

## THIS IS A GREAT MYTH! – ENGLISHNESS AND THE IMAGE OF THE BUTLER IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S THE REMAINS OF THE DAY

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*Abstract: Present paper dissects the problematic of Englishness and analyzes the quintessentially English image of the butler. The parodies of Englishness in the novel are well epitomized by the pastoral landscape of English countryside, the decaying manor house and continuous allusions to Victorian values. Our main focus is on questioning the validity of Victorian tenets pervading the contemporary British society that are personified by Stevens' anachronistic character.*

*Keywords: Englishness, butler, nostalgia, greatness, Victorian tenets*

*The Remains of the Day* can be interpreted as an allegory illustrating the fading glory of the British Empire. Ishiguro, ridicules, to put it mildly, the concept of Englishness and questions the validity of Victorian value systems that numb the collective mind. The parodies of Englishness in the novel are well epitomized by the pastoral landscape of English countryside, the decaying manor house and continuous allusions to Victorian values. Indeed, the novel seems to set as a focal critical aim the interrogation of nostalgic manifestos that nurture a high degree of superiority complex in the English/ British society. The writer, Kazuo Ishiguro contends in a very straightforward manner in a rather harsh statement on the novel's objectives:

The Remains of the Day is not an England that I believe ever existed. What I'm trying to do...is to actually rework a particular myth about a certain kind of England. Sleepy, beautiful villages with very polite people and butlers and people taking tea on the lawn...The mythical landscape of this sort of England, to a large degree, is harmless nostalgia for a time that didn't exist. The other side of this, however, is that it is used as a political tool. Away of bashing anybody who tries to spoil this Garden of Eden. This can be brought out by the left or right, but usually it is the political right who say England was this beautiful place before the trade unions tried to make it more egalitarian or before the immigrants started to come or before the promiscuous age of the '60s came and ruined everything (Vorda and Herzinger "An Interview" 14-15).

*Remains* protests against the ways in which the stereotypical splendor of upper class milieu and over romanticized landscape are considered to be the embodiments of fundamental Englishness. The writer does have an aversion against the prelapsarian visions of an utopist England burnt on the collective psyche, which visions cannot be reconciled with the proceeds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: immigrants, the counter-culture movement and trade unions. Ishiguro deliberately ponders upon the novel's myth defying character with specific references made on the 'shadowy' side of nostalgia's predominance:

I wished to set this book in a mythical landscape, which to a certain extent resembled that mythical version of England that is peddled in the nostalgia industry at the moment. This idea of England, this green, pleasant place of leafy lanes and grand country houses and butlers and tea on the lawn, cricket - this vision of England that actually does play a large role in the political imaginations of a lot of people, not just British people but people around the world...I felt it was a perfectly reasonable mission on my part to set out to slightly redefine that mythical, cosy England, to say that there is a shadowy side to it. In a way I wanted to rewrite P.G. Wodehouse with a serious political dimension (Kelman "Ishiguro in Toronto" 73).

The novel operates largely as socio-political apologue that holds a thwarted mirror not only against the contemporary, 'greatness-restoring' Thatcherite administration but also against the criticisms that failed to interpret a novel as anything else but a quintessentially English, bucolic dream. Patrick Wright suggests that the 'past' proposed by the Tory government of the period was one step ahead of the present and existed "as an accomplished presence in public understanding. In this sense it is written into present social reality, not just implicitly as residue, precedent or custom and practice, but explicitly as itself - as History, National Heritage and Tradition" (142). Ishiguro makes an attempt to deconstruct Wright's theory as it rejects the idea of seeking shelter in the past in order to conserve a decaying era in the present's collective psyche. In this paper the main focus falls on the novel's demystificatory mission, on nostalgia and on the questioning of English commonplaces' validity that emerge in the narrative.

