

The Mistaken Inheritance of Victorian Gentlemen Culture in *The Remains of the Day*

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The Remains of the Day, written by Kazuo Ishiguro, retraces Stevens' life by describing his six-day driving trip: pursuing perfect work and restraining his other feelings... All of these reflect his stubborn, restraint, and forbearance. Stevens always follows the social culture. All reveal the relationship between the limits of the Victorian values, such as the gentleman culture and the tragic fate of individuals, and reveal the desolation of British society after the "World War II", warning readers that the stereotyped copying of social culture will inevitably bring tragedy.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, Victoria era, gentleman culture

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro (1954-) is a Japanese British novelist, born on November 8, 1954 in Nagasaki, Japan. He moved to the United Kingdom with his family in 1960. He graduated from the University of Kent and the University of East Anglia, and obtained British nationality in 1982.

Unlike other ethnic minority writers, Kazuo Ishiguro prides himself on being an internationalist writer. His work *The Remains of the Day* won the Booker Prize as soon as it was published in 1989 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. The novel depicts Stevens' memories and remorse for his life during his driving journey. This paper argues that Stevens is a sacrifice under the gentleman culture. His forbearance, restraint, and excessive loyalty are portrayals of the Victorian gentlemanly culture, revealing the relationship between the limitations of gentlemanly culture and the tragic fate of individuals.

Insight Into the Victorian Era

Victorian era followed by the era of King George, followed by the era of Edward. The late Victorian era was the peak of the British Industrial Revolution and the British Empire. It was considered as the golden age of the British Empire together with the era of Edward. Its time limit is often defined as 1837 to 1901, that is, the reign of Queen Victoria. The long-term peace and prosperity of the Victorian era have further refined the rational development of Britain and consolidated the national confidence of the British Empire. The Victorian era is regarded as the culmination of the British Industrial Revolution and the heyday of the British economy and culture. At that time, the British economy accounted for 70% of the global economy. The wave of scientific invention in the Victorian era is surging. Victorians believe in scientific progress and are optimistic and confident about the industrial revolution. The emergence of steamboats has made transportation and trade achieve unprecedented prosperity, and the railway traffic runs through the east, west, north, and south in all directions.

Victorian values generally advocate the moral cultivation and standard etiquette advocated by the British aristocracy in the peaceful and prosperous times when science, culture, and industry have been vigorously developed. Thomas Macaulay, the most enthusiastic supporter and spokesman of the Victorian era, expressed his confidence in the British culture of this period: "British culture is actually the history of progress", and believed that the British nation is "the greatest and most civilized nation ever". Albert, husband of Queen Victoria believed that the British exposition "should not only have the function of practicality and beautification, but also have the function of promoting morality" (Carter & McRae, 1997, p. 278). This moral instruction undoubtedly shows the British people's sense of superiority to their own moral system and the mentality of considering themselves as moral leaders and role models around the world. Queen Victoria herself is regarded as the moral model of the whole society for her self-denial, decent behavior, good breeding, and strict motherhood. The highly developed material civilization and moral standards in the Victorian era have become the source of national pride for the British people, and the moral concepts such as restraint, concealment, forbearance, and obedience advocated in the Victorian era have also become the life creed deeply rooted in the marrow of the British people.

Compared with the 17th and 18th centuries, the connotation of gentlemanly demeanor in the Victorian era has changed significantly. As Robin Gilmore described, "... from about 1840 to 1880, or earlier, or later... it is in these years that the nature of gentlemanly demeanor has been more hotly debated and defined than ever" (Gilmore, 1981, p. 2). Its moral connotation has indeed strengthened. It is generally believed that the Victorian gentlemen were destined to cultivate gentlemanly manners and acquire good manners and gentlemanly manners. In terms of the gentlemanly demeanor in the Victorian era, people emphasized the sense of morality rather than their social status.

