

## “FOREVER LOOKING BACK”: MEMORY AND UNRELIABILITY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO’S *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*

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**Abstract:** *Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel The Remains of the Day studies the notion of narrative unreliability through the exploration of the relationship between memories and one’s sense of identity. Ishiguro employs a narrator who communicates a struggle between reality and what he can partially remember about himself, his idea of Englishness and the house he has worked in, through gaps, omissions and ambiguities that install unreliability as the key vehicle with which the narration operates. However, the unreliable narrator in the novel challenges any notion of stable identity, and the impossibility of fixating either the national or the personal identity into singular, essentialist and idealist framing.*

**Keywords:** *identity, memory representation, truth, unreliability,*

### 1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* portrays an English butler’s mental trip, through his memories that seem to control and even overpower his narrative. Stevens, as a narrator, attempts to shape and control his narrative by recreating his memories, to prove that he fits into the definition of the “great butler” who had served in the house of a great gentleman, Lord Darlington. However, the novel progresses to show the discrepancy between Stevens’ interpretations of his own memories and what they actually represent. Stevens oscillates between an idealisation of Englishness that he wants to protect and fixate, and a gradual acknowledgement of its absence. Ishiguro’s narrator communicates this unresolved struggle through gaps, omissions, and ambiguities that make his narrative unreliable. However, I believe that Stevens’ unreliability, in fact, “guides us to other inferences that lead us to recognize that [he], nevertheless, captures some underlying truths about life” (Phelan 2008: 13). Thus, I argue that the novel’s use of an unreliable narrator challenges any notion of a stable identity, and the impossibility of fixating either the national or the personal identity into a singular, essentialist and idealist framing.

### 2. A narratological approach to the issue of unreliability

Unreliability, as a narratological term coined by Wayne Booth, characterises the “moral” distance “between the norms of the implied or real author and those articulated by the narrator” (Nünning 2008: 36), whereby “the speaker is himself the butt of the ironic point’, since ‘the author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker’s back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found

wanting” (D’hoker 2008: 149). When the reader notices this mentioned distance, he detects the unreliability embedded in the narration. However, many critics, such as Rimmon-Kenan, Wall, and Nünning, find such a definition insufficient, since it does not fully explain how unreliability is detected by the reader. According to Rimmon-Kenan, the norms and values of the implied author “are notoriously difficult to arrive at”; he goes on to talk about certain textual factors that

may indicate a gap between the norms of the implied author and those of the narrator: when the facts contradict the narrator’s views, the latter is judged to be unreliable (but how does one establish the ‘real facts’ behind the narrator’s back?); when the outcome of the action proves the narrator wrong, a doubt is retrospectively cast over his reliability in reporting earlier events; when the views of other characters consistently clash with the narrator’s, suspicion may arise in the reader’s mind; and when the narrator’s language contains internal contradictions, double-edged images, and the like, it may have a boomerang effect, undermining the reliability of its user (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 104).

Unreliability is recognized when the evaluations and interpretations of the narrator contradict or misrepresent the actual event or claim what it might stand for. Although these indicators which reveal that the narrator’s interpretation of his own experience or of external events might be misleading or simply missing, it is important to note that usually “the unreliable narrator’s account of events can be trusted” as it is according to the accuracy of these events that the reader judges the narrator to be reliable or unreliable (D’hoker 2008: 151). Moreover, according to Wall (1994: 19-20), unreliability can also be marked through the discourse, because it “offers clues to narrator’s unreliability, their verbal tics giving us some indication of preoccupations that render their narration problematic... - a signal that does not demand the complex cross-referencing that diegetic inconsistencies require”.

