The Acceptance of Wrinkles

Ageing in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Novels

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Preface

During my student years I worked as a home carer for the elderly, which involved cleaning their houses, but, for the greatest part, having a cup of tea whilst listening to their stories, of which I am, as a literature student, of course, very fond. As I dusted their photographs, the elderly usually became quite personal and told me about their lost son, first dates, favourite music, food and other preferences, varied by their personal opinion about Dutch celebrities, the weather or the monarchy. My two favourite clients were Rika and Jannie, two sisters who had decided to live together after their husbands had died. With their wrinkly faces full of make-up, their loud laughter and inappropriate comments about their “dull” neighbour, who frequently complained about loud noise, their appearance was certainly colourful. I was surprised, as my image of the elderly had thus far been, apart from that of my own grandparents, quite negative. Their grumpy comments about having to quit drinking and smoking aside, these two ladies appeared to have the time of their lives.

This dissertation is inspired by Rika and Jannie and all those other elderly who told their life accounts while I cleaned their houses. I enjoyed the examination of the process of growing older, which certainly proved to be interesting, but also the “life accounts” of Ono, Stevens and Kathy as created by Kazuo Ishiguro. I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Irene Visser for her patience during my chaotic trains of thought during the tutorials and her elaborate answers to my questions. I also owe many thanks to Freek, Anneloes and Lydia for reviewing my work and, of course, to my family and friends who have, for the last couple of months, listened to nothing else from me but school-talk.
Introduction

In 1960, Kazuo Ishiguro moved from Nagasaki, Japan to England with his parents when he was only five years old. His family settled in Guildford, southern England, where Kazuo attended British schools and, while the intention of the Ishiguro family was to return to Japan, they eventually established themselves in England permanently (Sim 7). Ishiguro always maintained a strong connection with Japanese society throughout his childhood (Mason 336).

After graduating in 1973, Ishiguro attempted to become a songwriter before attending a creative writing course in 1979. He finished this course with great success; he attained an advance from Faber and Faber for a novel in progress, which resulted in the publication of A Pale View of Hills in 1982 (Sim 7). For this novel, Ishiguro was included in the 1983’s *Granta* magazine’s list “of the twenty best young British novelists as names to watch out for in the future” and won the Winifred Holtby Prize (Sim 7). In 1986, Ishiguro published his second novel and first bestseller, *An Artist of the Floating World*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Whitbread Book of the Year award. His third novel, *The Remains of the Day* (1989), became an international success and is nowadays Ishiguro’s best-known work (Sim 7). The novel received the prestigious Booker Prize and was released as a movie in 1993, which resulted in eight Academy Award nominations of which three were materialized into awards (Sim 7). His following novel, *The Unconsoled* (1995), received mixed reviews, but Ishiguro’s success appeared irreversible; he attained an OBE for his contributions to literature and was named Chevalier de l’Orde des Arts et des Lettres by the French government in 1998 (Sim 8). His most recent novel, *Never Let Me Go* (2005), was the runner-up at the Booker Prize awards and became a movie in 2010. After his last novel, Ishiguro wrote a number of short stories and several screenplays, which received little critical attention compared to his novels (Sim 8). Nevertheless, Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the major and most popular contemporary writers of literature.
There are several themes which reoccur throughout Ishiguro’s work that are highlighted by scholars and reviewers. The most prominent feature of Ishiguro’s novels is their narrative perspective. In interviews, Ishiguro explains his attempts to recreate the structure of memory, thus creating a fragmented narrative. This narrative is discussed thoroughly amongst scholars and reviewers who analyse the notion of reliability. Scholars and reviewers, moreover, examine the influence of Ishiguro’s Japanese heritage in his novels. Much to his dismay, Ishiguro has often been categorized as a Japanese author. After the publication of his first two novels, the reading audience “appeared to see him as a spokesman for Japanese culture, a native informant who could not only offer expert opinion on Japanese society and more, but also explain its assumed eccentricities and mysteries” (Sim 13). To avoid such criticism and emphasize underlying themes in his work, Ishiguro then tried to create international novels that would not be categorized as Asian. Besides the most prominent aspects of Ishiguro’s work, narrative perspective and Japanese influences, Ishiguro’s novels are known for their themes of dignity, Englishness, guilt, regret and the definition of humanity.

In this dissertation, I discuss three of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels, namely An Artist of the Floating World (1986), The Remains of the Day (1989) and Never Let Me Go (2005). Ishiguro’s An Artist of the Floating World is, compared to the other novels, most distinctly the product of a writer who is influenced by Japanese culture. The novel is set in Japan and the characters have Japanese names and habits. In Artist of the Floating World, the protagonist, Masuji Ono, is grandfather of Ichiro and requires care from his daughters Setsuko and Noriko. The novel takes place in Japan shortly after World War II and revolves around the marriage negotiations of Noriko, Ono’s younger daughter. During the war, Ono painted propaganda art pieces for Japan, but now spends his time quietly. Ono has trouble with the changing Japan after the war and holds on to traditions, while his daughters take a modern view towards Japan
and the older generation. Afraid of his past, Ono visits old colleagues and pupils throughout the novel to request secrecy about his contributions to the war. At the novel’s denouement, Ono confesses his guilt to his daughters and future family in law in the hope of a successful marriage negotiation between the two families.

The novel’s successor, *The Remains of the Day*, differs from the former, as Ishiguro deliberately tried to write an English novel. The novel is narrated by butler Stevens, now employed by his American master Mr Farraday, towards the end of Stevens’s life. During the novel, Stevens embarks on a journey through the English countryside to meet his old colleague and lost love, Miss Kenton. Throughout his journey, Stevens reminisces about the past and especially his work as a butler at the residence of his former master, Lord Darlington. Lord Darlington held great conferences in his house where guests were prominent figures during World War II. Stevens, like Ono, questions his own contribution to the war, and feelings of regret and guilt are passively present throughout the novel.

Ishiguro’s last novel, *Never Let Me Go*, appears to be completely different in its themes, which include ethics and creation. The novel does not emphasize any nationality particularly, but follows the life of three clones created to donate their vital organs around thirty years old, which, consequently, leads to their “completion” or death at a premature age. In the novel, narrator Kathy H. and her friends, Tommy D. and Ruth, deal with their inevitable fate. The love triangle between the three students of Hailsham, the place where clones were brought up, is a common thread throughout the novel. Towards the end of the novel, Ruth has completed and Tommy and Kathy start their romantic relationship while hoping for a deferral of their donations. After their former guardians, teachers of Hailsham, tell them that deferrals are non-existent, the novel ends with Tommy’s death. Kathy, moreover, formerly a carer to the donors, receives her notice which marks the beginning of her donations and, subsequently, death.
Although the three novels appear rather different in their themes and setting, they are comparable in their portrayal of the development of the attitude towards ageing, or impending death. The novels deal with the influence of nationality on the attitude towards ageing and the notions of acceptance and impending death that become prominent in the final stage of life. While some aspects of the above representation of ageing overlap in the novels, each novel has one aspect which is prominently present. *Artist of the Floating World* depicts the influence of nationality on the attitude towards ageing most explicitly out of the three novels through the portrayal of Ono’s household and conflict with the younger generation. It is difficult to determine “Japanese” and “western” thoughts, as these are such entities in themselves and entail such diversity. “Japanese perceptions” are, in this paper, derived from books on Japanese culture and philosophy. “Western” thought is also a general notion, which is, in this dissertation, primarily based upon Europe (England) and America, as my sources are generally either English or American.¹ *Artist of the Floating World* and *Remains of the Day* both contain the theme of dignity of the elderly and acceptance of ageing, though the latter is most prominent in *Remains of the Day* in the portrayal of Stevens. *Never Let Me Go* appears most different in themes and setting from the other two novels. The main characters are young, unlike Ono and Stevens, but appear to be in a similar life stage. The manner in which they deal with death, however, depicts an influence of the Japanese perceptions of acceptance. Although slightly differently executed, all novels portray the development of main character’s acceptance of ageing, or impending death, which is greatly influenced by Japanese culture. With this dissertation I hope to provide a new interpretation of Ishiguro’s works and highlight the importance of ageing in his novels.

The first chapter of my dissertation provides background information on ageing with respect to Ishiguro’s novels. During my research I found that sociologists, psychologists and

¹ See also Wiener’s Preface to Nakamura’s *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*.
medical scholars in particular have written literature about ageing, but ageing in literature is an underexplored theme. Kathleen Woodward wrote *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and other fictions* in 1991, but places emphasis on the psychoanalytical view of ageing rather than its connections to literature. This dissertation is therefore written without an established framework, which may be provided in 2014 when Routledge will publish Jago Morrison’s book *Ageing in Contemporary Literature*. It is clear, however, that more academic research is needed in this neglected area of literature. To examine the psychological and sociological effects of ageing, I use Erik H. Erikson’s theory on the eight stages of life. His theories are still influential for psychological theories about life stages to this day. In his papers he represents an overview of life stages along with their psychological and sociological effects, which is relevant to all three of the novels. The process of ageing itself transcends nationality. I demonstrate the view of the elderly in Japanese society, families and of the elderly themselves towards ageing or retirement. Although the Japanese influence is most evident in Ishiguro’s novels, there is also a presence of western attitudes towards ageing which requires attention as well. As Japan is so essential throughout his work, I then turn specifically to Kazuo Ishiguro’s Japanese heritage. Through the exploration of interviews with Ishiguro, I portray his personal identification with Japan and, subsequently, the influence on his novels. I continue on the Japanese influence in his novels with the importance of acceptance in Japanese culture and I also portray western psychological attitudes towards acceptance and ageing, as these are partially intertwined. The style of the novels, moreover, portrays ageing as well and I therefore conclude my background chapter on Ishiguro’s narrative perspective.

