

Personality, class, and culture in the remains of the day



“ A profound and heart-rending study of personality, class and culture” To what extent do you agree with this assessment of the novel? Throughout “ The Remains of the Day”, Mr Stevens, the protagonist, not only explores the world outside of his beloved Darlington Hall but also takes a journey into his own past, allowing the reader to examine his personality alongside explanations of both class and culture . The complexity of Stevens’ mind is gradually exposed to the reader, who is open to interpret his personality as either profoundly depressed or infinitely frustrated. The intricacy and unclear nature of his feelings are typical of the post-modernist style, leaving the reader to decide whether the novel is indeed a “ heart-rending study of personality, class and culture.” This assessment offers the reader a partial insight into the characteristics of the novel; arguably, however, there are many aspects of the text that are not profound or heart-rending. The relationship between Mr Stevens and the reader is of primary importance in the study of Stevens’ personality. The amount of information he freely remembers in contrast to what remains merely as “ fragmented” allows the reader to observe the repression that is intrinsic to his personality. Stevens’ narrative is often unreliable due to the restraint he shows in recollecting some memories, “ often disguising more than it lays bear ”. In post-modernist literature, unreliable narration is used as a device to put pressure on the reader to decide his or her version of what is true, often reflecting the confusing complexity of modern life. Because Stevens is an intradiegetic narrator, his narrative voice could be considered unreliable as he is telling the story as he sees it, while also existing within it. While illustrating both his knowledge and his blindness, this method of narration raises the question as to whether the reader is ever shown his true personality. One example of the <https://assignbuster.com/personality-class-and-culture-in-the-remains-of-the-day/>

unreliability of Stevens' narration because of emotional repression is the occasion of Miss Kenton hearing of her aunt's death. The lexical choice of words such as "confused" and "fragment" in this passage could lead the reader to believe Stevens has truly forgotten the episode. However, he also comments that the incident remains "vivid through the years". These conflicting views link to Newton's observation that Stevens "glides through his memories, alternately looking and looking away." In concealing his memories he is also hiding his personality from the reader or possibly showing that he becomes overwhelmed by some emotional experiences. Stevens represses this particular memory, possibly as a reaction to his unprofessional conduct of not offering his condolences, or perhaps due to the regret he feels for not comforting Miss Kenton at the time. The contrasting references to this memory illustrate the process of concealment and revelation of knowledge that makes the narrative so complex. He comments upon the "strange feeling" that overcomes him, leading the reader to believe he may be experiencing emotion or stifling regret. This occasion, like others in the novel, can be interpreted as heart-rending, for the reader feels sympathy for an ageing butler who lacks the ability to express himself outside his professional boundaries. Stevens also represses his feelings of sorrow when his father dies, choosing to treat the reader as he would an employer or guest and not bothering them with his personal grief. The stifling of some memories and emotions coincides with what Adam Parkes describes as Stevens' "fear of losing control". One such example is of Stevens' repressed sexual love: "Might it be that our Mr Stevens fears distractions? Can it be that our Mr Stevens is flesh and blood after all and cannot fully trust himself?" It is clear this suggestion, especially coming from <https://assignbuster.com/personality-class-and-culture-in-the-remains-of-the-day/>

