

**JOSEPH CONRAD  
AND KAZUO ISHIGURO**

**FROM MORAL ENCLAVES TO  
MORAL RESTORATION UNDER  
MODERNIST/POSTMODERN EYES**

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Andreea Finichiu

## INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) and Kazuo Ishiguro (1954–) are two prominent figures in English literature who have been subject to much discussion and revisitation. Although not English by blood (born in Poland and Japan respectively), they captured and critiqued English history and identity — Conrad, by exposing the dark spots under the pretence of civilization (most notably, in *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899), and Ishiguro, in his 1989 exploration of (self-)deception and the political undercurrents in pre-World War II England (*The Remains of the Day*). Factoring out the English readings, however, we find acute questions prodding at our very own human nature. They deconstruct our notion of *what makes humanity* and work across a gap of over 60 years towards what I call the Moral Restoration — the renewal of moral sentiments in two societies (modernist and postmodern) which had already turned the page on didacticism and literary absolutism.

This thesis is structured into three major parts: the first, addressing Conrad’s work with a focus on his short story “Falk: A Reminiscence”; the second, focusing on Ishiguro, his relation to the Japanese *Ma* aesthetics, and a selection of three novels: *Klara and the Sun*, *Never Let Me*

*Go*, and *The Remains of the Day*; and the third, which places Conrad and Ishiguro side by side, offers a condensed analysis of the main intersection points between the two and sheds light into how their fiction works together towards the common goal I proposed. A preliminary theoretical chapter is meant to recapitulate the main characteristics of modernism and postmodernism.

The chapter on “Falk” opens the discussion about Conrad’s mode of expression. The blank interstitial space that separates narrator (and reader) from tale (here, Falk’s reminiscence is the segment of the tale that is of interest) is a nursery for the new, democratic morality, I argue, precisely because of the distance it puts between us and what is said. Distancing is achieved by 1. reminiscing (stylistic) and 2. the recurrent tendency to isolate the ‘horror’ and the ‘horror-struck’ victim from what constitutes home, homeland, and society understood as civilization (thematic). Through reminiscing, the past is “constructed or reconstructed to create new meaning,” as Ishiguro argues (qtd. in Duangfai 87), but it most notably involves some kind of self-reflection, and some scrutinising look behind. Through the selective sharing and/or suppression of the horror-inducing event, Conrad creates another kind of isolation, that of being “away from the truth of things” (Matz 220), which the ‘horror-struck’ character cannot (fully) disclose to the world. The rest of the world would never understand. And there is yet another form of distancing in the short story, symbolically rendered in the form of Falk’s profession — towing ships, the dragging

motion. The tugboat itself, or its proximal space, can stand for a buffer zone, a place where no action need be initiated by the ones towed. From this limbo state, we can take our time to ponder on what we are told throughout the story.

In the subchapter dedicated to Kazuo Ishiguro and *Ma*, I look at Ishiguro's writing through the lens of the Japanese concept of *Ma* — negative/empty space, or meaningful silence. Essentially, *Ma* stands for *what is left unsaid yet which is substantial*. From pauses in dialogue to the laconism on which haiku is based and the blanks intentionally left on the canvas in Japanese art (such as *sumi-e*), it can be said that it is one of the many forms of Japanese restraint. We populate this silence with our personal experience, hence the greater impression on us when piecing meaning together. Klara's language is algorithmic, Kathy's is elliptic, and Mr Stevens's is artificial, sterile, self-conscious. These blank spaces in the discourse of each help, I argue, to connect to the reader's sensibilities, making Ishiguro's novels capable of stirring and challenging what makes up 'standards of morality.'

The three subchapters that follow discuss *Klara and the Sun*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *The Remains of the Day* respectively in relation to their thematic takes on humanity. Aesthetically, I try to localize the negative spaces and show how they work to sensitize us, or, as worded in my BA thesis, how they "lift the lid of lethargy." The novels seem to oppose the anaesthetic trends in an era of mass proliferation of violence, trauma, torture, oppression, etc.