In my second chapter I discuss the Japanese cultural perspective on ageing as illustrated by *Artist of the Floating World*. Before World War II, the elderly were treated differently in Japan than after the war. A law from before the war obliged households to take

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2 See also Welchman.
care of multiple generations, but due to the abolition of that law after the war, the emphasis on family-based society decreased (Harris and Long 98). The elderly in Japanese society and families and their personal view towards ageing are distinctly portrayed in this novel. Ono struggles with becoming older, but feels superior to the younger generation. He demands respect and holds onto traditions such as his role as a father in Noriko’s marriage negotiations. The younger generation, however, practises a post-war treatment of the elderly, where the individual overrules family as regards importance. Noriko states that, after her marriage, she will end nurturing her father and Setsuko, the oldest daughter, only visits her father once a year.

My third chapter portrays the development and change of the acceptance of ageing as illustrated by *The Remains of the Day*. In *Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro tried to eliminate every Japanese aspect by setting the novel in England and naming the protagonist Stevens. The influence of Japan is, however, still present due to the representation of ageing, since a basic premise of Japanese culture is to accept one’s fate instead of fighting it (Moore 289). Stevens’s ageing and acceptance of the end of his life portray this Japanese notion. Through the narrative perspective it becomes clear that Stevens gradually accepts his fate: the end of his life. In this novel, guilt, regret and dignity are also prominent themes which he reflects upon. Stevens eventually resigns himself to his fate through memory and reflection on his life.

My fourth chapter deals with the acceptance of impending death as illustrated by *Never Let Me Go*. I end my analysis with *Never Let Me Go*, as this novel deviates from the distinct theme of nationality altogether, but is connected to the other two novels due to the notion and development of acceptance of impending death. The main characters of *Never Let Me Go* do not portray an obvious dislike of the elderly, nor see them as a burden. They, therefore, do not characteristically imitate the Japanese attitude towards the elderly after the war. As the life stages of Erik Erikson indicate, however, they experience a similar process in
life as Ono and Stevens, which can be seen in the reflective narrative and portrayal of Tommy. It is the attitude towards ageing and death that connects the novel to the *Artist of the Floating World* and *Remains of the Day*, which, simultaneously, shows that ageing is an essential and connecting theme in Ishiguro’s novels.
Chapter 1: The Different Faces of Ageing

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives multiple definitions of “ageing” of which the noun indicates “the process of growing old” (OED). This definition means that every living person is ageing, as by every second humans are growing older until the inevitable ending of life: death. To examine ageing in a novel, then, requires explanation of the usage of the definition, as the term itself implies the entire life span of a human. In this paper, the end process of growing old, the final part where death is approaching, is discussed. Erik H. Erikson, a psychoanalyst, mapped out the process of growing old and its psychosocial effects in several papers which were combined in the book *Identity and the Life Cycle*. In one of the papers, “The Problem of Ego Identity”, Erikson gives a table which summarizes the psychosocial crises during human life:

![Erikson's Life Stages](Image)

Figure 1: Erik H. Erikson’s life stages (Erikson *Identity and the Life Cycle* 129).

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3 The *OED* gives three other definitions of “ageing”, but these are not related to human ageing and are, therefore, not mentioned.

4 See for an extended version tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix.
In this paper I discuss the end stage of life, defined in Erikson’s table as “mature age” (VIII). Life’s final stage, “mature age” (people from sixty-five years old to death), centres on the reflection on life in which people “gather the experiences of a long and eventful life into a meaningful pattern”, and success in this life stage may create a sense of wisdom, while failure might provide feelings of despair (Erikson *Vital Involvement* 288-9). Erikson does not elaborate on the issue of nationality and the question of differences in psychoanalytical crises in various countries, yet states in his preface that: “The program committee of the American Psychoanalytic Association asked me to enlarge on [the] subject [of “The Problem of Ego Identity]” (Erikson *Identity and the Life Cycle* 9), which suggests that his research is influenced by the western world. His findings, however, appear to transcend the notion of nationality.

The psychoanalytical effects during the final stage of life may occur regardless of nationality, but the emphasis on the role of the elderly, a term which, in this paper, refers to Erik H. Erikson’s definition of “mature age”, is certainly prominent in Japan. In the past, age defined a social ordering in Japan at kindergarten and school and, besides, an advanced age was a positive aspect for employers, as Coulmas writes in his book: “In Japanese companies, wage differentiation on the basis of performance begins later in the career than in other industrialized countries and the ascension of the wage curve with increasing age is accordingly steeper” (23). Although the emphasis on age has changed throughout the years, it is still prominent in ordering Japanese society. In Japan there are “silver seats” in every bus, tram and subway (Koyano 342) and the coming of age and certain specific ages are celebrated with holidays and ceremonies, such as the *Shichi-go-san* (Seven-five-three) and Respect for the Aged Day (Carpenter 138). These holidays are celebrated collectively, rather than individually on birthdays (Coulmas 23). Also, in family relations age is a defining feature:

5 *Shichi-go-san* is a festival that marks critical ages in the development of Japanese children. Especially children look forward to this annual tradition (Matsuri 16).
“Vertical relations that secure the continuity of the family line have often been described as more important than horizontal ties between spouses and siblings […] The stem family, centred upon the father to son succession, functioned as the major social mechanism of intergenerational transmission securing continuation of the family line, its name and assets” (Coulmas 23). Age, therefore, can be determined as a defining and essential feature in Japanese culture, as it structures society, but also families. Old age is relative, as this changes through time. Before World War II, old age in Japan was a person fifty years or older, but after the war people are considered to be “old” when they are sixty-five or older (Coulmas 25). The Japanese definition of “old age”, after World War II, corresponds to Erikson’s definition of “mature age”.

After the war, Japanese life expectancy increased, which resulted in a change of conceptions of and attitude towards the elderly (Coulmas 25). Old age, before the war, indicated wisdom, authority and “the freedom to be flexible and creative” (Ritts 9). A traditional Japanese ritual is the kankrei, in which an elderly person is celebrated for their release of responsibilities and the joy of new competencies and freedom (Ritts 9). Grandparents were treated with respect (Holmes and Holmes 142) and Japanese seniors’ major function was to serve as advisors for family problems (Frazier and Glascock 122). An important influence on the Japanese view on ageing comes from an originally Chinese source, namely Confucianism (Ritts 10). Filial piety according to Confucianism, requires all family members to respect and obey the elderly family members, which entails that every family member owes a so-called debt to their parents, for all they have done for them (Holmes and Holmes 118). This results in a bond which makes all children take care of their parents when they are incapable of doing so themselves (Holmes and Holmes 118–9).\(^6\) Besides, there is a

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\(^6\) This can also be seen in Japanese writer Haruki Murakami’s *1Q84*(2009, 2010), in which Tengo goes to care for his dying father, even though he hated the man tremendously and refrained from visiting him for years. Even though it takes place far after the war, the nurses in the novel comment upon the son’s traditional doings.
perseverance in maintaining the family entity, or as O’Leary states in his paper:

“[P]reservation of the family, maintenance of ancestral graves, and caring for the elderly” (qtd. in Ritts 10). In the nineteenth century, a Japanese law was established by cultural influence which required a multigenerational household, where the eldest son, and later daughter-in-law, were obliged to take care of the elderly (Harris and Long 98). Thus, by cultural influences and later even by law, the Japanese elderly were respected, as an authority and nurtured by their children. This, however, changed after World War II, as the Japanese became free in their choice of partner and had equal rights to inheritance (Harris and Long 99). Although the Japanese often still live with their parents and take care of them, the emphasis on family has certainly weakened (Harris and Long 99). There is, nowadays, also a clear distinction among the elderly:

It should be noted that Glascock and Feinman (1986) made a distinction between the ‘healthy elderly’ and the ‘decrepit, care-needing aged’. Support is often more forthcoming to the healthy elderly than those who require a large amount of care (Ritts 11).

The Japanese view of ageing is not only positive, but holds similar attitudes that the American have about the elderly, for they are described as a grouchy, stubborn, out of step with times and meddlesome (Koyano 336-7, 339). Although there might be a fundamental emphasis on the Japanese view on ageing, after World War II a change occurred and the care and attitude towards the elderly reformed. However, not only the view towards the elderly in Japan changed, but also the lifestyles of the elderly underwent a transformation. The individualization of the family has caused the elderly to spend less time with their children, but more on hobbies and other leisurely affairs. A figure in Florian Coulmas’ book shows the Japanese lifestyle changes in old age:
The figure shows that throughout the years, people eventually hope to spend time leisurely (33% of the participants in 2003 against 20% in 1973) while time with their family decreases from 38% in 1973 to 24% in 2003. It is clear that there has been a change in Japan when it comes to age. The elderly and relatives focus less on family, but more on individuality. Children are not required to take care of their parents anymore and therefore the elderly create a more individual life in which more time is spent on hobbies than on family members.

