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## **Professional, Personal, Societal : The Detrimental Effects of Identity Revolving around Career in Kazuo Ishiguro's Remains of the Day**

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## Abstract

In Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*, Mr. Stevens immerses himself in his work as a butler until it becomes his identity. In Stevens's quest to be superlative at his job, he accepts his role in society, adopting an extreme view of dignity that constrains him rather than providing him a sense of self. Although his interpretation of dignity and obedience to the social hierarchy helps him fulfill his desire to be a butler of the highest order, it hampers his development as a person. In discussing Stevens, critics have focused on his desire to fulfill his duties as the perfect butler; however, a key aspect not discussed is the British class system's role in his decisions and how it affects his view of dignity. Stevens shapes this view through his place in the British social hierarchy, as he believes that dignity means never wavering from the role given to one in society. Through David Cannadine's *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (1999) and Lucy Lethbridge's *Servants: A Downstairs View of Twentieth-century Britain* (2013), this thesis integrates ideas on the British hierarchy and the life of servants to understand the role they have in Stevens's choice to have his identity revolve around his career. Raymond Williams's notes on individuals, careers, and society are used to discuss how his decisions affect each aspect leading to Stevens's mental stagnation and the damage society incurs when individuals adhere too closely to the status quo simply to maintain the hierarchy.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Professional, Personal, Societal: The Detrimental Effects of Identity Revolving around Career in Kazuo

*Ishiguro's Remains of the Day*

By

Salvatore Cerchio

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

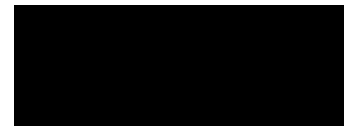
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Montclair, NJ

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One is simply accepting an 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,  
and to devote our energies to the task of serving him  
to the best of our ability.

—Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*

In Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Remains of the Day*, Mr. Stevens, the supreme butler at Darlington Manor, justifies his trust of Lord Darlington by claiming ignorance of the world affairs about which Darlington is supposedly an expert. Stevens feels the same about societal matters, deferring to his employer. It is not a foreign concept, as David Cannadine points out in *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, but rather one of domestic politics: "Much interwar Tory propaganda was devoted to stigmatizing and demonizing the working class, or at least the trade-union and industrialized section of it" (139). Propaganda—when successful—can weaken a class, leading people to believe that they are incapable of controlling their own lives, removing any reason to challenge social norms. The results of such propaganda can be viewed through the behavior of Mr. Stevens, who, by accepting his place in the social hierarchy, turns to his employment for fulfillment in his life.

*The Remains of the Day* explores the significance of Mr. Stevens's choice to center his existence on his job because he adheres to the British class system. His interpretation of dignity plays an important role in his decision; it is why he never breaks from his class and professional

persona. He takes pride in pleasing his employer, overseeing the polishing of forks instead of sitting at his father's deathbed or offering comfort to a coworker. Stevens's compliance in service to the British class system and his employer hides the detrimental effects it has on his personal self as he promotes a social hierarchy not predicated on helping people of the lower classes. Ishiguro's novel reveals the harm an individual and society incur when an individual follows orders without hesitation.

## Literature Review

Literary criticism of *The Remains of the Day* has focused on Stevens. The critique of Stevens focuses on the negatives of his character and provides a look into how Stevens's behavior is harmful to him. A point that I would like to add is how the idea of class plays a role in his choices.

In her work "Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*: The Empire Strikes Back," Meera Tamaya takes an interesting approach to analyzing the character of Mr. Stevens, as she views his relationship with Lord Darlington as a colonized individual and colonizer. She uses the comparison to discuss how *The Remains of the Day* reflects the relationship between Britain and its former colonies (46). Stevens adopts the manners of his employer just as the colonized would adopt the manners of British society, but just as the colonized would never be considered British, Stevens would never be seen in the same manner as his employer: "The situation is familiar to the Westernized native: culturally displaced, he neither belongs to his own society nor can he ever hope to attain a comfortable membership in his adopted country as he continues to wander in an existential and cultural limbo" (53). Tamaya says that Great Britain culturally displaces the colonized individuals because when Great Britain brings its values to the colonies, the natives



adopt them, but adopting the values does not give the natives a new identity; it only leads them to feel misplaced. Even when the newly Westernized natives venture to live in Great Britain, the British view them as the Other since they are not accepted as authentically British (53). Similar to the colonized individual, Stevens may be able to adopt the manners of a lord; however, he will never be one. Tamaya mentions how the British class system affects the thinking of its citizenry, but she focuses more on Stevens's connection to the colonized than on his lower-class status. In discussing Ishiguro's critique of British society, Tamaya states, "The British class system makes such role-playing mandatory as every individual is expected to act out the role assigned to him/her at birth. A crucial element of such 'acting' is the rigorous submission of the private self to the demands of the public persona" (48). Tamaya notes that a society determines a person's position from the moment they are born, so British society will always view the low-class individual—like the colonized individual—similarly, whether they are a poor child or an accomplished butler. Britain's traditionally strict adherence to the class system prevents a person from changing, so they must allow their public persona to overtake the personal self.

