

## MEMORY, GUILT, AND SELF-INTERROGATION IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD

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### ABSTRACT

Self-analysis is an important process by which a person examines the inner self, past actions, moral choices, and personal responsibility. It helps an individual understand the hidden movements of the mind and the consequences of one's decisions. Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* presents self-analysis as a painful but necessary act of memory. The protagonist, Masuji Ono, is an ageing Japanese artist who looks back upon his life after the Second World War. Once admired for his artistic and political involvement, he later finds himself surrounded by doubt, criticism, and changing social values. His memories of his career, his family, his students, and his political associations make him confront the question of guilt. Ono tries to justify his past by claiming good intentions, but his recollections also reveal fear, shame, denial, and remorse. His introspection becomes a form of self-interrogation. He examines his role in supporting imperialist ideas, his strained relationship with his daughters, his conflict with younger generations, and his troubled memory of his student Kuroda. This paper studies how Ishiguro presents self-analysis in the life of a trauma survivor. It argues that Ono's journey into memory reveals the struggle between self-justification and moral recognition in postwar Japan.

**KEYWORDS:** Self-analysis, memory, guilt, introspection, trauma, personality, self-discovery.

Received: 02-June-2026

Accepted: 02-July-2026

Published: 14- July-2026

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Self-analysis helps a person understand the self more deeply. It allows one to look at past choices, inner conflicts, emotional wounds, and moral responsibilities. Every individual differs in temperament, memory, fear, ambition, and conscience. For this reason, self-analysis becomes necessary in personal growth. It connects the mind with the inner life and helps a person understand why certain decisions were made and how those decisions affected others. Self-analysis also plays an important role in relationships. A person who understands the self can respond better to family, society, and moral challenges. It helps in decision-making and in facing the burden of guilt. In literature, self-analysis often becomes a way of studying character. A fictional character may look back upon the past and discover hidden truths about the self. Such a journey may bring peace, but it may also bring pain. Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* presents such a journey of self-examination. The novel is narrated by Masuji Ono, an ageing artist living in Japan after the Second World War. He once enjoyed reputation, authority, and social respect. After the war, however, the values of society change. The ideas that once brought him admiration now cause discomfort and shame. Ono begins to revisit his past and tries to understand his role in the political and artistic culture of prewar Japan. The novel is not a simple confession. Ono does not speak with complete clarity or full honesty. His memories are selective, uncertain, and sometimes defensive. He wants to believe that he acted for the good of the nation. At the same time, he slowly becomes aware that his art and influence may have supported destructive imperialist ideas. This tension gives the novel its psychological depth.

This paper examines Ono's self-analysis as a process of introspection shaped by trauma, guilt, pride, and memory. It studies how Ishiguro presents the mind of a man who wants absolution but hesitates to fully accept responsibility. Ono's story shows that the past cannot be erased. It continues to return through memory, family conflict, social change, and the silent judgment of others.

## 2. MASUJI ONO AND THE BURDEN OF MEMORY

Masuji Ono is the central figure of *An Artist of the Floating World*. He lives in an unnamed Japanese city after the Second World War. The city has changed because of war, defeat, destruction, and new social attitudes. Ono once saw himself as a respected Japanese artist. He believed that his work served the nation and supported a noble cause. After the war, however, this belief becomes troubled. Ono's self-analysis begins with memory. He revisits his past as an artist, a father, a teacher, and a public figure. He remembers how he built his reputation, how he challenged certain artistic authorities, and how he later moved towards political art. These memories are not neutral. They are shaped by his need to explain himself. He wants to recover dignity, but he also wants to reduce the weight of guilt. The past returns to Ono in fragments. He does not narrate his life in a straight and confident manner. His recollections move backward and forward. He remembers incidents, conversations, quarrels, and social meetings. Each memory opens another part of his personality. He tries to understand who he was, but he also tries to protect himself from the full pain of that understanding. Ono suffers because his former reputation has lost its value. What once seemed honourable now appears dangerous. His support for imperialist ideals, his connection with political figures, and his influence over younger artists become sources of discomfort. He is caught between the pride of the past and the shame of the present. His self-analysis is therefore not only personal. It is also historical. Ono's inner life reflects the crisis of postwar Japan. A whole society has to reconsider its past. Old values, military pride, national glory, and unquestioned obedience no longer carry the same authority. Ono's mind becomes a site where this larger historical change can be seen.

