

MEMORY, SELF-DECEPTION AND DENIAL IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S
THE REMAINS OF THE DAY

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ABSTRACT. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* delves into the intricacies of memory, self-deception, and denial through the lens of its protagonist, Stevens, a devoted butler. This article meticulously examines the interplay of these themes within the novel, elucidating their profound impact on Stevens' identity and worldview. By meticulously dissecting Ishiguro's narrative, the paper elucidates how memory functions as a tool for constructing personal narratives, particularly evident in Stevens' selective recollection of events to maintain his idealized butler persona. Furthermore, it explores Stevens' unwavering commitment to duty, which leads to his blindness towards his employer's moral failings and the subsequent isolation and regret he faces. Through a comprehensive analysis, this paper argues that Stevens' self-deception and denial emanate from a quest for dignity and purpose, underscoring Ishiguro's critique of sacrificing integrity for societal conformity. Moreover, it elucidates how Ishiguro's exploration resonates with broader philosophical discourse on memory, identity, and ethical considerations, accentuating the imperative of acknowledging past errors for individual growth and societal advancement.

KEY WORDS: memory, self-deception, denial, unreliable narrator, Kazuo Ishiguro

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, born on November 8, 1954, is a highly acclaimed British novelist of Japanese descent whose literary oeuvre traverses themes of memory, identity, and the intricate interplay between personal narratives and historical contexts. Raised in Guildford, Surrey, Ishiguro's formative years were marked by a fusion of cultural influences, a dynamic that would profoundly shape his artistic sensibilities. Graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Philosophy from the University of Kent in 1978, Ishiguro embarked on a literary career characterized by a nuanced exploration

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of human experience, often set against the backdrop of societal upheaval or cultural displacement. His debut novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), garnered critical acclaim for its evocative portrayal of postwar Japan and introduced Ishiguro as a masterful chronicler of the complexities of memory and the enduring legacy of historical trauma. Subsequent works, including *The Remains of the Day* (1989), which won the prestigious Booker Prize, and *Never Let Me Go* (2005), further solidified Ishiguro's reputation as a preeminent voice in contemporary literature. Throughout his career, Ishiguro's thematic preoccupations and stylistic finesse have earned him numerous accolades, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017, underscoring his enduring influence on the literary landscape and the enduring relevance of his narrative inquiries into the human condition.

Interestingly enough, quite a big part of Kazuo Ishiguro's Nobel Lecture is the author's reflection on the role of memory in his life and writing. Ishiguro begins his pondering by describing how, as a child growing up in England with Japanese parents, he was simultaneously constructing a sense of identity rooted in his Japanese heritage. Despite being physically distant from Japan, he formed a mental image of the country based on memories, stories, and personal experiences shared by his parents. The author expresses a sense of urgency to preserve his memories of Japan, recognizing that the Japan of his childhood was evolving and fading. As a result, Ishiguro considers that the intense writing period in Norfolk was in fact a subconscious act of preservation, an attempt to capture and safeguard the specific colors, customs, and nuances of his imagined Japan before they faded from his mind. Moreover, in his Nobel Lecture Ishiguro reflects on the cultural context of his early years in England, emphasizing the contrast between the England of the 1960s and the rapidly changing social landscape of the 1970s. In addition, he describes his joyous wonder the acceptance and generosity of the local community towards his family, despite the recent history of conflict between Japan and England during World War II. However, the author is forced to highlight the dichotomy of his life, living by English middle-class expectations externally while maintaining a different set of rules and expectations at home with his Japanese parents. This dual existence contributed to a sense of belonging to both cultures yet being an outsider in each, what we could now define as postcolonial. Besides his personal history and attempt at preserving the past through the use of memory and writing, Ishiguro describes how external events, such as reading Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* influenced his approach to writing. Ishiguro explains that Proust's non-linear narrative and exploration of memory not only provided him with a new perspective on storytelling, but also inspired him to move away from traditional linear plots. As a result, Ishiguro expressed a desire to explore richer narrative techniques based on use of tangential thought associations

and drifting memories, an approach that allows for a more complex exploration of characters' inner worlds and the layers of self-deception and denial associated with memory.

