

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 5. Issue.2., 2018 (April-June)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THEMATIC CONCERNS IN “THE REMAINS OF THE DAY” BY KAZUO ISHIGURO

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ABSTRACT

The following paper is all about the themes in the most celebrated novel of a popular writer Kazuo Ishiguro. It bagged him Man Booker Prize. The major themes are Loyalty, dignity, professionalism and regret. All through his life Stevens the protagonist of the novel was busy to be a professional butler at Darlington Hall to Mr. Faraday. From the very beginning we see the dignity and professionalism in the novel. Stevens is at his toes to fulfill the expectations of all who come to Darlington hall. No matter whatever may be the situation Stevens is ready to suppress his emotions and work for his role as a butler. The present paper also tries to find the strong reasons that why this novel should be read by everyone. The most prominent theme of the novel is professionalism. The other parallel theme which is obvious in the novel is relationships and the balance between professional and personal life. First relationship is shown between master and his servant. Second relation is between father and son and the third relation is between the staff members. One more relation is shown between human beings and animals and human beings and nature. Second relation is between father and son and the third relation is between the staff members. One more relation is shown between human beings and animals and human beings and nature. Relationships are secondary to work. But in the blind race of professionalism somewhere regret is there at the last where very less time is left out to fix it.

Key words: Professionalism, relationship, dignity, regret

Introduction

*The remains of the day* is the award winning novel which is listed in the list of books titled books one must read, the third novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, was published in 1989 to great acclaim, winning the Man Booker Prize for Literature. The book tells the story of Stevens, an English butler working at Darlington Hall.

The present paper tries to find the strong reasons that why this novel should be read by everyone. The most prominent theme of the novel is professionalism. Webster dictionary defines professionalism as the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person.”

There is much more to being a professional than simply acquiring the best training and skills. Becoming an expert in your field is only one part of earning the respect of clients and colleagues. A large part of achieving recognition as a professional has to do with the way that you present yourself to others. It is a mindset that becomes easier to apply as you progress further and becomes an inspiration for others to

follow. There are five important keys to being a true professional : Character, attitude, Excellence, Competency, Conduct.

### Discussion

Under the light of above definition and features if we scrutinize the novel then we must first study the character of Stevens the protagonist of the novel who was the butler in Darlington hall. The novel opens with the present tense where Stevens is talking about some planned expedition. From the very outset we see Stevens as very serious and sincere character. He is busy with his daily chores when his lord Mr. Faraday proposes that he must take break and visit his country. The attitude of the protagonist towards his job is very positive and as we progress reading the novel we come to know that Stevens put his heart and soul to accomplish his assignment as a butler. He shows his excellence number of times in the novel and he works with such competency that all the guests are happy by his hospitality. His conduct is very good and polite and always conforming to the needs of the master. Here we come to know that what a true professional is ; a person who is ready 24x7 to serve his master and his guests. Another strict professional is father of Stevens. Who became quite old and were now losing stamina to hold the tray loaded with plates and cups and one day he became unconscious and the tray fell down. Mr Darlington said to Stevens to ask his father not to carry loaded trays and his father was such a strict professional that he found the alternative in order to accomplish his task and he started carrying the things in the trolley. This compels us to add one more quality to a true professional and it is that one must not give up and to accomplish the task one should be able to find the alternatives.

The other parallel theme which is obvious in the novel is relationships and the balance between professional and personal life. First relationship is shown between master and his servant. Second relation is between father and son and the third relation is between the staff members. One more relation is shown between human beings and animals and human beings and nature. The beginning it is shown that Mr. Farraday is the owner of the big house and Stevens is the butler but the master is so much concerned about the well being of his servant that he proposes that I will pay the gas bills and Stevens must take his ford and should visit the countryside for a change to feel better. Stevens and his father shared a silent relation and they talked very less. Miss Kenton was having liking for Stevens and many times she tried to come closer to Stevens but Stevens being a strict professional repelled her back. The romantic exchanges are not so explicit in the novel but through gestures and indirect method writer has tried to explain the liking of Miss Kenton towards Stevens. Another relation is between man and animal. While Stevens was driving he applied brake to his car to save the hen named Nelly and the owner of the hen was so happy that she invited Stevens for a cup of tea. This shows the love for animals that they are also living beings and we must have concern for animals.

