

## A Study of the Signals of the Narratee in *The Remains of the Day*

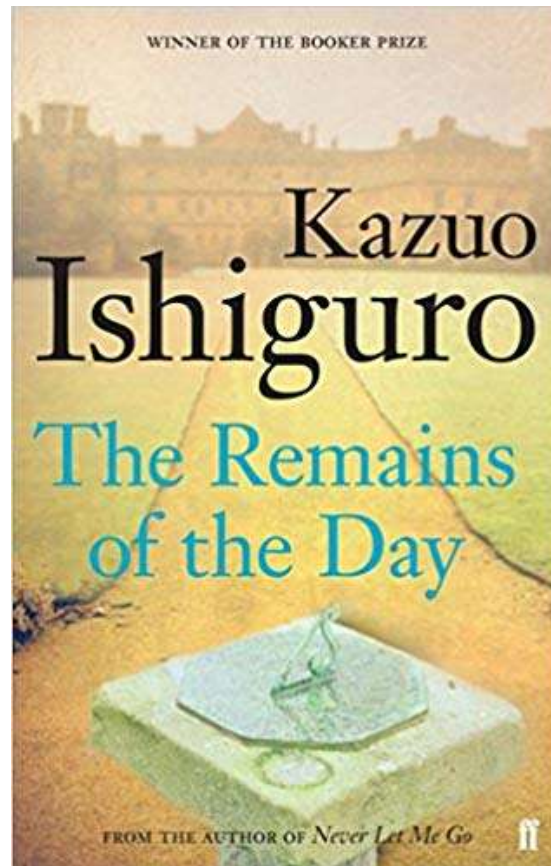
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### Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's third novel *The Remains of the Day* is in the first person narrative. An attempt has been made to apply Gerald Prince's theory of the signals of the narratee to the novel and analyze the functions of those signals. The narrator Stevens, the English butler, actively engages the narratee by addressing him using a variety of signals. The signals include direct addresses such as using pronouns, indefinite pronouns, references to shared extra-textual knowledge, over-justifications, pseudo-questions and negations. These are employed to accomplish a specific purpose. The narrator Stevens uses a lot of references directed at the

narratee because the narrative type is one in which there are a lot of explanations and motivations rather than action. The discourse dimensions are crucial to the narrator because he wants to persuade the narratee to accept his explanations and motivations on topics such as dignity, professionalism, and the greatness of the British butler. These are more important than the narrative itself. Paying attention to these signals helps in comprehending the motives, characterization and the themes of the novel.

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, Gerald Prince, Signals of the Narratee



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Kazuo Ishiguro's third novel *The Remains of the Day* has been the focus of great critical attention ever since its publication in 1989. The narrator is Stevens, the butler of a large English household owned by an American gentleman called Mr. Farraday. Stevens takes great pride in having served his former master Lord Darlington who, he believes, was engaged in great national affairs which might determine the country's future. The narrator's trust was complete in the man at the helm in spite of the latter's pro-Nazi sentiments which motivated him to indulge in questionable actions, in spite of his noble intentions. Just as the people in a democratic government place trust in the elected members, Stevens believed that his duty was only to trust his master and serve him to the best of his ability. Though the narrator appears to be an unassuming one, the post-Great War English scenario and its impact on a butler's life emerge through the limited but sharp view of the conscientious narrator. Urged by Mr. Farraday to take a break from his routine work, the narrator undertakes a trip to the West Country. As he is motoring down the road, the butler takes stock of his personal situation at the end of the day, metaphorically speaking.

The word "remains" in the title sadly echoes the connoted meanings of "the part left over after other parts have been removed, used or destroyed", "remainder", "residue", and "a person's body after death." The title suggests that whatever remains of Stevens' life, after his service under his previous master, is not his best. The memory of his service marked by extreme restraint, self-denial and the gossips about his master's Nazi connections are

distressing reminders that the best part of his life has been spent on serving a man of dubious morals. His conservative ethical standards and compulsive attitude towards work did not permit him either to have diversions or to reciprocate the love of the house-keeper Miss Kenton, despite his admiration for her. The word *remains* through its connotations imprint upon the reader's mind the wastefulness of the butler's life at two levels: personal and socio-political.