While also mentioning the colonized and colonizer, Mark Rollins's "United Manlike through Domestic Service: The Remains of Carlyle's Feudal Labor Model in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*," mainly focuses on the detrimental effects of domestic servitude in the homes of the aristocracy. Focusing on Thomas Carlyle's idea of work as a divine mandate, Rollins recounts how Stevens follows Carlyle's model in which workers should view their jobs as noble sacrifices to a higher calling: "Regarding his work as affectionate, sacrificial service to his employer enables Stevens to evade the transactional nature of his labor. At no point during his exhaustive description of his work at Darlington Hall does Stevens ever mention his wages" (283). Rollins argues that Stevens's view of his job is similar to how Carlyle envisioned the

factory boss who makes connections with employees beyond paying wages. In not taking a knowable wage, Stevens can romanticize his job and inflate the trivial tasks he completes because it seems nobler. Those trivial tasks, Rollins says, emasculate Stevens since women traditionally handle most of the day-to-day chores Darlington assigns him (285). Rollins compares Stevens to the woman in Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House," whose specific role is to please her husband: "Stevens occupies a position similar to that of the idealized Victorian wife, described as 'the angel in the house.' He is 'the butler in the house,' who renounces his own desires to serve lovingly at his master's side" (284). In discussing the feminine nature of Stevens's tasks and his attempts to inflate their importance, Rollins points out Stevens's demeaning chores and desire to avoid the truth that his job is not as important as he makes it out to be. The connection between Carlyle's idea of work and Stevens is solid, but in neglecting to mention Stevens's class, he perhaps misses an argument for why Stevens leads a subservient life.

The idea of work as divine loosely connects with Kwame Appiah's argument on individuality in "Liberalism, Individuality, and Identity." Appiah notes that Stevens views the worth of his life through the context of his job, and Stevens's decisions lead him to be a failure:

It is a failure, in part, because he is and intends to be servile. It is important here that servility entails not acting as a servant—which is what Burke plainly thought—but rather behaving like a slave. Servility isn't just happily earning your living by working for another; it's acting as an unfree person, a person whose will is somehow subjected to another's. (315)

Edmund Burke did not view everyone as equal (311). While Burke would view Stevens as an ordinary man, he would not consider Stevens an enslaved individual. However, Appiah points

out that Stevens's desire to serve is not the outlook of a servant but that of an enslaved individual, an "unfree person" who allows others to subjugate him (315). Yet a problem with thinking that Stevens is an enslaved individual is that he does not view himself as one and would argue that he is fulfilling his role in society. Enslaved individuals also do not "allow" others to own them freely, while Stevens willingly works for Darlington. To compare Stevens to a slave is an interpretation that does not engage with the novel's portrait of British society.

In an idiosyncratic analysis, Richard Russell reads the novel as fantasy in "Monsters of Anti-Semitism in Ishiguro's Rural English Landscape: Re-reading *The Remains of the Day* as Ethical Fantasy Novel"; he argues that Stevens is the story's monster. He claims that people do not recognize the monster that Stevens truly is because of how ordinary he appears; however, Stevens's ordinariness allows Darlington to sway him to dismiss Darlington's fascist tendencies as problematic and support them himself (442). Again, Stevens's social status should not be understated. Stevens is ordinary because he has no choice but to be ordinary. Russell says that "On the night in question, in 1935, Stevens chooses to allow himself to look unintelligent and uninformed about political and cultural affairs so that he may reinforce Darlington's and his guest's low opinion of those classes beneath the aristocracy, thus proving the supposed superiority of fascism and the outmoded nature of democracy" (448). Stevens uses his ordinary status to validate the thinking of Lord Darlington and his friends because they associate his response with the general population. However, Stevens has no choice but to act ignorant; even if he has an answer to the questions, he risks making his employer look foolish by not acting as he should.

In "How the Butler Was Made to Do It: The Perverted Professionalism of *The Remains of the Day*," Rob Atkinson discusses how Stevens is similar to lawyers in modern society. Unlike

critics such as Russell, who argue that Stevens lacks morality, Atkinson makes the case that Stevens actually does have morality, but Stevens ties his morality to his employer (186). Tying Stevens's morality to Darlington's allows Atkinson to make the argument that Stevens is a product of his profession. In this, Stevens follows the idea of "neutral partisanship" (185). Focusing on the first part of the term, Atkinson states, "The first principle, neutrality, lets the professional claim personal disinterest in, or even antipathy toward, client ends and mortal nonaccountability for helping to advance them" (185). "Neutral partisanship" would explain Stevens's demeanor in following through with Darlington's order to fire the two Jewish maids. If he is following this way of thinking, Stevens is simply carrying out a command by his employer and, in his mind, doing nothing wrong since he is fulfilling the duties that his profession entails. Atkinson does mention a difference between Stevens and neutral partisanship in that the latter is a theory, while the former does not mention any legal or professional theories besides his own thinking (189). In this regard, Atkinson makes a note of the social hierarchy in play but does not go into detail about it.

