

English B Extended Essay

Research Question: How is the concept “obsession” reflected through the novel *The Remains of The Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro?

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Introduction

When reading the novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, “The Remains of The Day”, I saw that “obsession” seemed like the concept that Ishiguro was most fixated to. There were many different aspects that the main character Stevens’ obsessive personality was reflected from. These different aspects inspired me to form a research question based on this concept and I planned my roadmap within the categorization of different aspects that “obsession” was reflected by Ishiguro. Stevens’ obsessive personality comes from his past, and it’s seen that he embraced this quality because of the events that he has gone through. Because of this, his obsession affects his different relationships in his life. Therefore, when answering my research question, I included both why Stevens gained this personality in the first place, and also the consequences of his actions that are caused by his obsession.

The story of “The Remains of The Day” by Kazuo Ishiguro takes place in Oxford, England in the 1950s. Stevens is a butler in a high-class mansion who was previously owned by Lord Darlington, who had strong affairs with the current state of England after The World War 2. The novel is set five years after The World War 2 ended, and often has historical references to the war through the side characters of the book.

Observing the novel’s timeline, it's seen that class distinction between butlers and employers have an effect on Stevens’ thought process. He is seen as a workaholic and almost emotionless butler who is obsessed with the concept of being the “great butler” that his father once was. His cold appearance usually gets in the way of him forming relationships based on love, and this doesn’t seem to bother him most of the time. Therefore, his most interactions through the book are superficial, although he sees this as professionalism and claims that this is the way through being a butler with “dignity”. It seems like Stevens uses the concept of dignity as a reason to act the way that he does. Two of Stevens’ relationships have a

significance in the novel, which are his father and Miss Kenton who were both former butlers in Darlington Hall. Their relationships are explored within the concept of “obsession”, since Stevens doesn’t think he has the time for anything besides his work.

Another concept observed by Ishiguro through the character Stevens is the past and the future. Stevens is usually unconcerned with the present time, and is seen rather obsessing over the events that took place in the past, which are again entirely about his work life, or obsessing over his future plans about Darlington Hall’s work plan that he prepares. Ishiguro specifically used the title “The Remains of The Day” because of Stevens’ obsession with the past. The day in the title represents the life in general. The entire title’s meaning is meant to convey how Stevens must live the rest of his life without dreaming of the past. Ishiguro’s presentation of Stevens reflects the effects of disassociation from the current time. The reason I picked to research on the concept of obsession was because of this detail that caught my attention in the novel. Obsession is a wide concept that can be about anything, and the obsession with work life seems to be a common concept that many people can experience such as Stevens.

Aspect of Personality

In the novel, Stevens appears to have a cold personality mostly due to his will to meet the standards to be a great butler and contribute to his family’s history of good butlers. He is therefore obsessed with the idea of being a butler and classifies butlers into three categories: “lesser butlers”, “competent butlers” and “great butlers”. He is determined to be one of the greats, however his fear of not being enough at his job turns him into an emotionally unavailable and obsessive person, which has negative aspects in his daily life and his relationship with others. Stevens is obsessed with the concept “dignity”, as it is seen that the concept of dignity is repetitively discussed by him in the novel. Because of his aim to be a

great butler, he seems to have a people-pleasing persona with little to no opinions to himself. At the beginning of the book, when Mr. Farraday asks Stevens to take a break from his work and go on a vacation, Stevens wants to refuse him because of his blindness to the outside, only focusing on his job and his plans for the house as a butler.

