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## A Quest for Closure: Stevens's Journey in Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*

"The road of life twists and turns and no two directions are ever the same. Yet our lessons come from the journey, not the destination."

Don Williams's words of wisdom paint a vivid picture of the progress of life and the changes that occur in order to make us stronger, more durable people. In literature, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* produces Stevens, an orderly butler whose constant mission is to serve Darlington Hall to his utmost capabilities. Stevens's stalwart dedication to his work leaves little room for anything else. However, when the new owner of Darlington Hall, Mr. Farraday, gives Stevens the opportunity to take some time off, he decides to take a road trip through the West Country with the purpose of reconnecting with Miss Kenton. Miss Kenton, an old employee of Darlington Hall and friend of Stevens, is the source of many memories for Stevens and is very much a part of the nostalgia of Darlington Hall. As such, Stevens turns his journey into a business trip in order to see if Miss Kenton would like to take up her old position at the manor. In a quest rooted in the discovery of a new sense of "seeing" and an enlightened view of the world, Ishiguro takes the reader on a trip with Stevens as he tackles the questions of his career, namely his service to a "great gentleman." All in all, Stevens's journey forces him to divulge his true feelings to Miss Kenton and to really look deep into his service during the days of Lord Darlington, culminating in his realization of his own faults in dealing with Miss Kenton and Lord Darlington.

On the first day of his journey in Salisbury, Stevens decides to pull over to take in the natural world when he is stopped by an old man sitting before a hill. The old man beckons Stevens to take a hike up the hill and to enjoy the view of the English countryside before it's too late (25). The man's remark catches Stevens off guard, and he finds the comment offensive. Nonetheless, Stevens treks up the hill and realizes that the old man was right about the scenery. In response, Stevens makes the following insightful statement:

It was a fine feeling indeed to be standing up there like that, with the sound of summer all around one and a light breeze on one's face. And I believe it was then, looking on that view, that I began for the first time to adopt a frame of mind appropriate for the journey before me. For it was then that I felt the first healthy flush of anticipation for the many interesting experiences I know these days ahead hold in store for me. And indeed,

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it was then that I felt a new resolve not to be daunted in respect to the one professional task I have entrusted myself with on this trip; that is to say, regarding Miss Kenton and our staffing problems (26).

From the beginning, Stevens recognizes the magnitude of this trip, and makes reference to the fact that it will encompass more than just a settling of staff problems. Stevens's leaving Darlington Hall represents the catalyst for change upon which his journey hinges. Although Stevens see his trip as purely professional before his departure from Darlington Hall, the sight on the hill literally opens his eyes to the splendors of the outside world and what he has to look forward to over the course of the coming days. Furthermore, Stevens's adoption of an appropriate "frame of mind" is an early indication of the impending changes that will result as he begins to examine the pre-World War II events at Darlington Hall, and his reactions to various life-altering events, such as the death of his father, throughout the latter part of the novel.

The question of "greatness" and its relation to the traditional English butler begins to occupy Stevens's mind at the start of his journey. Dignity and greatness become two central issues that Stevens examines while touring the countryside, using examples from his daily interactions with various butlers and gentlemen and ladies of the highest order. Collectively speaking, Stevens looks at the career of his father, and in particular, an incident involving his reserved manner when faced with adverse circumstances. As such, Stevens examines "dignity," and defines it as living up to one's duty day to day with the desire to be unfaltering in dedication and service. Reaching a relative conclusion while driving through Salisbury, Stevens clarifies for the reader that "dignity has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits" (42). Essentially, Stevens's journey is in part an interpersonal session in which he examines the origins of his values and their practical application throughout his life. Nonetheless, Stevens will continue to examine the traits necessary to be of dignified service as he embarks on a quest to reunite with Miss Kenton.

Stevens's relationship with Lord Darlington is solid throughout the entirety of the novel, but as his journey progresses, Stevens begins to examine Lord Darlington's actions during the pre-World War II years. The first mention of Lord Darlington and his downfall is reiterated by Stevens in the following manner:

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A great deal of nonsense has been spoken and written in recent years concerning his lordship and the prominent role he came to play in great affairs, and some utterly ignorant reports have had it that he was motivated by egotism or else arrogance... Whatever may be said about his lordship these days -- and the great majority of it is, as I say, utter nonsense -- I can declare that he was truly a good man at heart, a gentleman through and through, and one I am proud to have given my best years of service to (61).

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Stevens's defense of Lord Darlington and his activities, shrouded in pro-German sentiments, represents his unfaltering fidelity to Lord Darlington's character and motives. Recollections of the conference of 1923 are crucial in understanding Stevens's defense of Lord Darlington, as he tells the reader of Darlington's friendship with Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann, whose deterioration after the war prompts Darlington to side with the Germans as they wish to revitalize their economy with the blessing of the world powers. Darlington's heartfelt feelings for Bremann lead him to believe that the English traditions forbid such a manner of treatment (71). Ultimately, Stevens's clarity comes into question in his retelling of the story, and while discussing Darlington's desire for "justice in the world." Dedication to professionalism clouds Stevens's judgment when examining the crucial moments of discussion and debating at the Darlington Hall conferences.

