



Beyond "One-World Thinking": Ishiguro's Early Novels as a "Two-World Literature"

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Abstract: Scholarly evaluation of Kazuo Ishiguro's initial literary output frequently relies on post-colonial theory or evaluates his fiction as globally accessible "world literature". Such interpretive frameworks, however, risk oversimplifying the intricate cultural friction and renegotiation present in his narratives. Utilizing Rebecca Suter's paradigm of "two-world literature," this study posits that Ishiguro's initial trio of novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), actively counter the uniform, homogenizing impulses that Aamir Mufti classifies as "one-world thinking". Instead of engineering a centralized, Eurocentric vantage point designed to categorize and evaluate peripheral societies, Ishiguro's early prose operates within a highly fertile intersection of British and Japanese cultural modes, choosing to preserve rather than dissolve the structural discords of this liminal space. This investigation explores how Ishiguro destabilizes Eurocentric preconceptions of Japan in his first two texts by utilizing the setting as a metaphorical construct, while in *The Remains of the Day*, he establishes a narrative architecture readable across both English and Japanese socio-cultural codes, compelling audiences to interrogate their internalized cultural biases. By unpacking his formal strategies—such as narrative unreliability, systemic cultural opacity, and the friction between institutional conditioning and personal autonomy—this paper demonstrates that Ishiguro's early bibliography functions as a calculated disruption within global literary studies, subverting simplistic explanations and demanding a sophisticated engagement with individual identity, historical trauma, and memory.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro; Two-World Literature; Rebecca Suter; World Literature; Cultural Identity; Post-Colonial Literature.



Introduction

In recent decades, the paradigm of world literature has evolved into one of the most fiercely debated and intellectually productive arenas within contemporary literary criticism. Advocates often celebrate its potential to unshackle humanistic scholarship from the constraints of localized national canons, promising a democratic, borderless international textuality. However, as Aamir Mufti demonstrates in *Forget English!*, these idealistic assertions frequently obscure a stark asymmetric reality: the ongoing hegemony of the English language and its systemic enforcement as the primary global standard of value. Mufti characterizes this phenomenon as the product of "one-world thinking," a direct ideological descendant of colonial mapping strategies that views the globe from a centralized, Westernized locus. This ideological framework assumes a monolithic metric against which every heterogeneous literary tradition must be appraised, thereby reinforcing the geopolitical inequalities it claims to dismantle.

Rebecca Suter's formulation of "two-world literature" provides a vital counter-strategy to this homogenizing framework. In *Two-World Literature: Kazuo Ishiguro's Early Novels*, Suter illustrates how Ishiguro's artistic output serves as a sophisticated evasion of one-world thinking. Born in Japan and educated within the United Kingdom, Ishiguro leverages his plural cultural positioning to craft narratives that recontextualize universal human dilemmas through a fractured lens. By analyzing his early formal mechanisms, Suter illustrates how Ishiguro constructs a narrative model that addresses cross-cultural crises without succumbing to a flattened, Eurocentric perspective.

The present study adopts Suter's critical framework to re-examine Ishiguro's foundational novels: *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), and *The Remains of the Day* (1989). We argue that these specific texts function as a self-conscious intervention in transnational literary debates, rejecting the monologic imperatives of globalized publishing by positioning their narratives in the unstable spaces between distinct cultural paradigms. Ishiguro's initial deployment of a highly allegorical, metaphorical configuration of Japan parodies and deconstructs Eurocentric orientalist tropes, challenging the supposed universality of Western ethical systems. This destabilization achieves its formal peak in his third novel, which operates simultaneously within English and Japanese hermeneutic frameworks. Through these methods, Ishiguro probes the friction between individual accountability and cultural inheritance, proving that while human behavior is inextricably tied to heritage, it cannot be reduced to deterministic cultural essentialism. The critical value of this paradigm extends well into his mid-career and late-career masterpieces, such as *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *The Buried Giant* (2015), providing the conceptual foundation for his Nobel Prize-winning exploration of collective historical amnesia. Denied the reductive comfort of one-world interpretations, the reader must confront the complicated intersections of personal recollection, national history, and subject agency.



