

# The Loss of Reflection: The Distortion and Modern Enlightenment of Stevens' Self-analysis in the Remains of the Day

Yuqing Jin

School of Arts, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China

201911690495@stu.blcu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** The psychological crisis of Stevens, the main character in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*, is rooted in the loss of self-will. Reflection is a kind of Self-analysis, but the method Stevens uses to alleviate his psychological problem is a distorted reflection mechanism. The accumulation of multiple ineffective reflections and the stimulation of a small number of effective reflections eventually lead to a highly subversive and effective reflection in terms of psychology and values. The paper aims to analyze the loss of Stevens' self-will from the perspective of Self-analysis distortion, based on which it tries to explore the relationship between the modern reflection and life fulfillment.

**Keywords:** The Remains of the Day; Kazuo Ishiguro; Stevens; Reflection; Psychology; Ego.

## 1. Introduction

Stevens, the protagonist of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, is a middle-aged professional housekeeper. The novel combines his personal psychological experience with the dramatic world changes before and after World War II. The story, based on Stevens' memories, illustrates his service to Lord Darlington for more than thirty years. Currently, most of the academic papers analyzing Stevens' psychology focus on the self-deception or the political and cultural influence on human nature, i.e., the restriction, impact and alienation of a single fixed external standard on human complexity. However, the paper centers around the importance of Stevens' Self-analysis on the lack of self-will. Starting from the psychological crisis reflected in the details of Stevens' words and actions, the author summarizes Stevens' reflection mechanism and explains its generation. Moreover, the author also explores the commonality between the psychological crisis behind Stevens' ineffective reflection and the mental dilemma of modern people, and considers the possibility that effective reflection can bring people infinitely closer to freedom and truly realize their life values.

## 2. Stevens' Reflection Mechanism

### 2.1 Assumed Audience

Stevens' psychological Self-analysis makes up most of the novel. However, his self-talk implies a bitter self-control and calmness. He speaks to readers in a self-talk-like manner as he recalls, which means that he formally sets out a subject to hear his story. In addition, he uses written language and words carefully to show respect and humility.

Stevens applies that calm and controlled working state to his recollection and reflection, showing that "self" is a potential reader Stevens needs to face rationally. It indicates that both in his work and personal life, he always presents himself in a professional light, with professional requirements applied to the reflection process that should remain honest at best.

The authentic self, with infinite possibilities, is inevitably complex, which determines the diversity of life values. Stevens' presumed audience is another ideal state of "self" whose existence is an examination. To cope with the examination, he requires his self-demonstration to match the well-set ideal state. And he considers his ideal state as the realization of his career goals, which is the only value of his life. Therefore, his complete "self" is concealed, leaving a partial "self" integrated with his professional mask.

## 2.2 The Limitation of Career Goals

Career ambitions dominate Stevens' life values. Under the examination of assumed audiences, he often ends the reflection with the excuse that his words and actions are consistent with a great housekeeper's dignity, limiting his true self to the career ideals and negating the multiple possibilities for himself.

Stevens served the Lord devotedly at a grand banquet and missed his father's final moments, but he considers the choice a professional one and a career highlight. "Despite the fact that this event is reminiscent of a sad past, whenever I remember that night today, I feel a great sense of accomplishment". In Stevens' view, he came infinitely closer to his professional ambitions, and he considered himself to be an important support of Lord Darlington's career because his service at the party was nearly perfect. Stevens chose the latter in the conflict between his normal emotional needs and his work, which is an important part of his loss of self-control.

Although Stevens tried to hide his pain, he still had normal emotions deep inside, which is demonstrated in other people's perspectives. For example, both Lord Darlington and the German Countess noticed his unusual behavior at the party. Stevens struggled with the conflict of worrying about his father's illness and maintaining a professional work ethic. His complicated emotions reached a minor climax after his father's death. The author's choice to reveal this from others' perspective reduces the emotional volatility in Stevens' self-reflection, which further proves that he tries his best to remain calm and well-controlled to conceal his emotions even in Self-analysis.

Stevens is so self-repressed in both family relations and love. Miss Kenton found Stevens reading a romantic book and covering up about it. The curiosity and desire for love is normal to human needs, but Stevens de-normalizes it with professional demands that as a dignified housekeeper he should not be entrapped by mundane emotions. He could not tolerate such unprofessional behavior, so he gave it a justification consistent with the professional requirements of a housekeeper, trying to explain that reading the book would help to have a more elegant accent in daily interactions with gentlemen and ladies, as well as a more proficient command of phraseology.

But then Stevens questioned that one should not be ashamed of enjoying reading an elegant and beautiful love story. Such self-questioning was a very crucial moment for him. Although Stevens did not touch more deeply on the fact that he did not dare to show the essence of his true self, the reflection here was different from the previous self-deception. His habit of concealing his true thoughts was torn open, and it was an effective reflection.

