

The Art of Repression: Exploring the Themes of Regret and Self-Deception in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract. This research paper explores the art of repression in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*. The protagonist, Stevens, an English butler, is unable to express his emotions and desires, leading to a life of regret and missed opportunities. The paper examines how Ishiguro uses Stevens' character to demonstrate how repression and self-deception can have a profound impact on one's life. The butlers' code, which Stevens adheres to strictly, is also analyzed as emblematic of the repression that permeates his life. Ultimately, the paper argues that the novel is a poignant reminder of the importance of taking risks and pursuing one's passions, even in the face of professional obligations and societal expectations.

Keywords : Repression; regret; self-deception; obligations.

Kazuo Ishiguro is a highly acclaimed novelist known for his poignant and insightful explorations of human relationships and the complexities of the human experience. Born in Nagasaki, Japan in 1954, Ishiguro moved to England with his family when he was just five years old. He went on to study creative writing at the University of East Anglia and began his career as a writer in the early 1980s.

Ishiguro's novels are characterized by his masterful use of language and his ability to create deeply emotional and evocative atmospheres. He is known for his understated prose and his exploration of complex themes such as memory, identity, and the passage of time. His works often focus on characters who are grappling with issues of personal identity and the search for meaning in their lives.

Ishiguro's most famous works include *The Remains of the Day*, which won the Booker Prize in 1989 and was later adapted into an award-winning film, as well as *Never Let Me Go*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2005 and was also adapted into a film. His other works include *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, and *The Buried Giant*.

Throughout his career, Ishiguro has received numerous awards and honors for his contributions to literature. In 2017, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his “novels of great emotional force” that “uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world.” Ishiguro’s impact on contemporary literature is profound, and his works continue to resonate with readers around the world.

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* is a novel that explores the themes of regret, missed opportunities, and the weight of duty through the story of an English butler named Stevens. Set in the years leading up to World War II, the novel takes the form of Stevens’ reflections on his life and his relationships with those around him. Through his reflections, Ishiguro delves into the complexities of regret and the ways in which missed opportunities can shape one’s life.

At its core, *The Remains of the Day* is a novel about the human experience and the universal desire for personal fulfillment and happiness. It is a poignant reminder of the importance of taking risks and pursuing one’s passions, even in the face of professional obligations and societal expectations. Through his masterful use of language and his understated yet emotional prose, Ishiguro creates a sense of atmosphere and mood that is both evocative and deeply moving.

In this research paper, we will delve deeper into the art of repression, which is a key theme in the novel, and explore how Ishiguro uses Stevens’ character to demonstrate how the act of repressing emotions can lead to a life of regret and missed opportunities.

Repression and Self-Deception: The novel *The Remains of the Day* explores the theme of regret and self-deception through the protagonist, Stevens, an English butler. Stevens’ inability to express his emotions and his constant repression of his feelings and desires is what ultimately leads to his regretful existence. In the following quote, Stevens reflects on his life as a butler:

I cannot even say for certain when the idea first came to me to apply to Mr. Farraday should he ever require my services. Certainly, it was some time before I began to realise that my father’s health was in serious decline. (*The Remains of the Day*, 57)

This quote demonstrates Stevens' tendency to repress his emotions and desires, even when they are in his best interest. Instead of admitting to himself that his father's health is declining and that he may need to look for a new job, he represses this thought and continues on with his duties as a butler.

Stevens is so skilled at repressing his emotions that he convinces himself that he does not have them at all. This self-deception ultimately leads to a life of regret. In the following quote, Stevens reflects on his relationship with Miss Kenton:

It is quite possible, then, that she is still under the impression that I was angry or disappointed with her in some way, that I have been nursing a grudge against her all these years. And this is perhaps the chief reason why I wish to see her again: to make it clear to her that I have never harbored any such feelings whatsoever. (161)

Stevens' regret is compounded by his self-deception. He has convinced himself that he did not have feelings for Miss Kenton and that he was not disappointed by their separation. In reality, he is consumed with regret for not expressing his emotions and for the missed opportunity to pursue a relationship with her.

