The Remains of the Day

by Kazuo Ishiguro

SUMMARY

The Remains of the Day is a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, one of the most successful young novelists writing in English today. It was the winner of the 1989 Booker Prize, the biggest literary prize in Britain and in 1993 was made into a successful film starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson.

The story begins in the summer of 1956. Stevens, the ageing butler of Darlington Hall takes a rare holiday, borrowing his employer, Mr Farraday’s car to drive to the west of England. He intends to meet Miss Kenton, a former housekeeper at Darlington Hall, whom he has not seen for twenty years, but who has recently written him a letter.

As his journey progresses, Stevens begins to reflect upon his life and to try to make sense of it. His impending meeting with Miss Kenton causes him to recall the time they spent working together at Darlington Hall when it was owned by Lord Darlington, a well-meaning but politically naive man who, it seems, acted unwisely in the years between the two world wars. Lord Darlington’s attempts to broker a peace between England and Germany caused him to be despised as a Nazi sympathiser and collaborator. Details of this are revealed gradually by Stevens who retains an unswerving loyalty to and belief in his former employer. As he does so, he displays his total acceptance of a class system which demanded the subjugation of all the human needs of the servant to the requirements of the master. Stevens’s rigid adherence to this code results in a stiff formality which prevents him from expressing his feelings. His dealings with everyone in the house, including his own father, are carried out with a detached formality. He seems incapable of natural human behaviour, even missing his father’s death because his employer needs him to serve drinks to his guests. Stevens’s belief in the superiority of the upper classes and his loyalty to his employer are unshakeable. His work is his life, leaving no room for personal emotions.

Yet for the reader, Stevens is neither a figure of fun, nor a man to be condemned for his apparent heartlessness, but rather someone to be pitied. This is partly because he is himself the narrator of the story and we see things through his eyes. He is totally unaware of the absurdity of his behaviour and absolutely convinced of its rightness.

As he muses on the past, it becomes clear that despite the apparent acerbity, at times bordering on open warfare, between them, Stevens and Miss Kenton both had deep feelings for each other. However, Stevens’ inability to express his feelings, and Miss Kenton’s frustration at this, led to her moving away and marrying another man. Now, her letter seems to indicate that her marriage has broken down and Stevens clearly hopes that she wishes to return to Darlington Hall, although she has not actually said this in the letter.

When they meet, Miss Kenton explains that her marriage has had its ups and downs, but that although she has left her husband several times, she has always gone back to him, and she has done so now. However, she also reveals that she once had hopes of a life with Stevens. On hearing this, he admits to himself that his heart is breaking, but the formalities are still observed and nothing is said to break the atmosphere of distant politeness. He wishes Miss Kenton well and drives her to the bus stop.

The Remains of the Day is a novel about missed opportunities. Even when Stevens’ heart is broken by Miss Kenton’s admission of love, he is still unable to express his love for her. Nevertheless, a conversation with a stranger and the sight of people having fun make him resolve to adopt a more positive attitude to his old age. He decides to practise the art of humorous conversation. Sadly, he does so with the intention of pleasing his current employer. Old habits die hard.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan in 1954. His parents moved to Britain when he was five and he grew up there, attending the University of Kent and the University of East Anglia. His first novel A Pale View of Hills is a powerful and disturbing account of a middle-aged Japanese woman living in England who, after the suicide of her daughter, recalls her life in Nagasaki shortly after the atomic bomb had fallen. This novel was awarded the Winifred Holtby Prize by the Royal Society of Literature and Kazuo Ishiguro went on to write three other prize-winning novels, including The Remains of the Day. In addition to writing, Kazuo Ishiguro has done community work in a problem area of Glasgow and has worked with homeless people in London. He now lives in London with his wife and children.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Most of the events described in the novel take place in the years between the two world wars. At this time the English aristocracy lived in great houses with a large staff of servants to run the house and look after their every need. Outside of these great houses, employment opportunities, particularly for women, were few, and it was common for the children of working class families to go into service as soon as they left school. Girls would start as parlour or kitchen maids and, if they were bright and worked hard, might one day aspire to become housekeepers. Boys might start out in the stables or working as footmen. For them, the highest ambition was to become a butler. The strict class structure of society in general was reflected in the hierarchy which governed the staff of a great house and it was important for everyone to know their place and to respect those above them.
Although the main focus of the novel is Stevens’ relationships with other people, particularly Miss Kenton, it also reveals much about the political atmosphere of the time. After the First World War, Germany was punished severely by the victorious Allies and made to pay large sums of money in reparations, leading to great economic hardship. Lord Darlington feels that the punishment is too severe and that the economic crisis in Germany will put the rest of Europe in danger. He holds secret international conferences to try to influence the leaders of other European nations to take a more forgiving approach to Germany. Politically naïve, he does not realise that the leaders of the Nazi party are using him for their own ends. Stevens may wish to leave such matters to people above him in the social hierarchy, but ultimately he cannot escape the consequences. When two Jewish maids are dismissed on Lord Darlington’s orders, although Stevens refuses to question his employer’s decision, repeated badgering by the outraged Miss Kenton forces him to admit that he is unhappy with it.

