

Contemporary Literature

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Good morning. So, we will continue our discussion of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. And the key words for today will be discussion of dignity. As you remember that Mr. Stevens, our hero, the butler of Darlington hall, he has been mulling over the issue of what makes a great butler and who possesses this virtue of dignity. And you also remember, of course, the dictates of the high society, where there are very hard and fast and very strict rules of admission.

Membership is extremely limited and only to those distinguished butlers who come from extremely distinguished households as well as possess great deal of dignity. And on matters of dignity, the high society, of course, unable to define exactly what the term means, but by distinguished households, they mean not aristocracy of course, but people who have made it as they say and not just the nouveau riche, but in several different aspects of life and society. Second notion is that of memory and as we have seen so far, *The Remains of the Day* is a novel of memory. Mr. Stevens throughout the novel reflects over things that happened to him and in his also reflects on his life at Darlington hall. There was a time and the last time when we stopped, we were looking at the great conference of March 1923 at Darlington hall, where Stevens feels that he really made himself indispensable. And perhaps came very close to the ideals of one of the greatest butlers of his time. So, dignity, memory and as seen earlier, Stevens as an unreliable narrator. The idea is we look at the novel or we see the novel entirely through his point of view, but at times we also feel that Stevens is not a very reliable or very trustworthy narrator.

Why not because of any sense of dishonesty, but because of his deep sense of loyalty towards Lord Darlington and at times we do feel that his loyalty although justified, but it is also slightly colored. And this sense of loyalty which is so deep and so unwavering and unquestioning towards his employer, it has impacted his sense of judgment. And therefore, we call Stevens an unreliable narrator. And then today we are also going to discuss something that we have not so far talked about with reference to the remains of the day, the idea or the theme of anti-Semitism in the novel. So, we stopped on page 110

and now we will go to Mortimer's pond Dorset which is day 2 afternoon.

You may also recall the chapterization, the chapter titles of the novel. The way it is titled day one at Salisbury, day two Salisbury afternoon and so on. So, numbering the days and naming various places, the rural parts of England, but it is not as if Stevens is actually concerned with that particular day or with that particular place. Wherever he goes, his thoughts invariably go back to those glorious days at Darlington hall. And now in the afternoon of his life or rather in the at the dusk of his life, he remembers whatever has happened to him.

So, he is actually counting his days and what he is banking on is this letter which is quite ambiguously written by Miss Kenton, his former colleague at Darlington hall, which gives him some kind of an impression that she might want to come back. She might want to return and resume her services as a housekeeper at Darlington hall. Darlington hall is no longer what it used to be. Now there is no Lord Darlington. The hall remains, but it has a new owner Mr. Faraday, an American and Stevens is struggling to cope with the ways of Mr. Faraday who is an American. So, there is a cultural difference and also who is not a noble man as the British would understand. So, there is a lot of, there are lots of misunderstandings between Mr. Faraday and Stevens.

Now page 113, it would seem there is a whole dimension to the question, what is a great butler? So, this is how we start and we come back to the same idea. repetition is an important feature of postmodernist literature and in this novel also we find the idea, same idea, same motive is repeated in several different ways. what is it that defines a great butler? What is the definition of a great butler? I have hitherto not properly considered. It is, I must say, a rather unsettling experience to realize this about a matter so close to my heart, particularly one I have given much thought to over the years. So, again his obsession with being remembered as a great butler, you see, and somehow it has got something to do with the, with the socialist structure.

England, as we have been talking about, has a very hierarchical society and people are ranked according to their places, according to their, you know, their various ranks in society and that is very important. So, to be ranked as one of the greatest butlers of his time is very important, although he is not really modest, we cannot use that word, but perhaps too polished a person to accept or admit that it is his life's ambition to be counted among the ranks of the great butlers of his time. And therefore, this, this frequent reference to his society and also obsessing over what makes a great butler and the reasons why he, he can consider himself a great butler. And the last time where we stopped, we were all, we were talking about what makes him feel that he can indeed join the category of a great butler. The fact that he had outperformed himself at the

conference of March 1923, where he let it be known to everyone that his duties come over and above all personal and emotional relationships.