In order to appreciate the myth defying aspect of the novel it is inevitable to dissect the term 'great' that served as a guiding principle behind the conservative nationalism of the time. Margaret Thatcher in her 1978-79 general election campaign marched for the restoration of 'Great' to Britain, a catchy phrase that remained her motto in the 1987 election campaign as well, when she promised to restore 'Victorian' values for the conservative Britons. According to Gilroy the main concept behind Thatcher's policies was to harbor enmity against immigrants, organized labor and counter culture by promising the electors -exhausted by the previous decades' historical and economical hardships- the vanished splendor of the Victorian golden-age. "The theme of patriotism...was a major feature of the campaign. The Labour party pleaded for Britain to heal its deep internal divisions..., whereas the Conservatives underlined their success in 'putting the Great back into Britain'...this language made no overt reference to race, but it acquired racial referents" (Gilroy 268). Kobena Mercer reflects upon the Thatcherite propaganda as she appraisingly remarks:

Combination of racism, nationalism and populism ...the predominant framework of the imagined community in which the 'collective will' is constructed - 'it's great to be Great again', as the 1987 Tory election slogan put it...the Falklands War and Royal Weddings, Victorian values and Raj nostalgia movies are all recycled in the Great British heritage industry, and not just for the benefit of Japanese or American tourists either" (53).

Sim states that the term 'great' is assiduously analyzed in *Remains* - this occurring due to the fact that the novel's main story is centered on Stevens' re-evaluation of his lifetime dedication to a principle of greatness. He further argues that the above mentioned commitment is the most striking in two important passages right at the start of Steven's motorcar journey. I do agree with Sim when he suggests that for him the above mentioned

two passages contain ‘in an embryonic form’ the novels anti-pastoral and essentially deconstructing aspect (190). In the first passage Stevens marvels at the greatness of view of the English country side and contemplates at the beauty offered by England:

Now I am quite prepared to believe that other countries can offer more obviously spectacular scenery...but I will nevertheless hazard this with some confidence: the English landscape at its finest...possesses a quality that the landscape of other nations, however more superficially dramatic, inevitably fail to possess. It is, I believe, a quality that will mark out the English landscape to any objective observer as the most deeply satisfying in the world, and this quality is probably best summed up by the term ‘greatness’...We call this land of ours Great Britain, and there may be those who believe this a somewhat immodest practice... And yet, what precisely is this ‘greatness’. Just where, or in what, does it lie? ... I would say that it is the very *lack* of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart. What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint. In comparison, the sorts of sights offered in such places as Africa and America, though undoubtedly very exciting, would I am sure strike the objective observer as inferior on account of their unseemly demonstrativeness (Ishiguro 28-29).

The excerpt subtly alludes to the Victorian and imperial amplitude, in spite of the fact that Stevens does not elaborate too much on the grandeur of the scenery claiming that one gets to be moved by the greatness as soon as he or she glances the landscape (Ishiguro 28). Moreover, Africa’s and America’s spectacular natural heritage is utterly inferior to the views of ‘great’ Britain. Important to mention, that Stevens makes his judgments based upon secondary sources (encyclopedia, National Geographic Magazine) thus his views simply become “forged by imagination” (Benedict qtd. in Ti-yang 2). Sim continues by mentioning that Stevens’ agitated praising of the English scenery is basically a projection of a desperate need to support a loosening self-image. It is crucial to mention that for Stevens, the issue of Britain’s ‘greatness’ bears close resemblance to what makes a butler ‘great’(192).

It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants. I tend to believe this is true. Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race is capable of. Continentals — and by and large the Celts, as you will no doubt agree — are as a rule unable to control themselves in moments of strong emotion, and are thus unable to maintain a professional demeanour other than in the least challenging of situations. In a word, ‘dignity’ is beyond such persons. We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman (Ishiguro 43).

Curiously enough, Stevens conjugates the national landscape and an implicit national character superior to other “breeds incapable of...emotional restraint” (Ishiguro 43), so his hilltop manifestos become the sad mementos of the previously discussed Thatcherite identity politics. The paradoxical idea of the English landscape attaining ‘greatness’ from a simultaneous ‘lack’ when compared to African and American topography, accurately depicts

the psychological eccentricities of post-war imperial nostalgia. It exemplifies how the spirit of the age granted 'greatness' to the British as remarkable epigones of the empire-building trailblazers, a move that excludes and sabotages the emergence of other ethnicities and new identities (Sim 193-194).

Peter Bishop argues that those various tropes of English national identity, like that of island, locality, village, cottage or garden, can be gathered under the term of "hidden valley" (134). "Each of these images of place, the hidden valleys of Englishness - island, locality, village, cottage, garden - offered a gradient down which sentiment could slide into reveries about racial origins, nostalgic longings, and primal renewal. But from another perspective, each of these places similarly opened up to the wider global vistas of imagined English greatness" (Bishop 134). Stevens' ideas and musings of an "island untouched by the landscape and subjects it dominated" (Gikandi 86), his train of thoughts that links the land and the national majority illustrate and justify Ishiguro's fears of a "shadowy" facet of a "mythical, cozy England" (Kelman 73-74).

