

Sense and Sensibility: The Dual Narrative Progression in *The Remains of The Day*

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Abstract:

The Remains of The Day has been recognized as the work that established Kazuo Ishiguro as a first-class writer and the work that best reflects his personal style and narrative features. However, previous studies that mainly focus on his narrative strategy and style have often been limited to the discuss of the plot development, while neglecting the “covert progression” that goes hand in hand with it. Based on the theory of Shen Dan’s “dual narrative progression”, this paper attempts to clarify how the overt plot and covert progression complement and subvert each other to produce deep thematic meaning. In the overt plot, “dignity” is the only thing that the butler attached importance to because of the pressure put on by the social rules, while the undercurrent reveals the collision of sense and sensibility in a patriarchal society, which enriches the character’s image, fills the break in the plot development, and reveals the complex interactions among people.

Keywords:

Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of The Day*, Characterization, Covert progression

1. Introduction

The Remains of The Day, the third novel written by Kazuo Ishiguro, continues his usual style of unfolding from memories without a coherent plot. It weaves Stevens’ experiences of six-day drive to the Southwest and memories of his past life. “For me, plot is just one of the many tools a writer uses to express himself.” [1] At the beginning of his journey, Stevens drew an analogy between the English countryside he encountered along the way and the English butler, pointing out that dignity was what made a great butler, which was the most authoritative criterion for membership in the Hayes Society and a concept Stevens endorsed. The famous British novelist Rushdie also praised Kazuo Ishiguro for raising important questions about “Englishness”, “greatness”, and “dignity”, [2] and the fact that the trip took place after the Suez Canal incident triggered several scholars to analyzed Stevens’ characteristics from the viewpoints of nation, ethnics and society. John and Shaffer critique the British national imaginary self-construction of identity; [3,4] McCombe reveals the decline of the British empire and the rise of the United States; [5] then Gehlawat, Nélis, and Khalaf point out the plight of imperial adherents during the decline of

Britain and the change of the culture. [6,7,8] However, few scholars have analyzed Stevens' characterization in terms of the circumstances of his personal upbringing. Previous studies have been limited to the development of overt plots. Indeed, plots have been a focus in fictional narrative studies since Aristotle. In recent years, however, Shendan has suggested that many narrative works have a dual narrative progression which means there may be a parallel narrative undercurrent behind the overt plot progression called "covert progression". She points out that "the juxtaposition of plot development and covert progression expresses two different thematic meanings, two different characterizations and two contrasting aesthetic values. The excavation of the covert progression requires breaking the interpretive framework since Aristotle and focusing on the two tracks in a work, the two creative positions of the author and the two ideal readers he has in mind." [9] By closely examining *The Remains of The Day*, two tracks can be discovered, and from this new perspective readers can enrich the novel's themes by making up for the shortcomings of previous criticism.

2. The Overt Plot: the Statute of Society

The main plot development of the novel is that Stevens worked for Darlington House for more than thirty years and witnessed the most glorious period of Darlington House during World War I and World War II, during which the illustrious aristocratic house actually became the center of power that had great influence on the general policy of the British Empire, especially foreign policy. However, after World War II, due to Lord Darlington's dishonorable pro-Nazi policies before the war, Darlington House was in decline and Lord Darlington was charged with treason and committed suicide in disgrace. Eventually, Darlington House was sold to an American businessman called Mr. Faraday, and the butler Stevens continued to serve the new owner as part of the historical legacy. The new owner offered Stevens to drive out for five or six days while he was away. Therefore, Stevens decided to take a trip to the southwest of England and visited Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper of Darlington House, hoping to convince her to return to Darlington House, thus solving the problem of staff shortage to make the house function properly. Throughout the trip, the past days frequently came to Stevens' mind, and he continued to reflect on it in order to further his self-awareness and got out of his predicament. *The Remains of The Day* is divided into eight parts and with the exception of the introduction, the other seven parts follow a chronological narrative and are interspersed with Stevens' recollections of past events during the road trip. In the introduction, the protagonist Stevens revealed the reason for the six-day journey to the Southwest as to solve the staffing problem at the house. Readers thus see the changes that occurred in Darlington House after the American takeover, which also confirmed the shift of world sovereignty from Britain to America and the change of cultures after World War II. Stevens lost control of the status quo, so he proposed to retrieve Miss Kenton in order to regain control of the situation. In this chapter, the author reveals the most prominent characteristic of Stevens: the desire to control others. On the surface of the plot, the desire for control is consistent with the socially defined status of a steward, which represents discipline and order. In Stevens' eyes, a butler was like a general, and a pantry was like a command in a battle, where all personnel should follow orders and all objects should be arranged neatly according to their own will; a qualified English butler should know about dress, language, etiquette, and professional skills while a great butler should also possess a high dignity commensurate with his position, and "dignity" means hiding personal emotion. The author thus portrays a typical

English gentleman: polite and orderly, emotionally repressed, even hypocritical. Since the 18th century, learning to be a gentleman had been popular because of the pursuit of elegance. Although Stevens does not belong to the middle class, he served Lord Darlington and repeatedly emphasized that he should maintain a social status and appearance commensurate with it. He was polite, knew how to dress himself, and made full use of the discourse of cultural capital to arm himself.

