



Kazuo Ishiguro

(1954-)

Life and works

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954, and at the age of six came to England, where he received his education. He attended the University of Kent and the University of East Anglia. He now lives and works in London.

His first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, appeared in 1982 and consists of the memories of Etsuko, a Japanese widow who often recalls Nagasaki during the American occupation after the war.

An Artist of the Floating World was published in 1986 and won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award. The title of the novel refers to a Japanese master painter, of whom the narrator was a disciple, who captured in his work the fleeting changing pleasures of life. It is classically Japanese in its use of indirection and analogy. Since the

narrator's indirect ways of telling the story can be variously interpreted, the effect is an example of the contradiction produced by the unreliable narrators of many modern novels.

In 1989, Ishiguro was awarded the Booker Prize for his third novel, *The Remains of the Day*, which was made into a successful film directed by James Ivory in 1993. He published *The Unconsoled* in 1995, *When We Were Orphans* in 2000, *Never Let me Go* in 2005 (filmed in 2010, → Route 11), *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* in 2009 and *The Buried Giant* in 2015. In 2017, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. As a whole, Ishiguro's works reflect his talent for elegant understatement, economy and careful selection of detail, just as the choice of subject shows his concern with social and historical change, and the need to survive.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ about Ishiguro's life and works and complete the author's ID.

BORN:
MOVED TO:
BEGINNING OF HIS LITERARY CAREER:
PRIZES:
WHAT HIS WORKS REFLECT:

The Remains of the Day

Kazuo Ishiguro
(1989)

PLOT

The story is set at Darlington Hall in the summer of 1956, when a new American owner, Mr Farraday, succeeds Lord Darlington. This English gentleman had acted in favour of Germany and after the war found himself in disgrace. Mr Farraday is less rigorous and formal than Lord Darlington, and tries to establish a friendlier relationship with his butler, Stevens, suggesting that he should take some days off. So, Stevens sets out on a six-day tour through the West of England. During the trip, he recalls his lifetime service to the English aristocracy and recollects his past friendship with the housekeeper, Miss Kenton, whom he has arranged to see, hoping to convince her to return to Darlington Hall under the new owner.

Through the figure of Stevens, Ishiguro presents public and private behaviour as indivisible, wondering whether such an absolute devotion to one's job might be a sort of alibi, which frees the individual from any sense of responsibility towards reality, history and life itself. In this respect, Stevens is a man who has renounced the exercise of judgement and intelligence. He has chosen to make his personality coincide with his social role.

The climax of the book is Stevens's discovery of himself, of his repressed feelings towards Miss Kenton whose affection he tries in vain to recapture. At the end, sitting on a bench in front of the sea in the evening, he concludes his inner journey and reaches a sort of serenity; he returns home with a new proposal in his mind: to live what 'remains of the day'.



THE MAIN CHARACTER

Stevens, a dutiful English butler, lives and works by a code of obedience, self-control and reticence. His belief that what makes a great butler is the possession of dignity in keeping with his position, leads him to a passive attitude towards important historical events, and to the suppression of his feelings and affections.

MAIN THEME

As in other works by Kazuo Ishiguro, this novel carefully analyses people who have pursued an aim to distinguish themselves or simply to provide a reason to their existence. He usually presents these people in the moment when the old assumptions they held about their lives are under scrutiny, leaving them in the attempt to make sense of their memories and become aware of their inner self.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

The novel has a double narrative frame: the account of the slow drive through the English countryside, interwoven with memories, both recorded by Stevens's voice. Stevens notes down the details of his journey in a diary which provides a structure to the book. The use of the diary form enables Ishiguro to range freely through the past and especially through his character's inner thoughts. Awareness is gradually attained through the use of flashbacks.

LANGUAGE

Stevens speaks in a tortuous, stiff, formal style, which is maintained throughout the novel, sometimes creating delightful moments of comedy when the events narrated are described in such a dignified and constrained tone.

2 READ the text *The Remains of the Day* and answer the following questions.

- Where and when does *The Remains of the Day* take place?
- Where can the climax of the novel be found?
- Who is the main character of this novel?
- What is the main theme?
- What kind of narrative technique is used?
- What are the main features of the language?



