

Narrative Gaps and Moral Blindness: Stevens as an Unreliable Narrator in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract

Using Ansgar Nünning's theory of textual signals, this paper examines Stevens' unreliable narration in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* in order to examine the intricate relationship between memory, emotion, and identity. By means of Stevens's selective memories, cryptic language, and justifications, Ishiguro creates a story that encourages readers to make inferences. The paper looks at how Stevens's ideas of loyalty, professionalism, and dignity fuel his emotional suppression and moral blindness. It highlights Ishiguro's skill at capturing psychological depth and narrative ambiguity by illuminating the mismatch between Stevens's self-perception and the underlying truths of his life through an analysis of key sections.

Keywords: unreliable narrator, Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens, narrative technique, textual signals, Ansgar Nünning, repression, dignity, postmodernism

The Remains of the Day (1989) by Kazuo Ishiguro is a brilliantly written book that perfectly demonstrates the literary device of unreliable narrative. The protagonist, Stevens, serves as both the narrator and a character whose moral self-deception and psychological complexity place him at the centre of the novel's narrative ambiguity. Contradictions, emotional evasions, and rationalizations consistently undermine his credibility as a narrator, and they are all highlighted by what Ansgar Nünning refers to as "textual signals of unreliability."

According to academics such as Wayne C. Booth and Nünning, unreliable narration is when the narrator's credibility is undermined, either by internal contradictions, differences between the narrator's account and the implied author's viewpoint, or inconsistencies with external facts.

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 Nünning highlights some cues that readers should be cautious when interpreting the story, including ironic detachment, emotional gaps, and contradictions (Nünning 30).

The storytelling style of Kazuo Ishiguro adds to Stevens's account's unreliability. Instead of revealing dishonesty through outright falsehoods, Ishiguro creates a story of exclusion, suppression, and justification. Stevens's narrow viewpoint, which is influenced by his need to maintain a respectable self-image, filters the story. Ishiguro's introspective first-person narrative and spare literary style push readers to look past what is stated to discover what is purposefully left unsaid. Readers are actively involved in figuring out the underlying emotional and moral landscape beneath Stevens's restrained words because to this method, which produces a subtle but potent irony.

The most obvious signs of unreliability in Stevens' situation are his selective recall and self-justifying tone. His steadfast devotion to Lord Darlington is among the most telling literary cues. "Lord Darlington was a gentleman of great moral stature—a true old-fashioned English gentleman" (Ishiguro 124) The historical background of Lord Darlington's Nazi sympathies and his involvement in appeasement politics, however, cast doubt on this claim. By portraying Darlington's demise as a tragedy rather than a judgmental error, Stevens' narrative steers clear of outright censure. Stevens' credibility is undermined by this narrative attitude, which demonstrates a moral blind spot.

"It was not my place to be curious about such matters. I was simply doing what was expected of me" (Ishiguro 134). Here, Stevens defends his involvement in morally questionable acts, chief among them the firing of the two Jewish maids on Lord Darlington's orders. Stevens assumes the role of a submissive servant who is only carrying out orders, refusing to own his guilt or the act's inhumanity. This enables him to evade the moral ramifications of his compliance. He has deeply internalized class structures and believes his boss is infallible, which is shown in his emphasis on professional duty over personal morality. As a result, the remark perfectly captures Stevens's lack of moral conviction and propensity to use professionalism as an excuse for immoral behavior.

"I do not think I responded immediately, for I recall I was unable to quite digest her words... It is possible I may have muttered something" (Ishiguro 172). Stevens suppresses his emotions, as seen by his incapacity to react to Miss Kenton's emotional approach. The ambiguous and passive phrase "it is possible I may have" functions as a linguistic cue of emotional instability. He avoids confronting his feelings by using vague words, so maintaining the sense of emotional detachment. In addition to being a lost chance for intimacy, this instance also illustrates the psychological toll that his strict dedication to duty has had. Here, Stevens's narration highlights the boundaries of his

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 emotional intelligence and his tendency to withdraw into ambiguity anytime emotional fragility feels like it might manifest.

