

## Aspects of tragedy: Text overview – *The Remains of the Day*

---

Read our overview which shows how you can consider *The Remains of the Day* in relation to the genre of tragedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead, we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail. It is important to note that *The Remains of the Day* is an examination set text for AS students only, although the text can be studied by A-level students for the NEA.

### Overview

Although *The Remains of the Day* could be termed a tragi-comedy (its humour, satire and irony work quite differently from how they work in a conventional tragedy), and although the hero does not die, the novel has more to connect it with the tragic genre than the comedic. Stevens, the novel's tragic protagonist and narrator, is a sad and lonely figure, one who has lived in denial of an emotional and spiritual life and in the end can only weep. In the story, Stevens reflects on his life as a butler in which he faithfully served Lord Darlington the owner of Darlington Hall. The aristocrat is now dead and English society has changed. Stevens is bereft. Ishiguro incorporates many aspects of tragedy in his novel: its presiding mood is elegiac and Stevens evokes pity. It is also fair to say that some positives emerge. There are two strands of narrative which have a bearing on how the tragic aspects might be interpreted by readers as well as a narrator whom the reader cannot trust.

In the narrative present, in which Stevens apparently writes a diary, he takes a holiday by car to the south of England to meet Miss Kenton. His six day journey where he travels through Oxfordshire to Cornwall is a metaphorical and psychological journey to self knowledge (the signposts he passes are significant metaphors). His journey is a kind of Pilgrim's Progress. During his journey he loses his way and is helped by random people who tell him to look at the view—the old man, the young woman in Salisbury, the chauffeur and Doctor Carlisle take him towards that knowledge. He is offered another way of looking at life and although he rejects some ideas, for example Harry Smith's views on democracy, they are part of his growth. The second strand of narrative though involves the past, that which has so affected Stevens in the present. The story of the past is of Stevens as a butler and Stevens as a staunch disciple of Lord Darlington who betrays that trust, leaving Stevens empty.

## The problem of the narrator

The ambiguities Ishiguro sets up in *The Remains of the Day* in terms of the tragedy result from his choice of Stevens as a narrator. The tragedy is filtered through Stevens who does not meaningfully present himself as tragic hero yet Ishiguro develops Stevens as tragic nonetheless. The same points might also be made about Lord Darlington as tragic villain and Miss Kenton as tragic victim. Stevens certainly does not foreground Lord Darlington's villainy and yet the reader can see more than Stevens and while Stevens sees Miss Kenton as having wasted her life, the reader may not.

Much is said by critics about Stevens as 'unreliable narrator'. However, given that Stevens is apparently writing a diary in which there are long sections of troubled contemplation, it is hard to see him as deliberately trying to deceive. Ishiguro has constructed a Stevens who is more deluded than insincere, though the extent to which he is deluded or is simply evading truth is debatable. The style chosen for Stevens' writing is stilted as if he is holding back, consistently concealing. This makes his surface narrative unreliable but Stevens acknowledges this. He is aware that he cannot remember and that he gets things wrong. For example, he rewrites a number of times the reason for Miss Kenton's tears. But, only when she admits the feelings she held for him, at the end of the novel, only when she says that if they had acted differently there might have been a different outcome, does he realise the truth.

Stevens' tone throughout the narrative is wistful and nostalgic. In his delusion he suggests that the past is a glorious thing but as the story progresses and he gradually re-evaluates, the tone darkens. He is always at a distance from truth and self knowledge and in creating such a narrator, Ishiguro draws attention to the post-modern unreliability of the text rather than the unreliability of the narrator.

## Stevens as tragic hero

Even though not much happens in terms of large tragic events, Stevens is the novel's tragic hero who it could be said experiences a fall from greatness. Significantly, Ishiguro uses the motif of falling to foreground Stevens' tragedy. Like Miller's heroes, Stevens is an ordinary man, one defined by his occupation. In his past Stevens has prided himself on being a great and dignified butler and in doing so he has imposed upon himself a debilitating restraint. When Miss Kenton asks, 'Why, why, why do you always have to pretend?' he cannot answer. Neither can he account for the tears which instinctively flow when his father dies. His tragedy is that his pursuit of greatness as a butler subsumes everything: his emotions, his critical faculties and his judgement. Stevens' restraint also wrecks his chance of finding happiness and love with Miss Kenton. He cannot admit his feelings for her and thus his, in part, is a tragedy of love. Only at the end does he realise that his heart is breaking, but by then it is too late. As Stevens tells his story, Ishiguro invites us to see a man who, like Lear,

slenderly knows himself. The Stevens of the back story has defences which are so strong he cannot admit to feelings or to fears or to any deep knowledge.

