The Remains of the Day

Kazuo Ishiguro

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 poor area of Glasgow and has worked with homeless people in London. He now lives in London with his wife and children.

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.

Chapter 1: **Staff Plans** Mr Stevens, the butler at Darlington Hall has difficulties running the house with few servants. His new master, an American, meanwhile suggests he should go away for a few days and offers to lend him a car. Stevens intends to use the trip to talk to a previous housekeeper of the Hall, hoping she might agree to come back. We see that the relatively modern values and conversation of the American, Mr Farraday, are difficult to understand for an old-fashioned butler like Stevens.

Chapter 2: **Unfamiliar Territory** Three months later, Stevens sets out; he has not left the area for many years. He stays at a guesthouse in Salisbury, and worries about meeting Miss Kenton (now Mrs Benn) again. We understand that he is always thinking about what makes a good butler. We discover that Miss Kenton is now married but separated, and that it is twenty years since she left Darlington Hall. He thinks back to those days in the 1920s, when England was so different and he was running Darlington Hall with 28 staff.

Chapter 3: **Small Errors** Back in 1922, Stevens employed Miss Kenton as housekeeper and also employed his own father, an experienced but aged man, as under-butler. Stevens and Miss Kenton have a disagreement over whether she has the right to address his father by his first name. Stevens’s father begins to make small cleaning errors, which to Stevens are a very serious matter. He tries nevertheless to ignore them.

Chapter 4: **An Embarrassing Fall** Stevens recalls a conversation he had in 1923 with Lord Darlington, who, he insists, was ‘a good man with a good heart’. Darlington is concerned that Stevens’s father is making more mistakes. The lord is particularly concerned since ‘an important conference’ of ‘friends of Germany’ is soon to be held in the house. Stevens explains to his father stiffly that he must only do more simple jobs from now on.

Chapter 5: **The Birds and the Bees** Miss Kenton is rather ill-tempered with Stevens. Meanwhile the first guests arrive for the conference. One of them has brought his twenty-three-year-old son, who is engaged to be married. The young man’s father has not been able to talk to his son about sex. Darlington asks Stevens to explain the facts of life to the young man, a job Stevens does not find easy.

Chapter 6: **The Conference** During the conference, Stevens’s father falls seriously ill. Despite his serious illness, he is only concerned about the work in the house being well done. He tells his son he is proud of him. A little later, Stevens’s father is obviously dying, but Stevens continues to worry only about Lord Darlington’s guests.

Chapter 7: **Silver** Back in the present (1956) Stevens is staying in Taunton and thinking about the importance of polishing silver correctly, as a butler. He talks of the visitors to Darlington Hall admiring the silver. These visitors include Ribbentrop, a Nazi leader. It becomes clear that Darlington was close to friends of Hitler’s. Stevens excuses Darlington, saying that in the atmosphere of the
time, Darlington’s attitude was understandable. Stevens is hoping very much that Miss Kenton will want to come back to work again with him.

Chapter 8: Sarah and Ruth Stevens remembers an episode where Darlington ordered that all Jewish staff should be dismissed. Stevens agrees, but Miss Kenton objects and threatens to leave. In the end she stays. Darlington, one year later, reconsiders his decision.

Chapter 9: Lisa One of the non-Jewish replacement maids is called Lisa. Miss Kenton accuses Stevens of finding the girl attractive, an accusation that he cannot reply to. In the end Lisa decided to marry one of the other servants and so is obliged to leave her job.

Chapter 10: A Lonely Hill Stevens continues his 1956 journey, running out of petrol and having to stay the night at a farmhouse.

Chapter 11: Secrets Stevens puts himself in a difficult situation with his hosts at the farmhouse. Later, Stevens goes back to his memories of the past and particularly of the time when his relationship with Miss Kenton began to go wrong. After Miss Kenton saw Stevens reading a love story, Stevens decided relations between them had become too familiar. He was also, the reader understands, jealous about the fact that Miss Kenton is clearly seeing a man she is interested in romantically. Stevens decides that he and Miss Kenton should no longer meet over cocoa in the evenings. We understand that he now feels he missed an opportunity to have a much closer relationship with Miss Kenton.

Chapter 12: Miss Kenton’s Aunt Stevens remembers another episode, when Miss Kenton’s aunt dies, and he only showed interest in errors in cleaning rather than showing he cared about how Miss Kenton was feeling. Indirectly, again, he shows that he had dreamed of a different kind of relationship with Miss Kenton.

