

**The Use of Unreliable Narration to Portray the Instability of
Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's "The Remains of the Day"**

Research Question: How does Ishiguro use unreliable narration to portray instability of
Stevens?

Subject: English B (Category 3)

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I. Introduction

“Things like memory, how one uses memory for one's own purposes, one's own ends, those things interest me . . . deeply. And so, for the time being I am going to stick with the first person, and develop the whole business about following somebody's thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves.” -Kazuo Ishiguro (Mason, 1989)

Stevens is one of the examples of an "unreliable narrator", a type of first-person narrator that became popular in Western literature during the Modernist period, used for the audience to admire, identify, or sympathize with the protagonist. Throughout the novel, readers have doubts about Steven's reliability as a storyteller. However, Stevens has several distinguishing characteristics that set him apart from other untrustworthy protagonists in literature such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Albert Camus' *The Fall*, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* it does not explicitly portray the narrator, Stevens, as actually planning to misguide and provocatively manipulate a fictional narrate.

Consequently, Steven objectifies himself to the extent where he identifies with his workplace, even defines his nationality –Englishness- with stewardship, and in the end reduces himself to one identity: “butler”. Thus, his unreliability stems from not his unethical objectives, but his deception and restriction of self. His identity crisis makes it impossible for him, as well as the reader, to credit his words. Thus, the narrator's way of hiding and overlooking things, the things he does not say, portrays him more objectively than his description of his self-image.

Investigating the effect narration has on a literary work, on its own, is highly significant. However, I find unreliable narration particularly worthwhile of investigation since it broadens the

perspective of readers, by enabling the reader to make their own commentary and form their own thoughts about the narrator's intentions, a psychoanalytical challenge one could say. With a detailed examination of Stevens' narrative unreliability, undermining his fundamental beliefs would leave Stevens without any foundations to create the outlines of his own individuality. Allowing the reader to see him bare.

In the following analysis, the effect unreliable narration has on the development of the protagonist Stevens, in the novel *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro will be analyzed with the research question: **“How does Ishiguro use unreliable narration to portray the instability of Stevens?”** Critics and proponents of the novel base most of their analyses on unreliable narration, although a work researching this specific question has yet to be published. Stevens' instability and how it is effected by his unreliability will be explored in four main categories, which are prominent and relevant to the topic.

II. Dignity

From the beginning to the end of the novel, Stevens tries to define many times, what greatness is and how it can be obtained. Not only is he obsessed with attaining it, but also constantly thinking about comprehending the true meaning of, as he calls it “dignity”, so that he can embed it in the center of his being. Many of his definitions do seem to revolve around the concept that dignity is a butler's ability “not to abandon the professional being he inhabits.” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.38) Dignity is especially a significant theme in the novel since it is Stevens' obsession with it that triggers his self-deceptive behavior, loneliness, and unrealistic self-expectations. For Stevens, a butler with dignity needs to balance his availability and invisibility.

Therefore, Stevens has neither time for personal hassles nor creating an identity. Outside his working hours, he only spares time for Miss Kenton. However, for the sake of “dignity” he converses about work only with Miss Kenton, drawing sharp boundaries, which he ultimately regrets.

Furthermore, the change in Stevens’ definition of “dignity” is a symbol Ishiguro uses to express how Stevens’ values change as well.

In the beginning Stevens makes it clear that greatness for him has to do with work only and that it is “(...) something one can meaningfully strive for throughout one’s career.” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.30). This creates the necessity for Stevens to leave his feelings unspoken, causing him to dehumanize himself, perhaps on purpose. His search for dignity being based on professionalism hinders -and will only continue to do so until the very end- his search for greatness in his personal life. Towards the middle Stevens feels that he is ready to be discussing if he possesses this very crucial quality of a great butler:

“(...) that is not to say I consider I became, necessarily, a ‘great’ butler; it is hardly for me, in any case, to make judgments of this sort. But should it be that anyone ever wished to posit that I have attained at least a little of that crucial quality of ‘dignity’ in the course of my career, (...)” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.63)

The question of why he did not decide to start this discussion, in the beginning, ought to be brought up. As an unreliable narrator, Stevens first desires to inform the readers about his experiences and choices that demonstrate that he is deserving of the “reputable” identity, without letting the readers decide for themselves. Essentially, he does give great importance to professionalism, which, needless to say, contains “modesty”. In the novel, he often seems unsure

whether he could accept his achievements, aiming to be as modest as possible. However, he thinks highly of himself when he compares himself to other butlers and talks with his “audience” about nothing but his daily hassles that prove his greatness as a butler. It is possible Ishiguro created this instability in order to portray the inner contradiction of Stevens’ inferiority and superiority complexes or to portray how he wants to be seen as modest as possible. Thus, Stevens’ constant strive for professionalism puts him into a state where he can neither accept nor deny his success.