Focusing on how Stevens's view of dignity shapes his character and the results such views produce, Michel Terestchenko's "Servility and Destructiveness in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*" concentrates on the political implications. Terestchenko argues that Stevens's dignity is one of professional obedience: "More disturbingly, however, it is the ethics of 'duty' and dignity that leads the protagonist to obey destructive orders simply because he accepts the legitimacy of the authority which issues them" (78). The assertion is similar to Atkinson's point about "neutral partisanship," in which Stevens can claim no culpability for the decisions made by Darlington since Stevens can claim to keep his opinions to himself, but it differs because Terestchenko is saying that Stevens actively accepts Darlington's views as

legitimate. In this telling, Stevens agrees with Darlington—not just carrying out orders—which is destructive in the sense that it can lead to social destruction (84). The idea of social destruction is an important point to this paper, as it is argued as the inevitable conclusion of disregarding the self and developing a tragic sense of professionalism.

Although not directly discussing *The Remains of the Day*, Lucy Lethbridge's *Servants: A Downstairs View of Twentieth-century Britain* and David Cannadine's *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* help connect Stevens's decisions to adhere to the social hierarchy of Great Britain. Lethbridge discusses how the butler sets the overall tone for the house (51) and also has no room for growth outside their profession (58). Cannadine highlights how during the twentieth century, the social hierarchy was "successfully refurbished, reconstructed, and reinvented" (125). His chapter on class during the twentieth century discusses the arguments people gave in favor of a hierarchy, such as the use of Charles Darwin's ideas on evolution justifying inequality (128) and the order that it brought about to society (127-28). He also touches upon how the upper class was able to sell the idea of the hierarchy to the other classes (126). These two works help bring to light why Stevens behaves the way he does.

## Dignity

While Stevens exhibits traits of a dignified individual, his interpretation of the term *dignity* turns it into a tragic flaw. Someone with dignity is worthy of respect or honor and has pride in themselves. It is easy to see how Lord Darlington possesses it; he is a member of the aristocratic class who can influence powerful people. Despite his low status and job, Stevens has dignity, as he is a remarkable butler who takes pride in his work. He receives praise from numerous guests at Darlington Hall, and Lord Darlington trusts him to coordinate the Conference

of 1923—the consequential meeting in which foreign politicians and other influential individuals met to help Germany after the Treaty of Versailles left the country devastated. However, the problem is that Stevens’s interpretation of the word is misguided. Stevens states, “‘dignity’ has to do crucially with a butler’s ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits” (42). In Stevens’s view, dignity is to know one’s role in society and never waver from it. The problem is that, if someone is to stand up for what they believe in, they are showing dignity, but based on Stevens’s interpretation standing up for himself would not be dignified. Standing up for himself would put him at odds with his profession and standing in society. This would be the opposite of what he believes about the trait. His interpretation is closer to the idea of pride in oneself, but even that is contradictory, as pride will lead an individual to stand up for their beliefs, above accepting their role.

His misguided understanding of dignity trains him to shut off his emotions and accept his place in society. His point, “not to abandon the professional being he inhabits,” leaves no room for emotions because they can interfere with one’s ability to perform their duties. In an interview with Graham Swift, Ishiguro says, “He [Stevens] somehow thinks that turning yourself into some animal that will carry out the duties you’ve been given to such an extent that you don’t have feelings, or anything that undermines your professional self, is dignity” (37). Ishiguro points out that Stevens’s idea of dignity is a contemptible one in which a person forgoes a quality that separates humans from animals. His point can be taken a step further to tie into the argument about the social hierarchy of Britain and Stevens’s devotion to it. For a hierarchy to flourish, people have to accept it, and by being an “animal,” Stevens is trained to do only what he needs to do. Stevens does not view being emotionless as a negative because it is what English society encourages.

For an astute look into British culture, E. M. Forster's "Notes on English Character" is elucidating. While Stevens did not attend one of the public schools that Forster discusses, Stevens will have picked up some of the qualities in emulating the people in power he serves, and as public schools were preeminent, people would look to them as guidance for how to behave. Forster notes the failures of British schools: "And they go forth into a world that is not entirely composed of public-school men or even of Anglo-Saxons, but of men who are as various as the sands of the sea; into a world of whose richness and subtlety they have no conception. They go forth into it with well-developed bodies, fairly developed minds, and undeveloped hearts" (5). Forster's description of British men is that they are educated and well-nourished, but when it comes to emotions, they understand little as emotions cannot be taught and are discouraged, as they can distract individuals from obtaining their goals of perfection. Stevens is the epitome of the English man in his profession and decorum skills, but his training has led him to an "undeveloped heart." When given a chance to comfort coworkers, such as when Miss Kenton's aunt dies, he turns the discussion back to work because, while he understands that she is sad, he cannot express his compassion, as it will distract from the work that must be completed to keep the house running smoothly.

The decision to close his emotions in order to be dignified leads to an obedience that prevents Stevens from understanding that his compliance to the social hierarchy undermines democracy. His idea is restricting and a way for people with power to keep it. Ishiguro supports this idea in his interview with Swift: "The book debates that notion of dignity—not having emotions—against another concept of dignity. The dignity given to human beings when they have a certain amount of control over their lives. The dignity that democracy gives to ordinary people" (37). Dignity gives ordinary people like Stevens personal respect, and people like Lord

Darlington and his guest Mr. Spencer do not want ordinary people to have that power.