Stevens – The Unreliable Narrator

In Kazuo Ishiguro's renowned novel *The Remains of the Day*, the protagonist, Stevens, serves as a window into the intricacies of memory, self-deception, and denial. Set against the backdrop of post-war England, Ishiguro constructs a narrative that attempts to closely examine the complexities of human psychology and the construction of personal narratives. Through the lens of Stevens, a devoted butler who has dedicated his life to serving his employer, Lord Darlington, Ishiguro invites readers to explore the profound impact of memory on identity and worldview.

Toprak (2019: 1050) correctly observes that Ishiguro has a predisposition to using a first person unreliable narrator in his novels, which serves very specific purposes. The common use of an unreliable narrator is something that the author confesses himself as well, when, in an interview with Don Swaim (2008: 103) Ishiguro states: "I've always used first person narrative, and for me, the great advantage of using a narrator who is also a central character is that you tell readers what that character is like, not just through what happens to him and what he says and does to other characters, but just through the tone of his voice, those words that are there on the page. And so I think a very subtle relationship is created with the reader and the central character, if the central character is the one actually telling the story." Nonetheless, Toprak (2019: 1050) argues that the unreliable narrator of Ishiguro's Booker Prize winning novel specifically "constructs his narrative within a multi-layered structure" and as a result encompasses "hidden meanings" within the recollection of his memories. Whether one agrees with the idea that "Stevens proves to be afflicted with the complications coming from midlife crisis" (Jaffary et al. 2022: 87), which the authors of the article "Generativity Versus Stagnation: Midlife Crisis in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains Of The Day*" have drawn by "reading between the lines", forced by an unreliable narrator who seems "to be hiding his true motives and intentions", most readers would probably agree with their following statements: "the reader in the process of reading the novel has to wrestle with an unreliable narrator-protagonist who is not honest even with himself. Thus, for the most part of the novel, confronted with this psychologically complicated narrator-protagonist, one needs to look for his genuine psychological drives through the signs he leaves behind" (Jaffary et al. 2022: 87-8). Therefore, Ishiguro's deliberate use of the unreliable narrator in *The Remains of the Day* serves as a significant narrative tool that pushes readers into a maze of apparently random recollections that, in fact, carry hidden meaning, thus inviting readers to

engage in a process of introspection, so that they may challenge perceptions of truth and self-awareness.

Stevens's Physical and Metaphorical Journey

The Remains of the Day unfolds as Stevens embarks on a journey to revisit his past, both in terms of his professional career and personal relationships. Scholars generally agree that Stevens's journey is not only physical, but also serves as a metaphor: "Significantly, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* begins with a journey, an archetypal undertaking which is traditionally a motivation for self-discovery and insight" (Jaffary et al. 2022: 83). Adam Parkes (2001: 28) emphasizes that, although the butler's motoring trip is an actual journey taking place in "present chronological time and in actual geographical space", Stevens' trip to the West also functions as a metaphorical "journey of remembrance." Brian Shaffer (2006: 161) contends that "although Stevens remains largely oblivious of the idea, this physical trip, as figured and prefigured in the novel, is a voyage not only out of the house but out of his mental routine and psychological paralysis in search of amatory and political engagement." Toprak (2019: 1051) reads the butler's car trip across Britain as "an epistemological journey where he can no longer remain a stable, ontological being."

However, what needs to be emphasized is that Stevens's journey is fundamental in both the readers' and the narrator's quests for meaning and truth, as "Stevens' external and then internal adventures begin after that he is empowered and encouraged to be disentangled from servitude. His exploration of his own social roles begins when his master gives him the opportunity to feel important" (Jaffary et al. 2022: 84). Therefore, through a physical journey that is paralleled by a trip down the memory lane, the novel's (anti)hero is granted to possibility of introspection outside of the confines of what he has previously perceived as true, while also being forced to reassess the veracity of the already known and accepted versions of identity, history and even reality.

Language, Narrative and Selective Memory

As Stevens reminisces about his time at Darlington Hall, memories emerge not merely as objective recollections of past events but rather as subjective constructs that reflect Stevens' selective interpretation of his own life. This selective recollection serves as a mechanism for Stevens to maintain his idealized butler persona, underscoring the theme of memory as a tool for constructing personal narratives.

