

**Narratology and Unreliable Narration in the Diary Novel:
*The Butler's Diary in Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day.***

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Abstract:

Studying the structural elements of fictional narratives is not limiting, but it is rather an invitation to read literary texts in a way that brings out their multiple meanings and connotations. One of the most ingenious narrative tropes is the diary novel in which the narrative is framed within multiple diary entries. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is a modern classic that won the Booker Prize in garnered much attention among critics for its narrative techniques. It is a variation of the epistolary novel comprised of letters, but it is written in a form of a diary with entries of six days through which the story's homodiegetic narrator travels along the British countryside to visit an old acquaintance. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to examine the function of the diary as a narrative technique, and how it establishes the unreliability of the butler in the novel.

Keywords: Narratology; Unreliable Narration; The Diary Novel; Structural Analysis; Ishiguro.

1. Introduction

The Very often, studying the structural elements of fictional narratives is not limiting, but it is rather an invitation to read literary texts in a way that brings out their multiple meanings and connotations. One of the most ingenious narrative tropes is the diary novel in which the narrative, much like in the epistolary novel, is framed within multiple diary entries. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) became a modern classic after it won the Booker Prize in the same year of its publication, and it garnered much attention among critics for its narrative techniques. The novel is a variation of the epistolary novel comprised of letters, but it is written in a form of a diary with entries of six days through which Mr. Stevens, the story's homodiegetic narrator, travels along the British countryside to visit Miss Kenton. The fact that he invokes his memories in a diary is significant in terms of narratology, which begs to ask the following questions: What is the function of the diary as a narrative technique? And how does it relate to other thematic elements in the story? Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to examine the function of the diary as a narrative technique, and how it establishes the unreliability of the butler in *The Remains of the Day*.

The formal elements of the novel indicate that it is a frame story in which there is a primary or frame narrative and a secondary or embedded narrative. Therefore, the primary narrative of Ishiguro's novel is the six-day trip Mr. Stevens takes to visit his past co-worker Miss Kenton, which he narrates in diary entries. The embedded narrative is Mr. Stevens' retelling of the glories of Darlington Hall back in its heyday and his professional career as a butler twenty years ago from the time he is narrating. The diary allows the frame narrative to set the mood for the embedded one and to create a delay between the two. In narratologist terms, the frame is "a delaying device, the role of which to invoke a certain mood or atmosphere" (Barry, 2009, p.243). This delaying device imposes on the reader the perspective of Mr. Stevens' regarding the events that happened 20 years ago in Darlington Hall. Regardless of whether Mr. Stevens narration is authentic or not, the reader has no option but to sympathize with him since the events are presented to them within a diary.

2. The Diary Novel:

It is, therefore, interesting that the whole narrative, both frame and embedded are packaged in the form of a diary, which makes the whole story a diary novel. Lorna Martens (1985) defines the diary novel as “a fictional prose narrative written from day to day by a single first-person narrator who does not address himself to a fictive addressee or recipient” (p.4), in which the diarist usually “writes about events of the immediate past – events that occur between one entry and the next” (p.5). While Gerald Prince defines it as a “roman personnel, an Ich-Roman, a first-person novel in which the narrator is a protagonist in the events he records” (qtd. in Field, 1989, p.1). Ishiguro’s choice of the diary novel provides the text with a constellation of formal elements that render it an interesting work of art. Martens (1985) argues in her book *The Diary Novel* that:

The authors of the diary novels... choose the form consciously, and usually with some particular artistic end in view: to convey the impression of immediacy, to show the development of a character, to present variations on a theme, to establish a context for dramatic irony, and so forth. (p.26)

In the case of the novel at hands, all the elements mentioned by Martens are at play as will be explained.

One of the ways in which we see the character development of Mr. Stevens are the memories provided in his diary entries. Indeed, memory is central to the narration of *The Remains of the Day*. The six-day journey recorded in the diary is an act of stirring up all the dust piled up on memory. Mr. Stevens’s remembering of past events in Darlington Hall is triggered by a letter he receives from Miss Kenton telling him about the unfortunate end of her married life. In fact, it is Mr. Stevens’ hope to bring back Miss Kenton to Darlington Hall that drives the whole narrative. He undertakes an expedition that he foresees will “take [him] through much of the finest countryside of England” (Ishiguro, 1989, p.1). Throughout his journey he tries to remember, and the whole narrative goes back and forth between memories of his butler life, and current events of his six-day expedition: he

resorts to the words “as I recall”, “I can recall”, “as I remember”, “I recall”, “painful memory”, “I am pleased to recall the memory of that moment.”