And as his fatherly dying, Mr. Stevens continues with his duty of serving the people at the conference and that he feels is a distinction and that he feels is something that should earn him a place in the ranks of the great butlers. Page 115, I believe I can best highlight the difference between the generations by expressing myself figuratively. Butlers of my father's generation, I would say, tended to see the world in terms of a ladder, the houses of royalty, dukes and the lords from the oldest families placed at the top, those of new money lowered down and so on. Just one read a point below which the hierarchy was determined simply by wealth or the lack of it.

Any butler with ambition simply did his best to climb as high up this ladder as possible and by and large the higher he went, the greater was his professional prestige. Such are of course, precisely the values embodied in the Hayes society's idea of a distinguished household and the fact that it was confidently making such pronouncements as late as 1929 shows clearly why the demise of that society was inevitable if not long overdue. Stevens feels that the demands of the high society that so called distinguished households which are basically marked by nobility and the households aristocratic antecedents and those are the features or those are the factors that define a household. But Stevens himself feels, Stevens who is so traditional and conservative in his outlook, he too feels that even by the standards of 1929, Hayes society was quite outdated and out of sync with the changing times. One no longer associated even in 1929 dignity with one's birth and especially one's noble birth.

As some later in the novel Stevens feels that one is as great as one does. So, if someone has provided great service to the society, then that gentleman should also be included as a person with great dignity and also that household should be qualified as a prestigious household. So, Stevens also gives you know indication of his own unrest with his times, but then being what he is, he remains quite straight jacketed and as we see that he himself is a person who is as outdated as Hayes society. We also felt and we also saw that when Stevens is in Dorset, he comes across a person and while they are engaged in a conversation, he denies that he ever worked for Lord Darlington although he admits that he comes from a great household that is Darlington hall, but denies that he had ever known Lord Darlington. Last time we were also talking about what causes this denial.

Perhaps there was too much of suppression of emotions at Darlington hall under Lord Darlington and therefore, at a subconscious level Stevens is not very comfortable with the idea that he had served or he had actually served a person like Lord Darlington. Although his sense of loyalty, his unwavering loyalty never lets him admit that. Perhaps

he is too proud to admit that Lord Darlington after all was not such a great person. He was, he had harbored a fascist and anti-Semitic tendencies. He had also harbored feelings where which in the long run were not politically very beneficial to society at large and that this could be one of the reasons why Stevens feels suffocated and refuses to admit that he had served Lord Darlington.

And while he say, he,; muls over the fact that why he could not admit that he had been in the service of Lord Darlington, we are on page 121. I may not have thought further why it was that I had given the distinct impression I had never been in the employ of Lord Darlington. For surely there is no real doubt that is what occurred. He had asked, you mean you actually used to work for that Lord Darlington and I had given an answer which could mean little other than that I had not. It could simply be that a meaningless whim had suddenly overtaken me at the moment, but that it is, but that is hardly a convincing way to account for such distinctly odd behavior.

In any case, I have now come to accept that the incident with the Batman is not the first of its kind. There is little doubt it has some connection, though I am not quite clear of the nature of it, which what occurred a few months ago during the visits of the Wakefield's. Now, see he says this is not the first time, this is not one odd incident. I denied having ever worked for Lord Darlington. Something like that had happened even earlier and look at the structure of the novel.

It moves back and forth, more back than forth because he spends very little time. We see him not for all that long at Darlington hall actually. Most of the time he is out of Darlington hall, but reminiscing and recollecting about his days at Darlington hall. So, this incident suddenly triggers things and triggers of his memory. So, here I would just like to quote Marcel Proust, the French writer who has written this remarkable book called the Remembrance of Things Past.

