Elements of the Dreamlike and the Uncanny in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*

Wojciech Drąg, ***PhD student***
University of Wrocław, Poland
moontauk@gmail.com

Abstract: This essay examines Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* in terms of an uncanny dream narrative. The Booker Prize winner's most puzzling novel – with its frequent departures from realism – conjures up a unique logic combining the elements of the dreamlike and the uncanny. By making reference to certain basic notions of Sigmund Freud's theory of dreams, the first part of the essay exemplifies numerous parallels between the mechanisms operating in the novel and the mechanism of dream work (such as temporal and spatial compression, displacement, wish-fulfilment). The latter part focuses on Freud's notion of the uncanny as prescribed in his 1919 essay and the manifestations of the uncanny in *The Unconsoled*, which include the prevalence of the strangely familiar, the sense of being split, doubled, lost, the instability of identity and the experience of *déjà vu*.

Keywords: déjà vu, dream theory, displacement, wish fulfilment.

This article is a brief study of certain devices by means of which Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* (1995) constructs its highly unconventional narrative. Ishiguro's fourth novel, directly following his most acclaimed work to date – the Booker prize winning *The Remains of the Day* (1989), is widely regarded as his most difficult and disturbing novel. On its publication, *The Unconsoled* was received by critics with a mixture of scepticism, confusion and admiration. Most reviewers were thoroughly baffled by the author's radical departure from the intricately constructed realistic narrative that he had been praised for in his first three novels. The dreamlike verging on surreal atmosphere conjured up in *The Unconsoled* is strikingly different from the hard-boiled realism of *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) or *The Remains of the Day*. This essay will focus on the novel's departures from realism and argue that *The Unconsoled* is structured like an uncanny dream narrative. Occasional reference shall be made to some of the fundamental tenets of Sigmund Freud's dream theory espoused in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and his 1919 essay entitled "The

Uncanny". A study of the elements of the uncanny in Ishiguro's novels has not, to the best of my knowledge, ever been undertaken before.

The Unconsoled is an over 500-page-long, first-person account of three days spent in a highly mysterious unnamed Eastern European city. The protagonist – a renowned pianist named Ryder – arrives in the city to give a concert which he has no memory of ever agreeing to perform. The novel chronicles his many engagements connected with the preparations for the concert and a number of increasingly puzzling interactions with the local people encountered during his wanderings around the city. The novel ends on an inconclusive note, following the curious non-occurrence of Ryder's performance on the night of the concert and the protagonist preparing to leave for Helsinki, the place of his next professional engagement.

In order to provide a sample of the disturbing reality constructed in the *The Unconsoled*, I am going to outline the opening scene, which can serve to encapsulate the atmosphere enveloping the rest of the novel. The text begins with Ryder arriving at a deserted hotel, which strikes him as "claustrophobic" and "gloomy" (Ishiguro 1996: 3). Nobody is there to welcome him; after a while an astonished hotel clerk materialises and apologises profusely for a poor welcome of a guest of such magnificence. Accompanied by an elderly porter, Ryder gets on the lift, which is to take him to his room. In the lift they both engage in a conversation, which feels increasingly absurd. The porter delivers a four-page-long disquisition on the advantages of holding the luggage in the air over putting it down on the floor. He then goes on to expound on the trials and tribulations of the local community of hotel porters. Despite the glaring absurdity of the porter's speech, the pianist appears concerned and even asks additional questions. At one point he suddenly notices that there is yet another person in the lift, who introduces herself as his personal assistant. The pianist is seized with anxiety as he realises that he does not remember any of the commitments and details of his stay in the city. At last the interminable journey on the lift comes to an end and Ryder is shown to his room. On closer inspection, Ryder begins to find the room strangely familiar. He then concludes that this is the very bedroom in which he lived for two years as a child in a house on the border of England and Wales. Overcome by exhaustion, he eventually dozes off.

