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Research Article



Stevens: The Unreliable Narrator in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of The Day*

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro, an eminent figure in contemporary literature, crafts narratives distinguished by their nuanced, restrained characters. One of his most profound works, *The Remains of the Day* (1989), offers readers a masterclass in the art of subtle storytelling. Central to this novel is the depiction of the protagonist, Butler Stevens, an embodiment of Ishiguro's knack for blending subtlety with complexity. Stevens stands as a hallmark of Ishiguro's imaginative prowess, serving as an intricate reflection of an era gone by. This character's unyielding dedication to his profession, as reflected in the ideals of "Butler's dignity," not only encapsulates his identity but also becomes the lens through which he views the world. Yet, as

the narrative unfolds, this seemingly unshakeable commitment is juxtaposed against Stevens' personal introspection during a brief hiatus from his professional realm. This period of introspection proves revelatory, unearthing memories, regrets, and truths previously buried beneath the veneer of his professional demeanor. The novel expertly 'compels' its readers to discern the actuality behind the events depicted and, simultaneously, beckons them into the emotional depths of Stevens' responses. As Stevens delves into the annals of his past, a realization dawns upon him: there are moments of folly, instances of misled loyalty, and actions driven by misconceptions. While he had dedicated his life to the grandeur of Darlington Hall, this commitment had come at the expense of personal fulfillment and genuine human connections. Towards the novel's denouement, a poignant sense of regret permeates Stevens' psyche. The culmination of this sentiment is his acknowledgment of certain truths and the unreliability of his own narration. This unreliable narration isn't just a literary device but serves as a mirror to Stevens' internal conflict, revealing the dichotomy between his perceived duties and suppressed emotions. Thus, *The Remains of the Day* is not just a tale of loyalty and duty but an exploration of the human soul, its vulnerabilities, and the intricate web of memories and emotions that define us.

Keywords: English Butler, Unreliable narrator, Journey, Past, Existence, Darlington Hall, Memory, Repression, Discretion, Identity, Cognitive Processes, Post-colonial Era, Nostalgia, Introspections, Professional Excellence, Narrative Subversion, Emotional Suppression

In David Lodge's seminal work, *The Art of Fiction* (1992), he delves deeply into the literary phenomenon of the unreliable narrator. Lodge's commentary on Stevens, the central character of *The Remains of the Day*, is particularly insightful. He posits that Stevens' existence is fundamentally characterized by a perpetual act of suppressing and evading truths, both concerning himself and those around him. The dual layers of Stevens' life, encompassing both personal and professional dimensions, seem to be shrouded in this willful obfuscation of reality.

Following his exploration into the Japanese milieu, Kazuo Ishiguro penned what would become his magnum opus, *The Remains of the Day*. This best-selling novel, which garnered the prestigious Booker Prize and was later adapted into a critically acclaimed film, is nestled in the backdrop of post-World War II England. The narrative traces the journey of Stevens, a quintessentially old-school butler, as he embarks on a trip using his new American employer's vehicle to reunite with a former housekeeper. Notably, Stevens, akin to other protagonists crafted by Ishiguro, exemplifies the traits of an unreliable narrator. His unreliability stems not merely from his tendency to withhold information from readers, but more profoundly from his self-deception. By consistently taking refuge behind the façade of professionalism, Stevens circumvents making pivotal decisions and moral adjudications. His entire existence becomes a pursuit of achieving the epitome of butlery, allowing no room for personal relationships or external distractions to compromise his mission.

Several factors contribute to Stevens' narrative unreliability, including his flawed memory, unwavering allegiance, and the ambiguous objective behind his recounting of events. This scholarly examination seeks to delve deeper, providing a more nuanced understanding of Stevens' role as a narrator.

James Wood, in his analysis of narrative techniques, suggests that a hallmark of a reliable narrator often lies in the use of third-person narration. This approach taps into the potential of third-person omniscience, allowing the narrator to encompass the perspectives of multiple characters by referring to them using pronouns such as "him" or "his". This panoramic view facilitates a comprehensive understanding of an event, bolstering its veracity. Wood delineates the attributes of a reliable narrator, emphasizing qualities like alignment in values with the implied author, resonance with the reader's values, accurate portrayal of one's reality, and fostering a sense of rapport and trust with the reader.