I. "A Japan Explicitly Used as a Metaphor": Subverting Stereotypes in the First Two Novels

In *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), the protagonist Etsuko gazes at the rural scenery from her British residence and remarks on its striking similarity to the English landscape. As Andrew Bennett argues, this invocation of likeness highlights a definitive motif across Ishiguro's authorship: the unstable nature of authentic national and cultural belonging. When contextualized through Suter's methodology, this observation reveals a multi-layered displacement. The statement functions through a dual perspective: it is an evaluation of Britain spoken by a Japanese immigrant whose entire cognitive framework is split between two historical landscapes. It serves simultaneously as an assertion of assimilation and a marker of unbridgeable distance.

This duality governs Ishiguro's early formal design. Constructing the narrative spaces of *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* around a highly stylized, metaphorical iteration of Japan yields two distinct analytical interventions. First, it exposes and parodies the West's consumption of Japan as an exotic, static, and unknowable oriental landscape. Second, it undercuts the assumed hegemony of Western values by presenting a socio-cultural domain that avoids easy integration into Eurocentric semantic systems.

The Metaphorical Japan

The urban space of Nagasaki in *A Pale View of Hills* does not function as a realist documentary representation of the mid-century post-war environment. Instead, the atom-bombed city serves as a psychological canvas for tracing individual trauma and the failures of memory. Crucially, the text deliberately avoids direct representations of the nuclear catastrophe itself. This structural omission is highly political: by refusing to sensationalize or visually recreate the historical trauma, Ishiguro rejects the expectation that non-Western literature must validate itself through spectacularized suffering. He neutralizes the Western gaze that seeks an exoticized victimhood. Etsuko's narration utilizes a nested memory structure that resists any monolithic interpretation of Japanese subjectivity. Applying Jan Assmann's cultural memory parameters shows that the novel evaluates how repressed psychological wounds and collective historical discourses shape modern identity. The characters navigate deep geographic alienation and emotional displacement, indicating that the book is ultimately an ontological study of memory rather than an ethnographic study of Japan.

Similarly, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) provides a setting that is deeply localized yet intensely allegorical. The protagonist, Masuji Ono, attempts to process his past aesthetic contributions to imperialist state propaganda. Yet, the text avoids the straightforward moral transparency of standard confessional memoirs. Ono's profound unreliability, his strategic omissions, and his self-serving rationalizations complicate any clear moral calculus of culpability. The narrative leverages its historical setting to interrogate universal questions of artistic accountability, generational shifts, and the porous boundaries between individual agency and ideological state conditioning.



Subverting Stereotypes

By configuring these settings as highly plastic metaphors, Ishiguro systematically deconstructs the romanticized imagery that has dominated the Western literary imagination. The mystified, aestheticized East is replaced by domestic mundanity and psychological vulnerability. Traditional tropes like geishas or samurais are entirely absent; instead, the text focuses on typical domestic anxieties, professional rivalries, and the weight of personal regret. This intervention is formal rather than merely thematic. The structural composition of these texts resists smooth translation for Western consumption. Suter notes that Ishiguro's formal tools—evaporating narrative authorities, fractured chronologies, and moral ambiguity—withhold the easy interpretations demanded by one-world frameworks. Readers are blocked from mapping standard Eurocentric values onto these characters, forcing them to acknowledge the limits of their own cultural literacy. Consequently, Ishiguro's two-world model achieves a radical political dimension. By neutralizing orientalist depictions, he actively dismantles the absolute authority of the Western gaze. He demonstrates that the critical assumptions Western audiences bring to a text are highly contingent, regional, and frequently inadequate for decoding alternative social structures. Rather than presenting Japan as an unbridgeable, radical otherness, Ishiguro shows that cross-cultural understanding is possible only when readers abandon their claims to universal authority and actively interrogate their own biases.