Darlington's reason is that some people are not smart enough: "The few people qualified to know what's what are talked to a standstill by ignorant people all around them" (198). Although Lord Darlington is a puppet for the Nazis when he says this to Stevens, his view is that only certain people should be able to make decisions because they truly know what is right. The ignorant people Darlington refers to can be one of two groups: elected politicians or those who elect the politicians. Either way, Darlington's idea is to disenfranchise millions of people by allowing a select few to make the decisions. Giving ordinary people control over government will threaten Lord Darlington and other influential people's power, as their voices will become smaller as more are added and potentially make governing more difficult. Stevens adheres to this way of thinking and assumes he should have little control of his life, and his views justify that thinking; however, as Democratic Socialist Harry Smith demonstrates in Stevens's stop at Moscombe, Ishiguro wants the reader to know that Stevens's dignity is flawed: "The whole world would be a few masters and millions upon millions of slaves. And I don't need to remind anyone here, there's no dignity to be had in being a slave. That's what we fought for and that's what we won. We won the right to be free citizens" (186). Unlike Smith, who views dignity as personal freedom, Stevens's idea of dignity is confining instead of liberating. Cannadine makes an interesting point that can be connected to the two men and their way of thinking about dignity. He discusses how conservatives view freedom as the freedom to be unequal so that hierarchies must be maintained (129). In this thinking, Stevens's views of dignity align with the conservatives, as he sees nothing he can do to change.



## Butler over Self

The British social class system discourages the idea of an individual breaking from their place in society. According to Raymond Williams, the term “individual” started as a term for indivisible, a necessary connection, but the term has evolved to include “individuality” (114). With the emergence of the term “individuality,” a sense of personal self emerges: “The emergence of notions of individuality, in the modern sense, can be related to the break-up of the medieval social, economic and religious order. In the general movement against feudalism there was a new stress on man’s personal existence over and above his place or function in a rigid hierarchical society” (116). Williams’s point is that the individual breaks from the restraints of a traditional social hierarchy to establish a sense of self. However, Ishiguro shows us an individual who does not look to break from his place in the hierarchy; instead, he promotes it. Stevens is content with his place in the social hierarchy because his sole purpose in life is to be a great butler, and according to the Hayes Society, a society made up of the preeminent butlers of the time, a butler must work for a distinguished house and possess dignity to be considered great. Based on such criteria, Stevens succeeds, as he works his way up to be Lord Darlington’s butler and, while his idea of dignity is problematic, takes great pride in his work. He sets the example for a butler’s behavior, and while he sometimes worries about how to complete a task or respond to a situation, he does not doubt his final decision. However, Stevens’s pursuit leads him to justify and reinforce the hierarchy of society to achieve a successful life, preventing him from being anything more than a butler.

In accepting the social hierarchy, Stevens devotes his life to his employment, leaving him unable to separate himself from his work. The inability to separate himself from work makes him deferential to those around him, acknowledging the difference in status between himself and

those around him, yielding power to them. To a butler, it is an essential attribute because they must always put others before themselves; however, Stevens's interactions with the villagers of Moscombe and the doctor show how his views on dignity are tragic, as he consistently defers to others, even when they are not his employer. His behavior demonstrates a devotion to the social hierarchy. Referring back to Tamaya's quote, "The British class system makes such role playing mandatory as every individual is expected to act out the role assigned to him/her at birth" (48), Stevens is keeping with his role of being lower class. Although the doctor is not his employer, he occupies a higher status than Stevens, so Stevens cannot break away from the deference he practices in his profession. The doctor addresses Stevens's deference, saying, "I wish you wouldn't call me 'sir' like that all the time, Mr. Stevens" (208). Stevens's use of "sir" indicates each man's status in the social hierarchy. It is the same term the villagers use to address Stevens when they mistake him for a lord. Stevens cannot allow himself to address the doctor informally, as he will dismiss the difference in status between the two and drop his professional demeanor.

Regarding class, one can view the interaction between Stevens and the doctor as an example of the unequalness that many people believe society requires. According to Cannadine, conservatives such as William Hurrell Mallock and Lord Hugh Cecil argued for the hierarchy in society using Charles Darwin's idea of evolution (128-29). The thinking was that "inequality, was the natural result of natural selection: men, like animals, were not born equal, nor could they be made equal" (128-29). Although Stevens has just met the doctor, his behavior toward him displays that Stevens understands that the doctor is someone of higher status, and because of Stevens's thinking, he treats the doctor with the kind of deference he would treat anyone of that status. He reinforces the idea of inequality when—despite the doctor's request—Stevens can

only call him “doctor” instead of his name. Using the term “doctor” is another way for Stevens to be deferential in which he acknowledges the other’s elite profession.

The inability to separate himself from work extends to those outside of the upper class and prevents him from placing himself before others, even when doing so would assert his individuality. It is one thing to be deferential to the upper-class doctor, but Stevens defers to the villagers, as well. This scene reinforces Stevens’s devotion to the hierarchy because the villagers are not of the same status as the doctor but are still above Stevens as they are not servers beholden to others. When the villagers mistake his identity, Stevens never corrects them that he is not a lord and allows the villagers to continue with the assumption: “I could not have enlightened these people without creating much embarrassment all around” (193).