Insight Into Steven's Characteristic

From the very beginning, Stevens expressed his thoughts on how to make a butler great. He said that "a great butler can only be, surely, one who can point to his years of service and say that he has applied his talents to serving a great gentleman and through the latter, to serving humanity" (Ishiguro, 1998, p. 117). Stevens holds the faith that he must to be a fully loyal and competent servant. His faith of "perfect professionalism" devours the chance of him to show the care and love for senior Mr. Stevens.

Facing the illness of his father, he repeated that "I'm so glad you're feeling better now". Then, when Miss Kenton, a house keeper, informs him that "your father has become very ill", "But you must come now, Mr. Stevens, or else you may deeply regret it later", "He is gone very poorly", his responses are that "I only have a moment. The gentlemen are liable to retire to the smoking room at any moment", "This is most distressing. Nevertheless, I must now return downstairs"... All these responses show that Mr. Stevens keeps his "perfect professionalism" at the first level, anything else; even the death of his father is less important. The faith of restraint is the virtue of gentlemen, which is popular in Victoria era. Mr. Stevens is deeply influenced by the traditional hierarchy and moral concepts of the Victorian era. He uses strict and even harsh stewardship professional ethics to restrain himself, maintain rationality and dignity at any time, and achieve self-worth. In fact, he made mistakes and went astray, leaving tragic flaws in his life. However, such a cold attitude towards his father's illness and death must have shocked the readers. We should carry forward the qualities of the gentleman culture, such as tenacity and tolerance, but we should combine the actual situation, analyze the specific problems, and reasonably inherit the gentleman culture. Stevens' rigid pursuit of perfection has led to irreparable regret and tragedy.

With this kind of criteria in mind, Stevens dedicates all his time and life to be a perfect butler. Being indifference to his father is just one aspect, showing his criteria, avoiding and suppressing his personal feeling toward Miss. Kenton also indicates his gentleman value.

There are some events showing the relationship, maybe a “conflict” between Mr. Stevens and Miss Kenton. Stevens is reluctant to show the “privacy” to Miss. Kenton. At last, it turns out to be a romantic story, and Miss Kenton reads it loudly. For Stevens, it is very embarrassment. But Stevens was too reluctant to be seen in front of others that he did not perform his duties. He was more willing to take Miss Kenton’s joke seriously. All indicate that Stevens is “protecting” his privacy and escaping Miss Kenton’s approaching. His pantry is a bit like a harbor, where he can hide his heart, but not just a rest room. Stevens regards anyone who steps into this private field as an intruder. Miss Kenton enters in the pantry with flowers, using to decorate the pantry. As a reader, one can clearly feel Miss Kenton’s kindness. This is a kind of hurt for Miss Kenton. Apart from these events, there are other things that show that Stevens made Miss Kenton feel sad, so that she chose to meet her suitor and leave here. Miss Kenton asked Stevens many times whether she would go out to meet her suitor. Stevens always said yes, which made Miss Kenton even more disappointed. Once, at their meeting, Miss Kenton seized the opportunity to say that “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, 1998, p. 173).

Nevertheless, to her further disappointment, Stevens’ response only shows that he has more ambitions to achieve, without considering his personal life. Stevens said

If he cannot complete all the tasks, his mission will not be fulfilled. The employer has arranged for him. And he would not feel content if he cannot serve his lordship until the day he has finished all his ambition of making a peaceful and justified world. (Ishiguro, 1998, p. 173)

From his words, it is clear that Stevens still believes that his career is the most important thing in his life. He cannot do anything other than service. Miss Kenton felt completely hopeless and finally accepted the suitor’s proposal to marry him. He did not express his feelings for Miss Kenton when she was proposed. These mistakes have caused him irreparable emotional loss and trauma. His realization of self-ideal is based on the complete elimination of the value of self-independency. When he thinks that he is approaching the perfect morality step by step, he hardly knows that he has gone into the abyss of complete alienation, which is a huge value paradox in itself. Stevens said: “Mr. Harry Smith’s words tonight remind me very much of the sort of misguided idealism which beset significant sections of our generation throughout the twenties and thirties”, and the result was to find that their career eventually “achieved nothing” (p. 187).

