

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERIZATION AND UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S '*THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*'

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Abstract. Kazuo Ishiguro's '*The Remains of the Day*' (1989) presents a complex study of memory, identity, emotional repression, and self-deception through the retrospective narration of Stevens, an English butler. The novel's psychological depth is created not primarily through direct descriptions of the protagonist's emotions, but through the narrative strategies by which he reconstructs his past. This article examines how first-person narration, selective memory, self-justification, emotional concealment, narrative gaps, and the tension between stated and implied meanings contribute to the construction of Stevens as a psychologically complex and unreliable narrator. Drawing on narratological and psychoanalytic perspectives, the study argues that Stevens's unreliability is not simply a matter of factual inaccuracy. Rather, it emerges from his limited self-knowledge, professional ideology, emotional repression, and persistent attempt to preserve a coherent image of himself. His narrative gradually reveals a conflict between the identity he consciously constructs and the experiences that challenge it. The article concludes that Ishiguro uses unreliable narration as a central technique for representing psychological complexity, allowing readers to understand Stevens not only through what he says, but also through what he avoids, suppresses, and leaves unsaid.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, '*The Remains of the Day*', Stevens, psychological characterization, unreliable narrator, memory, self-deception, first-person narration

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's '*The Remains of the Day*' is widely regarded as a significant contemporary novel of memory, identity, and moral reflection. Published in 1989, the novel follows Stevens, an ageing English butler who reflects on his years of service at

Darlington Hall and undertakes a short journey through the English countryside. Although the narrative appears to focus on professional service and the traditions of the English country house, its deeper concern is the relationship between personal identity, emotional repression, memory, and responsibility.

The novel's psychological complexity is closely connected to its narrative form. Stevens tells his own story, and readers encounter the past through his highly controlled and subjective perspective. His account appears orderly, rational, and professional; however, the narrative gradually reveals inconsistencies between his interpretations and the emotional or moral implications of the events he describes. As a result, the reader is required to interpret not only the information Stevens provides but also the omissions, hesitations, contradictions, and evasions within his account.

The concept of the unreliable narrator is particularly relevant to the analysis of Stevens. In narratological studies, an unreliable narrator is generally understood as a narrator whose account cannot be accepted as a complete or authoritative representation of reality. However, Stevens's unreliability is more complicated than deliberate deception. He does not necessarily intend to mislead the reader. Instead, his narration is shaped by professional ideology, limited self-awareness, selective memory, and a strong desire to preserve his understanding of dignity and service.

Previous scholarship has examined Stevens's unreliability from different perspectives. Kathleen Wall discusses the contradictions between Stevens's descriptions of events and the interpretations he assigns to them. Zuzana Fonioková examines how his professional views, relationship with his father, and attitude toward Miss Kenton reveal problems in his narrative authority. Elif Toprak Sakız places the novel's narrative unreliability within a rhetorical narratological framework and connects it with subjectivity, Englishness, and the construction of identity. More recently, psychoanalytic approaches have emphasized that important aspects of Stevens's character emerge less from what he explicitly says than from what remains unspoken in his narrative.

This article examines how Ishiguro constructs Stevens as a psychologically complex unreliable narrator. It focuses on five interconnected features: first-person narration, self-

justification, emotional concealment, selective memory, and narrative silence. The central argument is that Stevens's unreliability functions not merely as a technique for creating uncertainty, but as a means of representing the difficulty of self-knowledge.

2. Theoretical Framework: Psychological Characterization and Unreliable Narration

2.1. Psychological Characterization in Narrative Fiction

Psychological characterization refers to the representation of a character's inner life, including emotions, thoughts, memories, motivations, conflicts, and processes of self-understanding. In traditional realist fiction, psychological states may be explained directly by an omniscient narrator. A character may be described as anxious, regretful, emotionally conflicted, or afraid.

Modern narrative fiction, however, often presents psychological experience indirectly. Instead of explicitly explaining what a character feels, the text may reveal the character's inner condition through speech patterns, narrative structure, omissions, repetitions, and contradictions. In such cases, the reader participates in the construction of psychological meaning.

In '*The Remains of the Day*', Stevens's psychological state is rarely presented through direct emotional confession. Rather, it emerges from the relationship between his professional language and the experiences he narrates. His controlled vocabulary, formal tone, and repeated concern with dignity create the impression of emotional stability. Yet these same features gradually reveal the extent to which he has disciplined and restricted his emotional life.

Thus, psychological characterization in the novel is closely connected to the act of narration itself. Stevens does not simply describe his identity; he actively constructs it through the way he tells his story.

2.2. The Unreliable Narrator

Wayne C. Booth's concept of the unreliable narrator has become an important point of departure in narratological studies. In general terms, a narrator may be considered

unreliable when there is a significant discrepancy between the narrator's account and the norms or understanding established by the text.

