

# Historical, Political and Personal Double Narrative: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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**Abstract**—This paper discusses the historical, political and personal double narrative inherent in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989). The first-person narrator, butler Stevens approaches self-awareness from double angles of time and space. Although Stevens and his country, the British Empire had lost its glory of the past and the nostalgia of its magnificent days, they still try to look positively into the present. Drawing on historicity and mythology, aristocracy and democracy, Stevens' nostalgia and self-awareness, Ishiguro implies that we are all butlers. This paper does not find greatness within past nostalgia but explores the way to dignity through historical, political, and personal self-awareness in the fast changing world of today.

**Index Terms**—Double narrative, dignity, greatness, self-awareness.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro, a British writer of Japanese descent and a Nobel Prize laureate in 2017, won the Man Booker award in 1989 with his third novel *The Remains of the Day*. Unlike his first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), which were set on Japan, *The Remains of the Day* is a novel which is set on the British mansion, Darlington Hall, narrated in first person retrospectively by the butler Stevens, in the historical period after the first and the second world wars.

One of the ways of study into Ishiguro's works is grasping the interpretation of his works through the works' motives that Ishiguro reveals in his interviews. After a year after the publication of *The Remains of the Day*, in the interview on the CBS Radio with Don Swaim, when asked the question how he devised such butler as the protagonist of the novel, he answers by relating to the two kinds of facts he wanted to convey in the work. He points out that "a frustrating feeling I had as somebody who had grown up in an idealistic time in the late '60s and early '70s, when the younger generation—people of my age—we grew up thinking that we were going to change the world," and that "we had a duty to change the world" and, "certainly in England," "the tendency to equate expressing emotion with weakness" was "a trait very strong in English society and Japanese society" [1]. In the interview with Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger, Ishiguro commented that "it's almost impossible now to write a kind of traditional British novel," and that "the kind of England that I create in *The Remains of the Day* is not an England that

I believe ever existed"; he reveals that he was trying to do with the novel was "to actually rework a particular myth about a certain kind of mythical England," in other words, to portray "an England with sleepy beautiful villages with very polite people and butlers and people taking tea on the lawn" [2]. Through the usage of the metaphor in the shape of a butler, contained in Ishiguro's words that "we're like butlers" [3], this paper intends to discuss the historical, political and personal aspects of the Great British Empire that Ishiguro recreated, and the myth butler Stevens passed through.

This paper explores to look into the political historical nature of the Great British Empire appearing in *The Remains of the Day* and the personal historicity of butler Stevens as he served Lord Darlington in Darlington Hall. Also, the paper intends to delve into Steven's nostalgia and late revelation through his retrospection that takes place in conjunction with the scenery of the English manor as he goes on a journey to western England for six days on the encouragement of the new owner of Darlington Hall, Mr. Farraday. Therefore, the paper will discuss the historical nature, political nature and personal double narrative that Ishiguro purveys through the metaphor "we are like butlers". In addition, this paper examines whether the people living in the age of democracy should either remain as being "we are like butlers" and do the best in the given roles so that the people of greater importance doing major works can do their jobs or whether become the voices of criticism, although weak, to the "hub of this world's wheel" [4].

## II. HISTORICITY AND MYTHOLOGY

The prologue of this work is the July of 1956. The year 1956 is a landmark year, signaling the fall of the seemingly-infallible Great British Empire with the Suez Canal Crisis. The Crisis in Suez forced Britain to declare that "Britain is no longer the center of world order", and as the event acted as one that measured Britain being void of national dignity and America's influence in the post-world war era, it was a critical hit to Britain's national self-esteem. By purposefully setting the American Farraday the new owner of Darlington hall at the beginning of the novel, Ishiguro symbolically signifies that "the age of Pax Britannica came to an end and that the age of Pax Americana opened its sails" [5].

As evident in the example above, Ishiguro setting the background of his works with historical fact is consistent with the 80s Post-modern writers' "reinterpretation of history by utilizing new types of historical narrative." He leads "focus to an individual's diverse and personal history although the public history, represented by the highly

Manuscript received June 25, 2018; revised September 11, 2018.

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discussed Second World War, was the main historical subject...a narrative technique of fragmented and severed temporality” [6]. Lilian R. Furst suggests that *The Remains of the Day* is a traditional post-modernist historical novel in the aspect that it utilizes “public memory, private history” [7]. Within this work, Steven’s own history, his fractured and distorted history, is interlocked with the historical events that Great Britain had to face. Linda Hutcheon explains past representation that “in post-modernism novels, the boundaries between the past and the present, and the fabrication and the real are constantly breaking... but there are no solutions for the constantly appearing inconsistencies...the boundaries still remain” [8]. It is observable from Steven going on the journey wearing an outdated suit, in fashion at the time when Lord Darlington owned Darlington hall, and driving Mr. Farraday’s Ford that the past and the present existing within Stevens recreated.