When Stevens eventually accepts the vacation offer, it is observed that he talks little about the nature of the places that he visits, and usually speaks of his past memories as a butler. In the majority of the novel, Stevens seems to be obsessed with the past and the future. He can't stay in the present time and is seen constantly talking about either his past stories as a butler, or the future he planned for the house, which he calls the "house plan", to improve the quality of the housework. His issue of not staying in the present causes him to disassociate from the events happening around him in the moment. An example of this is when Stevens goes on "vacation" that Mr. Farraday asked him to take a break from work, he always speaks of stories about how he will improve his work in the house, dreaming of his work life even when he is on vacation. It is seen that there is little sensory imagery described by Stevens during his trip, which reflects his obsession with the past and future of his work life. "If you are under the impression you have already perfected yourself, you will never rise to the heights you are no doubt capable of." He doesn't see himself worthy enough to take a break, therefore tries to plan his future changes for the house and can't connect to the outer world easily. He is unable to live in the present moment and either talks about his past or future work life. Because of his tunnel vision caused by his obsession towards his job and the concept "dignity", Stevens is blinded to his physical and emotional needs and uses the idea of "remaining professional" as an excuse not to see the negative impacts of his unconsciousness. This makes Stevens an unreliable narrator because his strong opinions about "dignity" and "professionalism" blinds him to the factors that may refute his way of thinking. Stevens' desire to be a good butler concludes with him placing his trust in the people that he works for, who indeed sometimes

makes questionable choices. Stevens refuses to see his employers' flaws, and is always seen defending them in controversial situations. Kazuo Ishiguro's choice of such character like Stevens is aimed to mislead the reader, showing only the perspective of Stevens while creating a suspicion in the reader's mind about the actual way the events are happening.

Aspect of The Past

The state of being successful makes people feel happy and worthy of themselves. The standards set by the society claims that in order to be worthy of living, everyone needs to have a purpose that serves humanity in the best way possible. People's past, the environment they grew up in and the imposition they have encountered in their environment shapes their personality. In the novel "The Remains of The Day", this concept is reflected through Stevens. His past shaped him into the personality that he has now, and the best example of this is the effect of his father in his life. Stevens' father William Stevens is a butler all his life, and has worked for Darlington Hall in the past just like Steven does. Steven idolizes his father and sees him as the embodiment of dignity and professionalism. He got his idea of being a "great butler" from his father who had the same mindset. Growing up around his father, Stevens always encountered and was impressed from the serious and work-focused attitude of his father and made him his role model for this reason. His relationship with his father is seen to be weirdly professional and formal, which is usually not the case with blood-related relationships. His father is also an emotionally unavailable person who dedicated his life onto his work as a butler. This means Stevens experienced little affection of love during his childhood and had a formal relationship even with his family. This caused him to have a professional understanding of the concept "love", and he had struggles about expressing and understanding his feelings throughout the book.

Stevens talks about his father and his achievements multiple times, and tries to impose the same qualities onto the situations that he encounters. Stevens' father has a calm and unbothered personality just like him, and this can be seen in one of Stevens' stories where his father doesn't respond to people's insults and remains calm which even results with him receiving an apology from the people that insulted him in the first place. Steven talks about this as one of the examples of his father's dignity and concludes that these examples differ him from the other "competent butlers". Therefore, remaining professional at all times is the most important quality of a butler according to Stevens.

Stevens' admiration of his father is most clearly seen in the scene where his father is dying. In his deathbed, his father tells Stevens that death shouldn't preclude one from remaining professional. He tells Stevens that he should serve the guests at Darlington Hall in the most professional way possible, and leave him behind because dignity always comes first. "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." As seen in this quote, Stevens trusts his father would want him to keep his calm attitude at all times, and refuses to see his father and continues working instead of mourning his father's death even when he is at the edge of dying. While this action seems "heartless" to Miss Kenton who is a character who is more in touch with her personal feelings, it seems totally normal to Stevens and he is sure of what his father would want for him.

The idolization of family members usually come naturally to people who grew up around them. However, Stevens overly idolizing his father concludes him with having little original thoughts to himself. Most of his thinking process is highly influenced by his father, and he is seen to having no other concern than being the "great butler" that his father is. This affects his life negatively, leaving no space for personal connections and having a rather

superficial vision of his emotions. He also has other “great butlers” that he idolizes, who mostly seem to have the same traits as his father. Stevens usually goes along with the opinions of the people he looks up to, and shapes his entire goal around their behaviour and how he thinks he should act exactly the same as his father and the other great butlers. Because of his lack of self-awareness, Stevens tends to always agree with opinions that correlates with his fathers, and therefore his own morals. This can lead to him having a judgemental viewpoint on other people’s morals, just because their viewpoints contradict with his own. The biggest example of this is how Stevens responds to people such as Miss Kenton’s way of living life, which is completely different than the way he sees how life should be lived. As a result of this, he sees Miss Kenton’s actions as a threat to the house’s system that he is obsessed with.