However, the concept should not be reduced to deliberate lying. A narrator may be unreliable because of limited knowledge, ideological commitment, emotional repression, faulty memory, self-deception, or an inability to interpret personal experience accurately.

Stevens represents this more complex form of unreliability. His narrative is not simply inaccurate because he invents events. Instead, it is limited by the conceptual framework through which he understands his life. His commitment to professional dignity influences what he considers important, how he interprets past events, and which experiences he is able to acknowledge.

Consequently, Stevens's unreliability is psychological as well as narratological. His narrative reveals the limitations of his self-understanding and the distance between his conscious identity and the experiences that challenge it.

3. First-Person Retrospective Narration and Subjective Experience

One of the most important narrative features of *The Remains of the Day* is its first-person retrospective narration. Stevens recounts events from his past while speaking from a later stage of life. This structure creates a double perspective: the narrator is both the person who experienced the events and the older individual who attempts to interpret them.

First-person narration provides direct access to the narrator's consciousness. Readers hear Stevens's vocabulary, judgments, explanations, and reflections in his own voice. At the same time, this perspective limits access to other characters' thoughts and prevents the reader from receiving a fully independent account of events.

Stevens's narrative is therefore subjective in two senses. First, it is shaped by his personal experiences and professional values. Second, it is influenced by his later attempt to give those experiences a coherent meaning.

His narration frequently adopts a formal and analytical tone. He discusses professional conduct, household management, and the responsibilities of a butler with considerable precision. This style creates an impression of authority. Nevertheless, the very

confidence of his professional language becomes a source of tension when he addresses personal matters.

For example, Stevens tends to interpret emotionally significant situations through the vocabulary of duty, service, and professional standards. His language creates distance between himself and his own feelings. The reader gradually recognizes that the apparent objectivity of his account is not neutral but shaped by a particular worldview.

The first-person retrospective form thus performs two contradictory functions:

1. It brings the reader close to Stevens's consciousness.
2. It restricts the reader to Stevens's limited and self-protective perspective.

This contradiction is central to the novel's psychological effect. The reader is close enough to hear Stevens's thoughts but sufficiently distanced to recognize meanings that he does not fully acknowledge.

4. Stevens's Self-Justification and the Construction of Professional Identity

Stevens's identity is strongly organized around the concept of professional dignity. For him, a great butler is expected to maintain emotional control, discretion, loyalty, and composure under all circumstances. His professional identity is not merely an occupation; it functions as the central foundation of his self-worth.

Throughout the novel, Stevens repeatedly attempts to define what constitutes a successful butler. He emphasizes the importance of serving a "great gentleman" and maintaining the standards of an excellent household. His understanding of dignity requires the suppression of personal reactions and the prioritization of professional responsibility.

This ideology allows Stevens to interpret his life as meaningful and coherent. However, it also becomes a mechanism of self-justification. By presenting his professional role as the highest form of personal achievement, he can avoid confronting the emotional and moral consequences of certain decisions.

His service to Lord Darlington is particularly important in this regard. Stevens tends to evaluate his employer through the language of greatness and social responsibility. Yet the historical and political implications of Lord Darlington's actions complicate Stevens's idealized image of service. The more Stevens attempts to preserve the idea that he served

a genuinely great man, the more difficult it becomes for him to acknowledge the limitations of that judgment.

This tension demonstrates how self-justification operates within the narrative. Stevens does not merely remember his professional past; he interprets it in a way that protects his identity. His account seeks to establish that his life has been governed by dignity, even when the events he describes invite more critical reflection.

Fonioková observes that the novel contains contradictions between the scenes Stevens narrates and the interpretations he assigns to them. These contradictions are especially visible in his discussions of professional dignity, his father, and Miss Kenton.

Stevens's self-justification can therefore be understood as both a psychological defense and a narrative strategy. It helps him maintain a stable self-image, but it also limits his ability to interpret his past honestly.

5. Emotional Repression and the Concealment of Personal Feelings

A central feature of Stevens's psychological characterization is his tendency to suppress or conceal emotion. His professional ideal requires him to remain composed and avoid allowing personal feelings to interfere with his duties. As a result, emotional restraint becomes deeply internalized.

The relationship between Stevens and Miss Kenton provides the clearest example of this repression. Their professional interaction contains signs of mutual concern, intellectual companionship, and emotional possibility. However, Stevens consistently interprets their relationship through the language of work, household management, and professional propriety.

Rather than openly acknowledging his affection or vulnerability, he often transforms emotionally meaningful situations into professional discussions. This process allows him to maintain emotional distance. Yet the reader can detect a tension between the significance of the relationship and Stevens's restrained account of it.

