



# The Influence of Childhood Memories on Human Needs in Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*

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**ABSTRACT:** *When We Were Orphans*, a book by Kazuo Ishiguro, examines the complex relationship that develops between early memories and human needs. Through the use of a psychoanalytic framework, the research reveals how Banks' early life experience impacted his adult desires and worldview. Shanghai both before and during the war serves as the backdrop for the story, offering a rich context for analysing the characters' reactions to loss and displacement. This study investigates how Banks's longings for identity, connection, and a sense of belonging are shaped by memories. This article advances our knowledge of the complex interplay between memories, trauma, and the search for identity in Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* by highlighting the story's investigation of these topics.

**Keywords:** memory, mystery, identity, nostalgia, human, needs, relationship

## 1. Introduction

Every person definitely has what is called a memory and experiences that occurred in childhood. A memory that could be beautiful but could also become a miserable mystery that carries over until we grow up. Sometimes, this gloomy memory can have an influence on the things that will happen or the choices we will make in the future. As happened in the novel *When We Were Orphans* by Kazuo Ishiguro, memory plays a huge role in influencing the life path of the main character. Based on Thamrin (2013), characters are linked to human beings, so in order to understand who they are, we must consider the factors that go into how they are created, what the characters say or do, as well as what the author, other characters, or third parties have to say about them. Truman et al. (2017) explain that characterizations are developing features that the story's characters need to come to life. According to Astuti (2015), characterization is how a character is presented in a book or movie. A character's characterization must be attractive and straightforward for a story to be exciting and draw readers in. In this regard, a psychological approach will be taken in this paper to achieve the relationship between the character's thoughts and their relationship to memories.

The examination of suppressed memories and their influence on the protagonist's adult desires in Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* could be a major area



of study. Examining how specific childhood traumas are either intentionally or unintentionally suppressed and then resurface to impact the character's desires and actions can offer a valuable understanding of the complex mechanisms of memory and desire inside the book. An in-depth analysis of how cultural and contextual elements, in particular the pre-war and wartime Shanghai backdrop, shape human needs may be another issue. An additional layer of complexity to the analysis and a deeper comprehension of the novel's wider socio-cultural implications comes from examining how the character's fundamental needs are shaped by childhood experiences, historical events, and the socio-political context.

The psychological aspects of the characters are highly related to their needs as a human. There are several types of human needs, and the order is based on the most crucial. This paper analyses the main character's human needs based on their levels of needs, which Abraham Maslow initiated with the 'Hierarchy of Needs' theory and its relationship to the power of past memories in influencing decisions. As mentioned before, this paper chooses a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro entitled *When We Were Orphans* with the main character named Christopher Banks. This novel is selected because the life of Banks was basically controlled by his memories and the urge to solve the mystery that occurred since he was a kid.

According to academics, social institutions include collective memories of childhood conflicts that have shaped not only individuals' behaviour but also the behaviour of entire communities (Noel et al., 2017). These memories have the power to shape ideas, mindsets, and actions that either support efforts to establish peace or feed violent cycles. The author wants to understand the complex dynamics that affect people and communities in war-torn cultures. By exploring the connection between childhood memories and current behaviour, this research wants to shed a spotlight on these dynamics and ultimately inspire strategies for conflict resolution and post-war reconstruction.

The main purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the relevance between a main character's cognitive ability, the social situation they face, and the needs they have to fulfil in accordance to seek resolution. The thing that the author is concerned with is that we want to deliver profound information and knowledge of the way these aspects engage and influence narrative formation by critically reexploring some studies that have existed. Scholars and academics in this field have been involved in the complex depiction of a protagonist's cognitive capacity to fulfil their human needs in their action to solve a childhood mystery for centuries. Since early experiences have a lasting impact on our attitudes, assurance, and behaviours, researchers have long been concerned about how our activities today are highly carried away by early experiences.