The development in Japan highlights conflicting attitudes towards ageing – either positive or negative – which can also be found in the western world. The emphasis on ageing is much more rooted in Japanese culture than in the western world, due to and illustrated by the pre-war law on multigenerational households and the influence of Confucianism. The western world does, however, also portray the conflict between a positive and negative view towards ageing. Positive European stereotypes about the elderly concern “traits such as capable, wise, alert, healthy, and family-oriented”, while negative stereotypes depict the elderly as “fragile, senile, dependent on family, and incapable of handling a job” (Bousfield and Hutchinson 452). Emily Grundy concludes in her paper on the elderly in European
countries that the elderly are vulnerable and dependent of their family and savings to “remain strong in later life” (Grundy 128). This statement suggests that, without family or money, the elderly are incapable of living an independent life. The consulting editor of a supplement of *The Lancet*, Anne Hudson Jones, writes in her preface about the ambiguous attitudes towards ageing. As an example she uses the ancient Greek myth of Tithonus, which “reflects one of the most powerful fears of ageing: losing the attributes and faculties that make life worth living” (Jones 1). Jones sketches a part of the myth where Aurora (Eos), goddess of the dawn, asks her father Zeus for immortality for her mortal husband Tithonus. Zeus agrees, but Aurora forgets to request eternal youth for her husband, and Tithonus grows very old, but in a very bad state, wishing for death (Jones 1). Jones states: “The goal for longevity revolution should not be simply to extend the quantity of human years lived on this earth but to enable the inherent quality within human lives” (1). The process of growing old, Jones’s example suggests, should evoke a positive attitude where the emphasis in life is on quality rather than quantity. An elderly woman, interviewed especially for this supplement of *The Lancet*, supports Jones’s view on ageing. She writes about turning eighty and suddenly becoming aware of her own mortality, but gradually, she says: “I accepted the inevitable. Life is still very good. I am very fortunate” (Jaffé 9). Ageing might be viewed by society as something negative, or frightening, but the elderly woman and positive English idioms towards ageing also suggest an acceptance and emphasis on the remaining qualities of life.

Influences of Japanese and western culture converge in the novels by Ishiguro, which may be due to Ishiguro’s Japanese-British heritage. After *Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro deliberately attempted to create an English novel, which eventually became *The Remains of the Day*, and had, therefore, used characteristically English names, professions and setting to enable critics to categorise him as an international rather than Japanese writer.

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7 The myth of Eos (Aurora) and Tithonus can be found in Morford’s book *Classical Mythology.*
Ishiguro states, moreover, that: “I feel very much of the Western tradition” (Mason 336). The influence of Japanese culture is, however, inescapable in Ishiguro’s work, especially in his earlier novels, and Ishiguro also mentions that Japanese culture influenced his life, as he was raised in a Japanese household (Mason 336). In *A Pale View of Hills* and *Artist of the Floating World*, for example, Japanese influences become visible in the novels’ setting, character names and habits. Although Ishiguro grew up in England, his ties with Japan have always been strong, as he states in an interview:

I grew up with a very strong image in my head of this other country, a very important other country to which I had a strong emotional tie. My parents tried to continue some sort of education for me that would prepare me for returning to Japan. So I received books and magazines, these sorts of things” (Oe 76).

This quotation shows that Ishiguro, though raised in England, was indeed closely connected to Japan, through books, magazines, his parents and other “sorts of things”. Ishiguro also talks about the “strong emotional tie” to Japan, which would explain the obvious presence of Japanese influences in his novels. Ishiguro’s upbringing constituted of a mixture between two cultures, that of Japan and the west and, as this paper argues, throughout his oeuvre the countries’ attitudes towards ageing are represented.

The acceptance of ageing is a common aspect of the process of growing older, but in Japanese culture the notion of acceptance is emphasized. Acceptance of “mature age” is a common phenomenon in the final stage of life. Erikson describes that integrity in old age means: “the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle and of the persons who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that by necessity, permitted of no substitutions” (Erikson *Identity: Youth and Crisis* 139). In Japan, however, the emphasis on acceptance is embedded in culture and not only related to “mature age”. It accounts for the
acceptance of life as a fact, of actuality and even of death (Moore 289). Moore states that Japanese thought and life are based on “simplicity, purity and sincerity” (Moore 290). The Japanese mind is based on “actual experience, actual living, and second, the rejection of the intellectualistic examination of life and experience” (Moore 291), which opposes western perceptions of life. In Japanese culture, the emphasis in life is rather on the “practical adjustment […] of life” and the acceptance of problems, instead of attempts to overcome incompatibilities (Moore 295-6). The representation of ageing in Ishiguro’s novels may therefore be influenced by the Japanese cultural emphasis on acceptance, in which ageing would, then, be accepted as a fact of life.

The perceptions of ageing as portrayed in Japanese and western culture are combined in the novels due to Ishiguro’s heritage and is depicted in the narrative perspective, which serves as a literary device to portray distorted memories. All of Ishiguro’s novels are written in the first-person narrative, which depicts the protagonists’ examinations of their lives, as they look back on life through their narration. Suzuki states in his paper that: “The Western mind abhors paradoxes, contradictions, absurdities, obscurantism, emptiness, in short, anything that is not clear, well defined, and capable of determination” (429). The emphasis in the western mind, Moore argues, is on the intellectual examination and analysis of life (Moore 290). The narrative perspective of Ishiguro’s novels, in which characters examine and analyse their lives, may therefore be interpreted as a western train of thought. In an interview given in 1989, before the publication of Remains of the Day, Ishiguro says: “Things like memory, how one uses memory for one’s own purposes, one’s own ends, those things interest me more deeply” (Mason 347). A narrative may therefore be unreliable, as it is based upon memory, which may be used for “one’s own ends”. The older a person gets, the more memories the mind has to contain and, one could argue, the less reliable memories become. Anne

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8 See also Hideo and Tesshi.
Whitehead states that a memory cannot be reliable, as it is “not a copy of an original but more precisely a version of it” (emphasis added, Whitehead 51). As the characters of Ishiguro’s novels are looking back on their lives, they need to rely on their memories and, therefore, portray a personal version of their past, thus creating an unreliable narration, which many scholars refer to as Ishiguro’s most prominent characteristic (Sim 108-23). As the perception of ageing in Japan and the west is depicted in the narrative perspective, this literary device is essential in portraying the developing attitudes of main characters with regards to ageing.
Chapter 2: Japanese Cultural Perspective on Ageing

This chapter is an analysis of *Artist of the Floating World*, in which the novel depicts the influence of nationality on the attitude towards ageing. Of the three novels discussed in this dissertation, *Artist of the Floating World* appears to be most connected to Ishiguro’s native country, which is, on the surface, due to the Japanese setting and characters. The Japanese influence, however, is much more rooted than that, as *Artist of the Floating World* depicts the Japanese attitude towards the elderly, before and after the war, throughout the novel in the portrayal of the conflict between the younger and older generations. While the younger generation sees the older generation as a burden, the elderly have trouble adjusting to change and to acknowledge their advanced age. In this chapter I discuss the novel’s narrative perspective, in which this conflict and acceptance are depicted. The Japanese views towards ageing are also prominent in the novel’s theme of dignity, and the discussion of that theme concludes this chapter.

The first-person narration of *Artist of the Floating World* portrays the process of growing older and the changing and conflicting attitudes, for example towards the past or future, which correspond with that. Ono’s narration is based on memories, which becomes clear from sentences such as: “But I am digressing […] As I may have said” (emphasis added, 28) and “I believe I have already mentioned […] as I recall” (63). According to Ono, his advanced age influences his memories: “Of course, this is all a matter of many years ago now and I cannot vouch that those were my exact words” (69). This statement suggests that the passing of time has caused a distorted memory of events, which, in Ono’s case, contributes to an unreliable narration. His interpretation of these memories develops and changes throughout the novel, as “the past is (re)figured in memory […] remembering does not simply reproduce an image of the past but necessarily adapts it in the process” (Whitehead 51). The first-person
narration of *Artist of the Floating World* portrays this process, as it depicts a development in the mind of Ono; he is reminiscing and, through the reinterpretation of his memories, he changes his attitude towards the past and future.