The opening scene introduces the reader to the dreamlike atmosphere and the surreal logic that will govern the rest of the narrative. The porter's speech serves as one of a number of instances of utterly absurd elements in the novel which are rendered in a perfectly solemn language. The use of distinctly elaborate language and elevated style is one of Ishiguro's signature devices (best exemplified by Stevens's narration

in *The Remains of the Day*). Here, however, it serves a different purpose – to create the comic effect of the inadequacy of lofty style to absurd content (mildly reminiscent of the mock heroic). One of the most effective examples of this technique is an extensive funeral speech delivered by one of the locals and dedicated to the memory of a deceased dog, who is hailed as "the greatest dog of his generation" (*U* 142). The novel's outlandish episodes often border on the grotesque, as is the case with the scene in which an injured local conductor enters the stage with an ironing board instead of crutches and the ironing board eventually unfolds itself, causing the conductor's collapse (*U* 488-9). The absurd scenes are seamlessly interwoven with perfectly realistic ones, thus creating a truly dreamlike logic, according to which virtually anything could happen. The probable merges with the improbable, which in itself is one of the most potent sources of the uncanny. The opening scene, with its curious twists and hazy, trance-like atmosphere, could be interpreted as an illustration of Freud's remark about the effacement of "the distinction between imagination and reality" as the source of an uncanny sensation (Freud [1919] 1985: 367).

The way the piling up of absurdity is enacted in the novel may be redolent of some of the examples of manifest dream content as analysed by Freud in one of the chapters of *Interpretation* entitled "Absurd Dreams". Freud argues there that absurd content is an essential feature of dream-work and goes so far as to suggest that "a dream frequently has the profoundest meaning in the places where it seems most absurd" (Freud [1899] 2008: 271). The meaning that absurd dreams may yield to the psychoanalyst is – according to Freud – often related to the absence or loss of the father figure. This hypothesis may not be irrelevant to Ryder, whose ongoing anxiety (as shall be noted later) can be interpreted as originating in his fear of failing to satisfy his father's expectations. The father's absence might then be conceived of as the dreaded consequence of the fiasco of Ryder's career as a pianist.

Another feature of the dreamlike reality which is highlighted in the opening scene is the abundance of coincidences, whose improbability confirms the reader's premonition that they have entered a realm where the laws of logic, rationality and probability are suspended. Throughout the novel, Ryder bumps into old friends and familiar objects in places where one would least expect to find them. Almost every stranger accosted in the streets of this alien foreign city is revealed in the course of the conversation to be a schoolmate, university friend or a distant relative. The recognition is never instantaneous on the part of Ryder – the sense of the strange familiarity gradually gives way to certainty. The quoted passage also introduces the

reader to two mechanisms which are crucial to understanding the uncanny character of *The Unconsoled*: the mechanisms of temporal and spatial compression. Barry Lewis quotes the lift scene as an example of the former technique, arguing that the time spent by the characters in the lift, judging by the length of the conversation (six pages of continuous text), does in no way correspond to the time it normally takes to go up several floors (Lewis 2000: 110). It is only one out of many similar situations in the novel, which, as a whole, seems rather unconstrained by the passage of time. Certain events and conversations are disproportionately long to the rest of the narrative. Time flows as if in slow motion, allowing Ryder to do much more than a twenty-four-hour day would in reality. He can separate from his companion and disappear for what feels like hours and then have the other person still waiting in the same place when he gets back (*U* 260-65). Despite the bizarre fluidity of time, Ryder is constantly aware of its oppressiveness and the impending evening of the concert, which contributes to his increasing anxiety. The extensive use of temporal compression may explain the novel's overall length in relation to the period of only three days that it recounts.

Ryder's realisation that his hotel room in Eastern Europe is in fact the room which he occupied as a child on the border of England and Wales serves as an effective example of what can be labelled as spatial compression or displacement of space. This device is employed in the text in a variety of ways, including the already mentioned motif of Ryder encountering his old English friends and acquaintances in the streets of this foreign city. On his way to a party at a mysterious place called the Karwinsky Gallery, Ryder parks his car in a deserted field only to discover his parents' car abandoned in the thickets (*U* 261). In certain scenes in the narrative, space seems to be a mere reflection of Ryder's state of mind: streets drag interminably, the town centre suddenly becomes a labyrinth or the outskirts turn into wilderness. The "claustrophobic" aura of the opening scene is also there to stay: for the rest of the text the protagonist finds himself either in gloomy interiors, narrow alleys or in empty, desolate spaces, which are shrouded in darkness. The setting is often endowed with elements of the Gothic, such as the ubiquitous reign of darkness, forsaken sites, let alone the scenes set at the cemetery. The disturbing atmosphere of the city is intensified by the aura of an oppressive system (an eastern European totalitarian regime?) which appears to be in control of it. Another illustration of the novel's dreamlike logic is its use of inaccurate or displaced information, which can be exemplified by an early scene in the novel, during which Ryder chooses to visit the local cinema to see his favourite film of all time – Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* starring Clint Eastwood and Yul Brynner, neither of whom, in real

life, appeared in the film. Interestingly, one of the novel's reviewers pointed it out as an "editorial oversight" (Lewis 2000: 126).