A man can best judge his stance in a social or political situation when he distances himself from the situation. Stevens undertakes a trip which facilitates this understanding. This truth of a wasteful life dawns on him only when he distances himself from the house where he serves. The vilifying gossip of the other citizens about Lord Darlington and the confession of her love for him by Miss Kenton (Mrs. Benn) help correct his own vision and put him in the right perspective. In the beginning of the travel, Stevens, the self-effacing, graceful and polite butler, uses a lot of asides to the narratee (the one addressed by the narrator) as a ploy to convince him about his motives and opinions. The novel is narrated in two modes: one in which there are only conversations between characters and the other in which the narrator reminisces his past. When he is ruminating on his bygone days he is all the while offering a lot of explanations and motivations directed at the narratee.

According to Gerald Prince, one of the pioneers of Reader-Response Criticism, there are two major categories of signals directed to the narratee: "On the one hand, there are those signals that contain no reference to the narratee or, more precisely, no reference differentiating him from the zero-degree narratee. On the other hand, there are signals that, on the contrary, define him as a specific narratee and make him deviate from the established norm" (Prince 12). For example, this sentence in *The Remains of the Day* implies the first category narratee: "Having made this announcement, my employer put his volumes down on a table, seated himself on the *chaise-longue*, and stretched out his legs" (1). Here, the intended narratee understands the language used by the narrator, its grammatical rules and the vocabulary. Beyond these, he is not endowed with any other characteristics.

The second category signals are addressed directly or indirectly to a well-defined narratee. Such signals abound in *The Remains of the Day*. The signals of the narrator characterize the type of the narratee to whom the narration is addressed. There are a lot of passages in which the narrator refers directly to the narratee by using the second-person pronoun "you" or "we" which includes the narratee. There are passages where the nationality and the profession of the narratee are suggested very clearly. The narratee addressed here is another English butler because the narrator unmistakably uses certain signals to that effect. The narratee seems to understand the difficulties ingrained in the profession of the butler and, like Stevens, he is a perfectionist when it comes to the recruitment of staff. The words addressed to the narratee suggest that he is acquainted with the professional tasks of a butler: "... but, as you know, finding recruits of a satisfactory standard is no easy task nowadays." (4) He is a conservative Englishman perhaps: "Now naturally, like many of us, I have a reluctance to change too many of the old ways" (4). The narratee is taken into confidence when the narrator

tells him that, unlike the other Europeans, Englishmen are known for their characteristic restraint: "... continentals – and by and large the Celts, as you will no doubt agree – are unable to control themselves in moments of strong emotion" (31). He is investing the narratee with the unmistakable English identity when he says, "We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect... when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman" (31). The narrator also believes that both of them share common knowledge about what some good butlers believe in: "I am in agreement with *those* who say that the ability to draw up a good staff plan is the corner stone of any decent butler's skills" (3). In addition to making him an Englishman, the narrator persuades him to agree that the landscape of Great Britain is unique: "I distinctly felt *that* rare, yet unmistakable feeling – the feeling that one is in the presence of Greatness" (19).

There is a close rapport maintained throughout between the narrator and the narratee. Prince is of the view that "the complexity of the rapports and the variety of the distances that are established between them can be significant" (20). These distances and the rapport determine to a great extent the way in which certain values are praised and others are rejected in the course of a narration and the way in which certain events are emphasized and others are passed over in silence" (Prince 20). The narrator holds a close affinity with the narratee in his arguments in support of Lord Darlington's actions, his own absolution in the whole imbroglio, the question of what makes a great butler, his reason for undertaking the trip, and the question of professional dignity. There are almost no direct references or signals to the narratee on the question of his feelings for Miss Kenton except towards the end when Miss Kenton declares her love: "Indeed – why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking" (187). This fact that he does not have any other asides to the narratee regarding his attraction towards Miss Kenton accentuates the character's restraint and his preoccupation with work during his service for Lord Darlington.

The narrator Stevens also uses the signals that are called *over-justifications* (*surjustifications*). Through these signals the narrator "explains the world inhabited by his characters, motivates their acts, and justifies their thoughts" (Prince P.15) Prince is of the view that these explanations and motivations are sometimes situated at the meta-language, meta-commentary and meta-narration levels. Sometimes the narrator asks to be excused for a poorly phrased sentence or for being rude in his expression. When the narrator talks about the superior emotional equilibrium of the British butlers over the other nationals he says, "If I may return to my earlier metaphor – you will excuse my putting it so coarsely – they are like a man who will, at the slightest provocation, tear off his suit and his shirt and run about screaming" (p. 31). When his language borders on the informal banter, he immediately asks the narratee to be excused for his manner. He again wants to be excused when he does not find the language adequate to explain what makes a butler a great one: "If you have ever had the privilege of meeting such men, you will no doubt know of the quality they possess to which I refer. But you will no doubt understand what I mean when I say it is not at all easy to define just what this quality is" (20). In the words of Prince, "These over-justifications indirectly provide clues for