II. "Perfectly Legible Through Both English and Japanese Cultural Paradigms": The Remains of the Day

While Ishiguro's initial novels deconstruct Eurocentric biases by deploying an allegorical East, his third book, *The Remains of the Day* (1989), expands this strategy by shifting its geographic setting to Great Britain. By rendering an explicitly British landscape legible through both English and Japanese socio-cultural traditions, the text achieves a unique cross-cultural synthesis. Superficially, Stevens's narration resembles mid-century British social realism, capturing an aristocratic class system in decline. However, its formal operations, including systemic narrator self-delusion, an absolute devotion to professional duty, and emotional repression, vividly align with the Japanese behavioral paradigms that Suter places at the center of the two-world model.

The Butler as Japanese Hero

Stevens functions as a semiotic bridge, fully interpretable within both Eurocentric and East Asian cultural matrixes. To a British audience, he represents an extreme manifestation of classical Englishness: the stoic butler who sublimates personal desire into absolute service, embodying the emotionally restrained, disciplined temperament traditionally associated with the British Empire. Conversely, from a Japanese perspective, Stevens's unyielding fidelity to his master, his absolute suppression of individual romance for



institutional obligations, and his quietism mirror the ethical values found within the bushido code and the societal framework of *giri* (compulsory obligation).

This structural overlay is entirely intentional. Suter emphasizes that *The Remains of the Day* achieves a perfect equilibrium of legibility across both cultural hemispheres. The book can easily be decoded as a biting critique of the emotional sterility produced by the British class hierarchy. Concurrently, it operates as a profound exploration of traditional Japanese ethics, illustrating the immense psychological damage caused by extreme self-abnegation and the tragedy of replacing personal desire with rigid corporate obedience. The artistic success of the narrative relies on its capacity to sustain both readings simultaneously, refusing to validate one over the other.

The Unreliable Narrator and Cultural Ambiguity

This dual legibility depends entirely on the novel's complex use of a compromised narrator. Stevens is highly unreliable: he constantly revises historical events, rationalizes his moral compromises, and remains blind to his own emotional life. This formal unreliability is not a simple narrative gimmick; it is an organic expression of the ideological frameworks that construct his identity. For instance, his refusal to acknowledge his romantic attachment to Miss Kenton is an unavoidable byproduct of the professional code that dictates his existence. Viewed through an English lens, this behavior critiques the systemic emotional paralysis enforced by class dynamics. Viewed through a Japanese lens, however, his restraint manifests as a virtue designed to maintain interpersonal harmony and corporate decorum. The narrative explicitly refuses to choose between these meanings, forcing them to remain suspended in productive tension.

This institutionalized ambiguity is the defining feature of Suter's two-world literature. By establishing a narrative code that demands multi-layered cultural translation, Ishiguro breaks the monologic assumptions of one-world criticism. Audiences are prevented from applying simple, monocultural assumptions to Stevens's decisions; instead, they must recognize that his choices are overdetermined by overlapping ethical systems. This destabilization forces the reader into what Suter identifies as a true "two-world appreciation"—a critical reading practice based on cognitive flexibility and self-reflexivity.

Social Conditioning and Agency

Expanding on his earlier thematic concerns, Ishiguro's third novel maps the complex, non-linear relationships between systemic social programming and human autonomy, proving that while an individual's identity is constructed by cultural heritage, it is never entirely restricted by it. This insight remains one of the most vital contributions of the two-world paradigm to contemporary Ishiguro scholarship. Stevens is undeniably an artifact of his cultural environment, his behaviors forged by the rigid class realities of interwar Britain. Nonetheless, the novel resists transforming him into a mere cultural caricature. He transcends his



professional archetype, emerging as a human agent burdened with unique longings, hidden griefs, and capacity for choices. His eventual epiphany—the devastating realization that he sacrificed his emotional life to an aristocratic Nazi sympathizer unworthy of his loyalty—represents an authentic moment of existential clarity that shatters his institutional conditioning and communicates across all cultural divisions.