His emotional repression is not expressed through dramatic declarations or explicit confessions. Instead, it appears in the way he avoids direct emotional language, changes the subject, qualifies his statements, or explains personal events in professional terms.\

he narrative consequently creates a distinction between what Stevens consciously says and what the reader can infer. His account appears emotionally controlled, but this control itself becomes evidence of the feelings he cannot or will not express.

A psychoanalytic reading of the novel similarly emphasizes that important aspects of Stevens's life emerge through what he does not say. Rosemary Rizq argues that Stevens's pursuit of dignity and greatness leads him to erase or minimize emotional traces from his account, particularly in relation to Miss Kenton and his personal history.

This does not mean that every omission should be interpreted as deliberate repression. Rather, the novel suggests that Stevens's emotional limitations have become part of his habitual way of understanding the world. He does not simply choose silence on isolated occasions; he has developed a narrative identity in which emotional concealment appears natural and proper.

6. Selective Memory and the Reconstruction of the Past

Memory is one of the principal mechanisms through which Stevens constructs his identity. His narrative is retrospective, meaning that the past is presented from the perspective of the present. However, memory in the novel is not a neutral recording of previous events. It is selective, interpretive, and shaped by the narrator's current needs.

Stevens remembers particular moments because they appear relevant to his understanding of dignity, professional excellence, and service. His memories are therefore organized according to a particular value system. Events that support his professional identity receive considerable attention, while experiences that challenge this identity may be minimized, delayed, or presented indirectly.

This selectivity is especially significant when Stevens recalls Lord Darlington's conduct and his relationship with Miss Kenton. His memories do not simply reproduce the past; they attempt to arrange it into a meaningful narrative. The past becomes a resource through which he explains and defends the person he believes himself to be.

The relationship between memory and identity is therefore reciprocal. Stevens's identity influences what he remembers, while his memories reinforce the identity he has constructed.

His retrospective narration also reveals that memory is not necessarily a process of complete recovery. The act of remembering may expose uncertainty rather than resolve it. Stevens sometimes qualifies his statements, revises his recollections, or introduces information that complicates earlier interpretations. These moments suggest that the past remains unstable within his consciousness.

Toprak Sakız describes Stevens's narration as profoundly retrospective, emphasizing that he looks backward not only to recall the supposedly great days of his service but also to construct his subjectivity upon that idea of greatness.

Consequently, selective memory functions as a form of psychological characterization. It reveals what Stevens values, what he fears confronting, and what he needs his past to mean.

7. Narrative Gaps, Silence, and Unspoken Meaning

One of the most distinctive features of Ishiguro's narrative technique is the importance of what remains unspoken. In *'The Remains of the Day'*, Stevens's silences, omissions, and narrative gaps are not merely absences of information. They actively contribute to the construction of meaning.

A narrative gap occurs when an event, motivation, or emotional response is not fully explained. Such gaps encourage readers to interpret the relationship between what is stated and what is left unstated. In Stevens's case, these gaps are particularly significant because his narrative style is otherwise highly detailed and controlled.

When Stevens discusses professional matters, he often provides extensive explanations. However, when the narrative approaches emotionally or morally difficult experiences, his account may become indirect, hesitant, or evasive. This contrast draws attention to the limits of his self-expression.

The reader may therefore discover important aspects of Stevens's character through questions such as:

- Why does Stevens avoid describing a particular emotional response?
- Why does he reinterpret a personal event as a professional matter?

- Why is certain information introduced only after the reader has formed an initial impression?
- Why does he devote so much attention to professional dignity while offering little direct discussion of personal loss?

These questions demonstrate that silence has a positive narrative function. It does not simply conceal meaning; it produces meaning by inviting interpretation.

Rizq's psychoanalytic study similarly argues that readers come to understand Stevens less through his explicit statements than through what he does not say. The unspoken elements of his narrative become important evidence of his divided and incomplete self-knowledge.

Thus, Stevens's psychological portrait is created through both verbal expression and narrative absence. His silences reveal the boundaries of his consciousness and the emotional experiences that remain difficult for him to articulate.

8. The Gap Between Narrated Events and Narratorial Interpretation

A major source of Stevens's unreliability is the difference between the events he describes and the interpretations he gives them. This distinction is central to understanding the novel's narrative structure.

Stevens often presents events in a factual or descriptive manner, but his subsequent interpretation may direct the reader toward a particular understanding. In some cases, however, the details of the event appear to undermine his own explanation.

For instance, Stevens may describe a situation involving personal sacrifice, emotional distance, or questionable professional loyalty, and then interpret it as evidence of dignity or proper conduct. The reader is not necessarily required to reject his account entirely. Instead, the narrative encourages a comparison between his interpretation and the broader implications of the scene.

This gap creates irony. The reader understands that Stevens's language does not fully contain the meaning of his experiences. His words may be sincere, but sincerity does not guarantee accuracy or self-knowledge.