According to Kinnunen & Jokisipilä (2012), understanding how early memories have an influence on our actions today is further context of the world war. In this extensive review of the literature, The author digs into numerous theoretical frameworks and the varied aspects of this subject. We investigate multiple theoretical frameworks, objective research, and possible causes that are essential to the relationship between memories from childhood and current behaviour in the context of



global warfare. Maslow in (Bahuwa, 2018) elaborates in his theory that there are five needs needed by humans that are structured in a hierarchy, they are Physiological Needs, Safety Needs, Love and Belonging Needs, Esteem Needs, and Self-Actualization Needs.

The ability of the main character to think significantly impacts their capacity for navigating and solving a childhood mystery. The cognitive aspects involved, such as logical reasoning, critical thinking, memory retrieval, and problem-solving abilities have been extensively studied. Researchers have discovered that a character's upbringing, family dynamics, socioeconomic status, and societal expectations have substantially impacted their thinking. A protagonist's cognitive growth and problem-solving skills are greatly influenced by the sociocultural setting in which they are located. This kind of study produces a deep understanding of research results due to comparisons between real and surreal things. The innovative blend of the two in this novel, blended in a strange memory, makes for a unique artistic achievement that opens up new territory for literature. However, a study like this is only sometimes needed since the readers might develop their own interpretations of the story.

Several influential studies have discussed the relationship between memories and dreams (Cook, 2004; Holmes, 2005). Indeed, an analysis by Bizzini (2013) states, "Memories play a crucial role in bridging the past and the present, in addition to being a part of and recounting a past time. One way of coping with life is the desire to examine one's former lives." Both analyses by Ronie & Hellystia (2019) and Bahuwa (2018) apply the same theory of Abraham Maslow, the Hierarchy of Needs, that I am going to use in my analysis. These two articles are pretty similar to each other. Bahuwa's research discussed the main character's need to analyse Abraham Maslow's hierarchy needs to be described in the *Gatsby* novel by Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald. Meanwhile, Ronie & Hellystia's research is intended to find out what is the hierarchy of needs that have been fulfilled by the main character and how the main character fulfilled the hierarchy of needs. Both of them also use the descriptive qualitative method.

Analysis by Junaidi (2014) entitled *Psychological Analysis of Jay Gatsby's Life in Francis Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby"* (Viewed from Abraham Maslow Hierarchy of Needs Theory). The writer of the paper examines the psychological issues with the main character. The writer employed a psychological strategy based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The study's findings indicated that the main character had psychological issues that may be divided into five levels: needs for physiology, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.

Analysis by Özçelik (2021) concludes that "using memory as a narrative the tool illustrates how memories can reflect the skewed version of human thinking and can affect reality." The reader can see that each person has a unique background and history that is subject to change on different occasions and at other times using this instrument. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research on the development of the analysis of memories nowadays. This paper will fill the gap by analysing Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *When We Were Orphans* using the Hierarchy of Needs theory by Abraham Maslow.



## 2. Method

The researcher employed a descriptive qualitative approach to conduct this research. Qualitative approaches use a variety of designs, distinct phases in data processing, and text and picture data as input (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The reason the researcher selects qualitative research is that it can methodically describe the facts and features of the data. In addition, the social sciences established qualitative research methodologies, such as case studies and ethnographies, to help researchers analyse social and cultural phenomena. The researcher will specifically use Maslow's theory of the "Hierarchy of Needs". According to Maslow (1987), human needs contain Physiological Needs, Safety Needs, Love and Belonging Needs, Esteem Needs, and Self-Actualization Needs.

The first stage to conduct the analysis is by defining the variables. In this stage, the author sets up the variables that are going to be used within the research or analysis. The variables used here include Physiological Needs, Safety Needs, Love and Belonging Needs, Esteem Needs, and Self-Actualization Needs.

The second stage is collecting the data. The author gathers the data by profoundly reading the novel. At that point, the author highlights some of the quotations from the novel that demonstrate the theme of the Hierarchy of Needs. We ensure that the data collected is relevant to the specific needs outlined in Maslow's theory.

