

# The Realization of Stevens' Autonomy in *The Remains of the Day*

WANG Jing

(College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Xiamen University, Xiamen 361005, China)

**Abstract:** *The Remains of the Day* is a masterpiece of Ishiguro Kazuo, the winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature. Based on a six-day journey, this novel intertwined Stevens' recollections and thoughts, revealing a traditional British butler's self-deception and self-suppression while confronting with the dilemma of professionalism and personal emotions. This article intends to analyze Stevens' realization of autonomy through his unutterable love toward Miss Kenton in three stages: separateness, competence and emotional autonomy.

**Key words:** *The Remains of the Day*; autonomy; love; competence; separateness; emotional autonomy

中图分类号: I106 文献标识码: A 文章编号: 1009-5039(2019)23-0217-02

As a butler and servant, Stevens requires himself to be separated from a fulfilling emotional life. His behavior is constrained: when his father passes away, he is too occupied with worrying about whether his professionalism is being undermined to mourn, something that he later reflects on with immense pride; his emotion is suppressed: any thought might compromise his dignity would be buried deeply in his mind, including his feelings about Miss Kenton. Fortunately, at the end of this novel, he finally realizes the numerous possibilities of his life that erased by his innate butler criterion, assisting him in finishing his final step in autonomy.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's English, autonomy indicates "the ability to act and make decisions without being controlled by anyone else". In this novel, instead of being controlled by any person, Stevens' behavior is controlled by his own criterion towards his occupation. As Frank (1988) pointed out, the process of acquiring one's autonomy involves with three stages: competence, separateness and emotional autonomy. This article will combine the events chronologically between Mr. Stevens and Miss Kenton and Frank's three-stages theory to prove that Stevens has realized his autonomy.

## 1 Competence

According to Frank, competence can be evaluated through decision making scale which indicates that the ability to "make important decisions and life choices without undue influence from the parent" (731). Correspondingly, Stevens should be independent of his occupation when he is making personal decisions. However, his failure at competence has been fully demonstrated in his suppressed love towards Miss Kenton.

At the beginning of this novel, having been influenced by Lord Darlington, Stevens asserts that love relationship between housekeeper and butler is "a serious threat to the order in the house" and "house keepers are particularly guilty here — who have no genuine commitment to their profession and who are essentially going from post to post looking for romance" (Ishiguro 34) who will only cast a blight on good professionalism. Therefore, he deliberately ignores Miss Kenton's affection whenever their conver-

sation is about to get involved with love.

Undoubtedly, Stevens loves Kenton. He is used to "minimize his presence by standing in the shadows" (53), but Miss Kenton just like "a series of orange shafts from the sunset breaking the gloom of the corridor" (49). Stevens arguably understands and even shares, to some extent, Miss Kenton's feelings, but he fails to reciprocate.

He is moved by the proposal that Miss Kenton accepts, and "remains standing" outside her room. Then he feels "a deep feeling of triumph" because he "preserve a 'dignity in keeping with my position'" by serving "the most powerful gentlemen of Europe" (166). That night, he completely submits himself to his position as a butler, which indicates a failure of competence.

## 2 Separateness

Separateness can be evaluated through self-other responsibility scale which "described the young adults' ability to separate from and develop investments outside of the parent-child dyad" (Frank 731). Correspondingly, separateness can be interpreted the establishment of boundaries between Stevens' life and career. In this novel, Mr. Farraday, Stevens' new master, accelerates his separateness with old-fashioned British butler.

At first, when his new master suggests him to "get to see around this beautiful country" (5), Stevens insists on his butler lifestyle. The crack of his perfect image of being a qualified butler occurs when he receives Miss Kenton's letter. Though he repetitiously emphasizes his professionalism, Stevens also keeps on reviewing Miss Kenton's letter, revealing his sentiment of missing. From this moment, he takes a step to separate his personal life and career life. In the prologue, Stevens describes a recent letter from Miss Kenton, which expressed "an unmistakable nostalgia for Darlington Hall," and he is "quite sure of this-distinct hints of her desire to return here" (Ishiguro 9). In fact, his interpretation of Miss Kenton's letter reflects that he subconsciously hopes she could return to Darlington Hall and companies him.

