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The Futility of Striving: A Marxist Reading of *The Remains of the Day*

YANG Haining
Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Kazuo Ishiguro is a Japanese-born British novelist, widely regarded as one of the most acclaimed contemporary writers. He has received many prestigious awards for his works, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. As one of Ishiguro's best-known novels, *The Remains of the Day* follows the introspective journey of Stevens, an English butler, whose lifelong dedication to his profession culminates in a profound realization of a wasted life and misguided faith. Drawing on Marxist criticism, this essay examines how Stevens's understanding of dignity legitimizes class subordination and how his labor estranges him from his agency, emotions, and relationships. His unquestioning loyalty to Lord Darlington transforms service into a moral ideal, while professional discipline leads him to suppress personal judgment and intimate feeling. Through Stevens's belated recognition of the emptiness of his life, Ishiguro exposes the human cost of internalized domination and suggests that genuine dignity depends on agency, emotional connection, and the capacity to give meaning to one's own life.

Keywords: The Remains of the Day, Marxist Theory, dignity, alienated labor

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro stands as one of the most accomplished and celebrated authors in contemporary English literature. His works explore such themes as identity, memory, and mortality, often revealing the tensions between individuals' aspirations and their lived experiences. In the collection of his interviews *Conversations With Kazuo Ishiguro*, Ishiguro has articulated a recurring thematic concern: "I am interested in how people who tried to do something good and useful in their lives suddenly find that they have misplaced their efforts" (Shaffer & Wong, 2008, p. 5). His celebrated novel *The Remains of the Day* vividly embodies this very predicament, portraying an individual who, after a lifetime of dedicated striving, ultimately discovers that his entire career has been devoid of true significance. In the twilight of his life, he begins to question whether his lifelong dedication has served a meaningful purpose or merely reinforced the social hierarchy to which he has submitted.

This paper examines Stevens's tragedy through Marxist criticism. It argues that his pursuit of "dignity" is not simply a personal virtue but an ideology shaped by hierarchical social relations. His labor is alienated because he lacks meaningful control over his work and increasingly subordinates his emotions and relationships

YANG Haining, MA Candidate, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology.

to his professional role. The more completely he embodies the ideal of the "great butler", the further he distances himself from his own humanity.

Dignity as an Ideology of Subordination

Stevens defines dignity as "a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 43). This definition presents dignity not as a universal human quality but as the perfect performance of a social role. He believes that the destiny of civilization rests with social elites and that people like himself should not "meddle in the great affairs of the nation" (p. 209). By equating service to Lord Darlington with service to humanity, Stevens relinquishes his moral agency and accepts the hierarchy that determines his position.

In Darlington Hall, the ideal of the "great butler" transforms subordination into a source of pride. Stevens's loyalty, emotional restraint, and self-effacement seem to be signs of professional excellence, yet they also require him to suppress personal feeling and ethical judgment. When Lord Darlington orders the dismissal of two Jewish maids, Stevens's own instincts oppose the decision, but he carries it out. He explains that "our professional duty is not to our own foibles and sentiments, but to the wishes of our employer" (p. 157). Professional duty has displaced individual conscience: Stevens's sense of dignity depends on obedience, even when obedience makes him complicit in injustice.

Stevens's retrospective narration reveals cracks in this ideology. He repeatedly defends Darlington as a gentleman who was misled, yet feels ashamed to acknowledge his former employment when villagers ask about his past. In Moscombe, the villagers argue that citizens have a responsibility to express their own opinions: "We've all got strong opinions here, and it's our responsibility to get them heard" (p. 198). Their view challenges Stevens's belief that a butler's loyalty requires him to avoid political judgment. His embarrassment suggests that the dignity he once took for granted cannot withstand public scrutiny.

His emotional restraint similarly exposes the cost of his ideal. When Miss Kenton considers leaving to marry, Stevens interprets his failure to respond to her feelings as a triumph of professional composure. He later admits that "at that moment, my heart was breaking" (p. 252), revealing the emotion his role had forced him to deny. Even decades later, he continues to call her "Miss Kenton", resisting the reality of her changed life and his lost opportunity. The tension between what Stevens says and what his memories disclose makes him an unreliable narrator: The contradictions in his account expose the ideology he tries to preserve. As Eagleton argues, social consciousness is conditioned by social relations (p. 5); Stevens's notion of dignity reflects the class structure that has shaped his imagination. His tragedy is not simply that he loses love or makes mistakes, but that he mistakes submission for self-realization.

This ideology of dignity has consequences beyond Stevens's private life, shaping his response to the political authority of the class he serves. Darlington sees himself as acting for the public good, but his involvement in European politics exposes the danger of allowing inherited status to substitute for informed judgment. Stevens rarely evaluates Darlington's decisions independently; instead, he assumes that a gentleman's intentions are sufficient grounds for trust. This deference reproduces a division of responsibility that protects the upper class: The employer makes decisions, while the servant treats obedience as his own

moral achievement. By refusing to judge the political actions carried out in Darlington's name, Stevens helps preserve an unequal order in which those who exercise power can rely on others to carry out their wishes.