Yet, recourse to memory is controversial in this case. It is unclear if Mr. Stevens’ recollection of the past is longing or regret of his unlived life, especially with Miss Kenton since his recollections started with her coming to Darlington Hall in 1922. Nevertheless, his real emotions are repressed throughout the whole narration. Niederhoff (2015) argues that Stevens rigorously represses his thoughts and feelings that go against his dignity as a butler. He further quotes Deborah Guth claiming: “the text enacts memory as an ongoing act of repression, repeating in recall the same erasure of emotion that characterized the relationship [between Stevens and Miss Kenton] itself” (p.172). The most striking moment of his emotional repression happens at the end when he meets Miss Kenton and she says:

For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr. Stevens. And I suppose that’s when I get angry over some trivial little thing and leave... After all, there is no turning back the clock now. One can’t be forever dwelling on what might have been...Indeed – Why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking. (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 239)

Even though his heart is breaking, he represses his feelings and responds with a smile: “you’re very correct, Mrs Benn. As you say, it is too late to turn back the clock” (p. 239). It is even possible that his memories are not accurate or are very much biased, since he recalls the memory of Miss Kenton vividly, unlike others. The appearance of the particle ‘as’ in expressions such as “as I recall”, and “as I remember” imply a certain amount of doubt in his recollections.

3. Unreliable Narration:

The fragile potential of memory leads to the much-discussed assertion of Stevens' unreliability as a narrator in various critical approaches. In fact, this claim is plausible if we consider the formal elements of the diary novel since it entails a first-person narrator, and therefore, subjective perspectives. As Martens (1985) argues, in a diary novel,

we hear only a single, subjective voice, that of the narrator. The narrator may change his mind, but it is nevertheless his mind; he may doubt or question himself, but it is still he who is doubting; he may narrate events whose full significance he does not understand till later, but it is always he who reports, understands, or revises. (p.34)

This allows us to see the instances where the novel provides a good number of signals of the narrator's unreliability. The first-person narrative can be the first tool to represent unreliable narration but it is not the only one. Indeed Mr. Stevens is caught idealizing the past in an attempt to glorify his own occupation and give it meaning.

Mr. Stevens constantly misinterprets himself and tries to give professional reasons for his actions that might have other motives. For instance, he refers to his habit of calling 'Miss Kenton' by her maiden name instead of Mrs. Benn, as a habit that results from the fact that he knew her during her maiden days: "you'll perhaps excuse my impropriety in referring to her as I knew her, and in my mind have continued to call her throughout these years" (Ishiguro, 1989, p.30). His calling her by her maiden name only in his mind is suspicious, since he has no problem addressing her by her married name in her presence. Not only this, but he interprets her letter as having a nostalgic tone and expressing a desire to return to Darlington Hall believing her arrival will put an end to the staff shortage.

Another sign of Mr. Stevens unreliability as a narrator can be witnessed during his journey. Whenever people ask him about Lord Darlington he denies any connection with him, yet, he gives another excuse for his denial:

Then let me make it clear that nothing could be further from the truth. The great majority of what one hears said about his lordship today is, in any sense, utter nonsense, based on an almost complete ignorance of the facts. Indeed, it seems to me that my odd conduct can be very plausibly explained in terms of my wish to avoid any possibility of hearing any further such nonsense concerning his lordship. (p.124)

Stevens ends up saying the sorts of things he is saying because he knows deep inside what to avoid, and he tries to justify his attitudes that show his life-long dealings as mistaken (Foniokova, 2006, p.91). This proves that a good deal of his recollections is object to verbal embellishment.

His memory fails him later and adds even more credibility to his unreliability when he says expressions such as: “It is possible this is a case of hindsight colouring my memory” (Ishiguro, 1989, p.87), and “it is hard for me now to recall precisely what I overheard” (p.95), “I cannot recall precisely what I said” (p.167). These admissions of his memory’s shortcomings are not surprising considering he is retelling events from more than twenty years. Furst (2007) explains that “The interplay of sharp remembering with phases of fuzziness or forgetfulness reflects the oscillation between transience and persistence” (p.538).

The mimetic nature of the diary novel creates the illusion of experiencing at firsthand what the narrator recounts. The slow retelling of the past events through the diary dramatizes the events in order to present them in a scenic way. Steven’s internally focalized narrative focuses on what he thinks and feels, giving a personal account of his psychological state. This is significant in two levels. First, narrating through a private diary often a times makes the reader believe that the privacy of the diary implies a sincere account from the narrator, given that “the assumption is that because the diarist writes secretly, he writes sincerely, and that the self in the diary is the “true” self and stands in contrast to the outward façade presented to the public” (Martens, 1985, p.38). The narrative is thus staged in a way that permits the reader to experience the events on his/her own, which further compels them

to believe in Mr. Stevens narrative despite the embellishments he performs throughout the narrative.

Second, the form makes the diary especially suited to a sympathetic presentation of the narrator. As a matter of fact, the reader can't help but sympathize with Mr. Stevens as he often calls for the audience to 'excuse' his misconceptions and 'trivial' mistakes. Furthermore, the confusion between what he narrates and how he interprets events calls for the audience's compassion. This is strongly apparent from his account of Lord Darlington's 'wisdom' and his unsuccessful libel action. Mr. Stevenson is portrayed as a naïve, ignorant of world affairs. At the conference at Darlington Halls, some deputies ask him about his political opinions, and he constantly answers: "I am very sorry, sir, but I am unable to be of assistance in this matter (Ishiguro, 1989, p.195). Moreover, Mr. Stevens is easily fooled on account of his blind faith in his master as he could not comprehend the guilt of Lord Darlington, and he believed that "his lordship's good name was destroyed", and that "some truly terrible things had been said about his lordship" (p.243). Only after years that he acknowledges: "the passage of time has shown that Lord Darlington's efforts were misguided, even foolish" (p.201). He recounts with sadness: "I *trusted*. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom" (p.243). This confession is at the same time touching and upsetting. Tretov Field (1989) affirms in his *Form and Function in the Diary Novel* that "the diarist's I is a suffering being" (p.147). In this light, Mr. Stevens appears to be a lonely and solitary figure. However, that same solitude is a potential reason for the existence of the diary.

