

The Protagonist's Hidden Conflicts in *A Pale View of Hills*

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Introduction

A Pale View of Hills, published in 1982, is the first novel written by Kazuo Ishiguro (1954-). This research paper examines how Ishiguro depicts the protagonist's thoughts as he hides the protagonist's guilty conscience in the layers of ambiguity. The heroine, Etsuko, who is a middle-aged Japanese woman, lives in the country of England. She has two daughters, Keiko and Niki. She married a Japanese man, Jiro Oagata, however, she divorced him 7 years after Keiko was born. Then, she remarried, this time with an English man, Sheringham, and after they moved to England Etsuko gave birth to Niki. Unfortunately, she lost her first daughter, Keiko, who committed suicide in England. After Keiko's death, Niki came to her mother's house to encourage her. During Niki's five-day stay, Etsuko remembered when she was pregnant with Keiko in Nagasaki.

The story is constructed in two parts; Part One: Chapters 1-6; and Part Two: Chapters 7-11. In Part One the past in Nagasaki alternates with the present in England, while Part Two is mostly narrated in the past tense, with only the final chapter, that is, Chapter 11, narrated in the present tense. The story is a first-person narration by Etsuko. Her guilty conscience and anxiety are unconsciously revealed against her more superficial feelings which she reveals through this first-person narrative. Etsuko has a guilty conscience about Keiko's suicide because she thinks that Keiko hanged herself because of trouble with her mother. Etsuko was also anxious about becoming a mother before giving birth to Keiko. This essay will consider Etsuko's deeper thoughts as they are revealed through relationships with the other characters in the story.

Etsuko's happiness and conflicts in the past

Firstly, we look at Etsuko's anxiety at becoming a mother from her recollections of Nagasaki. She looked back at the parent-child relationship of Sachiko and Mariko who moved to the cottage near Etsuko's apartment during the time she was pregnant with Keiko. When Etsuko first talked with Mariko, she recognized that "[t]he child's response had, it is true, upset me somewhat; for in those days, such small things were capable of arousing in me every kind of misgiving about motherhood" (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 17). However, Etsuko recalls that she talked about her hope and happiness at having a child. Before Keiko's birth, Etsuko told her friend, Mrs Fujiwara, about her environment, saying

that “I’ve never been happier” (24) and “I’m not unhappy in the least” (77). But Mrs Fujiwara looks into Etsuko’s anxieties through their conversations. After looking at Etsuko “for several seconds” (24) or “for a moment” (77), Mrs Fujiwara said to her “I meant you looked a little — miserable” (24); and “What are you so unhappy about?” (77). Thus, it is obvious that Mrs Fujiwara saw into Etsuko’s uneasiness. Moreover, Etsuko laughs unnaturally in front of Mrs Fujiwara, and she seems to avoid Mrs Fujiwara’s questioning. Therefore, Etsuko hides her emotions and thoughts and kept saying to herself that she was happy. This indicates that Etsuko did not mean to show her feelings of uneasiness or did not want to admit to them. Furthermore, Mrs Fujiwara encourages Etsuko saying about motherhood, “You [Etsuko] must keep your mind on happy things now. Your child. And the future ... Your [Etsuko’s] attitude makes all the difference. A mother can take all the physical care she likes, she needs a positive attitude to bring up a child” (25). However, it is possible that Mrs Fujiwara pressures Etsuko. Mrs Fujiwara talks to Etsuko saying, “Once the child comes [...] you’ll [Etsuko] be delighted, believe me [Mrs Fujiwara]. And you’ll *make a splendid mother*, Etsuko” (italics added) (77). Brian W. Shaffer mentions that besides Mrs Fujiwara, Sachiko also repeats the words “*make a splendid mother*” but their assurances, “fail to allay, and instead only intensify, her [Etsuko’s] fears” (Shaffer, *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* 23). Mrs Fujiwara who already brought up five children is a woman, that is to say, she has a lot of maternal experience. However, ironically, because she lost most of her children in the war, she cannot say she was happy either.

In addition, Etsuko has other anxieties that relate to her husband, Jiro Ogata, and in turn they are related to her anxiety about having a child. When Etsuko thinks back to her past with Jiro, she remembers he always ignored her and never felt concern about her, even though she was pregnant with Keiko. Etsuko mentions Jiro’s personality, which was dishonest and irresponsible to his family and that was one reason for their divorce. They had divorced when Keiko was seven years old, although Etsuko does not give any clear reason for the divorce. Therefore, we can suppose that during that time, their relation would not have been good and Etsuko simply endures life with Jiro. This quotation is the conversation between Etsuko and Ogata-san, her father-in-law.

miJiro is a good husband to you [Etsuko], I [Ogata-san] hope.”