The third stage is categorizing the data. The data that had been collected should be classified into the corresponding categories of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In this research, the author categorizes them into physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization categories.

The fourth stage is to consider the context. We try to understand the context in which the data is contained. We have several factors that we bear in mind such as culture, environment, and personal experiences that happen in the novel. These factors can influence the way in which the main character prioritizes and meets their needs.

The fifth stage is the content analysis. As mentioned before, the author uses a qualitative approach based on Creswell & Creswell (2018) as a guide. We conduct content analysis by relating the context and identifying recurring themes or patterns related to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Then we jump to the last stage which is the conclusion.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel "When We Were Orphans" was released in 2000. The narrative centres on Englishman Christopher Banks, who qualifies as a detective in London before going back to Shanghai to investigate the disappearance of his parents. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs analysis of the novel can shed light on the motivations and character growth of the protagonist. There are five categories of human needs according to Maslow's theory. Here is the definition of each category according to (Alwisol, 2014) as follows:

- 1) **Physiological Needs.** The most fundamental human requirements, such as the need for food, drink, nourishment, rest, and shelter, are known as physiological needs.
- 2) **Safety Needs.** An individual's demands for safety include regularity, boundaries, protection, security, structure, legal protection, and the absence of dread and anxiety.
- 3) **Love and Belonging Needs.** The needs of an individual to receive affection from friends, family, peers, a spouse, or kids. It also includes the need to be a part of a community or society.
- 4) **Esteem Needs.** Needs for gaining authority, competence, mastery, self-assurance, and independence. A person at this level also craves prestige, recognition from others, fame, dominance, being a significant person, honour, and gratitude.
- 5) **Self-Actualization Needs.** As the new self-actualization needs can only be satisfied if the four preceding hierarchies have been satisfied, self-actualization needs represent the highest level (peak) of the hierarchy of needs.

**Table 1. Data of Human Needs**

| No. | Data  | Chapter | Human Needs Categories |
|-----|---|---------|------------------------|
| 1.  | <i>“My poor lad. First your father. Now your mother. Must feel like the whole world’s collapsed around your ears. But we’ll go to England tomorrow, the two of us. Your aunt’s waiting for you there. So be brave. You’ll soon pick up the pieces again.”</i>                     | 2       | Physiological Needs    |
| 2.  | <i>With all respect, sir. The ambition which I just confided to you is hardly the whim of a moment. It’s a calling I’ve felt my whole life.”</i>  | 1       | Safety Needs           |
| 3.  | <i>“As I may have said already, I tended to regard Akira as a worldly authority on many aspects of life, and so I listened to him that day with great care.”</i>  | 5       | Safety Needs           |
| 4.  | <i>“This city, in other words, has come to be my home, and I should not mind if I had to live out the rest of my days here. Nevertheless, there are those times when a sort of emptiness fills my hours, and I shall continue to give Jennifer’s invitation serious thought.”</i> | 23      | Safety Needs           |
| 5.  | <i>“When we were boys,” I said, “we lived in a good world. These children, these children we’ve been coming across, what a terrible thing for them to learn so early how ghastly things really are.”</i>  | 20      | Safety Needs           |