## 3. ART, IMPERIALISM, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

One of the main questions in the novel concerns the responsibility of the artist. Ono was not a soldier or political ruler. He was a painter. Yet his art became connected with imperialist ideas. He used his talent to support a national cause that later brought destruction. This makes his guilt complicated. He wants to believe that he acted with sincere intention. Yet intention alone cannot erase consequence. Imperialism

involves the expansion of power through military force, political control, colonization, and ideological influence. In the world of the novel, imperialist thinking encourages the belief that Japan must take its place among the great powers. Ono accepts this idea and allows it to shape his artistic purpose. He moves away from pleasure, beauty, and the floating world of entertainment. He begins to believe that art should serve the nation. This decision once gave him status. His social and political connections made him feel important. But after the war, the same involvement becomes a burden. Ono realizes that the cause he served led to suffering. His art, which he had believed to be socially meaningful, becomes tied to violence, nationalism, and moral failure. Ono repeatedly tries to justify himself. He wants to say that his intentions were good. He believed he was helping his country. He thought he was working for social improvement and national greatness. Yet his conscience does not remain silent. Whenever he thinks of his past, he feels shame and unrest. His self-analysis becomes an attempt to decide whether good intention can excuse harmful action. This question is never fully settled in the novel. Ono wants forgiveness, but he does not fully confess. He wants to accept guilt, but he also wants to preserve dignity. He wants others to see him as influential, but he also wants them to absolve him. This contradiction lies at the centre of his character.

#### **4. KURODA AND THE UNHEALED WOUND**

Ono's memory of his former student Kuroda is one of the most painful parts of his self-analysis. Kuroda once belonged to Ono's artistic circle. Later, their relationship turns bitter. Ono's actions contribute to Kuroda's arrest, imprisonment, and suffering. Yet Ono hesitates to accept the full weight of his responsibility. Kuroda represents the human cost of Ono's choices. It is easier for Ono to speak in general terms about the nation, art, duty, and intention. It is harder for him to face the specific suffering of a person whom he once knew closely. Kuroda's story brings guilt from the public world into the personal world. Ono's hesitation reveals the difficulty of confession. He wants to see himself as a man who made mistakes in good faith. But Kuroda's suffering challenges that self-image. If Ono's choices caused harm to a student, then his guilt cannot remain abstract. It becomes intimate and unavoidable. The memory of Kuroda also shows the limits of Ono's self-analysis. He approaches truth but does not always stand before it fully. He admits certain things indirectly. He avoids others. This makes him a deeply human narrator. He is neither completely honest nor completely false. He is a man struggling to see himself while fearing what he may find.

#### **5. CHANGING SOCIETY AND ONO'S UNEASINESS**

After the war, Japanese society in the novel changes its moral language. Ideas once praised are now condemned. Men who supported imperialist ideology are seen with suspicion. Younger people look at the older generation with anger and disappointment. Ono feels this change everywhere around him. His continuous support for prewar ideals once brought him respect. After the war, those same ideals become embarrassing. Society wants to move forward, but Ono remains attached to the older world. He finds it difficult to accept that the moral values of his youth have lost their authority. This creates uneasiness in his relationship with others. The younger generation does not honour him in the way he expects. His daughters speak to him with a freedom that would have been unthinkable in his youth. His son-in-law Suichi and younger men such as Miyake and Enchi represent a generation that holds the wartime leaders responsible for the destruction of the country. Ono's difficulty lies in his inability to adjust. He remains proud of his past influence, even when others treat that influence as shameful or insignificant. He wants people to recognize his importance. At the same time, he wants them to forgive him. But many people do not even grant him the importance he desires. Some seem to excuse him by suggesting that he was not powerful enough to cause much harm. This does not satisfy him. He wants to be seen as both significant and forgivable. This is a painful contradiction. If he was influential, then his guilt is greater. If he was harmless, then his dignity is reduced. Ono's self-analysis moves within this unresolved conflict.