The way Stevens' selective memory functions in the novel in order to construct the narrative is important, since it becomes obvious that we are told "stories that mask or distort rather than uncover the most revealing implications" (Shaffer 2006: 158). Describing Ishiguro as "above all a novelist of the unspoken", Shaffer (2006:

158) supports the previously mentioned discussion concerning the importance of the unreliable narrator, whose selection of recounted memories must be analyzed not only based on what the narrator states, but also on what he fails to mention as well as the language he uses in doing so. The same author points out that “the narrative moves back and forth seamlessly across events spanning several decades of the protagonist’s life to form a vast web of personal and historical traumas” (158), offering the reader the grand picture as well as the key to understand both what is said as well as what remains unspoken. However, Shaffer takes his analysis a step further, arguing that Ishiguro’s novel, “obscures as much as it illuminates the true nature of [Stevens’s] his earlier life at Darlington Hall and his present voyage west” (161).

Shaffer’s observation is in line with Ishiguro’s intent and identity as a writer. Comparing himself with Rushdie, whose use of language “always seems to be reaching out—to express meaning that can’t usually be expressed through normal language” (Vorda and Herzinger 2008: 70). Ishiguro sees himself as being “almost the antithesis.” The reason for this description is the fact that “the language I use tends to be the sort that actually suppresses meaning and tries to hide away meaning rather than chase after something just beyond the reach of words. I’m interested in the way words hide meaning” (Vorda and Herzinger 2008: 70-1). Moreover, Ishiguro confesses the same intention in a different interview: “I was trying to explore that type of language, how people use the language of self-deception and self-protection” (Mason 2008: 5). One way in which Stevens uses the language of self-deception and self-protection is what Ishiguro calls “butler-speaks” when describing his intentions with the book: “I tried to write the whole book in a kind of “butler-speak.” So that the actual language—the way that he struggled in the way he used the language—just to keep a hold of his emotions, just to keep in control and not lose control, would actually support the theme of the book” (Swaim 2008: 103). Moreover, the author explains that the butler recounts events in a calculated manner, choosing words and topics carefully as he intentionally tries to avoid certain uncomfortable truths. Despite Stevens’s attempts, there is an underlying awareness of these avoided issues, which actually makes the narrative go further. Sadly, the butler-narrator tries to handle his inner conflict, refusing to acknowledge his painful inner reality:

[Stevens] ends up saying the sorts of things he does because somewhere deep down he knows which things he has to avoid... Why he says certain things, why he brings up certain topics at certain moments, is not random. It’s controlled by the things that he doesn’t say. That’s what motivates the narrative. He is in this painful condition where at some level he does know what’s happening, but he hasn’t quite brought it to the front. (Swift 2008: 38)

Ishiguro confesses that his interest focuses on how people attempt to either justify their actions when reconsidering their lives or “hide from themselves.” Therefore, every event in his novels deals with the dramatic fact that “one side of the person demanding a certain honesty, and the other side demanding some kind of preservation from the truth” (Kelman 2008: 45).

Stevens – The Dignified Butler

The so-called “events” of the novel, as well as what drives Stevens's (re)actions throughout the novel are based on the butler's desire for dignity, one of the central themes of *The Remains of the Day*. The concept of dignity is closely connected to that of memory, as Stevens prides himself in quoting definitions of what makes a great butler: “I will try and quote accurately from memory; the most crucial criterion is that the applicant be possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position” (Ishiguro 1990: 25). Therefore, what and how Stevens remembers needs to be closely and carefully chosen, so that his self-delusion of greatness might not be affected.

