

## *The Unconsoled: The Modern Rogue Trapped in Traumas*

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Supported by Fundamental Research Fund for the Central Universities of China (3102017jc19006).

Received 4 November 2017; accepted 8 January 2018  
Published online 26 January 2018

### Abstract

Ryder, the protagonist in the novel, suffers many traumatic experiences during his childhood. Though these traumas shadow his life, he doesn't narrate them directly in the novel. Instead, he unfolds his own experiences through others' traumatic stories: traumas in Boris' childhood, in Stephen's youth, and in Brodsky's middle-age. Besides, in his adulthood, Ryder reperforms his experienced traumas upon his son Boris and his wife Sophie, which leads to tragedies to both himself and his family. Through his narration, he unconsciously uncovers his own traumatic pain that deprives him of controlling his life. Like the rogue in modern society, he can neither find any consolation from others nor give any consolation to others. To some extent, what Ryder experiences reflects the existing conditions of the unconsoled people in the west in 20<sup>th</sup> century with endless helplessness and loneliness.

**Key words:** Kazuo Ishiguro; *The Unconsoled*; Trauma; Narrative

Sun, Y. Q., & Zhao, S. (2018). *The Unconsoled: The Modern Rogue Trapped in Traumas*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 16(1), 31-36. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/10305>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10305>

### INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro, a famous English writer in 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote his novel *The Unconsoled* in 1995. *The Times* introduces this book as "a masterpiece.... It is above all a book devoted to the human heart." Known as a well-known pianist, the protagonist Ryder receives respects around the world and he is invited to give a concert in the "Thursday night" to help those town people with their current troubles. However, his spiritual state cannot compare with his achievements as an artist. Though he comes to the town and tires hard to get himself prepared for the vital performance, he actually does nothing in the end. What's more, he himself is stuck in the suffering predicament with endless despair towards his future life.

Besides, throughout the novel, Ryder is a rather absurd person, he is usually lost in his memories and he even doesn't remember his wife Sophie and his son Boris. During his stay at the town where he is going to give his concert, he even does not know his schedule. With the development of his unconscious narration, gradually, the chaos of his memories come out which indicate that he indeed has some traumatic experiences in his childhood, the inharmonious relationship of his parents, the violence of his parents towards him, his timid characteristic, his hatred towards his parents and so on. All these memories and experiences lead to his spiritual traumas when he grows up. By telling stories of others around him, he unconsciously narrates stories of himself to try to escape his unforgettable pain borne in his deep heart.

Whereas, many characters in the novel have various traumatic experiences like Ryder, for example, manager Hoffman, Stephen, Sophie, Brodsky and Boris. Ryder, the narrator of the novel, narrates others' stories and traumatic experiences but nearly does not directly mention his experiences as there are only a few words describing his traumatic memories in childhood. As for his trauma in

childhood, he concentrates on Boris through the depiction of Boris' sufferings. When it comes to the young period, he casts his eye on Stephen's experiences. Through the description of Brodsky's tragic ending, Ryder actually predicates his own life ending in the future. Therefore, by narrating traumatic experiences of people confronting with him, Ryder can truly understand himself, his parents, his childhood, his youth and his fear of the future. Unfortunately, in his adulthood, Ryder throws his inside pain to his family, which re-performs tragedies to people around him. Due to his unfortunate childhood, Ryder cannot escape those memories to seek happiness though he has his own son and wife.

Being a troubled modern people, Ryder wants to seek consolation and escape the past, but he cannot get rid of it, instead, he duplicates modern tragedies. Thus, he is one of the unconsoled people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with endless helplessness and loneliness. So, Ryder's traumatic sufferings in different period correspond to others' individual experiences in their respective period, namely, Boris in childhood, Stephen in youth and Brodsky in the older age period. In return, Ryder also reproduces pains and traumas among others around him.

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## 1. BORIS: CHILDHOOD VICTIM OF FAMILY TRAUMA

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Although Ryder does not directly tell the reader about his childhood experience, some hints from his sudden memories still indicate that he suffers a rather tough childhood. In the second part of the novel, during his preparation to take some photos with the reporters, Ryder met his schoolmate, Fiona Robert, a girl from his village primary school in Worcestershire with whom he had a very close friendship when he was nine years old. He immediately recalls an afternoon of their childhood and discusses about the "training sessions". Some conversations as follows:

"I like being lonely" (Ryder) (Ishiguro, 1995, p.171)  
When you get married, it needn't be like it is with your mum and dad. It won't be like that at all. Husbands and wives don't always argue all the time. They only argue like that when... when special things happen. (Fiona) (Ibid., p.172)

According to Ryder's narrating of their dialogues, the inharmonious relationship between his parents is obvious which also has great impacts on Ryder's childhood. On account of this kind of relationship, he forces himself to leave away from his parents and home. With the strange mixture of fear and exhilaration he experiences, Ryder compels himself to stay outside for more time which becomes a regular feature of his life forcing himself to remain under the tree for just a few seconds more. His development of "training sessions" unavoidably leaves dark shadows on him that he wants to tell it in a rather indirect way through Boris' stories.

