VRÁNKOVÁ, K., KOY, CH. (eds) *Dream, Imagination and Reality in Literature.*
South Bohemian Anglo-American Studies No. 1.
České Budějovice: Editio Universitatis Bohemiae Meridionalis,
2007. ISBN 978-80-7394-006-5

The Orphan's Dream Come True: Representation of Reality in Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*

Zuzana Fonioková
Masaryk University

Abstract:

This paper deals with the ways reality is presented in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *When We Were Orphans*. This topic is connected with the condition of the main character and narrator of this novel, Christopher Banks. According to the representation of reality, the novel can be divided into two parts. The novel's reality as it is presented in the first part, the account that the narrator created during his life in London, corresponds to the reality of the reader's own world. In this part, Banks acts as a conventional unreliable narrator, deceiving himself in order to avoid realizing unacceptable aspects of his situation as an orphan, yet the scenic presentation mostly remains reliable. In the second part, created in Shanghai, a gap opens between the reality presented and the reality of the reader's world. The fictional world of the novel adjusts to Banks's self-deceived mind and his wishes, dreams and products of imagination become the reality. Although more options for the interpretation of the novel's second part exist, I argue that Banks lives in a kind of 'surreality' which connects the realm of dreams with that of reality. In this way, *When We Were Orphans* challenges the reader's conception of reality and of its possibilities and shows new ways of representing reality in fiction.

I. Introduction

With regard to the portrayal of reality, the novel *When We Were Orphans* can be divided into two main parts: one narrated in London and one narrated in Shanghai. In the first part, the narrator's perception of reality is distorted and therefore the narration becomes unreliable, but the reader can still recognize this unreliability and consequently the reality remains to a large extent clear. On the other hand, in the second part, reality starts to mingle with the narrator's imagination. In my presentation I will try to explore some aspects of both the ways of presenting reality in this novel, and their connection to the mental condition of the narrator and the main character, Christopher Banks. First I will comment on the features of the narrator's account in the London part and then I will demonstrate the psychological reasons for the narrator's unreliability: his self-deception and misperception of himself as the world's saviour. Afterwards, I will attempt to show that these reasons also lead to the illusion in which Banks lives. This illusion corresponds to his childhood dream, which comes true in the Shanghai part of the novel, when reality and imagination become one. As a way of conclusion, I will present a brief comparison of *When We Were Orphans* with Ishiguro's earlier novels.

II. London

In the first part, narrated from London, the narrator can be interpreted as unreliable. An important feature of the unreliable narration is the presence of two versions of what happens. There is a manifest version, which corresponds to the first-person narrator's view and his perception of reality. The other version remains hidden and is communicated to the reader indirectly, with the help of other information that the narrator provides unconsciously and indirectly (Zerweck 2001:157). Usually, the

second version emerges gradually, in pieces, as the narrator involuntarily discloses his or her real self (Nünning 1998:6). In short, the narrator tries to withhold some information but in the end he himself (or she herself) arouses, by indirect clues, the suspicion that his or her rendering of the story cannot be trusted.

The first part of the novel contains clues of this kind that enable the reader to identify Banks as an unreliable narrator. For example, Banks's questionable perspective shows itself in the contrast between his opinions and the opinions of the other characters in the novel. As an instance of such incongruity, the narrator's memories of events following his parents' disappearance diverge from the depiction of the same events provided by the Colonel, who accompanied the boy on his journey to England. While Banks portrays himself as a happy child unaffected by the tragic circumstances, the Colonel's memories show a contradictory picture – one of a boy "withdrawn and moody, liable to burst into tears at the slightest thing" (Ishiguro 2000:28). Banks's memory is further contradicted by the opinion of a former classmate, Morgan. Morgan's remark about him and Banks having been "two miserable loners" and "so left out of things" (Ishiguro 2000:195) is confronted with Banks's conviction that he "was always the one for mucking in" (Ishiguro 2000:196). Such inconsistencies throw doubt on the self-portrait Banks provides.

In addition, Banks draws attention to the unreliability of his narration by expressing doubts about the correctness of his memories, for example by saying "this is how, admittedly with some hindsight, I have come to shape that memory" (Ishiguro 2000:91). These kinds of reflections also make us aware of the fact that Banks actually strives to tell a true story, but his unreliable memory makes it impossible. One can therefore determine Banks as what Monika Fludernik calls "perhaps the most typical case of narratorial unreliability: the narrator who is obviously in the grip of an overwhelming obsession but blithely unaware of the fact, and who suffers from a patent epistemological distortion regarding the fictional world, what is actually happening, what he or she is doing, and how this should be explained" (Fludernik 1999:77). Such narrators fail to present the correct version of the story not because they intend to deceive the reader, but because they lie to themselves: they attempt to hide something from their own consciousness. These circumstances draw attention to Banks's psychological condition, which has to be analysed in order to understand the motives of the character's unreliability as a narrator.