“Embarrassment” is the key to Stevens’s choice. When the village people mistake him for a lord and treat him as such, Stevens believes correcting them would be embarrassing for them and impolite. The willingness to spare them the uncomfortable feeling is why Stevens allows the villagers to dictate his identity. He has the opportunity to break away from the role of the butler, correct the villagers, and assert himself; however, his belief in dignity prevents him from establishing a sense of self. He never sheds the practices of a great butler in order to fulfill his commitment. It is key to understanding the negative effects it has on him. As Tamaya states, “A crucial element of such ‘acting’ is the rigorous submission of the private self to the demands of the public persona” (48); therefore, at this moment, Stevens is embracing and following society’s expectations of his class and profession. People can view it as a silly moment of mistaken identity, but when taken to the extreme, the inability to claim an identity allows him to be easily persuadable.

Terestchenko argues that Stevens “emerges as a servile and obedient person, all the more ready to follow destructive orders because he has elevated renunciation of the self, absence from his true self, ideologically, to the rank of virtue” (87). In renouncing his self, Stevens is servile and follows any orders, no matter the morality, which the reader sees in the moment of Stevens abetting his employer in helping fascism flourish, but Stevens does not see the danger in his decisions. Stevens is following the only path that society has laid out for him, in which being obedient is seen as a virtue, in which case, Stevens would be praised for not straying from his social class.

Looking at the idea of “honors” of the Primrose League in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century can shed light on why Stevens would allow the villagers to dictate his identity. The Primrose League was founded to promote a hierarchal view of Britain and had a diverse membership of people from the country and towns (Cannadine 125-26). Their bestowment of “honors” to its members was a different approach from previous notions, as “honors were not just about rewarding people in a way that was appropriate to their achievement; they were also about rewarding people in way that was appropriate to their social rank” (126). Stevens is never said to be a member of the Primrose League, but his behavior among the villagers is a situation in which he would qualify as achieving an honor. The achievement is that Stevens knows his place in society and does not deviate from it, despite being around people that would allow him to. He continues to be deferential to people, despite it being a ruse. This idea of “honors” based on social rank extends to Stevens’s inability to create a sense of self.

After Darlington’s death, Stevens has a chance to pursue something new with his life, but because of his choice to strictly follow the class system, he cannot do so as he has no self. He cannot leave Darlington Hall because he has no identity to identify with besides being a butler,

so he becomes equivalent to a piece of furniture left behind by the prior occupant. Stevens admits as much when talking to a former butler at the end of the novel, following his conversation with Miss Kenton in Weymouth:

“So you stayed on with the house. Part of the package.” He turned and gave me a grin.

“Yes,” I said, laughing a little. “As you say, part of the package.” (242)

By being “part of the package,” Stevens acknowledges that he believes he has nowhere else to go. Prior to this moment, Stevens has his epiphany that his life has been far from the ideal version he recalls. Stevens admits that he was a follower, unable to break from the British expectation of butlers. Instead of living out the rest of his life for himself, he decides to change himself at 70 for his new employer. Meera Tamaya explains, “In other words, Stevens will learn a new trick to perform for a new master. Even as he has acknowledged the waste of his life in service to a discredited master, he prepares to devote the rest of his life to another” (54). Tamaya notes that Stevens has nowhere else to go but back to the former Darlington Hall, but coupling this thought with the reality of a butler provides the reader with why Stevens does this. This decision is a logical conclusion for Stevens. In her study, Lethbridge notes that, despite all their abilities, “A butler with a gentlemanly mien and a talent for leadership was nonetheless stuck for ever in the servants’ hall—and yet not quite of it” (58). Despite possessing abilities to excel at other professions, a butler’s professional journey ended in a prestigious house. Finding new work was never an option because a butler has no other options.

## The Professional Self Is the Only Self

By renouncing his self outside of his profession, Stevens develops a problematic professional identity centered on obedience. Williams designates the idea of “career” as “continuity if not necessarily promotion or advancement, yet the distinction between a career and a job only partly depends on this and is often associated also with class distinctions between different kinds of work” (20). A person with a career can look for advancements as they gain experience, but the person with merely a job will see no advancement, as there are no prospects for growth or change. Because of his class, Stevens’s only form of advancement is serving people of higher status. Stevens goes to significant lengths to be a consummate professional to give his life meaning; however, in pursuit of recognition, he forms a view of the duties of his profession that deepen the hold that his social class has on him.

Stevens’s incessant need to accommodate his master reinforces a stereotype of the lower class as unintelligent and beneath others. Cannadine reaffirms this stereotype with a reference to Orwell, “Like many people from his social background, George Orwell had been brought up to believe that the working class were ‘stupid, coarse, crude, violent’—and they smelt” (139). The irony behind the thought is that the aristocrats and other influential people rely on those of the lower class to organize conferences and the house staff, which entails a level of expertise. When Lord Darlington has Mr. Spencer over, Mr. Spencer attempts to prove that lower-class citizens should not be allowed in a country’s decision-making. To prove it, Mr. Spencer questions Stevens on current affairs. Stevens understands that he is supposed to appear clueless to the questions and responds with, “‘I’m very sorry, sir,’ I said, ‘but I am unable to be of assistance on this matter’” (195). His reply to the questions fulfills the passive role expected of the butler by saying he cannot help because the role of the butler is to refrain from engaging with matters that