Ono’s narrative portrays a conflict between the younger and older generation. Ono and his peers represent the older generation, while Ono’s children and their partners represent the younger generation. The chasm between the two groups can be compared to the change of Japan during World War II, where the younger generation depicts Japan after the war, when society became more individualized and progressive, while the older generation portrays a pre-war Japan (Ritts 10). The gap between the two generations is most clearly depicted in the relationship between Ono and his son-in-law Suichi. After the burial of Ono’s son Kenji, Suichi and Ono talk about the many deaths during the war. Suichi is angry at the older generation, for sending young men into their “brave deaths”, while they are carrying on with their lives, more successful than ever (58). Florian Coulmas states that Japan has often been described as a ‘gerontocracy’ or as a ‘silver democracy’” (Coulmas 94), where the elderly govern the country. Suichi’s statements appear to be a reference to this development. As life expectancy increases, the elderly actively take part in society much longer than before and Coulmas’ ninth chapter of his book on ageing in Japan is therefore titled: “Government of the elderly, by the elderly and for the elderly” (94), which implies that the aged call the shots in Japan. Ono notices that the younger generation has, in general, had undergone a change of character during the war, in which they harbour bitterness for their elders (59). Ono does not mention it explicitly, yet his narrative portrays his disapproval and fear of this attitude, as, during the conversation, he states that Suichi’s features looked “fearsome”, “threatening” and “accusing” (58) and, moreover, describes a transformation in Suichi from a “polite, self-effacing young man” to this bitter state, a transformation, according to Ono, typical of the younger generation (59). Ono portrays the gap between the generations, when he says:
“[T]here is a different mood in the country these days, and Suichi’s attitudes are probably by no means exceptional […] perhaps all men of Miyake’s and Suichi’s generation have come to think and speak like that” (61). The conversation between Ono and Suichi suggests that the war appears to have created this chasm, in which the two generations stand opposite of one another.

The chasm between a younger and older generation may, however, also transcend nationalistic affairs, as the novel depicts the disapproving attitude of the elderly towards youngsters throughout. Besides Ono, other characters in the novel also appear to have an aversion to the younger generation. Ono’s mother implies that youth equals ignorance by saying about her son: “‘He’s still very young. I’m sure it’s just a childish whim of his’” (46) and that “‘[w]hen you are young, there are many things which appear dull and lifeless. But as you get older, you will find these are the very things that are most important to you’” (48). This statement by Ono’s mother suggests that an advanced age provides more advantages than youth, as it gives wisdom and a realistic perspective on the future. Ono’s old colleague Matsuda summarizes the general attitude of the elderly towards young people as follows: “‘[W]hen I look around me, children seem to be nothing but worry’” (95). Ono agrees with Matsuda’s comment and appears to prefer the elderly over young people as well, which is depicted in a meeting between Ono and his grandson: “Ichiro came running towards me, his arms outstretched as though to anticipate an embrace. But then as he reached me, he appeared to check himself, and fixing a solemn expression on his face, held out his hand to be shaken” (135). Ichiro tries to come across as mature in an attempt to gain Ono’s approval, as it appears that his grandfather serves as his role model, and his attempts are appreciated by Ono. Ono happily comments that Ichiro was ”significantly taller, his whole manner had become calmer and less childlike. His eyes in particular seemed to have a much older gaze” (136). The older
generation in *Artist of the Floating World* depicts a disapproval towards the younger generation, but also of youth in general.

Although Ono does not provide a positive depiction of younger people, his narrative also portrays the negative characteristics of the elderly. A research in 2011 showed people’s reluctance to define themselves as “old” (Bazalgette 53). Volunteers of that research stated that others always appeared older than themselves or, as one volunteer mentioned: “I think of the elderly as someone 20 years older than me” (Bazalgette 54). The Japanese attitude towards ageing in particular has more negative connotations than, for example, the American view towards ageing (Koyano 341). A similar attitude can be found in Ono’s struggle to acknowledge his advanced age. When Ono visits his old colleague Matsuda, he stresses Matsuda’s declining health: “His body has become broken down by ill-health, and his once handsome, arrogant face has become distorted by a lower jaw that seems no longer able to align itself with the upper” (89). The depiction of Matsudo evokes a sense of decline and decay, as though his generation is close to death. Matsuda, however, compliments Ono on his vigorous appearance, yet remembering that they were once “both young and ambitious” together, Ono must be around the same age. When Ono sees Kuroda, a former pupil of his, on a tram he describes Kuroda’s hollow cheekbones and heavy lines in his face and comments: “I thought to myself as I stood there: ‘He’s not young any more’” (78). Kuroda’s advanced years and the effects of growing older seem to astonish Ono, but, considering that Kuroda is presumably younger than Ono as he used to be his pupil, Ono appears unaware of his own advanced age. It is not until later on in the novel that Ono compares himself to Matsuda instead of distancing himself from the elderly man. In the description of Matsuda and Kuroda the disadvantages of the elderly are portrayed and, moreover, so is Ono’s struggle to accept the process of growing older.
It is the confession at the dinner table of the Saitos that creates a change of attitude within Ono, as he, after this incident, depicts the younger generation positively and accepts his own old age. It can be argued that the younger generation forces Ono to accept the past and adjust to the new Japan. After the encounter with Mitsuo Saito, the little brother of Ono’s future son-in-law, Ono visits Matsuda again and the two men stand near a pond when a boy watches them for a moment. Ono, then, finally compares himself to his peer as he says: “Today, [the boy] saw two old men with sticks, standing by the pond” (201). He also changes his attitude towards younger people as, at the final page of the novel, he says they look so “full of optimism and enthusiasm”, which fills him with “genuine gladness” (205). Ono made mistakes in his past, but he eventually feels happy, for it gave him the opportunity to rise above the mediocre (124, 125). Ono’s narration depicts that Ono has altered his attitude and appears to embrace his past and his advanced age and is looking with enthusiasm to the next generation who will make their contribution to Japan.

The Japanese view towards ageing and its change in World War II is, moreover, depicted in the theme of dignity. The representation of the older generation in Artist of the Floating World indicates that the elderly are dignified, an attitude which can be compared to the view of the elderly before World War II. Ono connects ageing to dignity, which becomes clear when he describes Setsuko: “[N]ow, it seems, as she approaches her thirties, Setsuko’s looks are taking on a new and not inconsiderable dignity” (17). The younger generation, however, opposes this view and creates a negative image by commenting on the burden of the elderly and by abolishing traditions.

Ono takes the traditional position of a father and elderly advisor in the family, for example when it comes to marriage negotiations. The novel revolves around the marriage negotiations of Noriko and Taro Saito. Coulmas states that in Japan: “[T]here has been a trend away from arranged marriage to love marriage” (9). Ono is clearly still adheres to the
arranged marriage, which is part of traditional Japanese culture (Kumagai 22). Ono takes his traditional role as a father seriously and devotes his days to the upcoming marriage of Noriko. Ono visits Kuroda, for example, as he may cause trouble to the marriage negotiations due to Ono’s past. When another family, the Miyakes, pull out of the marriage negotiations, Ono believes it his fault. The marriage negotiations occupy Ono’s mind for days, which becomes clear when Ono says, after he has had an encounter with his possible son-in-law; “I pondered over the whole business during the days which followed […] a new idea struck me: that perhaps the encounter itself had helped bring about the withdrawal” (54). According to Ono, it is his responsibility that his daughter gets married and any mistakes are therefore on his account. Ono worries about his unmarried daughter, yet does not realize that after the war Japanese women get married around their thirties, instead of their early-twenties (Coulmas 25). Noriko is only twenty-six years old and is therefore no exception to her peers by marrying at a later stage in life. Besides, Noriko’s failed relationship with the young Miyake was supposed to be a love marriage instead of an arranged one. Therefore, Ono would not have had any official role in these negotiations, although he still treats the negotiations traditionally. The elderly no longer have a central position in a modern Japanese family and marriage is arranged individually. Clearly, times are changing.

While Ono sees himself as an authority within and an influential member of the family, his younger family members certainly disagree. Typically Japanese, the elderly fulfil the advisory role and serve as an authority within family circles (Frazier and Glascock 122). Ichiro, however, does not treat his grandfather with any respect. He is abusive in his language and fulfils the role of an authority more than Ono, which can be seen in the following:

‘Oji! [Ichiro] said, turning angrily. ‘Can’t you see I’m busy?’ ‘I’m sorry, Ichiro, I didn’t realize.’ ‘I can’t play with you just now!’ ‘I’m very sorry. But it sounded so exciting from out here I wondered if I could come in and watch.’ For a moment, my
grandson went on staring at me crossly. Then he said moodily: ‘All right. But you have to sit and be quiet. I’m busy.’ ‘Very well,’ I said, with a laugh. ‘Thank you very much, Ichiro’ (29).

Ichiro is not traditional in his attitude towards his grandfather, since he does not show him any respect whatsoever. There are characteristics of the traditional Japanese culture left, though, when Setsuko tries to reprimand Ichiro: “Such bad manners in front of your grandfather […] Don’t stare at your grandfather like that.” (15,16). Ono still attempts to fulfil a traditional role to Ichiro. He compares Ichiro to his lost son, Kenji: “I was struck yet again by the similarity Ichiro bore to how my own son, Kenji, had been at that age” (136). Ichiro can be seen as the replacement of Kenji in the family order and is now “the elder son”. In the “old” Japan, the eldest son inherits the family wealth and takes care of the family obligations after the death of his father (Coulmas 23,24). Loyal to Japanese tradition, Ono attempts to pass on his profession as an artist to Ichiro. Ono has bought crayons and a sketchpad for Ichiro and rewards him if he continues to draw. Ichiro, however, is not interested and prefers to play with his cowboys. This is a similar scene to that of Ono and his own father in which they have business meetings to prepare Ono for his future. Both Ono and his father take the traditional advisory role in the family. Ichiro, however, shows that times have changed and that the importance of grandparents has changed in Japanese households. While the elderly still take their traditional roles, the younger generation has moved on to different views.

