



# Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*: An Interdisciplinary Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The study proposes a theoretical analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's fourth novel, using the storytelling forms proposed by Kurt Vonnegut, along with the Freudian and Jungian oneiric theories, in order to decide the Kafkaesque texture of the narrative. The protagonist Ryder can open secret portals to physical places in his past and can reconfigure his reality based on memories. Firstly, the study discusses the intertextual connection of *The Unconsoled* with Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* while treating its Kantian value according to the domino effect and the quantum principle of probability. The second part analyses Ishiguro's dream techniques, in conjunction with concepts like the Pygmalion and Golem effects, the imposter syndrome, the tunnel memory and Kahneman's system 1 and 2 of thinking, for explaining Ryder's irrational doings. The last part examines Ryder's cognitive dissonance, his lack of anagnorisis, as well as his flow of consciousness, as compared to Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Joyce's *Odyssey*. The protagonist's need for mental decluttering and willpower is then explained through the Stoic principles in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, as a way to strike a balance between creation and consumption, both in Ishiguro's novel and in real life. The problems of the nameless European city are also interpreted from a game theoretical perspective, with the tragedy of the commons and the public goods game as examples of faulty cost-benefit relationships. Holistically speaking, the study highlights the meditative power of *The Unconsoled*, focusing on the narrative's similitudes to the semantic-linguistic incomprehensibility of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, story shapes, dream techniques, mental decluttering



## The Story of All

Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the most emotional contemporary writers, the sincerity of his novels being fully acknowledged in 2017, when the British writer of Japanese origin was awarded the Nobel Prize for revealing the abyss behind the illusion of social interconnection (Nobel Prize, 2017). All of Ishiguro's eight novels talk about identity, hence the major importance that the author attaches to the past and the memory processes. The mental multiverse of Ishigurian characters creates the illusory three-dimensionality of the subjective mundane. Ishiguro's novels prove that life itself is a huge yet finite mental diorama: Everyone sees something different, depending on their own biography!

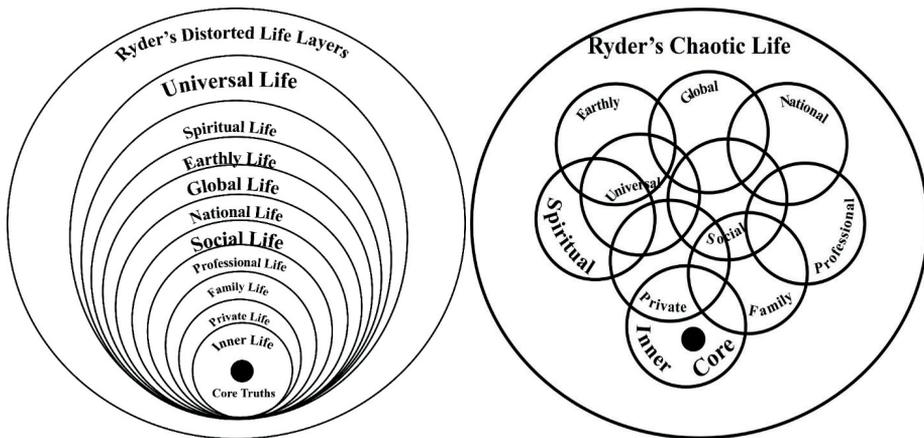
The Englishman Ryder, the protagonist of Ishiguro's fourth novel, *The Unconsoled*, is a pianist known worldwide, who, having tasted the blessing and the curse of fame, knows only too well that the most important tenet of universal transaction is to give some in order to get some. One small failure in abiding by the universal law of fair exchange renders the whole human world doomed to uncontrollable disorder, beyond the second law of thermodynamics or natural entropy, which underlies the ever-expanding nature of the Universe (Basurto-Flores et al., 2018). There is a whole scientific explanation behind the aforementioned statement, even a probability theory known as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which stipulates that there will always be properties of particles that cannot be observed at the same time and thus can be deemed unreal (Eastwood, 2017). However, in a world of quantum probabilities, it has been predicted that the universal mind could go past determinism once it could perceive past, present and future simultaneously: "We may regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its past and the cause of its future. An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion [...] for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes" (Laplace, 2012, p. 4). Ryder, having achieved professional greatness, must therefore be well aware not only of the law of chaos that governs the Universe, but also of the butterfly effect, which makes anyone's advance through life universally significant: humans, whether children, parents, porters, pianists or stay-at-home moms, matter equally in the universal scheme just because the butterfly-like flapping of their extended or broken wings can have a domino effect on the whole world and, ultimately, on the fabric of the whole Universe (Dooley, 2009).

Ryder, famous as he is, unconsciously knows all these scientific explanations of his worldly success. He checks into the hotel that has thoroughly prepared to accommodate a prestigious person like him and then he intends to go about his artistic business as planned. This is the first time Ishiguro has shown that the novel setting should not decide what type of novel he will write. In many interviews the author discusses the problematic nature of finding the right location for his novels, an endeavour that comes long after he has started his narrative: "Often the setting comes quite late in the process. I usually have the whole story, the whole idea, and then I hunt for the location, for a place where I can set it down" (Chang, 2015). *The Unconsoled* is set in an unnamed town with Germanic flavour, as most of the characters' names, along with the scanty description of some locations, might indicate. Ryder's job in the small city is both artistic and civic. His concert, scheduled for Thursday evening, should save the whole community from rapid decline due to collective dissatisfaction with the general status quo: "People need me. I arrive in a place and find terrible problems, and people are so grateful I've come" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 156). The unconsoled of the unnamed town want to return to their past values and seem to have decided that only Ryder and his concert can reverse the downward-spiral state of their collective and individual living. By reversing "the spiral of misery gaining ever greater momentum at the heart of [their] community", Ryder can help the residents "build a new mood, a new era" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 167). The famous artist seems eager to help and yet, somehow, also seems out of control in anything he does throughout his whole stay in the town. "I have a particularly tight schedule" he keeps repeating as he sees the futility of his well-intended acts (p. 23; p. 35; p. 67). The community, however, appears prepared to take risks at an individual level: "Perhaps you'll warn us of the hard work that lies ahead for each one of us if we're ever to re-discover the happiness we once had" (p. 115). Is returning to past values impossible, both collectively and personally? The general scheme of advancement implicitly entails dismissing the previous values in favour of something new, which may prove beneficial or detrimental in the long run.

Before giving his concert, Ryder wants to be a good counsellor for the people asking for his help and yet his gliding approach to his and others' problems and predicaments is as shifty as the texture of a very uncontrollable dream: "They take so much for granted, all these people. What do they want me to do, on this night of all nights" (p. 171)? All of his encounters seem to lack a well-established itinerary while he is both a guest in this nameless provincial place and a long-term resident, with a wife, Sophie, and a son, Boris, both of whom entail a lot of familial responsibilities. Ryder also seems to have

discovered the secrets of space-time travelling, which renders him able to circulate between distant places, far outside town and back to the hotel in next to no time, with the help of incomprehensible passageways. Almost all residents of the unconsoled town have something to ask from the famous piano player in a tiringly blathering way: "But it's the same as everywhere else. They expect everything from me. They'll probably turn on me tonight, it wouldn't surprise me" (p. 171). Moreover, many of his old friends, who have marked his school days and childhood in Worcestershire and whom he has not met for ages, seem to pop up out of nowhere exactly when he finds himself in the middle of another engaging errand. With each unexpected occurrence, Ryder's mind gets busy with involuntarily recollecting episodes from his past, all the way back to his childhood, like the time when the car in which he used to spend his days as a child, now eaten by rust and old age, pops into his way while he is going to a reception.