The last chapter condenses this contrastive analysis and can be a quasi-manifesto for the new Moral Restoration movement. New, or newly reconstructed by the literary archaeology endeavour that this paper attempts to be. I consider Ishiguro and Conrad enclaves, on the one hand, because their work spans across more than a century, yet does not intersect — there is a roughly 60-year gap between Conrad's last complete novel (*The Rover*, 1924) and Ishiguro's first (*A Pale View of Hills*, 1982). The enclaves, most importantly, stem from their rather queer position against the backdrop of a moral agnosticism. By definition, modernism rejected the conventions of the past, including the exclusive belief in objective reality, which meant that nothing was moral or immoral anymore, but amoral because *one thing comes off differently to me, and neither perception is more valid than the other*. There was no more interest in the didactic scope of literature. Postmodernism abolished central, absolute meaning and favoured pluralism, but instead of discarding what came before, it revisited and re-/deconstructed the past. It does not tolerate moralism, but it has room for people's takes on morality and, ultimately, for keeping the discussion open. The discussion can never be closed as per the postmodern policy of non-cancellation (all views are valid, except for the ones which imply silencing other views — a safety mechanism).

This brings me to my choice of title. If Conrad and Ishiguro are enclaves against these two literary and cultural movements, they are also moral enclaves. This is because they seep through (they topple their respective eras while

employing their aesthetics; an opening) and erode them in the process. Moral Restoration is when we consider these effects. It is shaped by the enclaves. It is not reactionary, tracing back to the dogmas of classical antiquity, but it is an undercurrent of 20<sup>th</sup>-and 21<sup>st</sup>-century desensitizing, overstimulating-to-the-point-of-numbness trends. When we are shelled by a plethora of stimuli, we become less responsive in the long run. This movement then becomes a re-attuning endeavour.

This study came as a continuation of my BA thesis, *Joseph Conrad's Ethics and Aesthetics – Moral Decline at the Heart of Modernism*, which, most notably, demonstrated how Conrad subverted the modernist canon by making use of its own mechanisms. It discussed the ethical and aesthetic aspects of his work as an extrapolation of my findings while analysing *Heart of Darkness* and “Falk: A Reminiscence”. The premise had been that of looking into what seemed to be the liminal nature of his writings — the ‘tales of unrest’ at the border between the waning Victorian times and a waxing modernist era. What I then called “the era of norm conservation” and “the era of norm revocation,” respectively. Upon looking at Conrad’s aesthetics in the two works of fiction mentioned, I pointed the fine differences in how the tales were “rendered,” to use Conrad’s term (qtd. in Ciocoi-Pop 115), although, to the naked eye, they would seem very much alike, and understandably so. *Heart of Darkness*, a frame tale, unfolds as a *transcription* (carried out by the secondary narrator) of Marlow’s remembrance (also a narrator). Falk’s life-and-

death experience is, on the other hand, *reported* by the unnamed narrator — not recorded word for word, but rather a work of minimal adaptation (i.e. the narrator minds the changes to third-person narration and indirect speech). “In both cases,” I argued, “the two narrators’ accounts have an ‘insulation’ effect, to use Chinua Achebe’s term (qtd. in Bloom 78) – between the reader and the happenings of the tale a safeguarding space becomes manifest, which favours reflection and individual moral judgement”. Keeping this in mind, I then presented three levels of reading Conrad, mainly to see if his ethics (content) and aesthetics (form) do work *in concordiam* or as contraries. These were:

1. Conrad’s ethics and aesthetics work together in favour of his adherence to modernism (because “the thematic reticence [or decency] of [the] previous modes of literature seems to be missing in *Heart of Darkness* and “Falk”; reality is rendered with no reserve – a crude, unvarnished reality: the underlying corruption of imperialism, the atrocities one can resort to, degradation due to moral inequity or unjust distribution of power, the severity of rejecting or being unaware of what constitutes truth, etc. and because “the points of view are multiplied (double narrators), temporality is reordered, [and] meanings are enriched by the use of symbolism (‘darkness’, for instance, may stand for primitivism and the regress of society, but also for the mystery at the origins, for the repudiated truth or the moral decline of man, among other readings”).)

2. Conrad’s ethic opposes modernism, while his aesthetic (for the same reasons as in 1.) does not — they are

therefore discordant, serving different purposes (because “refraining from a definite resolution, as it becomes apparent from the content, could well indicate a care on the part of Conrad for preserving morality in mankind. The lack of a verdict may in fact awake and train the reader’s moral conscience, which modernists passionately declined. [...] [This consolidates] the theory that, with Conrad, there is a covert wish to tend to man’s moral sentiments”).)