Romantic Relationships

Stevens’ professional view of love can be observed through his relationship with Miss Kenton. Miss Kenton is also a butler who works with Stevens at Darlington Hall, and Stevens is most of the time seen warning her about how she isn’t handling certain situations professionally. However, later in the book, Stevens also states that Miss Kenton still fulfils the qualities to be a good butler. Stevens and Miss Kenton often have up and downs in their relationship working together because of Stevens’ pitiless and criticizing behaviour towards Miss Kenton. On the other side, the actual reason of Stevens’ overly judgemental approach towards Miss Kenton is because of his romantic feelings for her that he tries to hide even from himself. However, it is clear that Stevens has feelings for her to the reader from Stevens’ inner monologues about Miss Kenton. When Miss Kenton gets married and leaves the house, Stevens is constantly seen talking about his memories with her and wanting her to come back to Darlington Hall after her divorce so they can work together again. His feelings

towards Miss Kenton are the only glimpse of emotion he shows through the book, and it can be said that, it's the only emotional connection that Stevens secretly strives to have.

Miss Kenton sees Stevens as an emotionless and judgemental person, and is aware of his lack of emotions. However, she has a strong moral sense and doesn't hesitate to disagree with Stevens when necessary. This results with the two characters having multiple conflicts through the book and they seem to almost never have a stable relationship with one-another. Miss Kenton also has feelings for Stevens, however she eventually dismisses them because of Stevens' lack of emotional response. Stevens' emotionless and "professional" approach towards people indirectly affects his personal life and invades his chance of having a possible romantic relationship with Miss Kenton. In fact, it's stated that this is one of the reasons why Miss Kenton marries someone else and leaves Darlington Hall. Because opposing from Stevens, Miss Kenton doesn't emphasize Lord Darlington's values as her own and instead makes decisions based on her own values. She also has a warmth and joyful attitude that Stevens never reflects, which affects their relationship negatively and Stevens viewing her perception as "unprofessional". Whenever Miss Kenton displays a sense of romantic attraction towards Stevens, he is seen dismissing Miss Kenton's feelings and going back to his concerns as his career as a butler. The opposition between the design of these two characters is meant to reflect the conflict of an emotionally unavailable and an emotional person.

In one of the chapters in the book, Miss Kenton calls Stevens out by saying "Why, Mr. Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to pretend?" it is seen from this quote that Miss Kenton is aware that Stevens is only pretending to be emotionless, and not actually is. Emotions are in humans' nature, and Miss Kenton knows suppressing them with a professional butler mask won't make Stevens' life any better. However, Stevens sees emotions as a threat against his professionalism, since he hasn't experienced much "love" or emotional connections

in his past life either. Stevens thinks he suppresses his emotions to a level that will succeed him with not compartmentalizing his business life and his personal life. Instead, he doesn't realize, him acting this way is lowering his chance of having any meaningful relationships based on love, leaving absolutely no room for his personal feelings.

In the novel, Stevens' pantry is a symbolism of his mind. His pantry has no significant decorations such as flowers or any kind of plants, and also has no sign of pictures of his family or anyone that he loves. Just like his pantry, Stevens' mind is also disconnected from any kind of feeling of affection. He has no eye for aesthetics and only cares for the quality of his work. Steven thinks that the key to a meaningful life is only by having a sense of achievement, and he wants to fulfil this desire by becoming a worthy butler.

Aspect of Loyalty

The theme of "loyalty" is reflected through class distinction in the novel. Stevens' desire to be a great butler with dignity encourages him to be obedient to his employers. However, he turns his obedience into a feeling of trust to his employers. It's seen that Stevens fully trusts whatever his employers say, and doesn't have an ounce of doubt about them. This affects Stevens' thought process negatively, again, leaving no room for his own opinions. For the sake of his image as a butler, he reflects all his opinions based on someone else's, just because of them being in a higher class in the society. Stevens describes his former employer Lord Darlington as a "true gentleman", however, in the book, it's often directly hinted that Lord Darlington has a controversial view of society and justice. Lord Darlington is the host of English Fascists and a Nazi sympathizer. Stevens is aware of this, however he still defends Lord Darlington, claiming that he knows him better than the people talking poorly about him, saying he is more than just his view of justice. He strongly believes Lord Darlington was manipulated by other diplomats, and actually had good intentions from the start.