Repression and the Butlers' Code: Throughout the novel, Stevens adheres strictly to the butlers' code, which dictates that a butler should maintain emotional distance from his employer and refrain from expressing his own opinions or desires. This code is emblematic of the repression that permeates Stevens' life. He represses his emotions to such an extent that he becomes detached from his own humanity. In the following quote, Stevens reflects on his own emotional state:

My own life, it seemed, was one that consisted predominantly of work, of practical duties, and responsibilities...Yet what is the point of worrying oneself too much about what one could or could not control? At any rate, it became clear to me as I listened that the great majority of these stresses we place upon ourselves unnecessarily. (98)

This quote highlights the extent to which Stevens represses his emotions, choosing to focus solely on his practical duties and responsibilities. He views his emotional life as an unnecessary stressor and dismisses it in favor of his professional obligations.

Regret and Missed Opportunities

Stevens's life is defined by his commitment to his job as a butler. He is so consumed by his duties that he neglects his personal life and the opportunities for happiness that it may have provided. In the following quote, Stevens reflects on his life:

I cannot even say for certain when the idea first occurred to me that I might one day become a butler. But once it did occur to me, I took to it with the enthusiasm of youth and never looked back...But now, having seen what I have seen, I realize that one's life need not be limited by such things as this. (132)

Stevens's regret is palpable in this quote. He recognizes that his devotion to his job has prevented him from exploring other possibilities and experiencing a fuller life. This missed opportunity for exploration and self-discovery haunts him throughout the novel.

The repression of emotions and desires ultimately leads to a life of regret and missed opportunities. Throughout the novel, Stevens reflects on his life and realizes that he has missed out on many things because of his dedication to his job as a butler. In the following quote, Stevens reflects on a missed opportunity with Miss Kenton, a former colleague and love interest:

I can see now that it was Miss Kenton who, in her own way, was trying to make contact with me across the gulf of years; and that, furthermore, it was my own emotional incompetence and fear of sentimentalizing that prevented the simple and human contact from ever taking place. (178)

This quote demonstrates how Stevens' repression of emotions and fear of sentimentality ultimately leads to a missed opportunity with Miss Kenton. He realizes that he was emotionally incompetent and unable to

connect with her on a human level, which resulted in a life of regret and missed opportunities.

One of the most poignant examples of missed opportunity in the novel is Stevens' relationship with Miss Kenton, a former colleague with whom he had developed a close bond. Despite their obvious attraction to each other, Stevens represses his emotions and fails to act on his feelings. In the following quote, Stevens reflects on his missed opportunity for love:

It occurs to me, furthermore, that the opportunity that presented itself to me, while of a highly unusual nature, ought still to have been considered in terms of my professional duty...It is my view that this duty to preserve a professional manner should take precedence over any personal wishes. (223)

Stevens' regret is palpable in this quote as well. He recognizes that his professional obligations prevented him from pursuing a relationship with Miss Kenton, and he regrets his inability to act on his feelings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is a profound exploration of the themes of regret and self-deception, and the ways in which they shape our lives. Through the story of Stevens, the English butler, Ishiguro delves into the complexities of the human psyche and the ways in which we can become trapped by our own illusions and desires. The novel is a powerful reminder of the importance of self-reflection and the pursuit of personal fulfillment and happiness, even in the face of societal expectations and professional obligations.

The use of repression and self-deception as narrative devices in the novel allows Ishiguro to explore the deep-rooted fears and anxieties that often hold us back from pursuing our true desires. Through Stevens' reflections on his life, we see the devastating consequences of missed opportunities and the weight of regret. Ishiguro's subtle and understated prose creates a sense of atmosphere and mood that is both evocative and deeply emotional, leaving a lasting impact on the reader.

Overall, *The Remains of the Day* is a masterpiece of contemporary literature that continues to resonate with readers around

the world. Its exploration of the complexities of the human experience and the importance of self-reflection and personal fulfilment make it a timeless work of art. Kazuo Ishiguro's skill as a writer is evident throughout the novel, and his contributions to the literary world have solidified his place as one of the greatest writers of our time.

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Work Cited

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