
L I T E R A T U R E

Representations of History in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

ANA MARIA
HOPÂRTEAN



KAZUO ISHIGURO

Ana Maria Hopârtean

Lecturer at the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communications, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. Research interests: postmodern and postcolonial literature, teaching and learning strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGING LINDA Hutcheon's position that postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations,¹ this paper aims to analyze the manner in which history is represented in Kazuo Ishiguro's third novel, *The Remains of the Day*.² While postmodernism in itself is now categorized as belonging to the past,³ through its focus on ex-centricity and its undermining of a "grand narrative,"⁴ it breaks down the concept of history as a macro-narrative into a multitude of histories, thus allowing the micro-narrative of national history through the lenses of individuals such as Stevens, the butler in *The Remains of the Day*.

The novel has been interpreted as postcolonial,⁵ but not in a strict sense of the term. Unlike Rushdie, Achebe or Gordimer, Ishiguro distances himself from the explicit realities of the former British colonies. Ishiguro is mainly concerned with the repercussions of the de-colonizing process on British identity and, more specifically through his

character Stevens, with the retelling of personal history against the background of a wider national history.

The novel is set in 1956, when the Suez Canal was nationalized by President Nasser, which humiliated Great Britain and France. This political context is particularly significant for the way in which Ishiguro chooses to associate Stevens's personal history, *his story*, with national *history*. Stevens reminisces about Darlington Hall in its pre-World War II years, when he was employed as a butler to Lord Darlington, a British aristocrat who sympathized with Hitler. Now working for Mr. Farraday, an American who bought Darlington Hall, Stevens is caught between past and present, idealizing the former while trying to come to terms with the latter.

The novel's great achievement lies in its ability to make the reader empathize with Stevens and thus get involved in the process of telling *his story*, which is ultimately a story of what it means to be a great butler in Great Britain and, more specifically, in England. "It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only mensevants. I tend to believe this is true. Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of. . . . 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."⁶

In an attempt to come to terms with his own failed story, he embarks on a journey to find Miss Kenton, now Mrs. Benn, with whom he has never been able to share his feelings. Stevens resorts to history and national identity as a way of justifying his lifelong purpose: "Each of us harboured the desire to make our own small contribution to the creation of a better world, and saw that, as professionals, the surest means of doing so would be to serve the great gentlemen of our times in whose hands civilization had been entrusted."⁷ He is Ishiguro's way of deconstructing the grand historical narrative of a national identity that is rooted in a past which is no longer relevant today.

The novel is "imbued with a post-imperial melancholy"⁸ in which one's identity only makes sense if placed in a center-periphery, master-servant type of relationship. Stevens's quiet acceptance of Lord Darlington's political views is, to a great extent, what defines him in this power relationship: "It is, in practice simply not possible to adopt a critical attitude towards an employer and at the same time provide good service. It is not simply that one is unlikely to be able to meet the many demands of service at the higher levels while one's attentions are being diverted by such attempt; more fundamentally, a butler who is forever attempting to formulate his own 'strong opinions' on his employer's affairs is bound to lack one quality essential in all good professionals namely loyalty."⁹ It is through

his reticence, sense of restraint and humility that Stevens disempowers himself in relation with his master. By having Stevens involve the reader into *his story*, Ishiguro approaches the crux of the matter—each individual, by positioning their own story in relation to the greater collective story, even to the history of a nation, contributes to the writing of that greater story. When the individual fails to assume responsibility for their own story, the entire grand narrative fails.

By placing Stevens's personal history against the background of Englishness with its ambivalent time-space representation, Ishiguro revisits national myths so as to suggest the need for a new national narrative. Stevens embarks on a journey through the English countryside and at the same into his past, thus configuring both space and time in terms of what he perceives it means to be English. Ishiguro says that he has not “attempted to reproduce, in an historical accurate way, some past period” and that what he is trying to do is to “rework a particular myth about a certain kind of mythical England.”¹⁰ Stevens's journey into time and space is a pretext for a more meaningful identity search. The times are changing and, although he is drawn to his past, he is also faced with the need to adapt to his new employer's demands.