In Stevens' reminiscences, the reader can see the efforts he made in dress, language, and professionalism. Dress was a symbol of dignity and professionalism for the English butler, and he knew how to dress appropriately without crossing class boundaries, always maintaining a look that was appropriate to his profession. In considering matters related to the whole journey, Stevens spent a lot of words describing his requirements for out-of-town clothing, and at the same time considered on forming Miss Kenton of his visit, preparing the clothing, and taking care of the housework as the three major preparations to be made before the trip. While enjoying the stunning scenery at Mortime's Pond, he passed up the opportunity to experience the unique charm of the landscape because he could not bear to get his costume covered in mud. And in the end, he was also discouraged by the threat to his costume when he was lost and looking for a way out. He even tied "dignity" to dress, believing that when stimulated, English butlers would not undress while the butlers in other countries would rip off their formal clothes and shirts and run around. Stevens did not rely on physical features to distinguish people, but rather identified class through their clothing: peasant women in aprons, farmers in wellington boots, retired orderlies in shirts and gentlemen in costumes. Stevens also implied political discourse in clothing. It is well known that the British shows respect through wearing formal dress, but M. Dupont who had the power to decide the situation at the meeting only wore a vacation suit and looked relaxed, which revealed that he considered the meeting only as part of a pleasure trip and paid no attention to it.

The discourse of cultural capital also contributes to shaping Stevens as a gentleman. Even though he did not need to use much discourse at home, he was identified as a gentleman on his travel because of it. He read novels to maintain and improve his command of English and admitted that this generation of butlers had spent so much time and effort training a standard accent. Stevens did not need to maintain his self-image in everyday conversation as the old lady in Cranford Town and Emma did but only in front of his staff where Stevens spoke as if he were a general preparing for a meeting, which reminded readers of the morale-boosting and inspiring speech delivered by Henry V before the Battle of Agincourt. Stevens' mastery of language is also evident in his ability to analyze words. During the first meeting, he can identify Lord Darlington's speeches as being emotionally resonant and Lord David's as being more technical. Also Stevens was inclined to use formal words when telling stories. For example, on the night that the Taylors took him in, Stevens used "ascertain" to mean find out their background which was a formal term meaning to find out the true or correct information about something. The next day when he left, he wanted to express his gratitude and also used "remuneration" to express his thankfulness, as if the connection between them is something mechanical. In Oxford Dictionary "remuneration" means "(formal) an amount of money that is paid to sb. for the work they have". The discourse of Stevens' cultural capital lacked the element of personal feelings, and although it shaped him as a gentleman, it also suppressed his personal feelings.

In addition to the emphasis on clothing and language, Stevens also focused on the professional skills he was expected to have, such as for the cleaning of silver, which in the early 1920s “served as a public index of a house’s standards..... Housekeepers up and down the country, under pressure from their employers, were focusing their minds on the question of silver-polishing.”, [10] and through silver Stevens was also praised by George Bernard Shaw and the German ambassador to Britain, thus considering himself to have contributed more or less to the great cause. Stevens went so far as to train flirting as an occupational skill after the change of ownership because his American hosts always flirted with him. He listened to radio programs to gain experience, designed training programs for himself, and applied them in real life. Although the results he achieved were never as good as he would have wished, he believed that “there is no reason to suppose this is not an area in which I will become proficient given time and practice”. [10] His dedication to professional excellence fits the image of what one might expect of a British butler.

Clothing, language, and professional skills are only the basic qualities of a butler; to be a great butler, Stevens also needs to pursue the concept of “dignity” proposed by the Hayes Society, the highest standard in the profession. Kazuo Ishiguro explained Stevens’ pursuit of “dignity” as “to turn oneself into some kind of animal, without any feelings or things that would destroy professionalism.” [1] On the surface, Stevens’ habit of controlling all people and things around him, even his own emotions due to professional standards and social regulations, which deprives him of affection and love while performing his duties during the two international conferences; however, the covert progression tells the reader that there is more to Stevens’ emotional repression than that.

