

Art, Memory, and Aftermath: Post-Traumatic Growth in Ishiguro's Wartime Japan

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) explores war's psychological and societal repercussions, particularly through the lens of memory, guilt, and emotional detachment. This study examines the novel using the framework of Post-Traumatic Growth Theory (PTG), which suggests that individuals can experience positive psychological transformation following adversity. The protagonist, Mesuji Ono, a former propagandist painter in wartime Japan, undergoes an introspective journey of self-reckoning, illustrating the complexity of trauma, regret, and identity reconstruction in a post-war society. His internal conflict, stemming from his past actions and their consequences, highlights the moral dilemmas the older generation manipulated in the name of patriotism faces. The novel further reflects on the intergenerational transmission of trauma, showing how war's effects extend beyond the battlefield to shape the cultural and psychological fabric of society. By applying PTG, this paper argues that despite the lingering shadows of war, Ishiguro's narrative suggests a path toward growth, self-awareness, and reconciliation. *An Artist of the Floating World* offers insight into the possibility of psychological resilience, adaptation, and meaning-making in the aftermath of trauma.

Keywords: War Trauma, Memory, Guilt, Resilience, Intergenerational Trauma, Psychological Transformation, and Identity Reconstruction.

Set in post-World War II Japan, the novel examines the psychological aftermath of war through the life of Mesuji Ono, a retired artist grappling with the consequences of his past ideological affiliations. Ono's journey is a tragic yet illuminating study of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), a psychological framework highlighting the potential for personal transformation following adversity. Ishiguro intricately portrays how self-reflection becomes a catalyst for growth, allowing Ono to confront his past, navigate guilt, and seek reconciliation. Through the lens of PTG, this study analyses the novel's portrayal of moral reckoning, uncertainty in healing, and the complex relationship between trauma and resilience. By examining themes of self-awareness, forgiveness, and identity reconstruction, this article underscores how *An Artist of the Floating World* offers a nuanced perspective on the emotional and psychological dimensions of post-war recovery.

Mesuji Ono, the narrator, whose recollections are shaped by the shifting landscape of post-war Japan. Once celebrated for his artistic contributions to the nationalist movement, Ono now grapples with the burden of his past, reflecting on the ideological choices that once defined him. His narrative unfolds as a process of self-examination, where personal, social, and political upheavals intertwine, forcing him to confront the moral implications of his wartime actions. As he navigates feelings of guilt, confusion, and shame, Ono's journey highlights the tension between personal responsibility and collective memory. His struggle to reconcile his past with the evolving post-war society explores the broader theme of identity reconstruction, further emphasising Ishiguro's exploration of Post-Traumatic Growth. Through Ono's introspection, *An Artist of the Floating World* presents a compelling study of how self-reflection can serve as a means of understanding, healing, and ultimately redefining one's sense of self in the aftermath of historical trauma.

"The years have passed. But the memory of them – it is as though it was yesterday. It seems impossible that I should be so old." (124)

The trauma of war profoundly shapes Ono's life, casting a long shadow over both his identity and the collective memory of post-war Japan. The guilt of his past actions continues to haunt him, despite his attempts to minimise his involvement in wartime propaganda. His struggle with accountability reflects the complex psychological and ethical dimensions of post-traumatic reckoning. "I had believed at the time I was doing something noble, something that would contribute to the greatness of Japan." (102)

Ono's selective memory becomes a defence mechanism, allowing him to rationalise or obscure the extent of his complicity, highlighting the human tendency to reconstruct the past in ways that mitigate guilt. This internal conflict highlights Ishiguro's exploration of the fragile relationship between memory and identity, demonstrating how self-deception and selective recollection function as coping strategies in the face of trauma. As Ono navigates his past, *An*

Artist of the Floating World presents a compelling narrative of moral ambiguity, emphasising the intricate process of self-reflection required for personal and societal reconciliation.

"I believed then that my work had some greater significance, but in the end, it was only the people who mattered, not the painting itself."(191)

Ono employs standard defence mechanisms to justify his past actions, reframing his role in wartime propaganda to escape guilt. However, as his self-reflection deepens, he realises his mistakes cannot be easily erased or rationalised. The war has left lasting scars, not only on the national consciousness but also on his identity, forcing him to confront the enduring consequences of his choices. His struggle reflects the tension between denial and accountability, as he grapples with the inescapable weight of his past. Despite his attempts to reinterpret his actions, the history of his involvement remains an indelible part of his identity, highlighting the complex relationship between memory, remorse, and the search for redemption. Ishiguro's narrative suggests that while self-reflection can foster growth, the past cannot constantly be rewritten or absolved, emphasising the moral and psychological burden that follows those complicit in historical trauma.

