

**Ideological or Psychological Subjugation?
- Inescapable Servitude in *The Remains of
the Day* (1993)**

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Abstract

This research paper explores Stevens - the protagonist of the cinematic text *The Remains of the Day* (1993) which is directed by James Ivory, whilst aiming to delineate his absolute servitude to the British aristocracy and its socio-psychological impact on his personal alienation. The study further attempts to posit Stevens's predicament and reification within the wider socio-political context of 1930s Britain. The seemingly innocuous employer-patron relationship is analysed through the convergent theoretical frameworks of Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses, Karl Marx's false consciousness and

Freudian psychoanalysis. As revealed in the discussion, it is evident that Stevens has internalised British aristocratic values to the extent of complete subjectivity, reflecting the concepts of subject and agent under hegemonic reproduction and emotional repression. This interdisciplinary research thus postulates the ways that servile subjectivity is produced and maintained drawing on contemporary research and situating Stevens's narration within a conceptualisation of broader forms of social and psychological domination within a postcolonial British social system.

Keywords: Marxism, Repression, Servitude,

The Remains of the Day.

Introduction

Unearthing the concealed realities of the power dynamics in British society; James Ivory's movie *The Remains of the Day* (1993) mirrors the contemporary socio - political dynamics of 1930s Britain. This cinematic adaptation, which is based on the book *The Remains of the Day*

by Kazuo Ishiguro, features a stellar cast consisting of Anthony Hopkins, Emma Thompson and James Fox. This study engages in a close reading of the protagonist, Stevens's character - the butler of Darlington Hall, through whose reminiscences the movie is unraveled, exploring how Stevens's immense loyalty and unwavering servitude to the British aristocracy in the movie *The Remains of the Day* reflect the broader socio-political hierarchy of Britain in the 1930s whilst analysing the socio-political and psychological implications of Stevens's predicament.

Literature Review

Contemporary scholarship has extensively researched *The Remains of the Day* as a critique of hierarchical servitude and its ramifications. Ishiguro's novel presents an implicit critique of Britain's stratified class apparatus (Ishiguro, 1989), which Ivory's film adaptation visually reinforces through mise-en-scène and dialogue construction as complementary critiques of aristocratic hegemony (Ivory, 1993). Scholarly analysis of power

dynamics in the cinematic text *The Remains of the Day* unearths the aristocratic ideologies of pre-war British society which dictated rigid roles for servants, perpetuating a system where unquestioning loyalty was expected. This paper builds on these discussions by exploring how Stevens entraps himself within this ideological interpellation, leading to his internalisation of dominant class values and ultimate personal downfall.

Further insights are drawn from prevailing research studies which analyse the psychological and historical context of Stevens's servitude. Scholarly works including Molly Westerman's seminal analysis of the butler as a metaphor for the fragmented self, posit how Stevens's identity is shaped by his servile position as a servant within the domestic hierarchy (Westerman, 2000). The film is also further examined in relation to other critical perspectives on the British class system highlighting the moral and ethical dilemmas of Stevens's unflinching loyalty.

Research Problem

The research problem employed in this study is “How does Stevens’s unwavering servitude to the British aristocracy in the movie *The Remains of the Day* reflect the broader socio-political hierarchy of Britain in the 1930s via Marxist and Psychological lenses?” Set against the backdrop of a declining aristocracy, the protagonist of the movie, Stevens, the butler of the fictional Darlington Hall, remains steadfast in his faith toward the English gentry. This study attempts to explore how his life is entirely defined by an unwavering devotion to service, to the extent that he consistently prioritises duty over personal relationships and his emotional fulfillment, dwelling on Marxist and Psychoanalytic literary criticism.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach through close cinematic textual analysis, primarily incorporating a thematic analysis of servitude and a character analysis of Stevens’s character against the backdrop of 1930s Britain,

unearthing the historical and cultural significance of Stevens's loyalty.