the characterization of the narratee. These are attempts at “overcoming the narratee’s defenses, prevailing over his prejudices, allaying his apprehensions” (15). The narrator wants to explain what he thinks about the greatness of a butler: “You will notice I use ‘what’ rather than ‘who’ is a great butler” (20). He again wants to persuade the narratee to accept his views on *dignity*. He first gives common examples of great butlers known to both. He argues that the factor that distinguishes the great butlers from the ordinary butlers “who are merely extremely competent is most closely captured by this word ‘dignity’” (23).

The narrator also includes some signals with demonstrative meaning referring to another text or, to some extra-textual experiences shared by the narrator and the narratee. “But from my observations of Mr. Farraday over these months, he is not one of *those* gentlemen prone to *that* most irritating of traits in an employee – inconsistency” (8). The narrator colludes with the narratee by talking about an experience common to them, an experience known to them. These signals suggest that the narratee has certainly heard about *those* gentlemen and *that* quality. The narrator also believes that both of them share familiar knowledge about what some good butlers believe in: “I am in agreement with *those* who say that the ability to draw up a good staff plan is the corner stone of any decent butler’s skills” (3). In addition to making him an Englishman, the narrator persuades him to agree that the landscape of Great Britain is unique: “I distinctly felt *that* rare, yet unmistakable feeling – the feeling that one is in the presence of Greatness” (19).

There are instances in the novel where the narrator includes the narratee by using the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘us’. The narrator is of the opinion that dignity in one’s profession is very difficult to acquire. “But I believe *we* have a duty not to be so defeatist in this matter. It is surely a professional responsibility for all of *us* to think deeply about these things – so that each of *us* may strive towards attaining dignity for *ourselves*” (32). The narrator’s character as a self-righteous, duty-conscious butler who is constantly striving to achieve professional perfection emerges through these signals to the narratee. The narrator also uses impersonal expressions and indefinite pronouns to refer to the narratee: “... for our generation, I think it is fair to say, professional prestige lay most significantly in the moral worth of *one’s* employer” (87).

Stevens is obsessed with the ideas of *greatness* and *dignity*. He has an intimate tone when he gets ready to convince the narratee about what is dignity: “You will not dispute, I presume, that Mr. Marshall of Charleville House and Mr. Lane of Bridewood have been great butlers of recent times” (24). The narrator uses the narratee as a tool or a mediator to convince the readers about the idea of dignity. He wants the readers to believe that his own father was also one of the great butlers who had dignity. The narrator achieves this by holding a conversation, bordering on argument, with the narratee. “But you may think me merely biased if I say that my own father could in many ways be considered to rank with such men, and that his career is the one I have scrutinized for a definition of ‘dignity’” (24)

He furthers his argument by appealing to the reasoning powers of the narratee: “I realize that if one looks at the matter objectively, one has to concede my father lacked various attributes one may normally expect in a great butler” (24). He argues that in spite of his father’s limited language skills he was a great butler because he had the essential attribute of dignity. All other additional qualifications are ‘of superficial and decorative order’. By relating two incidents which clearly throw light on his father’s dignified role as a great butler, the narrator succeeds in using the narratee as a mediator between the reader and the narrator. Comparisons and analogies are not direct references to the narratee. However, they are indirect signals addressed to the narratee. For example, general knowledge and eloquence are desirable qualities in a butler but they are not essential. This point is made clear when the narrator uses this extra-textual reference to enlist the narratee’s experience: “But those same absent attributes, I would argue ... attributes that are attractive, no doubt, *as icings on the cake*, but are not pertaining to what is really essential” (24). The narrator compares the quiet dignity of the English butlers with that of the great English landscape. The English landscape’s lack of ostentatious drama or spectacle sets it apart. “What is pertinent is the calmness of *that* beauty, of its own greatness, and feels no need to shout it” (19). Similarly, the narratee being an English butler will definitely appreciate this analogy: “It is with such men as it is with the English landscape seen at it best as I did this morning: when one encounters them, one simply *knows* one is in the presence of greatness” (31, 32).

Prince says that some passages by the narrator are presented in the form of negations. These passages help the narrator to contradict the beliefs of the narratee. These references attack the preconceived notions of the narratee or silence his questions. “Of course, you may retort ... that if I am correct in what I am saying, one could recognize a great butler as such only after one has seen him perform under some severe test” (31). When the narrator feels that the narratee believes that a truly great butler’s dignity can be proved only under very trying circumstances, he anticipates it and vehemently argues that one can feel the greatness of a butler when such a butler is presented before one.