Like Ryder, Boris' painful childhood is also dependent on his family (Ishiguro, 1995). The reasons for the family trauma come from the chaotic parents relationship. Ryder, as a father, is so mad of his own work that he cannot accompany with Boris at home. Sophie, as a mother, usually shares her anger of Ryder towards Boris. So, Boris cannot get any love from his parents, which even causes his hatred emotion towards them. For example, Boris has a furious quarrel with Ryder on their way to the Karwinsky Gallery.

"It's important you two don't have another quarrel tonight," said Sophie. (Ibid., p.247)  
"What do you mean, cool down!" (Ryder) (Ibid., p.247)  
"I want to stop! I'm frightened! I feel sick!" (Boris) (Ibid.)

Obviously, Ryder does not have many patience towards his son and he cannot find effective ways to console Boris because the father and son relationship between Ryder and Boris is estranged by Ryder's regular absence to son's growth. So, Boris also suffers from Ryder's emotional ignorance and torture as Ryder is rarely at home. In Boris' mind, he is a stranger who usually leaves him aside to satisfy others' need. In this way, the distance between father and son is so far, which leads to Boris' feeling of lacking father's love. Also, according to Ryder's memories in the novel, he disappoints Boris for many times. He promises Boris to go back to their old department, but he leaves Boris alone in the bar almost a whole day. Even in their department, Ryder pretends to read the paper to avoid talking with Boris. When Sophie begs him for keeping accompany with Boris, Ryder always find many reasons to refuse to do so.

In the daily life, Ryder again cannot play the role of being a father. Boris likes drawing. Once he hesitates whether to tear the drawing up or keep them, Ryder still pretends to read his paper and do not pay any attention to his son's puzzle, more to say, gives any guidance and consolation to him. In the end, Boris is so sad that he tears them up and desperately leaves the room without any words. Ryder could have chosen to support Boris and helped him with finding confidence, but tragic scene still happens. Ryder gives no consolation to Boris, which further estranges their rigid relationship. All these things impress Boris with despairs towards his father. Therefore, Ryder destroys his image of being a father in Boris' heart. That maybe the reason why Gustav says that Boris usually reflects some traumatic potentials.

What's more, there are many quarrels between his parents. Because Ryder is also a workaholic, Boris not only has to witness these fight but also becomes his parents' rage subject. He is both the physical and spiritual victim of the family. Due to Ryder's regular absence at home and his inharmonious relationship with his mother, Boris naturally has to tolerate his mother's anger towards him. In general, Sophie takes care of Boris, and

to some extent, she is a fine mother. But because of her rigid relationship with Gustav, even when her father is in great sick, she asks Boris, the little boy to send messages between her and her father. While on account of her jealousy towards the close relationship between Boris and Gustav, she heats Boris to relieve her rage.

“Why are you doing that? Like this! Like this!” Sophie grabbed Boris by the shoulder and began to shake violently. (Sophie) (Ibid., p.469)

She glared at Boris and continued to shake him. “Oh, so you think you are so grand, do you? Do you?” (Sophie) (Ibid., p.469)

In return to his parents’ apathy, Boris is obsessed with illusions. Only in his fantasy world, he can escape reality and find consolation. He imagines that his family is attacked by others and he asks his grandpa to help him. But, the havoc of his family comes from the inside reasons. The traumas are from the most closed family members. So his imagination indicates that he wants to deny the facts that he needs the care from his parents to cure his experienced traumas.

Boris’ has his traumatic childhood which lacks love and communication, so he is inclined to live in the invented world by playing games, which helps him with forgetting and escaping unhappy things. All these experiences reflect that parents become the trauma maker towards their child. Family influences cause their sorrowful childhood. Like a spiritual rogue, Boris’ sense of belonging is so vulnerable to be damaged. Children like him in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to some extent, may also be indulged in such spiritual perplexity and cannot easily be adapted to a society that parents are too busy to spend time with their children. In the end, they may feel fearful and helpless in the heart along with their growth.