Class snobbery, heritage consumerism are at their best portrayed via Darlington Hall in the novel. The manor house is presented through Stevens' disappointed spectrum of appreciation, albeit his representations clearly show how deeply the myth of the stately-home nostalgia penetrated not only his conscious, but allegorically the collective English psyche as well. David Cannadine wonders how is it possible that the "country-house nostalgia" can burn so devastatingly in a "ferocious, uncritical and seemingly incurable vigour" in national mind, when that environment practices an utterly exclusivist ideology towards the lower classes (Cannadine qtd. in Petry 105). He further denotes that: "the stately-home world that most of us never knew...becomes the world we ourselves have lost, and thus the world we desperately want to find once more: the only paradise we seek to regain is the one which was never ours to lose in the first place" (105). Gill, however, has a different opinion: in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, the English manor house "is obviously much more than a literal setting: it is the chosen emblem of what the author considers humane order and enduring values, a microcosm which has the advantage of being public and familiar" (14).

In the light of the above mentioned approaches, the fact that Ishiguro inserts the fallible Lord Darlington and his anachronistic servant, Stevens into a 'manor-house' setting underscores the author's aim to take apart a myth. Upper class elitist exclusivity is blatantly obvious if we consider Stevens' status as a paid servant in the household: he is closed out of the aristocratic milieu propagated by Darlington Hall, whereas his only duty is to serve and to subdue his whole life to the maintenance of decaying value system. Paradoxically, he becomes the spokesman of an absurd entity that clearly denies the entrance in the secluded world it represents. Nigel Dennis has the right approach to manor house nostalgia when he satirically remarks that:

This sort of house was once a heart and centre of the national identity. A whole world lived in relation to it. Millions knew who they were by reference to it. Hundreds of thousands look back to it, and not only to grieve for its passing but still depend on it, non-existent though it is, to tell them who they are. Thousands who never knew it are taught every day to cherish its memory and to believe that without it no man will be able to tell his whereabouts again. It hangs on men's neck like a millstone of memory; carrying it, and looking back on its associations, they stumble indignantly backwards into the future, confident that man's self-knowledge is gone forever (Dennis qtd. in Tom Nairn 109-110).

I highly disagree with Virginia C. Kenny who views the English country house as an allegory of civility and benevolent manifestation of might and potency: “The country-house ethos had the greater efficacy as a unifying metaphor because its setting - the country-house itself - was so palpably a functioning entity, bearing witness to the reality of the fusion of past, present and future social values in an ever changing but seemingly unbreakable continuum” (204). Raymond Williams has a different and more realistic take on the issue when he suggests that perceiving country-house nostalgia as the essence of English national life is certainly a mistake, it distracts the attention from the less attractive segments of history: class struggles, privatization and financial hardships and creates an image that is definitely appealing but untrue, “ a class England in which only certain histories matter” (180): “It is fashionable to admire these extraordinarily numerous houses: the extended manors, the neo-classical mansions, that lie so close in rural Britain. ..But stand at any point and look at that land. Look at what those fields, those streams, those woods even today produce” (105). He further explains by raising awareness:

Think it through as labour and see how long and systematic the exploitation and seizure must have been, to rear that many houses, on that scale. See by contrast what any ancient isolated farm, in uncounted generations of labour, has managed to become, by the efforts of any single real family, however prolonged. And then turn and look at what these other ‘families’, these systematic owners, have accumulated and arrogantly declared ( Williams 105).

In the novel Stevens is forced to painfully acknowledge that his very much idolized and appreciated “systematic owner” is a traitor from national politics’ perspective, albeit his lifelong commitment to his master and the aristocratic values that Darlington represents numb Stevens’ clear judgment. *Remains’* intellectual tragedy lies embedded in this dramatic awakening which echoes the above quoted commentators’ theories: history as such ought not to be falsified by nostalgic cravings. Stevens’ humiliation by one of Darlington’s guests (Darlington fails to make any attempt to prevent it) just further deepens the gap between the real life phenomena of class division/humiliation and the middle-class fantasies, largely responsible for the popularity of an ethereal manor-house nostalgia.

