

The Remains of the Day

by Kazuo Ishiguro · Language: EN

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Overview

The Remains of the Day is a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, first published in 1989. It is narrated by Stevens, an English butler who has served Lord Darlington for over thirty years. The story unfolds during a six-day motoring trip Stevens takes in 1956, after the death of his former employer and the sale of Darlington Hall to an American, Mr. Farraday. As Stevens travels through the English countryside, he reflects on his past, his professional dedication, and his relationships, particularly with Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper. The novel is a meditation on memory, regret, and the cost of a life devoted to duty.

The narrative alternates between Stevens's present journey and his recollections of the past, revealing the gradual decline of Darlington Hall and the moral compromises made by Lord Darlington in the 1930s. Stevens's unwavering loyalty to his employer blinds him to the ethical implications of Lord Darlington's actions, including his sympathy for the Nazis. Through Stevens's unreliable narration, Ishiguro explores themes of self-deception, class, and the nature of dignity. The novel's quiet, restrained prose contrasts with the emotional depth of Stevens's unspoken feelings, particularly his suppressed love for Miss Kenton, who left the house years earlier.

The book is significant for its masterful portrayal of a man who has sacrificed his personal life and moral judgment for a misguided sense of professional honor. It won the Booker Prize in 1989 and has been adapted into an acclaimed film. The Remains of the Day is a profound exploration of how people shape their identities through their work and how they confront the choices they have made. It remains a classic of contemporary literature, offering a poignant critique of Englishness, class, and the dangers of unquestioning loyalty.

Key Takeaways

- Stevens's blind loyalty to Lord Darlington leads him to suppress his own moral judgment and personal desires, illustrating the dangers of unquestioning devotion to authority.
- The novel demonstrates how memory can be unreliable and self-serving, as Stevens often justifies his past actions to avoid confronting painful truths.
- Dignity, as Stevens defines it, is a form of emotional repression that prevents genuine human connection and self-awareness.
- The English class system and the ideal of the 'gentleman' are critiqued through the relationship between Stevens and his employers.

- The political events of the 1930s, including Lord Darlington's sympathy for the Nazis, show how private individuals can be complicit in historical tragedies.
- Stevens's missed opportunity with Miss Kenton highlights the cost of prioritizing duty over love and personal happiness.
- The novel suggests that it is never too late to acknowledge one's mistakes and attempt to change, though the past cannot be undone.
- The motif of the 'remains of the day' symbolizes the remnants of one's life and the choices that define it.

Chapter Summaries

Prologue: July 1956

Stevens, the butler of Darlington Hall, introduces himself and his employer, Mr. Farraday, an American who has purchased the house. Mr. Farraday suggests that Stevens take a motoring trip while the house is closed. Stevens initially resists but eventually agrees, partly to visit Miss Kenton, who has written to him about her unhappy marriage. He reflects on the nature of 'dignity' and his professional standards, setting the stage for his journey.

Day One: Salisbury

Stevens begins his journey, noting the English countryside and his discomfort with the idea of a holiday. He recalls his father, also a butler, and his own early career. He thinks about Lord Darlington's role in international affairs in the 1920s and 1930s, including a secret conference at Darlington Hall. Stevens's memories reveal his pride in serving a great gentleman, but also hint at the questionable nature of Lord Darlington's activities.

Day Two: Mortimer's Pond, Dorset

Stevens continues his travels and remembers a significant event from 1932: the arrival of Miss Kenton as housekeeper. He describes their professional relationship and the tension that arose when he dismissed two Jewish maids at Lord Darlington's request. Miss Kenton objected, and Stevens defended his employer's decision, revealing his willingness to obey orders without questioning their morality.

Day Three: Taunton, Somerset

Stevens recalls a meeting at Darlington Hall in 1923, where Lord Darlington attempted to influence a journalist and a politician. He also remembers a conversation with Miss Kenton about his father's declining health. Stevens's father dies during a grand banquet, and Stevens continues to serve the guests, demonstrating his commitment to duty over personal grief. This episode underscores his emotional repression.

Day Four: Devon

Stevens reflects on the period when Lord Darlington became involved with the British Union of Fascists and other right-wing groups. He remembers a visit from a German diplomat, Herr Ribbentrop, and the growing anti-Semitic atmosphere. Stevens also recalls a moment when Miss Kenton was upset and he failed to comfort her, a missed opportunity that he now regrets. He begins to question the wisdom of his past choices.

Day Five: Little Compton, Cornwall

Stevens arrives at the village where Miss Kenton, now Mrs. Benn, lives. He meets her and they have a long conversation. She reveals that her marriage is unhappy but that she has decided to stay with her husband. Stevens realizes that he has lost his chance to be with her. He returns to Darlington Hall, where he reflects on his life and the meaning of dignity. He resolves to serve Mr. Farraday with renewed dedication, but also acknowledges his loneliness.

Themes

- Duty vs. personal happiness
- Memory and self-deception
- Class and social hierarchy
- Political complicity
- The meaning of dignity
- Regret and missed opportunities

Notable Quotes

- "The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing." — Stevens reflects on the nature of professional dignity in the prologue, defining the ideal butler.
- "Indeed, why should I not admit it? At that moment, my heart was breaking." — Stevens recalls the moment Miss Kenton told him she was leaving Darlington Hall to marry another man.
- "I cannot even be sure that I have done a good day's work." — Stevens's final line in the novel, as he sits on a bench at the end of his journey, questioning the value of his life's work.
- "The evening is the best part of the day. You've done your day's work. Now you can put your feet up and enjoy it." — A stranger on the pier tells Stevens this, prompting his final reflection on the 'remains of the day.'
- "I have been thinking about this for some time, and I have come to the conclusion that I should have been a butler." — Stevens's father, in a moment of confusion before his death, says this to Stevens, highlighting the generational devotion to service.

- "It is sometimes a mistake to be too eager to please." — Stevens reflects on his interactions with Mr. Farraday, realizing that his attempts to be witty may have been misguided.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *The Remains of the Day* about?

The Remains of the Day is about Stevens, an English butler who reflects on his life while on a motoring trip in 1956. He recalls his service to Lord Darlington, his relationship with Miss Kenton, and the moral compromises he made. The novel explores themes of duty, regret, and the cost of emotional repression.

Is *The Remains of the Day* worth reading?

Yes. It is a beautifully written, poignant novel that won the Booker Prize. Its exploration of memory, loyalty, and self-deception is deeply moving. The unreliable narration and subtle prose reward careful reading. It is considered a modern classic and is widely studied and admired.

How does *The Remains of the Day* end?

Spoiler: Stevens visits Miss Kenton, who is now married, and they part after she decides to stay with her husband. Stevens returns to Darlington Hall, where he reflects on his life and admits his heart is breaking. He resolves to serve Mr. Farraday better, but the ending is bittersweet, suggesting he has wasted his chances for happiness.

Who should read *The Remains of the Day*?

Readers who enjoy literary fiction with psychological depth, unreliable narrators, and historical settings will appreciate this novel. It is also a good choice for those interested in themes of class, duty, and the aftermath of World War II. Fans of Kazuo Ishiguro's other works will find it essential.

How long does it take to read *The Remains of the Day*?

The book is about 258 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 4 to 5 hours to read. Most readers finish it in a few sittings, but its dense prose may require slower reading.