| No. | Data  | Chapter | Human Needs Categories   |
|-----|---|---------|--------------------------|
| 6.  | <i>"It's all right. I'm not upset. After all, they were just things. When you've lost your mother and your father, you can't care so much about things, can you?"</i>   | 10      | Love and Belonging Needs |
| 7.  | <i>"For the truth is, over this past year, I have become increasingly preoccupied with my memories, a preoccupation encouraged by the discovery that these memories—of my childhood, of my parents—have lately begun to blur."</i>  | 4       | Love and Belonging Needs |
| 8.  | <i>"In fact, it has always been a puzzle to me that Osbourne should have said such a thing of me that morning, since my own memory is that I blended perfectly into English school life. During even my earliest weeks at St. Dunstan's, I do not believe I did anything to cause myself embarrassment."</i>                                | 1       | Love and Belonging Needs |
| 9.  | <i>"Yours is the name on everyone's lips just now. If you wish to bring a companion, they'd be only too pleased."</i>   | 2       | Esteem Needs             |
| 10. | <i>"I was, for one thing, reminding myself that my recent triumphs had more than entitled me to my invitation"</i>  | 3       | Esteem Needs             |
| 11. | <i>"Although the front of the house had remained virtually untouched, the whole of the back half of the room we were in lay in ruin. Thinking about it today, I would suppose a shell had come through the roof, bringing down the upper storey, and destroying the rear of the house, together with the property adjoining it behind."</i> | 21      | Esteem Needs             |
| 12. | <i>"You mean you're the Christopher Banks? The detective?"</i>  | 23      | Self-Actualization Needs |
| 13. | <i>"I have come to take a foolish pride in sifting through old newspaper reports of my cases in the Reading Room at the British Museum. This city, in other words, has come to be my home, and I should not mind if I had to live out the rest of my days here."</i>  | 23      | Self-Actualization Needs |

### 3.1. Physiological Needs

Every person needs to live a decent life every day, including Christopher. The lack of his parents' appearance and the fact that he was still very young at that time indicate that he could not live on his own yet. However, he needs to prioritize meeting his basic needs, such as maintaining nutrition by ensuring he has enough food to overcome energy deficits.

*“My poor lad. First your father. Now your mother. Must feel like the whole world’s collapsed around your ears. But we’ll go to England tomorrow, the two of us. Your aunt’s waiting for you there. So be brave. You’ll soon pick up the pieces again.”*

It is also important for her to continue his education, as it provides the foundation of knowledge and skills needed to achieve her goals in the future. Because he still needs adults to live, Colonel Chamberlain asked him to go to England so he could live with his aunt who lived there while waiting for news about his parents. This shows that his physiological needs must be a concern considering that he is without parents at such a young age.

### 3.2. Safety Needs

Christopher Banks' psychological safety is a major factor in his desire to learn the truth regarding the disappearance of his parents. He suffers the sudden loss of his parents as a child, which leaves him feeling extremely vulnerable and insecure.

*“With all respect, sir. The ambition which I just confided to you is hardly the whim of a moment. It’s a calling I’ve felt my whole life.”*

His adult life is shaped by this early trauma, which drives him to use his detective work as a means of protection and resolution. One may argue that his unwavering search for the truth is a coping strategy used to reclaim his sense of security and control over his life. The book shows how people would do whatever it takes to get inner peace and closure when there is no psychological safety.

*“As I may have said already, I tended to regard Akira as a worldly authority on many aspects of life, and so I listened to him that day with great care.”*

As he deals with Shanghai's complicated relationships and shifting allegiances, Christopher Banks struggles with the need for social safety in the novel's social setting. His encounters with Akira Yamashita, Sarah Hemmings, and other people highlight how fragile interpersonal relationships and trust are in a society on the verge of political revolution. Christopher's search for safety is made more difficult by the backdrop of the Sino-Japanese War, as the social conventions and institutions that formerly offered him a sense of security start to fall apart. The work poses interesting queries regarding the fragility of societal safety in unsettling and unpredictable times.



*“This city, in other words, has come to be my home, and I should not mind if I had to live out the rest of my days here. Nevertheless, there are those times when a sort of emptiness fills my hours, and I shall continue to give Jennifer’s invitation serious thought.”*

Since Christopher struggles to come across the outcome of his awful past, his psychological needs are still very much visible in his adult life. The death of his parents left deep emotional scars that altered his emotional space and firm relationships. It is difficult for him to build meaningful and close relationships as a result of unresolved sadness and a need for closure which affect how he interacts with others. He needs to build protection to avoid emotional loss by shutting himself off. He feels that a close relationship is something like a threat that enhances the risk of getting hurt again. What people see is that Christopher may have strong social skills on the surface, but the actual feeling of having a relationship feels like an unexplored realm for him.