It can be discussed whether Steven's loyalty is genuine or just based on his wish to be respected as a butler, though it's clearly seen that his obsession affects his view of his employers. Stevens doesn't just pretend to agree with them for their respect, but he truly believes they have good intentions by heart. His obsession with dignity actually makes him more loyal as a person, who would do anything for the sake of the upper-class people he serves for. Even though Stevens' loyalty can be seen of one of the positive traits that he has, too much loyalty causes him to over-simplify some events, justifying every controversial action his employers take.

Consequences

At most parts of the novel, there isn't much character development that Stevens goes through. However, at the ends of the book, when he finally contacts Miss Kenton again, he tells her that her life could have turned out better if she had married him. He doesn't directly tell her how he actually feels a connection to her and doesn't speak of anything romantic that he thought that could've happened between the two of them. However, this is the first time in the entire story where Stevens indicates of having feelings towards someone. With this, Ishiguro proves that everyone has emotions and they can't be kept hidden forever. Even a workaholic butler who seems to have no emotions hints at his feelings at one point, because repressing them all the time caused him nothing but loneliness in the end. Though, even if he hints Miss Kenton of having feelings towards her, him not speaking of his true feelings once again upsets Miss Kenton. Stevens and her return to their individual lives, once again leaving the opportunity to get together while they still have feelings for each other.

Therefore, we see that Stevens has almost no character development from the beginning to the end of the book. He remains with a professional attitude no matter what, and treats everyone equally without letting his emotions get in the way. This once again affects his life

negatively, and even at the end, he can't seem to form a relationship based on love. When Stevens returns from his conversation with Miss Kenton, he carries on with his daily life, doing what he always does. He is afraid of any kind of change, and almost addicted to having a routine in his life, because of his obsession with being the "great butler" with dignity. At the end of the book, we see Stevens once again return to his matter of "bantering" with his employer, which was also one of the first scenes in the book. With this parallel, it is reflected that Stevens got nowhere from the beginning till the end of the book, nothing in his life changed and he still lives the same routine every day. This shows how Stevens' view of butlers and the idea of "dignity" ended him up with no actual happiness, but with a never-ending routine of the same life. Although staying in this non-ending routine of his life was Stevens' own choice, him destroying his only chance of having a bond at the end leaves him broken inside, having no development until the end after all.

Conclusion

Obsession is a wide concept that can be explored from many topics, and is an important issue within psychology. Obsessing over something usually affects people's life negatively, leaving little to no room for other life activities. Kazuo Ishiguro represents this concept with the main character of his novel "The Remains of the Day", Stevens. As a butler, Steven thinks it's his utmost duty to serve his employers in the best way possible, and that the way that being a "great butler" works by being as professional as possible. However, it seems that Stevens exaggerates professionalism to an extent where his attempts interfere with his personal life. Stevens' loyalty to his employers causes him to focus entirely on them and their opinions, which causes him to having almost no personal feelings and depending on acting the way his employers would want him to.

The history of the book reveals how Stevens' way of thinking is impacted by the class distinction between butlers and their employers. He is perceived as a workaholic and essentially heartless butler who is fixated on the idea of emulating his father's former "great butler" status. He usually has trouble developing connections based on love because of his cold appearance, yet this doesn't seem to affect him very much. Because of this, the majority of his interactions throughout the novel are fleeting, despite the fact that he views this as professionalism and believes that it is the only way to be a butler with "dignity." It appears that Stevens justifies his behaviour by citing the idea of dignity. In the majority of the book, Stevens doesn't go through any character development and by this situation, Ishiguro reflects how Stevens' desire to have a stable routine life is also implicated through his character. The message of the book is that Stevens hasn't changed from the start to the end of the novel, and preserved his ideal of being a butler with dignity to the last minute even though it might take bits off of his happiness. When it comes to the concept of obsession, it's hard to get out of one and return to your personal life. Stevens is an example of this because of his unchanged expression throughout the book.

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