What seems problematic with the emphasis on the implied author and “self-explanatory yardsticks, like ‘normal moral standards’ and ‘basic common sense’”, for both Wall and Nünning is that “no generally accepted standard of normality exists which can serve as the basis for impartial judgments” (Nünning 2008: 44). Attempting to define the unreliable narrator by basing the notion of reliability on the “norms and values” of the implied author suggests that “an unreliable narrator presupposes a reliable counter-part, who is the ‘rational, self-present subject of humanism’, who occupies a world in which language is a transparent medium that is capable of reflecting a ‘real’ world”; an attempt that is quite impossible (Wall 1994: 21). In fact, the unreliable narrator mirrors that the incoherence and dynamism of human subjectivity “is indeed a sight of conflict; that, like unreliable narrators, we frequently ‘lie’ to ourselves, and-with just a shadow of awareness-avoid facts that might undermine the coherence or the purpose of narratives we construct about our lives (ibid.). Nünning presents a definition of the unreliable narrator that is aware of these contradictions:

The structure of unreliable narration can be explained in terms of dramatic irony and discrepant awareness because it involves a contrast between a narrator’s view of the fictional world and the contrary state of affairs which the reader can grasp. The reader interprets what the narrator says in two quite different contexts. On the one hand, the reader is exposed to what the narrator wants and means to say. On the other hand, the statements of the narrator take on additional meaning for the reader,

a meaning the narrator is not conscious of and does not intend to convey. Without being aware of it, unreliable narrators continually give the reader indirect information about their idiosyncrasies and states of mind. The peculiar effects of unreliable narration result from the conflict between the narrator's report of the 'facts' on the level of the story and the interpretations provided by the narrator. The narrative not only informs the reader of the narrator's version of events, it also provides him or her with indirect information about what presumably 'really happened' and about the narrator's frame of mind (Nünning 2008: 38).

Another question related to Nünning's definition is about how consciously or rather unconsciously the narrator keeps or hides the information, and, if he does so unconsciously, is it really possible to label him as unreliable. In Stevens' case, he compartmentalizes his memories and their "true" evaluation not because he is simply ignorant or unaware, but in order "to avoid the psychological conflict that inheres in being aware of one's fractured subjectivity, or of the way in which values that rule one part of one's personality diminish one's ability comfortably to meet the needs dictated by another part" (Wall 1994: 23). Stevens' omission and silences in the novel seem to show his subtle awareness that he has to face these issues, and his fear to do so. According to Wall, Stevens' partial acceptance at the end of the novel closes the supposed gap between the implied author and the narrator and thus the novel "asks us to formulate new paradigms of unreliability for the narrator whose split subjectivity, rather than moral blindness or intellectual bias, gives rise to unreliable narration" (ibid.).

### 3. Unreliability in *The Remains of the Day*

*The Remains of the Day* is a narrative account of Stevens' memories and his attempts to remember and order these memories. As memories are changing, slippery textures, narrative unreliability is at the centre of the novel. This unreliability is observable in a number of places throughout the novel, such as the narrative discourse, and "the conflicts between scenic presentation and Stevens's commentary" (Wall 1994: 22). The discursive elements that install Stevens's unreliability are given through his defensive protestations and attempts to clarify his claims in the way he wants the reader to understand them, by saying "Let me make this clear" (Ishiguro 1999: 10), "I am able to refute it with absolute authority" (122), "I would like to explain" (63). Kathleen Wall (1994: 24) sees these slippages as "largely unconscious, meant as a defence of his life and the values that have shaped it" But these slippages also suggest that it is Stevens' discomfort and disturbance caused by a partial awareness of the accuracy of his claims about Lord Darlington's failures and "misguidedness", as well as his own that cause him to amend his life and mistakes by correcting and controlling his memory and its meaning. Stevens' narrative progression reveals that he "would rather not show and tell all that he knows, even while he is painfully aware that he must cover up what he hopes to never know" (Wong 2007: 500). For example, when Stevens refuses to see his own father on his death bed, claiming that "To do otherwise, I feel, would be to let him down" (Ishiguro 1999: 111), he believes to have displayed "in the face of everything, at least in some modest degree a dignity worthy of ... my father" and feels a "large sense of triumph" in contributing to international politics that will serve the continuation of peace (115). Although Stevens has the impression that he has managed to hide his emotions, the questions asked by Mr.

Cardinal and Lord Darlington about his state, whether he “is alright”, or the fact that that he looks as if he were crying shows that his pain is visible and readable by others, despite his attempts to brush it off as “hard work” (110). Stevens’ account of professional triumph shows the narrative “unreliability in the repression of the personal and in the deeply fractured subjectivity that follows such an enormous and significant bracketing off or denial of aspects of the self” (Wall 1994: 26). Moreover, when he recalls that moment, he claims that “I may have given the impression earlier that I treated [my father] rather bluntly... The fact is, there was little choice but to approach the matter as I did – as I am sure you will agree once I have the full context of those days” (Ishiguro 1999: 73). Stevens’ attempt to rearrange his memory according to his own view of what is correct seems to be an attempt to comfort himself by recreating a past that could be explained otherwise, justified, and pardoned. Of course, the more Stevens explains the events of March 1923, the less we agree with him and his actions.