Marcel Proust talks about the accuracy of memory and associations and particular sensations that accompany remembering. So, some of you might be familiar with the incident of Madeleine. He takes a bite of Madeleine and the association of Madeleine takes him back in time and he remembers things that had happened to him long ago. So, in Marcel Proust sensations are powerful, but cannot be described. They are indescribable, but memories have associations, associative power of memory.

At the same time, Proust is also very good with the arbitrariness of memory, the inaccuracies of memory and that is what we are seeing here. A person in the village, it suddenly takes him back to his recent past at Darlington hall where he had come in contact with a couple, an American couple who had been visiting Mr. Faraday and this is

how it goes.

Mr. and Mrs. Wakefield are an American couple who have been settled in England having a number of acquaintances in common with Mr. Paraday, a Miss Boston society. They paid a short visit one day to Darlington hall and I now refer to a time only a few weeks after Mr. Paraday had himself arrived at the house, a time when his enthusiasm for his acquisition was at a height, acquisition that is Darlington hall when he acquired the place. Much of the Wakefield's visit was taken up with my employer leading them on what might have seemed to some an unnecessarily extensive tour of the premises including all the dust sheeted areas.

Mr. and Mrs. Wakefield however appeared to be as keen on the inspection as Mr. Faraday. Mr. Faraday had commenced the tour at the top of the house and by the time he had brought his guests down to inspect the magnificence of the ground floor rooms, he seemed to be on an elevated plane pointing out details on cornice and window frames and describing with some flourish what the English lords used to do in each room. Although of course, I made no deliberate attempt to overhear, I could not help but get the gist of what was being said and was surprised by the extent of my employer's knowledge which despite the occasional infelicity betrayed a deep enthusiasm for English ways.

It was noticeably moreover that the Wakefields were themselves by no means ignorant of the traditions of our country and one gathered from the many remarks they made that they too were owners of an English house of some splendor. And then comes a time because now we see a couple, an American couple, they sorted with the English way of life and also the great English homes which had that typical British architecture and they are quite impressed with the way the house was. And Mr. Paraday himself is quite proud of his acquisition and his ownership of this great house. And then comes the interesting part, Mrs.

Wakefield turns to Stevens and asks, perhaps you are the one to tell me, this arch here looks 17th century but is not it the case that it was built quite recently, perhaps during Lord Darlington's time, it is possible madam, it is very beautiful but it is probably a kind of mock period piece done only a few years ago, is not it right, I am not sure madam but that is certainly possible. Then lowering her voice, Mrs. Wakefield had said, but tell me Stevens, what was this Lord Darlington like, presumably you must have worked for him, I did not madam, no and this again comes as a big surprise that Stevens denies having ever worked for Lord Darlington, not just when he is touring across the country but also he has done it earlier as well. So, this is the mystery, why would he do that repeatedly.

And then Mr. Faraday understandably is quite upset with the way Stevens had

conducted himself. In Mr. Faraday's opinion, this is a sort of betrayal because after all he bought the house because of its antique value and in one stroke, Mr. Stevens has just demolished whatever image, whatever reputation Mr. Faraday had tried to cultivate for himself.

Indeed Stevens, I had told her, you were the real thing, a real old English butler. This see, look, this is also quite ironical, a real thing, he is treated not as a human being but as a thing, a real English butler as if it is an object, as if it is some odd piece of furniture, something that we call curious. So, butler perhaps 20 years down the line from 1923 to this particular period, they have become relics, something that are valued for their antique value but it is not as if they are really significant or vital in those contemporary times. So, therefore, this idea, you are a real thing, I thought you are a real English butler that you had been in this house for over 30 years serving a real English lord. So, see, all these things, they do not really matter, they just have some kind of a nostalgic value, a real lord, a real butler, a real English house that they may not have much of a practical value but yes, they do have some kind of curiosity value and that is how Mr. Faraday looks at things. But Mrs. Wakefield contradicted me on this point, in fact, she contradicted me with great confidence. Mrs. Wakefield was convinced, you never worked here until I hired you, in fact, she seemed to be under the impression, she had had that from your own lips, made me look pretty much a fool as you can imagine. I mean to say, Stevens, this is a genuine grand old English house, is it not? So, now, he wants a validation, this is what I paid for, did not I and you are a genuine old fashion English butler, not just some waiter pretending to be one, you are the real thing again, you are the real thing, aren't you? That is what I wanted, is it not, that what I have and this again, while Mr. Faraday may be a good employer and he is definitely less formal, less straight jacketed as compared to Lord Darlington.