An odd incident

It is the summer of 1956. Stevens, an ageing butler, is travelling through the West Country during a rare holiday. But his journey is disturbed by the memories of his lifetime service at Darlington Hall. The extract you are going to read is one of the turning points in the novel.

Kazuo Ishiguro
The Remains of the Day
(1989)

Chapter 1

The fact is, I have tended increasingly of late to indulge myself in such recollections. And ever since the prospect of seeing Miss Kenton again first arose some weeks ago, I suppose I have tended to spend much time pondering just why it was our relationship underwent¹ such a change. For change it certainly did, around 1935 or 1936, after many

5 years in which we had steadily achieved a fine professional understanding. [...]

In thinking about this recently, it seems possible that that odd incident the evening Miss Kenton came into my pantry² uninvited may have marked a crucial turning point. Why it was she came to my pantry I cannot remember with certainty. I have a feeling she may have come bearing³ a vase of flowers 'to brighten things up', but then

10 again, I may be getting confused with the time she attempted⁴ the same thing years earlier at the start of our acquaintanceship⁵. [...] I might emphasize, in any case, that notwithstanding⁶ our years of good working relations, I had never allowed the situation to slip⁷ to one in which the housekeeper⁸ was coming and going from my pantry all day. The butler's pantry, as far as I am concerned, is a crucial office, the heart of the house's

15 operations, not unlike a general's headquarters during a battle, and it is imperative that all things in it are ordered – and left ordered – in precisely the way I wish them to be. I have never been that sort of butler who allows all sorts of people to wander in and out with their queries and grumbles⁹. If operations are to be conducted in a smoothly¹⁰

- underwent. Subì.
- pantry. Lett.: dispensa, qui: ufficio.
- bearing. Portando.
- attempted. Tentò.
- acquaintanceship. Conoscenza.
- notwithstanding. Nonostante.
- slip. Degenerare.
- housekeeper. Governante.
- queries and grumbles. Quesiti e lamentele.
- smoothly. Agevolmente.



co-ordinated way, it is surely obvious that the butler's pantry must be the one place in the house where privacy and solitude are guaranteed.

As it happened, when she entered my pantry that evening, I was not in fact engaged in professional matters. That is to say, it was towards the end of the day during a quiet week and I had been enjoying a rare hour or so **off duty**. As I say, I am not certain if Miss Kenton entered with her vase of flowers, but I certainly do recall her saying:

'Mr Stevens, your room looks even less accommodating at night than it does in the day. That electric bulb is too dim¹¹, surely, for you to be reading by.'

'It is perfectly adequate, thank you, Miss Kenton.'

'Really, Mr Stevens, this room resembles a prison cell. All one needs is a small bed in the corner and one could well imagine condemned men spending their last hours here.'

Perhaps I said something to this, I do not know. In any case, I did not look up from my reading, and a few moments passed during which I waited for Miss Kenton to excuse herself and leave. But then I heard her say:

'Now I wonder what it could be you are reading there, Mr Stevens.'

'Simply a book, Miss Kenton.'

'I can see that, Mr Stevens. But what sort of book – that is what interests me.'

I looked up to see Miss Kenton advancing towards me. I shut the book, and clutching it¹² to my person, rose to my feet¹³.

'Really, Miss Kenton,' I said, 'I must ask you to respect my privacy.'

'But why are you so shy about your book, Mr Stevens? I rather suspect it may be something rather racy¹⁴.'

'It is quite out of the question, Miss Kenton, that anything 'racy', as you put it, should be found on his lordship's¹⁵ shelves.'

'I have heard it said that many learned books contain the most racy of passages, but I have never had the nerve¹⁶ to look. Now, Mr Stevens, do please allow me to see what it is you are reading.'

'Miss Kenton, I must ask you to leave me alone. It is quite impossible that you should persist in pursuing¹⁷ me like this during the very few moments of spare time I have to myself.'

But Miss Kenton was continuing to advance and I must say it was a little difficult to assess¹⁸ what my best course of action would be. I was tempted to thrust¹⁹ the book into the drawer of my desk and lock it, but this seemed absurdly dramatic. I took a few paces back, the book still held to my chest²⁰.