Towards the end of the novel, Steven begins to question the importance of his occupation for the first time. He admits that he is envious of his lord's determination, of at least choosing his own path, even if it led to the wrong conclusion. He regrets not being able to at least own up to his own mistakes. “All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. (...) Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.215) However, this questioning begins only after he accepts he cannot reach the standards he once set for himself anymore. It is unknown to the reader whether this questioning began because Stevens realized there are other aspects to life, or because he is self-soothing after realizing his skills have become blunt.

Steven regrets not leading his own life and letting his occupation lead his life instead. In addition, he never succeeds in forming an intimate bond with another person. It is clear that Stevens wanted dignity, but by suppressing his personality and making himself believe it was for the best; he tried attaining “great things” the wrong way, or in an incomplete way. Nevertheless, his definition of dignity seems to be corrupted. Making mistakes is a part of the path leading to success; greatness cannot be achieved if there are no mistakes to be learned from. Dignity to Stevens is not perfection anymore, but living with your own choices and their consequences, bravely and confidently.

However, the tale does appear to end with some sense of resolution when a stranger in the park advises him “Don’t keep looking back all the time; you’re bound to get depressed.” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.215) As Čigarská (2019) describes, Stevens will now living according to his new understanding of dignity.

“Perhaps, then, there is something to his advice that I should cease looking back so much, that I should adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day.” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.216)

Throughout the novel, Stevens usually speaks of the past, rarely explaining his day. The reader does not learn how Stevens began to live after this day of realization. Perhaps to convey the message that Stevens did start a new life, leaving behind some of his habits, such as keeping a diary.

III. Self-Deception

In only the first pages of the novel, the readers are confronted by Stevens over-explaining himself on a very simple matter, which is buying a suit for himself. “I hope you do not think me unduly vain with regard to this last matter (...) it is important that one be attired at such times in a manner worthy of one’s position.” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.12) Stevens could be persuading himself and/or the “audience”, that he merely requires this new clothing for business purposes, and allows no room for another thought to arise. It seems as if Stevens’ internalized feelings of inferiority cause him to feel that he has to explain why all of his actions revolve around his “greatness” as a butler. His self-deceptive attitude, since he believes himself already, only makes his rationalizations more convincing, which is a remarkable example of unreliable narration.

Furthermore, although Stevens is having an inner monologue, the use of the "you" pronoun -which only continues to be used throughout the novel- immerses the reader forcefully in Stevens' thoughts. This is especially interesting for the reason that "remaining in character" and maintaining professionalism unless completely alone is highly significant for Stevens. Considering the belief of his we come to know, it is quite strange that he mentions a "you" whilst stating his feelings, memories, and flaws. (Westerman, 2004) Even when no one is around to witness his "dignity," he wants to be approved of. He talks to a "you" whose purpose of existence is merely fulfilling Stevens' demand of validation.

A comparable instance is when Stevens uses merely a portion of a letter from the former housekeeper Miss Kenton to justify his odd journey away from Darlington Hall, claiming that she wants to return to the house. He pleads somewhat desperately for this interpretation, Stevens seems to try to convince himself and the "you" he refers to that he has not made an enormous mistake. (Westerman, 2004)

Furthermore, Stevens tends to over-explain and exaggerate the importance of his profession. Conventionally, one over-explaining themselves could denote that they are tackling to convince themselves, or that they are seeking validation in their stance on something. Reckoning Stevens' unreliable character, this habit of his very compatible with his identity.

Stevens genuinely believes that by serving a prominent leader who had formerly helped define the national policies of his country, he was also "furthering the progress of humanity." (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.103)

. He assumes "ethical and political significance" to his action of polishing household silverware. (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.119)

Ishiguro explains “(...) the butler is a good metaphor for the relationship of very ordinary, small people to power.” He believes that people offer the modest services they have mastered to a variety of people: employers, and organizations, and wish for the best – that they favor the way it is used. (Swift, 2008, p. 37) Not only does Stevens over-explain the importance of his profession, as mentioned previously his obsession with appearing modest causes him to over-explain his intentions of “modesty” as well, which manifests itself as another habit of his, humble-bragging.

