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Myth and Memory in *Ishiguro*

If *The Remains of the Day* is a modern fairy tale, then Stevens the butler is the knight in shining armor. However, Stevens' heroism lies in his station more than his character, and even then more as a representation of what it means to serve than the service itself. According to Stevens, the very measure of a professional butler is measured by greatness and dignity of character. The character is now infused into the role, and though the butler character can be seen as an archetype with characteristics both innate and immutable, Stevens the man is no more susceptible to bouts of irrational behavior than the next man. So if the man can be corrupted, what happens to the butler? Is his dignity preserved, or has the moral failure of his occupant turned acts of service into acts of enablement? The difference lies in what we choose to acknowledge about ourselves: are we responsible for following the path that's been set before us by higher society or not? By touching on the dangers of unwavering loyalty, the trappings of nostalgia, and the lament of all the roads not taken, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and, to a lesser extent, *Never Let Go* weaponize myth and memory to peel back the role from the person and examine all the complexities found within.

There's a scene early on in the book that illustrates this conflation of character when Stevens is recounting instances where his father displayed great dignity during his career. During one of these occasions, the father takes three drunk men for an afternoon drive at their own request. When their drunken ramblings inevitably turn to insulting Stevens and eventually Mr. Silvers, the lord of the house, Stevens' father stops the car and stands imposingly by until the men admit their overstep. This action, Stevens tells us, is a matter of dignity. Great butlers like

his father will “wear professionalism as a decent gentleman will will his suit” (Ishiguro, 43). There is to be no ‘undressing’ so to speak while a butler is in service. So what should we take from this scene? That Stevens deeply admires his father is made clear, as is his notion of dignity and greatness as it relates to service. But if we look at this scene through the lens of the entire book, then this scene is emblematic of the shadowy conflict between noble intention and cruel reality. Disrespect, when quietly refuted, results in a charming anecdote, like the story Stevens tells about his father; but when that same nobility unknowingly placates evil–that’s where the ejection of personal responsibility comes in, and that’s what we see unfold in Darlington Hall.

While we understand the merit of dignity, a dignity that Stevens’ father exhibits through humility and loyalty, Stevens praising this type of professionalism is soon brought under scrutiny by we the readers as a result of an emotionally detached attitude toward the death of his father and relationship with Miss Kenton.

If we look at Stevens as a knight, then Lord Darlington is his lord, which makes Darlington Hall the castle. And just as a knight is honorbound to protect his lord, Stevens serves Lord Darlington with unwavering loyalty. He is determined to remain dignified at all times, considering that trait to be the essence of a gentleman. He wishes himself more conversational, more witty, anything to be of a greater service to the lord of the house. Certainly this is not how modern people think about themselves in relation to another human being, which makes Stevens’ behavior seem otherworldly, mythical. Stevens embodies his role as a butler the same way a knight remains devoted to his quest to defeat the dragon. Both the butler and the knight never waver in their loyalty because often their role has been fully grafted onto their personality. What they do is who they are. Stevens claims the smallest external influence will cause the “facade to drop” and “reveal the actor underneath” (Ishiguro, 42). Only I think Stevens has trouble

discarding his uniform under any circumstance. After all, he was more concerned about maintaining order at the conference dinner than visiting his dying father's bedside.

There's a wonderful montage in the film version of *The Remains of the Day* that introduces us to the idea of England as a constructed ideal. Stevens is giving a pep talk of sorts to all the staff of Darlington Hall in advance of the arrival of delegates from around the world. We see the table being set and the grounds being trimmed, and over it all we hear Stevens say, "Let them know we are in England, where order and tradition still prevail." This state of being is what literary critic Andrew Bennett would call an 'invention' in his essay "Ishiguro and the Question of England." He goes on to say that any human community like England can only be "like itself" and not "itself" due to the instability inherent in the ever-changing perspectives of its citizenry (Bennett, 23). So when Stevens talks about 'order and tradition' being part and parcel of England's identity, you could say he's inventing an England that matches his experience. Now to say a nation's core values are up to individual interpretation is silly, but it makes sense in Stevens' case because he's been in and around service all his life. All he knows is the life of a butler. His reality has been built around what it means to serve with excellence.