As the novel opens, the reader discovers a butler with an American master, who intends to go on a “professional journey” in order to bring back a former employee, Miss Kenton (who is in fact Miss Benn), and restore the mansion in which he works to its previous British greatness, since the butler's greatness also depends on it. For Susie O'Brien (1996: 788), the presence of Mr Farraday, as opposed to that of Stevens, serves to construct “a narrative which is thematically constructed around an opposition between what are commonly regarded as Victorian values – formality, repression, and selfeffacement, summed up under the general heading of ‘dignity’ – and those associated with an idea of ‘America’ that has expanded, literally into a New World – freedom, nature, and individualism” (788). Thus, the reader is faced with a narrator whose definition of dignity opposes individuality, requiring self-effacement, as much as possible. It comes as no surprise, thus, that Stevens accepts his new master's proposal to enjoy a well-deserved holiday under the pretense of duty:

Having made such an analysis of the situation, it was not long before I found myself reconsidering Mr Farraday's kind suggestion of some days ago. For it had occurred to me that the proposed trip in the car could be put to good professional use; that is to say, I could drive to the West Country and call on Miss Kenton in passing, thus exploring at first hand the substance of her wish to return to employment here at Darlington Hall. (Ishiguro 1990: 7)

As Stevens' imagined dignity compels him to offer extra clarifications, the conversation between him and Mr Farraday becomes comical, but also deplorable, since the American master sees through Stevens's British repression, freely joking about it:

But you will perhaps understand that there was a natural tendency on my part, in asking what was after all a generous favour from my employer, to hint that there was a good professional motive behind my request. So it was that in indicating my reasons for preferring the West Country for my motoring, [...] I made the error of declaring that a former housekeeper of Darlington Hall was resident in that region. [...] It was only after I had mentioned Miss Kenton that I suddenly realized how entirely inappropriate it would be for me to continue. [...] I suspect, then, that I paused rather abruptly and looked a little awkward. In any case, Mr Farraday seized the opportunity to grin broadly at me and say with some deliberation:

'My, my, Stevens. A lady-friend. And at your age.'

This was a most embarrassing situation, one in which Lord Darlington would never have placed an employee. But then I do not mean to imply anything derogatory about Mr Farraday; he is, after all, an American gentleman and his ways are often very different. There is no question at all that he meant any harm; but you will no doubt appreciate how uncomfortable a situation this was for me. (Ishiguro 1990: 10-1)

Stevens' language once again becomes a valuable resource, since the butler's choice of words such as "inappropriate", "embarrassing" or "awkward" demonstrate his fear of losing his dignity and therefore also his greatness.

However, Stevens' strongest sense of dignity comes from his relationship with Lord Darlington, whose memory Stevens vainly struggles to preserve, as the novel's narrator is aware that his greatness depends on the gentleman he works for: "a butler's greatness is attained only insofar as he serves a great gentleman" (Ishiguro 1990: 10). While in service of Lord Darlington, Stevens' strongest desire is that of serving his master, as the butler himself confesses: "As far as I am concerned [...] my vocation will not be fulfilled until I have done all I can to see his lordship through the great tasks he has set himself. The day his lordship's work is complete, the day he is able to rest on his laurels, content in the knowledge that he has done all anyone could ever reasonably ask of him, only on that day [...], will I be able to call myself [...], a well-contented man" (Ishiguro 1990: 149).

Nonetheless, the great gentleman that Stevens serves proves to be an anti-Semitic Nazi sympathizer, a fact that the butler finds hard to accept. The reader starts inferring the true nature of Lord Darlington, when Stevens describes a "very minor episode in the thirties which has been blown up out of all proportion" (Ishiguro 1990: 118), when he is required to dismiss the maids from their responsibilities due to their

Jewish nationality. Nevertheless, Stevens constantly feels compelled to justify Lord Darlington's actions, since the master's use of plural personal pronouns such as "we" and "our" grant Stevens the sense of greatness that he longs for, leading to the self-erasure of his individuality. Miss Kenton is the only character that sees through the injustice, confronting Stevens and reminding him of his humanity, but also of his ordinariness, which he rejects by succumbing to his own definition of dignity: "Miss Kenton, I am surprised to find you reacting in this manner. Surely I don't have to remind you that our professional duty is not to our own foibles and sentiments, but to the wishes of our employer" (Ishiguro 1990: 127).

