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A Metaphorical World Described by an Unreliable Narrator:

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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信用できない語り手によるメタフォリカルな世界

―カズオ・イシグロの『日の名残り』―

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カズオ・イシグロの『日の名残り』(1989) は「信用できない語り手」によって描かれたメタフォリカルな世界である。本稿では、小説のメタファーを分析し、「信用できない語り手」について検証する。これによって、我々が「外部世界」と考えるものが、実は個々人の「内部世界」の投影であることをイシグロが提示していると論じる。

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is a metaphorical world described by an unreliable narrator. In this thesis, I would like to discuss the metaphors of the novel and examine the reliability of the narrator in the novel in order to show how Ishiguro reveals that the world could be a reflection of our inner world. The idea of metaphor, here, is based on what Lakoff and Turner call the "basic conceptual metaphors": they are so deeply ingrained in us that they shape our view of the world. Robert Eaglestone maintains that we should understand that such basic conceptual metaphors shape our view of the world and control our idea. In conclusion, I would like to say that Ishiguro constructs his metaphorical world by using conventional cultural imaginations of England and presents the interaction between the workings of human mind and "reality."

The places, the characters, and the times of this novel are set in England; therefore, we presume it "an English novel." The 1930s when Stevens served Lord Darlington and the year 1956 when he serves Mr Farraday, an American businessman, are narrated alternately. The years Stevens served at Darlington Hall as a butler are remembered mainly concerning his father's death, Lord Darlington's collaboration with the Nazis, and parting from his former colleague Miss Kenton. On the other hand, the present time in 1956 is narrated as a story of the six-day trip which the now elderly Stevens takes to meet Miss Kenton, who lives in the western countryside of England.

The narrator/protagonist Stevens is, in a sense, an "Everyman" of today's England. The novel reveals his life to be insidious under the pretense of being "a great butler." On the other hand, Lord Darlington, an aristocratic statesman, represents the last days of "the British Empire." The story of the Lord and his butler here works to deconstruct the glorious British Empire.

The Remains of the Day as a metaphor of the British Empire

In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro reconstructs the British Empire of "the prosperous olden days" by presenting its cultural codes such as the aristocracy, a great mansion of a lord, and a devoted butler. And, as he

reads the novel, the reader understands that the life of a great butler and the glory of the great British Empire are both illusions.

When we think of England, what comes to our mind are concepts and images of kingdom, order, tradition, sophistication, and so on. Behind all of these, however, there exist the imperial and colonial hegemony, a feudalistic class system with the King on the top and colonial subjects at the bottom. Both Darlington's idea of noblesse oblige and Stevens's definition of a great butler serve to maintain the hierarchical society. As the reader realizes that this butler is unreliable and deceptive, however, the glorious British Empire reveals itself as a social system, which distorts the human mind and denies human dignity.

First, I would like to examine Stevens's definition of a great butler, and then compare his self-image with what the reader understands about him. Stevens defines a great butler: "It is, as I say, a matter of 'dignity'." (43) His effort to embody this through his life as a butler seems to be an execution of this dignity, but, actually, he mistakes this as mindless obedience, putting himself in an embarrassingly humiliating situation. He thinks that a servant should not outsmart his superiors, and he replies to Mr Spencer, when he is asked about the economy of the world in front of his master Lord Darlington, ''…but I am unable to be of assistance on this matter." (195) He understands that he is expected to be an ignorant servant, and he fulfills his role. Mr Spencer and Lord Darlington immediately agree that it is useless to ask the opinion of a servant, but actually he finds out that the 'masters' were completely mistaken about such matters, especially in regard to politics and the war. We see that blind obedience only encourages people of the privileged class to be insolent and disdainful, and worse, that being a servant discourages a person from knowing and thinking. And finally, Lord Darlington and his class were completely wrong about negotiating with the Germans.