What further contributes to the dreamlike feel of the novel is its extensive use of familiar dream patterns. Freud devotes an entire chapter of *Interpretation* to the curious phenomenon of "typical dreams" whose content and significance appear to be universal. The structure of familiar dreams is mirrored in the episodes dramatising Ryder getting lost in the maze-like city, experiencing the fear of having overslept and missed an important event and the fear of being completely unprepared for a crucial exam, which here takes the form of the upcoming piano concert. Fear and anxiety, in the shape they frequently take in unsettling dreams, underlie most of Ryder's thoughts and actions throughout the narrative. I shall discuss the instances and sources of these anxieties further in the article.

The analysis of the novel's representation of the reality that Ryder finds himself in – with all its twists and unlikely coincidences – brings Lewis to the conclusion that the city is nothing but "a projection of Ryder's unconscious" (*U* 124), where some of the elemental desires and fears are played out in disguise. It is populated by characters who have played a certain part in the protagonist's past or are displaced versions of them. Gary Adelman goes so far as to suggest that the realm of *The Unconsoled* is entirely solipsistic, since all the other characters apart from Ryder "exist only in reference to himself, as points of view on himself" (Adelman 2001: 178). In other words, they are not rounded, psychologically credible characters but merely projections of certain emotions or patterns of behaviour and serve a particular purpose in Ryder's dream. There is no distinction between the past and present, which freely merge as they do in dream fantasies. Many of the above characteristics of Ishiguro's narrative, particularly its rootedness in the unconscious, appear to invite a Freudian analysis. And, indeed, several mechanisms identified and described in Freud's theory of dreams seem to operate in Ryder's vision.

Of utmost importance to the structure of the novel is the Freudian notion of displacement, defined as a transference of qualities of an emotionally charged object onto another, thus creating a discrepancy between the dream's manifest and latent content. There are two significant instances of displacement that need to be emphasised here. Firstly, the already hinted at displacement of space, which consists in Ryder's projection of familiar people, places and objects from the England of his youth onto the unnamed eastern European city. Secondly, one can trace a displacement of identity, through which some of the less prominent characters serve as displaced variations on the character of the protagonist. Each of the four local

musicians introduced in the novel can be interpreted as a displaced portrait of Ryder as a conflicted artist (Lewis 2000: 111). The relationships between some of the local characters are also displaced variations on certain aspects of the relationships between Ryder and his wife, his son and his parents. An exhaustive account of the significance of these parallels is provided in Barry Lewis's Freudian reading of the novel (2000: 114-123).

One can also trace in the text the work of wish-fulfilment – the key mechanism of Freud's dream theory. The underlying argument in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is that the fulfilment of a wish is the purpose of each dream narrative. According to Freud, this also holds true for anxiety-dreams whose outcome is highly disturbing for the dreamer. This apparent paradox is accounted for by the discrepancy between the manifest and the latent content of the dream. The mechanism of wish-fulfilment can be traced in minor episodes, including Ryder's accounts of successful speeches that he makes and in the pervading aura of respect and admiration that surrounds him wherever he appears. The last scene of the novel could also be interpreted in terms of the work of wish-fulfilment, insofar as it reveals the extent of Ryder's self-delusion. It closes with the protagonist expressing his utmost satisfaction with his visit to the city despite the ultimate fiasco of the concert and the implied collapse of his marriage. Unfortunately, a meticulous analysis of the possible significance of the manifest as well as latent content of Ryder's dream narrative would be a task extending beyond the scope of this article.

Freud's argument that dream-work involves the enactment of the return of the repressed is a highly productive interpretative clue to the understanding of the logic of *The Unconsoled*. Ryder's continuous monologue, which constitutes the whole of Ishiguro's novel, is fraught with pervasive anxiety to the extent that it reads like – in Linda Simon's words – "a long, very long, anxiety dream" (Lewis 2000: 111). The notion of "anxiety-dream" was put forward by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and defined as the type of dream during which frequently banal content stirs very strong negative emotions, which ultimately leads to waking up. Freud argues that the possible origin of anxiety-dreams lies in "the sexual life, and corresponds to a libido which has been deflected from its object and has found no employment" (Freud [1899] 2008: 121). The surprising lack of any information about Ryder's sexual life might be interpreted as a symptom of his conflicted attitude towards his sexuality and therefore one of the sources of his anxiety. Gary Adelman appears to support that interpretation by labelling Ryder as "a potential paedophile". His suppressed paedophiliac desire would account for his isolation and inability to form

meaningful relationships with other people (Adelman 2001: 178).

