

Avery Stanley

English 104LC

Professor Boscagli- TA Michael Parra

March 20, 2024

Human Relationships in *The Remains of the Day*

Within Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Mr. Stevens is portrayed as the physical embodiment of regret and isolation as he prioritizes his idea of a professional career over the relationships within his life. As Stevens takes stock of his life throughout the text, analyzing moments of accomplishment, failure, and nostalgia, he evaluates his interpersonal relationships, or lack thereof. His relationships with key characters, such as Miss Kenton, Mr. Stevens Senior, Lord Darlington, and Mr. Farraday, as well as the setting of the English scenery around him, reflect how Steven's occupation of the social space around him led to him becoming incapable of intimacy and meaningful connections. However, by the end of the text, Steven's evolution of thought guides him to the desire to learn how to banter, potentially leading him to form more substantial relationships with those around him. Other British texts from the 1900's, such as Eavan Boland's "The Lost Land" and Philip Larkin's "MCMXIV", follow similar themes and patterns of thought that ultimately reflect a greater understanding of social spaces and class structures that affect interpersonal relationships within England during the time period.

In order to understand how Stevens operates within his relationships with other characters, it is crucial to understand the beliefs he holds about his professional life. Stevens' mindset surrounding his work can best be defined by the themes of dignity and respect. Stevens was a butler in the house of a very well-renowned Lord, a goal he had been working towards the majority of his life. Not only does he prioritize his work in the household above all else, but he

does not have the ability to separate his work and professional life. He holds the notion that “‘dignity’ has to do crucially with a butler’s ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits (Ishiguro, 42).” This means that Stevens’ demeanor of professionalism never disappears when he is off-duty, or even when he is by himself. He prides himself on never abandoning the social space which he inhabits. Though this social space causes Stevens to have to serve others his whole life, he is comfortable in this class position. This explanation of Stevens’ beliefs about professionalism and dignity assist in explaining his blind loyalty to Lord Darlington, a relationship which will define all of the other relationships within Stevens’ life.

Stevens’ and Lord Darlington’s relationship is one of many complexities that goes beyond mere employer and employee. As Stevens reflects on his experiences with Lord Darlington, he appears to have an unwavering loyalty to him. He is appreciative of the opportunity to serve under a Lord, and he gives everything that he has to his position in order for Lord Darlington to appear as professional as possible to his many important guests. Stevens views himself as a protector of Lord Darlington’s legacy, as he is highly strict on his staff to make sure every detail of the household is absolutely perfect. However, as Stevens reflects on his relationship with Lord Darlington, he begins to take note of where he may have gone wrong. Throughout the later years of Lord Darlington’s life and after his death, his reputation greatly diminished and his legacy was tarnished as he became known as a Nazi sympathizer. Stevens was privy to all of Lord Darlington’s guests and many of his conversations, however, he never criticized any of the Lord’s actions due to his blind loyalty and duty as a butler. Though Stevens has dedicated his entire life to serving Lord Darlington he feels as though “it is quite illogical that [he] should feel any regret or shame on [his] own account (Ishiguro, 201).” Stevens redirects any guilt he might feel over the situation by using the excuse that he was merely doing his duty

as a butler. It was not within his professional parameters to question Lord Darlington, again showing his commitment to his position above all else. His unwavering loyalty to the Lord and his job as butler is the pillar which prevents Stevens from furthering any other meaningful connections within his life. Similarly to his relationship with Lord Darlington, Stevens' interpersonal relationship, or lack thereof, with his father also demonstrates his priority of work and dignity above all else.

Throughout the text, Stevens tells stories of his father and the great accomplishments he has had as a butler in an admiring tone. It is clear Stevens looks up to his father, however, all of his stories have to do with his father's occupation. There are no anecdotes of fatherly love or any interaction as family members at all. In fact, through their cold and short interactions, Stevens and his father act more closely as co-workers than they do as father and son. A pivotal moment which reveals Stevens' connection with his father comes as Mr. Stevens Senior lay on his deathbed. Stevens continues to work through Lord Darlington's very important dinner party as his father is actively dying. Even in his father's last moments, he prioritizes his duty as a butler and Lord Darlington's legacy over his relationship with his father. It was not only because of his duty to his position that he did not visit his father in his last moments, but it seems as though Stevens did not have the emotional threshold to deal with the situation of loss. The previous lack of father and son relationship prohibited Stevens from being able to properly express his emotions of sadness about his father's death. His father occupied being a butler not just as a job, but as a way of living, just as Stevens has now vowed to do. Stevens recognizes their likeness in this moment and conveys to Miss Kenton that, "[his] father would have wished for him to carry on just now (Ishiguro, 106)." This scene reveals that Stevens views his father more as a professional mentor than a family member. Their distant relationship goes on to further show how Stevens lacks any

meaningful, personal relationships within his life, making him unable to form intimacy and properly convey his emotions.

