

Analysis of “Discipline Power” in *The Remains of the Day*

Li Zhen¹

¹ General Department, Qinghai University, Xining, China

Correspondence: Li Zhen, General Department, Qinghai University, Ningda Road 251, Chengbei district, Xining, China. E-mail: lzhengz@sina.com

Received: January 18, 2021 Accepted: February 20, 2021 Online Published: February 24, 2021

doi:10.5539/ells.v11n1p46 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v11n1p46>

Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyze “discipline power” and its implications for the service staff characters in the novel *The Remains of the Day*. From the perspective of Foucault’s power theory, especially the notion of discipline power, this essay explores these characters’ different destinies and responses to power. Contrary to many scholars who have discussed hierarchical power that easily finds expression in the master-and-servant relation in the traditional English house in this novel, the current essay mainly focuses on discipline power, which is internalized in people, allowing them to be unconsciously manipulated. Therefore, this essay first takes “Darlington Hall” as a model to analyze its disciplinary function and then turns to the main character, the butler, Stevens, who lives in the house and whose conduct mirrors how discipline shapes him. Finally, this essay points out solutions to the problem of the control of power by analyzing how Stevens and the housekeeper, Miss Kenton, renew their identities. This renewal echoes Ishiguro’s attempt to pay attention to the fates of marginalized people and console the unconsolated ones.

Keywords: discipline power, Darlington Hall, implication, identity, solution

In Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), he traced the cultural shifts that led to the predominance of the prison via the aspects of body and power. The “disciplines” use of prisons to create “docile bodies” was ideal for the economics, politics, and warfare of the modern industrial age. In Foucault’s opinion, to construct docile bodies, prisons must be able to “(a) constantly observe and record the bodies they control and (b) ensure the internalization of the disciplinary individuality within the bodies being controlled” (Schwan, 2011). That is, discipline must come about without the use of excessive force and through careful observation and molding of bodies into the correct form. This requires a particular form of institution that, Foucault argues, Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, a typical prison that uses surveillance and transparency to make convicts disciplined, exemplifies.

In *The Remains of the Day*, the author compares the butler’s rooms to prison cells. A careful consideration of Stevens’s room shows that the butler has no private life; his restricted activities and mundane routine make his room seem almost transparent. Miss Kenton, the housekeeper who also works for Lord Darlington with Stevens expresses the feeling that his room conveys. She says to Stevens, “your room looks even less accommodating at night than it does in the day. The electric bulb is too dim ... this room resembles a prison cell. All one needs is a small bed in the corner and one could well imagine condemned men spending their last hours here” (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 174). Her description, in a broader sense, mirrors the transparency of Darlington Hall, and accentuates its functions of maintaining order and organization. The room is a prison which ensures that each butler’s performance is observed and assessed to make sure things keep running smoothly. In the meantime, butlers are aware that they are being spied on, which materializes the panopticon’s mechanism that produces docile bodies. In the novel, Stevens’s father, a senior butler, lives alone in a cell-like room as Stevens’s. His muteness to his son creates distance. Stevens and his father hardly have any real interaction. When Stevens is asked by Lord Darlington to relieve his father of his service, he emphasizes his distant relation with the latter, saying,

I had rarely had reason to enter my father’s room prior to this occasion and I was newly struck by the smallness and starkness of it. Indeed, I recall my impression at the time was of having stepped into a prison cell, but then this might have had as much to do with the pale early light as with the size of the room or the bareness of its walls ... at least one assumed he had been watching the sky, there being little else to view

from his small window other than roof-tiles and gutting (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 67).

Here segmentation consolidates order and supervision, ensuring that the butlers only engage in organized and approved activities. In the panopticon, each convict lives in an enclosed, segmented cell; the slightest movement is supervised; and all events are recorded. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) gives further details about the panopticon:

Induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of a person who exercises it (p. 201).

The outcome of this sustaining power relation in Darlington Hall is seen in the butlers' complete docility and self-discipline. Stevens brands this docility and self-discipline "dignity", which he upholds throughout his professional life in Darlington Hall. His doctrine is as follows: "A butler of any quality must be seen to inhabit his role, utterly and fully; he cannot be seen casting it aside one moment simply to don it again the next as though it were nothing more than a pantomime costume" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 178). Clearly, he has been disciplined because he believes being a butler is not just about wearing the proper suit and obeying certain rules, but about framing oneself within the context of the discipline mechanism and having a fixed mind-set. Stevens behavior tends to conform to his master's, and he self-righteously believes that everything he has done for his master is "right".

During the 1930s, Stevens's first master, Lord Darlington, hosts numerous conferences and secret meetings between Germany, the United Kingdom, and other European powers at Darlington Hall. Given Lord Darlington's influence, the Germans try to manipulate him into persuading the British government to negotiate a peace treaty in Germany's favor. Mr. Cardina, Lord Darlington's godson, sees through the manipulation and tries to get Stevens, whom Lord Darlington trusts the most, to help him stop Lord Darlington from doing something he might later regret. In the following extract, he asks Stevens sincerely for his help:

I'll tell you this, Stevens. His lordship is being made a fool of. I've done a lot of investigating, I know the situation in Germany now as well as anyone in this country, and I tell you, his lordship is being made a fool of ... you must have seen it, haven't you?" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 233).

