

Reviews

Colombino, Laura. 2024. *Kazuo Ishiguro and Ethics*. New York: Routledge. 208 pp. €131.25. ISBN: 9781032660677.

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Laura Colombino brings much needed attention to the ethical concerns of Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction. *Kazuo Ishiguro and Ethics* (2024) is a study that is willing to follow the author's moral intuition and the ways in which this shifts across his career. Published in Routledge's Studies in Contemporary Literature series, the volume makes an important contribution to discourses on an author of our time and situates Ishiguro within a broader history of moral philosophy. The book begins with a forty-page introduction that is entitled "Ishiguro's Ethical, Existential and Emotional Worlds." This functions almost as a monograph in a miniature form. Drawing on an interview that she conducted with the author in Turin in 2021, Colombino reconstructs the philosophical underpinnings of Ishiguro's career, moving from the Platonic idealism of the early novels through the Heideggerian existentialism of the middle period, to what she calls the "ethical turn" (Colombino 2024, 94), inaugurated by *Never Let Me Go* (2005). This last shift she associates with Emmanuel Levinas's seminal work *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1974) and his philosophy of alterity.¹ Colombino acknowledges that her analysis broadly follows the three-phase periodisation established by Robert Eaglestone in his chapter for *The Cambridge Companion to Kazuo Ishiguro* (2023) (Colombino 2024, 7-12), but she distinguishes her work by focussing on the emotional roots of his ethics.

The first chapter, "What Is a Good Life? *The Remains of the Day* as an Aporetic Dialogue on Dignity" (28-59) considers Ishiguro's third novel as a philosophical inquiry into the nature of human worth and the pursuit of a moral mission. Colombino argues that the novel is structured as an aporetic Socratic dialogue that attempts to explore the "banality of evil" (2024, 46). The chapter's most original contribution is its reading of Stevens in implicit dialogue with Adam Smith and Thomas Carlyle,² whose views on dignity and other emotions shadow the novel in ways that open it to a different set of questions, namely, how ethics

¹ Levinas was an avid follower of Heidegger then became disenchanted with Heidegger in the context of the events around the Second World War. The central claim of Levinas's work was that 'ethics precedes existence,' which, at that time, was considered a direct critique of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and his idea of 'thrownness' (Geworfenheit) that can be found in *Being and Time* (1927).

² Laura Colombino's analysis of *The Remains of the Day* argues that Kazuo Ishiguro uses onomastics (the study of names) to confront the butler, Stevens, with the of ghosts of philosophers like Adam Smith and Thomas Carlyle (Harry Smith and Dr Carlisle in the novel) to dismantle Stevens's narrow definitions of ethics and dignity.

and emotions can be used to form the moral basis of analysis in Ishiguro's novels. According to Colombino, the novel reaches an ethical aporia, holding the need for belonging and the uncertain pursuit of the good in perfect balance. The discussion continues in the second chapter, "Wounded Idealists Travel the World," (60-92) with an examination of *The Unconsoled* (1995) and *When We Were Orphans* (2000). There, Colombino places the figure of "the wounded hero" (2024, 60) at the centre of her reading of the ways in which Ishiguro writes characters who are trapped in an impossible pursuit of naive ideals, often conveyed through dream-like narratives. Ultimately, this chapter argues that both novels represent a shift away from individual agency or free will to the dictates of childhood psychological trauma.

In her third chapter, "Not at Home in the World: Longing for the Possible and Caring for the Other in *Never Let Me Go*" (93-123), Colombino provides an in-depth investigation into the vulnerability of the characters Kathy, Tommy and Ruth, who are clones and whom the critic describes as "wounded heroes slaughtered by the state system" (2024, 23). What is interesting here is Colombino's identification of three distinct modes of vulnerability: the existential, the biopolitical and the ethical. Her claim is that the novel operates across all three simultaneously. Drawing on the theories of Foucault (1995) and Agamben (1998), she argues that the clones exist in a state of exception. They are reduced to biological material and designed to provide spare parts for a utilitarian system that prizes human longevity over their individual lives. The clones are trapped within human discourse, accepting their fate as 'rubbish' from which they were modelled. Her underpinning of Joan C. Tronto's (2009) ethics of care enables the reader to reframe Kathy's role as a carer. Tronto's theory argues that when we recognize that someone else is vulnerable, it should lead us to into an "assumption of responsibility" (Colombino 2024, 10), which resituates Kathy as a form of moral response to the other characters' finitude. The chapter concludes with a reading of Ishiguro's Platonism in which the dynamics of *philia* in the novel echoes *Lysis* and Hailsham functions as a distorted version of the ideal city of the *Republic*.³