The relationship between Noriko and her father is a classic example of the changing households in modern Japan. Before Noriko gets married, she takes care of her father, but she states: “[H]e can’t rely on me to come back and cook when I’m married. I’ll have enough to do without Father to look after as well” (14). This shows the modernized Japan, where multigenerational households are diminishing. It is therefore unsurprising that Noriko describes her father as “more gentle and domesticated”, as “[h]e even cooks meals from time
to time” (13). As the figure in Chapter One\(^\text{10}\) shows, the elderly gradually spend more time on their hobbies than with their family in modern Japan. Ono illustrates this fact, as he is forced to occupy himself while his daughters live away from home. The nursing of the elderly is, moreover, portrayed as a burden by the younger generation. Noriko argues to her sister that: “‘You’ve got to keep [Ono] occupied or he starts to mope’” (13). Throughout the novel, she stresses that her father is “moping around” all day. When Ono and Noriko discuss the garden, Ono suggests that Noriko should do it by herself. She sneers at him: “‘I don’t have all day as Father does’” (108). It is clear that Noriko believes her father is doing nothing and only a burden when it comes to her marriage negotiations. Setsuko is not as vocal in expressing her modern views on the elderly as her younger sister, but she only visits her father once a year, which suggests that Ono is nothing but an old man whom she visits once in a while. Though Ono still sees himself as the dignified, influential elderly man, the younger generation comments upon the burden of the elderly.

Throughout the novel, the views towards ageing by the older and younger generation are represented in metaphors of architecture. The surroundings of the characters portray the theme of dignity in relation to ageing. Ono’s house exudes a sense of tradition and importance, which is highlighted by the frequent visits of the Sugimuras. Akira Sugimura, the former inhabitant of the house, Ono describes at the first page of the novel, used to be “amongst the city’s most respected and influential men” thirty years ago (7). The house, therefore, symbolizes tradition and the fact that Ono lives in the Sugimura residence, implies that Ono, metaphorically speaking, still lives in the past. In the present time, however, Ono says that nobody would probably even know the name of Sugimura, which diminishes the dignity of the house that Ono so firmly holds on to. The younger generation, however, lives in modernized houses, which symbolizes their modern views: “Taro and Noriko’s apartment, for

\(^{10}\) See Figure 2: “Life style changes, Japan”, page 17.
instance, is a small two-room affair on the third floor [… Noriko] seems very proud of her apartment, and is forever extolling its ‘modern’ qualities” (156). It can therefore be argued that Ono lives for and in tradition, while the houses of his children portray modernization.

The development of Ono’s attitude towards becoming older and change in general is portrayed in the metaphor of the city. The city is divided into two parts by the, as Ono calls it, Bridge of Hesitation; on one side of the bridge is new architecture, a representation of modern Japan, while the other side depicts the old Japan in the “pleasure district”. Ono continuously walks on the Bridge, as though hesitating between tradition and modernization. Ono feels nostalgic about the past, which is portrayed in his longing for the old pleasure district and he hopes that, together with Mrs Kawakami, the owner of Ono’s favourite pub, and Shintaro, a former pupil of Ono’s, the three of them are able to relive and rebuilt the old district (76, 77). Throughout the novel the city is rebuilt with modern houses and eventually Mrs Kawakami’s pub is gone and, towards the end of the novel, Ono realizes that the district: “has passed away and will not be returning […] it has gone for ever” (127). After this realization, Ono looks upon young business-men in the rebuilt district and feels content with this new Japan, as he states: “I feel a certain nostalgia for the past and the district as it used to be. But to see how our city has been rebuilt […] fills me with genuine gladness” (206). It can therefore be argued that, though Ono depicts a conflict between the younger generation and his own, older, generation, the struggle of accepting an advancing age and the change of attitude towards the elderly in Japan, the novel ends on a positive note of resignation, which celebrates progression and acceptance of change.
Chapter 3: The Acceptance of Ageing

The influence of Japanese cultural perceptions of ageing can also be seen in Remains of the Day. The theme of dignity is more explicitly and elaborately present in this novel compared to Artist of the Floating World and is revealed in Stevens’s attitude towards tradition and age. The narrative perspective of Remains of the Day can be compared to Artist of the Floating World, as both protagonists are looking back on their lives. Stevens struggles with the acceptance and acknowledgement of his advanced age but gradually accepts his fate, of which I argue that the influence of Japan in relation to ageing plays a significant role. Instead of portraying the different attitudes towards ageing before and after World War II in Japan, this novel centres on the acceptance of actuality, or, in other words, accepting life as it is, which is a basic factor of Japanese thought (Nakamura “Basic Features” 143). Stevens, moreover, faces his guilt and regret in life in an attempt to gain resignation in the hope of spending the remains of his days peacefully and with a clean slate without guilt and regret.

The narrative perspective of Remains of the Day, in which western and Japanese influences on the novel are combined, depicts the development and change in Stevens’s acceptance of ageing. When Stevens’s father becomes ill in the beginning of the novel, Stevens mentions that his father is seventy-two and cannot work as a butler anymore (98). Assuming that Stevens’s father must have been, approximately, eighteen when his son was born, Stevens, in the heyday of Darlington Hall, is probably in his early fifties. When Stevens meets Miss Kenton towards the end of the novel, twenty years have passed since Miss Kenton left Darlington Hall, which implies that Stevens narrates his story around the age of seventy. Apart from that, he is referred to as an “old chap”, “old man” and “old boy” by Dr Carlisle, a doctor from Little Compton, Cornwall and Stevens may, therefore, be regarded as an elderly man, though he refrains from defining himself in that manner throughout most of the novel.
Stevens’s attitude towards youth and advanced age depicts the difficulties of both, but the celebration of tradition in the novel implies that true dignity comes with years. In the portrayal of the characters, Stevens generally points out their youth or advanced age. Miss Kenton, for example, is referred to as “childish” (60), “inexperienced” (83) and that she is “in spite of her youth” a proper housekeeper (57). Miss Kenton cannot be that much younger than Stevens, yet “youth” is almost a term of abuse in his vocabulary. The elderly are not depicted positively either, which becomes clear when Stevens refers to Lord Darlington as the following: “His frame […] has become alarmingly thin […], his hair prematurely white, his face strained and haggard” (207). Steven says to Miss Kenton later on that this was “most tragic to see” (247). Stevens depicts youth and advanced age negatively, but emphasizes the importance of tradition as though that entails dignity. Stevens’s obsessive interest in tradition is accompanied by archaic language as he uses words such as “bantering”, “motoring”, “retiring” and puts modern expressions between brackets as if he is unfamiliar with them, such as “beating about the bush”, “under wraps” and “foot the bill for gas”. Moreover, he emphasizes that he has to turn on an “electric light” (49), drives in a vintage Ford, wears “a lounge suit, passed on to [him] in 1931 or 1932 by Sir Edward Blair” (11) and examines an atlas by Jane Symons which was “written during the thirties”, but, luckily, “much of it would still be up to date” (11). Stevens appears to be a character from a different era who passively rebels against new influences, such as American expressions and holds on to the tradition by archaic language and old-fashioned clothes. Stevens is, moreover, a butler, a profession which belongs to another era that nowadays only appears to exist in old movies and novels. Although he states otherwise, Stevens works according to the notions of the Hayes Society, which only accepts butlers of “‘only the very first rank’” (32) and “‘the most crucial criterion is that the applicant be possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position. No applicant will satisfy requirements, whatever his level of accomplishments otherwise, if seen to fall short in
this respect”’ (33). Throughout the novel, Stevens discusses his views on dignity and Stevens’s father is, according to Stevens “the embodiment of ‘dignity’” (35). Stevens states that he is not in favour of the Hayes Society, as they “did not regard the houses of businessmen or the ‘newly rich’ as ‘distinguished’” (33), but clearly he cannot state differently as he is employed by Mr Farraday, who certainly classifies as such a master. Stevens, nonetheless, praises the tradition of the Hayes Society and almost appears to be part of his father’s dignified generation in his appearance and use of language. Advanced age or tradition, in this sense, seems to provide dignity and status. The profession of a butler is connected by Stevens to Englishness (44) and it could therefore be argued that dignity is, according to Stevens, typically English. In Japanese culture, however, dignity is also important, especially in the final phases of life.\(^\text{11}\) The theme of dignity can therefore not be defined as typically Japanese or western, but rather a mixture of both cultures, which may be due to Ishiguro’s Japanese-British background.

Stevens’s narrative portrays the examination of his life and, eventually, the acceptance of ageing. The need to look back, examine and analyse life is, according to Moore, a typically western concept, yet the acceptance of life as it is can be determined as an idea embedded in Japanese culture (Moore 291).\(^\text{12}\) Throughout the novel, Stevens is looking back on his life, thus relying on his memory. This occasionally leads to a fragmented and incoherent narrative due to the abundant use of “I recall”, but also in statements such as “However, let me return to my original thread” (20), “But let me return to [the earlier subject]” (31), “It is very possible [that] I have now forgotten” (59) and “quite probably I said nothing very definite” (emphasis added, 4). In the beginning of Stevens’s narrative, he has trouble accepting his advancing age,

\(^{11}\) Nihon Songenshi Kyōkai (Japanese Society for Dying with Dignity), formerly Anrakushi Kyōkai (Euthanasia Society), is founded in 1976 by doctors, lawyers and academics. See also: Coulmas 112.