Stevens' relationship with Lord Darlington, and the latter's greatness are constantly scrutinized throughout the journey, as the butler meets different people whose versions of the past and what it means to have dignity in their present strongly opposes Stevens'. The narrator's exposure to the reality of Lord Darlington's relationship with Germany and to the way in which common people describe him activate Stevens' defense mechanisms to such an extent that he denies having ever met his former master, while wearing his clothes and pretending to be someone else. Ishiguro points out that meeting these strangers forces him to acknowledge that dignity might be defined differently. The author explains that the definition offered to Stevens by the villagers while discussing politics is "that dignity comes from being a democratic citizen, the ability to control, to some extent, your own fate. But that only comes if you actually accept responsibility and participate" (Swaim 2008:102). As a result, Stevens' definition of dignity is challenged by this new one, since "up until then, he thinks dignity is just behaving like a butler in this kind of very stiff, unruffled way which he begins to see toward the end of the book is a very empty and shallow definition of the word" (Swaim 2008: 102-3).

Truth, Love and Self-Deception

Brian Shaffer considers that Stevens uses a Freudian tool, repression, in order to preserve his dignity. For Shaffer (2006: 163), repression as a tool of protection is "Stevens' ingrained habit of self-deception and self-censorship." Moreover, Shaffer enumerates multiple instances in which he considers that Stevens uses repression as a tool of preservation:

The butler clearly represses his sexual attraction to Miss Kenton, a woman with whom he works [...]; represses his disappointment upon learning that she is engaged to be married to another [...]; represses his "political conscience" through a total identification with his "master," Lord Darlington; and represses his emotional turmoil on the evening of his father's death, which he conflates with his successful professional

trial-by-fire during that same evening at Lord Darlington's first international political conference. (Shaffer 2006: 163)

Despite the long list of instances of repression, Guth (1999: 126) maintains that there are two main areas that Ishiguro minutely deals with in *The Remains of the Day*: "there are two hidden narratives, the one relating to Stevens' public self as butler and to the class he serves, the other to what we may call his unseen love affair with Miss Kenton." In addition, Laura Colombino (2023: 213) explains that "the representation of love in Kazuo Ishiguro's work most commonly involves both loss and longing." Moreover, Colombino sees the theme of love as "inscribed in Ishiguro's larger investigation of the human search for meaning within a context of professional and parental obligations, on the one hand, and the inexorable passing of time, on the other" (2023: 213). Colombino considers that Stevens clings to the belief that his total dedication to butlering could somehow benefit humanity, thus denying himself romantic love, only to realize the depth of his mistake by the end of the novel. Furthermore, the critic suggests, "apparently attuned to the Freudian idea that eros must be sacrificed to the construction of civilization [...] Stevens fittingly renounces love for the higher good of Lord Darlington's deludedly idealistic conception of international politics" (213). As a conclusion, Colombino shows, "it is paradoxical that [...] a novel about a love story that never quite takes place, is the work by Ishiguro which has been most frequently associated with eros" (213).

On the other hand, while discussing the importance of the butler in the novel, Ishiguro argues that "the role of the butler is to serve inconspicuously while creating the illusion of absence and at the same time being physically on hand to do these things" (Vorda and Herzinger 2008: 87). Ishiguro continues by saying that a character who desires to be a perfect butler is "a powerful metaphor for someone who is trying to actually erase the emotional part of him that may be dangerous and that could really hurt him in his professional area" (Vorda and Herzinger 2008: 87). However, the author explains that Stevens' failure results from the fact that "these kinds of human needs, the longings for warmth and love and friendship, are things that just don't go away", something that the butler "probably realizes at the end of the novel when he starts to get an inkling about this question of bantering. He starts to read more and more into why he can't banter, and this is an indication that he is somehow cut off from other people. He can't even make the first steps in forming relationships with other people" (Vorda and Herzinger 2008: 87). Moreover, Ishiguro explains that Stevens' language is meant "to keep his opinions and emotions at a distance", since he "is afraid of the human in him" (Swaim 2008: 103). In addition, Ishiguro points out, Stevens is

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a man very, very scared of love, and that's why he puts up this incredible alibi really, saying that he is this dedicated professional butler. And that it's the duty of the butler not to have any emotions and to him, that's a kind of professional perfection. But what I'm suggesting, what Stevens comes to realize at the end of the book is that it's a very hollow achievement, and in fact, it's not an achievement at all; it's just cowardice, it's just a way of running away from the really challenging, really scary part of being a human being. (Swaim 2008:103)