Butler Labor and Alienation

Marx's theory of alienated labor provides a framework for understanding how workers lose control over their productive activity. He argues that labor becomes external to the worker when "it is not his own, but someone else's" (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 271). This insight illuminates Stevens's career: Although he devotes his energy to Darlington Hall, his work is organized around his employer's demands, and he rarely regards his own wishes as legitimate.

The staffing plan he prepares for Mr. Farraday makes this imbalance visible. Having once supervised 17 employees, Stevens is asked to maintain the house with only four. Although he finds the proposal difficult and regrets the abandonment of old practices, he spends hours devising a plan that meets his employer's requirements (Ishiguro, 2015, pp. 7-8). He does not seriously consider whether the task is reasonable or whether he should refuse it. His time and judgment are treated as resources at the employer's disposal. The same dependence appears when Stevens hesitates for days before asking for leave, carefully waiting for an appropriate moment because he fears Farraday may reject the request (pp. 10, 13). Even decisions about his own time are filtered through his employer's expectations.

Stevens's lack of autonomy becomes more troubling when professional obedience conflicts with personal judgment. He believes the Jewish maids are satisfactory workers and feels instinctively opposed to their dismissal, but obeys Darlington's order nonetheless (p. 156). Alienation here is not only a matter of exhausting work or limited control over working conditions; it also involves surrendering the capacity to judge the moral meaning of one's activity. Stevens's labor serves the employer's authority even when it violates his own convictions.

The professional ideal that Stevens has internalized becomes a force governing him. He believes great butlers must inhabit their roles to the utmost and display emotional restraint even in private (Ishiguro, 2015, pp. 43-44). Marx argues that under alienated conditions, labor can cease to function as a meaningful expression of human life, "losing all semblance of life activity" (Marx & Engels, 1995, p. 128). Stevens's behavior illustrates this loss: He refuses to acknowledge his interest in romance novels except by claiming that they improve his command of English. Miss Kenton's description of his pantry as resembling a prison cell offers a telling image of the life he has constructed (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 174). The room's lack of warmth reflects Stevens's effort to exclude anything that might disrupt his professional identity. What began as a standard he chose to pursue becomes a rule that controls his behavior. The "great butler" is both his aspiration and the ideal that dominates him.

Alienation also affects Stevens's relationship to his human needs. On the night his father dies, Stevens remains at work rather than staying beside him. He explains that his father would have wished him to "carry on" (p. 110). Later, when Miss Kenton's impending marriage presents a chance to express his feelings, he again returns to his duties, insisting that important events are unfolding upstairs (p. 238). These occasions show how work displaces family affection and romantic attachment. Stevens treats the suppression of grief and desire as

evidence of professional strength, although these sacrifices deprive his life of relationships that could give it meaning.

Stevens's relationships with others are likewise filtered through professional status. His acquaintance with Mr. Graham, another servant, depends on the visits and relationships of their employers; when the professional connection disappears, their friendship fades (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 20). His relationship with his father is shaped by their shared occupation, and their exchanges are often restricted to work (p. 66). With Miss Kenton, Stevens insists on the "essentially professional character" of their relationship (p. 165), using the language of employment to avoid acknowledging intimacy. This pattern recalls Marx's observation that "each man views the other in accordance with the standard and the position in which he finds himself as a worker" (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 275). Stevens interprets friendship, family ties, and romantic love through the standards of his professional role, turning personal bonds into relationships defined by employment. His alienation is therefore social as well as personal: He increasingly understands himself and others through the narrow framework of professional roles, limiting his capacity to form relationships beyond work.

Conclusion

The Remains of the Day presents Stevens's tragedy as the outcome of a cycle in which ideology and alienated labor reinforce each other. His notion of dignity persuades him that obedience and emotional restraint are virtues; this belief leads him to surrender judgment, time, and personal relationships to his employer. The more perfectly he performs the role of the great butler, the more thoroughly he distances himself from his desires and moral responsibility.

Near the end of the novel, Stevens asks what dignity can mean if he has trusted in his employer's judgment and cannot even claim his mistakes as his own (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 251). The question marks a belated recognition that professional loyalty has not guaranteed a meaningful life. Ishiguro portrays this realization with sympathy, while showing how a rigid social order can limit a person's capacity to imagine alternatives. Yet this recognition does not mean that Stevens has fully escaped the values that have shaped him; rather, it signals a growing awareness of their costs. His story challenges readers to distinguish genuine dignity from submission and to recognize that meaningful labor requires not only diligence but also moral agency and human connection.

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