III. Motivation

It is striking that Banks provides an extensive description of his childhood as that of a flawless time, which contrasts with only sketchy information about the time that followed the disappearance of his parents. For most of the book, Banks does not explicitly state the importance of this event in the past, but it gradually becomes obvious that this incident plays a significant role even in his adult life. His aforementioned attempts to portray himself as unaffected by the misfortune, which are contradicted by other characters, signal that Banks avoids realizing the impact the loss has had on him.

After what Banks believes to be the kidnapping of his father, which ended the "splendid days" of his childhood, he and his friend Akira invented a game, in which they acted as detectives looking for the father (Ishiguro 2000:280). By playing this game repeatedly, Banks strived to turn things back to the idyll of the time before the catastrophe. The fantasies showed a better world than the one they were living in: the kidnappers were kind and the dramas always concluded with a happy ending. In his adult life, Banks continues to live in this hope for a better world – he tries to turn his fantasies into reality by becoming a detective. For him as a child, the re-appearing of his parents would have sufficed for the world to become good again. In the same way, Banks the detective believes that he will avert the world's crisis if he manages to find his parents. His conversation with a soldier whom he takes for his friend Akira shows what is behind his misperception of his role in the world: "After all, when we were children, when things went wrong, there wasn't much we could do to help put it right. But now we're adults, now we can [...] After all this time, we can put things right" (Ishiguro 2000:281). His view of his work as "a calling I've felt my whole life" (Ishiguro 2000:17) and a duty "to combat evil" (Ishiguro 2000:22) stems from his desire to make up for the inability to do anything about the disappearance of his parents. Now that he has become a renowned detective, he believes to be able to make his childhood dream come true and thus return to the happiness of the time before his parents' disappearance. He sees himself as the detective of these fantasies who acts as a saviour and is

capable of eradicating all the evil in the world. But he does not admit to himself that it is his feeling of guilt for failing to save the parents that motivates his 'mission.' He deceives himself into believing that his motivation comes from a "sense of public duty" and underestimates the influence of the orphaning on his present life (Ishiguro 2000:14).

Thus, Banks's condition as an unreliable narrator stems from an act of self-deception. Self-deception corresponds to a psychic defence mechanism, which involves explaining one's own behaviour by additionally invented rational motives, although it really results from unconscious irrational motives that one does not admit to oneself (Geist 2000:244). Often self-deception leads to "falsche Selbstverständnisse" [false self-understanding], to the misperception of oneself (Löw-Beer 1990:254; my translation). Banks deceives himself about the motives of his conduct in that he does not acknowledge his feeling of guilt for which he cannot find a rational explanation. As a result, he misperceives himself and his role in the world, which shows in his conviction about his mission to save the world.

IV. Shanghai

Banks's false understanding of his situation climaxes in the second part of the story, which takes place in the war-stricken Shanghai, where Banks arrives as a well-known detective. The reader can in many cases no longer judge Banks's perception of reality by comparison with a latent version of the story. Instead, the scenes harmonise with Banks's self-deceived mind. As Ishiguro says in an interview, "the world actually adopts the craziness of his [Banks's] logic" ("Kazuo Ishiguro with F. X. Feeney"). The change in the whereabouts of the narrator, from traditional England to "hot" Shanghai adrift in a war, thus signifies a turn from a relatively realistic (though unreliable) narration to a world adjusted to Banks's mind.

To start with, Banks comes to Shanghai to look for his parents more than twenty years after their disappearance, but no one seems to notice the absurdity of his conviction that the parents are still held by the kidnappers. Moreover, all the other characters are 'infected' by Banks's continuing belief of a child that finding his parents will suffice to put an end to the world's problems. The following words of one of the figures sums up everybody's view of Banks as the world's saviour:

> 'Mr. Banks,' she was saying, 'do you have any idea of how relieved we all feel now that you're finally with us? Of course, we didn't like to show it, but we were getting extremely concerned about, well' – she gestured towards the sound of gunfire – [...] when the news of your impending arrival reached us, that was the first good news we'd had here in months.' (Ishiguro 2000:169-70)

This statement demonstrates that other characters in the novel act according to the rules of Banks's imagination as well.