By means of long, digressive monologues, Ishiguro creates a type of story that defies time and space in a highly uncomfortable way. According to Fludernik (1999), meandering narrative usually contains "excessive information about marginal issues and insufficient treatment of what the reader constructs as crucial topics" (p. 76). At the outset, the bellboy Gustav manages to squeeze no less than four pages of soliloquy into an elevator trip of several seconds. The reader feels as out of control as Ryder while the physical coordinates of the three-dimensional world expand and compress, most times in direct contradiction to each other. Everything is off kilter, in a state of surreal imbalance that exceeds the absurd, physics-defying nature of Alice's Wonderland (Woolf, 2010). Moreover, through its suppressing nature, the language comes to further deepen the disequilibrium, as is often the case with Ishiguro's deliberate intention to conceal meaning rather than clarify it (Mason, 1989). Although Ishiguro does not particularly agree with being a precursor of Kafka's work (Vorda & Herzinger, 1994), this is one of the traits the Swedish Academy attributed to his writings, intermingled with "a little bit" of Jane Austin, before rewarding his talent with the Nobel Prize (Nobel Prize, 2017; Johnson & Pawlak, 2017).



**Figure 1.** Ryder's time distortion and existential overlapping

Does the eponymous adjective *Kafkaesque* really manage to encapsulate the surreal atmosphere of *The Unconsoled*? There is indeed a nightmarish quality to Ishiguro's prose while the action seems to have been caught in quick sands: the harried-looking Ryder is incapable of achieving elementary tasks; the settings and perspectives shift incongruously, one state stranger than the other; the characters' habits and behaviour seem peculiar, to say the least. The Kafkaesque of *The Unconsoled* is unarguably there, with its linguistic display of mixed-up emotions and the messed-up intermingle of what is real and what is fantastic, all of this underlain by a sense of trudging through the core of hopeful and hopeless realities alike (Reitano, 2007). Thus, Ryder's distorted temporality consists of a tangential and overlapping mixture of life layers, infected by paranoid, anxious and delusive logic. At the core of his existential rings are the truths that should render his life meaningful and yet Ryder never seems to get through the flesh of his multi-layered existence to grab hold of what counts most. The piano player practically absents himself from most of his own play, jumbling up his duties, or even excluding some of them altogether – the very image Kafka seems to create in most of his works.

The unity through inter-inclusion should have underlain the physics of Ryder's life and yet the concentric disposition of his layers has kept eluding his existence since childhood. Sadly enough, Ryder's chaos, at different degrees, seems to be the only reality humankind has known since its inception – both Ishiguro and Kafka acknowledge this aspect in their experimental fiction. Ryder is a famous English artist. He visits or revisits an unnamed town; his performance may or may not be crucial to the rebirth of the community; the circuits of human interconnection turn on and off in an

uncontrollable way; Ryder speaks to people for the first time only to engage in subjects that indicate how close he is, in fact, to his interlocutors. The more he converses with them, the more he remembers about them and, most importantly, how he feels about them. It is like entering a collective subconscious and getting entangled in a network of dizzying stories, overlapping and mirroring each other at a faster and faster speed. Just as Gustav, the hotel porter, has not spoken directly to his daughter Sophie for so long, so too Boris catches his father's attention in an impatient, even aggressive, way. Readers, however, cannot fully start judging Ryder for being such a neglectful father, because they cannot be sure whether Ryder is the father of the boy in the first place. On the other hand, the hotel manager Hoffman is still unable, after all these years, to forge a healthy bond with his son and wife. The young pianist Stephan exhibits the extent of self-consciousness that Ryder remembers experiencing in his relationship with his own parents, whom he anxiously expects at his forthcoming concert, as if their confirmation of his professionalism had never been given before. The Kafkaesque further transpires from the uncertainty of Ryder's perceptions and realities as well as his own projections on others. The cobweb of real and surreal, dream, fantasy and dysfunctional mindscape is woven by an army of spider fears: the fear of not living up to others' expectations; the fear of being unprepared for what matters; the fear of behaving inappropriately; the fear of being execrable at multitasking; the fear of not pleasing others; the fear of attracting more of what is feared through the very act of fearing uncontrollably (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 232).

At some point, bewildered readers stop asking themselves what is possible and what is not, or why the narrative threads become hilarious in places. Ryder's hotel room, for instance, is also his "bedroom during the two years [his] parents and [he] had lived at [his] aunt's house on the borders of England and Wales" (p. 36). The artist wears nothing but a dressing gown and slippers at an important event only to expose himself when all eyes are on him as he is expected to deliver a life-changing speech. Moreover, he starts witnessing a journalist and a photographer's double talk as they interview him, as if he were reading their hidden intentions to double cross him into unwillingly creating a positive advertisement for a controversial building. At another point, a funeral event is stopped on his account as the participants obsequiously offer him a cake in cellophane. Why Clint Eastwood stars alongside Yul Brynner in the nocturnal showing of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, instead of Gary Lockwood and Keir Dullea, becomes as remote a question as the alternate-universe battles presented in the famous movie. In the spotlight come, undoubtedly, the manic manifestations of the supposed watchers,

who fill the theatre with their grotesque talking, laughs and shrieks while they play cards or roll on their backs mirthfully. It is imperative that readers should get accustomed to the illogical advancement of the plot in order to surpass the chaotic narrative all the way to the core message of the novel. Furthermore, there is an omniscient quality to Ryder's already quirky behaviour: not only can the artist aptly guess details about others' lives by observing certain gestures or body movements, but he can also physically travel through his interlocutors' background stories when he speaks with or thinks of them. The artist can thus witness Gustav's worrying thoughts about his daughter or, while in the car with Boris, he can follow Stephan on his way to a woman the young man has a business with, watching the whole conversation between the two and giving important details about the woman's flat. Then, Boris makes a noise that focuses his supposed father back on the main track of this liquid reality. If readers were to reduce the whole book to a sentence or two, as the author likes to do at the outset of a novel creation, it would sound like this: *The Unconsoled* is about some people whose endeavours to save an unnamed town from cultural decay are thwarted by a surreal mash-up of spatial, temporal, social and reminiscing predicaments.