Miss Kenton, has an effect on Stevens as he refers to her comment as “chatter”. This use of metalanguage conveys to the reader that Stevens is uncomfortable with such unprofessional talk, as he fears it will detract from his job. He also excuses himself, commenting that their cocoa evenings maintain a “ professional character”, signifying that he fears the reader thinking of him as unprofessional in much the same way he wants to uphold an appearance to his employer. However, this leads the reader further to believe that he in fact cannot “ fully trust himself”, because by excusing himself to the reader and concealing his emotions, he is further deceiving himself in an attempt to uphold the “ dignity” that he constantly strives towards. Another incident similar to this is where Stevens defends his “ incidental enjoyment” of romance novels, offering rhetorical questions to the reader such as “ what shame is there in it?” By defending himself in this manner the reader experiences a profound study of Stevens’ personality, as his humanity is exposed underneath his professional exterior. To conceal his fear Stevens utilises a unique narrative style, which is precise and formal, disguising any feeling hidden underneath his words in order to uphold his professional facade. This “ butlerspeak”, David Lodge argues, “ has no literary merit whatsoever. ” However, the style offers refined and elevated vocabulary which firstly highlights the measured nature of Stevens’ personality and alongside this conveys to the reader that Stevens is a complex character whose narrative needs examining to determine its true meaning, a motif typical of post-modernism. In addition, every constrained sentence evokes Stevens’ strangled personality as he reveals very little about himself. The narrative is, as Petry comments, Stevens’ recollection of the “ non-formation” of his own identity; this is an observation on how

<https://assignbuster.com/personality-class-and-culture-in-the-remains-of-the-day/>

throughout the novel the reader is shut out of Stevens' background, since there is no mention of his mother, his childhood, or his friends, nor does he seem to have a Christian name. It could be argued that Stevens' job has formed his identity; he has shut everything else out classing it as a distraction and has let his personality become formed by his occupation. Obedience is intrinsic to his character, as subtly illustrated through his obedience to a travel volume at the beginning of his journey: " I did not fail to visit the fine cathedral, much praised by Mrs Symons in her volume." He cannot make choices himself as he is so accustomed to following orders; he only visits Salisbury Cathedral because it is suggested in her book. Ishiguro describes himself as " stuck on the margins" as he is neither Japanese nor English. This is similar to Stevens, as although he is devoted to his job, he does not belong to the aristocratic society of Darlington Hall nor to the society outside which he visits on his journey. Without his job, Stevens would be nothing. This personality trait is further comparable to Christopher Banks in *When We Were Orphans*, who does not fit in at school and talks at length about gaining acceptance in social clubs by becoming " well-connected" to the " various higher walks of life ". Banks' personality is similar to Stevens' in other ways - he is predominantly driving towards a deluded goal, not to serve like Mr Stevens but to " solve" his unresolved past. Duty and love are also conflicting issues for Banks in parallel to Stevens; however, unlike Stevens he achieves a late epiphany of unconditional love that does not have to be earned through " duty" or " dignity". Although the awareness comes too late to free him from a lingering " emptiness", the reader can at least feel sympathy to him eventually, whereas Stevens frustrates the reader with his blind loyalty to professionalism. Ishiguro himself refers to the <https://assignbuster.com/personality-class-and-culture-in-the-remains-of-the-day/>

narrative of "The Remains of the Day" as being "not random" but being "controlled by the things that [Stevens] doesn't say"; it is this restraint that acts to lead many readings against the profound and heart-rending ideal that emerges primarily at the end of the novel. It can be argued that for the reader to feel emotionally compelled she must feel that Stevens does in fact feel regret, and at times this means reading further into the character's personality than he narrates. For example, the readers knows that Stevens feels crushed when Miss Kenton mentions that she will not return to Darlington Hall; he has made reference to his hopes of her return throughout the novel. Of course, he never told Miss Kenton of his feelings and so does not convey his true sense of loss. Only to himself does Stevens reveal that his "heart was breaking," which is an astoundingly powerful revelation from a character that has shown little or no emotion throughout the novel. While he manages to conceal his "degree of sorrow", Stevens realises how much better his life could have been with Miss Kenton. This is a profoundly sorrowful and heart-rending climax to their relationship. A further complexity in the narrative adds to this effect, as Stevens fails to talk about what would constitute "Day Five". The reader is left to imagine Stevens wandering around utterly alone, his chance of intimacy gone. It is not clear, in the end, the extent to which Stevens realises he has deceived himself. This ambiguous conclusion is a key motif in postmodernist literature. Stevens appears to show regret with statements such as "I suppose I was something of a disappointment," which could refer to several things - his father's expectations of professionalism, his own ideal of dignity, or his involvement with Lord Darlington and his effect on historical events. This would suggest that Stevens finally realizes his error in judgment and feels sadness in his