The "facts of life" discussion led by Stevens with Reginald Cardinal, Lord Darlington's nephew, is a prime example of the sarcasm produced by Ishiguro's writing. Prompted by Lord Darlington to talk with Mr. Cardinal before the start of the conference of 1923, Stevens is pushed into unknown territory as someone who lacks the essential "facts of life" himself. Nonetheless, Stevens gives a speech concerning "the birds and the bees," resulting in Mr. Cardinal's attention being focused on his duties to come at the conference. Much like Stevens, Cardinal is more concerned with his duties than with the outside world, as it were, and Stevens leaves the scene with the whole incident behind him. Consequently, Stevens's desire to continue with his professional duties will prove to be the main inhibitor of his loss of clarity and hindsight in dealing with real-life problems outside of the management of the household, allowing the events of his journey to begin to fill the gaps left by his prior experiences at Darlington Hall.

Professionalism reaches new heights for Stevens upon his father's death and the dismissal of the Jewish staff by Lord Darlington. Stevens's desire to keep the affairs of the household in

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order forces him to miss what could have been his final, heartfelt conversation with a distant father. Nonetheless, Stevens pushes forward with his duties, only to lose the remaining time he has with his father. Similarly, the dismissal of the Jewish staff by Lord Darlington places Stevens in a predicament; however, he proceeds with relieving the girls anyway to continue living up to his professional manner. Resolution of the incident would come with Lord Darlington's regrets about releasing the girls and Stevens conveying to Miss Kenton his disdain for following that particular order. The reminiscences of Stevens prove to be valuable in that we are given a glimpse into his early days and we also see minor changes occurring before we reach any major developments in the novel. However, Stevens's inability to realize the preciousness of time and life proves to be his downfall, and does not come to light until his meeting with Miss Kenton. The mixture of professionalism and dignity is the backbone of Stevens's values and allows him to institute change in keeping with his core values.

The climax of the journey comes with Stevens's meeting with Miss Kenton in Weymouth, which ultimately brings about a true change in his character as a result of his journey. From the beginning of his reunion with Miss Kenton, Stevens possesses a desire to make the most out of the situation and to be more cordial than in years past. Stevens reaches new heights in his social skills by prompting a question about possible abuse, though Miss Kenton responds with a no. However, the conversation continues and Miss Kenton reveals to the reader how she feels about leaving Darlington Hall and the years since by responding in the following manner:

And you get to thinking about a different life, a better life you might have had. For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr. Stevens... After all, there's not turning back the clock now. One can't be forever dwelling on what might have been. One should realize one has as good as most, perhaps better, and be grateful (239).

Miss Kenton's exchange with Stevens opens up his mind to the possibilities that have been laid before him many years past, leaving him only with pressing forth with the future, and the "remains of the day." Stevens's journey reaches its peak with the visit with Miss Kenton, and for the first time in the novel, the true feelings that both characters have are brought to life in words. The exchange with Miss Kenton represents the first time in Stevens's life where he has some closure to a relationship or situation. From the death of his father to the incidents at Darlington Hall, Stevens has been left with his thoughts about dignity and professionalism, never the needed time to take advantage of final opportunities. Darlington Hall represents Stevens's life

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at the end of the novel, an empty shell with bygone memories and forgotten grandeur. As such, Stevens is able to reclaim his final days for himself as he passes into a new mindset after his journey. While sitting on the pier, Stevens tells the reader what advice he has taken from a bystander and says, "Perhaps, then, there is something to his advice that I should cease looking back so much, that I should adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of the remains of the day" (244). Coming into the final chapter of his life, Stevens is given the task of making the best of the remains of the day and after his emotional outpourings with Miss Kenton, Stevens is left with his final task of his life. All in all, Stevens's quest into the countryside is his passageway to an alternate future.

Reaching his final destination, Darlington Hall, Stevens is given his mission to make the best of the "remains of the day," and I feel that the author gives the reader the impression that Stevens is a changed man. As such, the journey in *The Remains of the Day* is a passage through time by which Stevens examines his life and ultimately decides to change before it is too late. Dignity and professionalism can be maintained at a cost considerably less than dedicating one's entire life to work. The "foggy mist" that clouds Stevens's judgment during his early years at Darlington Hall clears up at the end of the novel, allowing a dedicated butler to soak in the pleasantries of life. As Stevens points out, at least Lord Darlington had the luxury of making his own mistakes, proving to be the exact opposite for him as shown throughout his journey. In the end, Stevens's journey forces him to divulge his true feelings to Miss Kenton, culminating in a deep examination of his service to Lord Darlington, ultimately allowing him to realize his faults in dealing with both Miss Kenton and Lord Darlington.

#### Works Cited:

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

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