However, throughout the novel, Miss Kenton constantly forces Stevens to face a reality that he denies, once even exclaiming: "Why, Mr. Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to pretend?" (Ishiguro 1990: 154) Moreover, Brian Shaffer (2006: 165) acknowledges that "other attractive women are viewed by him as unbearable 'distractions'", a fact noticed by Miss Kenton, who asks the questions that Stevens fears the most, since they uncover his humanity: "Might it be that our Mr. Stevens fears distractions? Can it be that our Mr. Stevens is flesh and blood after all and cannot fully trust himself?" (Ishiguro 1990: 156)

The answer is obviously affirmative, since, according to Ishiguro, Stevens "wishes to deny this human aspect of himself" (Kelman 2008: 46). Ishiguro goes on to say that *The Remains of the Day* is "a story of a man who [...] is so ambitious to achieve a certain ideal that he does so at terrible cost. He actually loses a part of himself that is crucial: that is to say, his capacity to love" (Kelman 2008: 46). Ishiguro restates that he considered the internationally known and accepted "stereotypical figure of the English butler" would be appropriate to "serve well as some kind of emblem of this terrible fear of the emotional self, and the tendency to equate feelings with weakness" (Kelman 2008: 46).

At the same time, Stevens' denial concerning the reality of Miss Kenton's engagement and eventually marriage is emphasized by his incapacity to refer to her on her current name, Miss Benn. According to Wojciech Drag (2014: 46), Stevens' incapacity and/or unwillingness to refer to his former colleague by her current name is both "an indication of his refusal to acknowledge the change in the former housekeeper's status" as well as a demonstration of "his inability to accept the loss of Miss Kenton as a romantic figure in his life". However, when the two former colleagues meet, Miss Kenton becomes the voice of truth, once again challenging Stevens's consistent denial and self-deception:

'I feel I should answer you, Mr Stevens. [...] Yes, I do love my husband. [...] When I left Darlington Hall all those years ago, I never realized I was really, truly leaving. I believe I thought of it as simply another ruse, Mr Stevens, to annoy you. [...] But then

year after year went by, there was the war, Catherine grew up, and one day I realized I loved my husband. You spend so much time with someone, you find you get used to him. He's a kind, steady man, and yes, Mr Stevens, I've grown to love him.' [...] 'But that doesn't mean to say, of course, there aren't occasions now and then – extremely desolate occasions – when you think to yourself: "What a terrible mistake I've made with my life." And you get to thinking about a different life, a better life you might have had. For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr Stevens. And I suppose that's when I get angry over some trivial little thing and leave. But each time I do so, I realize before long – my rightful place is with my husband. After all, there's no turning back the clock now. One can't be forever dwelling on what might have been. One should realize one has as good as most, perhaps better, and be grateful. (Ishiguro 1990: 207)

Conclusions

Eaglestone (2023: 188) is right to affirm that "Ishiguro's characters are bound by their actions and the chain of reactions that follow, and this leads to attempted justifications, regrets, a desire for consolation, and forms of working-through or coming-to-terms, or the failure of these." Stevens is one of these characters whose choices, self-deception, and denial lead to attempted justifications, regrets and the quest for a way to properly live his "remains of the day." Interestingly enough, for Ishiguro:

Most of us are like butlers because we have these small, little tasks that we learn to do, but most of us don't attempt to run the world. We just learn a job and try to do it to the best of our ability. We get our pride from that and then we offer up a little contribution to somebody up there, or an organization, or a cause, or a country. We would like to tell ourselves that this larger thing that we're contributing towards is something good and not something bad and that's how we draw a lot of our dignity. Often we just don't know enough about what's going on out there and I felt that that's what we're like. We're like butlers. (Vorda and Herzinger 2008: 87)

Therefore, *The Remains of the Day* is not only a reflection of the main character's capacity for denial and self-deception, neither solely a depiction of the profound implications of memory on the character's understanding of reality, but also a wake-up call to every reader, who is invited to reassess his choices, his past, as well as the present reality, in order to ensure individual growth and societal progress.

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