Stevens’ unreliability lies in his attempts to exchange what he truly feels and thinks for the rearranged and polished version of a “professional” interpretation that further justifies his previous actions and mode of thinking. This is also evident in the way Stevens reads Miss Kenton’s letter. The first time he mentions the letter, Stevens claims that the letter holds in its “long, rather unrevealing passages, an unmistakable nostalgia for Darlington Hall” and rereading it confirms that “there is no possibility I am merely imagining her presence of these hints on her part” (Ishiguro 1999: 9-10). However, the closer Stevens gets to Cornwall, where he meets Miss Kenton, the more drastically his understanding of the letter changes and, after perusing it again, in order to “indicate unambiguously [Miss Kenton’s] desire to return to her former position”, Stevens admits that “one may have previously- perhaps through wishful thinking of a professional kind- exaggerated what evidence there was regarding such a desire on her part”(149). The change of meaning in the two different readings of the letter seems to show that Stevens “projects his own wish for [Miss Kenton’s] return onto a letter”, revealing that Stevens’ interpretation of the key events in his life have been faulty (Guth 1999: 133). Stevens seems to project his own emotions and desires onto Miss Kenton’s letter, assuming it is she that holds a great longing for Darlington Hall, when in truth, it is he who truly misses her presence in the house, while also wishing for the revival of Darlington Hall’s old glory. His memory is shaped by this longing, which is eventually mirrored in his retelling of the past events. However, at the same time, the reader is given hints about the unreliability of such instances by Steven’s constant concern with correcting himself and his attempts to reimagine and relive the moments he is describing, for the sake of accuracy. Such corrections indicate that a narrative dependent upon memory cannot be fully coherent and complete.

#### **4. Memory, unreliability and identity**

Stevens draws attention to how much he depends on his memories and on understanding them in order to make sense of his present journey. Throughout the novel, Stevens feels the need to express that “I see I have become somewhat lost in these old memories. This had never been my intention” (Ishiguro 1999: 167), since he admits it is “hard for me [him] to recall precisely” (99) and that “It is very possible there were a number of other instances... which I have now forgotten” (59). Stevens’ doubts about his own narrative suggest the impossibility of

remembering events fully and coherently, since one might actually choose to remember certain memories in a particular way, if they have a noteworthy contribution to the understanding of present events, aims, and personality of an individual, or memories themselves point to their own incompleteness and arbitrariness. The fact that most of Stevens' self-regulation and questioning is centred around his memories, which are also changing, fragmentary, and slippery, makes it impossible to arrive at an "entirely reliable version" of what happened. In fact, an example is when Stevens experiences difficulties in "properly" remembering and locating his memory of Miss Kenton's crying:

One memory in particular has preoccupied me all morning- or rather, a fragment of a memory, a moment that has for some reason remained with me vividly through the years. It is a recollection of standing alone in the back corridor before the closed door of Miss Kenton's parlour... as I recall, I had been struck by the conviction that behind that very door, just a few yards from me, Miss Kenton was in fact crying. However, I am not at all certain now as to the actual circumstances which had led me to be standing thus in the back corridor. It occurs to me that elsewhere in attempting to gather such recollections, I may well have asserted that this memory derived from the minutes immediately after Miss Kenton's receiving news of her aunt's death; that is to say, the occasion when, having left her to be alone with her grief, I realized out in the corridor that I had not offered her my condolences. But now having thought further, I believe I may have been a little confused about this matter; that in fact this fragment of memory derives from the events that took place on an evening at least a few months after the death of Miss Kenton's aunt. (Ishiguro 1999: 222)

Ishiguro's employment of an unreliable narrator serves to complicate the act of truth-telling with the help of the memory. Stevens' confusion about his memory of Miss Kenton's crying and locating its cause in two different occasions suggests that he does not possess any control over his memory, over his narrative and identity. Stevens' preoccupation with this particular memory presents an attempt to assign clarity and direction to himself as well as to his narrative, by trying to reverse his confusion and correctly locate that memory. This effort through which Stevens "attempts to grapple with his unreliable memories and interpretations and the havoc that his dishonesty has played on his life" serves to gain some sense of stability and control of his identity, since this is his duty as a butler (Wall 1994: 23). In that sense, Stevens' struggle with his own memories shows that "human subjectivity is not entirely coherent; that it is indeed a sight of conflict" (ibid.), which serves to problematize Stevens' attempts to fix his identity in an idealist image of Englishness and dignity.