The fourth chapter, entitled "Ethics, Myth and the Narrative Voice in *The Buried Giant*" (124-152) treats Ishiguro's 2015 novel as a philosophical investigation into how communities and nations handle collective trauma. According to Colombino, the novel functions as an elaborate philosophical argument regarding the processing of trauma. It explores whether it is better to retrieve dark memories (which might trigger a new cycle of revenge) or to

³ Laura Colombino concludes her analysis of *Never Let Me Go* by arguing that Ishiguro constructs a mythopoesis (myth-making) that is heavily inspired by Plato's *The Republic* (375 BC) and *The Lysis* (380 BC). Colombino builds her argument using Reale (2018), Vegetti (2016) and Snaza (2015). The main idea here is that Colombino draws a parallel between the protagonists' relationships and Plato's dialogue on friendship. For Plato, *philia* (friendship) is a virtue. In the novel, the characters' lack of evil could be seen as the reason for their pursuit of being good, which is also the crux of *Lysis*. Colombino uses the moment when Kathy realizes that Ruth is not ready for the truth as a Socratic moment that echoes how Socrates in *Lysis* stops an argument to avoid distressing a friend. Simply put, for Colombino, Hailsham (the place where the clones live) is the Cave in which the myth begins.

maintain a state of amnesia. Ultimately, the chapter concludes that the ethical impasse between justice and peace can only be overcome through relationality and friendship as by the end of the novel, Axl and Beatrice's, the central characters in *The Buried Giant*, appeal to the value of their human bond suggests that interdependence is the only way to break the "vicious cycle of revenge" (Colombino 2024, 138).

The final chapter, on "The Soul's Desire for the Good: Heliotropic Mythology and Anamorphic Mirrors in *Klara and the Sun*" (153-183) analyses how Ishiguro uses artificial intelligence and genetic engineering to investigate emotions and the modern concept of the soul. The chapter explores the tension between transhumanism, which views the human mind as data that can be uploaded or replicated and the theological belief in a unique, irreplaceable soul. The author attempts to use the android Klara to ask whether a machine can truly bond or feel emotions, or if its 'care' is merely a mechanical calculated output. Colombino reads the novel as structured around the opposition between cyclical and linear temporality. By identifying the mythological framework underlying the novel's imagery, she contends that Klara's trajectory (from the store to the yard) is a katabasis which imitates a descent into the underworld that gives philosophical and theological weight to the novel. To make this argument, Colombino draws on Ovid, Dante's *Paradiso* (1321) and the myths of Persephone and Hecate⁴ to analyze the 'heliotropic mythology' that Ishiguro constructs in *Klara and the Sun*. That being said, while the ambitious range of ideas (mythological, philosophical and theological) is admirable, this chapter will require diligent additional reading for those less familiar with all the concepts that Colombino deploys.

The overarching conclusion that Colombino reaches is that Kazuo Ishiguro's narrative world is a "field of unresolved tensions" (2024, 184) governed by three primary concepts: agency, relationality and loyalty. While the study is impressive, it is not without issues. For instance, readers without significant exposure to Heidegger may find portions of the second and third chapters demanding. The basis of the various philosophical strands upon which Colombino draws is biographical. Some might find a reliance on Ishiguro's personal history and interviews to ground analytical approaches to his fiction overly deterministic and potentially compromising in that it ties the author too closely to his imagined worlds, but I found that approach useful in easing the reader into an understanding of Ishiguro as a thinker. Colombino acknowledges Ishiguro's Japanese heritage but the personal history that she uses is primarily focussed on Western philosophy, which might suggest a wasted opportunity of transcultural