So how does this English myth affect Stevens on a personal level? We already discussed who Stevens wants to be–the perfect butler–but is this who he actually is? Does his butler persona succeed in protecting his emotional core from distraction? I think it does–right up until the end of the novel. Stevens' moment of realization comes when he's sitting on a bus stop bench with Miss Kenton. She shares how she sometimes feels like she made a terrible mistake moving away from Darlington Hall. Miss Kenton goes as far as to wonder aloud about the life she could have had with Stevens before acknowledging that her rightful place is with her husband, and the one shouldn't obsess over all the what if's in life. Stevens' inner reaction to Miss Kenton's words is quite telling. There is a chink in the armor. "At that moment, my heart was breaking," Stevens

writes (Ishiguro, 239). In light of this, it's hard not to wonder about his true motivation for driving to Weymouth. He tells Mr. Farraday that he can solve staffing problems by trying to bring Miss Kenton back to Darlington Hall, but I think a more powerful force is driving Stevens. It could be a love never expressed, or it could be a nostalgia for times past. At the bus stop he gets Miss Kenton to picture Darlington Hall as it used to be, "in the days when there were great gatherings, when it was filled with distinguished visitors" (Ishiguro, 235). That's the way Stevens wants Darlington Hall to be remembered. We see this well in the film where Stevens is looking through a door's viewing hole down a hallway. Miss Kenton is walking towards him, then fades when Stevens opens the door. Whether based in nostalgia or love, it can be argued that Stevens' feelings toward Miss Kenton are tied to an ideal world in which he's surrounded by those he loves and respects, and committed to serving a house at the peak of its prestige.

Earlier I mentioned the conflict between noble intention and cruel reality. Noble intentions, embodied by the representatives of Ishiguro's England, Stevens and Lord Darlington, are very rarely given the chance to redeem themselves when confronted by the cruel reality of heartbreak, regret, and ignorance. This plight is summed up well by Mr. Lewis when he addresses the table of delegates at Lord Darlington's conference. He accuses them of being amateurs. "The days when you could just act on your noble instincts are over," he says. "What you need are not gentlemen politicians but real ones" (Ishiguro, 102). The meaning behind these words is explained later on by Mr. Cardinal. He tells Stevens that Lord Darlington is a "true old English gentleman" (Ishigiro, 223). It's in his nature to offer a hand to help up a defeated enemy. In other words, the reason Lord Darlington is helping Germany get back on their feet after Versailles is because he believes all nations play by the same rules–England's rules, the rules of order and tradition. Lord Darlington is not a cruel man, he is simply naive and ignorant, swallowed whole by the myth of the professional gentleman.

In his essay, “The Perverted Professionalism of The Remains of the Day,” Rob Atkinson poses a question that relates to the issue of service to a person or an idea that goes too far. “Should,” Atkinson asks, “the service be limited by anything other than the principal's will?” (Atkinson, 9). He suggests that it is irresponsible if not immoral for a person to push the concept of service right up to the boundary of the law, paying no attention to the welfare of third parties. One thinks of how amenable Stevens was to the dismissal of two Jewish maids. Service trumped integrity. Going back to Stevens’ moment of realization on the bench after Miss Kenton’s departure, I think Stevens begins to understand the limitations of perfect service. He asks himself where the dignity is in being attached to Lord Darlington’s mistakes by virtue of blind loyalty. All this time, he’s believed he’s been doing something worthwhile. But now that he’s alone, far from his castle, the knight realizes his error. But he is too late. The arrow has already pierced his armor.

At the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), Ishiguro mentions in an interview how he was drawn to write about a butler character because it’s a role everyone participates in to some degree. He says, “We learn to do a little job, and we try to do our little job to the best of our ability.” This relatable portion of Stevens’ character is the heroic part of the book that I think is forgotten amidst all of the messiness at Darlington Hall. Because part of what makes a hero is one’s willingness to serve others. We see that in anyone from World War 2’s Dick Winters to Mother Teresea. Ishiguro goes on to say that “We live in a small world, and we contribute to some bigger world upstairs.”

While this is definitely true and relatable, it is easy to imagine a dark side to this paradigm. Stevens’ years of service to Lord Darlington and later to Mr. Farraday was voluntary, but what happens when ‘the bigger world upstairs’ doesn’t ask for permission before demanding something from you? Such is the way of the world in Ishiguro’s science fiction novel, *Never Let*

Me Go. At no point in the novel is Kathy offered a choice to opt out of the carer/donor bind. She is brought up in Hailsham always with some understanding of her fate. She was both "told and not told" about the service she was created to provide to the human population. Rebellion is never discussed. But the one emotion Kathy does allow herself to feel that you might say is counter-productive to her role as a carer is nostalgia.

In the TIFF interview, Ishiguro says he tells stories through the main characters' memories. This is observable in *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go* where Stevens and Kathy remark upon past events leading up to their current state. I would argue that both narrators occupy similar emotional spheres at the end of their respective narratives, namely a place of longing. Of course, this didn't come as a surprise to us as readers because of how the characters were framed in the narratives. 'The texture of memory,' as Ishiguro puts it, is made clear in the scenes Stevens and Kathy choose to recollect. Through this selective retelling, we see what's important to them and what isn't. What Ishiguro does so well is weave a tapestry of scenes into a 'texture of memory' using specific objects of attachment that Stevens and Kathy refer back to in order to perform or perhaps even weaponize their nostalgia in a way that makes tangible that which could have been or what never can be.