Stevens' tragedy is also bound up with the fate of Lord Darlington. Stevens suffers because of Lord Darlington's fall from grace and when his employer dies Stevens is bereft. He loses Lord Darlington to corruption and the Nazi cause and he never properly grieves for this loss any more than he grieves for the loss of his father or Miss Kenton. Modern psychology makes it clear that it is important to find time and space for grief and to admit to pain. Stevens does not do this. But his tragedy is also bound up with his feelings of betrayal and of guilt. He suffers as a result of his unquestioning loyalty and devotion to Lord Darlington, a man who is deeply flawed and unworthy of the love and respect bestowed upon him. Lord Darlington is a traitor and Stevens is implicated through his association with him and through his defence of him.

The car journey in the narrative present is also significant in terms of the tragedy. During the journey, Stevens gradually recognises the hollowness of his values and by the end he is able to admit some of his mistakes. In this sense the journey is cathartic. At the start of his journey he is still in denial, continuing to make excuses, defending how he has lived. When he visits Salisbury and Mortimer's Pond he is still a snob, looking down on the lower social classes. But, as the journey continues and he moves further away from his past and Darlington Hall, his eyes are opened to different political ideas and he begins to learn. He gradually admits to being let down by Lord Darlington and knows that he bears Lord Darlington's shame and disgrace. His journey fills him with a terrible emptiness and sadness.

The critical point of his journey is his meeting with Miss Kenton who he hopes to persuade to return to Darlington Hall as a housekeeper under the new owner. Perhaps he also wants to resurrect the feelings that he frustrated twenty years earlier. His failure to convince her to return, thereby losing her twice, thus intensifies his sadness and his tragedy. At the end he weeps on Weymouth pier, a twilight figure wondering why he can't enjoy the remains of the day.

At the end of Stevens' story there is a sense of quiet heartbreak. Ishiguro offers the story as a warning to those who suppress their feelings and deny truth. As with King Lear, this text is about the cruelty of existence. As he stares into darkness, Stevens admits the futility of his devotion and in doing so sees his own nothingness: '... I can't even say I made my own mistakes.... – what dignity is there in that?' Though he comes to some knowledge, it is too late.

## Stevens as tragic victim

While Stevens is a tragic hero, he can also be seen as a tragic victim. Although Ishiguro does not create a clear cut tragic antagonist, he condemns the power that the English ruling classes wield and sets the class system up as a villain of sorts. An interesting parallel can be drawn between Stevens and his brother Leonard in terms of their victim status. Leonard dies in the Boer War, a victim of an incompetent general and of a political system that took the country to war.

Both Stevens and Leonard accept authority and both are constrained by feudal bonds. Leonard's life is cut short literally and Stevens' metaphorically. Stevens believes that Lord Darlington is working for the good of humanity. But Lord Darlington is a Nazi collaborator. In trusting him, Stevens himself becomes tainted. He is therefore a victim of upper class power.

Stevens is also a victim of Lord Darlington's personal cruelty when with his house guests Lord Darlington humiliates and laughs at the butler. When Mr Spencer spitefully asks Stevens about politics and international matters, Stevens replies: 'I'm sorry, sir, but I'm unable to be of assistance in this matter.' Stevens believes this is a safe answer and he does not want to offend his lordship, but he falls prey to Spencer's and Lord Darlington's ridicule. They laugh 'heartily' at Stevens' discomfort. Although Lord Darlington later apologises, the truth is that Stevens has been used to entertain his guests like a performing monkey.

