

Absurdity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled**

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Abstract

The Unconsoled, written by Kazuo Ishiguro, is published in 1995. What impresses readers most is its absurdity. The absurd narrations in the novel not only represent life realities at that time, but also indicate the lost conditions of people at that time. This paper would investigate the representations, characteristics and meanings of absurdity that weaves in the novel, which may pave the way for truly understanding the purposes of the author of writing this novel with lots of absurd narrations.

Key words: Kazuo Ishiguro; *The Unconsoled*; absurdity

1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, a Japanese-born English novelist, writes his longest novel *The Unconsoled*. It tells a story that happens in a unknown European town where Ryder is invited to give his music performances. However, at the end of his journey, his playing doesn't given at all. Not only Ryder but also people in the

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town all want to seek for consolation though they actually couldn't find any help for others. The so called heroic role for Ryder as a savior of that town become lost and he would again start his new journey with loneliness in his deep heart.

After published, this novel not only receives warm researches but also receives some criticisms. Some believe that this work worth deep research because of the image of lost modern people in this novel and the realistic life conditions in this novel (Shaffer, 1998: 56). Some argue that this is a novel with total uselessness, so it is regarded as a absurd story which should not be given any serious attention. However, as time goes on, experts, either in home and abroad, realize the importance behind his work. Research topics like dream, memory, identity and nationality are frequently investigated. Moreover, the absurdity in this novel lacks due attention.

By examining the background of this novel, its surface absurdity may unfold its truthful meaning, namely, the absurd nature of life. The 20th century in the west is a century that involves wars, diseases, and anxiety. Two world wars are the horrible nightmares for people at that time, and their faith of rationality collapses. The ideal sense of war turns out to be an entire lie as so many people sacrifices their lives to pursue the so called heroic career. They gradually realize the fake side the heroic tale. After that, the industrialized society exerts tough influences on people's lives which dehumanized them as the modern one with endless desperations. They are inclined to seek for the horrible truths behind those absurd lives as the final findings that they cannot grasp their destiny at all. Life is of entire meaninglessness for them. This paper is going to explore representations, characteristics, and meanings behind the absurdity to uncover the writing purposes of Ishiguro.

2. Representations of Absurdity

Absurdity represented in the novel mainly includes two forms. The absurdity could be the contradiction between reality and the fictionality in the novel or the big gap between the ambition of pursuit and lost. These sort of incompatible and conflicting novelistic things are composed of the surface representation of absurdity. Also, these forms are coexisting with double forms. Like Ryder, all happening things on him seem that they are unexplainable, but they really happens and have some effects upon his and others' life. He comes to the town for performance but meet his wife and son. It is odd that he even does not recognize them. Only under Gustav's words can we know that they are family members. As for his pursuit of fame, he spares no efforts but all his hard workings result in failures. He starts his new journey again like his first day arriving in the hotel with loneliness. Absurdly, no matter how hard he tries, he could not change the absurd nature of both his life and his surroundings.

Then there are Brodsky and Stephen. With his sincere hope to alleviate the tight relations between his wife, he accept the request from the town people to become the cantor again though he finally receive nothing from his wife apart from her defiance. Stephen too wants to have a warmly family relationship, but ridiculously his parents never have any hope upon his performance. Another kind of absurdity is their pursuit of performing their talent. Brodsky sacrifices his life in the end while Stephen chooses to leave home. They all attach great importance to the "Thursday night", but they all turns out to be life clowns in front of the unaccountable absurdity behind.

2.1 Ryder and his family

The novel does not mention Ryder's former life as his beginning of arriving at the hotel. Along with Gustav's repeated request of helping him to talk to his daughter Sophie, the reader get to know the real relations between Ryder, Sophie and Boris. More than that, Ryder does not have a intimate relations with his family at all. According to Boris' words, Ryder often has quarrels with Sophie. Then Sophie herself conveys her demand towards Ryder to accompany with her to find a new department, which furtherly indicates the absurd plot of this novel.