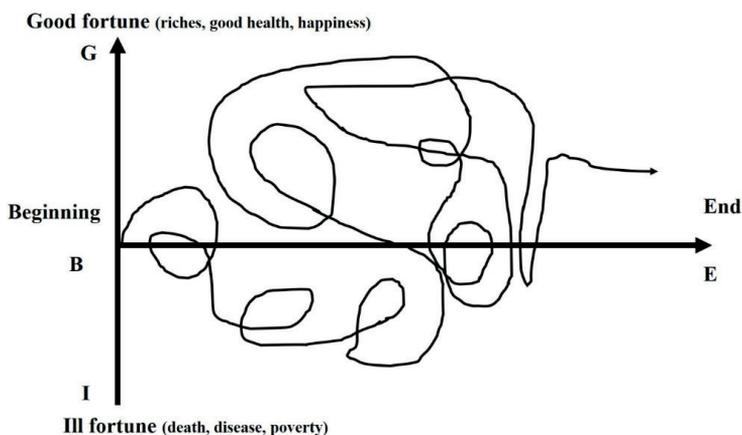
In Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim also experiences the liquidity of time travelling as he intermingles mundane and absurd life sequences, like the alien zoo that keeps him captive, the horrors of war, the beauty of the Grand Canyon and the intricacy of optometry. By presenting such an out-of-time-and-space narrative, Vonnegut only proves the adventurous nature of all stories, whether fictitious or real, being among the many scholars that have tried to make sense of the decision-making process underlying human behaviour. Back in the day, however, his interdisciplinary attempt to marry sciences to humanities in solving one of the greatest anthropological puzzles was met with incredulity and even rejection: "I have tried to bring scientific thinking to literary criticism, and there has been very little gratitude for this" (Johnson, 2019). Vonnegut believed so strongly in story shapes that he came up with no less than eight such creations, and they all depend on the graphic display of the protagonist's trajectory across the narrative on an X-Y axis, which represents the good and bad fortune of the protagonist (X) related to the beginning and the end of the story (Y). Vonnegut's story shapes bear significant names, corresponding to their heroes' life trajectories: (1) man in hole; (2) boy meets girl; (3) from bad to worse; (4) Which way is up?; (5) creation story; (6) Old Testament; (7) New Testament; (8) Cinderella (Murphy, 2011). However, both Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* fail to fall into any of the eight categories. Through their sincere portrayal of human

nature, the two authors create stories whose characters' fortune is never a clear-cut distinction, thus rendering their narratives closer to real life. Though Ryder is the character all the others gravitate towards, *The Unconsoled* does not really have a protagonist. Everyone is given the chance to tell their life stories in uninterrupted monologues that defy time and space, thereby not disturbing the order of circumstances. Real life is a series of probabilities and predictions beyond the control of one's conscious mind. Quantum mechanics and relativity theories are still trying to explain the quirkiness of two-state particles, time dilation and the interdependence of past, present and future that builds down the nature of both Newtonian and quantum physics. According to the quantum world, cause and effect are just a way of seeing two interdependent elements of an ever-growing system called the Universe as we know it (Dirac, 1932). Therefore, the unrealistic shapes of the eight diagrammed story types that are assumed to cover all the story-based texts ever created, the Old and New Testament included, cannot render the unshapeable trajectory of human life, with its unpredictable ups and downs: "This rise and fall is, in fact, artificial. It pretends that we know more about life than we really do" (Johnson, 2019). Such ambiguity therefore gives birth to the category of Hamletian life-shaped stories: "We are so seldom told the truth. In Hamlet, Shakespeare tells us we don't know enough about life to know what the good news is and what the bad news is, and we respond to that" (Vonnegut, 2004).

The purpose of Vonnegut's story shaping is to give true meaning to real life, acting as a dark backdrop for the moments of light. In other words, Vonnegut believes, as does Ishiguro, that, through stories, people can develop a habitual appreciation for the rare moments of true and simple happiness, and, ultimately, for all that human nature and character entail: "empty heroics, low comedy, and pointless death" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 67). Although Ishiguro does not overtly express this idea in his novel, only implies it through the airy-liquified travels of his protagonist, he still proves what Vonnegut states in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist ... It's just an illusion here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once that moment is gone it is gone forever" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 23). By accepting their helpless fate in the end, both Ryder and the inhabitants of the European city behave as the alien race of Tralfamadorians from Vonnegut's novels: At a subconscious level, they can see all the temporal sequences at the same time and therefore do not even try to alter their past or future – they become content with the little they have. In a later novel by Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, the protagonists seem even more in line with the awareness of Vonnegut's characters

that nothing can be controlled, so they decide “to love whoever is around to be loved” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 57). Back to *The Unconsoled*: the protagonist’s life trajectory is as Hamletian as the British-Japanese author, aware of the limitations of the human being, can make it, through unnerving facts, events and circumstances that overlap or revolve chaotically around each other. This is mainly due to Ryder’s amnesia intermingling with his omnipresence and mind-reading abilities as he witnesses key moments in the lives of the people he interacts with, such as Stephan, Miss Collins or Leo Brodsky (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 71).

While general relativity can explain the past events underlying the very fabric of spacetime dimension, quantum mechanics comes to explain the microstructure of reality, calculating the probabilities that make up the future of the Universe. Their happy marriage should not necessarily mean the fanatic search for a theory of everything, because that would fall under the *rags to riches* mentality: mankind’s need to have all loose ends tied up in the end (Ishikawa, 2012). Authors like Vonnegut and Ishiguro have indeed understood that the study of the big (relativity) could coexist peacefully with the study of the small (quantum) since all matter is ultimately a manifestation of energy. By travelling freely through spaces and times inside and outside his mind and consciousness, Ryder proves the validity of the great *Bohr-Einstein debate* about object permanence (Kupczynski, 2017). Thus, the Universe exists independently of the observer’s mind yet it always reacts to its intention of observation. This also comes in line with Kant’s transcendental idealism and his dichotomy between the experienced world and the one beyond human senses (1999, p. 345). Perfect decisions can never be made as long as there are so many choices at each moment, which leads to choice overload and decision fatigue (Pignatiello, Martin, & Hickman, 2020). This is particularly true when the whole world can be regarded as a constant accumulation of information, which, according to Moore’s law, doubles every eighteen months or so (Mollick, 2006, pp. 62–75). Like any other limited human being, the only thing Ryder could do is navigate life with decency and honesty. The non-linearity of Ryder’s narrative thus gives the temporal freedom needed by all human beings to transcend all boundaries imposed by human existence. By either slowing down or accelerating, time is not so much distorted as bent to the will of a higher force within the protagonist. Space suffers a warping condition as well, dilating or compressing, appearing and disappearing at ease, according to the superposition of states recorded in quantum mechanics: everything is both a particle and a wave, both a stranger and a friend, both here and there, both now and then, both in and out of earshot (Gudder, 1970).