4. Narration and Organization in the Diary Novel:

The chronologically organized entries in the diary on a regular basis indicate a sense of discipline and organization. Indeed, this claim makes sense considering that Mr. Stevens leading his duties as a butler on a highly professional level. He himself is proud of his ability to manage his staff, and most of all, his successful organization of the conference at Darlington Hall at the expense of his personal feelings, considering that his father was on a critical condition and died that same evening. The butler narrates: "In fact, I

often look back to that conference and, for more than one reason, consider it a turning point in my life. For one thing, I suppose I did regard it as the moment in my career when I truly came of age as a butler. That is not to say I consider I became, necessarily, a ‘great’ butler (Ishiguro, 1989, p.48). Additionally, his obsession with the well-ordered staff plan and his admiration of Miss Kenton’s professional excellence gives further insight into his sense of discipline and organization.

In this way, it is interesting to observe how the diary functions as a moral mirror. As a matter of fact, many “writers of diary fiction have been intuitively aware of the vital link between the intimate journal and imagery of mirrors” (Field, 1989, p.155). In a way or another, it overlaps in time between visions of the self in the present and the past. Twenty years earlier, Mr. Stevens was naïve and believed unconditionally in his master’s so-called wisdom. At the time of narration, Stevens seems to regret many of his mistakes, even though he may not admit that explicitly in his diary. For one thing he seems to be aware now that Lord Darlington had been foolish, and that he was duped to believe in that as stated earlier. Additionally, there is a key figure that might represent the epitome of his regret. Early in Stevens’ narration, and in his first day of travelling, at Salisbury, he encounters an old man that tries to persuade him to go up the path in order to have a look at a sight he won’t see anywhere else in the whole of England:

“I can see you’re in good shape for your age, sir. I’d say you could make your way up there, no trouble. I mean, even I can manage on a good day”.

I glanced up the path, which did look steep and rather rough. “I’m telling you, sir, you’ll be very sorry if you don’t take a walk up there. And you never know. A couple more years and it might be too late” – he gave a rather vulgar laugh – “Better go on up while you still can”. (Ishiguro, 1989, p.16)

This proleptic detail reflects Mr. Stevens’ regret of his un-lived life, realizing at the end that there is no way “to turn back the clock” (p.239). Therefore, the diary is like a mirror, at times distorting, and at others accurate at portraying Mr. Stevens’ inner state and the struggle between his private self

and dignified public self. This exchange between Mr. Stevens and the old man can be seen as a Freudian parapraxis that reveals his unconscious and repressed emotions.

It should be assumed that Ishiguro's choice of a butler as a profession for his narrator is not a random choice, but rather, a meticulous planning that is in harmony with the novel's narrative elements. For one thing, the butler's profession entails a certain interest in detail. This act would give justice to the act of narrating in a diary. Not only is privacy illusionary of honesty, but an interest in details would give it more credibility. One would not imagine a butler obsessed with details and carrying off his role to perfection to be an unreliable narrator:

And of course, and 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. A butler of any quality must be seen to inhabit his role, utterly and fully; he cannot be seen casting it aside one moment simply to don it again the next as though it were nothing more than a pantomime costume. (Ishiguro, 1989, p.196)

If Mr. Stevens' narration is given more credibility, his perspective of the surrounding events would be objective. This claim asserts the argument that the diary functions as a tool that generates sympathy towards Mr. Stevens. Usually, a butler is a figure that stands in the periphery. Making a peripheral character at the center of this narrative is like giving a microphone to the unnoticed subjects of great happenings. A diary is in this case, a tool of recording social and political happenings by a peripheral figure, not by great men.

5. Conclusion

It would be proper to conclude that approaching a novel like Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* through narratological analysis only does not do it full justice. Nevertheless, and as suggested before, the narrative choice is highly significant. It raises issues about narrating memory and unreliable narration at the same time. These issues have often been of great concern when incorporated within the structure of a conventional novel. Therefore, the diary is an option to enrich the narrative and give it more nuance to portray the flimsy nature of memories and the individual subjectivities. This structural analysis not only gives insight into private memory and, thus, reconstructs the self and the past, but it also makes the whole narrative a beautiful collection of intimate recollections. The Butler's diary does not condemn him for his shortcomings and unreliability, instead it reflects, just like a mirror, the fragile insides of all human beings that struggle to achieve a sense of unity in a fragmented world.

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