do not pertain to him. Following the interaction, the reader perceives a rare moment when Stevens admits to the uncomfortable nature of the moment, but he quickly dismisses it: “you will no doubt agree that any decent professional should expect to take such events in his stride” (196). His reply and justification are rooted in his ideas on dignity through the social hierarchy. Stevens believes that his profession requires him to act in this manner, and he takes pride in his behavior, but the level of obeisance he displays in living up to his interpretation of the trait is negative. His behavior does reflect well on Lord Darlington, and Stevens gains recognition from him; however, Stevens’s behavior reinforces negative views of the lower class. The disregard for the lower class’s ability is an idea shared by members of the Conservative party, such as Lord Hugh Cecil, who believed that hierarchy was preordained, leading to an inequality that could not be avoided and was a satisfactory way for a society to function (Cannadine 146). Stevens’s answers to Mr. Spencer’s questions strengthen the point of inequality being necessary. Stevens provides concrete examples of a lower-class person having no opinion on an important matter, providing the reader with an example of Stevens’s dignity being confining, not liberating, as it is used to keep people like Stevens in their lower-class status.

The accommodating nature of Stevens’s professional identity locks him into a strict professional and societal code to follow orders, no matter the consequence. When Miss Kenton confronts Stevens about firing the two Jewish workers because of their religion, Stevens reminds her that they are not to think: “Surely I don’t have to remind you that our professional duty is not to our own foibles and sentiments, but to the wishes of our employer” (149). Understanding his choice of words provides an apparent reason for why: “foible” and “sentiments” are both terms that denigrate independent thought in a person. Stevens’s use of the words “foibles” and “sentiments” together equates one with the other: if someone expresses their thoughts, especially

emotional ones, they are not adequately performing their professional duties. It also goes against the societal belief that a butler should not question an aristocrat. Questioning Darlington would only be detrimental to Stevens because questioning Darlington would be an act of defiance, providing no advantage to a butler with no other avenues for success nor strived to be anything else. Lord Darlington could report the defiance to others, preventing Stevens from ever working again as a butler to a prestigious individual. The idea of losing out on an opportunity to work for a prestigious employer would greatly affect Stevens's standing in society. Cannadine points out that "nonroyal public life remained built around hierarchy" (145); therefore, Stevens will lose what little recognition he had if he was forced to work for a common man or possibly lose the chance to work for anyone if he was viewed as problematic. His place in society was predicated on his employer.

To continue working for Darlington, Stevens displays an unquestioning loyalty reminiscent of his father's loyalty, showing a familial cycle of acceptance of the Stevens's role in the British social hierarchy. On the night of his father's death, Stevens does not break from his role, despite the severity of his father's situation. He is too preoccupied tending to Lord Darlington's guest during the Conference of 1923 than to be with his father. His views formed from hearing his father's stories about serving to perfection prevent him from being able to separate from his duties: "Miss Kenton, please don't think it unduly improper in not ascending to see my father in his deceased condition just at this moment. You see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now" (106). Stevens's desire to live up to the standards his father set requires him to ignore his dying father—a move that his father, through his own experience when, without hesitation, served a general who was responsible for his Stevens's brother's death, would have approved of—and return to the conference he was organizing.



Atkinson believes his actions are because of a misinterpretation of his father's stories: "Stevens's signal lapse was his failure to interpret adequately the stories from which he derived his fundamental values, to apply those values in the moral dilemma he faced, and to see how they fit into a coherent whole, a viable whole—in a word, a life" (218). Atkinson points out that Stevens's misunderstanding of his father's stories prevents him from becoming a complete person. It is a solid point, and by factoring in Stevens's adherence to the British social hierarchy, one can further understand why Stevens does this. According to Lethbridge, the butler is "the model gentleman, his life given over to public service and his general demeanor both dignified and modest" (50). Despite his father dying, Stevens accepts the butler's role and refuses to break from his professional demeanor. Darlington rewards him with praise in the end, as the conference is a success, but in earning professional success, he loses the last moment of his father's life and never laments about the moment.

The ability to overlook immoral acts and accept his role passively runs deep in British ideas of masculinity. It is a notion that Stevens shares—to build a military analogy—with the soldiers in Lord Alfred Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade":

Theirs not to make reply,  
Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do and die. (Tennyson, lines 5-7)

Like the soldiers in the poem, Stevens believes he is not to have any opinion. In the poem and novel, the soldiers and Stevens follow their orders without hesitation, no matter the consequences. They are expected to give up their sense of self to serve a higher purpose, and while serving others can be noble, it can also be a way of control. As Rollins notes, "Both systems persuade workers to accept their loss of agency by encouraging them to exaggerate the

importance of their labor to regard their self-abnegation as acts of masculine heroism” (285). In giving up their agency, the individuals become nothing more than a cog in the machine of society. Their decision to obey submissively exemplifies the stoicism expected from the citizen of Great Britain. As it is a general trait of British society, it constructs a narrative that citizens must abide by society’s standards, even when those standards are detrimental to the individual.

