



THE ARTISTIC LANGUAGE, STYLE, AND LINGUOPOETIC FEATURES OF KAZUO ISHIGURO'S NOVELS

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, the British-Japanese Nobel Laureate (2017), occupies a singular position in contemporary world literature. His novels — from *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) to *Klara and the Sun* (2021) — share a deep commitment to exploring the interior lives of characters who are unable or unwilling to articulate their most profound experiences directly. This paradox — that emotional reality is expressed through its systematic suppression — constitutes the defining feature of Ishiguro's artistic language. To read his fiction is to become attuned to what is withheld as much as what is said, to the weight of silence as much as the weight of words.

The Remains of the Day (1989), winner of the Booker Prize, stands as the most complete realization of this literary project. Narrated by Stevens, an aging English butler undertaking a motoring journey through the West Country, the novel presents itself, on its surface, as a polite and unhurried memoir. Beneath this surface, however, operates a dense network of linguistic, stylistic, and poetological strategies that collectively produce one of the most powerful meditations on regret, self-deception, and missed life in modern fiction. The novel's central drama — Stevens's gradual recognition that he has sacrificed love and moral autonomy on the altar of professional "dignity" — is never stated outright. It is encoded in the language itself.

The aim of this article is to examine the principal artistic and linguopoetic features of Ishiguro's prose as exemplified in *The Remains of the Day*. Analysis proceeds through four interconnected areas: the construction and function of the unreliable narrator; Ishiguro's lexical and syntactic style; the novel's figurative language, including metaphor, symbolism, and the English pastoral; and temporal and structural features of the narrative, with particular attention to the role of memory and retrospection. Taken together, these features constitute what the present article terms Ishiguro's "aesthetics of restraint" — a governing principle of his prose that makes silence itself the most eloquent of literary instruments.

Main Body

I. The Unreliable Narrator: Voice as Self-Concealment



The concept of narrative unreliability finds in Stevens one of its most nuanced literary instantiations. Unlike dramatically unreliable narrators whose distortions are legible as signs of madness or malice, Stevens's unreliability is of a subtler, more tragic kind. It proceeds from sincere self-belief: he genuinely does not know, for much of the novel, how fully he has deceived himself. Ishiguro constructs this unreliability through a persistent gap between what Stevens says and what the textual evidence implies — and that gap is the true subject of the novel.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Stevens's extended apologia for his service to Lord Darlington, a Nazi sympathizer whose political naivety he continues to defend long after the man's historical disgrace. The reader is positioned to understand what Stevens cannot bring himself to acknowledge: that the cause to which he devoted his life was profoundly unworthy of him. The pathos is linguistic before it is emotional. It resides in the very phrasing Stevens uses to avoid confronting the truth.

A defining feature of this evasion is Stevens's systematic recourse to modal hedging — the deployment of modal auxiliary verbs (might, may, could, would} and epistemic adverbs (perhaps, possibly, presumably, one might say) to deflect direct assertion of emotional or moral truth. Where another narrator might write "I loved her," Stevens writes: "It is possible that Miss Kenton did come to represent, at some level, a certain... personal dimension to my life." The ellipsis, the abstractions, the passive construction — all operate as defensive fortifications against the full admission of feeling. Near the novel's close, conceding that his allegiance may have been misplaced, Stevens can only manage: "I now see that I may well have been in error in making that choice." The grudging conditional performs an entire psychology. It acknowledges without admitting; it grieves without mourning.

This rhetorical evasion extends to Stevens's professional self-presentation. His extended meditations on the nature of "dignity" and what constitutes a "great butler" function as elaborate displacement activities — ways of investing intellectual energy in professional identity precisely because emotional identity has been foreclosed. The inflation of professional discourse stands in ironic counterpoint to the deflation of everything personal. Stevens's idiolect becomes both his character and his cage.