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## 2. STEPHEN: YOUTH WITH AMBITION TO TRAUMA

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Facing with traumas in childhood, Ryder does not lose his courage of pursuing his dream and he becomes a world-known pianist. He successfully transfers his pessimistic emotion into the optimistic one, so trauma may be the motivation of his success in art. As for this experience, Ryder pretends to narrate Stephen’s hardworking in arts of being a pianist to represent his own process of becoming a celebrated pianist.

Like Ryder, Stephen groups up in a broken family. His father is a hotel manager, and his mother is a woman that owes arts talents. Because of the big gap between them, their marriage is a nightmare. So they leave their hope on their son, Stephen. His mother wants him to be an artist and to make great achievements just like her. But the actual situation is different. Like Ryder’s “training session”, Stephen also does not want to stay at home sharing times with his parents.

Once he prepares to play piano to celebrate his mother’s birthday, but his mother gives him a negative feedback. His mother had hesitated, then said: “Very well, Show it to me quickly. Then I really must sleep. It’s the wine perhaps, but I feel extremely tired now.” (Ibid., p.71) Then Stephen informs his father that he will go back to school, while Hoffman shows a profound desolation across his face towards his son. So Ryder just consoles Stephen after his memory: “I do think you’ve been treated rather unfairly by your parents over the matter of your piano playing...” (Ibid., p.72). It is predicted that the family atmosphere for Stephen is rather nervous and he doesn’t have any chance to communicate his own ideas with his parents.

When he was young, he indeed had some talents in playing piano, and he has a very good teacher in this field who is responsible for his teaching. But when he was ten, he gives up practicing piano with Mrs. Tilkowski because of his parents’ tight marriage and their apathy towards his learning. Then he turns to another teacher Miss. Henze. While until he was twelve, one day he suddenly realizes that his father and mother have barely spoken to each other for months, and the relationship between his parents becomes more rigid than before. On account of this reason, though he returns back to Mrs. Tilkowski, he cannot make up for those two lost years. Though he may receive many praises or support from others, his parents do not give any praise of his progress in piano practices, more to say, accept his talents of playing piano (Robbins, 2001, p.426). With regard to his parents’ irresponsibility towards him, the following words of Stephen may tell the reason.

When I was seventeen, it was probably the first time they really listened, and they really realized that I would only humiliate myself and my family by entering the competition. As I say that was the first time they notice how weak my playing was. (Stephen) (Ishiguro, 1995, p.74)

Hoffman insists that Stephen is not appropriate to be a pianist, and his performance loses their face in the public. With Stephen’s request of his parents to attend the concert to watch his performance, his parents appear, but they leave him alone on the stage not until his performance started. Because of Hoffman’s fear of his son’s excellent performance in piano, he does not believe Ryder’s words that Stephen will be an excellent pianist. Thus, Stephen again becomes the sacrifice of his father’s jealousy.

His parents’ refusal of accepting his talents in arts hurts him on the one hand and encourages his ambition of reaching achievements in arts on the other hand. This dream of inviting parents’ to hear his piano is the same as what Ryder does in his youth. Like Stephen, Ryder is keen on his parents of seeing his performance on the stage and gaining their sincere support and praise. And both of them endeavor to make progress in their art dream.

But the thing is different from what they regard, their parents never truly want to attend their concert to watch his performance (Child, 2005, p.34). They think that it is impossible for them to become a successful pianist. When Ryder realizes this, he loses his mind and cries in front of hotel staffs, receptionist Hilde Stratmann. No matter how hard they try to change his parents' attitude, the result turns out to be an entire failure. At last, Ryder pretends to say that his parents have been there and given him encouragements.

However, Ryder makes a great success of being a pianist in the end. As for Stephen, he asks Ryder many times that he wants to get the guidance from him and to achieve a better performance for his parents. Stephen indeed receives support of Ryder and gives his final performance in the "Thursday night" with obvious progress. Even in the end, he decides to leave home to pursue his dream and to achieve success in his career in the future. Despite his failure of changing parents' attitude towards him, Stephen finds right ways to deal with his traumatic experiences, that is, his determination to continue to develop his talents of being a pianist.

Both Ryder and Stephen are the victims of parents' violence and abuse, and they are all indignant and ambivalent towards their parents. They choose to regard these attitudes as a more positive motivation for them to achieve their dream, which is also an effective way to relieve their inner mind. If they do not think in that way, they may waste their life and ruin themselves. When they realize their ambitions, they allay their repression and anxiety which can balance their mind. Their decisions of achieving the dream become positive reactions towards experienced trauma in their childhood.