This study applies the *Marxist literary criticism* to explore the concept of class inequality and ideological indoctrination that Stevens encounters in *The Remains of the Day*. Under Marxist theory, Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses provides insights into how Stevens has internalised servitude as a virtue, reinforcing the hegemonic structure of British aristocracy. *The psychological repression theory* of Sigmund Freud is utilised in understanding Stevens's emotional detachment and suppressed desires. These theoretical frameworks aid in contextualising Stevens's unquestioning loyalty within the broader critique of class-based oppression and self-imposed psychological restraints.

Results and Discussion

Despite the evident collapse of the aristocratic order in contemporary times, Stevens's loyalty to the English nobility remains unshaken throughout the cinematic text

The Remains of the Day. He has thoroughly internalised the belief that serving the upper class is not merely his profession but his life's sole concern. This internalisation can be explicated via Louis Althusser's concept of *Ideological State Apparatuses* (Barry, 2009) which explains how institutions including the aristocracy, tradition, and even language reproduce ideology in individuals through cultural means rather than explicit forces. Stevens becomes a product of this ideological conditioning; hence he unconsciously perpetuates the hegemonic order by embracing servitude as a moral virtue.

The manner in which Stevens continues to serve guests during his father's terminal illness speaks volumes about the totalizing nature of his occupational identity as he prioritises professional responsibility over filial concern. This act reflects an overwhelming sense of obligation and a deeply ingrained ideological subordination of servitude. Notably, his reference to the problems of the estate as "*our problems*" is juxtaposed with his emotional detachment from his own father's death. However, this utterly passive

attitude becomes more comprehensible when perceived through the lens of his personal philosophy, expressed in the line: “*A man cannot call himself well-contented until he has done all he can to be of service to his employer.*” Stevens, therefore, embodies the servant whose identity is wholly shaped by the master-servant relationship that defined much of the 1930s British socio-cultural context.

Analysing Stevens’s character in isolation is insufficient without acknowledging the mechanisms through which aristocratic authority projects itself through figures such as Lord Darlington. Stevens consistently attributes omniscience and moral supremacy to the British gentry. His proclamation to the staff that “*History will be made under this roof*” implies his uncritical belief in the elite’s authority, regardless of their ethical legitimacy or political judgment. His deliberate concealment of his service under Lord Darlington, presumably to avoid public criticism, further underscores his faithful allegiance to the upper class. This act appears less as a strategic deception and more as an expression of fealty, highlighting

how Stevens remains oblivious to the political implications of the events unfolding around him.

The totality of Stevens's subjugation is explicitly encapsulated in his assertion: "*I was his butler. I was there to serve him, not to agree or disagree.*" This is echoed later in the encounter between Cardinal, Lord Darlington's godson and Stevens as follows: "*It's not my place to be curious about such matters.*" These statements posit Stevens's complete abnegation of personal agency, governed by capitulation to servitude. His deference is such that he holds Lord Darlington's motives to be "*the highest and noblest,*" rendering Cardinal's attempts to enlighten him utterly ineffective. Stevens's faculty of rational reflection is thus constrained by his ideological conditioning, as theorised by Althusser, where the subject misrecognizes himself as an agent, whilst functioning as an ideological product of the system he serves.

The dismissal of the Jewish maids serves as a pivotal moment wherein Stevens's subservience becomes

particularly morally compromised. His justification, “*There are many things you and I don’t understand in this world. His lordship understands fully and has studied the larger issues at stake.*” reveals his willful ignorance, shaped by deep-rooted class ideologies. His eyes remain closed to the injustices around him, veiled by what can be read through the Marxist lens as *false consciousness*, which prevents the working class from recognising their own oppression and instead aligns them with the values of the dominant class.

The state of circumscription of Stevens’s thinking is further articulated in his statement about exploring the world: “*The world was always used to come to this house.*” This utterance encapsulates Stevens’s confinement within the narrow physical and psychological scope of Darlington Hall, revealing his immense idealisation of Darlington Hall as the nexus of experience.

