

Fading Shadows: The Decline of the Aristocracy and its Servants

in *The Remains of the Day*

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Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* presents a parallel with Stevens, the professional servant, and Lord Darlington, the declining aristocrat, to reflect the shifting social hierarchy of early 20th-century England. Their relationship illustrates how traditional class boundaries were being redefined, with the authority and relevance of the aristocracy waning while the servant class struggled to adapt to a modern, meritocratic society. Stevens' unwavering loyalty reflects not only personal repression but also the fading relevance of the professional servant class in a modernizing England. When asked about Darlington's political choices, Steven replies, "I'm sorry, sir, but I have to say I have every trust in his lordship's good judgement," (Ishiguro 225), a line that encapsulates his identity as a man whose worth is bound to a vanishing world.

England after the 1920s, when *The Remains of the Day* takes place, was undergoing great changes. The aristocracy was rapidly losing influence, and with that, those in the serving class were quickly forced into new jobs. Lord Darlington is not alone in his Nazi sympathies. Across England, a wave of fascist approval swept over parts of the aristocracy. Fascism, "in short, broadened the practices and ideas of aristocracy, and attempted to develop them for a new century" (Sacks). The aristocracy was desperate to hold on to the power and influence they exerted merely a few decades ago, and fascism was an ideology that promised just that. Domestic service, on the other hand, underwent a swift evolution in the way that it operated, and the servant class continued to shrink. The World Wars saw servants leaving their houses in dramatic numbers, and after the second World War, "the live-in housemaid of the 1900s was replaced with the part time cleaner of the 1950s" (S, Todd). Many women did not return to their service roles after the Second World War (Wallis). Servants in the modern era were loath to become live in domestic help, and many of those jobs were replaced by immigrants and refugees, like the au pair (Delap). Domestic service, "was "as obsolete as the horse" in an era of motor cars" (Delap). Meritocracy

was on the rise, and with education becoming increasingly accessible, support for more widespread civic engagement increased (Themelis).

These broader changes in England are evident in *The Remains of the Day* through Stevens' lack of purpose. His post-war journey, both literal and metaphorical, shows a search for relevance in a world that no longer values servitude. He desperately clings to his memories of importance in the Darlington house and his deep, blind loyalty to Darlington that gives him a sense of self-worth. He says that "Lord Darlington was a gentleman of great moral stature.. and I will readily vouch that he remained that to the last ... [I] was, in the truest terms, 'attached to a distinguished household'...My chief satisfaction derives from what I achieved during those years, and I am today nothing but proud and grateful to have been given such a privilege" (Ishiguro 126). His language here is defensive. He is unnecessarily justifying his decision to remain with the Darlington house— he knows that what Darlington did was wrong, and that others, perhaps rightly, have criticised him for it, but still maintains his loyalty. His language highlights that he is no longer "attached to a distinguished household," and so looks back fondly at the time where he was. He can only relive the satisfaction he once received from his work. When Reginald Cardinal tells Stevens of the meeting occurring in Darlington Hall, urging him to act, Stevens says, "I would not say I am not curious, sir. However, it is not my position to display curiosity about such matters," to which Cardinal responds, "It's not your position? Ah, I suppose you believe that to be loyalty? Do you? Do you think that's being loyal? To his lordship? Or to the Crown, come to that?" (Ishiguro 222). Stevens has never been curious before, and has never had to be. He does not believe he is of enough importance to hold a political opinion. Stevens, later in the interaction, says, "I'm sorry, sir, but I have to say I have every trust in his lordship's good judgement." (Ishiguro 225). He places his full trust in Lord Darlington, and it is through him that he experiences the world. When Lord Darlington is gone, this outlet disappears. The outside world has also moved on without Stevens, however. His job is now seen as a relic of the past, and the people Stevens encounters reflect that. One of the first men that Stevens meets on his journey remarks, after speaking with Stevens about his position, that there "can't be many like you left, eh?"

(Ishiguro 119). The age of the butler and formal servitude has long passed, and Stevens, in his refusal to adapt, has too become a relic.

Darlington reflects the deterioration of the English aristocracy. His fall from grace is one that is reflected across Britain. He is set up to be a promising character— he is full of naive bravado and nationalism, although he ultimately does not realize that what he is doing is harming his country, rather than protecting it. Even Stevens, a man so loyal to his master that he is willing to overlook Nazi sentiments, admits that Darlington's end is pathetic. He says, "It is hardly my fault if his lordship's life and work have turned out today to look, at best, a sad waste" (Ishiguro 201). Darlington's life comes to an end with him being a shell of his former self. Stevens details this, saying, "The fact is... some truly terrible things had been said about his lordship – and by *that* newspaper in particular ...his lordship saw no reason to go on suffering in silence...His lordship's good name was destroyed for ever. ...his lordship was virtually an invalid. And the house became so quiet. I would take him tea in the drawing room and well...it really was most tragic to see" (Ishiguro 235.) Lord Darlington, after the war, wastes away and eventually dies in disgrace. He represents the fall of the aristocrat— his power and influence eventually wanes, and he dies sequestered in his home and forced to sell, much like many other aristocrats across the country did (Russell).

The parallels and convergences between Lord Darlington and Stevens help elucidate differences in social status and class. The relationship between Stevens and Lord Darlington reveals the imbalance of the class system in decline. They are both devoted to the class structures of their time, and consumed by regret because they see the consequences of their actions at the end of their lives. Stevens throughout the book demonstrates not only a deep understanding of what his social position is, but a desire to uphold it. His position as a butler and of willing inferiority is meaningful to him because he believes it makes him a competent butler. He remarks that Harry Smith's philosophy of political equality is misguided and idealistic. His words reveal his perception of the tiered class system. He places the aristocratic class far above his own, and relishes in his own inferiority; he willingly relinquishes his own responsibilities as an

independent man to his sense of duty. Stevens likes to cling to outdated social ideas that completely leaves him at the will of aristocrats. This is part of the reason why he is so lost when the aristocracy he so loves essentially disappears, why he takes a journey across England in the first place. His differences with Darlington are clearly spelled out— he is of a different social class than him. Darlington can make decisions, Stevens must execute them. Stevens allows himself menial decisions, and only concerns himself with running the household. Darlington has political opinions, while Stevens doesn't believe he is entitled to them, as a less intelligent being.

Darlington is less blind to the consequences of his actions than Stevens is, but they both realize far too late what their actions have resulted in. Darlington is politically naive, and suffers for the rest of his life for his missteps. Stevens never tells Miss Kenton he loves her, and it is too late by the time he reaches her. When he finally sees Miss Kenton again, and she explains that she only married to spite him, and that while she loves her husband now, had loved Stevens at the time, he says, “ Indeed – why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking.” (Ishiguro 239). This is perhaps the most emotional Stevens has been throughout the book, and it comes at a pivotal moment of regret and longing. It is one of the first times he allows his emotions to spill out, and similarly to Darlington, he has to face the consequences of his actions and endure his “sorrow” for the rest of his life.

Lord Darlington and Stevens embody the slow, painful unraveling of a class system that once defined England. Both are bound by loyalty to outdated ideals—Darlington to a misguided sense of aristocratic duty, and Stevens to a professional code that denies him personal agency. In the end, both men are left behind in history, with only a legacy of regret and irrelevance. Stevens desperately attempts to cling onto his past glory by reliving his memories while the world around him moves on. Through the mirrored decline of a master and his servant, a full picture of the decline of the English aristocracy and their servants is revealed.

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