Stevens's mistaken loyalty is also observed when Lord Darlington dismisses the two Jewish servants who worked at Darlington Hall. Stevens seems to be opposed to their dismissal in his mind, but he obeys his master and dismisses them. He excuses himself by saying that his professional duty is not to his sentiments, but to the wishes of his master. His loyalty to his master means a lack of moral judgment. The same could be said when he proudly tells us about his achievement in the international conference of 1923, despite the death of his father. He does his duty and leaves his father on his deathbed. Even after he hears the news of his father's death, he continues to serve wine to the guests in tears. His loyalty to his lord and his belief in the dignity of a butler is far from human dignity. Stevens is a metaphor of the British Empire, a system which makes people ignorant and mindless.

Lord Darlington is also a metaphor of the British Empire. He thinks that the Versailles treaty was humiliating to Germany and very discreditable to England. Therefore, he tries to hold an unofficial international conference at Darlington Hall, in order to revise the harsh terms of Versailles treaty in advance of the conference in Switzerland in 1923. He appeals to the guests to ease the Versailles treaty to Germany from the moral point of view. After that, he holds another unofficial international conference at Darlington Hall in 1936, inviting the British Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, and the German Ambassador. These conferences held at Darlington Hall disclose that Lord Darlington and the British Government collaborated with the Nazis.

He holds "unofficial" international conferences at Darlington Hall confidentially in order to save Germany because of his friendship with Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann. This shows that he is naïve and arrogant as a statesman, just like Christopher Banks, the narrator/protagonist of *When We Were Orphans*, who fantasizes that he could bring order to Shanghai in the 1930s and save the world from the approaching world war. *The Remains of the Day* shows that such psychology is characteristically related to imperialism. The only American in the conference, Mr Lewis, argues that such amateurism as Lord Darlington's actually promotes Nazism and accelerates the crisis of

the world. After the war, Lord Darlington is blamed for his collaboration with the Nazis. He takes legal action for libel, but it is unsuccessful. His good name is destroyed forever, and he becomes ill and dies in loneliness and despair. Lord Darlington, described by Stevens as a noble British aristocrat, is just an incompetent amateur politician.

The rise and fall of Darlington Hall is also a metaphor of the British Empire. Darlington Hall, a historical mansion, has flourished for two centuries. In Lord Darlington's prosperous days, there were as many as twenty-eight staff members, and great banquets were held frequently. But only two international conferences were held there in the twentieth century; moreover, they were unofficial, as we know. The earlier glory of Darlington Hall has faded away as Lord Darlington loses his power in modern times. After the war, in 1956, three years after Lord Darlington dies, it is sold to Mr John Farraday, an American businessman. By this time, there are only two staff members left, including Stevens.

The old banquet hall now serves as a sort of art gallery, where there is a glass cabinet, displaying Mr Farraday's ornaments, instead of a bookshelf containing a complete set of the *Britannica* in Lord Darlington's days. Darlington Hall, once a place of international political arguments, has become Mr Farraday's personal museum of the old days in Britain. As I have shown, the ideal of a great butler, Lord Darlington, and Darlington Hall are all metaphors of the British Empire.

Stevens thought that self-abnegation, self-restraint, and austerities are virtues and embodiment of dignity. But he was too naïve. He could not think by himself and devoted himself to his job. As a result, he was heartless to his father and was unable to respond to Miss Kenton's love. Neither could he understand how serious his master's collaboration with the Nazis was. He made serious mistakes in helping his master against humanity, and he is morally guilty.