"I've got good news. That Mr. Mayer phoned earlier about a house. It's just come on the market today. It sounds really promising, something tells me that this might be it, the one we have been looking for all this time...I know you are very busy just now, but if it turns out to be anything like as good as it sounds, I'll call you and perhaps you could come out." (Ishiguro, 1995: 34)

These words firstly proves the absurd hints in the novel. Why Ryder himself does not acknowledge this fact and pretends not know them. Why this is a town that both his wife and son actually live in and he is not familiar with it. These confusions threw the readers to think its absurdity and the deep meaning behind it. After that, Ryder watches a movie with Sophie, and more details comes out.

Sophie grasped my arm. "If you want, I will take a completely clean breast of it. I'll tell you everything. Everything you want to know about..."(Ishiguro, 1995: 89)

"Once I find a proper home for us," she said eventually, "then everything will go better. It's bound to. This place I'm seeing in the morning, I'm really hopeful about it. It sounds exactly what we've always wanted." (Ishiguro, 1995: 89)

"Yes, Let's hope so." (Ishiguro, 1995: 89)

"You could sound a little more excited. This could be a turning point for us." (Ishiguro, 1995: 89)

Thus, the further hint of Ryder's family background becomes more clear. They are couples, and Boris is their son. As the novel develops, Ryder recalls his journey with Sophie to Karwinsky Gallery, with Boris to go back to their former department for seeking "Number Nine" and their family trip to the "Thursday Night". However, why Ishiguro does not narrate the family information of Ryder, and why Ryder pretends to ignore his family. The truth or reality behind all these absurd plots may be the final purpose of the writer. Based on Ryder's unconscious memories or narration, he has a badly tight relations with Sophie as well as Boris. He is often absent in home, and shares very limited time with his son. When Boris wants his help and consolation, he ignores him on purpose. Even when Gustav is dead, he does not give any consolation to his family members. At last, he remains a lonely person as his family abandons him again.

The reality is the predetermined destiny of Ryder's failure in pursuit of fame and his unconscious seek of consolation from his family. As for his son, Ryder makes Boris as a left-behind person who cannot communicate easily with his father and his mother. More importantly, Boris even becomes the victim of his parents' failed marriage and their violating quarrels. As for Sophie, she too is the victim of her marriage, and she always gives her anger towards Boris. She tries to rebuild her marriage but all turns out to be failures due to Ryder's repeat escape and ignorance. Like the tragic maker, Ryder not only personally create his tragedy but also creates others' tragedies. While carefully investigating the reasons of their fate, social factors cannot be avoided. The 20th century experiences lots of chaos and people at this time suffers a lot too.

Because of the unrest situations of the society, lost feelings haunt adults. They want to seek for life meanings and want to seek for consolations from other people like family members, but they fails. The unexplainable and predetermined fate wait for them and threw them into endless desperation. Ryder tries hard to do something for Boris and Sophie, but things are different as before. People or even family are estranged for their lack of love. In the end, no matter how urgently they want love, they are doomed to be life clown in vain as society is filled with absurdity and meaninglessness. That is the really truth, namely, the reality behind these absurd affairs that happen among Ryder and his families.

2.2 Stephen and his Parents

Like Ryder, Stephen hopes to achieve his dream of giving a fantastic performance to prove his talent or ability. While Stephen intends to ask his parents for anticipating the “Tuesday Night”, the results of parents’ absence hurts him a lot. Originally, he thinks that after his great efforts of performing, his parents may change their attitude toward him. However, the fact is neither his father or his mother once truly decides to trust Stephen’s competitiveness. Therefore, they choose to leave the concert hall not until Stephen’s performing really starts.