The butler is a blind adherent to Victorian values both in his behavior and life conduct. His self – denial (he chooses duty over personal matters two times, both choices change the direction of his life for the worse), his attitude and language are a sad parody of the upper classes. His whole persona imbued with Victorian longing is nothing more than Ishiguro’s way of drawing attention to the Thatcherite propagation of Victorian values in the 1980’s; as Peter Jenkins points out: “Victorian values made their first appearance in the repertoire of Thatcherism” ( 66). Via Stevens’ image Ishiguro demonstrates the less appealing sides of Victorian moral doctrines, which the conservative Thatcherite or any other political propaganda tries to hide. Strongman on the other hand argues that through Stevens, Ishiguro “parodies, celebrates, ironises, and salutes the notion of an increasingly displaced parochial gentlemanly type. His novel is one of assumed and wry nationalism that ironises the anachronistic character of the British imperial era. The world of Stevens is over and the novel recaptures a whimsical and nostalgic view of this...” (210). The events are portrayed solely from Stevens’ subjective and unreliable narrative angle and render the “outward speech and inner thoughts indistinguishable” (Strongman 210-211), while his detached and circumlocutory narrative tone is interpreted by Galene Strawson as “plonking but catching, sub-Jeevesian, PC Plod Witness Box English” (Strawson qtd. in Strongman 210). Applying Homi Bhabha’s notion of stereotype, Westerman claims that Stevens becomes a mere caricature of the English butler primarily because he overtly identifies with his role

(Westerman qtd in Barron 3). Stevens invests huge efforts into maintaining the perished imperial value system and considers himself to be a significant pillar of this 'machinery', however his conservation attempts become futile and ridiculous as the real substance of Englishness and imperialism have long been frittered away.

Presenting another facet of Englishness via the analysis of a character that is so anachronistic and breached, calls for a fresh theoretical perspective. Instead of exclusively applying the evident and, without a doubt, relevant colonial interpretation I would like to opt for the presentation of a new angle. Seonjoo Park applies a Bakhtinian reading on the novel, an approach that provides a reliable insight into the specific methods by which Ishiguro deconstructs and redefines the national signifier of "Englishness" (47). I would like to follow his train of thoughts when discussing Englishness from Stevens' perspective, as his narrative further deconstructs the stereotypical perception of this cultural signifier. Park applies the Bakhtinian concept of "parodic stylization" as this theory opens up the closed entity of Englishness (Bakhtin qtd in Park 47). Bakhtin develops the notion of "stylization", which refers to the conscious imitation of a certain style, the main aim of the device being the exploration of dialogical relations between the said and unsaid; more specifically, finding the hidden ideology through the act of borrowing and imitating is the key task (Bakhtin qtd. in Park 47).

Stevens skillfully reproduces images, languages and value systems that shore up the grandiosity of Englishness, however his narrative and persona lead the reader towards a conclusion that is entirely different from the narrator's aspirations. Stevens is obsessed to stylize himself after the notion of a quintessential English gentleman, which according to him is the embodiment of the spirit of Englishness in its purest form (Park 48). For instance: he chooses his clothes with great care and in his linguistic manifestations he limits himself to the customs of the stiff upper-lip. Many people he meets on his motor car journey take him to be a gentleman. The Salisbury landlady considers him "a grand visitor" due to his Ford and "the high quality of the suit" he wears (Ishiguro 26). At Moscombe Stevens takes for granted the villagers' hailing welcome –"it's a privilege to have a gentleman like yourself in Moscombe, sir" (Ishiguro 183) and gracefully replies in a condescending manner: "I assure you the privilege is mine" (183). Park argues that: "when a humble servant like Stevens articulates the dignified stylization of 'great' Englishness, there is an undeniable sense of displacement between the representing and the represented voice. Such highly stylized language, coming from a distinctly unheroic character, naturally takes on a mock-heroic tone throughout the novel" (48). Stevens further aggravates and confirms this idea when claiming that: "we English have an important advantage over foreigners in [emotional restraint] and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman" (Ishiguro 43). Park argues that Stevens seems to propose the butler as a main representative of England, characterizing thus England as an 'empire of butlers', instead of his original intention of emphasizing English superiority over other nationalities (48).