Stevens believes that "there seems little reason why I should not undertake my motoring trip to the West Country...But all in all,

收稿日期: 2019-08-22 修回日期: 2019-09-01

作者简介: 王靖(1998—), 女, 福建厦门人, 厦门大学2016级本科英语语言文学系英语专业学生, 主要学习研究语言学、外国文学、口笔译等方向。

本栏目责任编辑: 王力

中外文学文化研究 217

I can see no genuine reason why I should not undertake this trip” (17). Through these two applications of double negatives, he intends to emphasize the necessity of this trip. However, his intention is not only confined to recruit, but also to meet Miss Kenton. When Mr. Farraday describes this meeting as a “dubious assignments” (15), he didn’t explain his relationship with Miss Kenton. Moreover, he admits his “growing excitement at the notion that I might now actually undertake a motoring trip myself around” (11) the place where Miss Kenton lives. His re-emerged love towards her embodies that he shakes off the shackles of his self-oppression.

### 3 Emotional Autonomy

The definition of emotional autonomy is that whether a person can, based on self-awareness and self-recognition, control his own emotions, which can be evaluated through self-assertion scale (Frank 732). This scale emphasizes Stevens’ ability to consider himself to be the best evaluator of his own self-worth and is willing to risk disapproval by expressing needs or values that clashed with butler’s values.

Before the meeting, Stevens always indulges in the recollections that reveal the lost possibilities of their romantic relationship, as past interactions are recreated. Though he is never able to acknowledge the complexity of feeling he possesses for Miss Kenton, insisting only that they shared an “close working relationship” (59), his actions of repetitiously presuming Miss Kenton’s attitude and intention and convincing himself that his assumptions all prove his affections. Finally, they meet in the hotel’s tea lounge after 20 years. Under the dim light, it seems that they return to the night before Miss Kenton left, which also pervaded the atmosphere of sorrow and remorse. As he asserted before, the purpose of this trip is to find a qualified servant for Darlington Hall. Nevertheless, he never talks about this matter with her but just attempts to inquire about her life, exactly representing his beginning of emotional autonomy since he is no longer manipulated by his innate butler mind but follows his instinct for his affection.

When Stevens finally summons his courage to directly ask her married life, he, staring at the thick fog outside the window, dares not to look straight into her eyes. Afterwards, when his previous assertion that “sadness in her expression” (168) is proved to be incor-

rect because Miss Kenton states that she actually enjoys her current life, he dresses up his professional attitude (“work, work, or work”) to conceal his sadness, which is noticeable that he is no longer oppressed by his recognition of being a butler but actively utilizes his job to hide his increasingly emptiness and loneliness.

In the bus stop, Miss Kenton confides to Stevens her love towards her husband straightforwardly and mentions “a better life” they might have had, provoking “a certain degree of sorrow” within Stevens. At last, his love towards Miss Kenton is fully waken because he feels his “heart was breaking”. During their time spent at Darlington Hall, Stevens always maintains distance from discovering and admitting the feelings that existed between himself and Miss Kenton due to his personal understanding of dignity. It is only within their final encounter that Stevens tragically becomes aware of the lost potential of his life with Miss Kenton.

### 4 Conclusion

Some critics doubt about his awakening during this trip. For example, Ma (2010) states that this trip is just a temporary relief from the oppression of being a butler because without Miss Kenton, Stevens has to return to Darlington Hall alone to act as a perfect servant, which is just like going around in circles.

However, from the transition of his attitude towards his suppressed love towards Miss Kenton, it is obvious that he eventually breaks through the shackles of a butler’s mind. Admittedly, he will go back to Darlington Hall to continue his occupation as a butler. But it will just denote his identity instead of his self-recognition, which precisely reveals his realization of autonomy.

### References:

- [1] Frank, Susan J., et al. Young Adults’ Perceptions of Their Relationships with Their Parents: Individual Differences in Connectedness, Competence, and Emotional Autonomy[J]. *Developmental Psychology*, 1988, 24(5):729-737.
- [2] Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*[M]. New York: Vintage Books, 1998
- [3] 马宗燕. 寻找尊严之旅——从精神分析的角度解读《长日留痕》[J]. *文学与艺术*, 2010(3):14-15.

[通联编辑:王力]