3. Conrad’s ethics and aesthetics are concordant and subvert modernism “in its own arena” (because “[s]hould we consider the previously mentioned distancing effect – [the] ‘insulation’ effect – ascribed to the use of double narration (in *Heart of Darkness*), then the same humanitarian intent, supported by the ethics of Conrad’s texts, becomes apparent. By constructing a secure space, a climate where rumination is encouraged, Conrad may have taken notice of the moral stranding widespread at the time and, consequently, endeavoured to confront it”).)

Out of the three ways of making sense of Conrad, the third one I found the most nuanced and it represented my own contribution to perhaps furthering the discussion of (or opening new ones around) Conrad’s work. The conclusion I reached, then, confirmed and expanded on the proposition I made in the introductory note, that his work is to be seen as inhabiting the borders: “He [Conrad] may be the one writer of his time to have worked alongside modernism towards its own harsh exposal. He may have heeded the signals of a shattering civilization and endeavoured to revive moral sentiments among us all. More

than a ‘writer of the sea,’ Conrad may have been the *moral agent* to dare defy the moral decline at the heart of modernism”.

It then became necessary for me to examine these findings more closely. During my undergraduate course in *Contemporary British Literature*, I was introduced to Kazuo Ishiguro and was personally moved by his treatment of human fallibility in *The Remains of the Day*. While the detail of the writer’s Japanese roots did in itself spark my curiosity due to a personal preference for the *Nihon no* culture, the idea of placing Ishiguro next to Conrad initially came from one thought, which was my first impression while and after reading his 1989 novel — that the book was a ‘clean’ one. This was with reference to Mr Stevens’s carefully laid out civility, to his dutifully carried out commitments (duty/devotion and self-sacrifice being a major facet of Japanese tradition), and to the overall *cleaning-up-the-lentils* procedure he abridges his emotions and thoughts by. He seemed to be abnegation incarnate. And, although Lord Darlington’s (and Stevens’s) moral dilemmas were more easily recognizable at the time as fertile ground for a follow-up study, I meant to investigate this further and see if both visions (Conrad’s and Ishiguro’s) could hold more intimate connections in the way of dislodging the unspoken embargo on morality (across the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century literary modes which famously dismissed it). This shall be the aim of this study.

If the scope of this study proves to be of interest, it may benefit from further analysis. As Ishiguro said in his

Nobel lecture, “We may even find a new idea, a great humane vision, around which to rally” (16). This study could make us rethink the values we associate with modernism and postmodernism, and the effects they produced in society. If both cancelled the absolutist understanding of morality, there should be something proposed in its stead. Otherwise, it would seem as if they took after the imperialistic doctrine they kept away from. Whistler proposed a new moralism, what she calls “speculative moralism,” (2) or how-morality — centred on the approach rather than on the concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ as such. My proposal applies to Conrad and Ishiguro, but it would be interesting to see if other authors are proven compatible with the discussion here as well. Lastly, the brief examination of *Klara and the Sun* might be of particular interest given the recent publication the book (2021).

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **ON MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM**

In order to demonstrate why Joseph Conrad and Kazuo Ishiguro subvert their respective literary cradles through their work and, consequently, highlight the inception of the proposed counter-movement, I will provide a brief theoretical background of modernism and postmodernism in this section.

### **1.1. Modernism**

As noted in my BA thesis, modernism came as a wave of renewal “in every sphere of life” (Berman qtd. in Ciugureanu 16). Essentially, modernism parted ways with the “Victorian moral codes and artistic forms,” focusing on “exploding myths and subverting conventions, and [...] moving beyond notions of good and evil” (Ryan 291). An exception to this would be “Nietzsche’s modernism,” which

cannot be equated with a complete rejection of tradition. What he argues for is that there is a need to “evaluate” life differently; that is, from the point

of view not of eternity but of the present: “*If you are to venture to interpret the past you can do so only out of the fullest exertion of the vigour of the present.*” (Rabaté 11)