#### **6. FAMILY, AUTHORITY, AND GENERATIONAL CONFLICT**

Ono's self-analysis also takes place within the family. His relationship with his daughters, Setsuko and Noriko, reveals his struggle with authority. Noriko, the younger daughter, often speaks to him in a sharp and informal manner. She treats him at times like a child who needs supervision. This disturbs Ono because he still thinks of himself as the head of the family. Ono belongs to a culture where age, gender, and family position once carried strong authority. He expects respect from his daughters. Yet the postwar family no longer functions exactly as the prewar family did. Noriko's behaviour shows the confidence of a younger generation that is less willing to obey silently. The conflict between Ono and Noriko is not merely a personal quarrel. It reflects a wider change in Japanese society. Patriarchal authority has weakened. Younger people question elders. Women speak more openly. Fathers who once controlled the family now experience resistance from within the home. Ono's discomfort can be seen in small domestic incidents, such as his attempt to rearrange the garden or involve himself in the upbringing of Setsuko's son Ichiro. These moments show his desire to regain control. But his authority does not hold in the same way. He feels displaced within his own family. This family conflict becomes part of his trauma. Ono is not only troubled by national history. He is also troubled by the loss of personal authority. The world that once confirmed his position has changed. His daughters, sons-in-law, and younger acquaintances all remind him that his values belong to another time.

## **7. ONO AND HIS FATHER: THE ORIGIN OF FEAR**

Ono's memories of his father reveal the roots of his own personality. When Ono was young, his father wanted him to become a businessman. He expected Ono to take over the family business and follow the path chosen for him. The young Ono, however, desired to become an artist. This produced one of the earliest conflicts in his life. Ono's father represents the strict authority of the prewar Japanese household. He speaks in long and difficult language that the young Ono cannot fully understand. Yet understanding is not expected. Obedience is expected. Ono cannot ask questions freely. He cannot interrupt or challenge his father. The father's word dominates the house. This atmosphere creates fear in Ono. He recalls, "although month after month went by and I was never required to say anything more, I nevertheless lived in dread of the next business meeting" (Ishiguro 42). The business meeting becomes a symbol of paternal authority. It is connected with duty, expectation, and the denial of personal desire. The reception room also carries symbolic meaning. It is treated as a forbidden and sacred space where important male members discuss family business. Ono is permitted to enter because his father wants to prepare him for the business world. To the young Ono, the room represents the future being forced upon him. Ono's desire to become an artist grows stronger because of this pressure. His father's attempt to control him only deepens his ambition. He eventually speaks to his mother about his dislike of business and his dream of painting. His artistic life begins as a refusal of his father's will. This memory helps explain Ono's later behaviour. Having once lived under strict paternal control, he later seeks authority in his own life. He becomes a teacher, a public artist, and a father who wants respect. Yet the postwar world denies him the kind of authority his father once possessed. His self-analysis shows how the wounds of childhood continue into old age.

## **8. TRAUMA, SHAME, AND THE SEARCH FOR ABSOLUTION**

Ono is a trauma survivor in a moral and historical sense. He survives war, social collapse, public shame, and the loss of certainty. His trauma is not only caused by what others did to him. It is also caused by what he fears he may have done to others. This makes his suffering inward and complicated. His mind is filled with remorse and shame, but these feelings are often mixed with pride. He wants to confess, but he also wants to justify. He wants to admit error, but he also wants others to understand that his intentions were noble. His self-analysis becomes a struggle between conscience and self-defence. The postwar generation demands accountability from those who led the nation into war. Characters such as Suichi and Miyake represent this attitude. They believe that corrupted leaders should atone for the harm they caused. Some even see suicide as a form of responsibility. Ono is aware of this moral judgment, but he does not know how far it applies to him. He asks himself whether following one's conscience can excuse the consequences of one's actions. This is one of the deepest moral questions in the novel. Ono