This is an important distinction: Stevens is unreliable not necessarily because he consciously lies, but because his interpretive framework prevents him from seeing the full significance of what he narrates.

The novel's psychological effect depends on this tension. If Stevens were simply deceptive, the reader's task would be to identify false statements. Instead, the reader must recognize how a person can sincerely construct a misleading account of his own life.

In this sense, Ishiguro presents unreliability as a condition of human subjectivity. People do not always understand themselves clearly, and their narratives may reveal truths that exceed their conscious intentions.

9. Unreliable Narration and the Problem of Self-Knowledge

Stevens's unreliability is ultimately connected to the problem of self-knowledge. His narrative demonstrates that telling one's life story does not necessarily lead to complete understanding. On the contrary, narration may expose the limitations of the narrator's self-awareness.

Stevens attempts to organize his life around a coherent ideal: the dignified butler who serves faithfully and maintains professional excellence. This ideal provides structure and purpose. However, it also excludes aspects of experience that do not fit the model, including personal desire, emotional vulnerability, and moral uncertainty.

As the narrative develops, the reader begins to recognize that Stevens's identity is not entirely stable. It depends upon memories, professional beliefs, and interpretations that are increasingly difficult to sustain without qualification.

The journey undertaken in the novel provides a framework for this process of reflection. Although Stevens initially presents the journey in practical and professional terms, it becomes an opportunity to revisit the past and reconsider his relationship with Miss Kenton, his father, and Lord Darlington.

His reflections do not produce a complete transformation or a simple resolution. Instead, they reveal a partial and hesitant movement toward self-recognition. Stevens begins to confront the possibility that his understanding of dignity may have required him to sacrifice important aspects of his personal life.

This partiality is crucial. Ishiguro does not present self-knowledge as a sudden moment of total revelation. Rather, the novel portrays it as an uncertain process in which the individual gradually becomes aware of contradictions within the identity they have constructed.

Recent scholarship on Stevens's narration has also explored how unreliable narration can produce not only ironic distance but also a gradual sense of emotional proximity between the narrator and the reader. Such interpretations suggest that readers may initially question Stevens's account while gradually developing a more complex understanding of his vulnerability.

Therefore, unreliable narration in the novel serves both a critical and a humanizing function. It exposes the limitations of Stevens's worldview while allowing readers to recognize the psychological difficulty of confronting one's own past.

Discussion. The analysis demonstrates that Stevens's psychological characterization is inseparable from the narrative form of *'The Remains of the Day'*. His inner world is not presented as a separate psychological reality explained by an external narrator. Instead, it is embedded in the language, structure, and limitations of his own account.

Five major narrative mechanisms contribute to this representation:

First, first-person narration provides direct access to Stevens's consciousness while restricting the reader to his subjective perspective.

Second, self-justification allows Stevens to preserve a coherent professional identity by interpreting his past through the ideal of dignity.

Third, emotional concealment reveals the extent to which personal feelings have been subordinated to professional discipline.

Fourth, selective memory demonstrates that the past is reconstructed according to present needs and ideological commitments.

Fifth, narrative gaps and silence allow the reader to infer meanings that Stevens cannot or does not articulate directly.

These mechanisms do not function independently. They reinforce one another. Stevens's professional ideology shapes his memories; his memories support his self-

justification; his self-justification encourages emotional concealment; and his concealment produces narrative gaps that reveal his unreliability.

The result is a psychologically complex narrator whose account is both limited and meaningful. Stevens's narrative cannot be treated as an objective record of the past, but neither can it be dismissed as meaningless or deliberately false. Its value lies precisely in the way it reveals the processes through which an individual constructs, protects, and gradually questions personal identity.

Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's '*The Remains of the Day*' presents psychological characterization through a sophisticated narrative structure centered on Stevens's first-person retrospective account. His unreliability emerges through selective memory, self-justification, emotional repression, narrative gaps, and the discrepancy between narrated events and their interpretation.

Stevens's narrative demonstrates that unreliability is not always the result of conscious deception. It may arise from limited self-knowledge, ideological commitment, habitual emotional restraint, and the human desire to preserve a coherent sense of self. His professional identity provides him with dignity and purpose, but it also restricts his ability to acknowledge personal feelings and moral complexity.

The novel's psychological power lies in the tension between what Stevens says and what the reader gradually understands. His inner world is revealed not only through explicit statements but also through silences, evasions, repetitions, and contradictions. In this way, Ishiguro transforms unreliable narration into a method of psychological exploration.

Ultimately, '*The Remains of the Day*' suggests that identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing narrative construction. Stevens's attempt to tell his life story becomes an encounter with the limitations of that construction. His narrative remains incomplete, but its incompleteness is precisely what makes it psychologically and artistically significant.

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