Ishiguro talks about personal responsibility in *Nine Interviews*:

> …whether my life was a waste or whether it was a good thing, now, he sees, depends so much on whether his master, Lord Darlington, was behaving in an admirable and useful way or not. Very late he realizes that actually, the moral character of his own life is intricately linked with that of the person he offered his service to. (206)

Ishiguro, however, does not denounce a person who was perplexed in the prewar class society and in the unsettled postwar world. Not only his aging makes us sympathize with him but also his memoir, his own inspection of his past helps us see his conscience. *The Remains of the Day* shows not only Stevens's responsibility but also the responsibility of the British Empire. Ishiguro actually shows how British should take responsibility for its imperialism. Jonathan Culler writes about the "performative" nature of literary language:

> The literary utterance too creates the state of affairs to which it refers, in several respects. First and most simply, it brings into being characters and their actions, for instance…. Second, literary works bring into being ideas, concepts, which they deploy….
>
> …In short, the performative brings to centre stage a use of language previously considered marginal—an active, world-making use of language, which resembles literary language—and helps us to conceive of literature as act or event. The notion of literature as performative contributes to a defense of literature: literature is not frivolous pseudo-statements but takes its place among the acts of language that transform the world, bringing into being the things that they name. (96)

In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro reconstructs "the British Empire of the prosperous olden days" by setting the novel in the mansion of a Lord with a butler. Then he deconstructs or undermines the solidity of this world by making the butler an "unreliable narrator." The British Empire of the prosperous olden days now embodies the

inhuman feudal system and immoral collaboration with the Nazis. Then he asks how the characters, the author and the reader should fulfill their responsibility. Thus, he shows that literature is not only "constative" utterances but "performative" utterances which bring into being concepts and acts, and transforms the world. In other words, Ishiguro exercises the power of literature in *The Remains of the Day*.

An Unreliable Narrator

In Stevens's narrative, as in other works by Ishiguro, there appear to be falsehoods, incoherences, ambiguous memories, and omissions of narrative. These arise from his misunderstanding, self-justification, pride, excuses, and ambiguity. They all reveal his small-mindedness. He tells us that he was the embodiment of "dignity," self-abnegation, and austerities as a great butler, but actually he was a heartless son to his father, an obedient servant to his master, and an insensitive man to a woman who loves him. Now, I will examine Stevens, an unreliable narrator, in his relations to his father, to Lord Darlington, and to Miss Kenton.

His father William started working as a butler in 1869 when the Suez Canal was completed; [1] then in 1922, toward the end of his career, he was employed as an under-butler at Darlington Hall. He was over seventy then, and was no longer able to carry out tasks without making mistakes. He falls ill on the first day of the international conference held in the Darlington Hall in 1923 and dies on the following day. Stevens lacks understanding for aging and treats his father coldly, acting just as his superior but not as a son. He tells us that Miss Kenton pointed out to him that his father is entrusted with far more than a man of his age could cope with. But later, he becomes vague, saying that it may not be Miss Kenton but Lord Darlington who says, "…'these errors may be trivial in themselves, but you must yourself realize their larger significance'." (60) Here it seems that Stevens intends to examine his judgment to put his father in such a position regardless of his age and declining health.

As he remembers the international conference of 1923, he proudly tells us that it was a great turning point in his career and that his achievement was as great as that of great butlers, including his father. But his boast belies his guilt consciousness. Furthermore, he defends himself for being cruel to his father, saying that he pursued dignity.

After the War, Lord Darlington was denounced for his collaboration with the Nazis, lost his prestige forever, and died in despair. As a butler to such a figure, Stevens too is responsible. He conceals the fact that he was Lord Darlington's butler, telling frequent lies, so he can escape his responsibility. First, he tells a lie to Mr and Mrs Wakefield, an American couple, when they make a short visit to Darlington Hall. Stevens denies the fact that he was Lord Darlington's butler.