“Of course. I [Etsuko] couldn’t be happier.”

“And the child will make you [Etsuko] happy.”

“Yes. It couldn’t have happened at a better time. We’re [Etsuko and Jiro] quite settled here now, and Jiro’s work is going well. This is the ideal time for this to have happened.”

“So you’re [Etsuko] happy.”

“Yes, I’m [Etsuko] happy.”

“Good. I’m [Ogata-san] happy for you [Etsuko] both.”(Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 34)

Etsuko said to Ogata-san that she was very happy in her married life with Jiro; however, Etsuko’s positive comments are not borne out, especially when compared with her critical ideas about Jiro’s nature. Moreover, Ogata-san tries to ask Etsuko three times whether she is happy or not, that indicates that Ogata-san did not agree with her answer. Therefore, the relationship between Etsuko and Jiro would not be suitable for having a child and would create or at least add to her anxieties.

Although these anxieties are revealed indirectly in her past memory, Etsuko states clearly her anxiety at having a child in a conversation with Sachiko in a scene in Chapter 7. Etsuko looks back at her memory of the time when she went to Inasa with Sachiko and Mariko, at that time she intended to improve her negative situation by thinking optimistically from that point onward. Etsuko said to Sachiko,

I’ve decided I’m going to be optimistic. I’m determined to have a happy future. [...] it’s only in the last few days I’ve really thought about what it’s going to be like. To have a child, I mean. I don’t feel nearly so afraid now. I’m going to look forward to it. I’m going to be optimistic from now on. (111-112)

Therefore, Etsuko’s words to Mrs Fujiwara and Ogata-san, such as her statements about being, “not unhappy” (77) or “happy” (34), were not actually true. Moreover, because her statements to Sachiko are about the direction of her life, it can be said that she persuaded herself to have a child.

The relationship between Etsuko and her two daughters, Keiko and Niki

Etsuko causes conflicts between her two daughters, Keiko and Niki in the narrative present of the novel. Her first conflict is in her relationship with Keiko. Etsuko recalls that since Keiko had secluded herself in her room, the relationship with her family had been weak. Furthermore everyone felt nervous, and in addition, Keiko often had quarrelled with Niki and Sheringham, her stepfather, when all the family was together. Additionally, Niki did not attend Keiko’s funeral although she felt sad when she heard the news of Keiko’s death. She also says that Keiko did not attend Sheringham’s funeral after her died but while she still was alive. Thus, the family relations after Etsuko’s remarriage were also detrimental to her. Similarly, in the relationship between Etsuko and Keiko, there is not enough communication between them. This too can be seen from Etsuko’s statements. In the beginning of the story, Etsuko mentions that she will not talk about the details of Keiko’s suicide; however, she narrates her terror which she repeats again and again in the scene of Keiko hanging from the ceiling in her room in Manchester. Nevertheless she had

never visited Keiko's room. In short, it is clear that Etsuko suffers from a guilty conscience about Keiko's death. She tells of her regrets and makes excuses about this in Chapter 6;

I feel only regret now for those attitudes I displayed towards Keiko [...] All I succeeded in doing, it would seem, was to ensure that when she finally left — now almost six years ago — she did so severing all her ties with me. But then I never imagined she could so quickly vanish beyond my reach; all I saw was that my daughter, unhappy as she was at home, would find the world outside too much for her. *It was for her own protection I opposed her so vehemently.* (italics added) (88)

Etsuko does not commit herself too much in defending Keiko though she is clearly sensible of her responsibility for Keiko's death. Etsuko tries to understand for herself her attitudes towards Keiko when she was passionately against Keiko, however, she has been afflicted by feelings of her responsibility since Keiko's death.

On the other hand, it cannot be said that Etsuko built a positive relationship with Niki either. In the narrative present scenes, their conversations come to pass several times but there are emotional gaps between Etsuko and Niki. Etsuko tells Niki that she should live as she likes, yet Etsuko interferes in Niki's future. When Niki goes back to London in Chapter 11, Etsuko does not take any action one way or another toward Niki, although she wants to go to the station to see Niki off. Etsuko is satisfied to communicate with Niki by letters because Niki tells her about her London life. On the other hand, they do not talk to each other much face to face, that is to say, their communication through actions is tenuously held. We can assume that Niki has never relaxed during her stay with Etsuko because she gets called by her friends in London many times and is always reading the newspaper. Besides, Niki requests a room change being afraid of Keiko's room, and tells that she did not sleep well during her five-day stay, that is to say, she has never rested comfortably in Etsuko's house.

Therefore, neither relationship between Etsuko and her daughters is smooth. Moreover, Etsuko regrets Keiko's suicide, but she has never reflected on that in order to make an improvement in her relationship with Niki.