Stevens can also be seen as a victim of history, swept up by the politics of the 1920s and 30s that he does not understand. Given the depression of the 1930s, it is fair to ask how Stevens could have criticised his master. Even when the morally outraged Miss Kenton threatens resignation over the dismissal of two Jewish maids, she does not do so, because she knows that she would not easily get another position. However, the novel asks the question, should Stevens have 'known' more. He is not without intelligence, but chooses not to use his powers of reasoning, arguing instead that it is 'not possible to adopt ... a critical attitude towards an employer and provide good service'. Perhaps, therefore, he is more culpable than he admits. Reginald Cardinal, Lord Darlington's godson, tries to warn Stevens that Hitler is using Lord Darlington for propaganda purposes but Stevens buries his head in the sand. However, Ishiguro raises the question: what could Stevens have done? He is always a servant and whistle blowing was not taken seriously in the time the novel was set. It is important to note that the novelist is not judgemental here. The verdict is left open.

It is perhaps easier, and certainly from a psychoanalytical perspective, to see Stevens as a victim of his upbringing. His repressed emotions can be seen to emanate from the conditioning of his father from whom he is starved of love. Although there is no narrative focus on Stevens' childhood, the reader can deduce that his retarded emotional and spiritual life is a result of psychological conditioning. His father has been a guide and role model helping him to define dignity and showing him how to act stoically. Stevens has learnt his lesson very well. He replicates his father's coldness and lack of humanity in all his human dealings. There is a terrible irony in Stevens' pride that he resists the call to attend his dying father.

## Stevens' father as tragic figure

Although Ishiguro does not focus on what makes Stevens' father the man he is and although Stevens presents his father in a detached way, the elder Mr Stevens is a tragic figure in his own right. According to Stevens, his father is the embodiment of dignity and has clearly enjoyed 'greatness' in his professional role

as butler at Loughborough Hall. This 'greatness' is in spite of the faults which Stevens outlines: he does not have a 'good accent', his 'command of language' is not impressive and he does not have a wide general knowledge on topics 'such as falconry and newt-mating' (faults of course which reveal more of Stevens than his father). But Stevens is certainly proud of his father's achievements and impressed by his anecdotes of loyalty in service. He believes that his father has successfully emulated the butler of the story of the tiger under the table, shown clearly in the account of his father defending his employer against insults from two drunken gentlemen when he was happy to ignore the personal attacks on himself. In this respect he is a 'great' man – a traditional aspect of a tragic hero.

He also has tragic flaws, (not the superficial class based ones outlined by his son), but pride and misplaced devotion to the aristocracy. His belief in unquestioning duty and loyalty to his 'masters' has seemingly displaced paternal warmth. When Leonard is killed during the Boer War, the father is comforted by his son's dying for king and country, despite the fact that Leonard had died in an 'unBritish attack' on civilians led by an incompetent command. Where outrage might be expected there is nothing and when the same commander later visits Loughborough House to promote his business, Stevens' father treats him with utmost respect.

As befits a tragic figure, Stevens' father also falls from greatness. Having enjoyed an eminent career as a butler, he has to serve out his days at Darlington Hall in a less prestigious role as under butler and then gradually duties are removed from him owing to his age and his failing health. His arthritis causes him to fall and although he recovers from this incident about which he is acutely embarrassed, he later dies of a stroke. On his deathbed he perhaps comes closest to being a tragic figure largely because he gets more focused narrative attention. But he is tragic because neither he nor his son can drop their guards. His father attempts a personal connection, perhaps as an act of contrition, trying to bridge the gulf between them 'I hope I've been a good father to you. I suppose I haven't' but Stevens is evasive. Stevens does what sensitive readers would consider inexcusable: he continues with his duties to Lord Darlington and his father dies alone, denied a deathbed reconciliation with his son. However, it is also easy to see how to some extent he reaps what he sows. The son to whom he has denied affection ultimately denies him the same. Stevens handles the death with a constrained formality: '...don't think me unduly improper in not ascending to see my father in his deceased condition.'