'Please show me the volume you are holding, Mr Stevens,' Miss Kenton said, continuing her advance, 'and I will leave you to the pleasures of your reading. What on earth can it be you are so anxious to hide?'

'Miss Kenton, whether or not you discover the title of this volume is in itself not of the slightest importance to me. But as a matter of principle, I object to your appearing like this and invading my private moments.'

'I wonder, is it a perfectly respectable volume, Mr Stevens, or are you in fact protecting me from its shocking influences?'

Then she was standing before me, and suddenly the atmosphere underwent a peculiar change – almost as though the two of us had been suddenly **thrust on** to some other plane of being altogether. I am afraid it is not easy to describe clearly what I mean here. All I can say is that everything around us suddenly became very still; it was my impression that Miss Kenton's manner also underwent a sudden change; there was a strange seriousness in her expression, and it struck me she seemed almost frightened.

'Please, Mr Stevens, let me see your book.'

She reached forward²¹ and began gently to **release** the volume from my grasp²². [...] Miss Kenton continued very gently to prise the book away²³, practically one finger at a time. The process seemed to take a very long time – throughout which I managed to maintain my posture – until finally I heard her say:

11 dim. Fioca.

12 clutching it. Tenendolo stretto.

13 rose to my feet. Mi alzai in piedi.

14 racy. Scabroso, spinto.

15 his lordship's. Di sua eccellenza.

16 nerve. Coraggio.

17 pursuing. Inseguire, perseguitare.

18 assess. Valutare.

19 thrust. Infilare.

20 chest. Petto.

21 reached forward. Allungò la mano.

22 grasp. Stretta.

23 to prise the book away. A strappare il libro (dalla mia stretta).



'Good gracious, Mr Stevens, it isn't anything so scandalous at all. Simply a sentimental love story.'

I believe it was around this point that I decided there was no need to tolerate any more. I cannot recall precisely what I said, but I remember showing Miss Kenton out of my pantry quite firmly and the episode was thus brought to a close.

[...] The book was, true enough, what might be described as a 'sentimental romance' – one of a number kept in the library, and also in several of the guest bedrooms, for the entertainment of lady visitors. There was a simple reason for my having taken to perusing²⁴ such works; it was an extremely efficient way to maintain and develop one's command of the English language. [...] For all that, it has never been my position that good accent and command of language are not attractive attributes, and I always considered it my duty to develop them as best I could. One straightforward²⁵ means of going about this is simply to read a few pages of a well-written book during odd²⁶ spare moments one may have. This had been my own policy for some years, and I often tended to choose the sort of volume Miss Kenton had found me reading that evening simply because such works tend to be written in good English, with plenty of elegant dialogue of much practical value to me. A weightier²⁷ book – a scholarly study, say – while it might have been more generally improving would have tended to be couched²⁸ in terms likely to be of more limited use in the course of one's normal intercourse²⁹ with ladies and gentlemen.

I rarely had the time or the desire to read any of these romances cover to cover³⁰, but so far as I could tell, their plots were invariably absurd – indeed, sentimental – and I would not have wasted one moment on them were it not for these aforementioned³¹ benefits. Having said that, however, I do not mind confessing today – and I see nothing to be ashamed of in this – that I did at times gain a sort of incidental enjoyment from these stories. I did not perhaps acknowledge this to myself at the time, but as I say, what shame is there in it? Why should one not enjoy in a light-hearted sort of way stories of ladies and gentlemen who fall in love and express their feelings for each other, often in the most elegant phrases?

But when I say this, I do not mean to imply the stance³² I took over the matter of the book that evening was somehow unwarranted³³. For you must understand, there was an important principle at issue³⁴. The fact was, I had been 'off duty' at that moment Miss Kenton had come marching into my pantry. And of course, any butler who regards his vocation with pride, any butler who aspires at all to a 'dignity in keeping with his position', as the Hayes Society once put it, should never allow himself to be 'off duty' in the presence of others. It really was immaterial whether it was Miss Kenton or a complete stranger who had walked in at that moment. A butler of any quality must be seen to inhabit his role, utterly³⁵ and fully; he cannot be seen casting it aside³⁶ one moment simply to don it³⁷ again the next as though it were nothing more than a pantomime costume. There is one situation and one situation only in which a butler who cares about his dignity may feel free to unburden himself³⁸ of his role; that is to say, when he is entirely alone. You will appreciate then that in the event of Miss Kenton bursting in³⁹ at a time when I had presumed, not unreasonably, that I was to be alone, it came to be a crucial matter of principle, a matter indeed of dignity, that I did not appear in anything less than my full and proper role.