⁴ This section is arguably the hardest to digest without being familiar with names such as Ovid and Dante Alighieri or without a decent background in Greek mythology. In Greek mythology, Persephone is a Greek goddess whose movement between the underworld and earth symbolises renewal (at least as we know from Ovid in *Metamorphoses*). Hecate, Greek goddess of witchcraft, helps Demeter, the goddess of harvest and the mother of Persephone to search for her daughter, who was kidnapped by Hades and taken to the underworld. Colombino's careful juxtaposition of these mythological terms allows the reader to think about Klara's faith in the sun as a sign of renewal perhaps or salvation. One possible reading might also suggest that Klara's faith takes her between the worlds of the human and transhuman.

ethical analysis. What Columbino's research successfully accomplishes is a new way to think about morality and ethics. This book will become a cornerstone of scholarship on ethics and characterisation in Ishiguro's fiction, useful for scholars and students of contemporary English literature.

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Grauzľová, Lucia. 2024. *Writing a Thesis in Literary Studies: A Handbook for Slovak Students of English*. Bratislava: STIMUL. 106 pp. ISBN: 978-80-8127-426-8.

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Lucia Grauzľová is an assistant professor at the Department of English and American Studies at Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. She teaches and publishes about American and Canadian literature with also an interest in academic writing and literary theory. She recently completed a remarkable handbook entitled *Writing a Thesis in Literary Studies: A Handbook for Slovak Students of English*.¹ Grauzľová was urged to write the text because she felt that none of the available books really helped her students, as they were conceived in too general a fashion.

I could not agree with her more and am highly grateful for the publication. I have been teaching literature courses at the Department of English and American Studies at Palacký University in Czechia for over thirty years. Having been one country up until the year 1993, the educational systems, specifically at departments of English philology, are extremely similar. Students at English departments in both Czechia and Slovakia (and elsewhere of course) are expected to write literary essays in English from the first year of their studies at university. In addition, they write a thesis (usually on either a literary or linguistic subject) as part of their bachelor's degree (around thirty to forty standard pages) and once again to complete their master's degree (around fifty to seventy standard pages). A selected few continue with their doctoral studies and write their dissertation in English.

Teaching English academic writing, specifically for a literary paper, to Czechs and Slovaks involves a number of challenges. First of all, very little attention is paid to academic writing in English classes in secondary schools in both countries. In addition, this is not part of the tradition in the teaching of the native languages themselves, with the primary emphasis being on grammar and dictation as opposed to formulating a thesis and developing an extended argument in a piece of writing. The issues of AI and computer translations are of course worldwide phenomena and have only served to exacerbate the problem.

When I began teaching at university in the mid-1990s there were no Czechoslovak materials for teaching academic writing. We did have in the library various out-of-date chunky manuals mostly written for American undergraduate courses. I attempted to glean some useful material from books of this kind but

¹ The book has been published as an electronic publication and is available for downloading free of charge here under the Creative Commons international license: <https://dspace.uniba.sk/bitstream/handle/123456789/229/978-80-8127-426-8.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

mostly came up empty. Several years later, the market was flooded with flashy new teaching books for Cambridge exams (later IELTS), which contained practical advice and tips for teaching various kinds of essays. Nothing, however, specifically focused on what I needed for my classes, how to write a literary essay of various lengths: from five to six pages for a class essay, to longer lengths for the various theses at the end of the respective degrees.

Grauzľová has written a handbook which is tailor-made for her students, but which is nevertheless relevant and useful for a much wider audience. The author explicitly states in the acknowledgments that, unless otherwise indicated, all the examples are taken from theses written by students at her department. This is one of the biggest problems with 'western' writing handbooks as they include examples which are artificially created, often by the authors. Readers can learn better from mistakes made by students with the same background and native language or at least a similar one as is the case with Czech and Slovak. The handbook is divided into seven chapters and sub-chapters. It includes all aspects of the thesis writing process including a chapter dedicated to the oral defense of the work.