## Lord Darlington as a tragic villain

Although Lord Darlington is only revealed through Stevens' flashbacks and biased account, it is possible to see him as a tragic villain. He collaborates with the Nazis and in the narrative is a potential danger to Britain. He dismisses two Jewish maids from service to curry favour with his anti-Semitic friends and he cruelly ridicules Stevens when in conversation with Mr Spencer. He can also be seen as a representation of the right wing aristocrats who shared Hitler's

political views and sought to preserve their own power; he believes that 'Democracy is something of a bygone era'.

On the other hand, he could be seen as a true gentleman who is politically naïve, perhaps a victim himself. It is significant that readers are not given direct access to his thoughts. Ishiguro simply raises the question of how much he is at fault. Lord Darlington is certainly loved by Stevens and his godson, Reginald Cardinal, who sees him as a victim in his involvement with the Nazis.

According to Stevens, Lord Darlington was appalled by the unfairness of the Treaty of Versailles because it was ungentlemanly. Stevens claims that Lord Darlington's desire to right the wrong of the Allies led him to corruption so in this sense too he is presented as a victim. Stevens says that the newspaper that defamed him was responsible for ostracising Lord Darlington in a way that was 'really most tragic to see'. The text ultimately sets up an ambiguity around Lord Darlington inviting readers to decide whether he is to be pitied or censured.

## Miss Kenton as tragic figure

Miss Kenton can also be seen as a tragic figure. She functions in both the narrative past and the present. In the story of the past, it could be that Miss Kenton is a tragic victim in the way she is treated by Stevens. It is clear that while she is a housekeeper at Darlington Hall where she works between 1922 and 1936, she falls in love with him. She wants to break the barrier of his restraint. She is lively and has deep feelings but she doesn't really understand Stevens and what drives him to be a great butler. After his spurning of her advances she suffers greatly, crying alone in her room. For her, work is not enough. She craves love and marriage, and Ishiguro suggests that because her biological clock is ticking, she has to act when Stevens does not return her interest. Her decision to marry Mr Benn has a ring of desperation about it and later there is a sense that the marriage is loveless. Mr Benn is her second choice. Even when she agrees to marry him she hopes that Stevens will intervene and ask her to change her mind. When he doesn't, she cuts a very sad figure.

However, unlike Stevens, Miss Kenton is a survivor and an optimist. Although she leaves her husband on a number of occasions she returns to him and in the end finds that she does love him. Her life is finally one of happiness. She has a husband and daughter and now awaits her first grandchild. It could be argued that unlike Stevens she is not despairing and is proactive in finding a route out of her misery when in 1936 she leaves Darlington Hall to marry Mr Benn.

## The tragedy of England and the English country estate

The settings of England and Darlington Hall are themselves important tragic aspects in *The Remains of the Day*, though not surprisingly Ishiguro's presentation of them opens up different ways of responding to them in terms of tragedy.

England in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century is the backdrop to Stevens' tragic story. It is an old world England like that of Mrs Symons' 1930s' (fictional) travel book. In a sense Stevens presents England through her eyes seeing the beauty of England as a tourist twenty years earlier rather than how it would have actually been in 1956. That is not to say that all parts of the rural countryside had changed between those years (or that they have changed since) but there is no mention of the less attractive parts of the country through which Stevens' car journey would undoubtedly have taken him. In this respect it is a sanitised view. He sees the English landscape and believes it is 'the most deeply satisfying in the world'. By the time Ishiguro published the novel in 1989, readers would have known that this England had already passed and was only an idealised England anyway, one that the privileged classes might have constructed, not the real rural England in which working class people would have led hard lives. Yet the England the novel represents is beautiful, calm and restrained, a pastoral idyll of a bygone era (like the concept of service and Gifford and Co's silver polish company) and readers might well feel sadness at its passing.

Darlington Hall is in some ways a microcosm of the England Ishiguro presents. Stevens' tragic story is very much bound up with its tragic decline, a fate that befell many country estates after the war. In the back story, the estate is shown in its glory days, much loved and revered by Stevens, as a symbol of beauty, culture and privilege. He views the estate nostalgically and is sad that it has to change. Once the beautiful estate of Darlington Hall was run by up to twenty eight people, but now, in 1956, there are only four. It is for Stevens an England in miniature, a paradise where 'ladies and gentlemen' often visit for 'many days on end' and talk late into the night by a warm fire. He believes that in the Hall it has been his privilege 'to see the best of England over the years' and by this of course he means Lord Darlington's aristocratic and privileged friends. But this world has now passed. When Stevens meets Miss Kenton in the Rose Garden Hotel, he tells her that Darlington Hall is now covered with dust sheeting, and that in his absence it will be empty for the first time since it was built.

