

A Dear Price to Regret Over: On Mr. Stevens' Dignity and Professionalism in *The Remains of the Day*

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The Remains of the Day is one of Kazuo Ishiguro's renowned novels. The protagonist Stevens is an English butler whose life is deeply entwined with the concepts of dignity and honor. Set against the backdrop of post-World War II Britain and reflecting on the interwar period, the novel examines Stevens' devotion to his role and the traditional values of English aristocracy. The essay discusses how Stevens' identity is shaped by his unwavering commitment to professionalism and his admiration for British gentleman culture and highlights the identity crisis Stevens faces as he realizes the flawed nature of his employer and the outdated ideals he upheld. Through Stevens' journey of self-reassessment and eventual epiphany, the essay delves into the complexities of his internal struggle to reconstruct his identity, ultimately advocating for a more authentic understanding of dignity and honor.

Keywords: *The Remains of the Day*, dignity and honor, identity, professionalism

Introduction

The Remains of the Day (1989) is an early novel written by the British author Kazuo Ishiguro. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Stevens, an old-fashioned English butler, with the traditional English aristocratic residence, Darlington Hall, serving as the spatial background. Set against the background of post-World War II Britain, with the interwar period between the two World Wars as the narrative backdrop, this novel delves into Stevens' reflections on his past experiences working at Darlington Hall, pondering his personal emotions, professional ideals, and life values. It also foreshadows the detachment between the id and superego in the desires of the individual, thus deconstructing the national spirit and cultural dignity of the British Empire in the 20th century.

Identity Construction: Pursuit of Dignity and Honor

In *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro explores the theme of identity formation through the protagonist Stevens' relentless pursuit of dignity and honor. Stevens, an old-fashioned English butler, embodies the traditional values associated with his profession, placing utmost importance on maintaining a sense of dignity and upholding the honor of his position. Throughout the novel, Stevens' character is shaped by his unwavering commitment to his role as a butler, viewing it as not just a job but a way of life that demands strict adherence to

professionalism and loyalty. His identity is deeply intertwined with the ideals of service, sacrifice, and self-restraint, all of which contribute to his perception of dignity and honor.

Since the Middle Ages, English society has been characterized by a feudal system, with nobility and gentry comprising the upper class while merchants and commoners held lower social status. This structure gave rise to aristocratic politics and culture, gradually establishing them as the ruling class. The essence of aristocratic spirit could be traced back to the medieval chivalric code, emphasizing values such as loyalty, courage, perseverance, and protection of the weak. Another key aspect is a strong sense of masterhood and social responsibility, leading these noble classes to emphasize family traditions, a sense of honor, and the maintenance of social status (Zhao, 2013, p. 228). The development of gentleman culture is heavily influenced by this aristocratic spirit, considering it as the foundation of its cultural formation. During the era of Stevens' father, the Hayes Society devised stringent criteria for butler membership: "An applicant be attached to a distinguished household" and "the most crucial criterion is that the applicant be possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 25). The authority of this society's standards and its definition of distinction seemed as immutable as "scriptures engraved on stone" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 26). The criteria required butlers to adhere to the hierarchy, emphasizing respect for those of lower status and obedience to those of higher status to uphold the authority of the hierarchical society and attain dignity commensurate with their identity. Given the butler's dependency on the dignity of their prestigious employers, they were expected to demonstrate veneration towards their lords while fulfilling their duties. Attaining dignity equivalent to that of a first-class butler meant tirelessly upholding his lord's dignity, maximizing their talents in their duties, exercising willpower to restrain genuine emotions, and remaining unwavering in the face of emergencies. Under this ideology, Stevens' father prioritized the maintenance of his lord's dignity over the pain of his son, choosing to conceal true emotions and still showed utmost deference.