The novel provides great number of signals of the narrator's unreliability both in content and in form. The inconsistencies of content are related to Steven's view about his profession by which he tries to suppress certain feeling concerning his past. Stevens as he grows old feels that he next to examine his past. Purely a faithful servant, he is threatened by the prospect that like Ishiguro earlier narrators, he had lived without agency or effect that his existence has been without significant or lasting impact, Just as Ono strives to portray his very failures as successes, Stevens in his lack of individual glory retraces the path of his history where he tries to locate the precious jewel of greatness.

Kazuo Ishiguro, in his intricate portrayal of Stevens, crafted a character whose tangible journey is echoed metaphorically by the introspective voyage his mind undertakes into the recesses of his past. This introspection is not a mere act of reminiscence; it represents Stevens' endeavor to reconstruct and reinterpret his life, molding it into a version more palatable to his conscience than the actual sequence of events that transpired. His narrative strategy is an exercise in self-preservation, seeking to veil what he perceives as the "grievous error" of his existence and to attribute a more profound significance to his life's trajectory. To this end, Stevens selectively amends certain particulars of his experiences, reshaping the narrative contours of his past.

Initially, readers are led to surmise that Stevens' impending journey primarily revolves around the pragmatic objective of enhancing the staffing arrangement at Darlington Hall, specifically by bringing Miss Kenton on board. However, as the novel progresses, the genuine impetus behind this expedition becomes evident to the reader, even if Stevens remains oblivious to it. It emerges that Stevens harbors deeper, unacknowledged feelings for Miss Kenton. Subtle indications of this emotional undercurrent can be discerned in his persistent refusal to address her by her marital moniker, Mrs. Benn. Even when confronted with his oversight, Stevens rationalizes his reference to Mrs. Benn as Miss Kenton, justifying it on the grounds of familiarity, asserting that he remembers her as the Miss Kenton who departed to wed two decades prior.

Throughout the narrative, Stevens' character is punctuated by a series of self-imposed justifications and excuses, often preemptive, for minor transgressions. As the consummate

butler, Stevens is driven by an unwavering commitment to perfection, eschewing any semblance of error or vulnerability. For instance, when Miss Kenton discovers Stevens engrossed in a romantic novel, he hastens to defend his choice, asserting that his intent is to enhance his linguistic proficiency in service of his role as a butler. This leaves the reader grappling with the question of whether Stevens is genuinely in denial of his personal predilections or if his assertions hold genuine merit.

In the unique and somewhat unconventional narrative timeline of “The Remains of the Day”, the protagonist Stevens embarks on a journey that serves as an exposition of his deeply concealed passions and unwavering loyalty. This dual loyalty is directed towards Miss Kenton, with whom he shares a subtle romantic inclination, and Lord Darlington, to whom he dedicates his unflinching service. The story is anchored in the sprawling estate of an aristocratic lord, set against the tumultuous backdrop of the immediate aftermath of World War I.

This narrative is more than just a recounting of events; it delves deep into the psychological intricacies and scars borne by individuals in the post-war era. Rendered in an autobiographical format, the tale captures the inherent trauma and introspection characteristic of the period. Lord Darlington, as revisited through Stevens’ memories, emerges not merely as an isolated character but as a symbolic representation of the broader socio-political landscape of post-war England.

Ishiguro masterfully illuminates the quintessence of servitude in the English aristocratic system through the character of Stevens, a paragon of loyalty and dedication. Yet, as the narrative progresses, Stevens grapples with a burgeoning realization. He begins to discern the potentially malevolent underpinnings of his master’s intentions, a master to whom he has devoted the prime of his life, even at the expense of personal love. Memory plays a pivotal role, particularly spotlighting Stevens’ unrequited love and the poignant lament of unexpressed sentiments between him and Miss Kenton.

Stevens’ service under Lord Darlington parallels the service of his own father, who also served in the esteemed Darlington Hall, a bastion of British aristocracy. Following the demise of the old master and prompted by conversations with his new employer, Stevens embarks on a reflective journey, reminiscing about events that underscore his personal and professional misjudgments. His unwavering commitment to the ideals of his profession, even in moments of profound personal grief such as his own father’s demise, showcases his extreme dedication. Instead of attending to his ailing father, he chooses to serve inebriated guests, a testament to his misplaced priorities.