III. Implications for World Literature

Suter's conceptualization of two-world literature offers transformative interventions for contemporary debates surrounding globalized literary studies. By tracing how cultural tropes are both deployed and subverted within Ishiguro's early novels, Suter challenges and complicates standard definitions of the global canon. This re-evaluation is essential given the commodification that the field faces under modern global capitalism.

Against One-World Thinking

The paradigm of one-world thinking, as dissected by Mufti, exposes the systemic inequalities organizing global textuality. The dream of a democratic, borderless world literature often functions as an ideological screen for the ongoing dominance of Anglo-American publishing networks and linguistic paradigms. One-world thinking imposes a singular currency of legibility that flattens difference, forcing peripheral literatures to conform to Western aesthetic standards to achieve global circulation. Ishiguro's two-world model provides a crucial antidote to this trend. By engineering texts that open up into radically different cultural directions, Ishiguro resists the homogenizing pressures of global marketing. His novels do not merely translate an authentic Eastern experience for Western consumers, nor do they mimic Western styles blindly. Instead, they build a critical third space where multiple interpretive frameworks collide, exposing the provincialism of Eurocentric universalism.

The Politics of Cultural Translation

Furthermore, this framework draws attention to the power hierarchies inherent in global translation. Translation is never a politically neutral act of linguistic substitution. As Mufti highlights, it is governed by asymmetrical power structures, determining which cultures are processed, rewritten, and customized for consumption by dominant linguistic markets.



Literary Paradigm	Narrative Strategy	Cultural Mechanics	Readerly Outcome
One-World Thinking	Linear Translation / Homogenization	Assumes a singular, Western-centric universal standard of evaluation.	Reductive consumption; flattens cultural differences.
Two-World Literature	Structural Duality / Narrative Opacity	Operates in the tense, unresolved space between multiple cultural frameworks.	"Two-world appreciation"; forces critique of reader's biases.

Ishiguro's fiction models a resistant mode of cultural translation. Writing in English while embedding Japanese aesthetic and social principles within the subtext allows him to bypass the traditional traps of cultural commodification. His prose does not offer up an exoticized Japan for Western readers; rather, it creates an intermediate linguistic zone that challenges both domestic and foreign audiences.

Ishiguro's Place in World Literature

Suter concludes that by breaking away from the reductive frameworks of one-world reading practices, Ishiguro's narratives force an acknowledgment of the intricate configurations of individual subjectivity, collective memory, institutional power, and personal autonomy. This shifts the text from a passive global commodity to an active political intervention, challenging the very institutional hierarchies that manage global literary classifications.

Ishiguro's initial work does not merely fit into the global canon; it serves as a meta-critical critique of how world literature is conceptualized. His novels refuse to be assimilated into the flattened categories of globalized publishing, preserving the absolute friction of cultural differences while exploring the possibilities of cross-cultural communication. This remains the definitive value of Ishiguro's two-world approach: it models a transnational literature that avoids both naive universalism and insular cultural isolationism, capturing the true, fractured nature of identity within an interconnected world.

Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's early prose represents a calculated, self-conscious intervention in contemporary world literature, offering a powerful challenge to the monologic impulses of globalized textuality by operating within the fertile intersections of distinct cultural codes. In *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, the author configures the setting as an explicitly metaphorical space, enabling him to dismantle orientalist assumptions and contest the supposed universality of Western values. In *The Remains of the Day*, he expands this formal strategy by projecting this dual cultural perspective onto a classical British landscape, heightening the subversion initiated in his previous texts.



At the heart of these narratives is a rigorous exploration of the fluid boundary between ideological social conditioning and individual human agency, proving that while human choices are shaped by cultural lineages, they can never be entirely reduced to them. This refusal to rely on deterministic cultural categories provides his fiction with its deep ethical weight and its enduring transcultural resonance. Ultimately, it establishes Ishiguro as an author who actively dismantles the critical categories designed to assimilate his work. By stripping the reader of the simplistic explanations offered by one-world thinking, his novels demand an active engagement with the intersections of history, memory, and agency, creating a critical space where the work of cross-cultural translation remains forever open, dynamic, and beautifully unresolved.

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