## Promoting Social Stagnation

The health of a society is only as strong as its individuals. According to Williams, the word “society” has come to mean two different ideas: “our most general term for the body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live; and our most abstract term for the condition in which such institutions and relationships are formed” (228). In the first instance, individuals are the ones who occupy the institutions, and these individuals interact with each other, creating a society. The second idea discusses the formation of society through institutions and relationships, but even though the idea does not mention the individual, the individual affects them. Because of the importance of engaged citizens, a society can begin to crumble when people choose to detach themselves from it. Ishiguro’s characterization of Stevens presents the reader with a character who chooses to be disengaged and follow society’s prescribed social classes harming society in the process.

In accepting his social and professional role, Stevens promotes an unequal class system in which there is a strict hierarchy with a specific ruling class. He argues that people like him do not possess the necessary abilities to make a difference:

“The fact is, such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of those such as you and I, and those of us who wish to make our mark must realize that we best do so by

concentrating on what is within our realm; that is to say, be devoting our attention to providing the best possible service to those great gentleman in whose hands the destiny of civilization truly lies” (199).

Citizens in his position are not suited to make decisions that will affect the world; therefore, they should think only about serving the people Stevens believes capable of making those decisions. He frequently expresses that servants should have no freedom and should give themselves to their aristocratic employers. Stevens expresses this opinion when discussing how a butler can make something of his life: “However, if a butler is to be 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. I will hereafter devote myself to serving him.’ This is loyalty intelligently bestowed” (201). Stevens argues that life splits people into specific categories, and for a butler, the only way they can find a meaningful life is to accept that they will never be able to change their stance in life. His philosophy on serving is dangerous, as Stevens’s words imply that he advocates making himself a slave to his lord and wanting other butlers to do the same. This philosophy relates back to Appiah’s point about Stevens’s life: “It is a failure, in part, because he is and intends to be servile. It is important here that servility entails not acting as a servant—which is what Burke plainly thought—but rather behaving like a slave” (315). A significant problem is that Stevens’s thinking is not novel, and, according to Lethbridge, people accuse many servants of doing this: “The charge usually leveled against the career servant was snobbery, that they had accepted without question the cap-doffing assumptions about class that kept their ‘betters’ at the top of the pyramid and their peers at the base” (116). Although the servant was at the “base” of any structure in the house, they came to accept this role without question. The idea can be linked to the view of the ceremonies of the British throne after World

War I. The British throne “expressed and articulated a view of the world in which continuity and stability, rank and order were maintained against the disruptive and leveling social regimes that seemed in power everywhere else” (Cannadine 145). The goals of the ceremonies were similar to Stevens’s thinking: a strict hierarchy keeps a country stable.

The idea of supporting the class system and its injustices leads to an inevitable conclusion for Stevens: a democratic government is untenable. For a man like Stevens, this is a logical conclusion to reach since he structures his life around orderliness, and the word democracy has roots in the Greek word “demos,” which means “mob”; therefore, Stevens would view democracy as ineffective because a mob has a chaotic nature that threatens Stevens’s view of life. Though democratic governments, while not perfect, allow a person in Stevens’s class to have more representation than under fascism, Stevens makes no retort when Lord Darlington says, “Democracy is something for a bygone era. The world’s far too complicated a place now for the universal suffrage and such like. For endless members of parliament debating things to a standstill” (198). Darlington advocates for a strong man to lead the people instead of the people having a voice, but he does not realize that his affinity for strong leadership plays into fascism’s hands. In an attempt to point out Darlington’s incompetence, Ishiguro has him advocate for the strongman while not recognizing it as a tenet of fascism. Darlington’s view and Stevens’s blind acceptance display the dangers of blindly following those above them on the hierarchy. Stevens provides no pushback to the claim that will strip people like him of the little power they possess. While one may argue that Stevens agrees with Darlington only because Darlington is his employer, an analysis of Stevens’s thoughts after his encounter with Harry Smith years later proves his consent to the idea: “But life being what it is, how can ordinary people truly be expected to have ‘strong opinions’ on all manners of things – as Mr. Harry Smith rather

fancifully claims the villagers here do? And not only are these expectations unrealistic, I rather doubt if they are even desirable” (194). Stevens’s views are identical to Darlington’s, even though Darlington has been dead for years. He has no reason to agree with his employer but peddles Darlington’s opinions because they have become his own. In thinking that people cannot have strong opinions, Stevens agrees with Darlington’s belief that debate is pointless, an idea that Russell finds disturbing: “Such devotion to duty goes far beyond what almost every commentator writing on Stevens’s moral degradation has argued: in fact, what Stevens reveals to us in such scenes is not merely that he was following orders but doing so actively to help his lordship advance his noxious theories of fascism” (448). Stevens promotes a hierarchy over democracy; this notion was a popular idea in the early 1900s as the hierarchy was believed to be more stable for a community as the introduction of democracies worldwide led to the overthrow of royal dynasties (Cannadine 130). Stevens’s views would help upper-class people hold on to power over an ever-expanding electorate.