July of 1956 in the prologue implies the crisis of Suez and the consequential fall of the Empire. Similarly, the Boer War in South Africa which Stevens’ brother Leonard participated proved that “a most un-British attack” and “irresponsibly commanded with several floutings of elementary military precautions” [9]. That because of the shameful strategy that made the death of Stevens’ brother worthless shows the historical nature of “the discovery of the tragedy of family history is also the cause of the dismantling of the British Empire” [10]. In addition, even though acknowledging the historical nature of the fickleness of Imperialism that his father had felt this loss keenly, when he serves Mr. John Silvers, the commander, as a visitor of the mansion, he stifles the hatred and focuses on his roles as the butler, showing his personal historical nature.

Apart from the historicity, it can be observed in the novel the English manor mythicized through Thatcherism of the 1980s, represented by “strong obsession and nostalgia about the national and cultural past, always remembered to be better than the present times” [11]. Ishiguro comments that the “Mythical England” was used as a political tool to criticize those who were harming the “giant nostalgia industry” and this “garden of Eden” [12] happening in England at the time. Such scenery of the English manor is told to be “the hierarchy between classes are naturally expressed and therefore unequal, but in the ideal world in which trust, responsibility and love are present, the gentleman and the farmer in the shack both feel happiness in the warming arms of history and nature” [13].

Such mysticism can be studied in relation to the scenery of the English mansion that Stevens comes across in West England. In the first night of his journeys in Salisbury, Stevens ruminates that “what really remains with me from this first day’s travel is not Salisbury Cathedral, nor any of the other charming sights of this city, but rather that marvelous view encountered this morning of the rolling English countryside” [14]. It is frequently pointed out that Stevens is an “unreliable narrator,” but he stresses that no objective narrator would not summarize the scenery of Britain great. Such meaning is shown through the recreation of mythic England through English scenery.

“I would say that it is the very lack of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart. What is

pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint. It is as though the land knows of its own beauty, of its own greatness, and feels no need to about it. In comparison, the sorts of sights offered in such places as Africa and America, though undoubtedly very exciting, would, I am sure, strike the objective viewer as inferior on account of their unseemly demonstrativeness” [15].

Such English scenery that possesses the beauty of moderation makes Stevens question himself “what is a ‘great’ butler?” [16] He believes that the word that is in closest proximity to the definition of a great butler is “dignity”, and this poses another question of what dignity is made up of. He says that he himself believes dignity is something, “the most crucial criterion is that the applicant be possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position” [17]. He comments initially that “if one looks at the matter objectively,” “dignity in keeping with his position” [18]. Stevens connects to what he said about English scenery and the greatness of “mythic Britain” and comments that “it is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants” [19].

This symbolically shows that although the radiant glory of the British Empire came to an end, in its place, the scenery of the English manor became mythicized and magnified again.

### III. ARISTOCRATISM AND DEMOCRACY

As Stevens goes on a journey to the open nature of west England on the July of 1956, he is simultaneously going on a journey of his memories to his life spent in the limited space of Darlington hall in the 1930s. On his third night of his journey, travelling round the state of Devon, on the question of “have you had much to do with politics yourself, sir?” by Mr. Harry Smith, he answers that “not directly as such, . . . more so before the war perhaps. . . with international affairs more than domestic ones” [20]. What Stevens said is not actually true nor false. He, as a perfect butler, accompanied his master, Lord Darlington, in his discussions with other aristocrats regarding important state affairs, suppressing and never showing any situational emotion and perfectly serving as a butler. Although what Steven recollects “to make our own small contribution to the creation of a better world, and saw that, as professionals, the surest means of doing so would be to serve the great gentlemen of our times in whose hands civilization had been entrusted” [21], is not as direct as it seems, but it is also plausible that he participated in aristocratic politics within the restricted space of Darlington hall. However, when Mr. Cardinal “If you care about his lordship, shouldn’t you be concerned? At least a little curious?” [22] asks in regard to the secret meetings, he claims that “it is not my position to display curiosity about such matters” [23] and thus paradoxically reveals that he did not contribute anything to the politics happening in front of his eyes. He only reflects that he had to try hard to maintain the “dignity in keeping with my position,” and rather feels achievement by being “even my father might have been proud of” [24]. “Through Stevens’ retrospection of and longing for Lord Darlington and Darlington Hall, Ishiguro poses criticism onto anachronistic and past-oriented

Britishness and reveals that the moral superiority that the standard of gentlemen asserts is inherently elitist and racially discriminative" [25].