Modernists interrogated the normative truth — “modernism grows out of doubt [...] in absolute knowledge” (Erickson qtd. in Urquhart 24) — and favoured experimentation: they preferred multiple points of view (*heteroglossia*, or multiple-voice narration), non-linear plots, subjectivity (unreliable narrator), “mirroring the reality of the mind” (Ciugureanu 15). The modernist novel

may also examine specific cases of man’s conduct and their moral value but this examination is conducted in the language of moral possibility rather than obligation, because the proper arena of morality is private, subjective experience, of which very little is known, in which it is no longer certain that any universal moral rules obtain. (Teske 98)

Moreover, in critic Lee Oser’s view, “the modernist moral project” is the effort “to transform human nature through the use of art” and “[m]odernist art is aesthetic art. Individual consciousness is the privileged medium of the modernist view of things.” (qtd. in Ryan 291-292) Such a transfer of authority from a central, undisputable point of reference to the individual is the reverse of Victorian conservatism:

[I]n the context of Victorian fiction [...] one of the reasons novel reading was thought to be not only less respectable than other forms of literature but even morally suspect [...] was that fictional details enchant and seduce and are therefore liable to distract readers from the moral of the story. (Larson 4)

This concern for decency and for preserving stories untainted, it could be observed, no longer survived the modernist scepticism.

“[O]ne of the most distinctive innovations characteristic of the modernist novel” is “experimentation with the representation of time” (Shiach 12). There is a “marked dualism in the experience and the representation of time, primarily manifested as a disjunction between public or objective and private or subjective time” (Shiach 12). Indeed, time is now split and made relative — what someone perceives to last, say, an hour, can unfold in more or less perceived time for someone else. Based on the proposition of “a lifetime in a day,” a certain kind of novel (the 24-hour narrative, that is) became a preferred choice among modernists. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* come to mind as texts where the action happens over the course of a single day.

Modernism entails a subjective manner of writing, a preference for relativity of perception, and a shift of perspective from “an interest in the world of objects to an

examination primarily of the mind” (Bartoňová 6), to name but a few characteristics. Notably, the stream of consciousness technique was favoured by writers like Joyce or Woolf. This allows for an in-depth access into the minds of the characters, with the narrative unfolding as thoughts move forward or backward in time, recreating what happens inside the mind. As a “vivid psychological experience,” the novel pursues “the inner workings of the mind not only [as] a stylistic guide, but [as] the *point of interest* in [Woolf’s] work” (Martin 2). The nature of the consciousness becomes a central, pervasive concern. The “introspective, analytical and reflective point of view” comes to the foreground through the stream of consciousness narrative (Bouzid 20); the narrator engages “in search for understanding”; the reality of “the world is different for different observers” (not the same for each person; relativity and subjectivity prevail) (Bartoňová 6). The underlying principle is the matter of experience in its most ordinary form — “experience which any moment in life has the power to offer,” “the flow of impressions experienced on an ordinary day, some of which may seem trivial” (Bartoňová 7).

Although modernism and moralism (or moralizing fiction) are antipodal by definition, the same cannot be entirely held upright in the case of modernism and the treatment of morality per se:

For [Richard] Rorty, it is specific, limited and finite moral practices that are of principal importance in

ethics, rather than foundations or universal principles; and it is literature and especially the novel that would seem to him best to articulate this sense of ethical practice. (Gibson 7)

English Professor Andre Gibson goes on to quote another point made by Richard Rorty on the same matter:

The novelist's substitute for the appearance–reality distinction is a display of diversity of viewpoints, a plurality of descriptions of the same event. What the novelist [as opposed to the philosopher] finds especially comic is the attempt to privilege one of these descriptions. [...] What he finds most heroic is not the ability sternly to reject all descriptions save one, but rather the ability to move back and forth between them. (7-8)

Thus, he concludes, “[t]he novelist presents us with individuality and diversity alike without any attempt to reduce either to the terms of a singular scheme or totality. The novel thereby becomes the form for and expression of an ethics of free, democratic pluralism” (Gibson 8).

Modernism “originally was not a period preceded by Victorianism or Edwardianism and followed by a period we now denote as postmodernism, but an ongoing tradition of experimentation in literature, dance, architecture, music, painting, sculpture, photography, and film” (Schwarz 2).