**Figure 2.** Ryder's Hamletian story shape

Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* can also be regarded as a modern avatar of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*, for the fluid freedom of spacetime dimension within and outside mental boundaries. Ryder's commonest deeds are sprawled over the length of only three days, compensating for the period of over three hundred years in which Orlando pendulates between masculine and feminine identities and mentalities (Woolf, 1973, p. 48). The paradox of human nature is basically reduced to the boundlessness of the mental realms. Ryder's false sense of control at times becomes hilarious in comparison to his ever-growing inability to get himself together: "Having at last gained their attention, my anger now felt deliciously under control, like some weapon I could wield with deliberation" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 122). Nevertheless, a profound glimpse into the futility of the struggle transpires from a combined awareness of the mental vastness which renders one incapable of any type of control: "One should not, in any case, attempt to make a virtue out of one's limitations" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 111). Like Orlando's, Ryder's quest has no beginning and no end; his solitude is all the greater the more surrounded he becomes by needy and flattering people. The protagonists' desperate care for others' opinions about them, transpiring from their behaviour and verbal expression, is indicative of their wistful desire to belong to a secure place. Ryder considers that he has come to assess a crisis, though he never suspects that it is, in fact, his own inability to deal with the present moment. In a similar vein, Woolf states in *Orlando* that "the present participle is the Devil himself" (p. 102). This is an honourable attempt to reinstate the true value of time travelling between past and future within one's own mind as a way of escaping from the responsibility of rendering each present moment

worthwhile on a journey that leads nowhere in the end. As Mr Brodsky, the drunken conductor, tragically puts it: "I don't want to go, Ryder ... I don't want to go", thus rejecting his mission as the hopeless pawn in resurrecting the unconsolated town (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 303).

"Gravely important issues lie behind tonight's occasion. Make no mistake. Issues relating to our future, to the very identity of our community" declares one of the dead-serious elders of the city before the life-changing event that will never come (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 512). The common-sensical nature of fear and error within the all-encompassing abyss of the human subconscious reflects the uselessness of human struggles and the feeling of a hamster wheel when the present is always created by past actions. This appears to be the significance of the last image in the novel, with Ryder and his quite uncurious new friend riding on a tram which goes in circles around the town. The misery created by his incapacity to solve the big life issues is dampened by the little pleasures the tram buffet has to offer. In the end, Ryder remains within the safe confines of immediate rewards simply because life can never be addressed at a serious level. The circular movement of the tram symbolises his insulation from the uncontrollable.

## **A Rational Recreation of Dreamscape**

Ishiguro loves the human mind for its meandering identity, still widely unexplored by scientists and humanistic scholars alike, yet his fourth novel takes the recollecting process to the next level. Those who cannot let themselves be deprived of reason-based fathoming have the right to regard this book as a bad peculiarity, since it can indeed trigger all sorts of anxious sensations, similar to intermittent light for epileptic people. However, it could also have the opposite effect, by creating a state of full calmness, born out of the feeling that nothing can ever be fully controlled. As Vonnegut says about story shapes, humans inherently lack the tools to decide what is good and what is bad from a broader perspective, so they are in no position to make assumptions with universal validity (Johnson, 2019). Whatever lies buried deep within Ryder's subconscious has the chance to resurface following an oneiric logic. However, if the setting is not correctly decided, the narrator's experiences, hovering as they do on illusion, déjà vu and even out-of-body experiences, could be interpreted as the hallucinations of a sick mind. Ryder can open secret portals towards physical places in his past, can relate present and past locations, can reshape his reality according to his recollections. Or so it seems. Moreover, the people he meets for the first time become different temporal

manifestations of his identity or relatives, family members, old friends and physical embodiments of his deepest emotions, like his exhibitionist persona while giving an important speech. This panoply of mental and emotional states is more intricate than Ebenezer Scrooge's travel into the past, present and future in his dream state. For one thing, the protagonist of *A Christmas Carol* wakes up completely converted on Christmas day (Dickens, 2014, p. 52). Ishiguro, meanwhile, does not imply in any part of *The Unconsoled* that Ryder is *riding* the surfs of a roaring sea in one of his dreamscapes, thus allowing readers to interpret the book in any way they feel like. However, the author helps his readers to take a more pacifying track in deciphering the twisted avenues of the narration by overtly stating that he wanted to activate the grammar of dreams while connecting the lanes of memories and dreams (Hunnewell, 2008). This vast territory is only reached through intuition and instinct, whose logic is still out of reach from a scientific point of view. In a dream world, everything is possible; there is an abyssal freedom, both scary and universally liberating, while the sense of control disappears altogether. There is no sense of true identity, no spatio-temporal delimitation, no bounded interconnection, no language barrier. Although readers are entitled to their own interpretations of the novel, Ishiguro also put together a list of dream techniques before starting to write *The Unconsoled*: unwarranted emotion; unwarranted relationship; delayed realisation (enter/exit); odd postures (figurative postures + escaped metaphors); placing; weird venues; extended, tangential monologues; distorted time frame; unwarranted recognition of place; private enclaves; unwarranted familiarity with situation (or person or place); characters from foreign contexts; characters continuing under different surfaces; distorted logistics; transmuted narrator; partial invisibility (and odd witnessing); backward projection of intentions; bleeding with memory; backward projection of judgment; restricted witnessing; tunnel memory; the dim torch narrative mode; crowds – unwarranted uniformity; unwarranted expectation; mixed personality (Temple, 2018). By partly explaining the process behind the creation of his controversial novel, Ishiguro implicitly dismisses all the critical allegations regarding the neglectful style in which the book has allegedly been written. Although most of these techniques do not officially belong to the jargon of creative writing, psychology or literary analysis, they actually make perfect sense, given that the oneiric territory is mostly irrational, unreasoning and unreasonable, unwarranted, mixed, distorted, private, dim, weird, to name but a few ways of characterising the nocturnal unknown. One particular technique, *tunnel memory*, can signal Ishiguro's interest in the ramifications of recollection before beginning Ryder's hallucinatory quest. The cognitive term indicates that the main details of negative recollections are always much clearer than the peripheral

ones (Safer et al., 1999, pp. 2–7). During four experiments, subjects could give more vivid accounts of traumatic scenes than of neutrally presented ones. Tunnel memory can thus prove that closer interdependence between memory and negative emotion can lead to more accurate recollections of traumatic events, which quite contradicts the high unreliability of Ishigurian recollection.

Ryder is a famous pianist. This piece of information alone should be a case in point for the prose style chosen by the author. Like all professionals, renowned piano players cannot achieve a high standard of performance without compulsory practice. Any practitioner of classical music, be they professional or amateur, can testify for the amount of hard work behind the pitch perfect interpretation of any score. It thus goes without saying that Ryder will develop constant anxiety around the degree of perfectionism he has to employ in carrying out his artistic duties faultlessly, and maintaining his international position as a world-class pianist. In his nightmarish dream, Ryder arrives in a town that could be placed anywhere, whose importance is given by its insignificant size and whose people behave accordingly, incapable of understanding how important it is for the artist to organise himself before the big event. His tight schedule strangles him, not least because his obligations seem completely unconnected to his artistic duties. He constantly suffers from acute un-timing and the events always catch him unawares or unprepared. Moreover, he is forced to practice in the most inappropriate, claustrophobic places: a cubicle and a hut – a true nightmare for any perfectionist. Everything is placed on a downward spiral and Ryder seems more and more torn between his civic duty to restore the city to its former glory, whatever that is, and his job as a first-hand entertainer. Playing the role of the saviour seems the curse and the blessing of all good-natured people, artistic and highly sensitive as they are to the disharmonies of the real world.