Stevens has always pursued professionalism and dignity. From the very beginning of how to be a good housekeeper, Stevens was ready to dedicate his life to the job of housekeeper. In this process, Stevens hardly left personal space for his life, and even lost himself. On the one hand, he failed to take care of his dying father; on the other hand, he did not express his feelings for Miss Kenton when she was proposed. All these have caused irreparable regret and regret to him in his later years. Stevens inherited and implemented the qualities of tolerance and conscientiousness in the gentleman culture very “perfectly”. Stevens has a strong sense of responsibility for life, and believes that everyone should contribute to the creation of a better world. In Stevens’ eyes, Lord Darlington, the host, represents the value and honor of the country. As a civilian, he “has a limit to how much he can understand” (p. 194). Therefore, he should fully identify with the host’s values and provide the best service. He believes that the standard of an outstanding British housekeeper is to maintain “dignity” at all times, and must

control emotions. “Tempering emotions is just the uniqueness of the British people” (p. 39). It is not allowed to affect their professional ethics and obligations to the country because of personal emotions. Although he vaguely felt that some of Lord Darlington’s actions were inappropriate, he always believed that such elites as Lord Darlington could control the fate of civilization. Even if he questioned the master in private, it was an act of arrogance and contrary to professional ethics. The derogation of himself and the superstition of authority made him unable to see the political ignorance of Lord Darlington and understand the nature of the collusion between Lord Darlington and the fascists. In the case of fierce opposition from Miss Kenton, he still dismissed the Jewish maid with excellent work, involuntarily crossed the boundaries of justice, and became an accomplice of imperial violence and colonial plunder. It is not difficult to see that when he recalled his “accomplice” as Lord Darlington, he was regretful.

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The tragedy of Stevens’ life lies in his bigoted understanding and implementation of outdated traditional values, attaching the meaning of life to absolute obedience to morality and absolute superstition to authority, belittling or even giving up his dignity as an individual, so that he cannot face up to his true feelings and desires, and instead becomes an untimely wanderer. In the face of his father’s illness, Stevens adhered to the perfect professionalism and dutiful attitude, which led to his inability to accompany his father to take care of him when he was dying. For Miss Kenton, he evades his feelings, leaves no room for his personal feelings, and endures his feelings, which is the inheritance of tolerance and restraint in the gentleman culture. This led Miss Kenton to marry someone else. When she was old and even wanted to save it, it was useless. As for Lord Darlington, his “master”, Stevens insisted on obedience and execution. Even though he knew in his heart that some actions were inappropriate, he still chose to carry out Lord Darlington’s order and became an accomplice.

After the “World War II”, Britain’s international influence has declined significantly. This country has not maintained the greatness, stability, and peace that the Victorian scholar David Thomson said as time went by, as the British people in the Victorian era imagined. The world pattern is constantly adjusting, and the tide of the new democratic and free movement is also constantly washing out the sediment that violates the spirit of the times and human dignity. Britain after World War II is no longer Victorian Britain, and the gentry culture of that time also applies to the social environment at that time. With the development of society and the changes of history, we can no longer copy the past social culture. At the end of the novel, Stevens and the people on the dock once said: “for a great many people, the evening is the most enjoyable part of the day” (p. 240). The image of dusk refers not only to Stevens entering his twilight years, but also to Britain entering the sunset with comprehensive national strength and international influence. Its implication is to reveal that no matter how time passes and how society changes, in the process of generation, we all have the obligation to reflect on our historical footprints.

Conclusion

Stevens took a six-day driving trip and reviewed his life: pursuing perfect work and controlling his other feelings... all of which reflected his stubborn and stereotyped character image. Stevens lost himself, his family, and love. In the Victorian era, the gentleman culture represented by Queen Victoria: tolerance, restraint, loyalty, due diligence, and other social cultures have advantages and disadvantages. After the “World War II”, the loneliness of British society, like Stevens, the stereotyped copy of social culture will inevitably bring tragedy to

himself. Therefore, as individuals in society, we all need to make progress and treat everything with a critical spirit.

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