Steven's relationships with Lord Darlington and Mr. Stevens Senior give reason to the failure of arguably the most important relationship within his life, Miss Kenton. Though Stevens and Miss Kenton have some turmoil at the beginning of their working relationship, the two come to enjoy working closely with one another. Miss Kenton challenges Stevens at moments, though he admires her dedication to her work and her relationship with her staff. It is clear that Stevens has unresolved feelings for Miss Kenton as the intention of his countryside trip is to ask her back onto the staff for his new employer, Mr. Farraday. On this journey, Stevens ponders key moments in their relationship, which led to her leaving the staff to begin with. A major example of this is Stevens' delivery when he told Miss Kenton two of her maids were to be fired because they were Jewish. This incident of bigotry and hatred greatly upset Miss Kenton, almost causing her to quit her post. It was only months later that Stevens was able to reveal how the situation distressed him as well, leading Miss Kenton to plead with him, "Why, Mr Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to pretend (Ishiguro, 154)?" His inability to empathize or convey his own emotions with Miss Kenton is why their relationship is never able to progress. The mask of 'professionalism' he puts up is impenetrable, driving Miss Kenton away from the love they could have had. Similarly, throughout his trip through the countryside, the audience is able to see how Stevens' connection to England and the scenery he inhabits is representative of his inability to delve into deep relationships.

Before Mr. Farraday had proposed to him to take a trip, Stevens had never experienced much of the area he spent his whole life in. He almost always stayed within the boundaries of the house, taking very little time off, even when it was permitted. Throughout his trip, Stevens was

finally able to appreciate the beautiful scenery around him and visit parts of England he was previously unaware of. When describing the land around him, Stevens says that it is more beautiful than so many other places because “it is the very lack of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty, its sense of restraint (Ishiguro, 28).” This comment is very key to understanding Stevens’ mindset because he values restraint rather than indulgence.

Subconsciously, he views himself like the English countryside. Stevens consistently hides his emotions, never verbalizing his fears, sadness, or worries. What Stevens finds beautiful within the countryside is what prohibits him from creating meaningful relationships with those around him, showing how his blindness to beauty contributes to the naivety within his personal life. This theme is also exhibited within Philip Larkin’s “MCMXIV” as his description of England before the start of World War I shows an idleness that will eventually lead to destruction. The intention of the poem is to describe how beauty can be rooted in serenity, but how this allusion of comfortability may lead to ruin. Just as people could not recognize the impending war, Stevens could not recognize the consequences of his isolation. Stevens, like the oblivious people in Larkin’s poem, has a comfortable belief in traditional order, which ultimately leads to many negative consequences in his social life. However, Stevens’ obliviousness to how his actions have diminished his relationships seems to lessen throughout the novel as he ponders on his memories and explores his sense of nostalgia.

Stevens’ ability to filter through his memories and seek out what he feels he has gained from them is what signals his first step towards searching for a deeper connection. Though he still has some trouble understanding where he has gone wrong at certain points, Stevens’ internal dialogue seems to suggest that he has certain regrets about his inaction during several moments within his life. For example, Steven’s depiction of Miss Kenton learning her aunt has passed