“And one has a right, perhaps, to feel a satisfaction those content to serve mediocre employers will never know – the satisfaction of being able to say with some reason that one’s efforts, in however modest a way, comprise a contribution to the course of history.” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.124)

It is only at the end of the novel when Stevens begins to question whether there is more to life: “Surely it is enough that the likes of you and I at least try to make our small contribution count for something true and worthy.” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.216)

One not being content with themselves could very well lead to self-deception, and once Stevens becomes more accepting of himself, his basis of self-worth changes. He very courageously –for a person like him- is able to discuss the significance of his career and now finds what he has done and whether he is satisfied with it is more important. Doing his best is now enough for Stevens rather than striving to “contribute to history” while he suppresses his identity. “As I watch them now, they are laughing together merrily. It is curious how people can build such warmth among themselves so swiftly.” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.217) Stevens even lets himself wonder about human relationships and its warmth.

Moreover, Stevens' perception of his greatness had appeared to have been tarnished by the purchase of Darlington Hall by Mr. Farraday, a gentleman from America, who did not embody the authority and power of his previous employer Lord Darlington. Stevens frequently expressed the tormented feelings of pride in having contributed to the development of civilization, and his professional obligations to an American master, using anecdotes about the cultural distinctions between England and America. (Dweedard, 2020, p.29) It is once Stevens' self-deceptiveness fades, he realizes his sense of worth is not based on the glory of whom he is working for. The both meaningful and ironic ending is quite the evidence for Stevens' transformation: "I should hope, then, that by the time of my employer's return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him." (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.217)

IV. Identity

Stevens' tendencies to "deceive" roots in his self-created identity. Ordinarily, one would tend to separate their occupancies from their own selves, since their duties are more performances than identities. One particular situation, which by using humor, subtly guides the reader to realize just how deeply Stevens is bound to his formality is when Stevens is inquired to counsel Sir David's son -Lord Darlington's godson- in the matters of sex. Figuring out how to fulfil this request while continuing to sustaining his formality and dignity is an endeavor for him.

"I did my best not to give away anything of my exasperation on discovering that a task I had thought all but behind me was in fact still there unassaulted before me." (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.220)

It is nothing abnormal for one to portray different identities in different situations, however, Stevens cannot give up his identity as a butler even when he is alone; he finds “dignity” and earnestness in thinking of it as his authentic self, and finds it phony to be different people in different situations.

“A butler of any quality must be seen to inhabit his role, utterly and fully; he cannot be seen casting it aside one moment simply to don it again the next as though it were nothing more than a pantomime costume.” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.149)

Having to keep up with this hard-to-carry and limiting identity ultimately causes Stevens' human desires and emotions to appear unexpectedly and disappear in an instant, contributing to his unreliability.

While this might mean he is unceasingly his evident self, it might further mean that Stevens is deceiving himself by always operating and maybe even unable to distinct between performance and authenticity. Stevens' unreliable character hinders the readers' path to clarity regarding these possibilities. Perhaps, Ishiguro wanted to explore how performing a certain self can lead to morphing into that actual person, by using Stevens as an unreliable narrator. Which would then reveal that performance and authenticity do not have to be apart from each other, rather there is a thin vile separating them.

Even after Stevens, in the end, realizes that his sense of self-worth should not depend on his identity as a butler, he is unable to let go of it. His unreliable character does make the reader question whether he is returning to his old self, nonetheless, old habits die hard. Even so, Stevens discontinues writing, symbolizing that his demand of validation from “you” has come to an end.

V. Relationships

Stevens' obsession with professionalism directly affects his interactions, hence his relationships. He wants to live up to his self-expectations shaped by his definition of dignity. He will stop working only when he is alone, everything else is a duty to him, or he wants to think of it that way. Stevens' unreliable character disallows not only the reader but also people in his life to glimpse through his facade, precluding people from deeply knowing him, making Stevens even lonelier.

“The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role (...). They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: (...) he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. It is, as I say, a matter of ‘dignity’.”
(Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.39)

V.I. Stevens and His Father

Stevens feels great admiration for his father and considers him a great butler. While defining “dignity” Stevens mentions his father many times, relating anecdotes about his father that prove his professionalism. “(...) my father not only manifests, but comes close to being the personification itself, of what the Hayes Society terms ‘dignity in keeping with his position’.”
(Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.38)

The reader can strongly feel Stevens' admiration towards his father and ponders if his obsessions stem from his desire to be like his father. In this situation, Ishiguro's use of unreliable

narration significantly stands out. The reader cannot know if Stevens personally desires to obtain “dignity” or if he desires a bond with his workaholic father, and believes the only way to do so is to get approval from him.

However, because they both seem fully committed to their butler identity -which they believe, requires perfect professionalism- they never get the chance to strengthen their father-son bond. Their rare interactions remain distant, formal, and insincere.