Stevens answered coldly: "I am sorry, sir, but I can't say I have" (p. 234).

For Stevens, standing by his master is the only "right" and "dignified" thing to do. He remains impervious to Mr. Cardina's suggestions. So, he tragically becomes an accomplice in supporting Nazi along with his master. His consistent submissiveness not only makes him a traitor but also impairs his relationship with his second employer, Mr. Farraday.

When Mr. Farraday, an American businessman, takes over the house, Stevens finds it difficult to play his role well because he is incapable of responding to Mr. Farraday's good-natured banter. He mentions the awkward situation between him and Mr. Farraday at the very beginning of the novel: "I should point out that just such bantering on my new employer's part has characterized much of our relationship over these months—though I must confess, I remain rather unsure as to how I should respond" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 5). Again, this shows Stevens's ingrained belief that the "right" thing to do is to respond to his employer's banter correctly. He avoids having an emotional connection with Farraday but only focuses on giving standard responses to the banter, which leads to practices of his bantering skills by listening to funny commentary on the radio every day. It goes without saying that his efforts end up distancing him from his employer and often falls him into a very embarrassing situation. Stevens' docility in the case of Lord Darlington and Mr. Farraday only proves that discipline power has completely manipulation over him that he has been molded into a rigid and soulless image.

Stevens sees his father more as a butler than a family member. Susie G. Brien (1996) remarked that "Stevens' attitude to his father was consistent with his reliance on an anachronistic social order to provide him with a sense of self-definition" (p. 806). He addresses his father in the third person using the capital "F" as if the latter were an abstract entity. For example, when his father falls ill, Stevens says,

Father has become increasingly infirm ... His lordship is of the view as indeed I am myself, that while Father is allowed to continue with his present round of duties, he represents an ever-present threat to the smooth running of this household ... It has been felt that Father should no longer be asked to wait at table whether or not guests are present (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 44).

Stevens's use of the capital "F" indicates his estrangement to his father. Under the panopticon mechanism,

neither father nor son can genuinely express concern and love for each other. It is only on his father's deathbed that he is able to reveal his real emotion to say, "I am proud of you. A good son. I hope I've been a good father to you. I suppose I haven't" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 101).

By virtue of Stevens's docility, he insists that a butler should not have a romantic relationship with a housemaid, instead, he should serve his employer as long as he is needed, and this is a "dignified" butler should do. His outlook on marriage breaks Miss Kenton's heart, who secretly likes Stevens. One day, Miss Kenton asks Stevens tentatively about his future plans, hoping to hear that Stevens also has considered about marriage and personal life, "it occurs to me that you must be a well-contented man. Here, you are, after all, at the top of your profession, every aspect of your domain well under control. I really cannot imagine what more you might wish for in life" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 110). Stevens avoids his real feelings to Miss Kenton by rationalizing that a good butler should be devoted all his life to his profession. As Foniokova (2006) remarked, "In his relationship with Miss Kenton, Stevens prevented his professional relationship from deviating from the proper basis and therefore ruled out the possibility of romance between them" (p. 95).

Stevens's attitude toward his employers, his father, and his potential marriage reflects an acceptance of rules connected with the formation of a professionalism that turns, step by step, into a life model that is impossible to disregard. Under the pretext of "dignity," Stevens represses his emotions and alienates himself from others, leading to endless regret. However, as the title suggests, Stevens thinks about his past days and what remains of his day during his trip—a break that is offered by Mr. Farraday. Many scholars point out that this trip is epistemological journey that brings about Stevens's change, as Penner (1999) remarked on it:

Stevens has undergone a series of experiences and introspections which brings him at the end to some sort of deepened understanding of the social realm that has escaped him. It has become a socializing experience, marked by moments of creative self-reflection which leaves him changed and more fully realized within the suffocating routine which had been his life (p. 29).

While Penner emphasizes Stevens's change that his introspections and experiences bring about, this article argues that Stevens's decision to leave Darlington Hall is actually a decision to escape the impact of the discipline mechanism and entering a new environment gains him a new identity.

The turning point occurs at the first day of the trip. The shift in the environment signals the loosening of discipline power's hold on Stevens. As he steps out of Darlington Hall, its surrounding walls are replaced by the vast and beautiful landscape that lies beyond. Stevens's heart is stirred as he feels what he never felt within the walls of the house:

As I motored on in the sunshine towards the Berkshire border, I continued to be surprised by the familiarity of the country around me. But then eventually the surroundings grew unrecognizable and I knew I had gone beyond all previous boundaries. (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 24)

The "boundaries" he crosses are not simply geographical divisions, but a psychological separation from the old restrictions and fetters. In the statement, Stevens's sense of alarm and doubt indicate a rupture from his old self.

The feeling swept over me that I had truly left Darlington Hall behind, and I must. confess I did feel a slight sense of alarm—a sense aggravated by the feeling that I was perhaps not on the correct road at all, but speeding off in the totally wrong direction into wilderness (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 24).