*“When we were boys,” I said, “we lived in a good world. These children, these children we’ve been coming across, what a terrible thing for them to learn so early how ghastly things really are.”*

Christopher started to face the struggle of feelings of uncertainty and abandonment as a result of his parents’ absence since he was a kid. Christopher's inquiry for answers and comfort is nourished by his discontented need to know the truth about his parents' disappearance. He started that quest because he can never fully come to terms with their fate. He got an unforgettable emotional burden cause of the limited knowledge of his parents' whereabouts. The sense of loss is so deep-rooted that it creates an inescapable urge to find the truth. During his intensely emotional journey, Christopher also tries to find catharsis for the senses of loss and sorrow that lurk over his life. What follows, he learns to be strong when confronted with obstacles. At the end of the day, he finally accepts his parents’ fate with a peaceful mind.

### **3.3. Love and Belonging Needs**

When Christopher Banks' parents disappeared when he was a small child, it caused him to feel profound loss and inspired him to dedicate the rest of his life to trying to find out what happened. In an attempt to rejoin his family and fix the sense of security and connection that their absence destroyed, he is motivated by his deep-seated need for love and belonging.

*“It’s all right. I’m not upset. After all, they were just things. When you’ve lost your mother and your father, you can’t care so much about things, can you?”*





In the book, Christopher's solid search is shown as an expression of his need for acceptance and affection, which he combines with his career aspirations.

*“For the truth is, over this past year, I have become increasingly preoccupied with my memories, a preoccupation encouraged by the discovery that these memories—of my childhood, of my parents— have lately begun to blur.”*

The search for love and belonging that Christopher is on is closely connected to the issue of memory. He feels nostalgia and a longing for a time when he felt a sense of belonging, especially when thinking back to his early years in Shanghai, his parents, and his friendship with Akira. Christopher's search for love and a sense of belonging gets intertwined with his attempts to piece together his identity as he struggles with the fractured nature of his recollections and the unsettling truth regarding his parents' fate. The book deftly handles memory's intricacies and how they affect a person's sense of identity, highlighting how much the past shapes how people relate to one another and how they construct their identities.

*“In fact, it has always been a puzzle to me that Osbourne should have said such a thing of me that morning, since my own memory is that I blended perfectly into English school life. During even my earliest weeks at St. Dunstan’s, I do not believe I did anything to cause myself embarrassment.”*

Christopher's mental needs have been built by the societal expectations that come with Christopher's privileged nurture in colonial Shanghai. The strict social conventions and expectations of the British exile community burden him in dealing with the complexity of his identity and trying to harmonize his dual background. After losing his parents, he was faced with inner struggles because he had to grow up in England, which was a foreign place. This is what lies behind his search for a sense of belonging and closure for his struggle. Christopher faces a difficult psychological battle as he tries to strike a balance between his two identities, violating social norms, and his need for connection and belonging.

### **3.4. Esteem Needs**

The struggle that Christopher has to face is not something trivial. It is something that not everyone has. He had to live up to the expectations of his privileged maternity. To make it worse, the cultural norms of the British exile community in Shanghai only serve to worsen his need for respect and admiration.

*“Yours is the name on everyone’s lips just now. If you wish to bring a companion, they’d be only too pleased.”*

One of the aspects that strike Christopher's desire for acceptance can be seen in his interactions with figures like the mysterious Akira Yamashita and Sarah Hemmings. It highlights the complexities of social sequence in the surroundings in which they lived at that time. The fact that his identity is shaped and driven toward his journey to pursue his future by looking at the tension between his renowned and prestigious standing in the exile community and his boundless desire for genuine recognition and appreciation.