Whether originating in Ryder's perverse sexuality or elsewhere, his anxiety indisputably permeates the novel. Countless times Ryder describes his feelings as a mixture of intense fear, panic, anger, frustration and irritation. Insignificant, everyday situations are capable of arousing in Ryder a sense of overpowering panic. His reactions appear excessive and ungrounded, not related to any authentic danger. An effective illustration of such a bout of panic is a scene in which Ryder accompanied by Fiona – an old university friend – visit her friends so that she can boast of being acquainted with a distinguished pianist such as Ryder (*U* 238-41). Fiona feels increasingly insecure and fears losing face as Ryder fails to introduce himself to her friends and remains awkwardly silent. He is gradually overtaken by a bizarre paralysis, which prevents him from uttering a word. Finally, to everyone's embarrassment, he collapses on the bed, panting. Ryder's reaction feels grossly exaggerated, for the situation itself is devoid of any stimuli for anxiety or panic. Nevertheless, such is Ryder's unique condition – a curious inability to normally function in basic social situations.

The novel drops numerous clues that the protagonist's anxiety might also be rooted in his painful past and the toxic relationship with his parents, particularly the authoritarian and overly demanding father. Most anxieties articulated by Ryder centre around his parents' upcoming visit to the city and their intention to attend the concert. Ryder regards their visit as his one and only chance to convince them of his talent. He grows increasingly anxious about the performance and reveals how deeply insecure he is despite the air of self-confidence about his genius which he likes to project. In one of the last scenes, Ryder breaks down on learning that his parents have not eventually come. Sobbing, he explains that he was sure that this time at last they would listen to his performance, revealing that their supposedly planned visit was a mere figment of his imagination and another instance of his wishful thinking (*U* 511). Ryder's repressed trauma resulting from the fear of not living up to his father's expectations emerges as the most likely source of his all-encompassing anxiety.

It is the notion of the return of the repressed that creates a bridge between Freud's dream theory and his theory of the uncanny. The repressed underlies both dream work and our experience of the uncanny, which was famously defined by Schelling as "that [which] ought to have remained (…) secret and hidden but has come to light" (Freud [1919] 1985: 345). It is to the notion of the uncanny that I shall now turn. In his 1919 seminal essay entitled "The Uncanny," Freud describes – albeit

somewhat vaguely – the phenomenon in question as "something one does not know one's way about in" (*U* 341). Much of the uncanny feel of Ishuguro's novel hinges on Ryder's constant sense of being lost, the sense of helplessness and displacement. His numerous wanderings down the city's narrow alleys invariably result in his losing his way, which in turn generates frustration and panic. One of the most effective dramatisations of the horror of being lost is Ryder's walk to the concert hall on the night of the performance. Even though he is dropped off at a spot from which he can already see the hall, he still manages to lose his way. Increasingly anxious, he repeatedly fails to retrace his steps. When finally he can glimpse the concert hall in the distance, he discovers that there is a wall in the middle of the street. It is only many pages later that he eventually arrives at his destination. Ryder's frustrated wanderings mirror Freud's description of his own uncanny experience of getting lost in Italy and continually finding himself back in the same spot (Freud [1919] 1985: 359) and read like a quintessentially uncanny experience. The familiar route to a place within sight becomes increasingly complicated and gradually turns into a nightmare of impotence and paralysis.

Among the English equivalents of the German adjective "unheimlich" quoted by Freud in "The Uncanny" are "gloomy", "dismal" and "haunted" (*U* 341). These very adjectives could be used to evoke the novel's Gothic setting, described by critics as "Kafkaesque", "sepulchral" and "a deterring labirynth" (Lewis 2000: 108). The uncanny effect of the gloomy surroundings is intensified by the almost omnipresent reign of darkness, which is singled out by Nicholas Royle as the breeding ground of the uncanny (2003: 109).