### 3. RYDER HIMSELF: ADULTHOOD WITH REPERFORMANCE OF TRAUMA

In his adulthood, Ryder not only gets his marriage but also gains great achievements in his career. He repeats his traumatic experiences upon his son Boris and his wife Sophie, so he actually creates his own fragmented family. In order to get his parents' love, he works hard as a fair workaholic. On the other hand, he himself becomes a perpetrator of his wife and son's trauma. He pays all his attention to his career, so he gives up his responsibilities towards his family. His family goes to be a fragmented and unbalanced label. According to his neighbor, he and Sophie always shout late at night. Using career as an excuse, he always escapes his duty both as a husband and as a father. He promises Sophie that he will accompany with her to find a new house, but he stands her up many times. Once he has a quarrel with Sophie.

"How much longer can they expected you to carry on like this?"  
(Sophie) (Ishiguro, 1995, p.37)

"Look, the fact is, people need me." (Ryder) (Ibid.)

"But how much longer can you go on doing this for people? I mean for me and you and Boris..." (Sophie) (Ibid.)

"You've no idea!" I had broken in, now angry. "You don't know what you are saying!" (Ryder) (Ibid.)

He regards himself as a role of helping others with handling troubles. However, his hope of helping citizens is frustrated since his arranged performances do not start at all. People in the town actually do not intend to give him any chance. His arrangements of performing on the stage are sheer self-allusions and his sense of obsession. In this sense, his imaged role as the Savior definitely is a total failure (Wang, 2008). His hubris and attitudes towards work make him ignore Sophie's emotional needs which undoubtedly destroys their marriage. Thus, Ryder himself becomes the tragic maker of the family that once happens like his parents' marriage situation. So, when Boris' grandpa is in great sickness, he rejects to console Boris and his mother. More, he always uses his busy work as an excuse and tries to find Hoffman again and again to ask for information about his parents' coming. Even when Gustav is dead, he doesn't appear at all.

His failure as a husband and father also leads him to feel uncomfortable with his family member. He does not know how to communicate with Sophie and Boris. When he stays at the town and has dinner with the son and wife, but he indulges in his own world and even forgets the existence of others because what he only wants to do is to be in his own world. Usually, he escapes to the street which is the scene that really happens during his childhood. He frequently escapes his family after school to stand under the tree as he refuses to go back to home early in case that he may have any closed relationship with his parents. These experiences may impede his emotional inclination and he really feels estranged with others whom he cannot be easily accompanied with. Furthermore, he also plays the role of what his father used to treat him. Boris is doomed to be a victim of his father. When Boris tries to communicate with him about the gift book, he loses his patience.

"Look, why do you keep reading this thing?" (Ryder)

(Ibid., p.471)

"Look at it! Look at it!" (Ryder) (Ibid.)

"It's just a useless old manual someone wanted to throw away!"

(Ryder) (Ibid.)

"Listen, this is a useless present. Utterly useless. No thought, no affection, nothing went into it." (Ryder) (Ibid.)

Ryder's ignorance of his family in turn makes himself further estranged. Sophie urges him to go away from her and Boris when she realizes that Ryder will never provide any love or other life supports to them. Also, she persuades Boris to give up waiting for his father's love either and says that Ryder will never become a member of their family. After being abandoned by his family, Ryder



feels so sad that he experiences traumas again. Though finally he wants to be with his family again and tries to catch the bus, but both Boris and Sophie do not give him any chance and they just get off the bus. Ryder becomes a rogue on the bus. Under the assistance of some strangers, as a rogue abandoned by his family, Ryder is determined to continue his lonely trip again. Childhood trauma borne on his heart shapes his characteristic of endless seeking and the society turns this modern man into a tragedy maker.

#### 4. BRODSKY: MIDDLE-AGE WITH PREDICATED TRAGEDY TO TRAUMA

This novel is ended with Ryder's new journey. It seems that there are no blocks for him to pursue his dream, but his experienced traumas predicate his tragic fate since he cannot fully get rid of traumas that engrave on in his childhood, and the traumatic influences will be with him forever. Even in his most successful period, he couldn't help but feel fearful about his future among which Brodsky reflects the most.