For Kathy, one such object is Judy Bridgewater's *Song After Dark* tape which includes the titular track, "Never Let Me Go." The tape is prominently featured three times throughout her narrative. While at Hailsham, Kathy explains that whenever she heard the tape she'd imagine a woman who had a child after being told she could never have children. "She holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing: "Baby, never let me go . . . " partly because she's so happy, but also because she's so afraid something will happen, that the baby will get ill or be taken away from her" (Ishiguro, 70). In hindsight, I can't help but wonder if this admission is in someway a subconscious lament of her role in society. As a student at Hailsham, Kathy has been

given something a clone was never supposed to have–a normal childhood. But on some level I think she is preparing for the time when it's all going to be ripped away from her.

This idea of the tape being a tangible manifestation of nostalgia is reinforced when she rediscovers the tape at a second hand shop in Norfolk. Tommy is obsessed with finding the tape for her because he secretly loves her instead of Ruth. Kathy says: "If I happen to get the tape out and look at it, it brings back memories of that afternoon in Norfolk every bit as much as it does our Hailsham days" (Ishirugro, 173). That afternoon in Norfolk is meaningful because it marked a time when there was still a possibility in Kathy's mind, however suppressed, of falling in love, getting a deferral, and living a happy life.

Madame's revelatory conversation with Kathy and Tommy marks the third time the tape is mentioned, when she shares her perspective on that time when she oversaw Kathy dancing to the song "Never Let Me Go." Madame imagined Kathy holding onto 'the old world,' a world without all the technological advancements that allowed for clones to exist. "I saw you and it broke my heart" (Ishiguro, 272). In this scene, Kathy is a passive listener; one might expect such an emotional insight to draw out more of a reaction. Instead Kathy recounts that "we hardly discussed our meeting with Miss Emily and Madame on our journey back" (Ishiguro, 272). Life, in the limited form available to her, goes on as usual.

A heartbreaking conversation that does not incite change in the narrator's behavior is a common thread in Ishiguro's works. There is a similar moment in the *Remains of the Day* when Stevens admits to being heartbroken after Miss Kenton's shares that she has thought about the life they could have had together (Ishiguro, 239). Miss Kenton is like Kathy's tape for Stevens; it reminds him of the life he might have had. And like Kathy, Stevens' longing for a different life goes unacknowledged, even to himself.

In her essay "Cruel Optimism," Lauren Berlant writes:

> "Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way." (Berlant, 5)

I would argue that Kathy's tape is her "optimistic attachment" because it enables a private fantasy where she is playing with her old Hailsham friends, or walking around Norfolk with Tommy. Hailsham, then, is her "scene of fantasy." It's the one place where she was given the chance to live free from the burden of her societal role. And ever since the truth of her existence became clear to her, she's always felt inclined to return (though of course this inclination does not spur incisive action). At the end of the novel, Kathy writes, "So maybe on some level, I *am* on the lookout for Hailsham" (Ishiguro, 286). The last image of the book is her imagining Tommy appearing across the old Hailsham field but knowing this place, this fantasy land, is not where she is supposed to be.

Darlington Hall is Stevens' fantasy land. No where else can he inhabit the role of a butler so fully and effectively. However, when Miss Kenton–Stevens' optimistic attachment–departs the hall, Stevens is left alone to deal with the aftermath of Lord Darlington's debacle concerning his Nazi party sympathies. The glory days are gone, and the fantasy is no longer what it once was. "Indeed, you will appreciate that to have served his lordship at Darlington Hall during those years was to come as close to the hub of this world's wheel as one such as I could ever have dreamt" (126). Just as Kathy refuses to let her life at Hailsham go, Stevens is set to return to Darlington Hall at the end of the novel, ruminating over how to grow his wit so as to be of greater service to Mr. Faraday.

For both characters, the loss of an ideal forces them to reconcile their current situation with their past experiences. The result is a mutual disorientation in a world that no longer

supports childhood beliefs or mythic archetypes. So is nostalgia a curse in these instances? A symptom of cruel optimism that enables Kathy and Stevens to continue down their respective paths on the merit of happy memories alone? Perhaps. I suppose the answer would depend on what you think would be more advantageous to your well-being: continuing down the familiar path with a visible trap at the end, or striking out into the unknown forest with possible traps beneath every step. So you could also look at nostalgia like a drug, a distortion of consciousness that takes away the pain of the moment at the expense of stability in the future. Kathy could continue down the familiar path, drugged on memory, and die as all clones do; or she could take a step off the beaten path, revolt, and risk all the traps that are set in her path. Stevens could live out the rest of his days at Darlington Hall, satisfied with the years long ago in which he felt fulfilled; or he could retire and start something new. Whether a curse, or a drug, a crutch, or a guide, the texture of memory works to remind Ishiguro's characters of everything they've lost in a manner that keeps them clinging to the past, afraid to ever let go.

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