The damage done by Stevens’s submissiveness is apparent in his interactions with Lord Darlington and Mr. Spencer, allowing the self-important men to make broad accusations about the populace to justify the hierarchy. The problem is that they are basing their accusations on the responses of a man whose job is to serve. Stevens was not truthful in his responses to the questions and provided the answers he knew they wanted to hear. Russell further discusses Stevens’s complicity in this manner: “On the night in question, in 1935, Stevens chooses to allow himself to look unintelligent and uninformed about political and cultural affairs so that he may reinforce Darlington’s and his guest’s low opinion of those classes beneath the aristocracy, thus proving the supposed superiority of fascism and the outmoded nature of democracy” (448). An important word there is “chooses” because he has a choice to respond, but in reality, his

acceptance of his role does not give him a choice. Stevens serves Lord Darlington in any manner that will benefit him, no matter the situation to Stevens. Stevens's response may reinforce fascism to these men, but he also reinforces the social hierarchy to men who would benefit from it. Regarding the separation of classes, Cannadine states, "As in previous periods, this view that British Society was polarized was shared by those who placed themselves on the other side of the great divide, many of whom wished to consolidate property and privilege against what they saw as the revolutionary threat mounted by the organized working class" (138). As long as men like Darlington and Spencer can convince lower-class people like Stevens that they cannot control their life and need aristocratic people, they can continue to reap the rewards and benefits of being in said class.

Stevens's compliance with their expectations says more about Stevens than the rest of England; in accepting his role, Darlington and others like him are able to exert control over Stevens. In *Valences of the Dialectic*, Fredric Jameson makes a note of such acceptance:

In other words, no ruling class can ever permanently secure its rule by force, although that may well be necessary in moments of social crisis and upheaval. Rather, it must depend on some form of consent, or at least passive acceptance, and the function of a great ruling-class ideology will thus essentially convince people that social life should remain as it presently is, that change is futile, that social relations have always been this way, and so on. (325)

Jameson points out that, for a ruling class to maintain power, they cannot do so through force alone. The ruling class must provide the population with an ideology that they persuade the population is for the best, making change unnecessary. As Cannadine notes about polarization, convincing the lower class of their incompetence does more to hold power than brute force.

Jameson's point is pertinent when discussing Stevens. Darlington and the other aristocrats do not use force to persuade Stevens to accept their position but persuade Stevens to adopt their ideological views.

Stevens's code—to question nothing—prevents him from recognizing or addressing societal problems when they arise, conforming to the way of thinking of the masses even when the popular way of thinking is morally wrong. He conforms to the opinion of not just Darlington but also a growing acceptance of antisemitism in Great Britain. The growing antisemitism led to many families not caring about the plight of the Jewish families: “Most painful of all was the revelation that many English families simply did not want to know about what was happening to Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe” (Lethbridge 243). What begins as small, comedic moments, such as describing sex to Sir David's son, Reginald, for Darlington—an action that falls out of the realm of a butler's duty—in 1923, escalates to Stevens's firing workers because of their religion in 1932. Russell states, “The rise of the Nazis seems like the worst kind of fantasy, but in perceiving the ordinary Stevens's refusal to stand up for moral principles, we sense how such attitudes evinced across a populace gradually could lead to the rise of fascism” (442). Combining this with Stevens's behavior highlights the normalization of antisemitism in British society, allowing fascism to take root. Stevens takes these actions because if he did not, he would have broken his professional code and gone against how society expects him to act. However, while he later claims to have understood the immoral nature of the request, he would not allow himself to say anything else about the firing, such as ridiculing Darlington for it. His thinking here is dangerous, as the head butler is typically the one who sets the tone for the rest of the house servants: “As the servants' halls imitated the hierarchies found above the stairs, the butler, paterfamilias of the servants' hall, led by example, representing the moral and social values of

the drawing room to those beneath him” (Lethbridge 50). His frequent conversations with other butlers about work are attempts to set up the hierarchies. Only the conversations with people whom Stevens deems professionals are considered stimulating to Stevens. These conversations are Stevens’s way—whether conscious or not—to form a hierarchy similar to society’s. Unlike the innocent hierarchy of the downstairs conversations, Stevens’s decision allows fascism to flourish, condoning the action to the rest of the house.

## Conclusion

Even after his fall, Stevens is a master of his craft, as he has perfected the British characteristics of stoicism and understanding his role. He can keep his composure on the most stressful night of his career with a dying father above him and show unflappable loyalty to his employer despite the evidence that his employer is wrong. His ability to never waver from the expectations of his profession, class, and notion of dignity are driving factors to how he can become a great butler and perfectionist. Without this ability, Stevens would view himself as one of the butlers who flames out instead of reaching greatness. Stevens disparages such a butler when he recounts the story of Mr. Neighbours, who flames out after becoming a sort of rock star among butlers as Stevens recounts, “I could have told you this [Mr. Neighbours not being a great butler] at the height of his reputation, just as I could have predicted his downfall after a few short years in the limelight” (30). His admonishment of Mr. Neighbours masks the problem in his own choices. He dives headfirst into the profession to prevent himself from being just another butler. His acceptance does more to constrain him than any aristocrat or dictator can hope to do through force, as he is constrained without a retort or flinch.



Stevens is only one type of person who would allow this. There are also people who, filled with hate, will gladly relinquish their freedom in exchange for making the group of people they hate suffer. Although the motives differ, he is no different from those people, as both types give something up in return for what they want. In a society like that, rulers will not need physical coercion to force the workers to obey them. The populace will be too busy ensuring that the forks are polished.

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