believed he was doing what was right. Yet belief alone does not protect others from harm. The novel asks whether a person can be innocent simply because he meant well. Ono never receives complete absolution from society. Young men are busy rebuilding the city and the nation. They do not look to him with admiration. Ordinary people do not offer the recognition he desires. He is left with himself. Since the outer world cannot resolve his guilt, he turns inward. His introspection becomes the only space where he can search for meaning.

## **9. SELECTIVE MEMORY AND UNCERTAIN CONFESSION**

Ishiguro's narrative technique is important to the study of self-analysis. Ono is the narrator of his own story, but his narration is uncertain. He often revises, qualifies, or softens what he says. He remembers some things clearly and others vaguely. He gives explanations that may hide as much as they reveal. This selective memory shows the difficulty of self-knowledge. A person rarely sees the past in a pure form. Memory is influenced by desire, fear, shame, pride, and the need for comfort. Ono remembers in order to understand himself, but he also remembers in order to protect himself. His self-analysis therefore moves slowly. At first, he is not fully remorseful. He speaks with pride about his career and influence. Gradually, however, regret enters his narration. He begins to admit that his past may have had harmful effects. This movement from pride to partial recognition is one of the main developments in the novel. Ono does not become completely transformed. He does not offer a perfect confession. Yet he reaches a level of awareness. He understands that his influence may have been negative. He does not want to repeat such influence. He hopes that his country will move toward peace and a better future. His introspection gives him partial consolation.

## **10. HOPE AFTER SELF-ANALYSIS**

The ending of Ono's inward journey is not simple happiness. He cannot erase the past. He cannot undo Kuroda's suffering, the destruction of war, or the damage caused by imperialist belief. He also cannot fully regain his old authority. Yet self-analysis gives him a way to live with the burden of memory. Ono begins to see that his country belongs to the younger generation. The energetic young men in the rebuilt city represent a new beginning. They want to create a future different from the past. Ono may not fully belong to that future, but he can hope for it. This hope is important. Self-analysis does not merely expose guilt. It also opens the possibility of moral change. When a person examines the self honestly, even partially, he may learn to live with greater care. Ono's journey suggests that recognition, however incomplete, is better than denial. The novel therefore presents self-analysis as painful but valuable. It helps Ono face fear, shame, and memory. It allows him to understand the gap between intention and consequence. It also shows him that personal identity is never separate from history, family, and society.

## **11. CONCLUSION**

Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* is a powerful study of memory, guilt, and self-interrogation. Masuji Ono's life reveals the difficulty of examining one's past after history has changed its judgment. Once respected as an artist who served national ideals, Ono later finds himself linked with imperialist thinking and wartime destruction. His self-analysis begins when the values of postwar Japan make his former beliefs appear morally troubling. Ono's introspection moves through his career, his political associations, his student Kuroda, his daughters, his father, and his own need for recognition. He wants to justify himself, but he also wants to be forgiven. He wants to be seen as influential, but he fears the guilt that influence carries. This contradiction gives his character depth and pain. The novel shows that trauma is not only the suffering caused by external events. It can also arise from conscience, memory, and the fear of having harmed others. Ono's selective memories reveal a man who struggles to confess fully. Yet his very struggle shows that the past continues to trouble him. He cannot remain untouched by what he remembers. Self-analysis in the novel becomes a path toward partial understanding. It does not free Ono completely, but it helps him confront the burden of his actions. It gives him a small measure of consolation and allows him to hope for a peaceful future. Through Ono,

Ishiguro shows that the self is never fixed. It is shaped by memory, history, family, guilt, and the difficult courage to look inward.

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