However, even though some readers might see the decline of the estate as tragic, Darlington Hall as a demi-Eden is continually undercut and questioned during the novel. The Wakefields who visit Mr Farraday see it as a 'mock' house and the novel's politics constantly challenge its magnificence, most particularly when Lord Darlington betrays his country and the beautiful estate is re-labelled a traitor's nest.

## Comic relief and the all-licensed fool

Comedy is an important aspect of tragedy and is used by Ishiguro to heighten the tragic experiences the novel documents. Stevens can be seen as comic in his obliviousness to his own behaviour and the way he takes himself so seriously. A good example of this is when Miss Kenton approaches him in his pantry and he tries to parry her advances in a way that resembles farce. There is also comic relief in the section when Stevens tells of his father's decline. As Miss Kenton tries to warn Stevens of his father's failing aptitude she says '.... I observed

clearly a large drop on the end of his nose dangling over the soup bowls. I would not have thought such a style of waiting a great stimulant to appetite’.

In the narrative present, Ishiguro foregrounds comedy largely through Farraday’s penchant for bantering. Stevens learns that Farraday is a very different kind of employer to Lord Darlington. Farraday’s jokes are full of the sexual innuendoes we might find in dramatic comedy. When, having been granted time off from his duties, Stevens says he is going to visit Miss Kenton, Farraday mischievously says ‘My, my Stevens. A lady-friend. And at your age ...’. Stevens’ awkward and silent response is part of the humour, which heightens the tragedy given that nothing comes of the ‘assignation’.

The comedy of Stevens’ studying of the art of bantering and being a practiser of it also sharpens the tragedy. Stevens is determined to improve his skills but in doing so he will become an all licenced fool of sorts, providing the humour that Farraday wants: ‘it may well be that in America, it is all part of what is considered good professional service that an employee provides entertaining banter’. What Stevens doesn’t see is that he also performed this role unconsciously for Lord Darlington, the performing monkey at the house party.

## Tragic resolution

In classical tragedies the tragic hero usually dies. While there are deaths in *The Remains of the Day* - Lord Darlington, Stevens’ father and Reginald Cardinal - and while it seems that on Weymouth pier, Stevens is suicidal, he does not take his own life and is saved by the kindness of a stranger. In this respect the novel is not unbearably pessimistic. But on Weymouth Pier, the last setting for the tragedy, Stevens at last bears his soul and there is a deep melancholy. Here he admits to the stranger that he was a butler at Darlington Hall and that he gave his life to Lord Darlington. Here he also admits that his life is empty and he has little more to give.

But as in classical tragedy, there are some positives which emerge. The positives in *The Remains of the Day* are low key but it is possible to see that Stevens connects with life through his opening up to the stranger and through his seeing the virtues of bantering. Hitherto he had thought it foolish but now he re-evaluates because ‘in bantering lies the key to human warmth’. At the beginning and end of the novel, the focus is on the jovial American Farraday. He represents a new post-war world, a world which is not bound by class distinctions and remnants of feudalism, a world which will be more democratic. Whereas at the start Stevens had seen Farraday’s habit of bantering as disconcerting, now Stevens wants to engage with him. He says he will practise his skills and when Farraday returns from his visit to the States, Stevens will ‘pleasantly surprise him’. Stevens can only define himself by work and under Mr Farraday’s employment he will redefine himself and practise witticisms. Witticisms in the end are all Stevens has, but they are something. However, the ending of the novel could also be viewed more darkly. Unlike the retired butler who helps Stevens back into life on Weymouth pier, Stevens returns to his work at

Darlington Hall and in his desire to please Farraday, it could be that Stevens has simply changed his allegiance. It could be argued that without fealty, Stevens is nothing. Like his father he will work until his death. The novel thus ends ambiguously.