Throughout the novel, there’s an evident tension between Stevens’ allegiance to Lord Darlington, whom he views as a surrogate father figure, and his biological father. This dynamic speaks volumes about the internal conflicts Stevens faces. The narrative, primarily through memory recollections, paints a vivid picture of Stevens’ sincerity, his efforts to mask his genuine affections, and his naivety. This intricate portrayal evokes a range of emotions, prompting readers to grapple with the complexities of duty, love, and personal sacrifice.

The cognitive processes and recollections of Stevens attempt to rectify his past decisions and find a resolution, but invariably, he falls short. This portrayal of memory

positions Stevens as a figure trapped by the weight of historical actions and circumstances, highlighting his inability to muster practical wisdom or maturity in response to events that shape his life.

Stevens' conscious suppression of emotions serves as a conduit through which both his present state and an array of past incidents are elucidated, delineated in an epistemological sequence. This mental exercise underscores his attempts to come to terms with past transgressions and ruminations about actions he now deems avoidable. Utilizing repression as a coping mechanism, Stevens selectively filters certain experiences from his conscious recollection, allowing only particular events to permeate his awareness.

As the narrative progresses, the protagonist gradually relinquishes his anguish over lost romantic opportunities and his misguided allegiance to Lord Darlington's controversial political sympathies. Instead, he pivots towards making the most of his remaining days, as captured in his reflection: "I gave my best to Lord Darlington, hoping my life's endeavors might contribute, albeit modestly, to the betterment of the world." This characterization of Ishiguro's protagonist embodies certain enduring values that have anchored Japanese society for centuries.

However, it's also evident that there are values and behaviors in Stevens that might be perceived as less refined or cultured. The scars of the post-colonial era have left many individuals grappling with a sense of loss, yet there persists a profound emotional attachment to cultural legacies tarnished by conflict. Stevens is emblematic of this sentiment, with his palpable nostalgia for his former master and the noble ideals of service. Taking into account these insights into Stevens' character and his propensity to suppress genuine emotions, it becomes evident that he is an unreliable narrator. Only in the denouement does he achieve full self-awareness, and Ishiguro masterfully constructs this character arc, drawing deeply buried truths to the forefront, sometimes against the protagonist's own intent.

He failed to realize his relationship with Miss. Kenton and he also failed to attend to his father as he lay dying on his death bed and he was busy to attending the conference. *The Remains of the Day* has a great ability to attract its reader by the clever use of unreliable narration. Stevens possesses a great quantity of 'self-understanding' and foresight but he sacrifices everything for the sake of his Butler's dignity. It is very well shows in his confession in the form of unreliable narration 'that Stevens realizes the scale of his errors.' (Wai Chew-Sim, 45)

In one of his interview Ishiguro states in relation to Ono, the narrator of *An Artist of the Floating World*, holds true for *The Remains of the Day*, in that both novels explore a parochial perspective through the employment of an unreliable narrator who attempts to come to terms with his past. (Elit Oztabak, 49)

In his quest to epitomize the quintessential traits of an English Butler—discretion, calmness, and a deep-seated reverence for hierarchy—Stevens strives with a fervent intensity. However, as Oztabak astutely points out, Stevens' endeavors are continually compromised by his tendencies to subvert both his narrative and his own sense of self (Oztabak, 50). Upon his departure from Darlington Hall, a place that once defined his existence and identity, the

imprints of the grand estate begin to dissipate from his consciousness. As he ventures further into unfamiliar terrain, he likens the sensation to that of a sailor embarking on a voyage, losing sight of the familiar shoreline. There comes a pivotal moment, much like when sailing aboard a ship, where one eventually loses tangible sight of the land. The amalgamation of unease intertwined with a rush of exhilaration often associated with such a maritime transition, I conjecture, closely mirrors the tumult of emotions I experienced in the Ford as the once-familiar landscapes transformed into uncharted territories.

As this article concludes, it's evident that Stevens, in his pursuit of perfection within his role, often grapples with profound internal dichotomies. The interplay between duty and personal desire, between the structured confines of Darlington Hall and the expansive unknown, encapsulates the intricate complexities of his character. It's a poignant reminder of the sacrifices made in the quest for professional excellence and the inexorable passage of time that can lead one away from familiar terrains, both physically and emotionally.

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