In *The Remains of the Day*, the idealism and stability of both personal and national identity are deconstructed, since these identities depend on memory, which is itself already unreliable. Stevens' preoccupation with defining the ideas of greatness and dignity, which constitute his identity, his life, and his public image, reflects the parallelism between a personal identity crisis and a crisis of national identity. Stevens provides a static definition for both "greatness" and "dignity" in the very beginning of his narrative, connecting these notions, first, to a butler's identity and then to Englishness, claiming that "We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that, when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman" (Ishiguro 1999: 44). Stevens portrays greatness to be an essential element of his



self-image as a butler, but also a necessary and even compulsory part of Englishness, thus, also establishing a link between greatness and Darlington Hall. He explains that the greatness of a butler is measured directly by an “association with a truly distinguished household” and that “A great butler can only be, surely, one who can point to his years of service and say that he has applied his talents to serving a great gentleman- and through the latter, to serving humanity” (Ishiguro 1999: 123). As the stability of Stevens’ identity is directly linked with Lord Darlington and Darlington Hall, Stevens attempts to conjure up a fixed image of the house and its owner that fits into this definition. He wants to locate a more stable and unchanging definition for his identity by attributing greatness and dignity to the house he works in.

Thus, the resurrection of Stevens’ memories is accompanied by his attempts to explain them as corrections of the “small errors” and misunderstandings of Lord Darlington’s image and the decency of the house he works for. Before going on to narrate about Lord Darlington’s sudden dismissal of two Jewish maids for the “best interests” of the house and “the safety and well- being” of its guests (155), Stevens tries to persuade the reader, as much as himself, that “the allegation that his lordship never allowed Jewish people to enter the house or any Jewish staff to be employed is utterly unfounded”, while, at the same time, adding, “except, perhaps, in respect to one very minor episode in the thirties which has been blown up out of all proportion” (146). By contradicting the evidence he soon presents, the evidence that Lord Darlington indeed does not allow Jewish maids in his house, Stevens attempts to justify Lord Darlington’s actions, and euphemise quite a serious signal for Lord Darlington’s anti-Semitism that challenges the latter’s “greatness” and moral decency. Since Lord Darlington’s failures and mistakes entail that Stevens also failed as a butler, Stevens “work[s] to protect his image of the world, and to clarify and stabilize his role in it, by rationalizing and/or concealing contradictions like these” (Westerman 2004: 161). He does not voice his own opinion that “the maids had been perfectly satisfactory employees and.... my every instinct opposed the idea of their dismissal”, claiming that, as a professional butler, “there was nothing to be gained at all in irresponsibly displaying such personal doubts” (Ishiguro 1999: 156). Openly admitting Lord Darlington’s narrow-sightedness and mistakes means also accepting the collapse of the idealized image of the English identity that Stevens strives to protect. Therefore, he establishes an alternative narrative, where he tries to deem Lord Darlington’s acts, and consequently his own acts and unconditional loyalty, as acceptable and explainable.

In fact, by going through his memories, Stevens attempts to centralize the glory of the “grand English house” with “the staff of twenty-eight” (Ishiguro 1999: 7), and relocate the house as well as Lord Darlington within history and politics by reimagining the “large social occasions” (8) held in the house “with distinguished visitors” (247). Of course, this greatness of Darlington Hall is only illusory, as both the house and its owner represent the collapse of the world peace, because of Lord Darlington’s relation with the Nazis. This is symbolized in the house’s current standing, as it is turned into a “mock period piece, and so are its inhabitants, gentleman and butler alike, and all the values it used to stand for” (Nellis 2015: 14). Furthermore, the house is purchased by an American, who admits that he has bought it because it is the “genuine grand old English house” with a “genuine old-fashioned English butler” (Ishiguro 1999: 131). The country house as the symbol of Englishness is marginalized and Englishness is “itself mocked, that it is a myth that, when not regularly twisted, can lead to nationalistic manipulation and