At the start of the novel, he is encouraged to take a vacation by his employer, Mr. Faraday, an American gentleman who believes Stevens needs a break from his duties. Stevens believes the suggestion dovetails nicely with his desire to visit a former colleague at Darlington Hall - Miss Kenton, now Mrs. Benn, residing in West England. Twenty years ago, Miss Kenton and he worked at Darlington Hall together, he as butler, she as maid, but she left upon her marriage, and now twenty years later, she is divorced, and Stevens looks forward to bringing her back to Darlington Hall to help with his increasing staff problems. Specifically, Stevens has had trouble since the end of the second World War finding a large enough staff to handle the work at the estate. An act of Parliament in England severely limited the power of the aristocracy and ultimately began to break up these huge estates - Darlington Hall is one of the last few.

The book spans his one week trip to visit Miss Kenton and involves a mainly stream-of-consciousness 'moral inventory' of Stevens' life. It's as if he's creating a mental diary of his life over this trip, aiming to come to terms with his life choices and his ultimate direction. He first reflects upon what makes a butler a 'great' one, something he clearly has aspirations to achieve. In his eyes, a great butler is what the Hayes Society describes as a man of a distinguished household and a man of dignity. It is this definition of dignity that most concerns Stevens - and he believes it reflects a man who maintains his professionalism no matter what the circumstances. Much of the book, then, is dedicated to providing accounts of Stevens' exhibiting this professionalism at the expense of his human feelings.

For instance, during a great convention at Lord Darlington's house in 1923, Stevens had to handle his dying father in an upstairs room all the while managing the guests of the convention. Ultimately he forgoes his father to focus on the guests, and ultimately misses his father's passing. Stevens looks back on this moment with pride. At the same time, he looks back on the fact that he resisted his attraction to Miss Kenton and stayed faithful to Darlington Hall, even after she left. In his eyes, there is triumph in sacrifice for the sake of one's own employer. Even small anecdotes reveal this - like when Stevens fires two Jewish maids at the behest of Lord Darlington even though he doesn't agree with his employer's politics.

But the majority of the novel is dedicated to Stevens and his relationship with Miss Kenton over the course of their 20 years at Darlington Hall. Miss Kenton arrived at a time when Stevens and his father both worked at the estate. It is Miss Kenton who informs Stevens that his father no longer can do the work required and must be stripped of his major duties. And indeed, though Stevens is offended, it is Miss Kenton who ultimately stays with Stevens' father as he lies dying. Upon Stevens' father's death, Miss Kenton becomes almost a substitute for him in Stevens' life - the only person who seems like family, the only person who can provide him love. When the novel begins, then, she's been gone nearly twenty years, but Stevens seizes upon the fact that her marriage might be crumbling as a reason to visit her. Twenty years before, however, Miss Kenton had given Stevens an opportunity to stop her marriage and take her for himself - an opportunity he let go.

Stevens finds his car runs aground in Moscombe and spends the night with the Taylors. They have a dinner there, where Stevens speaks of his past meetings with dignitaries, never once revealing that he is, in fact, a butler. When Dr. Carlisle drives him back to his car the next day, the doctor pokes a hole in the facade and Stevens finally admits that he is, in fact, the butler at Darlington Hall. With this revelation, Stevens finally makes the last part of his journey to meet Miss Kenton.

But when Stevens finally does meet her, with full plans to bring her back to Darlington Hall and perhaps confess his love, he finds that the spirit has gone out of her. She reveals that she is going back to her husband. Even though she may not love him, he has always been there for her. Stevens realizes he's too late and sends her off with well-wishes and returns to Darlington Hall to fulfill the 'remains of his day.'