His reflections on his past, culminating with his meeting with Miss Kenton show him the opportunities he has missed and leave him weeping for what might have been. Can Stevens change? His decision to make the best of the time he has left and to practise his bantering skills suggests a desire to make a new start, but tellingly, at the forefront of his mind is a desire to please his employer.

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the Reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student’s Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers, but with the exception of pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by student working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK
Tell students that this book is about a man who has spent many years working as a butler, a servant in a large house.

1. Put students into small groups and ask them to imagine they are servants in a big house. They live at the house and work there every day with only a few days’ holiday a year. What is their life like? What sort of things do they have to do every day? Do they enjoy their work? What is their attitude to their employer?
2. In small groups, discuss whether their country has a class system and how life has changed over the last fifty or sixty years.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION
Chapters 1–4
1. In small groups, students find all the places where Stevens refers to Miss Kenton’s letter and make notes on what the letter said. They then write the letter.
2. In pairs, students read the scene where Stevens tells his father about the reduction in his duties. They rewrite it to make Stevens’ explanation gentler and more sensitive. They then act out the conversation.

Chapters 5–8
Ask students what they know about Stevens’ father and how they think he feels about getting old.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK
1. Discuss the following questions in small groups.
   a. The introduction to the book says that it is a story of ‘lost causes and lost love’. What does this mean?
   b. How do you think Miss Kenton spent the evening after her meeting with Stevens? Where did she go, how did she feel and what did she think about?
2. Make a list of occasions when events would have been very different if Stevens had been able to express his feelings.

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. Most of them are practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1–4
affection (n) a feeling of gentle love
anticipation (n) a hopeful feeling that something good is going to happen
banter (n and v) (have a) conversation that has a lot of jokes in it; to joke
butter (n) the most important male servant in a big house
climax (n) the most important or exciting part of something
devoted (adj) very loyal
dignity (n) calm, serious behaviour that makes people respect you
drawing room (n) a large room where people can sit and talk and meet visitors
grounds (n) the land or gardens around a large building
landing (n) the floor at the top of a set of stairs
landlady (n) a woman who rents a room or a house
lawn (n) an area of grass that is kept cut short
maid (n) a female servant
nostalgia (n) a slightly sad feeling when you remember happy events from the past
refreshments (n) food and drinks provided at a meeting, party, etc.
summerhouse (n) a small building in a garden where you sit in warm weather
tray (n) flat piece of wood or plastic with raised edges, used for carrying plates, glasses, etc.

Chapters 5–8
cocoa (n) a hot chocolate drink
footman (n) a male servant
senator (n) an American politician
stroke (n) a sudden illness which often makes you unable to move part of your body
trolley (n) a flat piece of wood with wheels which you use to carry things.

Chapters 9–12
condolences (n) expressions of sympathy when someone has died
fair (n) an outdoor event for entertainment
turning point (n) the time when an important change starts to happen

Chapters 16–18
pier (n) a structure built out into the sea for people to walk along
Prime Minister (n) the leader of the government in some countries with a parliament
puppet (n) a leader or government that is not independent and is controlled by a more powerful government or organisation.