The location, that is Shanghai of 1937, is adjusted to Banks's vision too. The appearance of the city fits the images Banks had when he was a child. He lived in the "safety of International Settlement," which was in his point of view opposed to the rest of Shanghai, where "lay all manner of ghastly diseases, filth and evil men" (Ishiguro 2000:56). Not leaving the Settlement himself, Banks believed his friend Akira's fantasies about the Chinese districts: "There were no proper buildings, just shack upon shack built in great proximity to one another. [...] There were, moreover, dead bodies piled up everywhere" (Ishiguro 2000:57). When Banks comes back as an adult, the International Settlement (lying between two countries fighting each other) really functions as a safe haven in the middle of a war, which is symbolized by shells flying over the area. The appearance of Shanghai outside of the Settlement resembles the belief of Banks as a child too: "Not all the walls were standing; sometimes we would pick our way through the debris of what might have been three or four houses before encountering another wall. The roofs were almost all smashed, often absent altogether [...]" (Ishiguro 2000:257). This example shows that not only the characters, but also the environment is fitted to the content of Banks's mind.

Even more importantly, the reality of this part of the narration reminds one of the games Banks played as a child with his friend Akira. Banks is convinced that "things will be brought to a satisfactory conclusion in a relatively short time," like in the fantasies, with him in the role of the

famous detective (Ishiguro 2000:166). Furthermore, the drama will close with a happy ending in the form of "a magnificent ceremony held in Jessfield Park," just as Banks and Akira imagined (Ishiguro 2000:118). The great significance of the ceremony in the childhood dramas goes on in Banks's adult mind. He regards the planned ceremony as vital, as something special in which to take part is everybody's wish. He shows this when he drops his intention to mention the Lieutenant at the ceremony and holds this decision for a great punishment: "And one other thing! You can safely assume I will no longer be mentioning you by name at the Jessfield Park celebration. At least if I do, it will not be in a complimentary light [...]" (Ishiguro 2000:263). Another element indispensable to the drama is Banks's friend and helper Akira, who also participated in the fantasies. Without Akira, the story would be incomplete and so Banks finds him in a wounded Japanese soldier. To retain the illusion of reunion with his old friend, Banks ignores hints that the soldier might not be Akira, such as the soldier's remark about his "home village" (not the International Settlement) (Ishiguro 2000:274). Everything therefore works as imagined in the child's daydreams.

V. Surreality

I have argued that the scenes in the second part of the novel reflect Banks's state of mind and the illusions he adheres to. One could certainly interpret this account just as the nonsensical narration of a self-deluded individual. Yet one can also choose to cross the boundaries of realism and believe all the events – to imagine a world in which the absurd episodes do not deviate from normality. In the first manifesto of surrealism, André Breton expressed his vision of a similar world: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a Surreality" (qtd. in Rabinovitch 2002:28). With this view in mind, one can find that in the second part of the novel, the narrator's fantasies merge with the facts (i.e. the war in Shanghai) to form a new reality. As in surrealist art, which, as Rabinovitch puts it, "shows that in reality, things are not determined by the common sense of the world" (Rabinovitch 2002:236), this text's reality resists the norms of the reader's world.

An important factor in this 'absolute reality' suggested by the Surrealists is the dream. In this respect, surrealist theory draws on Freud, who assigns the dreams the importance of "psychical phenomena of complete validity – fulfillment of wishes" (Freud 1998:155). In accordance with this opinion, one can interpret Banks's story in Shanghai as a dream that amounts to a fulfillment of his childhood wish. The character dreams about putting into practice the impotent daydreams of a child. As the dream merges with reality into 'Surreality', the Shanghai story is not presented as something unreal, but as a part of Banks's life, connected to both his past and his future.

As Breton points out, in a dream everything is possible because the sleeper's strict rationality is out of play and therefore it does not question the reality of events (Duplessis 1960:21-22). For dreamers, everything feels natural and only after they wake up do they regard the dreamed events as impossible, "im Namen unserer engen und beschränkten Logik" [in the name of our narrow and limited logic] (Duplessis 1960:22; my translation). Similarly, Banks does not doubt the reality of his Shanghai dream, which is often absurd from the point of view of conventional logic. He realizes the impossibility of his aim only when he wakes up from his childhood dream after he finds a house full of dead people instead of his parents. This awakening can be viewed as his journey from the childhood, about which he says: "[childhood]'s hardly a foreign land to me. In many ways, it's where I've continued to live all my life. It's only now I've started to make my journey from it" (Ishiguro 2000:297). The journey symbolizes his freeing from the self-deception, from his illusion that originates in his childhood daydreams – the illusion that he can save not only his parents but the whole world. Consequently, the journey is also one from the 'Surreality' of his fulfilled dream.