On the contrary, as Stevens leaves Darlington hall, where he indirectly contributed to important state affairs, and as he sees the English scenery and the people of west England, Stevens learns, though indirectly, what politics are. His nostalgia and memories of the past that self-deceptive days which he cannot go back are fractured through the "unreliable narrator," and his journey thus goes along.

He painfully denies that his life of servitude as the perfect butler to his master of high moral is one of vain achievement, but as he comes across people who has firm roots on reality and live their lives, as the car he drives stops cold to such and such reasons, he himself puts regulations to his narrow-minded and self-deceitful ways of thinking.

In addition to this, what Stevens thought was closest to the Great Butlers and Great Britain, Dignity, the hardened self-esteem that he held about his occupation, could be, as aided by Harry Smith's personal view about Dignity, something that any normal people living in the democratic society can be a little bit proud of.

"Dignity's something every man and woman in this country can strive for and get. You'll excuse me, sir, but like I said before, we don't stand on ceremony here when it comes to expressing opinions. And that's my opinion for what it's worth. Dignity's not just something for gentlemen. . . . you're born free and you're born so that you can express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament or vote him out. That's what dignity's really about, if you'll excuse me, sir" [26].

The obdurate and small world view that has encircled Stevens in his life at Darlington Hall, clashes with democracy of Great Britain and the shells are coming apart to see new flesh growing. It is shown that what one should wear is not the formal, standardized but anachronistic suits of the nobles in the 1930s, but the easy-to-wear clothes that can fully express who one is, although the British Empire, since the Suez Crisis, became a weak island nation.

Stevens' recollection which shows him not being able to answer Lord Darlington and three other gentlemen about grave national matters in Darlington Hall shows the blindness of aristocratism which claims Democracy to be a system out of date. "Aristocratic Elites not only proposed the directions for British Society on the basis of morality, ethicality, responsibility and fair-play, but also played a role in constructing the British Empire and implementing moral superiority and nobles oblige" [27]. "We're always the last, Stevens. Always the last to be clinging on to outmoded systems. But sooner or later, we'll need to face up to the facts. Democracy is something for a bygone era. The world's far too complicated a place now for universal suffrage and such like. For endless members of parliament debating things to a standstill. All fine a few years ago perhaps, but in today's world?" [28]

Lord Darlington's words ironically show that he is still wearing the old clothes of anachronistic aristocratism. Stevens in the year 1956, recollecting the memories of that day, still supports the moral thinking of Lord Darlington, and towards the view of Mr. Smith regarding Democracy

comments that it was "the result of misguided thinking" [29], and thus puts his direction towards the distorted past rather than facing the present.

#### IV. STEVENS' NOSTALGIA AND SELF-AWARENESS

Adam Parkes argues that "the narrator of this novel is indivisible from the main subject of the book. As a matter of fact, the protagonist is indeed the focal point of the whole story". [30] "The British Butler" Stevens, who "gave thirty-five years' service to Lord Darlington" [31] can be said to be the direct focal subject of *The Remains of the Day*. He has spent for the past 35 years serving the noble Lord Darlington who is representative of the radiant and glorious British Empire, and will spend for the rest of his remaining days serving with all his heart and soul for the American Mr. Farraday. His rigidity, which he was proud of for his efforts to suppress and restrict his emotions and keep his dignity required for his occupation, a butler, is considered a delinquency of duties for not being able to flexibly meet Mr. Farraday's jokes.

In the initial parts of the novel, in response to the suggestion of a journey from the new owner of Darlington Hall, the American Mr. Farraday, Stevens speaks of his journey as one to visit and discuss labor force problems with one of the old employer of Darlington Hall, Miss Kenton, to imply that his journey is motivated by important business. After hearing this, Mr. Farraday banters by saying "My, my Stevens. A lady-friend. And at your age" [32]. To such banter, Stevens contemplates that when Lord Darlington was the master of Darlington Hall, he had never given a butler such jokes. Also, by being a butler not able to deal eloquently with Mr. Farraday's banter, Stevens shows his rigid ways of cognition by thinking to himself about his work "It is quite possible, then, that my employer fully expects me to respond to his bantering in a like manner, and considers my failure to do so a form of negligence" [33]. Although he gains a belated enlightenment by the conclusion of the novel, this shows that Stevens had led a narrow-minded and stiffened life to the fact that "bantering lies the key to human warmth" [34].

