

Stevens's Ethical Identity Dilemma in *The Remains of the Day*

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Based on ethical literary criticism, this paper aims to analyze the factors contributing to Stevens' loss of ethical identity. It contends that distorted ethical relationships are the primary driver behind Stevens's ethical identity dilemma, which includes the abnormal father-son relationship, Stevens's blind admiration for his master, and his avoidance of Miss Kenton's feelings.

Keywords: ethical identity, dilemma, *The Remains of the Day*

Introduction

Published in 1989 by Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* is set against the backdrop of post-World War Two England and explores the profound impact of the war on the country, particularly in the context of individuals grappling with their evolving identities during this transformative era. The novel narrates Stevens's memories of his butler career. As the story progresses, Stevens gets out of self-deception and is able to hear his inner world.

Scholars hold different views on Stevens's identity. Deng Yinling (2016) pointed out the significant events recalled by Stevens, which shows Deng's affirmation of Stevens's inner emotional world. Some scholars explain identity from culture factors. Ryan S. Trimm (2005) announced that Stevens is a symbol of a national brand. Lin Ping (2018) agreed with Trimm. She declares that Stevens's stewardship is constructed because of his mimicry of Britishness. This forms a relationship with his master Darlington, which is similar to the relationship between the colonizer and its colonies. Lin's analysis provided a new interpretation of Stevens's identity from a postcolonial perspective. Ayaka Nakajima (2019) maintained that the tone and structure of Mr. Stevens's narration imply his anxiety regarding imminent personal and social changes.

Based on previous studies, ethical literary criticism concerning the novel remains relatively scarce in China. This paper investigates the reasons behind Stevens's family and professional identity predicament, identifying the distorted father-son relationship, Stevens's blind worship to his master, and his fear of looking straight into his heart, so as to miss Miss Kenton as the main reasons for his identity dilemma. By analyzing Stevens's ethical identity, we gain access to his inner heart, exploring Ishiguro's ethical concerns regarding personal destiny. This exploration also provides a warning for people's ethical identity, emphasizing the importance of personal responsibility in modern society.

Abnormal Relationship Between Father and Son in Family's Ethical Identity

Ethical identity is one of the core terms in literary ethical criticism. Ethics mainly refers to the social system,

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the ethical relations and order between human beings and society. Moreover, "in specific literary works, social identity refers to the identity that a person has in society. The nature of social identity is ethical, which social identity can also be called ethical identity" (Nie, 2010, p. 17). The ethical identities of individuals are subject to change in response to variations in ethical environments, but everyone needs to take their corresponding responsibilities and obligations.

First of all, communication between Stevens and his father is devoid of emotional resonance in the novel. After William retired, Stevens invited him back to work at Darlington Hall. The only reason for Stevens's behavior is that his father is an excellent butler who has outstanding professional achievements. When his father fell at work because of his old age, Stevens told him in a very official manner. He uses the third person to call his father with an impersonal tone and is reluctant to reveal his concern for his father. William's reaction is calm and his face still does not show any emotion, "and he reached forward to the only chair in the room, and placing both hands on its back, brought himself to his feet" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 141). From their interaction with each other, it is clear that this kind of communication has long been accepted in their hearts. Even if brief conversations about their work are conducted in an atmosphere of mutual embarrassment. No intimacy or warmth is lying in the words of their conversation. In essence, their communication lacks emotional depth, rendering them unable to truly understand each other.

Furthermore, Stevens falls short in fulfilling his rights and obligations as a son. William's life hangs in the balance after suffering an acute stroke when Stevens is preparing for an important international conference in Darlington Hall. He is unable to be by his father's side on his deathbed. Stevens needs to make a decision between his father and an important guest. He chooses guests rather than William and says "We can talk that tomorrow morning" (p. 145). This choice compels Stevens to depart when his father's life hangs in the balance, symbolizing not only a physical departure but also an emotional one.

