

English B: Category 3 - Literature

The connection between characterization and entertainment

*What makes Stevens' character
appealing to the reader in *The Remains
of the Day*?*

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Introduction

Protagonists are a fundamental part of literature. They are seen in almost all works of literature. However, why are protagonists so entertaining to read about, and how can authors manage to create characters that many people can feel so strongly for? In the literary world, there are many iconic characters like Jane Eyre, Harry Potter and Sherlock Holmes, who in their respects have struck a chord with millions of readers. There are usually factors that make them memorable and when it comes to Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*, this is not an exception.

The Remains of the Day deals with Stevens, an aged butler in England, who goes on a trip to the countryside while reminiscing about his past. Stevens is not peculiar or compelling and he seems to be completely mundane and outright boring. Even with all those aspects in mind, many find his character compelling which logically doesn't make any sense. How can someone who doesn't have any enticing factors still be thought of as intriguing?

The following investigation thus will deal with the topics of characterization in fictional literature with the following research question in mind: **“What makes Stevens' character appealing to the reader in *The Remains of the Day*?”**

The chosen novel will be the main focus of the investigation with Stevens as the subject of interest. Areas of particular interest include Stevens' perspective, the usage of dialogue and actions and the depiction of personalities and the mundane lifestyle.

The role of literary techniques and memories

Ishiguro usage of dialogue and gestures should be considered when evaluating Stevens' appeal to the audience. They are foundational for his character as readers are first exposed to him through these literary devices.

Dialogue, for example, can reveal a great deal about characters. It allows readers to look into their opinions and views, as well as their relationships with those around them. Monologues, on the other hand, deals much more about the inner thoughts and perhaps the secrets that a character has. In Ishiguro's novel, the main perspective is given from Stevens and it is his thoughts and view that is presented to readers.

Gestures, on the other hand, convey unspoken information that could emphasize certain emotions or character traits. Conversations and gestures can also be a tool of deception, becoming a way for the author to disguise information from the reader. After all, words do not always carry truth in them and gestures can also contradict the dialogue. Therefore, it should also be noted that *The Remains of the Day* and its protagonist can't always be trusted.

A clear example, which showcases all of these devices, is at the end of chapter 2 where Stevens' father has suffered a stroke and is on his deathbed:

"I felt something touch my elbow and turned to find Lord Darlington.

'Stevens, are you all right?'

'Yes, sir. Perfectly.'

'You look as though you're crying.'

I laughed and taking out a handkerchief, quickly wiped my face.

'I'm very sorry, sir. The strains of a hard day'".¹

¹ Ishiguro, 1999, pp. 109-110

This conversation consisting of six sentences manages to convey both emotion and personality. Here it can be seen how Stevens is most likely trying to ignore the fact that he is mourning as Lord Darlington is the one to point it out and not Stevens himself. As stated previously, Stevens' words are not in agreement with his actions, and his answer to Lord Darlington suggests this even further. It is understood what he actually feels is not what he is showing on the outside. Stevens is hiding behind a façade, a disguise that is revealed gradually as the plot progresses.

Both dialogue and gestures are used to describe Stevens' emotions and personality indirectly. Ishiguro doesn't need to write it out, word by word that "Stevens was crying" or that "Stevens was mourning" because doing so would be redundant. The author understands that readers are capable of seeing through Stevens' charade, and when he allows readers to discover Stevens' personality, the effects of the events become much more significant. Discoveries that readers find out from each event about Stevens become personal and memorable because they were found without the author needing to reveal it. By gradually revealing Stevens' nature, the audience becomes more and more emotionally invested, similar to meeting a person for the first time.

The portrayal of Stevens' memories is often written with hints of grief and regret. His memories are filled with troubled moments even if he doesn't acknowledge it himself. An example of this tone is in chapter 4, where Miss Kenton tells Stevens that a man has asked her hand in marriage and that "[he] had a right to know that".² Stevens simply acknowledges this and continues with his tasks. While he simply accepts this fact and barely reacts, readers can understand why Miss Kenton decided to

² Ishiguro, 1999, p.225

specifically tell him. She has deeper feelings for him that he is oblivious to. This becomes even more overt a couple of pages later in another conversation:

“...Very well, if you must be rushing off, I shall just tell you that I accepted my acquaintance’s proposal.’ [...]