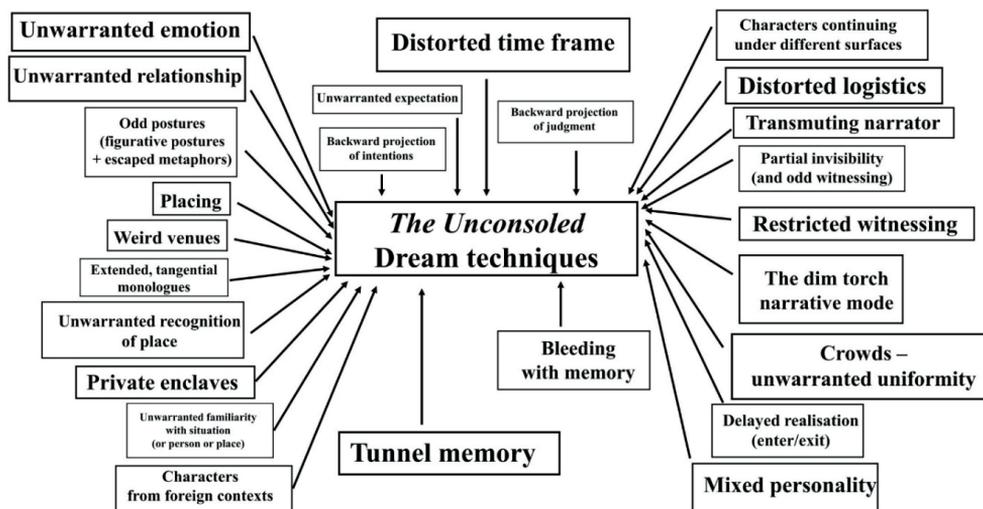
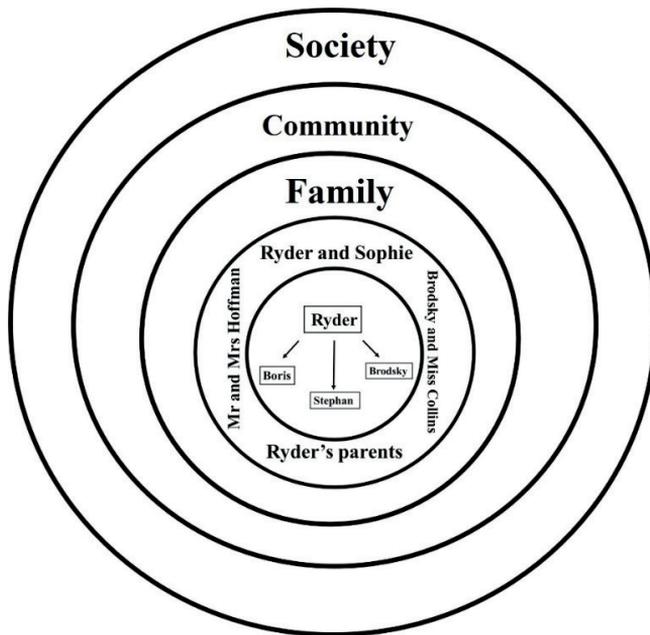


Figure 3. Ishiguro's dream techniques

The repetitive structure of the narrative sounds like the musical variations on the same theme with an orchestra of emotions, most of which irrationally triggered. Deprived of logic, readers are forced to focus on the text, whose original beauty draws heavily on human representation of the subconscious territories. All the concentric circles of human manifestation, distorted though they might be at times, are brought together within the realms of a sleeping psyche: the inner worlds of an individual and the power of all types of social ties. Ryder's dream gains its universality through the fact that all minds can harbour it in different forms. The secret door to such liberation is the realisation that freedom comes with allowing oneself to dream outrageously big, which leads to the language of self-invention, in the *Alice-in-Wonderland* style, with its "numerous mirrors and doorways, with alternative rules and random possibilities" (Luo, 2003, p. 76). The mind will know how to play the music of imaginary composers such as Kazan's *Glass Passions*, Mullery's *Ventilations* or Mullery's *Asbestos and Fibre*, and will therefore understand the techniques of pigmented triads or crushed cadences. The frustration of witnessing a character making more and more promises he cannot keep while taking responsibility for almost every action, past and present, in a provincial city he cannot identify himself with, can be alleviated by a preparatory introspection into the realms of the subconscious and conscious mind.

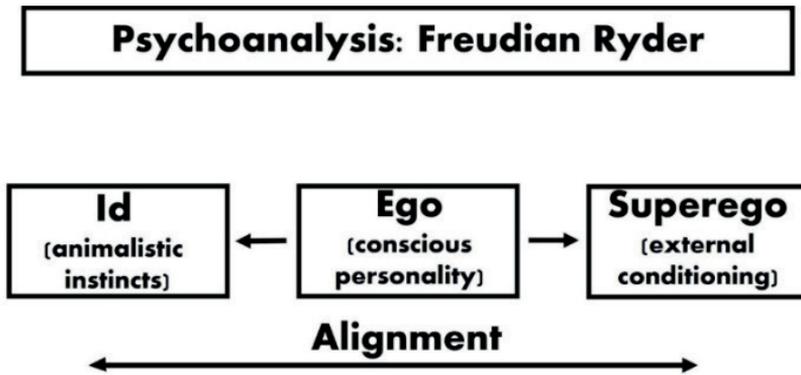


**Figure 4.** Ryder's overwhelming civic duty

There is still an ongoing process of trying to study and understand the concept of consciousness as separated from the phenomenon of wakefulness and yet many scientists struggle to accept what the pioneer in the development of the laser and laser applications describes as the union in consciousness: "Although each of us obviously inhabits a separate physical body, the laboratory data from a hundred years of parapsychology research strongly indicate that there is no separation in consciousness" (Targ, cited in Spini, 2009, p. 58). In the 1990s, when Ishiguro rendered Ryder clairvoyant and sometimes omniscient, physicist Russel Targ and parapsychologist Harold Puthoff developed an experimental programme at Stanford Research Institute in order to study the practice and implications of remote viewing (Targ, 2004, p. 14). Even though the psychic abilities promised, at the time, to bring benefits for American intelligence departments, like NASA, CIA and the Army, the mind's extra-sensorial capacities to probe into distant territories in search of exact information proved a controversial subject from a scientific point of view (Wiseman & Milton, 1999, pp. 297–308).