“I gave my best to Lord Darlington. I gave him the very best I had to give, and now—well—I find I do not have a great deal more left to give” (Ishiguro 244). This quote, which is made close to the book’s conclusion, is a crucial reflection. It alludes to a growing awareness that his life, which he dedicated to helping someone else, might have been in vain. Stevens’s evasive language—“I do not have a great deal more left to give”—masked his remorse with understatement, even in this epiphany. His attempt to present his history as a selfless sacrifice rather than a failure illustrates the untrustworthiness of a narrator who is unable to acknowledge his own disappointment. This quotation invites readers to witness the personal cost of Stevens’ misguided commitment by revealing a fracture in the façade of dignity he has upheld.

“Miss Kenton and I simply did not see eye to eye on a number of matters, and I can only say I did my utmost to keep our professional relationship cordial” (Ishiguro 106). Stevens’ incapacity to acknowledge or acknowledge emotional attachment is exemplified by this description of his relationship with Miss Kenton. Stevens minimizes the emotional significance of their contacts by turning their personal fights to simple work disputes. His unwillingness to admit that Miss Kenton might have wanted more from their connection is conveyed by the statement “did not see eye to eye,” which conceals a far deeper emotional gap. His impersonal style and understatement serve as a protective mechanism that keeps him from being vulnerable.

“What is the point in worrying oneself too much about what one could or could not have done to control the course one’s life took? Surely it is enough that the likes of you and I... gave all we had to give to the cause we believed in?” (Ishiguro 243). Here, Stevens presents a philosophy of resignation in an effort to justify a life of uncritical devotion to a defective goal. He justifies his decisions by using the term “the likes of you and I,” which reveals a deep-seated conviction in social hierarchy and obligation. The reader, however, interprets this as a justification rather than a conclusion drawn from sincere contemplation. This attempt to uphold a vanishing ideal highlights how untrustworthy Stevens’s narration is; instead of owning up to his mistakes, he hides his remorse behind the vocabulary of honor and fidelity.

“Dignity has to do crucially with a butler’s ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits” (Ishiguro 42). Stevens makes “dignity” the cornerstone of his identity early on in the book. But when contrasted with his moral and emotional shortcomings, this description becomes a meaningless ideal. He has lost his moral clarity, interpersonal connection, and personal satisfaction

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 as a result of his refusal to transcend his “professional being.” Ishiguro dismantles this idea of dignity throughout the book, exposing it as a front for Stevens’s fear of being vulnerable and his resistance to facing his own emotional needs. The quote thus captures the sad irony of Stevens’s life: his unwavering devotion to an ideal that ultimately results in his moral and emotional degeneration.

This paper focuses on Stevens, the protagonist and narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, whose narrative is characterized by unreliability—is immediately highlighted in the title. By identifying the “unreliable narrator,” the term foreshadows a deeper investigation into the intricacies of Stevens’s subjective viewpoint, memory, and self-deception. The line *The Remains of the Day* ensures clarity regarding the literary work being studied and places the study solidly inside the text.

With its emphasis on narrative theory and cognitive literary criticism—specifically, the use of Ansgar Nünning’s theory of textual signals—this title perfectly captures the critical perspective used to examine the book. It mirrors the goal of the study, which is to examine how Stevens’s narrative, which is characterized by moral complicity, emotional denial, and suppression, calls into question the reader’s confidence and encourages active interpretation. As a result, the title effectively communicates the research’s theoretical and thematic scope, bringing it into line with current academic debates on postmodern narrative approaches and narrative trustworthiness.

In summary, Stevens is a very untrustworthy narrator due to his narration’s numerous inconsistencies, emotional lapses, and evasions. This unreliability is created by Kazuo Ishiguro using nuanced storytelling strategies rather than overt dishonesty, which enables readers to recognize the stark contrast between Stevens’s self-perception and the truth of his life. It is clear from using Nünning’s framework of textual signals that Stevens’ version of events is a meticulously constructed story meant to conceal his identity, but in the process, it exposes his most profound regrets and his shortcomings.

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