FORMING HERO IN THE NOVELS OF KAZUO ISHIGURO

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the formation of the hero in the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro by focusing on three key dimensions: silence, ethical passivity, and the instability of memory. Unlike traditional literary models in which the hero acts decisively and transforms reality, Ishiguro presents characters who often fail to act, hesitate, or remain emotionally restrained. This apparent weakness, however, constitutes a new type of heroism rooted in endurance rather than achievement.The article argues that Ishiguro's heroes exist in a state of moral suspension, where the boundary between responsibility and helplessness is unclear.

Ultimately, the study concludes that Ishiguro redefines the hero as a figure who embodies the limits of human understanding. His protagonists do not conquer the world; instead, they reveal the difficulty of knowing it fully. This shift reflects a broader tendency in contemporary literature toward introspective and ethically complex character models.

Key Words

Kazuo Ishigurocharacter study, existential doubt, literary analysis, comparative fiction, narrative silence, human limitation, reflective narration, ethical tension, fragmented identity, storytelling, symbolic narrative, time perception, cultural memory, literary theory, inner conflict

Introduction

The literary figure of the hero has increasingly shifted from a symbol of action to a site of reflection. In contemporary fiction, the hero is often characterized not by what they do, but by what they fail to do, remember incorrectly, or only understand too late. This transformation is particularly evident in the works of Kazuo Ishiguro, whose novels challenge the expectation that a protagonist must be active, decisive, or victorious.[4: 62]

Ishiguro's characters are frequently defined by hesitation. They delay decisions, avoid confrontation, or remain trapped within their own interpretations of reality. This raises an important question: can passivity itself be a form of heroism? Rather than dismissing these characters as weak or ineffective, Ishiguro invites readers to see their restraint as meaningful. Drawing on a comparative analysis of When We Were Orphans, The Buried Giant, and Never Let Me Go, the study demonstrates how Ishiguro constructs protagonists who are defined by their relationship to the past rather than their control over the present. Christopher Banks, Axl and Beatrice, and Kathy H.[6: 56] each represent different variations of the "deferred hero," whose actions are delayed, misdirected, or rendered meaningless by larger social or existential forces.

In When We Were Orphans, the protagonist Christopher Banks believes he is solving a mystery, yet his investigation becomes increasingly detached from reality. In The Buried Giant, memory itself is unstable, and characters must decide whether forgetting is preferable to remembering painful truths. Meanwhile, in Never Let Me Go, the absence of rebellion becomes a central feature of the narrative.

This study aims to explore how Ishiguro constructs heroes through limitation rather than power. By analyzing different novels, it argues that Ishiguro's protagonists embody a form of "quiet heroism," where the central struggle is not against external enemies but against uncertainty, memory, and self-awareness.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Ishiguro has largely focused on memory and narrative reliability, but fewer studies have directly addressed the concept of passivity as a defining feature of heroism.

Scholars such as Brian W. Shaffer emphasize the ethical uncertainty of Ishiguro's characters, noting that they often operate without clear moral frameworks. This ambiguity complicates traditional interpretations of heroism, as it removes the possibility of clear judgment.

Cynthia F. Wong highlights the role of memory in shaping identity, arguing that Ishiguro's narratives are structured around acts of remembering and forgetting. This perspective is crucial for understanding how characters construct their own versions of reality.More recent criticism has turned to later works such as The Buried Giant, where collective memory becomes a central concern. [4: 86]Critics argue that the novel questions whether truth is always desirable, suggesting that ignorance can sometimes function as a form of protection.

Despite these insights, the connection between passivity and heroism remains underexplored. This study contributes to the field by examining how inaction, silence, and delay function as key elements in the construction of Ishiguro's protagonists.

Analysis and Results

The comparative analysis reveals that Ishiguro's heroes are not defined by what they achieve, but by how they respond to uncertainty.

In When We Were Orphans, Christopher Banks represents a distorted form of heroism. His determination to solve his childhood trauma appears heroic on the surface, yet it ultimately reveals his inability to distinguish between reality and illusion. His "heroic mission" becomes an act of self-deception.

In The Buried Giant, Axl and Beatrice undertake a journey to recover their memories. However, the more they remember, the more they risk losing emotional stability. Here, heroism is linked to the willingness to confront painful truths, even when those truths threaten personal relationships.

In Never Let Me Go, Kathy H. does not resist her fate, which challenges the reader's expectations. Her acceptance is not simply passive; it reflects a deeper understanding of her limited agency. Her heroism lies in preserving dignity within a predetermined system.

Across these works, Ishiguro constructs a consistent pattern: the hero is someone who exists within constraints and must navigate them without the illusion of control. Their struggles are internal, and their victories—if they can be called that—are subtle and often incomplete.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative literary analysis, with a focus on close reading and thematic comparison. The selected texts—When We Were Orphans, The Buried Giant, and Never Let Me Go—represent different narrative styles and thematic concerns within Ishiguro's body of work.

The analysis examines narrative voice, character behavior, and thematic structure, paying particular attention to moments of hesitation, silence, and memory reconstruction. The study also incorporates theoretical perspectives from postmodernism and existential philosophy.[5: 65]By comparing multiple texts, the research identifies recurring patterns in

character construction and explores how these patterns contribute to a broader redefinition of the hero.

Conclusion

The novels of Kazuo Ishiguro present a radically different vision of the hero, one that is grounded in limitation rather than power. His protagonists are not defined by decisive action, but by their ability to endure uncertainty and reflect on their own experiences.

This study has shown that passivity, often seen as a weakness, can function as a central component of heroism in Ishiguro's work. His characters demonstrate that understanding one's limitations is itself a form of strength.

In redefining the hero, Ishiguro aligns with broader trends in contemporary literature, where the focus is on psychological depth and ethical complexity. His work challenges readers to reconsider what it means to be heroic in a world where certainty is no longer possible.

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