\(^{12}\) Moore states also that the West “has had comparable attitudes and points of view […] The Japanese views are different, yes, but not unintelligible” (Moore 291).
which he conceals in his flawed memory. Stevens’s views towards the future are represented in the interpretation of Miss Kenton’s letter, as he argues that:

It does at times reveal a certain despair over her present situation […] she writes: ‘I have no idea how I shall usefully fill the remainder of my life […] The rest of my life stretches out as an emptiness before me’ (51).

At the end of the novel, however, this memory appears incorrect as Miss Kenton denies that these sentences are hers, therefore implying that they are the product of Stevens’s imagination, which suggests a sense of despair and fear for his present situation as well as for the future. Thus, Stevens’s incorrect memory of Miss Kenton’s letter portrays Stevens’s concealment of personal emotions. Towards the end of the novel, however, Stevens refrains from concealing his personal emotions and comments on his renewed attitude towards the end of life as he chats with an elderly man at the pier. As Stevens contemplates the past, the man says to him:

‘Don’t keep looking back all the time, you’re bound to get depressed […] We’ve all got to put our feet up at some point […] you’ve got to keep looking forward […] You’ve got to enjoy yourself. The evening’s the best part of the day. You’ve done your day’s work. Now you can put your feet up and enjoy it.’ (256).

Stevens agrees and decides to “cease looking back so much” and “adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day” (256). Instead of pretending that his personal future prospective is Miss Kenton’s, Stevens finally admits to his advancing age and decides to look towards the future. Stevens’s narration becomes more reliable towards the end, as his statements become less contradictory, which suggests an increase of acceptance, as concealment appears to be unnecessary. In his book *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, Nakamura writes about the emphasis on benevolence in Japanese culture, an influence from
Japanese Buddhism, that stresses the importance of harmony in society, love for others, but also the care for body and mind (Nakamura 381). Stevens, in that sense, creates interior harmony and tranquillity by accepting his past and fate in life. Nakamura also states that: “The tendency of the Japanese to accept the facts of life manifests itself especially in the form of acceptance and high esteem for man’s natural dispositions” (Nakamura 380). It can therefore be argued that ageing, or life in general, according to Japanese culture, should be accepted as a fact; a notion which can be found in Remains of the Day.

The portrayal of the ageing Stevens senior represents the gradual acceptance of ageing as a fact of life as well. The development of Stevens’s father in accepting his advanced years indicates the development Stevens will go through. Stevens’s father continues to work until his death and struggles with the acceptance of ageing, as it prevents him from doing his job as a butler. It is clear that father’s prime is behind him. He is to blame for errors in his work, for example when Miss Kenton observed “a large drop on the end of his nose dangling over the soup bowls” (62), which draws a comical yet sad image of Stevens’s father who, clearly, is unable to execute his butler duties. Stevens’s father, however, does not accept his fate and is determined to continue his duties, which is clearly illustrated by the fact that he obsessively examines the steps over which he fell in the hope of preventing another error (66, 70). After Stevens cuts back his father’s duties, father’s attitude changes and he appears to enjoy his new, less demanding, work and Stevens describes “an astonishing change seemed to come over my father […] his face lost much of the sunken look of recent times, and he went about his work with […] youthful vigour” (81). When father is on his deathbed, he expresses with uncharacteristic warmth to Stevens: “‘I hope I’ve been a good father to you.’ […] ‘I’m proud of you. A good son. I hope I’ve been a good father to you. I suppose I haven’t’” (101). His impending death changes father’s attitude towards life, as his focus is now on his role as a father, rather than his qualities as a butler. Samarel writes that the awareness of impending
death activates people to bring closure to relationships and reflect upon life (90), which can also be seen in the development of Stevens’s father, who expresses his emotions to his son and reflects that he was probably not a good father to him. Stevens and his father live in a similar room, which is compared to a prison cell by Stevens and Miss Kenton (67, 174), but their lives depict a comparable development and change in the acceptance of ageing and life as well. Stevens embarks on his journey in the hope to find a solution to his errors of late and eventually shifts his focus in life from work to his love for Miss Kenton, which he expresses at the end of the novel. The denial of age, the determination to continue to work and the sudden expression of love and reflection on life are depicted in both Stevens and his father’s life.

Stevens’s acceptance of ageing, as reflected in the narrative perspective and the portrayal of Stevens senior, is also depicted in the metaphor of the journey. Stevens’s journey through the English countryside on his way to his meeting with Miss Kenton is the common thread throughout the novel. Stevens’s memories and reflections are evoked by this journey, as a “traveller’s physical presence at a site will often be the spur for memories, reflections and imaginings that lead far away from their immediate surroundings” (Thompson 112). The journey is a metaphor for Stevens’s interior “journey”, as Stevens is literally and figuratively going, as he comments: “beyond all previous boundaries” (24). It is the acceptance of ageing that is represented in the road trip, which is symbolized by several signposts that indicate this process. In the beginning of his journey Stevens encounters an old man who sits outside and asks Stevens: “‘Just wondering, sir, […] how fit your legs were […] I can see you’re in good shape for your age, sir’” (24). He tells Stevens to go up the hill to look at the spectacular view, but Stevens feels offended by this suggestion and to “demonstrate just how foolish his insinuation has been”, he sets off up the footpath (26). Stevens takes the “challenge” and cannot help but emphasize that “it failed to cause [him] any real difficulty” (26), yet the man’s
insinuation makes Stevens realize that he is seen as elderly. During this stage of the journey, clearly, Stevens has not accepted his advancing age, but it has for the first time come to his attention. Ironically, though, Stevens has walked up a hill, which resembles an action previous to the English idiom “to be over the hill”, an indication of Stevens’s impending death.

Another signpost in the acceptance of the process of growing older occurs when Stevens almost runs over a hen, Nellie, which is “crossing her path in the most leisurely manner” (71). Until this moment, Stevens has referred to his trip as merely professional (10). However, after his encounter with the hen, Stevens mentions that he is “‘just motoring for the pleasure of it’” (72). He continues his journey in “slow speed” and “in very good spirits” (72), which may indicate, as Stevens admits for the first time in his life, that he commences to spend his life leisurely, a notion also to be found in the table in Chapter One13, where the Japanese mention that, as they reach old age, they hope to spend their time leisurely (Coulmas 29). It can be argued, therefore, that Stevens’s encounter with the hen causes the discovery of the pleasures of retirement, instead of rejecting everything that is unrelated to his profession in life, a development similar to his father’s. Yet he still refrains to acknowledge his advanced age, which becomes clear when Stevens enjoys a cup of tea at an establishment towards the end of the novel. When he describes his company: “two elderly ladies […] and a man – perhaps a retired farmer –” (141), he also comments that “surprisingly few of the inhabitants of Taunton seem to wish to avail themselves of it”, but truth is, generally, that only retired people, or elderly like Stevens, have time to sit at an establishment during the day since most people are committed to work.

To attain resignation, Stevens needs to face and accept his past by acknowledging his guilt and regret for his contributions to the war and his unexpressed love for Miss Kenton. Moore writes that anything other than immediate experience is, to the Japanese, “unnatural,

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13 See Figure 2: “Lifestyle changes, Japan”, page 17.
impractical, and a distortion, a getting away from – a deliberate refusal to face – things as they actually are” (Moore 289). Stevens faces and expresses his guilt and regret as he realizes that time has passed and he has little time left before death, a development which may be influenced by Japanese culture. The theme of guilt is passively present throughout the novel, as Stevens struggles with his contribution to the war. It is the journey which is the spur for memories and reflections upon his feelings of guilt, which becomes evident when Stevens encounters the man who repairs the Ford and asks him whether he worked for Lord Darlington, a fact Stevens denies. After this encounter, Stevens drives to a pond and revives a memory where he denies his employment by Lord Darlington to visitors of Mr Farraday. About this memory, Stevens states that he is not ashamed of his past, but chose to “tell white lies […] as the simplest means of avoiding unpleasantness”. Stevens remains proud of his career and comments that “Lord Darlington was a gentleman of great moral stature” (132). Later on in the novel, however, Stevens admits that Lord Darlington was “foolish”, but it was “he and he alone who weighed up evidence and judged it best to proceed in the way he did” and Stevens did nothing more than confine himself “to affairs within my own professional realm” (211). Stevens comments that “it is quite illogical that I should feel any regret or shame on my own account” (211). The emphasis on his plea of innocence, however, suggests Stevens’s interior struggle as though he attempts to convince himself of a clean slate. It is only towards the end of the novel that Stevens truly faces his feelings of guilt and regret, which becomes clear when he says that Lord Darlington chose the wrong path in life, but at least believed it to be good. Stevens, on the other hand, says that:

I cannot even claim that. […] All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that? (256).
Stevens finally realizes that he has been blind in following Lord Darlington, assuming that his work would be good and moral without taking matters into his own hands – that, Stevens suggests, is really foolish. After this realization, Stevens decides to choose his own path in life and “make the best of what remains of my day” (256). He comments, moreover, that he should stop looking back, but focus on the actuality of life (256-7), a notion described by Charles A. Moore and Nakamura as typically Japanese. It is ageing, therefore, that forces Stevens’s acceptance of the past as he is now determined to enjoy the evening of life without feelings of regret and guilt. At the very end of the novel, Stevens prepares to return to Mr Farraday with “renewed effort”, which implies an acceptance of the past and positive outlook towards the future.