There are two words which signify Stevens both as character and as narrator: dignity and loyalty. During the story, Stevens repeatedly brings up his thoughts on his definition of dignity. It is first presented as Stevens recalls two stories, one of which his father was "fond of repeating over the years" (36), about an English butler in India who handled a situation, where a tiger was found in the dining room, without flinching. The second concerns his own father's way of handling two men's unpleasant remarks about his employer without showing "one hint of discomfort or anger" but with "an expression balanced perfectly between personal dignity and readiness to oblige" (39). In contrast to these anecdotes, Stevens' account of the moment in which he claims to have reached his own peak of dignity depicts anything but the personification of the notion. His perception of dignity is strikingly different to that displayed by the butler in India and, perhaps more significantly, his father. Instead, he demonstrates his incapacity to express his emotions and the absurd, obsessive mentality of providing good service, despite the extenuating circumstances of the evening in question. The occasion, a night in 1923 when Stevens' father is lying on his deathbed, is also the same night as the significant international conference is taking place at Darlington Hall, with participants from all over Europe and the United States. Determined, or perhaps unable, to let the ill state of his father affect his work, Stevens acts in an almost robot-like manner upon receiving updates from other staff members about his father's current condition. His replies and statements when confronted with his father's state are telling: "I only have a moment. The gentlemen are liable to retire to the smoking room at any moment" (108); "This is most distressing. Nevertheless, I must now return downstairs" (108); "I'm very busy just now, Miss Kenton. In a little while perhaps" (111). These statements demonstrate Stevens' determination. Having returned downstairs to the smoking room, Stevens expresses the satisfaction he gets by his role as the perfect butler by declaring that "The footmen looked relieved to see me, and I immediately signalled them to get to their positions" (109). Ironically, the person most likely to be relieved is probably Stevens himself: he is able to avoid dealing with the rush of emotions felt when someone close is struggling in their last hours. However, Stevens' attempt to conceal his grief, both to the reader and to the people he serves, is exposed by the young Mr

Cardinal: "I say, Stevens, are you sure you're all right there? . . . Not feeling unwell, are you?" (109) and Lord Darlington: "Stevens, are you all right? . . . You look as though you're crying" (109-110). It is presented as if Stevens' narrative in this scene unintentionally reveals his grief and the tears in his eyes, as Cynthia F. Wong observes: "[E]ven though the narrative is constructed through Stevens's eyes, the reader sees the protagonist's grief only indirectly, in the words and actions of others" (497). Ultimately, when his father has passed away, and Stevens' receives the doctor's condolences, he immediately attends to another professional matter and requests the doctor to before his departure attend to the French gentleman Dupont's sore feet downstairs. Essentially, Stevens ignores both the doctor's condolences and his father's recent death in his narration, only to keep up his facade of dignity to the reader. Summarizing the night, Stevens states that he "display[ed], in the face of everything, at least in some modest degree a 'dignity' worthy of someone like Mr Marshall – or come to that, my father" and even though he admits the evening had its "sad associations" he feels, upon recalling it, "a large sense of triumph" (115). This statement, together with the way he handled the evening, provides a clear example of the difference between definition and illustration, as dignity becomes indignity: "Ultimately, dignity is the capacity to accept indignity without flinching, to serve drinks with a smile as one's father lies dying, to see one's idol exposed and one's world collapse without batting an eyelid" (Guth 130). 8 Along with his thoughts on dignity Stevens also regards the question "what is a 'great' butler" (119) important. His expressed disturbance with the snobbery of the Hayes Society, an exclusive society of butlers with challenging member criteria, leads him into discussing the differences between his and the previous generation of the profession. He asserts that one apparent contrast lies in their choice of household to serve in. Whereas his father's generation were more concerned with their employers' title, Stevens claims that: "we tended to concern ourselves much more with the moral status of an employer . . . I think it fair to say, professional prestige lay most significantly in the moral worth of one's employer . . . For we were, as I say, an idealistic generation for whom the question was not simply one of how well one practiced one's skills but to what end one did so" (120-122). Thus, Stevens underlines the importance of his own moral values in why he remained Lord Darlington's servant for several decades. However, after an unfortunate incident where Stevens runs out of gas on his trip, he is invited to spend the night in the home of some locals in Moscombe, and here his view of dignity clashes with the view of Harry Smith. The local politician Smith claims that dignity is to be free, and that everybody, no matter what class or political status one has, has the opportunity to "express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament or vote him out" (196). As a response to this in Stevens' narration, he recalls an event at Darlington Hall when one of Lord Darlington's guests, Mr Spencer, wishes to ask Stevens a couple of questions regarding international political affairs. Stevens' reply to all three questions: "I'm very sorry sir, but I am unable to be of assistance on this matter" (205) is evidently enough to prove Mr Spencer's point being that international political affairs is not for common people. Here it is easy to see that Stevens is being made a fool of by Mr Spencer in front of the other gentlemen, but of course Stevens, on the other hand, "was only too happy to be of service" when Lord Darlington apologizes for the "dreadful . . . ordeal" (206) they put him through the 9 previous evening. However, Lord Darlington also claims that Mr Spencer had a point in his argument, that high political affairs should not involve common people. Considering the significant influence Lord Darlington had over Stevens during his lifetime, and still in present time, this statement seemingly makes Stevens take a whole different approach to the matter without acknowledging what he claimed earlier: Indeed, Mr Harry Smith's words tonight remind me very much of the sort of misguided idealism which beset significant sections of our generation throughout the twenties and thirties. I refer to that strand of opinion in the profession which suggested that any butler with serious aspirations should make it his business to be forever reappraising his employer – scrutinizing the latter's motives, analysing the implications of his views. Only in this way, so the argument ran, could one be sure one's skills were being employed to a desirable end. Although one sympathizes to some extent with the idealism contained in such an argument, there can be little doubt that it is the result, like Mr Smith's sentiments tonight, of misguided thinking (209-210). Thus, after recalling Lord Darlington's words, Stevens obviously has changed his view on the matter of butlers striving to work for an employer who shares the same opinions as themselves. He continues by referring to "the butlers who attempted to put such an approach into practise" and whose careers "came to nothing as a direct consequence" (210). One incident which demonstrates the