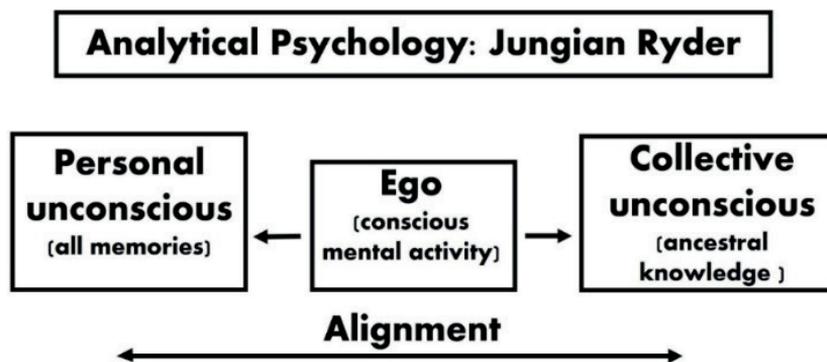
Ryder's real problem is not that he may remain slave to cultural prejudice, embarrassed as he is to acknowledge the true power of his intuition as a guidance tool. Something else keeps him from stating loudly and clearly that he trusts what he cannot see, through

the amazing and non-linear capacity of his subconscious mind to defy the human laws of time and space while travelling through past, present and future: the undeniable reality that oftentimes both his hunches and logic will lead him to improper decisions. Ryder's narrative respects the logic of well-formed language and yet the pictures it creates indicate the irrationality of the events described. What easily comes to his mind will influence his judgments while his intuitive insights are preferred over any type of systematic, rational or logical evaluation. This comes in line with Daniel Kahneman's dichotomy between system 1 and 2 of thinking while the behavioural economist acknowledges the power of system 1 over system 2, making irrationality a product of both systems (2011, p. 105; p. 111). It is easier for readers to understand Ryder's illogic in his dream from a cognitive and behavioural perspective and thus acknowledge Ishiguro's accurate approach to human behaviour in a dreaming state. It may seem inappropriate in terms of literary analysis that the narrative thread so often leaves the main character to depict the socialisation of minor characters and yet, psychoanalytically speaking, this technique looks like a 360-degree tour within others' minds while trying to rationally recreate the dreamscape of the protagonist. The image of Brodsky – the brilliant composer defeated by his addiction to drinking, who is able to love a dog yet incapable of maintaining his relationship with the woman he really loves – haunts Ryder the most, because it may be his own projection of what he might become if he lets himself go – that is to say, if he decides to take a breather and relax for a moment. How would Freud and Jung interpret Ryder's long dream? In terms of psychoanalysis, Freud would have looked at the causes that led to Ryder's manic way of starting many things yet never getting around to finishing anything or doing it right. He would have investigated Ryder's past sexuality, searching for different types of fixation or energy blockages. Then, he would have explained to Ryder the constant conflict between his Id, which contains his animalistic instincts – his system 1 of thinking, with his fight-or-flight responses, so necessary in the survival process – and his Superego, with his external conditioning, whether familial, social, moral, ethical or spiritual. Next, Freud would have taught Ryder to love his Ego, as long as he understood it as the conscious side of his personality, which constantly tries to span the gap between his Id and Superego (Freud, 1953, pp. 32–56). Therefore, according to Freud, Ryder's dream is only a typical display of his Ego's attempts to align Ryder's sense of freedom and his dire need for liberation with the tiring societal requests.



**Figure 5.** Ryder's Freudian dream interpretation

On the other hand, in terms of analytical psychology, Jung would have also viewed Ryder's psyche as a three-dimensional entity, yet the Jungian division would have differed from Freud's. While the latter psychologist would have regarded Ryder's unconscious only as a storehouse of neuroses, repressed frustrations and sexual desires, traumatic recollections and aggressive impulses, Jung would have told Ryder that, besides his ego, which contains his conscious activity in the brain, his unconscious has two layers, a personal and a collective one. Ryder's personal unconscious contains all his memories, whether repressed or acknowledged, while his collective unconscious includes the ancestral knowledge of the human species, shared with his fellow humans. Jung would have indicated that Ryder's dream is highly symbolic and indicative of his struggles and preoccupations in the wakeful state. From Jung's perspective, Ryder's double responsibility in the unnamed European city would have been indicative of both his external life and his recurrent feelings and thoughts. (Jung, 2014, pp. 23–42). For all intents and purposes, the idea of sharing the same fertile soil of the universal subconscious is not a psychological product, rather a philosophical and spiritual hybrid accepted almost unanimously by enlightened people throughout the history of humankind.



**Figure 6.** Ryder's Jungian dream interpretation

The episodes from Ryder's childhood prove the retrospective quality of dreams and yet Mr Brodsky's sad fate as an alcoholic conductor could also reveal the anticipatory function of dreams. Ishiguro shows an amazing capacity for rationally recreating a rich, authentic dreamscape that can be a great source of inspiration and collective values. In other words, Ryder's dream also contains within its intricate texture a sort of unconscious wisdom stemming from the collective archetypal knowledge every human being is born with. Thus, from a Jungian perspective, there may also be a spiritual, archetypal, or even universal dimension to Ryder's dream, besides its personal significance, given that most of the characters could indeed be perceived as aspects of personality that Ryder has unconsciously or consciously rejected or failed to integrate (Jung, 2014, pp. 78–102). However, the saviour role that Ryder assumes in his tormenting dream should not be interpreted personally but archetypally, from a Jungian perspective. Ryder does not play the role of God and fail – it may be that Ryder's innate morality does not allow him to accept his shadowy side, which keeps whispering in his ear that he is allowed to take a break from his image as a perfectionist. In short, such a dream would warn the real Ryder against the extreme programme he has come to impose on himself in order to achieve greatness in his profession. An exercise of imagination would be to try to see, through Ryder's success, what he has sacrificed for his career, including his wife and child's happiness. Ryder's perfectionism comes from his inability to content himself because, in childhood, he was neglected by his parents the way he is now neglecting his own family. His continual anxiety is fuelled by the lack of praise at the age when his subconscious badly needed adult guidance. His stressful, addictive decision to always take more than he can handle stems from his obsessive desire to prove himself in order to receive the recognition of his value, which should have come

in his childhood. The porter Gustav's death by deliberate exposure to overwork is also indicative of the same parental cause.

Furthermore, Ryder's incapacity of saying *no* to people, thus exceeding his attributions in terms of social norms, may be a jumbled combination of the Pygmalion and Golem effects, the self-fulfilling prophecy and the impostor syndrome. A lot of research has been devoted to such psychological phenomena over time, which proves all four of them psychologically accurate. The Pygmalion effect<sup>1</sup> indicates that high expectations, whether coming from others or the agents themselves, will certainly lead to positive results in connection to any field of interest (Blanchette, 2008, p. 356). In other words, if people are admired for doing something, they will feel infused with enough positive energy to do things well. Reversely, the Golem effect<sup>2</sup> stipulates that lower expectations lead to poor results (Blass, 2012, p. 485). Both effects are the two sides of another phenomenon, called the self-fulfilling prophecy, which posits that all false beliefs can become true over time, which leads to a feedback loop (Merton, 1948, pp. 193–210). From a quantum mechanical perspective, all three psychological phenomena could prove the magnetic power of positive and negative feelings and thoughts, whether they are expectations or beliefs (Oosterwijk et al., 2012). In Ryder's dream, however, although people have very high expectations of the protagonist, he never seems to be able to finalise his acts the way he should. It may be that all that flattery and obsequiousness is so exaggerated that Ryder responds to his peers' true expectations of him, which are negative. Or it may be that their otherwise positive expectations clash with Ryder's low expectations as he permanently fears that he will fail. This can be explained through the impostor syndrome, which indicates that Ryder is doubtful about his achievements and expects anyone to see one day that he is, in fact, a fraud. This behavioural pattern is typical of all perfectionists and also has its roots in childhood, when Ryder was too little appreciated for his results, however big or small (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019).