But then again, it shows Stevens is being exploited and used for something, for some other thing now, there was a time when he was used for his services, for his undying loyalty towards Lord Darlington. This may not be a case with Mr. Faraday, but now he is treated like an object, like a relic from the past, this is what I bought the house and I bought a real English butler along with the house. And then, Stevens tries to cover up or save the situation and he says, in this country, we are not really, it is not considered very polite to discuss one's past employers and Mr. Faraday, although quite disappointed with Stevens' behaviour, buys the excuse.

Page 125, I believe, I realized even at the time that my explanation to Mr. Faraday, though of course, not entirely devoid of truth, was woefully inadequate. The fact that I told him that it is a British culture not to discuss one's past employers with one's current ones, but Stevens himself is not very convinced about this explanation and he admits it.

But when one has so much else to think about, it is easy not to give such matters a great deal of attention and so I did indeed put the whole episode out of my mind for some time, but now recalling it here in the calm that surrounds this pond, there seems little doubt that my conduct towards Mrs. Whitfield that day has an obvious relation to what has just taken place this afternoon.

And then comes another part, he says that Lord Darlington, although he did his best to serve his country and serve humanity to the best of his abilities, but still history does not remember him well. Time has not treated his reputation with kindness and today many people feel that Lord Darlington had a soft corner for the Nazis and Stevens being what he is, steadfastly loyal to Lord Darlington, rubbish is of the whole thing and he says, but one reason why I do not like admitting to people about the fact that I served Lord Darlington is the fact that people start talking about his political convictions and his ideals and it is not always in very flattering terms and this is something that I resent because of my great admiration for Lord Darlington. So, far we have been talking about loyalty as a theme in the remains of the day. Stevens is perhaps aware of Lord Darlington's weaknesses. Lord Darlington did make severe mistakes which had tremendous repercussions on the world political history, but still he is too loyal a person that has been ingrained in him to the kind of loyalty that is completely a part of his system and because of that sense of loyalty, he is unable to admit to himself that Lord Darlington indeed had committed severe mistakes.

We will move to the next chapter, day three morning Taunton Somerset and there comes a very interesting point where he is at a lodge, at an inn and he is surrounded by the simple village folks and he tries to banter. Banter, a term which is used initially in the early days early on in the novel by Mr. Faraday, he feels that Stevens is too serious a person. He does not joke. He takes, you know, he needs to lighten up a little and Stevens while he is travelling and while he is with people from the country side, he attempts to make a joke and that joke also is so labored that nobody laughs at him.

So, nobody laughs at the joke and this is his reaction. You will perhaps appreciate then my disappointment concerning my witticism yesterday evening. At first, I had thought it possible its limited success was due to my not having spoken clearly enough, but then the possibility occurred to me once I had retired that I might actually have given these people offense. After all, it could easily have been understood that I was suggesting the landlord's wife resembled a cockerel. This thought continued to torment me as I tried to sleep.

So, you see, he because he has been spurred on by his current employer to develop a sense of humor, to develop some kind of wittiness about him. So, he now actually

devotes himself and devotes his energies towards acquiring a sense of humor. Humor cannot be acquired. Either you are born with it or you are not, but he tries to that is Steven's character.