ambiguousness as to whether Stevens actually is aware of the significance of what he discusses is during his recollection of Lord Halifax's praise of the well polished silver at Darlington Hall. Lord Halifax had "arrived in a mood of great wariness" (143) and appeared very anxious before the upcoming evening and the meeting with Herr Ribbentrop. Stevens admits that "it is, of course, generally accepted today that Herr Ribbentrop was a trickster: that it was Hitler's plan throughout those years to 10 deceive England for as long as possible concerning his true intentions, and that Herr Ribbentrop's sole mission in our country was to orchestrate this deception" (144). However, Stevens soon goes back to focus on the silver instead of the implications of the German ambassador's visit. The silver "Lord Darlington himself suggested . . . might have been at least a small factor in the change of his guest's mood that evening" (146) and by that eased Lord Halifax's anxiety towards the meeting with Herr Ribbentrop. Ultimately, Stevens' satisfaction from Lord Halifax's enjoyment of the extraordinary well polished silver overshadows the significance of the participants in the meeting, and instead Stevens cannot but enjoy that "one has had the privilege of practicing one's profession at the very fulcrum of great affairs" (147). Consequently, he ignores or forgets that these particular "great affairs" of this evening might have had hazardous implications to the nation's security regarding the Nazi's movement in the thirties. He is only able to think to his amusement that "one's efforts, in however modest a way, comprise a contribution to the course of history" (147). He compound qualities of "dignity" and "greatness" pervade Stevens' thoughts throughout *The Remains of the Day*. Early in the novel, Stevens discusses the qualities that make a butler "great," claiming that "dignity" is the essential ingredient of greatness. He illustrates the concept with a number of examples, finally concluding that dignity "has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits." Stevens develops this exclusively professional mindset only too well. Because he always dons the mask of an imperturbable butler, he necessarily denies—and therefore leaves unexpressed—his own personal feelings and beliefs. Stevens' pursuit of dignity in his professional life completely takes over his personal life as well. By suppressing his individuality in this manner, he never achieves true intimacy with another person. The fact that his view of dignity is so misguided is sad; we can tell that Stevens has wanted great things, but that he has gone about attaining them the wrong way.

Although Stevens never overtly discusses what he thinks "regret" may mean, it becomes clear, when he breaks down and cries at the end of the novel, that he wishes he had acted differently with regard to Miss Kenton and Lord Darlington. The tone of the novel is often wistful or nostalgic for the past; as the story goes on, the tone deepens into one of regret as Stevens reevaluates his past actions and decisions, and finds them unwise. Miss Kenton also openly says at the end of the novel that she often regrets the choices she has made in her own life. The overwhelming sadness of the ending is only slightly lifted by Steven's resolve to perfect the art of bantering—it seems a meager consolation considering the irreparable losses he has experienced in life.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this investigation has been to explore the themes of the novel and also to explore the reasons to read this novel as it is indispensable. Where we find loyalty, professionalism, dignity and regret as main themes which inspires readers and also provoke thoughts as to how important these are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and also it tells that maintain balance in work and relationships before it is too late and then there will be no alternative except to regret.

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