Chapter 13: A Difficult Evening Stevens now recounts ‘a most uncomfortable situation’ he has experienced the previous day with his farmhouse hosts. His host and friends feel privileged to have ‘a gentleman’ to stay. They discuss what it means to be a ‘true gentleman’. Stevens cannot resist saying he has met Mr Churchill, Mr Eden and Lord Halifax, but does not say that it is as a servant that he met them.

Chapter 14: Dignity Stevens thinks back to another episode when upper-class gentlemen chose to humiliate him by asking him his opinions on international affairs he does not understand. Stevens was in no way offended, and in fact was incapable of having an opinion different from that of his master. Darlington explains to him shortly afterwards why he believes fascism is the solution to England’s problems. We learn that Darlington will later be known as a failure, a fascist, and a traitor.

Chapter 15: The Rose Garden Hotel Stevens is taken by a doctor to get some petrol. The doctor sees instantly that Stevens is a servant, not a gentleman. Stevens is now very much looking forward to meeting Miss Kenton again.

Chapter 16: Events of International Significance Stevens thinks back to 1936 one night ‘important international visitors’ are staying, whose identity the butler is not allowed to reveal. The same evening, Miss Kenton tells Stevens that a man has asked her to marry him, but that she has not yet made a decision. Stevens says nothing, but is clearly upset. Stevens is unable to react rationally either to his master’s fascist activities or to Miss Kenton’s expressions of affection.

Chapter 17: Old Friends Mr Stevens meets up with Miss Kenton (now Mrs Benn) for tea, and they talk. It turns out that her marriage with Mr Benn is now going better, and she is not looking to come back to Darlington Hall. Stevens tells of the very bad reputation Lord Darlington had after the war. Just before leaving, Mrs Benn explains that she might have preferred to be with Stevens all these years, rather than with her husband. Stevens is uncharacteristically heartbroken, but characteristically says nothing.

Chapter 18: The Best Part of the Day Stevens speaks to a man on the pier, and muses to himself in a melancholy way, feeling his life has not in fact been very dignified. He feels perhaps he should have a slightly lighter, more emotional approach to life, and looks forward to being a good butler for a few years more.

Background and themes

Life as a servant: 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
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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.

**British fascism and appeasement:** In the 1930s, when Hitler took power in Germany, there were sections of British society who looked quite favourably on his attempts to run society without democratic rights. The very high levels of unemployment and social crisis in Britain left some people desperate enough to be attracted by similar ideas. Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists organized throughout the thirties mass meetings and demonstrations. In 1936, Mosley organized a provocative demonstration through the streets of a large Jewish neighbourhood in East London. He was opposed by the mobilization of trade unions and left wing organizations at Cable Street. The fascist demonstration was dispersed, and Mosley's organization demoralized.

In a parallel phenomenon, sections of the British aristocracy who had never been at ease with democracy admired Mussolini and Hitler because of their capacity to impose order in their countries. Lord Londonderry admired Mussolini and Hitler because of their capacity to become a butler. The strict class structure of society in particular made friends with Hitler and worked hard to bring the British government into an alliance with Germany. Some parts of the British government, unsure of their ability to run another all-out war only twenty years after the previous one, were sympathetic to different attempts to improve relations with Hitler. This was known at the time as ‘appeasement’. After the war, all those involved in appeasement were severely criticized since they were seen as having been blind to the true nature of Hitlerism.

**Discussion activities**

**Before reading**

1. **Discuss:** Tell students that this book is about a man who has spent many years working as a butler, a servant in a large house. Put them into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions, then discuss with the whole group. **What was life like for servants to the English aristocracy in the 1920s? How often did they go on holiday? How many hours a week did they work? What were the duties of a butler, and of a housekeeper? What other kind of servants existed? What happened when a servant wanted to get married?**

**Chapters 1–2**

2. **Write: A letter of application.** Ask your students to imagine that they want a job as a housekeeper, as a maid or as a footman, in Darlington Hall in the 1920s. They should write a letter to Stevens asking for a job. Remind them to write as formally as they can.

3. **Imagine a conversation:** Ask your students to work in pairs. One of them should act the part of Stevens, a formal, old-fashioned butler. The other should act the part of his American master, Mr Farraday. The master jokes and makes informal conversation; the butler attempts to respond.

**Chapters 3–4**

4. **Role play: A job interview.** Ask your students, in pairs to role play the interview between Stevens and Miss Kenton when she applies for a job in Darlington Hall in the 1920s.