I believe that the above argumentation might seem farfetched, but if we take into account that Stevens is extremely confused in a rapidly changing era, Park's theory gains validity. In Stevens' mind the role of the butler and the picture of the English gentleman are essentially mixed up: he is a servant, but in the back of his mind he is very keen on being regarded as a gentleman. He takes delight in the occasions when he has the chance to 'fool' his 'audience', whom he actually looks down on. His whole persona is imbued with upper class, nationalist pathos that lacks any kind of rational judgment; the constant glorification of upper class ideology and national ethos eventually lead Stevens to a breaching point when he has to realize how the socio-political climate has changed and he is forced to formulate a new self-image.

Park takes advantage of the fact that Bakhtin is very much engaged with the issue of alterity; he denotes that in Stevens' stylized narrative lies an essential fear of the existence of the other; Stevens' obsessive attempts to keep up a dignified self-image that suit the national ethos only draw the attention to what he tries so diligently to exclude from his stylization (49). Bakhtin suggests that: "We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fibre to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person" (Bakhtin qtd in Park). All those things that Stevens terms to be 'other', namely the tiger killed by the anecdotic English butler, India where the ominous episode occurred, Africa and America and his love for Miss Kenton, are to be civilized and omitted from the stylization. Stevens struggles to exclude them but the hidden threat that they may cross the boundary and filter into his stylization is still present. As a result, Stevens' compulsive mystification of a national and personal ethos expose oppressed conversation with the other (Park 50).

Agnel Barron has a more 'enduring' approach to Stevens as she reflects on the emotional and also on the psychological sides of being a butler. Barron argues that Stevens is unconsciously engaged in playing a role. He nurtures a performative approach primarily to his work as a butler which is symbolized by his maniacal way of attiring himself -he tellingly calls his garment his "costume" (Barron 2). For Stevens, being a butler is very similar to playing a part that must be maintained at any cost at all times, only when in absolute solitude can this role be dropped; identifying with the role he plays is of utmost importance in order to be truly professional (Barron 2). He compares 'great' butlers with poor ones when he makes the following remark:

Lesser butlers will abandon their professional being for the private one at the least provocation. For such persons, being a butler is like playing some pantomime role; ... and the façade will drop off to reveal the actor underneath. The great butlers.... wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstances tear it off him in the public gaze... (Ishiguro 43)

The fact that Stevens over identifies himself with his job as a butler leads to "his emotional repression, his objectification and his total lack of professional as well as personal agency" (Barron 2), albeit Tamaya notes that the British upper class propagated role playing and that "a crucial element of such 'acting' is the rigorous submission of the private self to the demands of the public persona" (48). Dignity becomes a catchphrase when analyzing Stevens; in his perception dignity is a key factor that distinguishes a 'great' butler from a poor one and rather mistakenly he accommodates the notion of dignity with graceful behavior under pressing circumstances. Susie O'Brian claims that Stevens' idea of dignity equates the "Victorian values-formality, repression, and self-effacement" and "is predicated on surrendering the dictates of individual conscience and 'natural' human feeling to the authority of a rigidly (if arbitrarily) stratified social hierarchy" (788-790).

Stevens' emotional shortcomings are underscored by his alienated connection with his father and with the platonic love of his life, Miss Kenton, Darlington Hall's housekeeper, who yields consent to marry a less agreeable candidate after Stevens fails to acknowledge the mutual attraction between them. Stevens places proficiency above everything, no wonder that he views marriage as a distracting force. Barron suggests, and it is perfectly safe to agree with her, that: "what Stevens considers to be dignity is revealed to be an obsequious servility devoid of self-respect" (5). As a moral one can recognize that Stevens literally wasted his life;

he acknowledges it at the end of his motorcar journey in his lament: "I can't even say I made my own mistakes... what dignity is there in that?" (Ishiguro 243).

To conclude with, one of the most remarkable features of *Remains* is that it refuses to celebrate a pseudo-reality, it does not prettify the untrue splendor of a lost era. Defying sacred myths is a mission that Ishiguro skillfully accomplished. He is not afraid to criticize the national culture and label it, I dare say, xenophobic, overtly nostalgic and blind. *Remains* is an expose' of a nation choking of post imperial melancholy. For those individuals, unable to overcome the decadence of a former empire and to leave behind the false images of Englishness, coming to term with the harshness of contemporary reality and the real picture of themselves will be a very difficult venture.

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**I.Boldea, C. Sigmirean, D.-M.Buda**

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