3. The Covert progression: the Collision of Sense and Sensibility

The overt plot reveals that social rules and professional pursuits shape Stevens’ emotionally repressed character traits, but by examining the text, I found that under the surface of social rules and professional standards, the oppression of Stevens by patriarchal power also implicitly builds his personality. The discipline of his father as well as the absence of his mother cause Stevens to learn to look at things around him rationally, but with the disintegration of patriarchal power and the emergence of female power around him, Stevens’ inner emotions are awakened and his sense is impacted, allowing him to learn to face and grow in his life experience.

At the beginning of the novel, Stevens implied that he was an objective observer with a rational view of “dignity” and believed that “dignity” needed to be acquired and described Graham’s opposite opinion “endowed by nature” as “feminine beauty”, [10] thus endowing the two different views with different gender, with acquired effort being a male quality. As a matter of fact, his view of “dignity” was derived from his father rather than from independent thinking. Stevens often cited his father’s words and examples when discussing what dignity was. Whether in childhood, adolescence or as a footman, his father repeatedly instilled his own view of dignity into Stevens’ mind until it was ingrained in it. The reason why Stevens accepted his father’s views without judgments because he was actually oppressed by patriarchal authority during his upbringing, as theorist Hodge argues, “It is in the form of the family that most children first learn the meaning and practice of hierarchy and authoritative rule. It is here that they learn to accept group oppression of them as non-adults and learn theories of male supremacy and group oppression of women.” [11] The belief in male supremacy caused Stevens to be reluctant to acknowledge his father’s declining

abilities and to project his respect for him onto other servants, and the scene of his father's stroke was like attending some kind of solemn ceremony. He set his father's career as an example, believing that "dignity means not showing emotion", [1] and he also maintained a state of emotional repression in his personal life, which was by no means merely the result of Stevens' own choice, but rather a continuation of the way his father treated him as a child. Lacking intimate conversation with his father, Stevens was embarrassed when he needed to convey Lord's decisions and used the third person to refer to his father in the speech. His father was also extremely indifferent to his feelings, full of impatience and concerned only with Stevens' work problems. British sociologist Esther Dermott argues that the emotional bond between father and son is not as strong as that between mother and son, [12] and the absence of female characters further highlights the conflict between the father and the son. In the text, Sir David entrusted Lord Darlington to explain to his son, young Cardinal, about the sexuality between men and women while Lord Darlington passed the responsibility to Stevens who was set as a surrogate father by the author in the context. These three fathers were all unable to carry out intimate dialogue with their sons, ultimately leading to the failure of the task.

However, as the plot develops further, the gradual disintegration of patriarchy and the participation of female characters made Stevens' world more colorful but not only black and white. In the process of his father's aging and death, the author showed the disintegration of the patriarchy through two images-the attic and the cell and Stevens gradually broke away from patriarchal control and became a man with sensibility. When his father fell ill in bed during the first major international conference held at Darlington Hall, Stevens repeatedly chanted "I'm so glad you're feeling better now" as a robot in the face of his father's confession, and then returned to the smoking room for work-related reasons. The death of his father was a tribulation and he had to suppress his emotions so that his work was not disturbed. He was like getting lost in a forest and in order to come out of it he had to recover from the disorder and always be rational. Even though he tried to be sensible, the readers can still glimpse his inner emotions when he wended his way through those gentlemen and when he noticed young Cardinal in such a difficult situation. This subplot between Stevens and young Cardinal seemed not advance the plot from an overt standpoint, but when examined from a covert progression, it reflected Stevens' silent rebellion against patriarchy. In the text Stevens failed as a surrogate father, but the exploration of nature could reveal feminine overtones, "In ecofeminist theory, metaphors between women and nature are prevalent; women are considered closer to nature than men, and nature is first and foremost metaphorically portrayed as a female mother." [13] The addition of nature as a mother figure made the temporary father-son relationship less rigid and stereotypical and more tender and caring. Stevens gradually felt that father and son should not be like superior and subordinate but should be as equal as friends and full of caring. Stevens' postwar journey was compared as a spiritual pilgrimage by Liu Lu, [14] where the guide led him to a viewpoint, a secluded pond, a lonely village, etc., so that he could "grasp life and contemplate the value of existence" in the "time that has passed", [15] and the landscape along the way "breaks the stronghold of anthropocentrism", [16] allowing Stevens to return to nature, no longer centering on royalty and ancient families that he recognized as the center of the wheel. At the same time, baptized by the beauty of the English countryside, Stevens re-examined his relationship with his father with sensibility but not sense. The sight of his father wandering to and fro in front of the gazebo remained in his mind, and as he remembered Miss Kenton witnessing this scene, he said, "No doubt, she was feeling a