In addition, Stevens remembers that he had felt tremendous accomplishment regarding his work as a butler, "attained at least a little of that crucial quality of 'dignity' in the course of my career, such a person may wish to be directed towards that conference of March 1923" [35]. This unofficial international conversation was about "that fair play had not been done at Versailles and that it was immoral to go on punishing a nation for a war that was now over" [36] and was placed in Darlington Hall attended by Lord Darlington and other aristocrats of Europe to prevent the economic crisis of Germany. This conference would leave a glorious wound to both Lord Darlington and Stevens. Lord Darlington's elitism, which with moral superiority tried to practice good, succeeded in making the prestigious nobles of Europe and even the uncompromising Frenchman Mr. Dupont participate in the conversations. However, by the end of the talks, the American Mr. Lewis comments on Lord Darlington, who led through the whole session, to be "decent, honest, well-meaning. But his lordship here is an amateur" [37] and thus gives Lord Darlington a honorable wound. On the other hand, Stevens, professionally, to the point that he considered

self-deception, suppresses his own emotions and perfectly conducts his tasks as a butler, but he goes through a heartbreaking loss, being unable to watch his father's deathbed for serving his duties. However, Stevens thinks over the event of the past and asserts that "for all its sad associations, whenever I recall that evening today, I find I do so with a large sense of triumph" [38].

When Stevens reads Miss. Kenton's letters after seven years of her departure and reads the letter over and over again, he only utilizes his own form of interpretation to grasp the context of the text and therefore shows that his ways of thought are like his life spent in the limited space of Darlington Hall that they both are very narrow-minded and self-interpretative. Stevens has "thought of coming to for many years" and also miss Kenton "recommending particularly that it be visited in the evening when it becomes lit up with bulbs of various colours" [39], and Stevens sits on the bench at night reminiscing the encounter with miss Kenton two days ago in the seaside village of Weymouth. After twenty years of time, Stevens remembers that "by and large the Miss Kenton I saw before me looked surprisingly similar to the person who had inhabited my memory over these years" [40]. Stevens must have wished to check miss Kenton's love for him, but what truly mattered most for him was to see through her that his past life was an object of envy for somebody with nostalgia and a longing to go back. Strictly speaking, it can be said that although they were the times past that cannot be turned back or revisited, but those times filled with nostalgia and reminiscence were those that became the driving force for Stevens to live out the rest of his life.

After a man sitting on the same bench tells him "for a great many people, the evening was the best part of the day, the part they most looked forward to" [41], he finally realizes that what his life was about, becoming a "great" butler in conjunction with "Great" British Empire, with the same beauty of moderation seen at Salisbury on the first day, was nothing but a void accomplishment.

"Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man. He wasn't a bad man at all. And at last he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I trusted. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?" [42].

Nevertheless, unlike what Miss Kenton alluded to, "the rest of my life stretches out like an emptiness before me" [43], Stevens reestablishes his determination for the days to follow. Although he will never be able to stop himself from keep having recollections of noiseless reverberations with empty echoes filled with the remnants of the past, by responding to the American master Mr. Farraday's banters positively, "I will begin practicing with renewed effort" [44], Stevens shows hope filled with warm self-awareness and expectations.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper has contemplated upon the double temporal

settings and the historicity of the Great British Empire and the personal historicity of Lord Darlington and his butler Stevens apparent in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

Stevens' pursuit of universal value throughout the story is "greatness" from glancing at the British scenery and "dignity" as a butler. Although, he in Darlington Hall, did his best to do his work and supported Lord Darlington carry out his role in grave national matters, and never doubted Lord Darlington's political morality, he realizes the truth of the world when he leaves Darlington Hall and meets the petite bourgeois. On the last day of his journeys, in Weymouth, although it was a late revelation, Stevens comes to a realization that makes him see himself through his so-longed self-deception.

He had spent his days past suppressing his emotions to become a professional butler, and without expressing his own emotions even to Miss Kenton, but he feels warm humanity not from the cold English scenery filled with the beauty of moderation he could not stop himself from admiring, but from the night at seaside Weymouth filled with humane atmosphere.

John Locke argues that "personal identity as an identity of consciousness through duration in time" and that "the individual was in touch with his own continuing identity memory of his past thoughts and actions" [45]. Like such, through the rumination of historical facts and the recollections of Stevens past days, and through his late self-awareness free from his self-deception and his actions to find his self-identity, it should be an opportunity to find one's own identity within Ishiguro's words, "I think we are all butlers" [46].

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