Shaping and reshaping memory is a central theme in Ono's journey, as he navigates the intersection of art, identity, and moral responsibility. Defined by his artistic legacy, he initially uses his creative work to distance himself from the emotional burden of his past actions. However, as he begins to reflect on the broader consequences of his wartime propaganda, he realises that art is not merely a symbol of his former glory but also a potential medium for redemption. Through his engagement with art, Ono confronts the emotions he has long suppressed and reassesses the ideologies he once championed. This shift aligns with Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), illustrating how individuals can reconstruct their identities and respond to trauma by developing a deeper understanding of themselves and their world. By using art as a tool for self-discovery, Ono's journey reflects Ishiguro's broader exploration of how memory, reflection, and creative expression contribute to the complex process of healing and transformation in the aftermath of trauma.

Throughout *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono's relationships with others are crucial in shaping his journey toward healing and self-awareness. While he attempts to distance himself from the more troubling aspects of his past, his interactions with family, friends, and former colleagues repeatedly force him to confront the reality of his actions. Among these relationships, his dynamic with his daughter, Noriko, is particularly significant. Representing the younger generation, Noriko embodies a more pragmatic and, at times, unforgiving perspective on the past, reflecting post-war Japan's shifting attitudes toward those who supported nationalist ideologies. Her scepticism challenges Ono's self-perception, compelling him to reassess his legacy and the moral implications of his past choices. Through these interpersonal encounters, Ishiguro underscores how external forces, whether societal or familial, can act as catalysts for personal reflection and transformation. This interplay between individual memory and collective judgment further reinforces the novel's exploration of Post-Traumatic Growth, illustrating how healing is not solely an internal process but one deeply influenced by social and generational interactions.

Noriko's insistence on moving forward becomes pivotal in Ono's journey toward self-awareness and growth. As a representative of Japan's younger generation, her rejection of nostalgia and insistence on embracing change compels Ono to reevaluate his identity and place in an evolving society. "She did not want to hear anymore about those old days" (158). Initially resistant to her forward-looking perspective, he perceives her dismissal of the past as challenging his sense of self. However, as their relationship develops, Noriko's influence allows him to self-actualise, pushing him toward a deeper understanding of his transformation. Her emphasis on letting go aligns with a key theme of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), emphasising the necessity of response and reconstruction in the aftermath of trauma. Through Noriko's perspective, Ishiguro highlights the generational divide in post-war Japan, illustrating how the healing process is not merely about self-reflection but also about embracing the future. Ono's eventual acceptance of this shift underscores the novel's broader message: actual growth comes not from clinging to the past but from the ability to adapt and redefine oneself in a changing world.

The novel explores the generational divide between Ono and the younger generation, reflecting the broader cultural transformation in post-war Japan. This divide creates tension between traditional values and the rapidly modernising, democratic society that emerged after the war. Ono's strained relationship with his former students exemplifies this shift; once his devoted protégés, they now reject his authority, treating him with indifference and alienation. Their dismissal of his influence highlights the stark contrast between those burdened by the past and those determined to forge a future unshackled by prior mistakes. While the younger generation seeks to move forward, redefining their identity in a society no longer shaped by wartime ideologies, the older generation remains trapped in the lingering trauma of their choices. This generational gap underscores the challenges of achieving Post-Traumatic Growth on a societal level, as Japan grapples with the need for recovery while embracing new values. Ishiguro presents this cultural transition as a critical aspect of Ono's journey, illustrating that healing is not merely an individual pursuit but a collective struggle to reconcile history with progress.

Ishiguro portrays Ono's search for absolution as an essential yet unresolved aspect of his transformation, emphasising the complexity of Post-Traumatic Growth. While reflection can lead to awareness, the novel suggests that genuine

healing requires self-acceptance and acknowledgement of one's actions within a larger historical and ethical framework. In doing so, *An Artist of the Floating World* presents a poignant meditation on guilt, redemption, and the difficulty of finding peace in the aftermath of moral transgression. "I had always thought of myself as a man who had come to terms with his past. But now, looking back, I realise how little I had understood about the nature of my memories." (158)

In the novel's final moments, Ono's search for forgiveness remains unresolved, reflecting the complex and ongoing nature of Post-Traumatic Growth. While he begins to recognise the necessity of self-forgiveness, achieving complete absolution remains an unattainable goal. Ishiguro presents growth not as a definitive resolution but as a continuous reconciliation process with oneself and the past. Through Ono's introspection, the novel suggests that healing does not equate to erasing guilt but acknowledging its presence and learning to coexist with it. This nuanced portrayal of personal transformation highlights the enduring psychological burden of past actions, reinforcing the idea that trauma's impact does not simply fade but must be consciously navigated. In doing so, *An Artist of the Floating World* challenges conventional notions of redemption, illustrating that growth lies in self-awareness and the willingness to engage with one's past, even when complete closure remains elusive.