VI. Conclusion

I have shown that while a clear difference between reality and Banks's perception of it exists in the first part of Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*, in the second part the character continues to live in the dream he escaped into as a child and his illusion becomes the standard that determines the story. In the first part, Banks acts as an unreliable narrator, whose untrustworthiness results from his self-deception and misperception of his role in the world. The reader can distinguish facts (of the

fictional world) from the character's illusions with the help of contradictions and other clues in the text. On the contrary, the second part does not offer a realistic version of events – images in Banks's mind become facts and his childhood wishes are fulfilled in a different kind of reality. As a result, the novel challenges the reader's view of reality and imagination as of two distinct and contradictory spheres. At least for a while, it allows dream and imagination to flee from the restricting power of rationality and to blend with reality.

Ishiguro lets Banks experience the freedom from the restraints of reality and this peculiarity marks off *When We Were Orphans* from his earlier novels, in which the protagonists remain caught up in the fictional reality that makes them unhappy. However, the last – short – part of *When We Were Orphans* shows a common feature with the writer's first three books. In this part, Banks has returned to the realistic setting of London and, looking back at the past, regrets missing his opportunities for a better life, in particular for the fulfillment of his love affair with Sarah Hemmings: "There was someone once. Back then. But that went the way of everything else.' I gave a quick laugh. 'My great vocation got in the way of quite a lot, all in all'" (Ishiguro 2000:309). His sense of an essential mistake committed in the past finds a parallel in the feelings of the main characters of *A Pale View of the Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, who remember their prior lives with remorse and often with shame. Banks's stance at the end of the novel reminds one especially of butler Stevens (*Remains*), who confesses his feeling of waste, resulting from his blind devotion to his profession. Like Banks, he realizes late in life that by sacrificing everything to what he believed to be his mission in this world, he has thrown away an opportunity for a more useful life and for fulfillment in terms of a love relationship.

To sum up, Banks experiences a freeing from the restrictions of the actual world (that is, the fictional 'real' world of the novel) and succeeds in promoting the world of his imagination to reality. Yet at the end of the story, he 'makes his journey' from this reality back to the conventional one, and finds out that living in his delusions actually prevented him from a different life he would have liked. Ishiguro shows the possibility of shaking off the limits of the fictional reality, but then, in the tradition of his regretting protagonists, lets his character return from his world of dreams come true and suffer from the consequences of his past behaviour. In the context of the writer's other writings, the novel thus represents both an upgrade of the possibilities of representing reality in fiction and a continuation of the lineage of characters seeking relief from their awareness of a past mistake.

Works Cited:

Duplessis, Yves (1960): *Der Surrealismus,* trans. G. Metken, Hamburg: Verlag Johannes Maria Hoeppner.

Fludernik, Monika (1999): "Defining (In)Sanity: The Narrator of The Yellow Wallpaper and the Question of Unreliability," in *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context,* eds. Walter Grünzweig and Andreas Solbach, Tübingen: Narr: 75-95.

Freud, Sigmund (1998): *The Interpretation of Dreams,* New York: Avon Books.

Geist, Bohumil (2000): *Psychologický slovník*, Praha: Vodnář.

Ishiguro, Kazuo (2000): *When We Were Orphans*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Ishiguro, Kazuo (2005): "Kazuo Ishiguro with F. X. Feeney," 30 Mar 2005, http://www.writersblocpresents.com/archives/ishiguro/ishiguro.htm.

Löw-Beer, Martin (1990): *Selbsttäuschung. Philosophische Analyse eines psychischen Phänomens*, Munich: Verlag Karl Alber.

Nünning, Ansgar (1998): "Unreliable Narration zur Einführung: Grundzüge einer kognitiv-narratologischen Theorie und Analyse unglaubwürdigen Erzählens", in *Unreliable Narration: Studien zur Theorie und Praxis unglaubwürdigen Erzählens in der englischsprachigen Erzählliteratur*, Trier: WVT: 3-39.

Rabinovitch, Celia (2002): *Surrealism and the Sacred. Power, Eros and the Occult in Modern Art*, Oxford: Westview Press.

Zerweck, Bruno (2001): "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction," *Style* 35.1: 151-78.