> "…Presumably you must have worked for him."
> "I didn't, madam, no." (123)

On his way to the West Country, Stevens is helped by a man. When he asks the same question, Stevens denies again:

> "He was eyeing me carefully again. I said: 'Oh no, I am employed by Mr John Faraday, the American gentleman who bought the house from the Darlington family." (120)

The expression, "He was eyeing me carefully again," reveals that he is afraid of his relation to Lord Darlington being exposed. In his narrative, on the other hand, he admits his lie immediately after the incident:

> "…there seems little doubt that my conduct towards Mrs Wakefield that day has an obvious relation to what has just taken place this afternoon." (125)

Then again, he boasts to the residents of Moscombe

[1] The novel is set in 1956, when Suez Canal was nationalized. It shows that Ishiguro has the notion of the rise and fall of Great Britain in his mind.

and gets into trouble:

> “In fact, I tended to concern myself with international affairs more than domestic ones. …after all, to have consorted not just with Mr Churchill, but with many other great leaders and men of influence－from America and from Europe.” (187-88)

His words cause a sense of awe among the villagers. Actually, what he had done as a butler during the conference is to impress Lord Halifax with the silver and to take care of Mr Dupont who had some painful sores on his feet. However, he does not mention any of these trivial chores, which he had to deal with.

Stevens explains that these small lies are the simplest means of avoiding unpleasantness and tries to be proud of his achievement as Lord Darlington’s butler: “Darlington was a gentleman of great moral stature…and I am today nothing but proud and grateful to have been given such a privilege.” (126) His contradictory attitudes reveal that he knows that he cannot justify his past and that he cannot deny his entire life as a butler, either:

> “It is hardly my fault if his lordship’s life and work have turned out today to look, at best, a sad waste－and it is quite illogical that I should feel any regret or shame on my own account.” (201)

Finally I’ll examine his misinterpretations of the letters from Miss Kenton to him in order to show his unreliability as a narrator. The following is the first reading of her letter:

> [a]long with its long, rather unrevealing passages, an unmistakable nostalgia for Darlington Hall, …distinct hints of her desire to return here, obliged me to see my staff plan afresh. (9)

He is "sure" of her nostalgia for and desire to return to Darlington Hall. Moreover, he is careful not to expose his desire to see her, telling us that her letter prompts him to see a fault in his staff plan. This intentional narrative discloses his self-conceit and falsehood. And he considers a plan to drive to the West Country and call on Miss Kenton in order to find out about her wish. His wishful thinking turns into his confidence, and he says:

> I have, I should make clear, reread Miss Kenton’s recent letter several times, and there is no possibility I am merely imagining the presence of these hints on her part. (10)

When he explains the reason why he prefers a trip to the West Country to Mr Farraday, however, he is uncertain of Miss Kenton’s desire to return to Darlington Hall. This incoherence also discloses that he is an “unreliable narrator.”

The second day of his trip, he finds that she refers to an emptiness on the rest of her life:

> “Although I have no idea how I shall usefully fill the remainder of my life…” And again, elsewhere, she writes: “The rest of my life stretches out as an emptiness before me.” (49)

Then, the third day of his trip, he admits that his interpretation of her letter is different from the previous one and says ambiguously that he might have just imagined that she wishes to return:

> “For I must say I was a little surprised last night at how difficult it was actually to point to any passage which clearly demonstrated her wish to return.” (140)

In the evening, on the same day, as he pictures himself seeing Miss Kenton after 20 years, he reads her letter again. He admits that he has misunderstood her letter: “I am inclined to believe I may well have read more into certain of her lines than perhaps was wise.” (180)

The fourth day of his trip, he meets Miss Kenton. She denies having written about any such empty feeling:

> “Really, Mr Stevens,” she said, also laughing a little. “I couldn’t have written any such thing. … Let me assure you, Mr Stevens, my life does not stretch out emptily before me. For one thing, we are looking forward to the grandchild. The first of a few perhaps.” (236)

What he saw in her letters is the reflection of his inner world. The emptiness stretching out before the rest of life is not Miss Kenton’s feeling, but his own. He seems to have imagined her being unhappy because it makes him feel better. After he meets Miss Kenton, not only readers but also Stevens himself realize that he has tendency to project his own feelings on other people:

> “But the fact is, the letters I have had from you over the years, and in particular the last letter, have tended to suggest that you are—how might one put it? —rather unhappy. I simply wondered if you were being ill-treated in some way….” (237-38)