He is so loyal. He is such a devoted servant of his employers that he would do anything that is expected of him. ~~So~~, if Lord Darlington expects him to be survived and serious and be utterly committed, he would do that. If Mr. Faraday expects him to lighten up a little to develop a sense of humor to banter to quote Mr. Faraday, he would Steven's would do that as well. He says, I have of late taken to listening to the wireless in my room whenever I find myself with a with a few spare moments. One program I listen to is called twice a week or more, which is in fact broadcast three times each week and basically comprises two persons making humorous comments on a variety of topics raised by readers letters. I have been studying this program because the witticisms performed on it are always in the best of taste and to my mind of a tone not at all out of keeping with the sort of bantering Mr. Faraday might expect on my part. Taking my cue from this program, I have devised a simple exercise which I try to perform at least once a day.

Whenever an odd moment presents itself, I attempt to formulate three witticisms based on my immediate surroundings at that moment. So, diligently working towards acquiring a sense of humor to learn some jokes, so that he can please his current employer with his banter. So, again this is as pathetic as tragic as trying to please Lord Darlington with his devotion. That means, we would never know what Steven's really wants and that is the tragedy of the remains of the day. The remains of the day does not claim to be a grand or great tragedy, but one has to read between the lines to understand what unquestioning loyalty or devotion does to people.

It turns them into almost like mechanical creatures where they do not have a will or a mind of their own. They do what they are programmed to do, what they are told to do and there remains the tragedy. The question that we are left to face is what happens in those societies where people remain in the same position, unquestioning especially when people do not question their leaders and those in the position of power and authority. We move on to page 133. Now, Steven is again in the country side and travelling through and one of these destinations is the village of Merston.

Perhaps, Merston would ring a bell for you as it did for me upon my first spotting it on the road yesterday, sorry, road atlas yesterday. In fact, I must say I was even tempted to make a slight detour from my planned route just to see the village. Merston Somerset was where the firm of Giffen and company was once situated and it was to Merston one was required to dispatch one's order for a supply of Giffen's dark candles of polish to be

plaked, mixed into wax and applied by hand. For some time, Giffen's was undoubtedly the finest silver polish available and it was only the appearance of new chemical substances on the market shortly before the war that caused demand for this impressive product to decline. As I remember, Giffen's appeared at the beginning of the 20s and I am sure I am not alone in closely associating its emergence with that change of mood within our profession, that change which came to push the polishing of silver to the position of central importance.

It is still by and large maintains today. The shift was I believe like so many other major shifts around this period, a generational matter. And now, he goes back again to one of his role models, one of the greatest butlers according to Mr. Stevens, one Mr. Marshall and he says it was Mr. Marshall who taught the butlers of his times that polishing silver is one of the greatest skills that a butler should acquire and a household's prestige depends on the kind of silver it owns.

It may look very anachronistic, you know out of times, out of sync with the change of changing times to have a skill in polishing silver. And, Giffen's and co and Giffen's and company which is a company that manufactures the polishing material for silverware, it becomes a metaphor, a symbol for those decadent times. Then, once prestige depended on acquiring silver and polishing it with material brought from or with products from Giffen's and company. Interestingly, the decline or the closing of Giffen's and company coincides with the change in times.

So, according to Mr. Stevens, we are no longer living in those times when Giffen's and company's products are still being used. New chemical substances have arrived on the scene. People no longer flock to the market or rather send their under butlers or household servants to go to this place called Mersden and buy products from Giffen's and company. So, this also, this is not just a product that Ishiguro is talking about. He is also talking about certain symbols which become outdated with as time goes on.

So, times go by as times change. So, the shifts in time and shifts in periods, people change, products change and values also shift. So, the closing of Giffen's and company in a way also marks a shift in society's attitudes towards, towards its conventions and traditions. Like Giffen's and company, butlers too have become an outmoded symbol of a past which is no longer relevant. After past is always relevant, but these symbols, these objects including butlers, they have become outdated.

Nobody, no one really cares for them. They are as Mr. Faraday was mentioning that they are just things to be looked at and to be marveled at, but they really do not have any practical or utilitarian use or service and that is quite tragic because Stevens does feel out

of sync, out of touch with times. So, page 134, as far as I was concerned, it was a simple enough matter. One used good polish and one supervised closely. Giffen's was the polish ordered by all discerning butlers of the time and if this product was used correctly, one had no fear of one's silver being second best to anybody's. I am glad to be able to recall numerous occasions when the silver at Darlington hall had a pleasing impact upon observers.

