



An Inner Journey: Memory Narrative in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* centres on memory as its governing narrative principle, offering a sustained exploration of the inward life and the late formation of subjectivity. Through the butler Stevens's recollections during his journey — marked by rupture, omission, and self-deception — the novel stages an inward scrutiny of identity and a belated attempt at self-reconstruction. In doing so, it reconfigures “travel” from geographical movement into an internal voyage across temporal and affective dimensions, thereby unsettling the conventional narrative paradigm of travel writing. At the same time, by aligning Stevens's personal trajectory with the rise and decline of Darlington Hall, the text functions as an allegory of Britain's postwar cultural identity crisis amid imperial decline and the demands of historical reckoning. The novel ultimately achieves an organic convergence between aesthetic form and political insight.

Keywords: *The Remains of the Day*, memory narrative, inner journey, identity reconstruction

1. Introduction

Literary studies have long been haunted by a seemingly simple question: what makes literature literature? Where, precisely, does it draw the line against the “accuracy” of journalism, the “verifiability” of historiography, and the “truth-seeking” of philosophy? This question also preoccupies Kazuo Ishiguro. In his Nobel lecture, he states with characteristic directness: “If you can get a very similar experience by switching on the television, then why write novels at all?”[3]. In response, he turns to a mode of expression that can be fully realized in the novel yet resists equivalent reproduction in other textual forms — memory. Memory's defining feature is ambiguity, a quality that aligns closely with literature's investment in fictionality: it generates indeterminacy and semantic multiplicity, and thereby grounds a distinct aesthetic value. In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro mobilizes a narrative strategy of “fragmented memory” to stage Stevens's inward journey through dignity, nation, and responsibility. The result is a work that renders visible a pervasive modern condition — life lived under the pressure of compromised belief and deferred feeling — and that, in doing so, forges an organic convergence between aesthetic force and political insight[1], helping to secure Ishiguro's stature as an “international” writer.

2. Unreliable Memory and Self-Deception

Memory is the narrative core of *The Remains of the Day*, and its inherent unreliability stems from the self-deception of the narrator. The majority of the novel consists of Stevens's recollections during his six-day journey across southwest England, with the narrative of actual events taking up only a minimal portion. Ishiguro's preference for memory-driven narrative is rooted in his personal experience. At the age of five, he moved with his parents from Japan to England and never returned to his homeland. Yet, through his parents' continued recounting of life, customs, and culture in Japan, he constructed a richly imagined Japan in his mind, full of details that were entirely imaginary. This mental construct, born not from lived experience but from fragmented narratives and family memories, became the core of his cultural identity and emotional attachment, serving as the inspiration for the novel's aesthetic of memory.

Beyond personal experience, the inherent ambiguity, fragmentation, and non-linearity of memory are key to its role as the soul of the novel. In this novel, memory drives the narrative as Stevens's “present” journey is repeatedly broken by recollections of his father, Lord Darlington, and Miss Kenton, unfolding by emotional shifts rather than chronology and full of contradictions. He venerates Darlington yet avoids or denies having served him; he misreads Miss Kenton's tears while dodging his own rejection; he praises his father's professional dignity yet chooses duty over staying at his bedside. This unreliable, fragmented remembering forces readers to reconstruct the story and exposes the illusion of the “dignified self” he performs in restrained language. For Stevens, self-deception becomes a final defense against the unbearable truth of a life depleted by misguided goals and lost love.

3. The Inner Journey and Self-Reconstruction

If fragmented memory serves as a key narrative technique for Kazuo Ishiguro's formal innovation in his novels, why does *The Remains of the Day* situate memories within the external framework of a journey? This stems from memory's inherent nature as an internal voyage — a psychological process of retrospection, emotional confrontation, and self-reflection. Stevens's journey culminates in failure: he cannot convince Miss Kenton to return to Darlington Hall, losing her and any chance to reclaim the past. Yet, in the day's twilight, he discards his "dignity" mask, admitting he never truly chose for himself but merely executed Lord Darlington's decisions. He recognizes his lifelong beliefs may have been erroneous, rendering his existence meaningless. Nonetheless, his pivotal remark — I think it's time I learn to "banter"[2] — signals a subtle farewell to the past and a commitment to confronting the future anew. As Ishiguro noted in an interview with Tiff, "We are all Stevens to varying degrees". Through Stevens's tragedy, the novel poses a universal dilemma: upon realizing one's devoted beliefs were misguided, forfeiting life's true meaning, how does one proceed? No explicit answer emerges, but Stevens's choice exemplifies poignant courage: facing life's abyss in old age, refusing to forsake gentle self-reconciliation.

From a travel literature perspective, this inner journey innovates formally, inverting traditional paradigms where geographical traversal drives plot and themes. In canonical works, spatial crossings symbolize encounters with alterity, reality clashes, and protagonist maturation, illuminating broader motifs. Conversely, Ishiguro eschews exotic locales or spectacles in *The Remains of the Day*[5], reorienting the journey inward as Stevens's profound self-exploration. This inner travel eschews external pointers, becoming a temporal, emotional, and introspective process. Amid Stevens's mundane drive, fragmented memories disrupt consciousness, surfacing repressed emotions and exposing past choices' burdens. This subverts travel literature's reliance on spatiality for thematic progression, infusing "travel" with temporality, affect, and self-consciousness, thereby broadening the genre's expressive scope.

4. The Metaphor of British Cultural Identity and Historical Reflection

The Remains of the Day not only demonstrates formal innovation but also embodies Ishiguro's profound historical concern. Intertwining personal memory with national history, it reveals Britain's cultural identity crisis amid imperial decline with political aesthetic value, while Stevens's butler pursuit embodies upholding British gentlemanly culture, colonial hierarchy and upper-class dignity. With the end of World War II, Britain's international status underwent a fundamental shift[4]. The former global hegemony suffered enormous losses from the war, its colonial system collapsed rapidly, and the United States rose to dominance in the Western world with its powerful military and economic strength. The metaphorical representation of this transformation can be seen in the change of ownership of Darlington Hall — the mansion was bought by Mr. Farraday, an American millionaire, shifting Stevens's service from British aristocracy to foreign upstarts. The conflict between his meticulously preserved English butler traditions and Mr. Farraday's casual American style symbolizes not only the decline of his personal professional status but also the loss of Britain's geopolitical dominance, forcing it to adapt to a new world order dominated by the United States. Stevens's process of reconstructing his identity mirrors Britain's postwar efforts to reexamine its own history. In the wake of the war, British society began to critically reassess its colonial legacy and appeasement policies, seeking a new path forward through historical reflection. This process was an attempt to redefine its place in the world and reestablish itself in the international community with a renewed sense of purpose. By using Stevens's personal fate as an allegory for Britain's rise and fall, Ishiguro forges a deep connection between an individual's life story and the trajectory of national history. As a result, *The Remains of the Day* transcends the bounds of a conventional initiation novel or romance, becoming a rich meditation on memory, identity, and historical reckoning.

5. Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro often describes himself as an "international writer" who transcends national and cultural boundaries to pursue universal themes. *The Remains of the Day* fully embodies this pursuit, addressing timeless philosophical themes such as human dignity, the cost of choices, and the courage of reconciliation. Through the late-life confession of an English butler, Ishiguro elevates reflections on identity and self-awareness to the national level, even transforming them into shared human experiences. At the same time, the use of fragmented memory as the narrative core in this novel introduces a formal innovation that opens new possibilities for the novel's structure. In this context, memory becomes not just content, but form. Thus, *The Remains of the Day* truly achieves a synthesis of form and content, balancing both aesthetic and political value.

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