Towards the end of his essay, Freud puts forward an already quoted definition of the uncanny as the "effect (…) produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (Freud [1919] 1985: 367). The obliteration of a clear-cut boundary between the real and the surreal underlies the reality of *The Unconsoled* and remains a major ingredient of its uncanny atmosphere. It occasions a number of absurd episodes, some of which were hinted at earlier on. The reality conjured up in the novel is disturbingly fluid, malleable and enveloped in chaos. The identity of the characters is, likewise, unstable and shifty. At the start, Ryder meets an unknown single mother named Sophie, who – several hours into their meeting – begins to be indirectly referred to as Ryder's wife of many years. Similarly, the elderly porter from the opening scene gradually assumes the identity of Ryder's father-in-law. The unfolding of events builds up the sense of a world that evades comprehension, to which both the protagonist and the reader become gradually accustomed to. Whereas

the sense of the uncanny continues to haunt the reader, Ryder seems resigned to the logic of his dream and never questions or marvels at its oddities.

The identity of Ryder himself remains highly unstable. Cynthia Wong sees him as the embodiment of "the indeterminacy of identity" (2005: 66). Adelman perceives Ryder as "profoundly split, doubled" and argues that the reason for his split identity is the gap between his idealised professional self and his insecure private self ceaselessly fearing a public disgrace (2001: 178). The pianist appears to be obsessed with the notion of the audience "turning on him" or, in other words, discovering his mediocrity. This attitude stands at odds with his high self-esteem and overblown artistic ego, which Ryder exudes when surrounded by other people. Adelman's already-mentioned suggestion of Ryder's repressed sexuality might hint at yet another source of Ryder's split identity – the forbidden paedophiliac desire. Much of Ryder's anxiety appears to spring from an inner rupture, which Nicholas Royle refers to as "the sense of ourselves as double (…) at odds with ourselves" and regards to be one of the attributes of the uncanny (Royle 2003: 6).

The last component of the uncanny which I would like to investigate is the prevalence in the text of the strangely familiar. The novel defamiliarises Ryder's dreamlike reality with the extensive use of the mechanism of *déjà vu*, defined by Freud as the sense of having experienced before what one cannot exactly place in memory. *Déjà vu* functions in *The Unconsoled* as an essential narrative device. A number of places that Ryder finds himself in, particularly the mysterious city itself, strike him as strangely familiar. The sources of this familiarity, however, evade Ryder. The city referred to at the beginning as totally alien to the protagonist is gradually revealed to be inhabited by a number of his old-time friends and to contain places and objects that he identifies as distinctly familiar from childhood. Many of the faces and rooms that Ryder is confronted with arouse in him a vague sense or memory of having seen them before. If we adopt the interpretation of the realm of *The Unconsoled* as an unconscious reworking or recycling of Ryder's past, then the pervading sense of déjà vu appears by all means in place.

However thorough a study of the novel's logic and structure one might undertake, *The Unconsoled* still eludes full comprehension. It is not structured like a riddle, which on careful inspection may finally be resolved. It does not come with a hidden key to the meaning of its highly puzzling narrative. My study of the novel as an uncanny dream does not purport to explain away the intricacies of its bizarre logic. Other critics, likewise, concede that Ishiguro's novel is full of loose ends and evades a uniform interpretation. Wong conceives of Ryder's condition as that of a chronic

"amnesiac" (2005: 73). Lewis accentuates the dreamlike qualities of the narrative and suggests that, rather than "dreaming within his life, [Ryder] is living within a dream". "Whose dream it is, is not clear," he admits (2000: 124). Finally, the critic wonders whether *The Unconsoled* – with its "erasures and displacements" – could perhaps be interpreted as a metaphor for human memory. This interpretation is supported by the author himself who accounts for the protagonist's amnesiac condition as a compression of the universal human propensity to forget (Wong 2005: 78). The variety of interpretations hovering above Ishiguro's narrative testify to its ultimate indeterminacy and lack of closure – qualities rooted in the postmodern aesthetics, which can be found in most of his novels.

The abundance of the elements of the dreamlike and the uncanny traced in the text appears to justify the interpretation of *The Unconsoled* as an uncanny dream narrative. If, however, the experience of the uncanny is perceived as a momentary sense of disturbing revelation (Royle 2003: 320), then Ishiguro's narrative can be interpreted as a fleeting uncanny sensation yet artfully extended to the size of a half-thousand-page novel.

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