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## 'There Shall Be no Discernible Traces Left': The Invisible Butler in Ishiguro's "The Remains of the Day"

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**'There shall be no discernible traces left': The Invisible Butler in Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day**

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This paper draws its title from an anecdote Stevens, the butler in The Remains of the Day (1989), recounts to illustrate the primary attribute for servants: the ability to perform duties without leaving any discernible traces. Mrs. D.C. Webster, an American married into British “old money,” expresses astonishment at the treatment of servants during an interview for the documentary, The Secret World of Fame and Fortune. Mrs. Webster “had a staff of twelve . . . They would do everything for you. If you took a sweater off, it would disappear. If they were too loud or if they were seen, they would be dismissed.” The Webster home is typical of the class and the era to which it and Ishiguro’s Darlington Hall belong. Only the commission of an error causes an awareness of the servant’s presence. The unfortunate effect of such a system is that not only do the servant’s efforts go unseen, and therefore unrewarded, the servant becomes invisible. In this regard, Stevens once complains that serving two dinner guests is more difficult than serving a full room because it is “most difficult to achieve that balance between attentiveness and the illusion of absence that is essential to good waiting” (72). More significant than Stevens’ efforts to be invisible is Lord Darlington’s attitude towards his butler. On the occasion cited, Lord Darlington assures his dinner companion that he can talk in front of Stevens, as if Stevens were not in the room with them.

As a result of this treatment, Stevens experiences a version of the invisibility Ralph Ellison outlines in *Invisible Man* (1994). Ellison's narrator explains, "I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids — and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination — indeed, everything and anything except me" (3). While Ellison refers to a racist society, the aristocratic society for which Darlington Hall serves as a microcosm is built on perhaps a more rigidly defined order.<sup>1</sup> Racism is one of several repressive practices through which the hierarchy is maintained. Thus, scholars emphasize the postcolonial implications of Ishiguro's novel. These readings suggest an allegory of Britain's relations with its empire. Susie O'Brien observes, this is "evident in Stevens' unquestioning submission to a social order which reflects and supports the model of filial devotion deployed by empire to mask the enforced servitude of its colonies" (1996, 790). What gets lost in this model is how this is achieved at the personal level. David Lodge calls Stevens an unreliable narrator who reveals "in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter" (1992, 155). Lodge turns to the historical events of the book and does not address how or why Stevens is unreliable, only that he is.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Stevens' invisibility is central to the themes outlined above and it functions in two distinct but related manners. The disciplinary and subjection practices of servitude keep him "out of the club," or, in psychoanalytic terms, from entry into the Symbolic Order. Ultimately, Stevens becomes the agent of his own subjection.

The perceived need for unseen servants means that Stevens is invisible even to himself. That is, he is invisible in the Lacanian sense of an infant trapped, or arrested, in the mirror stage.<sup>3</sup> Stevens only has an illusion of subjectivity in that he believes his being *reflects* the appearance of a good butler; *i.e.*, this is the image he has assumed. More important is Stevens' difficulty acquiring language. In Lacanian terms, language is a part of the "symbolic matrix," or more commonly, the "Symbolic Order." Alan Sheridan describes the Symbolic Order as "the determining order of the subject, and its effects are radical: the subject in Lacan's sense, is himself an effect of the symbolic" (1977, ix). Stevens frequently has difficulties talking with Miss Kenton, bantering with Mr. Farraday, and he chooses romance novels as exemplars of "fine" language. The lack of language coupled with his profession ensures that Stevens' development remains arrested and that he remains invisible.

At the beginning of the novel, Stevens remarks he has made several “trivial” errors which foreshadow the later account of the demise of Stevens Sr. In one of both Stevens’ favourite stories, a “good” butler in India finds a tiger under the dining table just before dinner but takes care of the situation such that he is able to report: “I am pleased to say that there will be no discernible traces left of the recent occurrence” (36). The story gives Stevens a “vital clue” into his father’s thinking (36). Even in such extreme and dangerous circumstances as having a tiger in the house, the actions and emotions — and therefore the persons — of the staff have to remain invisible. That this reveals his “father’s ideals” indicates that for Stevens Jr. dignity and invisibility are synonymous (37). There is no doubt that invisibility is a more important method of subjection than silence. The massive noise of “three gun shots” from the “twelve-bores” did not go unheard but they did go unseen.