As his journey proceeds, beautiful villages and dense foliage replace the wilderness. Doubt and alarm are replaced by an outpouring of spontaneous emotions. For example, when he is driving, a hen comes in his way and he stops to save its life. The kindness and appreciation the owner of the hen shows him, "caused him somehow to feel exceedingly uplifted about the whole enterprise facing him over these coming days" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 73). Stevens's joy signals an emotional release in line with his change.

He also runs into a villager who is very warm-hearted to bring him to a charming spot. Stevens expresses his happy feelings there and he starts recalling his past life: "there is no doubt the quiet of these surroundings that has enabled me to ponder all the more thoroughly these thoughts ..." (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 128). "These thoughts" originate from the villager's chat with him and his question of whether Stevens had worked for Lord Darlington. Stevens denies it and this denial is in contrast with his previous pride at working for Lord Darlington. He is aware of his change for the first time. In Darlington Hall, years of complete docility makes him oblivious to the fact that Lord Darlington was a traitor, yet the denial of the moment awakens him and he starts to feel sad. So, the new environment provides a chance for Stevens to acknowledge his past faults and re-know himself.

Old self is questioned deeply by an encounter with a passionate campaigner. This man who lives in a small village is very ordinary, but he devotes most of his time to fighting for human rights. He tells Stevens, "it gets

easy for us here to forget our responsibility as citizens. That's why I work so hard at the campaigning ... We've all got to play our part" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 199). Stevens used to believe that he lived in a "crucial office, the heart of the house's operations, not unlike a general's headquarters during a battle, and it is imperative that all things in it are ordered—and left ordered—in precisely the way I wish them to be" (pp. 173–174). However, this villager, who fights for human rights and wants to promote social progress, lives in a remote area that is far from any centers of power, which might raise the following question to Stevens: was his service in Darlington Hall really of great significance? At this point, the fact that he was just a passive vehicle for power is easy to see.

On his last day, he meets Miss Kenton, who has become Mrs. Benn. After an exchange of pleasantries in the tearoom of the small hotel where Stevens is staying, Miss Kenton reveals her previous affection for him: "I get to thinking about a different life I might have had with you ... there's no turning back the clock now. One should realize one has as good as most, perhaps better, and be grateful" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 251). Hearing her words, Stevens confesses, "their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed—why should I not admit it?—at that moment, my heart was breaking" (Ishiguro, 1989, pp. 251–252).

Stevens's confession shows his progress toward seminal change. He realizes that he was never honest with himself and lost Miss Kenton. Sadly, he returns to the hotel in the evening and sees a crowd of people loudly cheering as the pier lights come on. He asks himself: "Why else would all these people give a spontaneous cheer simply because the pier lights have come on?" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 255). The question subtly implies his realization that spontaneity is the key to gaining real joy in life. At this moment, he decides not to regret but to cherish his remaining time.

The manipulation of discipline power creates Stevens early life tragedy as analyzed above, however, according to Foucault (2001),

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power ... their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network (p. 17).

Foucault does not suggest that the panopticon mechanism can absolutely discipline the body and behavior because there are so many discourses, thoughts, institutions, and so on. To some extent, the repression always causes resistance, and it can never control things completely.

With respect to Miss Kenton, it is unquestionable that she also gives up some of her freedom, being docile as Stevens, but she takes a different path. For example, Lord Darlington orders Stevens to dismiss two Jewish maids to show his support for Germany. Miss Kenton cannot accept the unfairness and bluntly expresses her indignation in her conversation with Stevens: "does it occur to you, Mr. Stevens, that to dismiss Ruth and Sarah on these grounds would be simply—wrong? I will not stand for such things. I will not work in a house in which such things can occur" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 157). Disappointed by the injustice, she quits and accepts a butler's proposal. Her resistance to the control of power makes her become Mrs. Benn and leads her to a new life. Though in the end of the novel, Stevens comes back to Darlington Hall after his trip, it is clear to see the endeavor he makes to escape the system that manipulates him. He takes back his autonomy as Miss Kenton, and starts with a change of attitude toward his new employer, confessing that "in bantering lies the key to human warmth."

References

- Brien, S. G. (1996). Serving a new world order: Postcolonial politics in Kazuo Ishiguro's *the remains of the day*. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 42(4), 787–806. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.1995.0178>
- Fonioková, Z. (2008). *The butler's suspicious dignity: unreliable narration in kazuo. Ishiguro's the remains of the day*. masarykova univerzita, roč. 2006.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Penguin Group.
- Foucault, M. (2001). *Power*. New Press.
- Ishiguro, K. (1989). *The remains of the day*. Vintage International.
- Penner, T. (1999). *Performing liminality: Kazuo Ishiguro's the remains of the day and Anita. Krookner's Look at me: A published master's degree*. Master's thesis, University of Manitoba. Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/43882.pdf>
- Schwan, A., & Shapiro, S. (2011). *How to read Foucault's discipline and punish*. Pluto Press.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author, with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).