II. Lexical and Syntactic Style: The Aesthetics of Restraint

Stevens speaks in a distinctive sociolect reflecting his professional formation: the elevated, formal English of the upper-class domestic servant of the interwar period. His vocabulary draws heavily on Latinate diction and the polite circumlocutions of a class trained to be present but unobtrusive. Words such as "endeavour," "proprieties," "vocation," "distinguished," and



"gratifying" recur with quasi-ritualistic frequency. This lexical register performs a dual function. On the one hand, it establishes Stevens's social and professional world with extraordinary historical precision. On the other, it creates ironic distance between the grandeur of the language and the pathos of what that language is used to describe. The vocabulary of vocation and dignity is deployed to describe a life of emotional impoverishment. The gap between register and reality is itself a form of characterization.

Syntactically, Ishiguro employs long, carefully subordinated sentences that enact Stevens's characteristic circling, digressive, self-qualifying thought. The Proustian sentence structure — with its elaborated qualifying clauses, parenthetical insertions, and retreat to the main clause after extended detours — mirrors the way Stevens approaches emotional truth: obliquely, reluctantly, always retreating to the safety of qualification before any admission is made.

One of Ishiguro's most distinctive devices is the rhetoric of self-correction: Stevens will begin a sentence, qualify it, revise it, and begin again, as if composing his narrative and his self-understanding simultaneously. Passages such as "But then, I suppose, when I really think about it — I mean really think about it, as one does in these quiet evening hours — I am not at all sure I can say with any confidence..." demonstrate the technique with particular clarity. The repetition, the self-interruption, the trailing ellipsis — all perform the drama of a mind approaching and then retreating from a truth it is not prepared to face. Ishiguro's strategic use of ellipses and em-dashes marks the precise moments when Stevens's self-protective narrative machinery breaks down, and raw feeling briefly intrudes.

III. Figurative Language: Metaphor, Symbol, and the English Pastoral

The novel's central structural metaphor is the journey. Stevens's motoring trip through the West Country is simultaneously a literal event, a retrospective narrative, and an extended figure for the examination of a life. The spatial movement through the English countryside enacts and enables a temporal movement through memory. The road becomes a figure for the passage of time; the destination — Miss Kenton's home — becomes a figure for the possibility of reckoning with the past.

Darlington Hall, the grand country house Stevens has served for decades, functions as the novel's principal symbol and is deployed with considerable complexity. On one level, the house represents continuity, tradition, and the values of an older England: stability, duty, the subordination of individual desire to collective purpose. On another, it is profoundly ironic. Its grandeur has been purchased with moral complicity: Lord Darlington's drawing rooms hosted meetings sympathetic to appeasement and fascism. The dignity Stevens



associates with the house is inseparable from its owner's political failure. By the novel's end, Darlington Hall has been purchased by an American businessman — a figure representing transactional modernity — and the house's changing ownership enacts the novel's elegy for an England whose values, however flawed, once possessed a kind of grandeur.

Ishiguro's figurative language draws extensively on a semantics of light and time, particularly the imagery of evening and fading light. These images cluster around moments of emotional recognition and constitute a sustained figurative pattern throughout the novel. In the closing pages, watching the evening fall over Weymouth pier, Stevens hears a stranger observe that the evening is the best part of the day — the work is done, and now one can simply enjoy what remains. The metaphor strikes him with the force of revelation. The evening light becomes a figure for his own situation: the years of service are behind him; whatever remains must be approached differently, with new attention to the personal. Yet this image is also, inevitably, a figure for loss. The opportunities for honesty and human connection that Stevens passed by are not recoverable. The temporal sublime — the experience of irreversible time — is the novel's governing emotional register.

Stevens's rhapsodic descriptions of the English countryside draw on the pastoral tradition, and his insistence that England's greatness lies in a quality of "restraint" — in landscapes of "gentle rolling hills" rather than Alpine drama — reads as a projection of his own psychological values onto the national geography. England, for Stevens, is a land that keeps its deepest beauties hidden, that does not flaunt or display — much as Stevens has kept his deepest feelings hidden throughout his life. This correspondence between landscape and psychology is one of Ishiguro's most sophisticated linguopoetic achievements, simultaneously evoking a nationalist ideology, a personal metaphor, and an ironic critique of both.