The relationship with Keiko's suicide and Etsuko's past memory

Etsuko's guilty conscience toward Keiko's death is related with her past memory. Etsuko recalls topics of death three times during remembrances of life in Nagasaki. Her first worry refers to the incident of successive murders of children in Nagasaki. Secondly, Sachiko tells Etsuko the story of a woman who committed suicide after killing her baby in a river. Then, Etsuko remembers the scene wherein Sachiko was killing Mariko's kittens in a river. Hirai Kyoko indicates that Etsuko's guilty conscience drives Keiko to commit

suicide, and makes a series of images of infanticides, which may be influenced and twisted by the layers of her past memory (Hirai, *Kazuo Ishiguro: Kyoukai no nai Sekai* 27). Keiko's suicide casts a shadow on Etsuko's memory. Shafer also states that "Etsuko's narrative of Sachiko's motherhood is a way of talking about her own anxiety, depression, and feelings of inadequacy regarding her then-impending motherhood" (Shaffer, *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* 16). Moreover, Ishiguro says in the interview, "What I intended was this: because it's really Etsuko talking about herself, and possibly that somebody else, Sachiko [...] the meanings that Etsuko imputes to the life of Sachiko are obviously the meanings that are relevant to her (Etsuko's) own life" (Shaffer and Wong, eds. *Conversation with Kazuo Ishiguro* 5). Etsuko seems to take similar actions as Sachiko does in the story. Etsuko and Sachiko do not fulfill the role of mother and ignore their daughters' happiness. Sachiko does not give up her desire to go to America with Frank, who is an untrustworthy American; though she says that she always thinks about Mariko's future. Etsuko also decides to go to England seven years later although she says that she "always kept Keiko's interests very much at heart" (91); however, Etsuko also says to Niki, "I knew all along she [Keiko] wouldn't be happy over here" (176). It is clear that she did not think of Keiko's happiness because Keiko did not adopt to her new family and environment, then eventually she killed herself. When Sachiko is killing Mariko's kittens in the river, Etsuko overlaps her own view with Sachiko's. Etsuko sees herself in Sachiko's attitudes in which she gives her own interests priority over her daughter Mariko. Moreover, when Etsuko remembers that she talked to Mariko about going to America, she may mix it with another memory in which she might be talking with Keiko.

"In any case ... if you [Mariko] don't like it over there, *we* can always come back."

This time she [Mariko] looked up at me [Etsuko] questioningly.

"Yes, I [Etsuko] promise ... if you [Mariko] don't like it over there, *we'll* come straight back. But *we* have to try it and see if *we* like it there. I'm [Etsuko] sure *we will*" (italics added) (173).

Etsuko oddly repeats *we* five times. She may have had this conversation with Keiko when she decided to go to England. At any rate, it is possible that Etsuko looks at Mariko as Keiko when she recalls the scene.

In Chapter 11, Etsuko tells Niki about her memory of the landscape as seen from Inasa in Nagasaki. Again she confuses herself in her memory.

"Oh, there was nothing special about it. I was just remembering it, that's all. *Keiko was happy that day. We rode on the cable-cars.*" I gave a laugh and turned to Niki. "No, there was nothing special about it. It's just a happy memory, that's

all.” (italics added) (182)

Etsuko said, “Keiko was happy that day” (182), however, Keiko was not born at that time and Etsuko was only pregnant with Keiko. Thus, it was only Etsuko’s illusion. In this way, Keiko’s suicide and Etsuko’s past memory are greatly mixed and Etsuko distorts the past as if she were following Sachiko’s way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, not only does Etsuko not appear to clearly understand her own anxieties and conflicts with her children but also does not tell the reason why she decides to go to England where Keiko is not happy and is to commit suicide. She hides her feelings ambiguously and switches the facts, that is to say, her self-deception leaks through the narrative events in this story. There is lingering doubt about whether she convinces herself about Keiko’s suicide or not. Ishiguro does not indicate whether Etsuko can face her anxieties and conflicts and set out in a new direction or not. We can expect both the endings of happiness or tragedy because of this ambiguity. Ishiguro attempts to portray his protagonist’s personality through expressing that Etsuko tries to struggle to overcome her anxieties and conflicts, rather than by depicting stories as either successes or failures. Moreover, this story seems to be more about the real matters of human conflict at the same time that Ishiguro does not depict the details of various problems in human relationships. His accomplishment is largely achieved through this story’s first person narration. Etsuko’s first-person narrative enables the story to be told in an intentionally ambiguous manner because she wants to avoid talking about clear reasons for the negative events in her life, her divorce with Jiro or Keiko’s suicide, and yet, indeed they are revealed through the protagonist’s fluctuating, lingering, guilty conscience in the narrative.

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