On more than one occasion, Stevens the narrator denies to people the fact of having worked for Lord Darlington on account of the notoriety incurred by the latter for his pro-Nazi sentiments. The narrator addresses the narratee and says: “... it may be that you are under the impression I am somehow embarrassed or ashamed of my association with his lordship, and it is this that lies behind my conduct. Then let me make it clear that nothing could be far from the truth” (96). He goes on to tell that he indulges in these white lies in order avoid unpleasant and nonsensical defamation of Lord Darlington, “a gentleman of great moral stature” (96). He offers these explanations to silence the questions of the narratee and to attack those who are slandering his master without any base. Stevens the narrator may justify his actions and claim that he is free of guilt. However, his silent acquiescing and his unquestioning compliance with the unjust dismissal of the Jewish maid-servants shock Miss Kenton as well as the reader. He was not unperturbed at the prospect of telling Miss Kenton about the dismissal, nevertheless he does not allow sentiment to creep into his duty.

These asides to the narratee help in highlighting the temperament, likes and dislikes of the narrator and other characters. The narrator has a liking for sentimental romance stories though his stated purpose is to develop his command of English. “I did at times gain a sort of enjoyment from these stories... 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?” (127). These questions are useful in silencing the reader’s doubts about his intentions.

The narrator’s absolute faith in serving his master, his penchant for maintaining professional dignity under the most trying circumstances, and his pride when he accomplishes his part are conveyed through the direct signals to the narratee. His motive to contribute his mite by serving a great master who is striving to make the world a better place is passed on the reader through these signals: “The hard reality is, surely, that for the likes of you and I, there is little choice other than to leave the fate, ultimately, in the hands of those great gentlemen at the hub of this world who employ our services” (192). He uses reason to convince the narratee about the rationale for his loyalty to his past employer: “... a butler who is forever attempting to formulate his own ‘strong opinions’ on his employer’s affairs is bound to lack one quality essential in all good professionals: namely, loyalty. Please do not misunderstand me here; I do not refer to the mindless sort of ‘loyalty’” (153).

Man has limited knowledge and trusting one’s employer is inevitable to serve him with loyalty: “One is simply accepting the inescapable truth: that the likes of you and I will never be in a position to comprehend the great affairs of today’s world, and our best course will always be to put our trust in an employer we judge to be wise and honourable ...” (153). The employer, too, is not sure about the outcomes of his actions.

Prince also includes questions as signals to the narratee. He says that “certain parts of the narrative may be presented in the form of questions or pseudo-questions” (14). These questions are directed to the narratee to resolve a problem or a doubt. The narrator is irked by the way Lord Darlington is being criticized for his pro-Nazi stance after the Great War and he also wants to absolve himself of any role that may be attributed to him. When the master was taking this decision to influence the British Government to take a pro-Nazi position, the time was unripe for understanding the full dimensions of the situation: “How can one possibly be held to blame in any sense because, say, passage of time has shown that Lord Darlington’s efforts were misguided, even foolish?”(154). Only time can tell whether these decisions were sound or not. Moreover, a butler is not to be tainted with disgrace for serving an employer with a dubious past. A butler, with his inadequate knowledge of the affairs of the world, cannot be held responsible for the actions of his master. Great butlers have served their masters assuming that the masters were noble. He suggests that there is nothing one can do to find out the credentials of all the masters one is going to serve: “... if a butler is to be of any worth to anything or anybody in life, there must surely come a time when he ceases his searching; a

time when he must say to himself: “This employer embodies all that I find noble and admirable.... This is loyalty *intelligently* bestowed. What is there ‘undignified’ in this?” (153). He is not guilty of any wrong-doing: “What is there at all culpable in such an attitude?” (153). At the end of the day of the great conference when Lord Darlington spearheads the pro-Nazi lobbying, though ‘downcast’ ‘initially, the narrator goes to bed with a feeling of ‘triumph’: “Who would doubt at that moment that I had indeed come as close to the great hub of things as any butler could wish?” (180). Pseudo-questions such as these are addressed to the narratee to settle an argument or a dispute.

An analysis of these signals undoubtedly helps the reader to achieve a more delineated reading of the text and a deeper understanding of the characterization. This type of study also facilitates an appreciation of the technical nuances and functions of the narration and a better assessment of the role of the narratee for the success of the novel.

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