Mr. Farraday, the American now in power, belongs to an entirely different structure. Forward-looking and pragmatic, he requires of Stevens to shift from the emotional restraint he used to take great pride in, to a more relaxed approach to his duties, including the permission to “undertake the expedition”¹¹ through the English countryside. At first Stevens resists his employer's suggestion by arguing: “It has been my privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within these very walls.”¹²

In stark contrast with Stevens's restrained and undemonstrative attitude, Mr. Farraday proposes banter as a type of discourse. Through banter one exposes oneself to the world, while at the same time being receptive to what others have to say. Banter cannot exist in isolation, it needs communion, openness, reciprocity. To a certain extent, bantering requires one to allow one's story to be intertwined with the stories of others. This shift from inwardness to outwardness through banter requires an ability to distance oneself from one's identity so as to be able to understand other identities.

Unsurprisingly, Stevens is skeptical of bantering. “Embarrassing as those moments were for me, I would not wish to imply that I in any way blame Mr. Farraday, who is enjoying the sort of bantering which in the United States, no doubt, is a sign of good, friendly understanding between employer and employee, indulged in as a kind of affectionate sport. Indeed, to put things into a proper perspective, I should point out that such bantering on my new employer's part has characterized much of our relationship over these months—though I must confess, I remain rather unsure as to how I should respond.”¹³

Gradually though, Stevens understands it is his duty to add this skill to “his professional armoury”¹⁴. However, this does not mean that he distances himself from his identity. If at the end of the novel Stevens ponders that bantering is a perfectly reasonable skill to be expected of a butler, it is only because his sense of discipline dictates his wish to conform to the standards of his new employer.

It is not only the story of the English butler with all his limitations in terms of assuming responsibility, questioning the greater system that he is part of, emotional reticence and inability to relate, that Ishiguro is concerned with. The very means of telling *his story* is essential for Ishiguro’s work: memory as a way to access both personal and national stories. However, it is not only the object of memory—the story in itself—that is relevant. The entire process of remembering lies at the core of the novel. The referent is almost dissolved in the inconsistency of Stevens’s unreliable narration. Nostalgia cannot lie at the core of genuine historicity, “the past as a ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.”¹⁵ Ishiguro works with the metaphorical, not with the concrete, thus encompassing a far deeper and more complex truth about present identity seen as a collection of journeys into the past. “We’re all like butlers,” Ishiguro says in an interview¹⁶, thus multiplying and generalizing Stevens’s personal story both in terms of its focus (our own past) and means of accessing it (memory).

Everything we learn about dignity and what it means to be English is formulated in Stevens’s butler terms. Stevens tells a story of a failed life. As he admits at the end of the novel, he did not even make his own mistakes. By using Stevens’s story as a metaphor for Englishness, Ishiguro poses fundamental questions as to the validity of a wider national narrative, which is further undermined by the unreliable narrator.

What is it then that remains at the end of the day? The ability to transcend one’s own limitations in terms of allowing other identities to permeate one’s own is what Stevens fails at. Just as “national consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension,”¹⁷ a sense of individual identity that is not exclusively concerned with one’s own persona can allow one to exist meaningfully amongst others. Beyond labels such as post-modern or postcolonial, *The Remains of the Day* is, at its core, a story about the need to re-tell the past in order to make sense of present identity and, ultimately, about the need for a reassertion of one’s personal history while revisiting national history.



Notes

1. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London–New York: Routledge, 1989).
2. Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989).
3. John Frow, “What Was Postmodernism?” in *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, eds. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1990), 139–159.
4. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 37.
5. Dominic Head, “Multicultural Personae,” in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
6. Ishiguro, 44.
7. *Ibid.*, 122.
8. Graham MacPhee, “Escape from Responsibility: Ideology and Storytelling in Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*,” *College Literature* 38, 1 (2011): 195.
9. Ishiguro, 210.
10. Kazuo Ishiguro, Kim Herzinger, and Allan Vorda, “An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro,” *Mississippi Review* 20, 1/2 (1991): 139.
11. Ishiguro, 1.
12. *Ibid.*, 4.
13. *Ibid.*, 15.
14. *Ibid.*, 138.
15. Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York–Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1993), 75.
16. Ishiguro, Herzinger, and Vorda, 140.
17. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 251.

Abstract

Representations of History in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*

This article aims to analyze the manner in which Kazuo Ishiguro deconstructs an ideal representation of Britain following World War II. By juxtaposing Stevens’s individual history, *his story*, with national *history*, Ishiguro makes a subtle critique of a backward looking post-imperial Britain. The concepts of power and responsibility as well as the metaphor of the butler are key to Ishiguro’s deconstruction of a grand historical narrative that is anchored in the past.

Keywords

history, postmodernism, postcolonialism, power, dignity, emotional restraint