Although Stevens rationalizes his errors as the result of Mr. Farraday’s changes, one of Stevens’ errors points to his own diminished capacity. Stevens recalls an “incident last April relating to the silver” in which he repeats an error committed by his father (139). Stevens tries to remove the utensil but instead startles Mr. Farraday when he should not be seen doing it. However, unlike Lord Darlington, Mr. Farraday’s ritual for conversation with Stevens involves closing “any book or periodical he has been reading, ris[ing] and stretch[ing] out his arms in front of the windows, as though in anticipation of conversation” with him (13). Therefore, it comes as little surprise that Stevens would be confused. Regardless, the need for ritual indicates that any sense of “democracy” created by the banter is immediately undercut by the employer/servant relationship. Stevens does not recognize nor is he even aware of the Symbolic Order except as a part of his job. Banter is one more duty to perform. He does not ever consider himself to be anything like an equal to Mr. Farraday because by considering the act of speech to be a duty performed at the beck and call of Mr. Farraday, Stevens perpetuates the master-servant paradigm. This point becomes clearer given Stevens’ subsequent remarks. Such bantering, “in the United States, no doubt, is a sign of a good, friendly understanding between employer and employee” (14). A good, friendly understanding between employer and employee is not only foreign to the grounds of Darlington Hall, according to Stevens it is foreign to England. Nevertheless, he will try to learn for fear that “in America, it is all part of what is considered good professional service that an employee provide entertaining banter” (15). In any case, he views the bantering not as dialogic, — as a conversation — but as monologic since he is

performing for his employer. He is at best a performance artist and at worst a clown in waistcoat and tails doing tricks for his master.<sup>4</sup>

Lacan asserts that there are three interacting and interdependent “Orders,” or levels of human understanding. Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy explain that Lacan’s “Imaginary Order includes the field of phantasies and images. It evolves out of the mirror stage, but extends into the adult subject’s relationships with others (1986, 81). Conversely, the “Real Order is what the subject keeps ‘bumping up against’ (Benvenuto & Kennedy, 81). Linking the Real and Imaginary Orders is the previously mentioned Symbolic Order. Stevens fumbles, at bantering, for instance, in his attempts to grasp the Symbolic Order. Following Lord Darlington’s decision to remove the Jewish maids from the staff, Stevens offers other examples. Miss Kenton initially threatens to resign but she is not in a financial position to do so, which makes her the target of some awkward teasing — bantering, if you will — from Stevens. Until he becomes an active and willing (as opposed to obligated) participant in the Symbolic Order, Stevens will remain invisible. Jane Gallop asserts the “mirror stage is a turning point” but is not necessarily attached to any sort of chronology (1985, 79). Thus, Stevens anticipates *being* a “great butler,” but fears he has not always *been* one. Thus, Stevens’ inability to handle “with dignity” the task of explaining the “facts of life” to Lord Darlington’s godson, Reginald Cardinal, comes as no surprise (81). This is paralleled at the end of the novel, when the younger Cardinal forces Stevens to sit down and listen in a scene that also recalls Lord Spencer’s interrogation in that Stevens is unable to reply.

Stevens’ self-denial extends to other areas. For example, he refuses to allow flowers in his room and pretty girls in (the service of ) the house. Stevens believes that servants who look for love among their ranks are “a blight on good professionalism” (51). Stevens “never allow[s] himself to be ‘off duty’ in the presence of others” (169). This is especially apparent after Miss Kenton informs Stevens that she is getting married. Stevens’ behaviour during this episode recalls his performance during his father’s death. Both times an international conference is contemporaneous with (seemingly) emotional period for Stevens, yet he tells Miss Kenton, “I have not taken anything you have said to heart” (226). In a few hours the denial already has taken effect. When the conference ends, an hour later, Stevens reports, as he had at the time of his father’s death, “a deep feeling of triumph started to well up within me. . . . I had, after all, just come through an extremely trying evening, throughout which I had managed to preserve a

‘dignity in keeping with my position’ – and had done so, moreover, in a manner even my father might have been proud of” (227). Ishiguro perhaps over-emphasizes the moment when Stevens recognizes that this evening is a “sort of summary” of his life (228).