In the Introduction, Grauzľová clearly explains the rationale behind the writing of the work:

This textbook was born out of frustration; this is a feeling I experience at the end of every academic year when faced with the task of reviewing and assessing students' theses. They often lack basic requirements: they are not built around a clear thesis statement; they lack theoretical footing; they do not use sources properly; in the Works Cited, they list items that have not been referenced in the body of text; and so on (9).

I can deeply relate to her exasperation as it is something that I have grouched about for years, but unlike myself, Grauzľová set out to remedy the situation. Concerning the earlier-mentioned bugaboo of the use of AI for writing essays, Grauzľová takes a healthy approach, neither embracing or rejecting it outright: "Given that the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools and large language models has become almost standard in student work, I have decided to provide students with tips on how to use these tools productively and ethically throughout the thesis-writing process" (10). This seems to me a rational middle ground when dealing with this increasingly controversial issue.

Chapter one defines what a thesis amounts to. This may seem gratuitous, but I can personally attest to a number of cases where students have had almost no clue as to what they were actually getting themselves involved in. One of the most frequent questions concerning bachelor theses is to what extent their work should consist of original research, this being something obviously and almost inevitably beyond the capacity of students at this level, researching and writing in a foreign language. Grauzľová makes it clear that expectations regarding original research, or as she calls it including "an element of novelty," (12) are more relevant when it comes to a higher degree thesis, i.e., a master's degree. There is no consensus at my department as to how many primary texts need to be included in the analysis and this seems to also be the case at Slovak universities as Grauzľová acknowledges.

Chapter two, entitled “Choosing a Research Topic,” explores this issue in more detail arguing that teachers “believe that being able to choose a research topic that is neither too broad nor too narrow – but manageable within the required length and one that is interesting, relevant and researchable – is half of the success” (14). She points out that there are always different approaches on the part of teachers when it comes to offering topics for supervision. While some instructors have a quite defined range of available topics, others (including myself) are very open to initiative on the part of students. The key, however, is that the student feels a certain enthusiasm about the subject. She warns, on the other hand, (which very much corresponds with my own experience) that “obsession with a topic does not, at least from my experience, render the best results” (15). In other words, students should not necessarily choose to focus on their favourite work/s as they might have difficulty being objective. The chapter also includes an overview of some of the most common critical approaches employed in written papers of this kind, including further reading for those interested in pursuing them in more detail. This section concludes with a discussion regarding formulating not only a research question but a thesis statement including a number of practical examples.

Chapter three tackles the subject of choosing the supervisor for the thesis. This is something which students often feel intimidated by, with them often having absolutely no clue as to what the particular instructor specializes in. She makes the very relevant observation that not all supervisors are alike and some might be a better fit than others depending on the needs of particular students:

Some have rigorous standards and set high expectations, closely monitoring your progress and providing detailed feedback at every stage. Others adopt a more hands-off approach, trusting that students will seek help when they need it” (29).

Chapter four focuses on the actual research process. The author not only provides an informative overview of various research approaches and research sources but also gives the reader extremely practical step-by-step tips as to how to go about the work and find relevant texts. She also tackles some of the latest controversial issues connected, for example, with predatory journals.

Chapter five builds on the previous section and deals with the ever-increasing problem of plagiarism and acknowledging sources. Once again, the author goes the extra mile providing the reader with practical and accurate examples of footnoting in different styles, structuring a bibliography, how to cite, etc.

Chapter six deals with the technical aspects of writing a thesis at a Slovak university, some of which will not be exactly the same in other countries. It also discusses how to structure the work, including the writing of the introduction and the conclusion.

Finally, chapter seven explores how to orally defend the thesis, something which is established practice both in Slovakia and in Czechia where I teach.

The entire handbook is extremely user-friendly and easy to negotiate, making it ideal for use in a class specifically dedicated to helping students go from A to Z in the thesis writing process. It can also, however, be used by both teachers and students outside the classroom for self-study. Although written for Slovak students writing a literary thesis about literature, it will also be of use for students of linguistics and other subjects and of benefit of course for students and teachers

from other countries. I have already been recommending it to both my colleagues and students and have received extremely positive feedback.