It is clear that Stephen could not receive any consolation from his parents as they never show any attention to him. A promising or ambitious child feel so sad about his family and he is determined to leave home to pursue his dream by himself. So why the absurd relations could happen between child and parents? The thing is that Hoffman and his wife are experiencing hard marriage and they both seek for consolation too. Hoffman makes great efforts to rebuild the bridge between them like inviting Stephen of celebrating his wife’s birthday though it is useless. His wife never pays any attention to his husband or his son, instead, she often flares up among her families which result in Stephen’s timid characteristic when facing with her as follows.

“Come on Stephen, This is your mother’s birthday, after all. Don’t disappoint her” (Ishiguro, 1995: 68)

“Very well, Show it to me quickly. Then I really must sleep. It’s the wine perhaps, but I feel extremely tired now.” (Ishiguro, 1995: 70)

During his performing, “neither of his father and his mother was looking at him. His father’s head had now become so bowed the forehead was almost touching the table surface. His mother was looking in the other direction across the room, wearing the frosty expression Stephen was so familiar with and which, astonishing, had been absent until that point in the evening.” (Ishiguro, 1995: 69) And when left alone with his mother, Stephen’s first feeling had been one of sheer terror-that something he said or did would shatter his mother’s good mood, thus undoing hours, perhaps days, of painstaking effort on his father’s part. Stephen becomes the victim of his estranged family, so the arranged performance for his mother’s birthday is a ridiculous idea. Since his mother’s ignorance, he is doomed to be the clown with his inside timidity.

In a century when people find hard to seek love, and find hard to seek for consolations, Stephen’s parents cannot escape that situation too. They suffers from tight marriage relations between each other, so their child Stephen have to be stuck in a condition of lacking parents’ love. As for Ryder, he is a father, and the same tragedy occurs. His marriage with Sophie and his son Boris’ suffering are all related to his ambitions. These are the fundamental realities behind those absurd things happens upon Stephen Ryder’s family. They cannot

get rid of their absurd fate, which leads to Stephen's leave of home, Hoffman's failure of making up their family relations, Ryder's loneliness of being abandoned by his family. Another thing is that both Ryder and Stephen always persevere in their dreams, though they are all frustrated during the whole course. And their endings are in a lost condition, which bring them back to the original state of being alone. Therefore, the absurd components in this novel can be reflected in two pair of opposite ways: absurdity and reality; pursuit and lost.

3. Characteristics of Absurdity

Upon the first day of Ryder's arrival at this unknown town, Gustav asks Ryder to help him to communicate with his daughter Sophie. On account of the novel's development, we know that Gustav and Sophie's relations get worse when Sophie was a child then. As a lonely father, he intends to rebuild their father-daughter relations when confronting with his loneliness and fear in his deep heart. But thing goes different, Sophie never think about forgiving him even when Gustav is approaching death and she refuses to look the last sight of his father. While as a grandfather, he wants to build a courageous model for his grandson Boris, so he chooses to exert his life to performing his ability of lifting heavy things. In the end, he pays his life. Brodsky, another tragic figure in the novel nearly sacrifices his life too. As fear haunts him day and night, he gradually becomes an acholic in the town where nearly everyone look down upon him. Thus, he bravely accepts other's suggestion of reperforming his career as a cantor for sake of losing his love heart again, his ex-wife. However, his efforts end with nothing at all.

When tracing all these inside motivations in Gustav's heart, he endlessly seeks for love and acceptance because the deep fear in his mind of losing his relatives. The fear of being lonely result in Brodsky's decision of leading a fresh life to win his love's heart again, however, Miss. Collins rejects his proposal of embracing him when he was going to die with blood covered his most body. Thus, the characteristics of their absurd endings all come from their fearful minds, which cause their inevitable fate either.