So, this is what Stevens remains in the past. He is never able to shake away his past. His past is something that has completely overpowered or consumed him and so much does he live in his past that every object, every like proves madeleine takes him back to that days gone by and Giffen's and company, a silver company that specializes in producing products for polishing silver, that too has very special memories for him and he says, once he recalls that once he observed a guest as distinguished as George Bernard Shaw, the celebrated writer, playwright who was a guest in Lord Darlington's house, Stevens observed that George Bernard Shaw was admiring the silver in Darlington hall and this Stevens takes as a matter of personal pride and joy but as Ishiguro tells us that all this was in the past, things have changed, things have come a long way since those days, those times. Coming to page 137, it needs to be said to what salacious nonsense it is to claim that Lord Darlington was anti-Semitic. I think that he had close associations with organizations like the British Union of Fascist, such claims can only arise from complete ignorance of the sort of gentleman his lordship was.

Lord Darlington came to abhor anti-Semitism. I heard him express his disgust on several separate occasions when confronted with anti-Semitic sentiments and the allegation that his lordship never allowed Jewish people to enter the house or any Jewish staff to be employed is utterly unfounded except perhaps in respect to one very minor episode in the 30s which has been blown up out of all proportion. As for the British Union of Fascist, I can only say that any talk linking his lordship to such people is quite ridiculous. So, now, it is slowly coming out, slowly unraveling. Lord Darlington did have a past which was slightly tainted.

Lord Darlington indeed was the kind of person who was a racist and anti-Semitic. He was, he never took Jewish people in his service. He also very unceremoniously dismissed of two of his maid servants. They were both Jewish. So, however, Stevens refuses to admit that even to himself and as we have been repeatedly saying in this class about the novel, what makes Stevens an unreliable narrator? The fact that he refuses to be honest even to himself.

We have already seen that he cannot be relied on for any reason. He lies to people that he had ever worked for someone called Lord Darlington and he lies to himself that Lord

Darlington was actually a racist. He was actually a person with Nazi sympathies, but throughout the novel, he tries to color our perception of Lord Darlington and Ishiguro is writing this as a caution. He cautions us that this is the way a society becomes when its people remain unquestioning and absolutely loyal to certain figures, to certain charismatic figures. Coming to the end of this chapter, then again, it seems hardly worthwhile to speculate greatly on such matters. Now, when one knows one will in all likelihood be talking face to face with Miss Canton within 48 hours.

Still, I must say, I did spend some long minutes turning those passages over in my mind last night as I lay there in the darkness listening to the sounds from below of the landlord and his wife clearing up for the night. This is what he wants. Deep down in his mind, he longs for Miss Canton. He feels that if Miss Canton returns, perhaps those glorious days would return. Of course, Lord Darlington is no longer there, but what he feels is that if there is any hope for any kind of happiness, it is there with Miss Canton who might be now married to someone else.

But, if she returns, then perhaps there is still some chance for some kind of personal happiness. He does regard himself as a great professional success though never admits it completely, but he does say that several times. But, what he does not admit is his utter loneliness, his total lack of company for human company. He just remains so devoted to his profession as a butler that he has cleansed himself of all human emotions.

He has just turned himself into some kind of a machine. Miss Canton for him represents everything that is human and humane. Someone who had displayed some affection and emotions towards him at one point. She is one person whose company he seeks and longs for although he does not accept that to himself. So, this is what we have been talking about, idea of dignity, the role of memory in the remains of the dead. Stevens stays a reliable or rather an unreliable narrator and the theme of unwavering loyalty towards one's superiors.

Such tendencies of unquestioning loyalty leads to unhealthy trends like anti-Semitism in our society and that is the hidden message in the remains of the dead. We will finish the novel tomorrow. Thank you very much. Thank you.