Brodsky, a famous cantor, marries with Miss Collins. Their relationship also results in failure and breaks down in the end. As an alcoholic, he lives with his lovely dog Bruno for about 20 years. Abandoned by his wife too, he gets lost and falls into endless obsession of trauma (Beedham, 2010, p.102). He has no interests about the outside world, but is stuck in his inner world to find consolation. Attacked by spiritual tortures and pains, he turns his attention to himself, so he is a self-centered one. Although he tries to make up his relationship with his wife again, but Miss Collins finally rebukes him that he only remembers traumas in his mind, that is, his own wound. Besides that, nothing is important to him. Also, she accuses him of an artistic fraud that he only cares about himself, and he will care nothing related to others or the society.

Seduced by Hoffman's conspiracy, he feels so sorrowful that he drinks wine again. Later, an accident happens, and he is knocked down by Ryder's car, which deprives him with one leg. Unfortunately, being a tool of those citizens represented by Hoffman, he is a fair clown on the stage of "Thursday night". No one cares about his lost leg, his pains or even his death. The crushed condition of his self-dignity brings him with great traumas. Therefore, he may think that he himself is the most important one. However, along with his current sense of futility, he is actually abandoned by the whole society.

Further, losing one leg leads to his physical disability, which also causes many discrimination upon him. Being regarded as a sheer joke towards the town people, he is forced to leave the performing stage. His last hope of performing for Miss Collins is in vain. Either for

his physical sickness or mind sickness, he is the one that totally abandoned by the society. In the end, he is sent to the mental hospital to live his whole remained life.

As a spectator, Ryder witnesses Brodsky's suffering which predicts his own destiny. Ryder narrates all these stories and carefully thinks that he should never become such a person like Brodsky. However, the fact is that Ryder's father is an alcoholic, and he also begins with drinking. When Ryder, Sophie and Boris decide to go to the Karwinsky Gallery, Boris asks Ryder to slow down the driving speed for fear that there will be some accidents, which indicates that Ryder's bad driving ability after drinking. But Ryder chooses to be silent to his son to cover his guilty. At last, he loses his temper again.

"We are too near the center of the road. We're going to crash."

(Boris) (Ishiguro, 1995, p.246)

"Nonsense," I said. "we are fine." (Ryder) (Ibid.)

"No, we're not!" (Boris) (Ibid.)

"I'm not moving any further over," I said. "We are perfectly fine now." (Ryder) (Ibid.)

Like Brodsky, Ryder is also abandoned by his wife. And they all exert themselves to rebuild their marriage relationship while their attempt to do so is for nothing. Absurdly, things always develop out of their arrangement as they are always abrupted by others' trifle things. When the "Thursday night" approaches, both of them never have a chance to truly give their wished performances. Not only their wish to help towns people to understand music falls to the ground, but also their wish to be with their loved ones falls to the ground either. It can be predicted that Ryder will be another rogue in the future like Brodsky painfully trapped in traumas. Though he achieves success in career, but he cannot truly offset his traumatic experiences (Adelman, 2000, p.167). Just like other people in the town, he cannot receive any consolations. Rather, he is approaching to the self-destroying course as his father experiences. Traumas will push him to the trap of obsession, and he will pay no attention to anything except himself. Thus, Ryder's worry and fear towards the future are appropriate.

#### CONCLUSION

This novel contains many victims with traumatic experiences, like Ryder, Boris, Stephen, Sophie and Brodsky. These traumas, caused by their family in one way or another, result in their physical and spiritual damages among them, so they all live in nightmares. Ryder hopes to escape those traumas memories in his childhood, which turns out to be a failure. Actually, he indirectly narrates traumas of himself in a way of narrating others' traumatic experiences. Due to his parents' apathy and abuse towards him, traumatic memories always haunt him, so he will be doomed to have a tragic fate in the future. Unfortunately,

he unconsciously duplicates his own experiences upon others, which in turn intensifies his traumatic feelings. Under the control of those traumatic experiences, he gradually loses his right of manipulating his own fate but creates more tragedies.

In regards to the living condition of people in 20<sup>th</sup> century, such a situation is of great ubiquity. On account of wars, economic crises, unemployment problems, and fast development of cities, people at that time have no choice but to experience the existing crisis and face with various assaults of the changing society. Though technologies make life more convenient, however, people become more helpless and hopeless in spirit at the same time. Driven by economic profits or high positions, parents become workaholics, which needs to the estranged family relationship. The relationships between children and parents, husbands and wives become indifferent due to their lack of communication. At last, people are anxious for whom they can get consolation as a result of their lack of love. It is hard for them to get through their spiritual loneliness and gain consolation from others. The more they seek consolation, the more they get hurt. As time passes, they finally become modern rogues trapped in trauma. In a way, people in the west in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are all “the unconsoled”.

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