1 The story of Pygmalion, who fell in love with the statue of Galathea, which he carved, indicates the power of beliefs, however farfetched they may be. In the mythical account, the goddess of love Aphrodite granted Pygmalion's wish so that he could have a normal family with his unusual beloved (Morford, 2007, p. 184).

2 Like the mythological story of Pygmalion, Golem was a clay figure brought to life, in Jewish mythology, in order to protect the Jews that lived in Prague. However, his behaviour became more and more out of control to the point that he had to be eliminated (Babad et al., 1982, pp. 459-474).

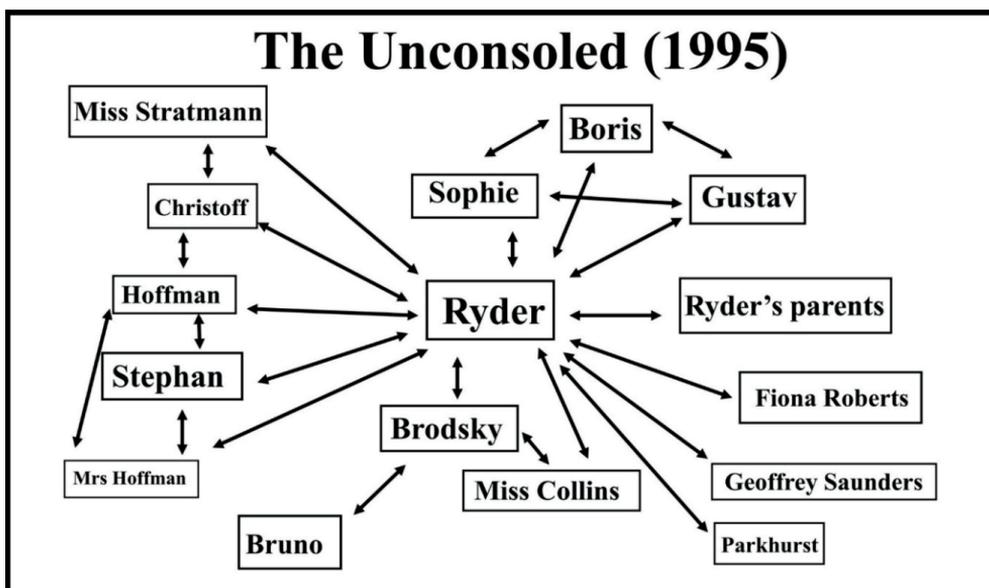


Figure 7. Characters' relationships

Whether psychoanalysed or just literarily interpreted, Ryder's dream is a network of apparently different individualities based on uncontrollable patterns of behaviour and agendas. Whatever motivations lie hidden within the characters' tormented psyche, they certainly have a personal, and most often Machiavellian logic, although sadly insignificant in the greater scheme of things. However, as a form of alleviation, readers should accept that all major characters in Ryder's dream may be only projections of his own fears, anxieties, frustrations and unresolved issues in his personal and professional life. According to the author himself, this technique can be called appropriation and has also been used in *A Pale View of Hills*, where Sachiko and Mariko seem to be Etsuko and Keiko at a different stage in their lives (Ishiguro, 1990). If the book is nothing but a dream – as its working title, *Piano Dreams*, suggests – then Ryder's amnesic episodes, connected with the ending of the book (on a circular tram track that leads to nowhere) indicate his desperate subconscious attempt to break the vicious cycle and start anew. In this case, Brodsky's mysterious wound, which has prevented the town's resurrection as well as his own rehabilitation, can finally be understood as the forever relapse of mankind into its state of helpless disharmony, given the tiring interplay of real and surreal, of logic and irrationality, that each mental system is subject to: "You'd destroy it all, you'd destroy everything, pull it all down around you just as you did before. And all because of that wound. Me, the music, we're neither of us anything more to you

than mistresses you seek consolation from. You'll always go back to your one real love. To that wound" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 498)!

## The Path of Least Resistance

Given Ryder's prestigious position among the artists of the moment, it is indeed a contradiction in terms to believe that he cannot handle a multitasking life, as Ishiguro wants us to believe at the surface level of the novel. Ryder says that he was not given a copy of his busy programme only to consult it a little bit later – that can only happen in a dreaming state, where opposite circumstances, ideas, feelings and thoughts can co-exist with the greatest of ease yet not without conflict. If taken literally, *The Unconsoled* appears to be a terribly messed-up puzzle, with so many addictions and obsessions vying for attention that neither the protagonist nor the reader seems to have a clue about what is really happening or where they are heading. In the face of such an amalgamated display of broken destinies, the question "What is better: to resist or to avoid temptation?" seems downright futile. If not consciously attentive, the reader may fall into depression while and after reading this book. It is easy to get engulfed in its stress-centred cobweb and stop trying to put one's life in order – because it does not matter in the end; because, as Vonnegut says, there are too many unknowns in the life equation to ever give the right answer to any of one's existential questions (Vonnegut, 1991, pp. 32–54).

Apart from reading the book as a 500-or-so-page treatise on the freedom of memory in dream patterns, Ishiguro also suggests a different interpretation, as is fitting to any novel about the workings of the mind. Like *Mrs Dalloway* or *Ulysses*, *The Unconsoled* could be interpreted as the most psychotherapeutic stream of consciousness to date, about decluttering, cognitive dissonance, willpower, self-control and stoicism, creation and consumerism and, last but not least, about the path of least resistance (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2009). Instead of viewing the bafflingly distracted narration that leaves almost all the ends dangling frustratingly as a nocturnal dream, readers can regard it as a daytime activity in the mind of a celebrity that has consciously enmeshed himself in the rat race mentality (Pearce, 2014). Ryder is highly successful because he forces every aspect of his competitive life to be played out to the full, and also because he has always brought his actions to the desired conclusions. That is who he is in real life – a control freak, never distracted, never dragged off in uncontrollable directions, which makes him "the world's finest living pianist [...] perhaps the very greatest of

the century" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 11). However, his mental work can indicate the price every highly organised person has to pay for the external image they create in an ever-demanding society. The busy, topsy-turvy world inside Ryder's mind represents a sure recipe for disaster, when all the chances for a peaceful, harmonious life are irreversibly squandered. Everything inside Ryder's head is a merciless whirl. He fusses around without respite; he finds no time to ponder anything; no sooner has he plopped down somewhere than he is called back to useless duties by a ringing phone or a blathering official. The cinematic quality of his mental film consists of a series of fast-forwarded scenes whizzing elastically in and out of focus, popping out of nowhere only to dissipate into nothingness a bit later, in a timeless and aspatial dimension, wavering between urgent and leisurely. Thus, the whole book may be only a mental display of how serious the consequences of chronic cognitive dissonance<sup>3</sup> are in the long run, and most of its episodes can be a solid case in point for the anguish and turmoil of being swept up in activities one does not want to do. In his day- or nightmare, Ryder has to give the most significant performance in his artistic life, yet he cannot remember its exact importance and, in the end, he cannot even hold his concert. The unnamed town becomes more and more familiar to him, not because he remembers it but because everybody there seems to know him quite well, so much so that Ryder finds himself reunited with a wife and son he cannot remember he has. His schedule is so full that he simply has no clue what it consists of, nor can he understand why he keeps bumping into old English acquaintances on the street, in the tram or in houses that conveniently open into his hotel rooms.