Simultaneously, Stevens’s emotional detachment and incapacity to pursue human connection can be

examined through Sigmund Freud's theory of *psychological repression*. Freud posits that repressed desires and emotions often manifest in rigid behavioural patterns. (Barry, 2009). Stevens's ideal, "*A great butler must be possessed of dignity*" functions as a superego-driven directive that suppresses his id impulses, particularly those related to intimacy and affection. For instance, Ms. Kenton's observation "*Why do you always have to hide what you feel?*" succinctly captures Stevens's defensive posture and repression. The 'book scene' where she attempts to connect with him through the avenue of literature reveals a momentary exposure of buried passions, suggesting that his psyche contains unacknowledged longings that he has trained himself to disavow.

His inhibition of carnal desires is poignantly juxtaposed with the scene of intimacy between two junior servants of a much lower social class. Stevens's plea to Ms. Kenton to leave him alone is lucidly more than a request for solitude - yet a desperate effort to maintain professional

boundaries that shield him from emotional vulnerability. His statement, *“In future, we should only discuss during the day. If necessary, by written message,”* is emblematic of a superego-driven compulsion to contain and deny emotional expression. Even when Ms. Kenton repeats that she is still contemplating a marriage proposal, his utter passivity reveals the extent of his emotional repression. His impassivity and rigidity in the face of her emotional turmoil reflect Freud’s concept of defense mechanisms, where the ego wards off anxiety by suppressing uncomfortable truths.

In contrast, Ms. Kenton’s later life, though in a loveless marriage, still allows her to project herself in the roles of wife and mother rather than being entirely confined to her career, in stark contrast to Stevens, who remains completely imprisoned within his professional identity. Her demonstrated capacity for emotional expression and regret starkly contrasts with Stevens’s stoic façade further highlighting his psychological entrapment.

The film also vividly portrays Stevens's marginality through key cinematic moments. Despite his physical proximity, he remains a perpetual outsider to the elite discourse throughout the entire text. This is evident when he becomes the object of exploitation during a political discussion at Darlington Hall. When Mr. Spencer asks Stevens about economic matters such as American debt and Europe's financial crisis, he thrice repeats his inability to assist in such matters. In this moment, he is reduced to a symbol, used metonymically by the upper class to represent the common man. His silence speaks volumes about the vulnerability of his liminal social position, enforced by both the power dynamics of class and his self-imposed regulations that govern his self-perception.

His final remark "*Always was work, work, and more work and will continue to be so, I have no doubt.*" sums up his life's tragedy in a nutshell. Stevens accepts his predicament without question, never endeavouring to challenge the confines of the social and psychological role he has been trained to occupy. The film's concluding

scenes, where Stevens's new American employer, whose values contrast starkly with the European gentry he reveres, symbolise a shifting world order which again reinforces his inescapable entrapment. The final image of the bird flying freely from the mansion becomes a potent symbol of liberation and transformation whilst Stevens remains behind, shutting the windows, symbolically closing himself off from change and freedom. From both a Marxist and Freudian lens, Stevens, thus emerges as a tragic figure entrapped in a structure that exploits his labour, in juxtaposition to the bird's carefree flight.

Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, *The Remains of the Day* stands as a cinematic excavation that offers crucial insights into an individual whose physique and psyche are bound by the invisible chains of servitude. Louis Althusser's theory of *Ideological State Apparatuses* postulates how Stevens has internalised the aristocratic values to the point of self-erasure, thus reproducing hegemonic structures.

Simultaneously, Freud's *theory of repression* elucidates his emotional detachment and personal neurosis. Stevens's unyielding loyalty to the British aristocracy ultimately deprives him of the multifaceted life he might have lived, rendering his story not merely a personal tragedy, but a compelling reflection of how ideological and psychological structures shape and confine human flourishing within predetermined social contexts.

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Biographical Note

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