It is also the notion of impending death, or the awareness of limited time on earth that forces people to bring relationships to closure (Samarel 90), which can be seen in the meeting between Miss Kenton and Stevens towards the end of the novel. Stevens asks Miss Kenton, indirectly, whether she loves her husband or not (250): a last attempt to try to live the life he has never had together with Miss Kenton. It is, however, too late, as Miss Kenton says: “After all, there’s no turning back the clock now. One can’t be forever dwelling on what might have been” (251). This moment creates the turning point in Stevens’s attitude, as he, just like his father, suddenly is able to feel a lot of emotions. He states: “[these words] were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed –why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking” (252). Miss Kenton’s words show that time has passed by, that Stevens has grown older and that the greatest part of life is behind them. After Miss Kenton’s statement, Stevens says to her: “We must each of us, as you point out, be grateful for what we do have” (252), which suggests that Stevens accepts the past and is willing to look towards the future. Stevens is unable to turn back the clock and change the course of his career or relationship with Miss Kenton, but his realization of his advanced age makes him
even more willing to accept life as it is and enjoy the remaining bits of it. The acceptance of fate, an important aspect of Japanese thought, probably influenced by Ishiguro’s heritage, becomes evident in Stevens’s resignation which gives the novel a positive ending, which, however, also contains hints of melancholy, as Stevens continues the remains of his days without Miss Kenton.
Chapter 4: The Acceptance of Impending Death

Kathy H., the protagonist of *Never Let Me Go*, is only thirty-one years old; not exactly an elderly person like Stevens or Ono. However, Kathy H. and her friends Tommy D. and Ruth are not regular persons: they are clones created to donate their vital organs at a young age, which means that they die after their final donation around thirty. Their ageing is, therefore, not particularly related to old age, yet the experience of their final phase in life can be compared to the effects as described by Erik H. Erikson’s “mature age”. When Kathy H. tells the account of her life at thirty-one, she is looking for acceptance, longing for a slower pace in life, reminiscing the past and reflecting in her narration, all of which are similar to the psychological effects of the final stage in life (Erikson *Vital Involvement* 288). Kathy H. comments that she and her friends have always known their fate (81) and in *Never Let Me Go* it is therefore not specifically biological ageing, but rather the awareness of the approach of the end of their lives which serves as the foundation upon which other themes are built.

Ageing in this novel is depicted drastically differently from *Artist of the Floating World* or *Remains of the Day*, as Kathy and her friends die around thirty, but the development of the attitude towards ageing can be compared to that of Ono and Stevens in the main characters’ acceptance of their impending death, which is represented in the narrative perspective and themes such as love and art.

Kathy’s ageing process is depicted in the first-person narration, which serves as a literary device to portray her reminiscing. When Kathy is Ruth’s carer, they find themselves at a recovery centre which has walls of white tiles. These tiles are so impeccably clean that they resemble mirrors and Kathy says: “[Y]ou don’t exactly see yourself reflected back loads of times [in the tiles], but you almost think you do” (17), which suggests Kathy’s frustration with reflection; she is unable to see the past clearly. Ruth and Kathy are at a place in their
lives where they reflect upon themselves, as the two girls are at the end of their lives; Ruth is a donor and Kathy a carer. Their upcoming death literally and metaphorically causes their presence in this reflective place. Kathy lives up to this metaphor and reflects upon her life throughout her narrative. This can be seen in sentences such as “[l]ooking back now” (16), “[m]y own memory of it is that” (20, 21) and “I shouldn’t look back so much. But […] I just stopped resisting” (5). Memory is an essential part of Kathy’s narration and “remembering represents a process of reflection upon [the past]” (Whitehead 52). Kathy says: “The memories I value most […]. Once I’m able to have a quieter life […] I’ll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that’ll be something no one can take away” (280-81). From this quotation it becomes clear that Kathy longs for “a quieter life”, which resembles retirement. Since she is at the end of her life, Kathy’s narration consists of memories, as there is no future left. The narrative perspective is therefore an expression of reflection and memories, similar to that of an elderly person, who is also aware of the approach of death (Erikson et al. 288).

Kathy’s reminiscing is less explicitly unreliable than Stevens’s or Ono’s (D’Hoker 164), which may be an indication that Kathy reflects upon her life without the need to conceal or block memories. There are instances when Kathy’s narration appears unreliable, for example when Kathy mentions that she does not want to boast, before starting to boast immediately and then apologizing for doing so. This implies a need to portray herself positively, but a reluctance to do so in an obvious way. Kathy talks about her childhood with Tommy and about the way she used to protect him from others, but she also reveals that she felt a certain repulsion for him. Furthermore, she criticizes Ruth for imitating American television shows at the Cottages, while later on Kathy is touching shoulders to create an intimate sphere – exactly like the American actors. Apart from these deviations, however, Kathy’s narration seems quite straight-forward throughout the novel. It can be argued that Kathy, unlike Stevens and Ono, has nothing to hide from her past, such as contribution to the
war, and may therefore be free of regret, as after all, her life has been planned out from birth to death.

*Never Let Me Go* is often described as a love story, referring to the love triangle between Kathy, Tommy and Ruth, a theme brought to the forefront by the ageing of the characters. Throughout the novel, Kathy emphasizes her special relationship with Tommy. It is therefore startling when Ruth eventually begins a relationship with Tommy which lasts until the end of their stay at the Cottages. Kathy is protective and attentive towards their relationship and never appropriates Tommy nor unveils her personal romantic feelings. This changes, however, when Ruth is close to “completing” – her final donation which causes her death.

That people who approach death sometimes turn their lives around was explained by hospice nurse Ada Meerse in her guest-lecture about nursing the dying. Meerse used the example of a young man who hastily started a charity after he heard that he would die soon. The knowledge of oncoming death forces a movement in people’s minds, to ask for forgiveness or pursue a long-cherished wish (Meerse). Nelda Samarel confirms this in her article on the process of dying, as she argues that people with an awareness of their oncoming death “allows the patient to complete the necessary tasks associated with dying, such as bringing relationships to close, reflecting on his or her life, and coping with psychological problems such as fears and regrets” (Samarel 90). Close to her death, Ruth feels a sudden need to come clean with her past. She asks Kathy to forgive her for keeping Tommy away from her and gives the new couple the address of Madame, their only way to defer their donations if they are able to prove true love for each other. It is therefore Ruth’s upcoming death which marks the beginning of Kathy and Tommy’s romantic relationship. Premature ageing and consequently premature death create a change of mind within Ruth which enables the theme of love to develop itself. Kathy also states: “I might have to act on [a lot of things]
pretty soon or else let them go forever” (209), which can also be seen as the cause for Kathy’s relationship with Tommy; if she does not involve in this romance soon, she might not be able to experience it. The impending deaths of the characters move certain events forward in their lives, such as Ruth’s remorse and the pursuit and experience of true love. Love is therefore connected to their inevitable fates and grows in importance because time is limited. It also depicts that characters try to come clean with their past and gain resignation before their deaths.

Kathy’s resignation and acceptance of the deaths portray her personal acceptance of her own impending death. As opposed to Ono and Stevens, Kathy accepts her oncoming death from the beginning onwards and the notion of acceptance is, therefore, present throughout the novel. After Tommy’s completion, Kathy drives to a field and recalls her youth and the deaths of Ruth and Tommy by looking at pieces of rubbish tangled in the wires of a fence, which represents Ruth’s description of clones, as she says: “We’re modelled from trash. […] If you want to look for possibles […] look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that’s where you’ll find where we came from” (emphasis original, 164). Kathy says: “All along the fence […], all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled” (282), which implies that the “strange” and “torn” rubbish, in other words, the clones, are stuck to their fates and will eventually be torn to pieces. Their fate is inevitable and Kathy expresses a sense of sadness in her fantasy of seeing Tommy again, but says: “The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn’t let it” (282), as though unwilling to admit to her grief. Kathy says that “the tears rolled down my face, [but] I wasn’t sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be” (282). Kathy experiences sadness, though she is “not out of control” or even “sobbing”, but merely waits a moment for her sadness to pass before she goes back to her daily routine. This quotation also portrays the inevitability of her fate, since she goes wherever she is supposed to be, without a
free will. Kathy refrains from feelings of anger and despair towards the unfair fate of her
friends, but accepts it as a fact of life. Kathy expresses a similar acceptance of her own fate. It
is the reflection of life and her memories that provide comfort to Kathy as she mentions that
all she needs are her memories and is even looking forward to it, as she says: “The memories I
value the most […] that’ll be something no one can take away […] on reflection, I’m glad
that’s the way it’ll be” (280-1). Kathy’s ageing and, consequently, reflection on life, give her
consolation and strength to accept her fate.