*"I was, for one thing, reminding myself that my recent triumphs had more than entitled me to my invitation"*

Christopher's need for respect is evident in his unwavering quest for recognition and achievement in his field of work as a detective in London. A burning urge drives him to explore the unresolved wounds of a traumatic childhood, while hell-bent on finding the truth behind his parents' disappearance. His relentless tenacity and passion led him to explore a complex maze of mysteries, along with his determination to be recognized as a famous detective. On this challenging journey, he confronts the shadows of his past, solves difficult puzzles, and digs deeper into the complexities of his own story. While he struggled with the psychological baggage that grew out of unresolved childhood traumatic events, his emotional well-being became inextricably linked to his career ambitions. His sense of self-worth was not only reflected in his professional achievements but also became her internal battleground, where he constantly faced the haunting shadow of the past. This journey taught him that true success is measured by career achievements as well as by the courage to face and care for oneself amidst life's complex obstacles.

*"Although the front of the house had remained virtually untouched, the whole of the back half of the room we were in lay in ruin. Thinking about it today, I would suppose a shell had come through the roof, bringing down the upper storey, and destroying the rear of the house, together with the property adjoining it behind."*

When Christopher finally returns to Shanghai, it marks a turning point in his psychological journey as he faces the remains of his past and tries to make sense of the many parts of himself. Visiting the places where he grew up and interacting with the traces of his family history represents a process of transformation in accepting the complexity of his own tale and coming to grips with his psychological demands. Standing at the intersection of past and present, Christopher attempts to integrate the diverse elements of his identity. The city becomes a parable, a place where he attempts to form a harmonious synthesis of his privileged upbringing, the scars of loss, and the aspirations of his present self. Through this introspective journey, Christopher embarks on a process of transformation, seeking resolution, understanding, and ultimately, regaining his sense of wholeness.

### 3.5. Self-Actualization Needs

Christopher's unwavering determination and passion are not only a manifestation of his persistence to achieve self-actualization but also a true testament to his relentless struggle. Christopher understood that the road to self-actualization is not an easy one and that persistence and resolve are necessary.

*"You mean you're the Christopher Banks? The detective?"*

The ability to persevere is crucial since it represents his ability to get past failures and reach his greatest potential. Now that he has become a successful detective, Christopher's entire life journey is proof that perseverance and determination can take one to the pinnacle of success. The result of his tireless efforts was the achievement of self-actualization, where he not only achieved his goal of becoming a famous detective but also realized his full potential as an individual. Now, with every steady step he takes in the detective world, Christopher is a living testimony that unwavering determination can take one through all obstacles to the pinnacle of success and self-fulfilment.

*"I have come to take a foolish pride in sifting through old newspaper reports of my cases in the Reading Room at the British Museum. This city, in other words, has come to be my home, and I should not mind if I had to live out the rest of my days here."*

One might see Christopher's goal of self-actualization in his attempt to solve the mystery and succeed as a detective. His efforts to unravel the mystery of his parents' disappearance led to the discovery of his identity. Christopher believes in achieving the sense of integrity that he has been seeking all this time by finding the answers to the questions about his parents' whereabouts. In Christopher's thought, this quest is not just one of his jobs as a detective. He sees it as a way to connect his identity to the dark history of his past and go deeper into the purpose of his life. Thus, for Christopher, finding his identity and need to end all these mysteries and struggles as well as becoming a successful detective is an integral part of his long journey toward self-actualization.

## 4. Conclusion

The novel *When We Were Orphans* written by Kazuo Ishiguro highly explores the impact that early memories have on human needs and desires. The book mainly talks about the main character, Christopher Banks, who is encouraged by his emotional desires and traumas from his early years that remain unfulfilled and have shaped his emotional and psychological health into his adult life. Renowned for his exquisite storytelling abilities, Kazuo Ishiguro highlighted the everlasting power of childhood memories and the ways in which they delineate several aspects of humans. Those aspects include human identity, relationships, and emotional fulfilment. As if that weren't enough, the novel delves into the complexities of human psychology and the impact of one's history on



one's sense of self. Now that we know, *When We Were Orphans* is a powerful reminder of how ingrained our early memories and experiences are in our lives and how they continue to shape them. Through the application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it is hoped that readers will be able to comprehend the general themes of human needs and aspirations and the character's underlying motives as they relate to Christopher's journey.

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