Ryder cannot refuse the requests of seeming strangers, however farfetched or absurd they are. That he unsuccessfully deals with errands beyond his artistic responsibilities may not be as painful as the fact that, in doing so, he lacks the time he should spend with the ones that should matter in his life, so he ends up disappointing almost everyone. That could be the curse of being a natural born people-pleaser. However, the artist superbly fails to speak up for his former school colleague in front of some snobbish neighbours while time slips mysteriously away and foils the success or achievement of other crucial errands, like attending the rehearsal of a young pianist who wants to impress his parents; browsing through some albums that contain clippings of his prestigious career put together by a staunch fan; reversing the effects of long-

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3 Cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon that manifests when there is a striking discrepancy between a person's beliefs, values or actions, so much so that they will try their best to make them congruent in the end (Festinger, 1957, p. 24).

term estrangement and rekindling the flame of lost love between two elders; dressing adequately for a stranger's funeral whose guest of honour Ryder seems to be. Nonetheless, the most tragic of all crises appears to be his failed attempt to revive the career of a washed-out conductor in a desperate town whose general welfare depends on its cultural success. Whether a nightmarish dream or a messed-up reality, Ryder fails to understand his true role in the unnamed crisis of the nameless town. He feels overwhelmed by the magnitude of his responsibility, mostly because he cannot understand and therefore cannot meet the disparate requirements that become parts of the rescuing action. The protagonist may be too blinded to experience his anagnorisis<sup>4</sup>, but readers will see that, only by decluttering, strengthening their willpower, striking a balance between creating and consuming, and learning how to take the path of least resistance, will they manage to prioritise their existential aspects and attain peace of mind. In order to mentally declutter, Ryder should start off by removing unnecessarily stressful situations from his life. His untidy room, as it were, desperately needs cleaning up. As Sophie puts it, Ryder has to stop thinking that the whole world is against him: "you always say they'll turn on you and so far no one, not a single person in all these years, has turned on you" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 444). Although the decision-making process puts a toll on the daily stores of his willpower, Ryder could find creative ways to avoid temptations and distractions rather than resisting them in order to preserve his energy and avoid accepting tasks by impulse or because of fear and misbeliefs. The dragging pull of Ryder's cognitive dissonance resembles the subconscious current described by Mrs Hoffman, which prevents both of them from living in the present: "As soon as the day starts, this other thing, this force, it comes and takes over. And whatever I do, everything between us just goes another way, not the way I want it. I fight against it ... but over the years I've steadily lost ground" (Ishiguro, 2013, p. 417).

At a societal level, the cultural crisis in the unconsolated European town seems based on the imbalance between the consuming and producing processes, which leads to a postmodern tragedy of the commons<sup>5</sup>. Instead of regarding culture as a public resource, jointly provided, non-excludable and non-competitive, at some point the residents of

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4 Anagnorisis comes from Ancient Greek, where it means recognition. It refers to the protagonist's ability to realise suddenly the true meaning of a circumstance, relationship or situation. In everyday life, it works as a wake-up call or an aha-moment, when one becomes aware of hidden layers of meaning (Cave, 1988, p. 47).

5 The parable of the tragedy of the commons, related to the ecologist Garrett Hardin, refers to the medieval English farmers whose sheep grazed on free land, shared by everyone. However, once each farmer started thinking about maximising their own profits, by adding more and more sheep, the resources of the shared land started to minimise to the point of destruction due to over-grazing (Surhone, 2010, p. 46).

the town started thinking of maximising their own profits by asking more and more of the culture creators of the town. Such relentless pressure through petty demands led to refuge in alcohol (Mr Brodsky) and exhaustion mistaken for mediocrity (Christoff), which impeded the cultural phenomenon until its extinction. The residents of the town wrongly believe that an outsider like Ryder can revitalise the cultural potential of the town when, in truth, each of them should become conscious of their major roles in providing and benefiting from culture as a shared resource. Only in this way can cultural provision and consumption as a public good game<sup>6</sup> turn the contributing agents in the European town into more conscious consumers and creators of culture, once they have understood that, by anxious living, they can unwillingly free-ride on their harmonious peers. If they had been fully aware of the imminence of a crisis (perceived threat), they would have anticipated that the benefits of Ryder's artistic and non-artistic intervention could not be greater than the physical and mental obstacles to be encountered (net benefits), which would have led to truly inspired actions from the part of the whole community. Both Mr Ryder and the residents of the Germanic town fail to change their behaviour because they cannot analyse the cost-benefit relation of such a dramatic decision, although they seem to have found the proper cues to take action in the face of a personal or collective crisis. By assimilating the aspects that stem from Ryder's inability to self-control, readers will consciously learn to take the path of least resistance in their own lives, seeing that forcing things into existence can never be the right way to advance through life. Following the Stoic self-discipline methods offered by Marcus Aurelius (2006) in *Meditations* (pp. 38–75) will further help readers to stop themselves just in time from becoming *Ryders*:

- Find your place in the world
- Realise that all there is comes from nature and will therefore come back to nature
- Remain undistracted from the goals that give you genuine satisfaction
- Be a good person
- Learn to go beyond the transience of the material
- Remain non-reactive to anything that bothers you

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6 Public good games, such as the tragedy of the commons, are part of game theory, which can successfully explain human interaction and the decision-making process in all fields, from economics and political sciences to biology, military tactics and psychology. The science of game theory, pioneered in the 1950s by the mathematician John Nash, entails all types of strategic interactions involving at least two people, where the participants' payoffs influence each other. In other words, each player's gains or losses are influenced by the other players' choices and decisions, since there are basically two types of social interaction: cooperation and competition (Barron, 2011, p. 42).

- Stay rational and clear-minded
- Rise above uncontrollable things like fame
- Learn the universal meaning of good and bad
- Forgive yourself

Instead of fretting about finding a coherent meaning in Ishiguro's hybrid novel, readers could therefore interpret its mangled scenes as independent meditative techniques, assimilating their linguistic and allegorical layers without judgment and as mentally silent as possible. If tackled so, *The Unconsoled* could become a powerful meditation tool that could combat anxiety and put to rest even the most chatty minds. There is another great work that could do the same thing, at an even more powerful level: James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (2002). *The Unconsoled* could very well become Ishiguro's *Finnegans Wake*, or another extreme case of stream of *subconsciousness*. When read without trying to put all the pieces together, *The Unconsoled* could leave the conscious mind baffled, and bafflement, if proactive, brings along silence.

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