To express love is an important bond that sustains family ethics. For Stevens and his father, William, even though they care for each other, they bury their truest feelings in the deepest part of their hearts. Instead of being expressed, this warm emotion between them is suppressed, resulting in Stevens's lack of the ethical identity he should have in his family.

Evading His True Feelings for Miss Kenton in Love's Ethical Identity

The waistcoat in the novel writes "a sad and humorous love story". The novel also can be regarded as a love affair between Stevens and Miss Kenton. Whether through words or actions, Stevens presents himself as a cowardly lover in his interactions with Miss Kenton. His professional role serves as his excuse for rejecting Miss Kenton. Lord Darlington discharges the Jewish maid without cause. Miss Kenton rejects this decision, but Stevens says, "Surely, I don't have to remind you that our professional duty is not to our own foibles and sentiments, but to the wishes of our employer" (p. 70). Kenton is disappointed in him and accuses him. Stevens insists on his stance, and the difference in their principles hints at the outcome of their final separation.

Stevens exhibits consistent weakness in his actions toward Kenton. One indelible memory that haunts him is the scene where he stands in a dimly lit corridor, mere yards from her room. On the other side of the door, Kenton is crying, but he does not push that door open. At last, he goes back to his work. He disguises his true thoughts about Kenton. He persuades himself that the affair is a serious matter for a butler. However, Stevens's

initial purpose in coming to Miss Kenton's room is to console her. He reckons many times how he could express his concern in words, but Stevens does not even take the first step, that is, out of his own heart. For Kenton and Stevens, that door forever prevents their love.

Twenty years later, Miss Kenton is married but unhappy with it. When they meet again, Stevens has time to express his love, but he only talks to Miss Kenton about his former work experience. He fails to grasp the emotion that Kenton passes on to him in various ways for occupational reasons. Regardless of whether Stevens is really relieved after he meets Miss Kenton, he can only let it go and seal everything up.

Blind Worship for Darlington in Professional Ethical Identity

In Darlington Hall, Stevens's job affords him a seemingly elevated status compared to other servants. Stevens maintains a facade of mutual respect in his relationship with Lord Darlington. However, it is imperative not to overlook the class distinctions that linger beneath their exchanges. From Stevens's perspective, his master is "a person who has a humble and good character" (p. 20), while Darlington weighs the pros and cons in his mind. In essence, Stevens, who is also employed by Darlington Hall, inherently belongs to the lower social group, and his status is still that of a servant. In this relation, Stevens and Lord Darlington embody a specific professional ethical relationship, that of master and servant.

As a butler, Stevens adheres to his undue professional ethics, labeling his work with dignity and honor. Even if it is time for personal travel, he justifies it as work necessities. The clothing he carries on his trips are clothes worn by Lord Darlington who bestows them on him (p. 10). The costume is his inner self-identity of the external expression. The costumes represent symbols of upper-class status, but it is in clear conflict with Stevens' status as a butler.

The dignity and honor that Lord Darlington gives to Stevens obscure the genuine desires of his heart. He once faced a choice between his profession and his personal affection and love, but he put the affairs of Darlington Hall above all else. He has lost his affection and love while shackling himself to his professional ethics. The root of these tragedies is his particular perception of his position as a butler.

In sum, Stevens seems to have succeeded in his career and become the archetype of the perfect butler. Nevertheless, in the service of his master, he abandons his individuality and suppresses his inner instincts. His strong sense of professional ethical identity ultimately leads him to lose sight of his true self.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the dilemma of Stevens's ethical identity, it is found that Stevens integrates multiple ethical identities. As a lover, he shuns his feelings, and as a faithful butler, he cannot balance his inner self with his professional ethic. Whether in family, love, or profession, Stevens's journey of self-understanding remains an indispensable part. Only by recognizing and embracing his authentic ethical identity can he truly connect with others, ultimately liberating himself from his ethical identity predicament.

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