3.1 Gustav

According to Gustav's self-narrating, he pretends to ignore Sophie's sobbing of her hamster's death when she was eleven and this little event changes their closed relation. Though he has very hard days and has been so looking forward to seeing her, but Sophie refuses to come and greet him, which makes him feel badly hurt. At last, when he realizes that he is going to die at the moment, he begs Ryder to bring Sophie and Boris to see him. Unfortunately, Sophie does not show any sympathy or grieve towards Gustav, instead, she shows her anger towards Boris and shouts:

“Why are you doing that?” (Ishiguro, 1995: 468)

“Why are you doing that? You know what I mean. Like this. Like this!” she grabbed Boris by the shoulder and began to shake him violently. “Just like his father! He copies it! His grandfather! That's where he gets it from, you see the way he does that with his shoulder?” she glared at Boris and continued to shake him. “Oh, so you think you are so grand, do you? Do you?” (Ishiguro, 1995: 469)

With her animosity towards Gustav, she refuses to speak with him for several years. She just stands outside the door where she asks Boris to send messages for her from Gustav. This is too absurd. A feeble man who is

near death hopes to speak with his daughter but his daughter refuses to do so. Being lonely for several years, Gustav wants nothing but Sophie's forgiveness so that the fear in his heart can be alleviated. Also, being separated with father, Sophie is fearful to go back to the original closed condition with Gustav. Thus, the fear engraved in their heart further misleads and estranges them and causes their absurd tragedies.

3.2 Brodsky

Due to his loss of Miss. Collins, Brodsky becomes degenerated gradually. Before that, he is a famous pianist and owes many fames. While after their divorce, he is obsessed with drinking and is cast aside by towns people. With the approaching of the "Thursday Night", he is invited to play again for rescuing people in the town. Absurdly, he himself is the one who urgently needs consolations because he almost loses his faith of living. So, the fear of being continuing alone guides him to accept that proposal for win Miss. Collins' heart back. Miserably, he loses one leg but he keep commanding the playing. Seeing all the bloody scene on the stage, Collins fails to say nothing, and she frankly and mercilessly refuses to embrace Brodsky though he badly begs her. At last, he receives nothing from Collins who feels fearful to face with a guy who plays with a leg bleeding.

As for Brodsky's efforts of being prestigious again, he indeed tries a lot. His elegant clothing, his accompanying with Collins to visit the zoo, his recover from his grieve of his dog's death all indicate his determination to become a better person. But, Hoffman's conspiracy disillusion his hope, so misunderstandings again impede his relations with Brodsky who suddenly indulges himself in drink, which badly let his mind crash again. He feels so sad that he unfortunately meets an accident on the road. Compared with the loss of Collins, the loss of one leg means nothing as a unprofessional doctor cut his leg with some sharp things. The fears in his heart tortures his mind but he still hopes Collins' forgiveness. Collins on the other hand hates him too much, she leaves Brodsky alone though he was going to die. Cruel words uttered by her as follows show her hatred attitude towards Brodsky.

"Come and hold me. Embrace me, then let them open the curtain. We will let the world see." (Ishiguro, 1995: 497)

"Oh, how I hate you! How I hate you for wasting your life! I shall never, never forgive you! Your wound, your silly little wound! That's your real love, Leo...How you waste my life! How I hate you! Can you hear me, Leo? Look at you! What's to become of you now? Well, I'll tell you. You are going somewhere horrible now. Somewhere dark and lonely, I won't come with you. Go on your own!" (Ishiguro, 1995: 499)

She stared down coldly at Brodsky with fears in her eyes. What a absurd scene in the stage, Brodsky pays his life to pursue a woman who even has no idea of looking him. Both of them pays a lot to escape fears, the fear of losing and the fear of facing. He is finally sent to the hospital and Miss. Collins leaves the concert. Therefore, both he and his wife will live with loneliness just as before since neither of them can truly find any consolations. The more they seek, the more they get hurt.