However, it had not been my intention to analyse here the various facets⁴⁰ of this small episode from years ago. The main point about it was that it alerted me to the fact that things between Miss Kenton and myself had reached – no doubt after a gradual process of many months – an inappropriate footing⁴¹. The fact that she could behave as she had done that evening was rather alarming, and after I had seen her out of my pantry, and had had a chance to gather my thoughts a little, I recall resolving to set about⁴² re-establishing our professional relationship on a more proper basis.

24 for my having ... perusing. Per cui avevo cominciato a leggere attentamente.

25 straightforward. Semplice.

26 odd. Occasionali, saltuari.

27 weightier. Più ponderoso.

28 couched. Scritto, espresso.

29 intercourse. Rapporto.

30 cover to cover. Da cima a fondo.

31 aforementioned. Già menzionati.

32 stance. Posizione, atteggiamento.

33 unwarranted. Ingiustificato.

34 at issue. In gioco.

35 utterly. Completamente.

36 casting it aside. Metterlo da parte.

37 don it. Indossarlo.

38 unburden himself. Liberarsi dal peso.

39 in the event ... bursting in. Nel momento in cui ... fece irruzione.

40 facets. Sfaccettature.

41 footing. Livello.

42 set about. Accingermi.



LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words and phrases with their meaning.

- 1 pushed hard
- 2 not engaged in the performance of one's usual work
- 3 free
- 4 farce
- 5 warned
- 6 set free
- 7 firmly
- 8 irrelevant

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the passage and note down the following information.

- 1 The characters involved;
- 2 the setting in time and place;
- 3 the situation.

3 EXPLAIN in your own words

- 1 the relationship between Stevens and Miss Kenton;
- 2 the reason why Miss Kenton went into Stevens's office;
- 3 what she thought of the room;
- 4 the sort of book Stevens was reading;
- 5 his aim in reading the book;
- 6 why he was so reluctant to show it to Miss Kenton;
- 7 what Stevens resolved to do after the incident.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

4 IDENTIFY the narrator. Focus on the alternation of tenses in the passage and say what each of them conveys, quoting examples from the text.

- A Present perfect tense:
- B Present tense:
- C Past tense:

5 WHAT is this passage part of? Tick as appropriate and answer the question.

- ☐ An epistolary novel.
- ☐ An autobiographical novel.
- ☐ A novel in diary form.

What effect does the choice of this form have?

6 CONSIDER the section concerning the dialogue between Stevens and Miss Kenton. What kind of atmosphere does the narrator build up? Choose among the following and answer the question.

horror suspense tension comedy passion romance

How does he achieve it?



7 ANALYSE the two characters involved in the scene.

1 Underline the words and phrases referring to the main features of Stevens's personality.

A Group them under the headings below.

Unawareness:

Control over his emotions:

Devotion to his job and sense of duty:

B Point out the lines where Stevens, a long time after the 'odd incident', seems to have acquired a new self-consciousness.

2 Write down Miss Kenton's actions. What do you think her feelings towards Stevens are?

8 DEFINE the kind of language used by the narrator. Tick as appropriate and support your answer quoting the text.

☐ Colloquial.

☐ Stiff.

☐ Syntactically simple.

☐ Formal.

☐ Straightforward.

☐ Syntactically complex.

9 GO through the passage again and answer the following questions.

1 What makes a great butler?

2 What kind of analogy does the narrator establish through the description of the butler's pantry?

10 DISCUSS whether, with the character of Stevens, Ishiguro is simply paying homage to a celebrated figure of the English tradition or trying to convey a deeper message about the life of the individual.

> COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE

11 DISCUSS this statement in the light of your knowledge of British history and traditions: '*The Remains of the Day* may be read as a story of loss and as a reflection on the decline of the way of life and the virtues Britain has been so proud of through the centuries'.