After the Industrial Revolution, the structure of gentlemen gradually broadened in British society, no longer confined to aristocratic backgrounds: businessmen and the middle class could also be considered as gentlemen. This change came about as some individuals from the middle class, who had prospered during the Industrial Revolution, entered the ranks of the aristocracy, altering the cultural essence of gentleman. Gentlemen were no longer seen as inherently noble but rather shaped their identity through their actions and moral qualities. Gentleman culture, compared to aristocratic culture, placed greater emphasis on education, etiquette, morality, knowledge, and professional conduct. The British middle class absorbed the spirit of the aristocracy while integrating values from other social strata, ultimately making it a symbol of national culture (Zhao, 2013, p. 228). In Stevens' era, both the "gentleman who promotes human progress" and the "noble-born gentleman" were all recognized, and the definition of a gentleman was no longer limited to lineage but deeply considered as the "lord's morality". The prerequisite for a butler to attain dignity was to utilize their talents in serving the true custodians of civilization. In this context, Stevens internalized gentleman culture and positioned himself as a great butler serving an English gentleman. In the novel, Stevens treated his lord and guests with utmost deference, strictly adhering to traditional etiquette and professional rules. The metaphor of light and shadow in the banquet symbolized Stevens' adherence to conventions. He viewed the upper class as "light" and his colleague as "shadow". To avoid disturbing the gentlemen dining in candlelight, he always remained silently in the shadows. He took pride in his professional identity, firmly linking his own worth and dignity with the responsibilities and honor of being a butler, considering it a universal truth. He regarded his father as a model of professionalism,

maintaining these qualities throughout his career as a meaningful pursuit. Dignity is the core of his professional spirit, shaping his life values, yet his excessive focus on professionalism forces him to restrain his human emotions. Thus, he actively suppressed his natural human emotions in favor of achieving a sense of dignity, internalizing personal joys and sorrows as achievements in his profession, as seen in his reactions to his father's passing and Miss Kenton's departure, viewing them as tests of dignity and transforming personal emotions into professional fulfillment.

Identity Crisis: Deconstructing the Notion of "Greatness"

Stevens believed that professional prestige lay most significantly in the moral worth of one's employer (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 85). His admiration for British gentleman culture, however, is not entirely correct, it has significant flaws, one of which is an excessive focus on the gentleman's character, or traditionally valued qualities. His blind adherence to dignity and professionalism led him to lose himself in his identity. Lord Darlington belonged to Britain's ruling class, possessed worldly knowledge, and made great decisions that influenced not only Britain but also global affairs. He was active in British politics, dedicating his life to the nation. "Learning" and "experience" constitute his indispensable "worldly knowledge" and "great decisions". In Stevens' eyes, Lord Darlington, was not only of noble birth and capable of wielding national power but also morally upright, deserving of the title of a great gentleman. Lord Darlington, as a great English gentleman, inherited traits from the knightly spirit such as being "gentle to the weak," "come to help of others," and "upholding justice" (Berberich, 2007, p. 149). He viewed post-war Germany, a nation in debt crisis and defeated in World War I, with sympathy and advocates appeasement policies to maintain peace and justice in Europe. He actively convened international conferences at his estate, attempting to assist Germany in overcoming post-war difficulties. Stevens understood the atrocities committed by Nazi militants but stood by as Lord Darlington has made such absurd decisions, helping Germany overcome post-war difficulties. The Nazis' ideology mirrors this notion by seeking to eliminate all heterogeneity and otherness to solidify their hegemonic rule, a reflection of Lord Darlington's thoughts. Stevens idolized this so-called "authority", disregarded rational judgment, and ruthlessly dismissed two Jewish maids. He considered Lord Darlington's actions as the "golden rule". Guided by professionalism, he saw himself as a small cog in the imperial machinery, believing unquestioningly in the progress and development this vast machine purportedly advances. Thus, he indirectly contributes to the grand cause.