‘Ah, is that so, Miss Kenton? Then may I offer you my congratulations.’ [...] ‘Now if you will excuse me, I must return upstairs.’ [...]

‘Am I to take it,’ she said, ‘that after the many years of service I have given in this house, you have no more words to greet the news of my possible departure than those you have just uttered?’”³

Miss Kenton is clearly hurt by his response and wants Stevens to notice, but it is to no avail. Only later, when he stands outside her door that he somewhat understands he has upset her:

“As I approached Miss Kenton’s door, I saw from the light seeping around its edges that she was still within. And that was the moment, I am sure, that has remained so persistently lodged in my memory – that moment as I paused in the dimness of the corridor, the tray in my hands, an ever-growing conviction mounting within me that just a few yards away, on the other side of that door, Miss Kenton was at that moment crying. As I recall, there was no real evidence to account for this conviction – I had certainly not heard any sounds of crying – and yet I remember being quite certain that were I to knock and enter, I would discover her in tears”.⁴

³ Ishiguro, p.229

⁴ Ishiguro, p. 237

Stevens comments on this event as another success of professionalism – being able to suppress what he is feeling. However, it is evident, that he was only “trapped in his stiff role, conventional and strict to the point of denying himself the possibility of expressing his feelings and of opening himself to the love of a woman...”⁵

He understands that she was hurt by his words, and yet he does nothing.

On the other hand, Stevens’ obliviousness of their relationship might not be real but rather a case of repression. He can’t look back to those times without lying to himself. Furthermore, the fact that he never actually saw her crying also proves that his recollection is not accurate nor truthful. With those ideas in mind, Stevens seems like a pitiful character. A character that suffers in silence, something that indeed makes him more realistic. Restraining emotions and holding back because of fear is something that many have experienced, which is the reason why the significance of this specific incident is much more emotional and vital for Stevens and the audience. Readers become intimately connected with both Stevens through his turmoil and regret. Furthermore, since his memories are deeply personal which contributes to an emotional bond between reader and character.

The main character in *The Remains of the Day* is in constant reflection and turmoil of his past actions. Memories retold by Stevens to give a conceptual understanding of how what he used to be and what has led him to his current state. Besides, the recollection of his past also allows for a more complex personality and hence more opportunities for the audience to become attached to him. Ishiguro makes his characters empathetic through the use of emotion and reflection, which then creates a somewhat somber tone. A tone that very many people can understand and

⁵ Terestchenko, M, 2007, p. 77

commiserate with. How Stevens contemplates, judges and draws conclusions is very realistic, like a human being. Stevens' thought process is sensibly eminent, and it is his awareness and thought process that is perhaps what makes him realistic and thus appealing for readers to read about.

Position and progression

Stevens' social position never changes in the novel. He is introduced as a butler in the beginning and that never changes, which can make him seem even more pitiful in the eyes of the reader. Stevens takes on the underdog role permanently, never undergoing any radical change in his personality. Also, by not letting Stevens to fundamentally change his ways, the author indirectly develops him into an even more realistic personality. Ishiguro himself has elaborated that Stevens' position in the novel also symbolizes a worry that not just butlers have, but one that everyone can relate to:

“Most of us, what we do is jobs, we do good jobs, little jobs, but most of us don't run countries [...] We learn to do a little job, and we try and do our little job to the best of our ability, and we usually offer up our contribution to somebody upstairs. We hope that the contribution is going to be used well but we often can't be sure”.⁶

Stevens is an example of how most people in the world will not be able to achieve their dreams. He represents a harsh but realistic truth about life that everyone can dream but only a few can indeed achieve their dreams.

In retrospect, Stevens' character isn't typically likable. He is not open or grand, in any shape or form, but readers can still feel for him. Ishiguro's represents him as

⁶ Originals, 2:58

somewhat inferior to those around him. Like the stereotypical butler that is frequently shown in popular media, he is a shadow, a side character. Stevens is not a king; he is a butler who ultimately just lives like most of the population.