prevents the kind of critical cosmopolitanism” (Nellis 2015: 14). Mr. Farraday’s questioning of Stevens whether he is indeed “the real thing”, not just “some waiter pretending to be one”, does not only threaten Stevens’ identity that is built on being a “great” butler, but also his national reality, history, and Englishness (Ishiguro 1999: 131). This threat grows further with Stevens’ journey away from the house. If Darlington Hall stands as a “site of being in which [Stevens] assumes a pre-determined, static sense of self primarily because of his role of a ‘good butler’”, the butler’s detachment from the house suggests an emotional and ideological movement away from the idealistic English identity (Toprak Sakız 2019: 1055). While Stevens’ distance from the house grows, his idealism built around the ideas of “greatness” and “dignity” gradually fades, as he begins to acknowledge that he had served a man who “sees international affairs as an extension of sports day at school, treats war like a cricket match ... and despises the French for not understanding that when a war- like any other sporting event- is over you ought to simply shake hands”, without ever “mentioning the millions of Englishmen who died” (Guth 1999: 127). Stevens’ journey from an enclosed space to an open sphere, with ordinary working-class people, symbolizes a detachment from “the grand narratives and grand characters of earlier historiography toward the lives and experiences of the ordinary, the mundane, the marginalized, and the dispossessed” (Wong 2007: 499). The importance Stevens assigns to himself by claiming that his butler duties contributed to the international politics of the 1920s and the 30s is challenged by his realisation that his master’s “efforts were misguided, even foolish” and therefore, his too (Ishiguro 1999: 211). His discussion with Harry Smith on dignity, in which his companion claims that “no matter if you’re rich or poor, you’re born free and you’re born so that you can express your opinion freely... you can’t have dignity if you’re a slave” (196), further challenges his definition of dignity and eradicates the “key gauges by which to measure his self-worth”, as he realizes he has been the slave of illusory ideals about the English butler and Englishness (Wong 2007: 499). The collapse of the English house and Englishness also means the collapse of the individual in *The Remains of the Day*, since these are the values with which Stevens attempts to control his memories, life, and narrative. He tries to justify Lord Darlington’s political moves, because his master’s ultimate failure “marks his recognition of the inconsistencies implicit in justifying his own life through praising that of the man he served” (Wall 1994: 35). Hence, Stevens attempts to free himself from his overwhelming memories, from the idea that he has indeed wasted away his life by attempting “to keep one’s [his] attention focused on the present; to guard against any complacency creeping in on account of what one may have achieved in the past” (Ishiguro 1999: 148). He is confronted with a re-evaluation of his past and the gradual acknowledgement that nothing meaningful, as he claims, remains behind the mask and the performance of the butler, as he has indeed been serving a man who sympathized with the Nazis. The deconstruction of his identity as the great English butler, in the end forces him to relocate himself in the present moment with the aim to “make the best of what remains of [his] day” (256).

## 5. Conclusion

In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro’s employment of a narrator who mainly deals with remembering and memory as the central elements of narrative creation shows that it is not simply the narrator who is unreliable, but memory and its

workings as well. The gradual awareness Stevens gains about his own self and his narrative “challenges an approach to unreliable narrators that focuses on a fixation with an authoritative version of events that the implied reader cleverly constructs in spite of the narrator’s purposeful or unconscious obfuscation” (Wall 1994: 34). Such narrative awareness by Stevens suggests that Ishiguro ponders on what may be considered unreliable. Since the very notion of reliability does not exist, what passes for truth may vary greatly and change, and may affect the way the reader might choose to follow the text. The recent approaches to the notion of unreliability mentioned above suggest that the element of unreliability provides a more focused engagement with the text and an easier identification with the fictional characters. The misunderstandings and the mistakes result from the fallibility of memory and mirror the reader’s own fallibility as a human being. In this sense, experimentation with different levels of unreliability in the fictional space may transform our own sense of identity, belonging, and engagement with the past or the present.

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