<https://assignbuster.com/personality-class-and-culture-in-the-remains-of-the-day/>

inability to alter the past, and so the reader can finally feel sympathy for Stevens. Alternatively, readers may feel frustrated at a man who has been consumed by his occupation and who blindly denied opportunities to live a life of happiness with Miss Kenton. Even at the end of the novel Stevens asks, "What can we gain in forever looking back and blaming ourselves if our lives have not turned out quite as we might have wished?" The question is particularly exasperating because the reader knows that Stevens could have taken agency over his life and achieved what he wished but chose not to. He ponders his situation and decides he must strive to improve his "bantering skills," ignoring the pain he feels after losing Miss Kenton. The reader is given an insight into the emotions Stevens can experience but is then left at a loss as Stevens resolves that bantering, which he considers a professional task, is the "key to human warmth". The irony is almost comic at this stage in the novel, as the reader has just seen Stevens turn his back on the very "human warmth" he is now talking about. From this perspective, the end of the novel is neither profound nor heart-rending, just frustrating. The question of whether the book's portrayal of "class and culture" are "profound and heart-rending" is somewhat easier to answer. Stevens allows himself to be "colonised" by Lord Darlington, putting the needs of the "coloniser" ahead of his own on numerous occasions and becoming confused about his own station. Stevens takes on the opinions of Lord Darlington and his gentleman visitors, including the traditional English hierarchy that places Stevens in a lower class. Stevens believes he has no choice but to inhabit the role of butler, which can be seen as heart-rending because this certainty is what prevents him from a life with Miss Kenton. His commitment to his post in a changing era is also heart-rending. As the nature of domestic service

<https://assignbuster.com/personality-class-and-culture-in-the-remains-of-the-day/>

changed in England, men in positions like Stevens became rare. Stevens, who embodies gracious decorum, represents the “remains” of an outmoded, professional “gentleman butler” who cannot exist in the more modern world of proficient handymen. Furthermore, the fact that Giffen and Co. is closing signifies more than the fact that the practice of polishing silver is becoming obsolete: it is symbolic of Stevens’ profession itself. This analysis highlights Stevens as somewhat of a pathetic character who takes pride in his “unrivalled” silver, whereas in fact it is his skewed concept of dignity that shields him from the changing culture. M. Tamaya comments, “as England has to accommodate itself to the rise of America as an imperial power, Stevens, after having served Lord Darlington for 35 years, has to adjust himself to an American master”; this is true throughout the novel. Stevens’ discussion of “bantering” demonstrates his entrenchment in old-fashioned values and judgements. Stevens is afraid of offending Mr Farraday when bantering with him because he does not know any better; he is consumed by the thought that he is inferior to Mr Farraday since he is a servant and Mr Farraday is his master. Although the strict hierarchy that used to characterise the ordering of English manor houses has faded away in favour of more democratic views, Stevens has not adapted to a climate in which he might joke with his employer as an equal and Ishiguro achieves a profound study into class and culture effectively through this example. In conclusion, Mr Stevens has become fixed within the ideal of what his profession once was. His inability to adapt is a result of his isolated life within Darlington Hall, knowing of nothing but his masters’ needs and a constant struggle toward dignity. This professional demeanor has led to Stevens attempting to conceal all personal feeling. His emotional repression can lead the reader to become

<https://assignbuster.com/personality-class-and-culture-in-the-remains-of-the-day/>

frustrated, because instead of reciprocating the feelings Miss Kenton has for him, he buries his personality deeper into his professional work. However, the reader is also shown a profound and heart-rending study of personality, class and culture, particularly by Stevens' claim that his heart is breaking and the sympathy that this induces, his inability to adapt to change after becoming colonised by Lord Darlington, and his powerlessness to change his past after realising his efforts as a butler have been wasted. Thus, the original assessment of the novel is correct.