Mundanity

The tone of *The Remains of the Day* can be summed up using one word: mundane. Stevens' line of thought is unexpectedly ordinary whether it is about his great employer or bantering. He isn't overly pompous or posh, as might be expected, considering his social circle among the British upper class. Stevens is humble, to say the least, and in the rarest of cases where he does flaunt, he expresses it with utter politeness and haste. This is particularly shown in one passage where he is pondering over the decision that he made at his father's deathbed:

“Let me make clear that when I say the conference of 1923, and that night in particular, constituted a turning point in my professional development, I am speaking very much in terms of my own more humble standards. Even so, if you consider the pressures contingent on me that night, you may not think I delude myself unduly if I go so far as to suggest that I did perhaps display, in the face of everything, at least in some modest degree a ‘dignity’ worthy of someone like Mr Marshall – or come to that, my father”.⁷

He uses many adjectives that indicate his reluctance to voice his own opinion like “humble”, “modest”, “delude”, and “unduly”. Stevens' thoughts aren't emotional but rather distant and cold. He rarely speaks about his mood or feelings. The author himself described Stevens as someone that “could very well stand for that part of all

⁷ Ishiguro, 1999, pp.114–115

of us that is afraid to get engaged, afraid to open ourselves to love and to the possibilities of being loved - the dangers of becoming emotionally engaged and hiding instead behind some sort of a professional role”.⁸

Ishiguro omits details because he is aware that readers can interpret what exactly is happening between the lines. Most can understand that Stevens is not as apathetic as the words tell us he is. The English butler lies like everyone else, with or without intention. He lies and hides his emotions behind the narration and only shows the audience the parts he wants them to know.

Stevens isn't a white knight and that is absolutely adequate for the audience because the issues and ideas that he raises do not require prestigious events. Whereas many famous franchises like Spiderman and Harry Potter often follow a hero, *The Remains of the Day* centers around the common people and the small and normal life, the so-called everyday life. Ishiguro tells a story about the average people, the bystanders, and those who are forgotten in history. Stevens finds happiness and fulfillment in the “small things” in life, and that idea can readers relate to.

What the theme of mundanity essentially portrays is that there are extraordinary moments in everyday lives that might not be as grandiose but still as important and memorable. It provides both comforts for Stevens but also the audience, that reality can be as rewarding as imagination in the end.

Perspective

The effect of writing *The Remains of the Day* from a first-person perspective is an intimate bond from beginning to end. As previously explained, Stevens' thoughts are

⁸ Originals, 2017, 1:54 - 2:14

explicitly exposed to readers which creates an opportunity for a deeper understanding of his personality than initially thought. Whenever Stevens experiences something, readers hence also indirectly experience it through him. The intimate and realistic viewpoint that he provides with his nostalgia and regret almost entrances the audience in Ishiguro's literary world. Whilst readers are not pushed into Stevens' shoes since there is a defined border between character and reader, the audience can still share his world view as if he was a real friend.

Stevens also tends to leave out certain details at certain points in the novel which could go unnoticed. Despite his thoughts being open to the audience, he is an unreliable narrator who does not always tell the truth. Chapter 3, in particular, sticks out, in which he describes Lord Darlington and the antisemitic views at Darlington Hall. He is ordered to dismiss the two Jewish staff members with the reason that: "There's the safety and well-being of my guests to consider" and that "It's all in our best interests".⁹ Stevens does not protest against his employer and frankly accepts the order with the reasoning that "...there was nothing to be gained at all in irresponsibly displaying such doubts".¹⁰ He is blindly obedient and affected by the authorities around him, which is indirectly found in the information in the said as well as unsaid. The perspective that Stevens gives is overtly biased, and it shapes how he is perceived as a character.

Ishiguro, on another note, revealed his intention with Stevens in an interview that: "I wanted to suggest that in some kind of way, in a political way, perhaps in a political and moral way, [that] most of us were butlers".¹¹ Normal people like Stevens, want to

⁹ Ishiguro, 1999, p. 155

¹⁰ Ishiguro, 1999, p.156

¹¹ Originals, 2017, 2:30-2:40

be acknowledged and remembered for the work they so diligently do. This according to him, however, comes with a price, namely the person's individuality. Stevens has in some respects given up his personality as a person for the role of a butler, to blindly follow someone not only professionally, but also spiritually. Critics like Jack Slay Jr explains further that "Stevens has managed to rid himself of all sense of identity, creating a blank façade that fools even himself"¹². And that "Stevens's lack of identity is further emphasized by the fact that he is known only as "Stevens"; with no apparent first name, he becomes "unselfed", possessing no self outside of his manservant role"¹³.