5. **Write: Miss Kenton’s letter.** Ask your students to work in small groups. They should find all the places in the first four chapters where Stevens refers to Miss Kenton’s letter and make notes on what the letter said. They should then write the letter. They should begin ‘Dear Mr Stevens, it must be a surprise to you to receive this letter after so many years without hearing my news …’

6. **Role play:** Ask the students to work in pairs. They should read the scene where Stevens tells his father about the reduction in his duties. They should then rewrite it to make Stevens’s explanation gentler and more sensitive. Finally they should act out the conversation.

**Chapters 5–6**

7. **Write and discuss: What makes a good butler?** Ask your students to imagine Stevens was asked, in the 1930s, to write a list of the most important rules of being a good butler. They should work in pairs, and each pair should write five rules. The pairs should then meet in groups of four and defend their choices, finally choosing in the group of four, three most important rules. Finally the whole class should choose one Golden Rule for being a good butler.

8. **Write: A letter of invitation.** Ask your students to imagine they are Lord Darlington. They should write a letter of invitation to the conference, addressed to selected English lords and businessmen.

**Chapters 7–8**

9. **Write:** Ask your students to imagine that Miss Kenton keeps a personal diary during her time at Darlington Hall in the 1930s. They should write the entry in her diary for the day after she discovers that Stevens is going to fire Sarah and Ruth, on instructions from Lord Darlington.
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10 Discuss: So British. Ask students to discuss in groups the presentation in the book of national characteristics. Guide them with the following questions: What in the book do we imagine as ‘typically British’? What ‘typically American’ characteristics are shown by Stevens’s new employer? How much truth is there in these stereotypes of the British and the Americans? What do foreigners often think of as ‘typical’ of your country? Do you think it is true?

Chapters 9–10

Before reading

11 Discuss and predict: Ask your students to discuss, in small groups what might happen if a maid whom Stevens finds attractive is employed at Darlington Hall. Guide them with the following questions: How will Stevens show he finds the girl attractive? Given what we know about his personality, how will he talk to her? How might Miss Kenton react? How might this affect the relationship between Stevens and Miss Kenton.

After reading

12 Write: A love letter. Lisa has been noticed by one of the other servants, who finds her very attractive. He writes her a love letter. Ask your students to write the letter. Remind them to write in a relatively traditional style.

13 Role play: Ask your students to work in pairs. One of them is Lisa, the maid. The other is a good friend of hers. Ask them to role play the conversation. Lisa is in love and would like to get married, but she knows she will lose her job if she does, and is worried about this. Her friend listens and gives advice.

Chapters 11–12

14 Write: 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.

15 Discuss: Is Stevens guilty of self-deception? Ask your students to work in small groups. Ask them to discuss the personality of Stevens and the reasons he gives for his different reactions throughout the first part of the book. Guide them with the following questions: Notice what Stevens says about his reasons for visiting Miss Kenton, about his attitudes to Sarah, Ruth and Lisa, about his reasons for reading love stories. Is he always honest with himself? Why/why not? Does he understand his own motives? Do you think there are really people like this?

Chapters 13–14

16 Role play: Passing for a gentleman. Put your students in groups of four. Ask them to act out the scene where the country people are saying how privileged they feel to have a gentleman to stay, and Stevens is boasting about the important people he has met. The country people want to know more and are impressed. Stevens doesn’t want to say he is a servant, but doesn’t want to actually lie, either. Then ask some of the groups to act out the scene in front of the whole group.

Chapters 15–16

17 Discuss: Ask your students to discuss the following questions in small groups: Stevens’s 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? 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’s apparent indifference to the news?

18 Write: When the conference happens in 1936, a journalist friend of the family tries to discover what the conference is about. Ask your students to imagine they are that journalist, and that they successfully discover the identity of the guests and the subject of the conference. They should write a newspaper article entitled ‘Secret conference at Darlington Hall’ where they give a dramatic account of what they discover and how. They should begin ‘One of our reporters succeeded in getting through the tight security at Darlington Hall yesterday evening and made astonishing discoveries …’

Chapters 17–18

Before reading

19 Predict: Ask your students, in small groups, to imagine what is going to happen when Stevens finally meets Miss Kenton. Guide them with the following questions: Will Stevens be disappointed? What might have happened to Miss Kenton over the last few years? What questions will Stevens ask her? Will he be able to deal with the situation? Will he say she is breaking his heart?

After reading

20 Role play: Put students in pairs and ask them to imagine a conversation between Mrs Benn (Miss Kenton) and her best friend the day after she meets with Mr Stevens. She should explain how she was feeling and what she said, and ask her friend for advice. Her friend should be sympathetic. Then ask some of the pairs to act out the situation in front of the class.