GLOSSARY

It is sometimes useful for your students to know the following new words. Most of them are also practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)
1 Read the first fifteen lines of the introduction and then close your book. Are the following sentences true or false? If they are false, correct them.
(a) Stevens and Miss Kenton both still work at Darlington Hall.
(b) Stevens’ current employer is called Lord Darlington.
(c) Stevens has received a letter from Miss Kenton.
(d) Stevens often goes away on holiday.
(e) Stevens does not accept Mr Farraday’s invitation to take a holiday at once.

2 Read the second part of the introduction, about Kazuo Ishiguro, and then close your book. Complete this paragraph.
Kazuo Ishiguro was born in (a) .................................... , but he has spent most of his life in (b) .................................... . His first novel, A Pale View of Hills (c) .................................... in 1982. (d) ........................ of his novels have won prizes and The Remains of the Day won the 1989 Booker Prize, the biggest (e) .................................... prize in England. In 1993 it was made into a successful (f) ................................., starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson.

The following activities can be done individually or in pairs (except the discussion questions, which can be done in pairs or groups).

CHAPTERS 1–4

Chapter 1
1 Choose the right ending for these sentences.
(a) Stevens has been upset recently because ...
(i) Miss Kenton has sent him a letter.
(ii) he has made mistakes in his job.
(iii) Mr Farraday has asked him to take a holiday.
(b) Miss Kenton ...
(i) has sent letters to Stevens before.
(ii) has not contacted Stevens for twenty years.
(iii) has asked to return to Darlington Hall.

2 What is bantering and why does Stevens find it difficult to respond to it?

3 Look at these names.
Miss Kenton  Mr Farraday  Lord Darlington
Who is Stevens’ (a) employer? (b) former employer? (c) former colleague?

Chapter 2
Answer the following questions.
(a) What evidence is there that Stevens has not travelled far beyond Darlington Hall before?
(b) Where does Stevens spend the first night of his holiday?
(c) Why does the landlady look alarmed when Stevens writes his address in the register.
(d) What one quality does Stevens think a great butler should have?
(e) Why does Stevens think that Miss Kenton’s real message is that she wants to return to Darlington Hall.

Chapter 3
Put the following events in the order in which they happened.
(a) Miss Kenton brings Stevens a vase of flowers.
(b) Stevens’ father loses his job and comes to Darlington Hall as under-butler.
(c) Miss Kenton points out to Stevens that a dustpan has been left outside his door.
(d) Miss Kenton asks Stevens to look at a statue which is in the wrong place.
(e) Stevens tells Miss Kenton not to call his father by his first name.
(f) Miss Kenton tells Stevens that his father has too much responsibility for a man of his age.
(g) Miss Kenton tells Stevens that the silver forks have not been cleaned properly
(h) Stevens tells Miss Kenton that his father’s work is perfect.

Chapter 4
1 The following sentences are false. Correct them and say what you know about each situation.
(a) Lord Darlington tells Stevens that he wants his father to leave Darlington Hall.
(b) Miss Kenton trips and falls on the steps of the summerhouse.
(c) Stevens and his father have a warm and friendly relationship.
(d) Stevens found it easy to plan for Lord Darlington’s international conference.

2 What is unusual about the way Stevens talks to his father? What effect does this have?

CHAPTERS 5–8

Chapter 5
1 Join these beginnings and ends of sentences.
(a) Lord Darlington asks Stevens
(b) Reginald Cardinal is
(c) Miss Kenton is
(d) Mr Dupont shouts for Stevens because
(e) Miss Kenton asks Stevens
(f) Stevens is
(i) angry because Stevens keeps criticising her work.
(ii) he has sore feet.
(iii) to explain the facts of life to Reginald Cardinal.
(iv) to send her a note instead of speaking to her.
(v) unable to complete the task Lord Darlington asks him to perform.
(vi) engaged to be married.
2 Why do you think there is so much tension between Miss Kenton and Stevens?