certain sense of guilt”. [10] The novel was told from a limited first-person perspective, with Stevens unable to know Miss Kenton’s emotions. He projected his emotions onto Miss Kenton to conceal his true feelings. At the same time, he employed an encounter during the trip to implicitly express the emotion of remorse. In the overt plot, Stevens drove his car in a low speed, so he missed the hen which was spared from its destiny of death while seen it from the covert plot, he then suddenly turned to tell the death of his father was not an accident. Kazuo Ishiguro once said the butler is wise, “Why he says these things, and why he mentions a particular topic at a particular time, it is not random, it is under the control of things he does not say.” [1] From the connection between these two events, the readers can be seen his guilt over the death of his father for that he could have saved his father’s life if he let his father stop and rest. However, he did not stop to be with his father in the first place because he was busy with an international conference, thus hastening his death.

The patriarchal culture is also reflected in Stevens’ interactions with the female characters. Stevens explained before his journey that he visited Miss Kenton to solve a staffing problem and he read Miss Kenton’s letter over and over again as a way to speculate whether she would be willing to come back to take up her position. Several descriptions in the text led the reader to speculate that Stevens’ true purpose is not quite the same, but it was still impossible to guess what Stevens would ask at parting “I simply wondered if you were being ill-treated in some way. Forgive me, but as I say, it is something that has worried me for some time. I would feel foolish had I come all this way and seen you and not at least asked you.” [10] The real question was slightly more abrupt, as Jill Allwood in her book *French Feminism - Gender and Violence in Contemporary Theory*, analyzes the various motives for male violence against women, pointing out that the deepest cause of male violence is the tacit approval and even encouragement of male violence by patriarchal culture. [17] Stevens was worried about Miss Kenton’s personal safety, not only because of Miss Kenton’s repeated runaways, but also because of his own reflection and distrust of the patriarchal society. In Stevens’ initial encounter with Miss Kenton, he remained the embodiment of reason and order. Stevens tamed her by controlling her words, actions and unwarranted accusations, but does not succeed in shaping her into a regimented body; instead, Miss Kenton used her feminine strength to gradually convert Stevens. Stevens was so set in his ways that even his pantry was bare, dark and cold. Soon after joining the team, Miss Kenton tried to arrange flowers in the damp room to brighten it and it was here that Stevens first sensed the feeling of love during the book grabbing process with Miss Kenton; when Stevens’ father died, she replaced Stevens at his bedside and played the role of a woman who cared for the patient; Stevens mentioned that he went to Miss Kenton’s sitting room for a cup of hot cocoa after work every day and he repeatedly emphasized that these were just about the work, but in fact his relationship with Miss Kenton at this time was not quite like this, he would also uncharacteristically comfort Miss Kenton when she was upset by the maid’s elopement. Nevertheless, he still tried to keep his sanity at work and fought tenaciously against his inner feelings. When dismissing the Jewish maid, Stevens followed Lord Darlington’s wishes and didn’t reveal any of his true feelings even in the midst of Miss Kenton’s sadness, leaving her feeling isolated. When Miss Kenton’s promise of marriage conflicted with the second international conference, he still put his career first, but the scene of Miss Kenton crying behind the door stayed inside him and stirred up a burst of love that he was afraid to admit. During this journey, he also began to reflect on the “turning point” that caused them to go their separate ways only to lament that “render whole dreams forever irredeemable”. [10]

“During the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England, patriarchy arose to accommodate the need for order and stability Patriarchy contributed to the formation of a relatively stable social order in England in the 16th and 17th centuries, which was one of the important factors in England’s pioneering transition from feudalism to capitalism.” [18] The metaphorical discourse of patriarchy’s involvement in constructing order is spread throughout the text, resulting in the characters’ rational restraint in dealing with others, but as the times progress, traditions change, patriarchy disintegrates and female power rises, the main character Stevens begins to know himself and gains the power of warmth in the collision of sense and sensibility again and again.

4. Conclusions

The covert progression and overt plot contrast and complement each other, enriching the deep reasons behind the characters’ images. In the covert progression, the writer writes about the complex and universal character relationship between Stevens and his father through subtleties, which makes the reader react to the plot development in a more complex way. The plot is a series of stories about the role of Stevens in a patriarchal culture and the regrets he has left behind. Because the plot development highlights Stevens’ emotionally repressed nature, previous interpretations have focused more on the English butler’s ethnic and historical environment than on his upbringing, by looking only at the overt plot development. The implicit plot allows the reader to see the power of emotion and to know that the warmth between people is the most solid cornerstone of the human spirit.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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