4. Meanings of Absurdity

Ishiguro writes this absurd novel with absurd things haunts his roles. Readers may get confused about what are the intended purpose of creating this work? There must be some hints that the author wants to

uncover or convey. Ryder, Stephen, Gustav and Brodsky, they all play certain roles in their home either of parents who estranges child or child who finds hard to communicate with parents. Nearly all people in the novel have their own pain and fear though they intends to figure out what factors hid behind these ridiculous affairs. The author does not give answers to the reader. The endings among his characters become lonely again, and the so called problems remains unknown. Absurd life still have no reason and no solution to deal with, which truly reflects the living conditions in the 21th century.

4.1 Unavoidable Reality

As the protagonist of this novel, Ryder is the father of Boris and the husband of Sophie. His fragmented family condition is the real manifestation of modern families. With the rapid development of society, people experience both the hardships and happiness. Now, the condition of being not hungry has achieved great success, while people get to live better and better. A sense of flaunting becomes popular with so many of them indulging in working for money and fame. Like Ryder, father as the main pillar of a home, they work day and night. Gradually, less and less communications remains in their daily life, sometimes they even finds hard to meet each other. As time goes on, wife turns to children for releasing their rage. This sort of situations really happens today. More than that, original outgoing children get to be alone because they have to stay with their grandpa or grandmother. Like Boris, it is clear that he has a closer relationship with his grandpa Gustav.

This may recall a term “left-behind children” for those who have very limited time to be with parents. Ryder’s career shows that he is usually absent in his home because of his ambition for fame. Sophie too find difficult to be closely with Boris. So the development of economic prosperity has two sides. To some extent, it ruins the original lovely relationships. Stephen too has a very busy father who cannot give him any suggestions of performing which also leads to his decision of leaving home. Brodsky, an acholic dreams his Collin’s forgiveness, which turns out to be a total failure. Form the text, it is predicted through Collins’ words that she has been bad experiences with Brodsky that she will never show her sympathy to him.

Three broken families remains broken at last. Unspeakable fears together with absurdity further damage their heart. Absurdity proves the unavoidable reality of their lonely psychological and unconsolated world. Due to fragmentations of modern society, the relations space between people becomes more and more narrow which contributes to their further gap of smooth communications (Yuqing, 2018: 31). They live with heavy pressure for the sake of earning more money to raise up their children. Neither families nor themselves can fully escape a society with fast changes. They get trapped in a condition of endless seeking and losing, the seeking of consolation and the losing of family love.

4.2 Literary influences

When facing with the rapid and dehumanized development of modern society, writers find their unique ways to tackle with the social problems which also contributes to the rising of modern literature. Like the father of modern literature Kafka, Ishiguro also looks for fine ways to depict the modern man and women confronting estrangement and fears.

More, Ishiguro writes for international topics (Beedham, 2010: 102). Though he is a writer with national background, what he really wants to convey is not just for their own spiritual and existential condition. He sets his angles to depict the life of all people in the whole world and tries to convey the internationality of world literature. In this novel, the absurdity actually indicates the absurdity of the world. In such a century, people find no ways to explain the absurdity they are experiencing or find any consolations for their heart. Since the fast development of the society, people are thrown into an endless trap seeking for wealth and fame. However, at the same time, fear, loss of faith, anxiety and lack of love all rise in their mind. Readers have to think carefully of all these depictions that truly reflect their life and to think how to confront with all these absurdity.

As for literary development, writers after Ishiguro could also be enlightened. It is Ishiguro who combines both the Japanese literature and English literature. He uses the styles and emotions of both type of literature to describe his characters and topics. To find the commonalities of the world, Ishiguro hopes that he is a strict writer as he intends to unfold and catch the truth of life to his readers.

5. Conclusion

Under Ishiguro's writing, people in this novel indulge in absurdity that they cannot truly understand. Though they really want to find consolations, they find it is hard to get rid of the trap of anxiety and lack of love. In the end, they are still lonely ones with their uncontrollable and absurd fate. What readers can learn from them is that we should really understand the nature of our life and confront them bravely. The key point is not recognition but changing not only for them in the novel but also for modern people all over the world which may be the main purposes of Ishiguro's writing.

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