Indeed, Stevens’ mind becomes the “four walls” of Darlington Hall. Although the trip that occasions the writing of the journal is supposedly a vacation, Stevens is only concerned with a professional task. Perhaps the most difficult part of arguing Stevens’ invisibility is accounting for his (very) material existence. The first part of the essay details Stevens’ invisibility in the Lacanian sense. However, the current section turns to Michel Foucault’s (1995) account of disciplined bodies to show how the invisibility is actually enforced. Frequently, the servant enforces his own subjection. In his discussion of discipline, Foucault differentiates between “useful” and “intelligible” bodies (136). He then introduces a third term, “docility,” which “joins the analysable body to the manipulable body. A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136). Thus, concludes Foucault, “discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (138). There is no doubt that Stevens’ is a well-practised body. In terms of invisibility, the primary disciplinary practices is “Panopticism,” which Foucault develops from Jeremy Bentham’s prison designed to provide complete surveillance. In short, “Visibility is a trap,” which prisoners will try to avoid (Foucault, 200). In contrast, Foucault explains that “invisibility is a guarantee of order” (200). Ideally prisoners can be viewed from a central tower, but cannot see their observer. Since visibility is their undoing, prisoners are also motivated by invisibility. Thus, there are contingencies between the theme of invisibility and the themes of containment and height. The constant surveillance reinforces the desire to be unseen.

Invisibility coincides with an inversion of positions when Stevens describes his father’s last days as a “professional.” The first description comes from Miss Kenton. She recalls that she and Stevens were looking down on Stevens Sr. while the old man walked “back and forth in front of the summerhouse, looking down at the ground as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there” (50). Stevens’ status with respect to his father is reversed. First, the younger Stevens looks down (pun intended) on his father without being seen. Moreover, William Stevens, though the father and the elder, is the junior butler. Stevens Jr. considers his father in terms of his position. He notes only a butler who *lets* himself be seen. In retrospect he realizes his father was “much ravaged by arthritis and other ailments” and should not be working (51). The confusion surrounding Stevens Sr.’s duties and Miss Kenton’s use of the elder butler’s first

name stems from Stevens' inability to differentiate the personal from the professional.

Essentially, Miss Kenton and Stevens argue about who sees what: she sees an old man doing too much; he tries to see a great butler. Stevens' denial occurs because acknowledging his father's errors means acknowledging his father's humanity, and, by extension, his own.

Miss Kenton tries to force Stevens to grasp the situation. Instead, he becomes annoyed at her for pointing out a dust-pan, the "remains of polish" on the silver (56), Stevens Sr.'s nose dangling drops "over the soup bowls" (60), and the reversed upstairs and downstairs "Chinamen" (57). Through their cosmology, the misplaced figures become emblematic of the father and the son. Stevens' comical performance during the "Chinamen" episode confirms the importance of his invisibility. He refuses to face Miss Kenton, but exiting through the back means tracking through mud. Stevens Sr.'s demise highlights the effects of Panopticism on the servants. For Foucault, the major effect is that those who are subjected eventually police themselves. Invisibility becomes the method of self-subjection instead of being resistance. Stevens Sr. fails because he cannot police himself. Unfortunately, it takes Stevens Sr.'s (obviously symbolic) fall to make everyone other than the already cognizant Miss Kenton aware of the situation. Since the fall occurs in his view, Lord Darlington must take action. In a fashion that emphasizes invisibility, and foreshadows his handling of the Jewish maids, Lord Darlington leaves it to Stevens to make the "problems" disappear. Lord Darlington's words, "In view of the persons who will be present, I do not think I exaggerate," are telling (62). While he means "in consideration," the word "view" has obvious other meanings. Lord Darlington does not wish his conference to be "seen" by outsiders in the sense of its being secret. Additionally, if his guests "see" the help they might fear compromised confidentiality. Stevens is similarly motivated. The number of visitors makes it more difficult to achieve his aims. As Foucault observes, "the more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are, the greater the risk for the inmate of being surprised and the greater his awareness of being observed" (202). Stevens' seeming insensitivity is an affect of his heightened self-subjection. The inability to speak with his father foreshadows Stevens' participation in the treatment of the Jewish maids: telling Miss Kenton and then the girls that they must go.