IV. Memory, Time, and Retrospective Narration

The *Remains of the Day* is structured as a retrospective narrative: Stevens composes his account during the journey and in the evenings preceding it, looking back over decades of service. This temporal architecture is fundamental to the novel's linguopoetic strategy. Everything Stevens narrates is mediated through memory, and the reader is never allowed to forget it. The present journey and the recollected past are held in constant, productive tension.

Ishiguro exploits this tension to generate dramatic irony that operates across the novel's entire length. Stevens's narration of the past is shaped by his current needs — the need to justify his choices, maintain his dignity, resist the full force of recognition that his life may have been misdirected. The reader,



perceiving more clearly than Stevens the distortions his defensive psychology introduces, occupies a position of sympathetic but ironic superiority. The novel's handling of deictic anchoring — the use of spatial and temporal markers to orient the reader — is particularly precise. The present tense of the journey ("I am writing this..." "As I sit here...") contrasts with the past tense of recollection to create a double temporal perspective that is the formal expression of the novel's central theme: the conflict between the present self and the remembered self.

Unusually, Stevens is explicitly aware of the limitations of memory. He frequently pauses to question whether his recollections are accurate, to note that certain events may not have unfolded precisely as described. This self-consciousness deepens rather than dissolves the irony. Stevens questions specific memories — whether Miss Kenton was crying in her room, whether she was reading a romantic novel when he interrupted her — but never questions the fundamental interpretation he places upon events: that his professional choices were right, that Lord Darlington was a great man, that his life was well spent. The self-questioning narrator is, paradoxically, more thoroughly self-deceived than a confidently unreliable one, because he mistakes local epistemic humility for genuine self-knowledge.

V. Irony as Structural Principle

Irony in *The Remains of the Day* is not a local rhetorical device but a structural principle — the organizing logic of the novel's relationship between language and meaning. Everything Stevens says means something different to the reader than it means to Stevens, and this double meaning is the source of the novel's characteristic combination of comedy and pathos.

The irony operates at multiple levels simultaneously. At the lexical level, Stevens's elevated diction to describe emotionally impoverished situations is persistently ironic. At the structural level, the journey he undertakes hoping to reaffirm his choices ends by systematically undercutting them. Each encounter on the road — with villagers who mistake him for a gentleman, with former colleagues who recall Darlington's disgrace, with Miss Kenton herself — peels away another layer of his self-protective narrative.

At the deepest level, the novel's title is itself ironic. "The remains of the day" is ostensibly Stevens's cautiously optimistic metaphor for the years remaining to him — a framing confirmed by the evening conversation at Weymouth. But the phrase also resonates as an elegy for all that is left when a life's work is stripped of its justifications: the remainder, the residue, the leavings. It is an irony inseparable from the novel's deepest linguistic resources.

Conclusion



Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* achieves its extraordinary effect through the most precisely controlled deployment of linguistic and stylistic resources in contemporary British fiction. The novel's power is inseparable from its form: the formal, polite, hedged language of its narrator is simultaneously the expression of his character and the instrument of his self-deception. Ishiguro's achievement is to make restraint itself expressive — to create a novel in which everything most important is communicated through what is not said, not done, and not admitted.

The linguopoetic features examined in this article — the unreliable narrator's modal hedging and circumlocution; the elevated sociolect that creates ironic distance between register and reality; the figurative language of journeys, light, and the English pastoral; the retrospective temporal architecture; and the structural irony governing the novel's entire semantic economy — together constitute the aesthetics of restraint identified at the outset. This aesthetics is not simply a stylistic preference. It is a philosophical and ethical position: to write about repression with restraint, to depict self-deception through its own linguistic mechanisms, is to honor the reality of what Ishiguro's characters experience — a reality in which the most devastating truths are precisely those that cannot be directly faced.

In this sense, *The Remains of the Day* is not only a masterwork of literary style but a meditation on the relationship between language and selfhood — between what we say and what we are. Its artistic language is, ultimately, a language about the limits and possibilities of language itself: a fitting achievement for a novelist who has made silence his most eloquent medium.

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