Tommy’s acceptance of his impending death is different from that of Kathy and can
be compared to the development and change in the acceptance of ageing of Stevens and Ono.
Kathy seems to accept her fate throughout the novel, while Tommy experiences difficulties
with the future prospective. In the beginning of the novel it is already indicated that Tommy is
Hailsham’s pariah, as he gets bullied and struggles with his lack of creativity and bad temper.
Later on in life, Tommy actively attempts to attain a deferral from his donations by drawing
animals. Though Ruth discovers the address of Madame (the lady who appears to select art
pieces for the Gallery, a place where, the characters believe, the best pieces of art from
student were exhibited), she eventually refrains from using it for her own purposes and gives
it to Kathy and Tommy. Tommy, however, tries to extend his and Kathy’s lives through his
creativity. When Miss Emily tells the couple that deferrals are non-existent, Tommy, unlike
Kathy, responds quite emotionally, and screams with frustration (268). After this incident,
Kathy remarks that Tommy has always been different from the others and implies that
Tommy’s foul temper during childhood indicates that he has always known, or rather
understood what the future held for clones like themselves, unlike the other students (270).
After Tommy finds out about the non-existence of the deferrals, he changes his attitude
towards the future. This can be compared to Stevens and his father’s change of mind, as they
also fight their fate in denying their ageing, but eventually accept their new phase in life by
enjoying its pleasures. Tommy continues, for example, to paint; now without utilitarian purposes but merely for leisure. He also tells Kathy that he no longer wants her as his carer, as he enters another phase in life which he intends to experience on his own (275-6). His focus shifts from life to death as he becomes more focused on his donations and eventually says to Kathy: “The donors will all donate, just the same, and then they’ll complete” (276). The tone in this comment almost appears indifferent, since he says “just the same”, and Tommy does not display frustration or anger anymore, but an acceptance of his future: death. The fact that Tommy struggles with his fate but eventually accepts it, separates him from the other students, but this development resembles the change in attitude of Ono and Stevens who both, after some resistance, accept their lot in life. Art, or creativity, in this sense, portrays Tommy’s development in the process of accepting his impending death.

The theme of art also evokes a tendency to be nostalgic in the novel, in which ageing plays a significant role. Apart from Tommy, other students look at art as a means to reminisce about the past. Many studies have found that ageing is largely a personal experience (Steverink 365). It can therefore be argued that to experience the process of ageing, one must have an individual identity, which students of Hailsham, according to outsiders, lack and they would therefore not suffer from ageing. The ultimate expression of identity, art, was taught at Hailsham, as Miss Emily explains to Tommy and Kathy at the end of the novel, merely to prove that the students had souls at all (emphasis original, 255). Besides, the absence of surnames indicates the irrelevance of their personas as well, just as their purpose in life; they only exist to serve others. All students of Hailsham are treated with disregard, which becomes clear when Madame refers to them as “poor creatures” (267) and Miss Emily says that she has felt “such revulsion” and that “[w]e’re [the guardians] all afraid of you” (emphasis original, 264). Although the characters of Never Let Me Go certainly have distinct personalities, they are not viewed by outsiders as capable of having an identity. Throughout the novel, art
gradually changes from a custom to receive tokens for the Sales and Exchanges (monthly events which resemble flea markets) to an expression of nostalgia. It is the process of ageing which changes art. Art invokes their feelings of nostalgia and a longing for dignity. These feelings become more poignant as it is all that Hailsham students have left and gives them consolation in accepting their fates.

The past, in Kathy and her peers’ view, is precious and serves as an escape for their dismal present. By means of their collections, Judy Bridgewater’s tape and their essays, students of Hailsham, close to their deaths, invoke feelings of nostalgia. When Kathy is taking care of a donor, she realizes that he wants to “not just hear about Hailsham, but to remember Hailsham” (5). Even though her patient did not attend Hailsham himself, the place functions as an idyll to drift off to. Kathy and her friends do the same, but through their personally created “collections”. The collections are wooden chests in which students have to keep their possessions acquired in the Sales or Exchanges. To students, this is a way to give themselves an identity, as it is one of the few personal possessions they own. Kathy keeps her collection with her until the end and, although she hesitantly throws her collection away, Ruth also stresses the importance of her collection (129). To Hailsham students, their collections serve as objects to remember the past. Another example of art invoking nostalgia, is Kathy’s tape by Judy Bridgewater about which Kathy says: “Even then [at the Cottages], it was mainly a nostalgia thing, and today, if I happen to get the tape out and look at it, it brings back memories of that afternoon in Norfolk every bit as much as it does our Hailsham days” (171). Kathy also wishes to play the tape in the background when she and Ruth reminisce about Hailsham, which implies that the tape is appreciated for bringing back memories.

Furthermore, another piece of creativity, the essay, serves the same purpose. As a last task of Hailsham, students need to write an essay whilst at the Cottages. Even though the essay does not need to be finished, Kathy says: “I’ve even toyed with the idea of going back and working
on [the essay], once I’m not a carer any more and I’ve got the time […] It’s just a bit of
nostalgia to pass the time” (114). Writing the essay is not for creative purposes, but merely to
reminisce and feel nostalgic when Kathy “retires”. Due to their premature death, these
expressions of art (the collections, tape and essays) grow in importance as the need for
nostalgia increases. The future of these clones lies in their memories of which their art pieces
function as means to reminisce about the past. In his paper about ageing and identity, Bryan S.
Turner writes about aged people’s need to store personal histories, for example in
photographs and videos (251). Susan Sontag states that: “[P]hotographs actively promote
nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art […] All photographs are memento
mori” (Sontag 15). This quotation indicates that the storing of pieces of art, which serve in the
novel as means to invoke feelings of nostalgia or reminisce about the past, can be compared to
the storing of personal histories by elderly people. Though the characters in the novel convey
a sense of acceptance, their emphasis on memories suggests that they live without a future and
their pieces of art are reminders of their impending deaths, which gives a hint of melancholy
or sadness to the ending as well.
Conclusion

From my analysis it can be concluded that the influence of Ishiguro’s mixed heritage is prominent throughout his novels in his portrayal of the development of the characters’ attitude towards ageing. Even though acceptance is a common phenomenon in “mature age”, the emphasis on acceptance is embedded in Japanese culture, which is illustrated in all three of the novels. The novels are, however, also influenced by western conceptions of ageing in, for example, the theme of dignity. Other themes, such as nationality, guilt, regret, love and art, increase in importance due to ageing. The attitudes of the main characters towards ageing is influenced by nationality and depicted in their acceptance of ageing and impending death.

From *Artist of the Floating World* I conclude that the Japanese perceptions of ageing are prominent in the portrayal of Ono and the younger generation. The chasm between the two generations of Ono and his younger family members depicts the Japanese situation before and after World War II. Ono stresses the importance of tradition, which also becomes clear in the depiction of architecture and the city. Ono eventually accepts the change in Japan and the new attitude towards ageing, although nothing in particular has changed throughout the novel except his own views. From this I conclude that, although Ono is an old man he is able to resign to his fate. The novel portrays an atmosphere of melancholy, as Ono’s life has, for the greatest part, passed and throughout most of the novel he expresses a sense of dissatisfaction with his past and present life. The fact that he is eventually able to look towards the future in good spirit, demonstrates that he accepts his life and fate and might even be looking forward to the future. With this novel, Ishiguro appears to expresses the hopeful notion that, although life seems miserable or even close to its end, one should accept the past and look forward to the future as it may hold something beautiful, a conclusion that truly mixes Japanese (acceptance) and western perceptions (life will become better) of life.
*Remains of the Day* portrays a similarly hopeful message, but also has a melancholic and sad feel to it. Stevens accepts his fate and looks forward to the future, to continue his work for Mr Farraday, yet his acceptance is ambiguous. He loses Miss Kenton and states that he lacked a certain control over his life, as he mentions that he did not even make his own mistakes, but followed Lord Darlington’s. Stevens, therefore, appears to be as unhappy as he was in the beginning of the novel. It is, however, the closure of his past and the acceptance of his fate which enables him to take a positive outlook towards the future. With this novel, I have demonstrated Ishiguro’s hopeful notion of acceptance and resignation in ageing.

My analysis of Kathy and Tommy in *Never Let Me Go* demonstrates the difference between acceptance and resignation. Kathy accepts her fate throughout the novel, but continues to look back. At the end of the novel she states that her future consists of the memories of Tommy, Ruth and Hailsham, or, in other words, the past. It can therefore be concluded that Kathy acquiesces in her fate, but does not particularly accept the future, as there is none. Resignation, in this sense, has a sadder feel to it than acceptance. Tommy’s development in the acceptance of impending death portrays acceptance and resignation. Tommy struggles with his fate and eventually gains resignation. However, Tommy also accepts the future, which can be seen in his art. At first he draws for utilitarian reasons, but eventually for the mere pleasure of it. Tommy eventually enjoys life, *at that moment*, and not through memories like Kathy H. Tommy, therefore, lives life in its actuality, while Kathy lives in the past. From the analysis of this novel I conclude that the impending death of the characters creates similar psychological effects as Erikson’s “mature age” and also the hopeful message of making the best of what the remains of life, no matter how miserable it may be.

This paper portrays parts of the psychological and sociological process of ageing, as demonstrated in the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro. This paper may give a new interpretation to
Ishiguro’s novels, which connects the novels, but also the themes in them. Although Jago Morrison’s book on ageing in literature will be published in 2014 by Routledge, more academic research is needed in this neglected area of literature.
Works Cited


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Appendix

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