Although Nazi propaganda fools Lord Darlington, one should recall that propaganda supported the plan to make all traces of Jews disappear. Stevens, like other more notorious individuals claims he was following orders, but at the time Stevens chastised Miss Kenton. If

Stevens ever had ambivalent sentiments, neither Miss Kenton nor the girls would have known because the butler always carries out his duties with “dignity.” But dignity is more than merely following orders, as Stevens patronizingly informs Miss Kenton. This scene is paralleled with the interrogation scene in which Stevens is cross-examined by Lord Spencer. He should have been humiliated by the experience. Instead, looking down on his master from a ladder, in a comic reversal of Panopticism, Stevens tells Lord Darlington that he was “only too happy to be of service. . . . [and] was not unduly inconvenienced” by the ordeal (197). Yet we know from Foucault that “the Panopticon was also a laboratory; it could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals . . . to teach different techniques simultaneously to the workers” (202). Seen this way, Lord Darlington’s dismissal of the maids is an exercise in eugenics. When combined with Lord Spencer’s harangue of Stevens, the two episodes can be considered experiments in fascism. As Homi K. Bhabha puts it, “the brilliance of Ishiguro’s exposition of the ideology of service lies in his linking the national and the international, the indigenous and the colonial, by focusing on the anti-Semitism of the interwar period. He thus mediates race and cultural difference through a form of difference — Jewishness — that confuses the boundaries of class and race” (1995, 62). A third linkage, between the individual and the national, can be added to Bhabha’s list. Darlington Hall, then, becomes a laboratory for the British fascists, one in which they can practice their theories on willing, if unwitting, subjects.

Significantly more sinister than his denials of human emotions are Stevens’ repeated denials of his association with Lord Darlington. Given Lord Darlington’s sympathy for the German cause, the postwar setting of the novel poses serious problems for Stevens. On three occasions the butler denies knowing his former master. Stevens admits a connection among the falsehoods but not its nature. Stevens is trying to convince only himself with his “white lies.” This becomes obvious when one considers that Stevens is not writing a novel, intended for public consumption, but instead he is writing a journal and is thus writing to himself. Indeed, the journal itself becomes a mirror of sorts for Stevens; one in which he cannot see himself. The white lies are also part of Stevens’ self-policing. In fact, he is still serving Lord Darlington after the latter’s demise. The denials are a vain attempt to conceal Lord Darlington’s collaboration and in this way Stevens tries to protect his master. Stevens’ denials, then, parallel one of his father’s more celebrated moments in which he defends the reputation of his master. By defending his



master, however, Stevens Sr. also defends his own subordination. The younger Stevens behaves similarly during his own automobile trip.

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## End Notes

1. The long-running BBC comedy, Are You Being Served?, pokes much of its fun at the overwrought and yet barely discernible class distinctions which may be based on accent, dwelling, location, and even one's hat. One of the most frequent routines involves Capt. Peacock, the Hamburg-wearing semi-detached lower-middle manager, admonishing Mr. Mash or Mr. Harmon, the unionized Cockney labourer, for being "on the floor" while the store is open. The cleaners and movers — that is, the lower classes — are not supposed to be seen.
2. Admittedly, this is not Lodge's purpose in The Art of Fiction, but his remarks emphasize the "themes of political bad faith and emotional sterility" as opposed to the self-erasure of the unreliable narrator. It is his self-erasure that makes Stevens unreliable.
3. Although the author has written elsewhere on the subject of psychological invisibility, the Lacanian approach is partly inspired by Robert Young's paper, "No I cannot see it but I can read it": Theorizing African-American Subjectivity." Young applies this perspective to Invisible Man and Bluest Eye.
4. In this regard, the scene with Mr. Farraday parallels Stevens' interrogation by Lord Spencer and contrasts his two abortive conversations with Reggie Cardinal. The three later scenes are detailed elsewhere.
5. For example, Renata Salecl offers a detailed Freudian reading of the title based on the concept of dreams as "days residues" (182).