He omits the narrative of the fifth day, to be precise, from the afternoon of the fourth day when he meets Miss Kenton to the evening of the sixth day when Stevens talks to a man on the pier. This might be the time when Stevens finally takes off his professionalism as a butler. He used to say about the great butler:

> [h]e will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. (43)

After he meets Miss Kenton he might have taken off his mask of butler and been stricken with grief, away from readers. But when he reveals his grief to the man on the pier, all his efforts are in vain. The omission of the narrative of the fifth day shows that Stevens, who told frequent lies, realizes his vanity and is hardly able to say anything.

His six-day trip discloses his small-mindedness in regard to his expectations. His narrative includes frequent misunderstandings and incoherent statements, which are the result of his absolute obedience to his master and his ignorance about things happening in the world. At the same time, he is caught between the necessity of confession and the anxiety of inhibition, as he remembers his past and realizes that he is guilty of collaboration with the Nazis. Stevens is an “unreliable narrator,” and we see his true nature in the reflection of his inner world.

Conclusion

In The Remains of the Day, the British Empire as “the prosperous olden days” and the self-portrait of the narrator as an embodiment of “dignity” eventually reveal the inhumanity of imperialism, colonialism and the feudalistic class system as well as the collaboration with the Nazis.

“Unreliable narrators” in the works of Fyodor M. Dostoevsky and Henry James explore human psychology as they construct stories. Ishiguro’s “unreliable narrator” further evolves to depict humanity in the postcolonial and postmodern age. At first, Ishiguro makes an “unreliable narrator” tell the story of the British Empire as “the prosperous olden days,” then he reveals that the world is the reflection of narrator’s inner world. As a result, the British Empire and the narrator’s self-portrait fall into pieces as unreal. By such reading experiences, readers realize that imperialism and war are products of individual reasoning and illusion.

Ishiguro’s novels, from *A Pale View of Hills* to *Never Let Me Go*, are all memoirs recounted by “unreliable narrators,” Etsuko, Ono, Stevens, Ryder, Banks, and Kathy H. In each novel, Ishiguro characteristically develops their unreliability. *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Remains of the Day* are realistic, while *When We Were Orphans* is more psychological: the paranoiac narrator sees the entire world according to his obsession. Ishiguro’s narrative style is further experimental in *The Unconsoled*. *Never Let Me Go*, a dystopian novel about the near past, is narrated by a human clone; the situation

itself reveals the inhuman condition of modern society.

Robert Eaglestone gives an important suggestion on how to interpret *The Remains of the Day* in *his Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students*:

> English deals with texts, certainly, but not just with what we read. It also explores how we read. It is concerned with the interpretation of texts and ideas that arise from interpretation. (137)

He also refers to Michel de Montaigne, emphasizing the importance of "interpretation about interpretations":

> [w]e need to interpret interpretations more than we interpret things, and how we interpret texts, whether they are novels, TV advertisements, political speeches (or anything), is absolutely central to the world today. (137)

When we interpret *The Remains of the Day* as a nostalgic story of the British Empire of "the prosperous olden days" or as a love story, we need to reexamine our longing for such concepts of England.

We learned from our history that the war is wrong, and yet imperialism and its wars are not over to this day. Their causes have been studied in the fields of economics, politics, philosophy, religion, and so on. *The Remains of the Day* is one of such efforts in literature. Through Stevens, Ishiguro shows us how foolish it is to hold nostalgia for imperialism, and, at the same time, how difficult it is not to.

Stevens served this aristocrat, who is no politician and ends up collaborating with the Nazis out of an outmoded sense of noblesse oblige and chivalry. At the end of the story, however, Stevens realizes his mistakes and at least he tries to do away with his nostalgia for his past. Such individual effort is small, but it could be a solution to current problems caused by imperialism. Ishiguro continues to explore how we can take moral responsibility today.

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