“Miss Kenton, please don't think me unduly improper in not ascending to see my father in his deceased condition just at this moment. You see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now.” (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.97)

It is questionable whether Stevens is making up an excuse to postpone his feelings –running away from this damaging situation- or asking for approval for the last time from his just deceased father. The situation becomes even more contradicting when Ishiguro, later on, presents Stevens crying about his father’s death, which reveals his repressed feeling of, love. This is a very surprising but also a relieving –reminding the readers that Stevens is too a human after all- point in the story. It is a significant event that helps the reader better comprehend Stevens’ character. Indeed, he has a hard time dealing with his feelings; pushing them away until he cannot, causing him to reveal important facts later in the story.

Ishiguro uses their father and son relationship to convey Stevens’ unreliability also by displaying Stevens’ self-contradictions. Mr. William starts working in Darlington Hall at the same time as Miss Kenton, meaning he is now old and therefore less dynamic. Stevens has a hard time

accepting this situation. "At first, I found it hard to credit such an error to my father. But I soon reminded myself that such trivial slips are liable to befall anyone from time to time." (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.49) It is unknown if this is because he took him as a model for so long, or because he wants his father to keep working close to him. Nevertheless, Stevens being a perfectionist character who typically leaves no room for mistakes contradicts himself when he ignores his father's mistakes.

V. II. Stevens and Miss Kenton

Being a second source of information about Stevens makes Miss Kenton, who has worked as the housekeeper at Darlington Hall for many years, a crucial character. For instance, when Lord Darlington requests to discharge two hardworking housekeepers from the staff merely because of their Jewish heritage Stevens, without questioning, relies on his employer. Miss Kenton however, has insight to recognize the situation, and the confidence to confront Stevens.

"I am telling you, Mr. Stevens, if you dismiss my girls tomorrow, it will be wrong, a sin as any sin ever was one, and I will not continue to work in such a house." (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.131)

Around one year after the event, Lord Darlington personally expresses regret, and Stevens finds himself in the difficult spot of withdrawing from his prior stern stance. When Stevens finally admits that he felt he made a wrong decision, Miss Kenton reproaches Steven for not sharing his feelings with her previously.

"(...) if you had thought to share your feelings last year? (...) Do you realize how much it would have helped me? Why, Mr. Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to pretend?" (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.135)

As an unreliable narrator, Stevens often forgets or even ignores his own sentiments since he is too focused on becoming a perfect butler. His lack of self-awareness makes Miss Kenton's repetitive question "Do you realize?" peculiarly meaningful. Furthermore, the last part drives the reader to realize that Miss Kenton has seen through Stevens' pretense, even before Stevens who has not yet comprehended that he is deceiving himself. Another significant aspect of their relationship is that even though Stevens calls Miss Kenton "Mrs. Benn" in person, he mentions her as "Miss Kenton", meaning Stevens could never actually accept her marriage. For Stevens, what he says does not define what he thinks, what he does not say does.

A further approach as to why Miss Kenton is a highly remarkable character is that she is the first person to ever make Stevens accept his feelings. Thus, plays a great role in Stevens' journey of transformation. When Stevens arrives at Miss Kenton's house to bring her back, Miss Kenton refuses. Stevens is taken aback by her response. Perhaps, it was this moment that inspired Stevens to change.

"For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr. Stevens. (...) I do not think I responded immediately, for it took me a moment or two to fully digest these words of Miss Kenton (...) their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed – why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking." (Ishiguro, 1990/2022, p.210-211)

VI. Conclusion

The novel *The Remains of the Day* is the diary of Stevens who is trying to accept and come to terms with his past by remembering and retelling his memories at Darlington Hall. Along with his choices, actions, and his values, especially “dignity”. While he explains and transfers his memories, the narration makes Stevens’ unreliable character increasingly obvious. His comments on, and interpretation of, past events in his life and his portrayal of himself and others in his tale paradoxically, expose him as an unreliable narrator. Stevens reveals most about himself and his life when he is trying to obscure the truth.

His attempts to deceive himself and others are possibly the most interesting and telltale aspect of the narrative, after all, the use of an unreliable narrator draws attention to a character’s psychology. The text opens all these questions, problems, and wounds without resolving them. It produces this rich and intriguing texture, this swirl of politics and romance and hope and misery and motion and inertia, through Stevens’ narrative. When the butler enacts his complicated existence on paper, the access we have to it is provided by the text’s very ambiguity, ambivalence, and insolvability. Although Stevens often expresses an understandable desire to communicate “without ambiguity” the remains of the day use the frustrations and limitations of his language as modes of representation, providing a dense account of its narrator’s split subjectivity. They allow the novel to include precisely what its narrator does not know and cannot say.

Considering the novel was read through scrutiny for the sake of this review; there are, naturally, limitations of this research such as containing personal reasoning. Nevertheless, in its own right, this research aimed to investigate how Ishiguro used unreliable narration to portray the instability of Stevens in his novel “*The Remains of the Day*”.

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