However, Lord Darlington was not as great as perceived. History has shown his actions to be mistaken. After World War II, Lord Darlington faced repercussions for aiding the Nazis. Darlington Hall was sold to the newly risen American, Mr. Farraday. The core of British gentleman culture, after enduring the test of time, became outdated. The collapse of Lord Darlington's image exemplified the decline of gentleman culture, also marking the decline of old-fashioned imperialist thinking in the British Empire. Stevens' lifelong adherence to British cultural identity was questioned by the era in his later years, shaking his sense of belonging to British culture. Living in the household for years, Stevens absorbed gentleman culture and internalized it as his British cultural identity. However, the identity he painstakingly built crumbled along with Lord Darlington's image, ceasing to exist.

Identity Reconstruction: An Attempt at Self-Reassessment

In the wake of Lord Darlington's downfall and the shifting tides of cultural values, Stevens embarked on a journey of self-reassessment, aiming to reconstruct his identity. This introspective endeavor involves a deep dive into his beliefs, values, and the evolving socio-political landscape around him.

Stevens grappled with the realization that his unwavering devotion to the ideals of British gentleman culture, as epitomized by Lord Darlington, may have been misguided. The revelations of Lord Darlington's errors forced Stevens to confront the limitations and flaws of his own identity, which had been intricately tied to his role as a dignified English butler. As he navigated this period of upheaval and introspection, Stevens began to question the very foundation of his identity. He explores notions of dignity, honor, and professionalism in a more nuanced light, untethered from the antiquated notions of aristocratic superiority and imperialist sentiments. He also recognized that his emphasis on distorted notions of dignity and professionalism had cost him the two most important aspects of his life, the loss of his father and Miss Kenton. However, now he found himself unable to reclaim familial love and it was too late for romantic love. His misguided perception had led him to willingly forsake basic human emotions. He acknowledged that Lord Darlington's failure also reflected the futility and meaninglessness of his own professional career in the first half of his life. He had turned himself into a working machine, erasing his humanity, leaving nothing behind in the end.

At the end of the novel, as night fell, strangers cheered for the sudden lights that illuminated the pier. In that moment, regardless of age or class, they engaged in enthusiastic conversations. This scene deeply moved Stevens as he admired the vibrant scene unfolding before him and found himself blending into the crowd, eventually experiencing an epiphany by the seaside. Standing by the sea, watching the distant waves, he felt a wave of calmness and liberation wash over him. He realized that the regrets and futile efforts of the past were now behind him. He decided to dwell excessively no longer on the past but to face the future actively, striving to make the remaining years of his life more fulfilling and meaningful. In the tranquil night, he felt the power of self-reconciliation, carrying with him hope and expectations for the future as he embarked on a new journey, opening a new chapter in his life. At the end of the novel, he said, "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. After all, what can we ever gain in forever looking back and blaming ourselves if our lives have not turned out quite as we might have wished" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 177)? Letting go of past regrets and reconciling with the futile efforts of his life seemed to be Stevens' wisest self-rescue measure. He had no choice but accept his past and who he has become, typically discovering that this realization brings comfort and an ending to mental anguish. This process of self-reassessment led Stevens to a profound realization: true dignity and honor are not solely defined by external affiliations or adherence to outdated norms. Instead, they stem from a genuine understanding of one's values and a willingness to adapt and evolve with changing times. Through this journey of self-discovery and redefinition, Stevens endeavored to reconstruct his identity on more authentic and inclusive principles, aiming to reconcile his past beliefs with a newfound understanding of self and society.

Conclusion

Stevens' understanding of dignity and professionalism under the guidance of his father who led him to establish what seemed like a perfect identity. Influenced by gentleman culture, he internalized it as the ultimate

standard, manifesting dignity, and professionalism as restraint of personal emotions and unconditional reverence for superiors. However, at the same time, he was deeply embroiled in crises of personal identity, unclear career direction, hesitancy in love, and emotional detachment from familial ties.

In the end of the novel, although Stevens' journey across England helps him achieve the spiritual epiphany, with life more than halfway through, his past dignity and the endeavor to service dissolve into emptiness, making no sense at all. With melancholic resignation, he continues to lead a solitary life, accompanied only by memories of declining Darlington Hall.

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