away identifies that he perceives this moment to be one of failure for himself. When Miss Kenton learned of her aunt's passing, Stevens, unsure of how to comfort her, became very cold to her. He had an opportunity to grow closer to Miss Kenton and comfort her in her time of need, but he was not able to let his guard down. Instead, he chose to critique the work of the new maids, further isolating himself from Miss Kenton, ultimately leading to her leaving Lord Darlington's household. As Stevens looks back on this memory, he finds himself feeling regret and confliction that there could have been "an infinite number of further opportunities in which to remedy the effect of this or that misunderstanding," but that there was, "nothing to indicate at the time that such evidently small incidents would render whole dreams forever irredeemable (Ishiguro, 179)." Stevens admits that he was ignorant at the time to his shortcomings. It is only looking back on the incidents that he can see where he has gone wrong, showing that he has a longing to fix the mistakes of his past. This theme is similarly presented within Eavan Boland's "The Lost Land", which holds themes surrounding memory and longing for the past. As Stevens longs for Miss Kenton, Boland longs for the land of Ireland being symbolized by her two daughters. Boland describes that "they are grown up and far away/ and memory itself/ has become an emigrant,/ wandering in a place/ where love dissembles itself as landscape." Like the daughters, Miss Kenton too has evolved and left Lord Darlington's household, while Stevens has essentially stayed the same throughout his entire life. It is only now that Stevens is taking account of his actions and shortcomings that he is able to make progress with his social relationships. Similarly, a major form of progress within his connections that Stevens exhibits is represented through his relationship with Mr Farraday.

Mr. Farraday, Stevens' American employer after the death of Lord Darlington, is the first person within the text who seems to bring out a different side to Stevens. Being the only

American within the novel, he seems to have a different set of ideals and traditions he operates his life by. Many of these expectations are new to Stevens, particularly the art of making 'banter.' When Mr. Farraday first began bantering with Stevens, he was unsure of how to react or what was occurring. A fundamental part of Stevens' beliefs is professionalism between employer and employee, but Mr. Farraday wished to joke with him, and Stevens did not want to let him down. At first, Stevens attempts to make a joke to Mr. Farraday, which unfortunately does not elicit any laughs and leads Stevens to wonder if he should begin practicing these jokes in his spare time (Ishiguro, 131). He does so because he believes it is a part of his job in working for Mr. Farraday and because it is what is expected of him. However, by the end of the novel, Stevens has a new resolve and reason for why he wishes to learn how to banter. He believes that he should begin to look at the art of bantering more passionately because "it is not such a foolish thing to indulge in - particularly if it is the case that in bantering lies the key to human warmth (Ishiguro, 245)." It is in this moment that Stevens not only recognizes the mistakes of his past, but resolves to actively take steps to remedy them. Bantering is one of the first actions he commits to that will further him forming meaningful human connections, which he has previously lacked. This realization, as well as others he makes at the end of the novel, is the major turning point which reveals his evolution as a character.

As Stevens watches the pier lights at Weymouth, he begins a deep conversation with a stranger in which he contemplates the heights and shortcomings of his life. He finds qualms within his unwavering support for Lord Darlington, feeling as though his decisions and mistakes were not truly his own. Stevens addresses the reader as he says, "there is little choice other than to leave our fate, ultimately in the hands of those great gentlemen at the hub of this world who employ our services (Ishiguro, 244)." Stevens has come to understand how the social position he

holds has affected the decisions he has made within his life, which in turn has negatively harmed his interpersonal relationships. He is also aware that he no longer has the same beliefs and efforts he once did when he served Lord Darlington. Stevens exclaims that he “gave him the very best [he] had to give” and that, “[he does] not have a great deal more left to give (Ishiguro, 242).” These realizations show the transformation that Stevens has undergone throughout his journey through the English countryside. He is able to acknowledge his regrets and imperfections, while making efforts to change the parts of himself that kept him from forming meaningful relationships in the past.

Through the analysis of Stevens’ interpersonal relationships, it is evident that his class position in society and his focus on dignity have prevented him from forming meaningful connections. These negative repercussions are seen through his inability to maintain important relationships with characters, such as Miss Kenton and Mr. Stevens Senior. However, Stevens’ decision to reflect on his life choices and resolution towards learning how to banter reveal his intention to remedy his mistakes and find the gift of human warmth. Likewise, the texts “The Lost Land” and “MCMXIV” aid in supporting this understanding of the text through their themes of naivety, loss, and longing. The evolution of Stevens’ thought throughout the text ultimately reveals the consequences of disregarding human relationships and the ways with which to alleviate these mistakes.

Works Cited

Boland, Eavan. "The Lost Land". Norton Anthology of English Literature, 1999.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*. Faber and Faber, 2021.

Larkin, Philip. "MCMXIV". Norton Anthology of English Literature, 1999