Self-deceit, as mentioned previously, is an underlying theme that might go unnoticed at the surface level. Stevens' subjectivity and lies add another layer to his personality, making him more enticing, as it creates a mystery for those who are reading. For example, Stevens would never outright say that he feels unhappy, however, his constant meandering could indicate that he is looking for something better. The present is too painful for him and thus the butler escapes to his memories, to the past.

Nostalgia and realism

Steven is so extremely homesick and nostalgic that he almost exists solely through his memories. Flashbacks are the primary narration method used by Ishiguro in *The Remains of the Day*. For the most part, the plot is therefore based on his memories and not in the present. And due to the state, he is in, Stevens has a difficult time moving on in life. The nostalgia that is so dominating reveals the dangers of being in

¹² Slay, J. 1997, p. 180

¹³ Slay, J. 1997, p. 180

love with the past, and the author's argument is expressed in the last chapter in a conversation between Stevens and an unnamed man:

“Don't keep looking back all the time, you're bound to be depressed. And all right, you can't do your job as well as you used to. But it's the same for all of us, see? We've all got to put our feet up at some point”.¹⁴

The message that Ishiguro is conveying is that reality is ever so changing and therefore people also have to adapt and develop. Everyone has a past that they eventually need to come to terms with. It is not worthwhile to remain in the past when the future offers so many chances.

Moreover, the conversation is the butler's moment of epiphany. Stevens realizes that he has reflected enough and continuing any further would be pointless. The ending of the novel is hence a turning point for his character since it concludes and exposes all the hidden problems that he has. He can finally move on and meet the next day without looking back. Although the ideas and arguments presented by Ishiguro might seem pessimistic, the conclusion is somewhat comforting for the audience. There is still hope and time for moving on since the future is full of possibilities.

Conclusion

What Ishiguro has accomplished through Stevens' characterization might look trivial and mundane. He created a dull personality that from the outside looks dreary and uninteresting to read about. Still, the butler in *The Remains of the Day* shows a broad spectrum of human behavior and reality in just under 300 pages¹⁵, which has

¹⁴ Ishiguro, 1999, p. 256

¹⁵ Ishiguro, 1999

fascinated many readers. To put it briefly, four factors account for Stevens' allure namely Ishiguro's usage of literary devices, Stevens' mundanity, his social status, and finally the tone of the novel.

To illustrate, Ishiguro's usage of dialogue, monologue, actions, and events contribute to how Stevens' personality is perceived by the audience. Even though his character is traditionally stale and dull, the author slowly reveals Stevens' inner using smaller dialogues and monologues. The author implements the idiom of "don't judge a book by its cover" through Stevens. On the outside, he might look plain and outright boring, but on the inside, there is much for readers to relate and sympathize with.

Besides, Stevens' relatability is derived from the mundane life he lives. His conversations with his coworkers and employers do not play into a larger scheme. From obscurities like polishing silverware to not being able to banter, Stevens' thoughts reveal his hardheadedness. He is not concerned with the political climate in the country or global conflicts, but rather "tries to just live" like the general population. Readers can connect with him because his life is not far removed from reality which again makes him more relatable.

Stevens' social status and perspective in life in the novel strengthens and solidifies his everyday life for readers. He is associated with his profession as a butler at Darlington Hall, and this extends to his private life as well. In fact, the butler status defines him. Stevens is not the protagonist – he is the butler. The protagonist suffers in silence, which is something that becomes eminent for readers as the novel progresses. And once realized, Stevens' become an even more tragic figure. His suffering is shown between the lines and it is from there that the audience can fully sympathize with him. Stevens' personality is not what is particularly pitiful, per se, but the deceitful life he lives.

By combining the two former factors, Ishiguro expresses many truths of human nature. The hardships that are shown to the audience, allow readers to see a portion of themselves in Stevens' whether it is his ordinary lifestyle, self-deceit or cowardice. His longing to "find" a place in this world and becoming the best, succeeding in life, is something that can be universally understood by the audience.

In conclusion, what makes Stevens memorable is the strong yet subtle bond that Ishiguro constructs between character and reader in the novel using themes, literary devices, and emotion – from beginning to end.

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