Chapter 6
1 Stevens doesn’t actually attend Lord Darlington’s conference, but he is aware of some of the things which happen at it. Make a list of the people at the conference and say what you know about each of them. Look back at Chapter 5 for more information.

2 Chapter 6 is called ‘The Conference’ but the main event in it is the death of Stevens’ father. What does this tell you about Stevens? Is there any evidence that Stevens is upset by the fact that his father is dying?

Chapter 7
Are these sentences true or false?
(a) One of a butler’s duties is to polish the silver.
(b) Many famous people visit Darlington Hall, but none of them notices the silver.
(c) Lord Halifax is happy to meet Herr Ribbentrop in secret.
(d) Stevens believes that Lord Darlington betrayed his country.
(e) Stevens has recently made an error with the polishing of the silver.

Chapter 8
Match the names of the people with the endings to make correct sentences.
(a) Sarah and Ruth
(b) Lord Darlington
(c) Stevens and Miss Kenton
(d) Stevens
(e) Miss Kenton
(f) Stevens
(i) meet regularly at night to drink cocoa and talk.
(ii) is angry that the maids are to be dismissed.
(iii) finally admits that he was upset by the matter of the maids.
(iv) are Jewish maids who work at Darlington Hall.
(v) does not believe Lord Darlington dislikes Jews.
(vi) orders the Jewish maids to be dismissed to please his German guests.

CHAPTERS 9–12
Chapter 9
Answer these questions.
(a) In what way is Miss Kenton right about Lisa? In what way is she wrong?
(b) Do you think Miss Kenton really believes that Lisa has ‘thrown it all away for nothing’?

Chapter 10
Answer these questions.
(a) Why doesn’t Stevens stay in Tavistock?
(b) Where is he going when he runs out of petrol?
(c) How does he meet the Taylors?
(d) How much do the Taylors charge for the room?

Chapter 11
1 In small groups, if possible, discuss these questions.
(a) How did the relationship between Stevens and Miss Kenton develop in the years between 1922 and 1935?
(b) Why did things start to go wrong?

(c) What does the incident over the book show us about both Miss Kenton and Stevens?
(d) Do you think Stevens is completely honest about his reasons for reading the book?
(e) What evidence is there that Miss Kenton wants her life to change?

2 Imagine you are Miss Kenton and it is 1935. Write a letter to your aunt in which you describe your present life and your feelings towards Stevens.

Chapter 12
Describe Stevens’ behaviour after the death of Miss Kenton’s aunt. What do you think about what he says and does?

CHAPTERS 13–15
Answer these questions.
(a) What makes the evening before Stevens’ meeting with Miss Kenton ‘difficult’?
(b) How do Mr Smith’s views about ‘people in high places’ differ from Stevens’?
(c) What incident from the past does Stevens use to support his views?
(d) What do you think about the way Mr Spencer treats Stevens?

CHAPTERS 16–18
Chapter 16
1 Stevens’ reaction to Miss Kenton’s news that her friend has asked her to marry him is formal and businesslike. What evidence is there that he is emotionally upset by the news?

2 Do you think Miss Kenton would have agreed to marry Mr Benn if Stevens had showed any sign of love for her? What evidence is there that she is hurt by Stevens’ apparent indifference to the news?

Chapter 17
1 This chapter tells of the meeting with Miss Kenton which is the climax of Stevens’ journey and the climax of the book. Do you think it is a satisfactory climax?

2 What does Miss Kenton mean when she says her marriage to Mr Benn was ‘simply another way to annoy you’? On what other occasions did she try to annoy Stevens and what was she really trying to do?

Chapter 18
Answer these questions.
(a) Why is Stevens crying when he sits on the pier?
(b) How does the man sitting next to him help Stevens take a more positive attitude to the rest of this life?
(c) What does Stevens learn from the group of people laughing and joking?

Activities after reading the book
1 In what ways has Stevens wasted his life? Do you think he has learned anything from his holiday which will make his old age happier?

2 Did you like the ending of the story? Write a different ending in which Stevens admits his love for Miss Kenton.