An Artist of the Floating World reveals the limitations of personal growth, even as it charts Ono's journey toward self-reflection and transformation. Despite his efforts to reconcile with his past, he remains unable to fully come to terms with his actions, highlighting the complexities of Post-Traumatic Growth. Ishiguro presents a nuanced perspective on healing, demonstrating that growth does not always lead to complete transformation or resolution. The trauma of war, the weight of historical memory, and the discord between past and present obstruct Ono's ability to achieve full recovery. His story illustrates that self-awareness and reflection are essential steps toward healing, but do not always culminate in total absolution. Instead, the novel suggests that the scars of the past remain, shaping one's identity and perceptions in ways that cannot be entirely undone. Through Ono's incomplete reconciliation, Ishiguro challenges idealised notions of recovery, emphasising that personal growth is often marked by ambiguity, struggle, and an acceptance of unresolved guilt.

The novel raises a fundamental question: Does Ono grow, or does he merely adjust to his circumstances? This question is central to Ishiguro's exploration of trauma and memory. *An Artist of the Floating World* suggests that growth is not a linear or complete process but an ongoing negotiation with the past. Rather than reaching a definitive resolution, Ono remains caught in a continuous cycle of self-reflection, rationalisation, and doubt. His unresolved tensions and persistent struggles illustrate the complexities of making peace with historical trauma, reinforcing the idea that healing is neither absolute nor easily attainable. Ishiguro presents Post-Traumatic Growth as a fluid, often contradictory experience marked by moments of clarity, regression, understanding, and denial. Through Ono's journey, the novel highlights the burden of memory and the challenges of reconciling personal and collective histories, suggesting that the past is something one must learn to live with rather than fully overcome.

The broader cultural backdrop of post-war Japan is crucial in understanding Ono's journey. Following Japan's defeat, the nation underwent a period of physical and ideological reconstruction as it sought to redefine itself in the aftermath of its wartime actions. This national struggle mirrors Ono's internal conflict, as he grapples with guilt and the responsibility for his past choices. Just as Japan faced the challenge of reconciling its imperialist history with its new democratic identity, Ono struggles to accept his role in wartime propaganda and its consequences. Ishiguro draws a parallel between personal and collective trauma, illustrating how memory, remorse, and the need for reinvention shape both an individual's and a nation's post-war reality. Through this connection, *An Artist of the Floating World* suggests that personal or societal recovery is a complex and often incomplete process, marked by a tension between acknowledgement, denial, and the necessity of moving forward.

Ono's journey closely mirrors Japan's national recovery, highlighting the delicate balance between accepting past wrongdoings and striving toward a redefined future. The individual and the nation bargain with guilt, grappling with the weight of collective memory while attempting to construct a new identity. This struggle underscores the broader challenges of Post-Traumatic Growth, demonstrating that healing is not a straightforward process but a continuous negotiation with history. The novel suggests that trauma is both an individual and a societal burden, shaping cultural narratives and influencing national consciousness. *An Artist of the Floating World* thus reflects not just on personal transformation but also on collective reckoning with the past. Ishiguro presents recovery as an imperfect, evolving process, where the past cannot be erased but must be confronted and integrated into the present. Through this lens, the novel offers a profound meditation on the complexities of healing, both at the level of the self and within the broader social fabric of post-war Japan. "In those days, we believed ourselves to be helping the nation in its time of need. I see now how misplaced that belief was." (115)

An Artist of the Floating World is an intense study of the complexities of trauma, memory, and Post-Traumatic Growth, illustrating both the potential for self-reflection and the limitations of personal healing. Through Ono's character, the novel explores how self-examination can serve as a crucial tool for processing trauma, allowing individuals to confront

their past and seek meaning in their experiences. However, Ishiguro also highlights the constraints of this process, suggesting that healing is neither absolute nor entirely attainable. Instead of presenting growth as a clear resolution, the novel portrays it as an ongoing struggle, one that is marked by uncertainty, selective memory, and the inescapable weight of past actions. Ono's journey underscores the idea that trauma leaves a lasting imprint, and while self-awareness may foster change, it does not necessarily lead to complete redemption or closure. In this way, *An Artist of the Floating World* challenges idealised notions of recovery, emphasising the fluid and often unfinished nature of healing in both personal and societal contexts.

Ishiguro's work invites readers to examine the tension between guilt and forgiveness, memory and forgetting, and the struggle to escape the burdens of the past. In Ono's journey, individual and cultural healing remain fragile, reinforcing that recovery is an ongoing and often uncertain process in post-war Japan. This lingering uncertainty creates an atmosphere of unresolved tension, where the past continues to shape the present, making proper closure elusive. However, rather than diminishing the novel's impact, this ambiguity enhances its depth, positioning *An Artist of the Floating World* as a profound meditation on resilience. Ishiguro suggests that individuals and societies must confront their histories, not expecting complete resolution, but with the understanding that healing requires continual negotiation. By portraying the complexity of post-war trauma and the psychological burdens it imposes, the novel highlights how both personal and collective memory must be reconciled, however imperfectly, to move forward.

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