21 Write: It has become clear in the story that after the war, Lord Darlington had been accused of being a traitor because of his close contacts before the war with friends of Hitler. Angered at the accusation, he had gone to court to sue for libel. Tell your students to pretend they are journalists and to write a newspaper article from 1946 when Lord Darlington had succeeded in getting through the tight security at Darlington Hall yesterday evening and made astonishing discoveries …’
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22 Write: Ask your students, in pairs, to write a different ending to the story, in which Stevens admits his love for Miss Kenton.

23 Discuss: The best part of the day. Put students into small groups. Guide them with the following questions: Why does Stevens talk about evening as ‘the best part of the day’ – do you think it’s possible that the best part of Stevens’s life is in front of him?

Extra activities

24 Write: Ask your students to imagine it is five years after Stevens’s holiday and his visit to Mrs Benn. He writes a diary. Ask your students to write a diary entry. Guide them with the following questions: Has Stevens changed? How has he managed with his new master? Has he learned to banter? Does he still think about the past?

25 Write: A parody. Explain to your students how parody works. In this book, Ishiguro does not make us laugh at Stevens, but takes him seriously. Divide your students into two groups. One group should write a parody of the scene where Stevens’s father dies. The other group should write a parody of the scene at the end of the book where Stevens meets Miss Kenton (now Mrs Benn). Then each group should present their parody to the other group.

26 Discuss: Heroes. Ask students to discuss Stevens as a hero. Guide them with the following questions. What characteristics do you need to have to be the hero of a novel? Is Stevens a hero? What is an anti-hero? Could Stevens be seen as an anti-hero? How much sympathy does Ishiguro want us to have for Stevens? Can you think of other heroes of novels or films who are similar?

27 Write an obituary: Show your students a short obituary in English. Ask them to imagine that, some years later, Mr Stevens dies. Ask them to discuss in pairs and then write an obituary for Mr Stevens explaining what was important in his life.

28 Debate: The good old days. Divide students into two groups. Tell one group that they must defend the values of the old world of the English upper class, and they must find reasons to claim people were happier and society was healthier. The other group must find arguments to say exactly the opposite, that the disappearance of this world was an excellent thing. It is a pity that traditional values are disappearing. The best way to be happy is to do your job well. Traditional values destroyed the personal life of those who were not rich. If you live like a slave, you think like a slave. The old world was much simpler than the modern world. Act on your feelings before it’s too late. Money doesn’t make you happy. It is important to be understanding about those who sympathize with extreme ideas.

29 Research and present: Servants in today’s world. Ask students to do research at home or on the Internet, about servants in today’s world. Guide them with the following questions: Do some people still have maids, butlers, and footmen? How good are the wages and the working conditions? What kind of arrangements do richer people make today if they do not have servants? Why do you think there are far fewer servants these days? You can encourage them to consult, along with other sites, the site www.butlersguild.com

30 Artwork: Ask students to design a new cover for the book. They may draw or paint it, or make a collage. They should try to ensure it corresponds to the atmosphere of the book.

31 Research and present: Retirement and pensions. In the book, we see that Stevens father, though old, has little choice but to go on working. Ask your students to research, on the Internet, the situation of old people in Britain in recent history. Guide them with the following questions: When were the first old age pensions introduced in Britain? What is the retirement age in Britain today? After what date did old people without money no longer have to live in the workhouse? Then ask them to present their findings to the class.

32 Debate: The moral of the story. Put your students into groups of three. Together they should make a list of the three sentences below they feel are closest to what they see as the message of the book, and the one sentence that is furthest from the message of the book. Each group then should defend their choice in front of the whole class, and the whole group should discuss to discover what they think is the one most important message of the book.

It is a pity that traditional values are disappearing. The best way to be happy is to do your job well. Traditional values destroyed the personal life of those who were not rich. If you live like a slave, you think like a slave. The old world was much simpler than the modern world. Act on your feelings before it’s too late. Money doesn’t make you happy. It is important to be understanding about those who sympathize with extreme ideas.

33 Research and present: British fascism. Put your students into four groups. Ask them to research at home these people events or organizations from the history of the far right in Britain: Oswald Mosley, Lord Londonderry, Cable Street, the Anti-Nazi League. Then in class they should present what they have found to the whole group.

34 Research and Present: heritage films. The Remains of the Day became a successful film. It is one of a series of films which show the life of the upper classes in England in the past. These films are sometimes referred to as ‘heritage films’. Ask your students to find other films of this category and to present them in class.

35 Discuss: Following on from Activity 34, divide your students into small groups and ask them to discuss the phenomenon of heritage films. Guide them with the following questions: What do these films have in common? Why are they popular? What kind of people like them, in your opinion, and why? What kind of people do not like them, in your opinion, and why not?

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.