends up as a rather unfortunate person who was adopted and then abandoned. She starts off as rather a plucky orphan, but over the years her resilience gives way (Blake).

Whether obvious or not, the three life scripts are being rewritten, hence the past meaning of the temporal clause in the title: *When We Were Orphans*. Moreover, the plural form of the first-person pronoun in the title indicates that Christopher Banks decides to remain one of those "whose fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents" (Ishiguro 2001: 312), like Sarah and Jennifer, whose parentless status cannot change. From a larger perspective, Ishiguro regards the transition from the sweet oblivion of a parent-protected childhood to the bubble-bursting reality as a universal state of orphanhood: "At some level we all share a sense of disappointment at finding the world isn't the kind, ordered place our parents wanted us to believe" (Blake). For all their parentless status, Christopher, Jennifer and Sarah choose to appreciate or start appreciating their present. Once they have decided to accept the cruelty of the world as an inherent part of their growth, they consciously embrace their orphanhood, just as all children should do while stepping out of the protective bubble their parents have built around them:

[...] 'orphans' is just a metaphor for that condition of coming out of that bubble in an unprotected way. Most of us are not orphans, and we have our hand held as we come of the illusionary world that adults have created for us. [...] You leave that protected world and then you suddenly find yourself alone in this harsher world: (Shaffer, Wong 2008: 168).

Unlike his previous work, Ishiguro's fifth novel renders the impact of past on present at a personal level: "In my other novels I do write about how historically the past impacts on the present, but here I was interested in how childhood impacts on adulthood" (Blake). Owing to its psychological nature, *When We Were Orphans* remains a widely re-readable novel, with powerful life messages, based on the strong emotional bond between characters and readers. In other words, most readers feel the irrational need to return although they are aware that nothing much has happened in the book. And that alone makes Ishiguro a great psychotherapeutic writer.

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### Abstract

The study proposes a theoretical analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro’s fifth novel from an interdisciplinary-holistic perspective on the nostalgic nature of the narrative. Firstly, some of the author’s interviews are brought to the fore, in which he openly discusses the influences of the English detective novels from the 1920s and 1930s. The works of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayer, from the golden age of British detective literature, are mentioned here as a direct source of inspiration. The study also mentions the Sherlock Holmes series, which the author acknowledges as another source of inspiration for his detective novel. The emotional logic behind Christopher Banks’ exaggerated professionalism and failed metacognition is then explained through the Dunning-Kruger effect. In the second part, the study deals extensively with the parentless theme, bringing forth other examples of orphan children, such as those in the Broadway musical *Annie*. Eric Berne’s life scenario is used to explain the nostalgic nature of the novel, which leads to a reinterpretation of the temporal subordinate in the title. In all three cases of orphanhood in the novel, the characters’ life scenarios are rewritten. Through conscious effort, Christopher, Jennifer and Sarah decide to break away from their past and appreciate their present. The moment they see the harshness of the world around them as an inherent part of their development and growth, they embrace their orphanhood, just as all children should do while stepping out of the protective bubble their parents have built around them.