## 2.3 The Combined Function of Invalid and Effective Reflection

Stevens' reflection is divided into two modes, ineffective reflection and effective reflection. Ineffective reflection is embodied in his misunderstanding or active concealment of the problems' essence. The core of reflection is empty as he performed Self-analysis with the loss of self.

But the few cases where he faces his true self after repeated invalid reflections are "effective reflections". Because Stevens still had the purest human judgment in his heart, with external stimuli, there were a few effective reflections. The external stimuli include two types. The first one is the people who have more individual independence and self-discovery potential than Stevens, such as Miss Kenton, Mr. Harry Smith and the people he met on the dock. And the other is the unfortunate consequences of repeated ineffective reflections, such as missing his father's last moment and losing his love with Miss Kenton.

Stevens' psychological development is a mixed process of repeated ineffective reflections and a stimulation of one effective reflection. Because his potential individual independence had not yet been destroyed, he would eventually reach a large-scale effective reflection. The previous reflections represented his psychological crisis, which was brewing for the final outbreak. After the meeting with Miss Kenton at the end of the novel, Stevens could no longer escape the irreversible and serious consequences of his abnormal reflection mechanism. The regret and remorse he had deep inside for the major issues of life values, family and love were fully exposed. The conversation with the stranger

on the pier was a trigger, under which Stevens' psychological crisis finally exploded in an effective mode. He touched his true self, but also experienced the deepest pain.

However, all effective reflections were short-lived, and Stevens quickly moved away from confronting his normal inner needs after a brief period of grief or questioning, believing that what he was doing was to comply with professional principles and requirements. Finally, Stevens even no longer considered it his own active choice to depend on the hero who could control the direction of the times for his life aspirations. He regarded it as an inevitable path and lost his self-will, giving up the self-control.

### **3. The Generation of Reflection Mechanism**

#### **3.1 The Pursuit of a Sense of Belonging**

The world changes all the time, and human nature drives Stevens to find a seemingly eternal and unchanging thing or spiritual idea that he is capable to grasp firmly. Therefore, he followed the will of a great man at the cost of gradually abandoning his own will, believing that he could thereby achieve eternity in the sense of a professional ideal. To provide the best service for Lord Darlington was sure a spiritual idea and a behavioral requirement, from which Stevens gains a sense of security and fulfillment. But in the midst of uncertain times, clinging to the safety of existing stability was bound to end in failure. At the end of World War II, the global landscape changes dramatically, and the tradition of having a butler, one of the attributes of British culture, comes to an end with the decline of Britain. In serving his new masters from the United States, Stevens repeatedly feels at a loss, and the professional standards he has followed are no longer important.

Life is always changing, and the ordinary people that Stevens comes into contact with in his daily life can change the trajectory of his monotonous life. The young Miss Kenton can be regarded as a variable. She is energetic and more self-determined than Stevens. Stevens sees in her the possibilities of life and loses his heart to her, but he is afraid to approach her because it may break his current safe pattern of life.

Stevens pursues symbols of eternity as an escape from reality. He wants to find a sense of belonging and security. With this mental state, he strives to work for the so-called great men who can determine the destiny of the times. In other words, he abandons the realization of his value and follows the people he serves completely.

#### **3.2 Absence of Independent Personality**

Effective reflection refers to the questioning, analyzing, and probing of decisions made according to autonomous will. Stevens' reflection is ineffective precisely because he is reflecting on himself under the condition of losing his ego, attaching all of his thinking to his being a stewardship rather than to the living self as an individual.

The absence of the ego makes Stevens act or reflect in a way that only follows external guidelines, and when the external world changes, he loses the creed to which he can cling. He tries to turn to his ego through reflection, but is overwhelmed by the emptiness of himself, thus turning this reflection into a dead-end circle.

Moreover, in order to keep a normal mental state to support his work and life, while not breaking his comfort zone (his constant but safe living style), Stevens is willing to be bound and cowardly chooses to deceive himself and pretend to reflect in order alleviate his pressure and avoid a complete breakdown.

#### **3.3 Distorted Purpose of Reflection**

Certainly, Stevens reflects on himself effectively to some extent. That's he tries to struggles, he has mixed feelings, and he shows intense emotion fluctuations. In these cases, he doubts his choices made in the past, his persona is unstable, and his hidden psychological crisis emerges.

The purpose of reflection is supposed to fundamentally solve this psychological crisis. However, Stevens is timid to change, and his reflection is done for securing his psychological comfort zone, which is a sign of his refusal to accept his true self. Therefore, it is an ineffective reflection, which only conceals the psychological crisis.

Stevens always maintains that Lord Darlington is a perfect gentleman, and see Lord Darlington through all his goals. Even though he has realized more than once that Lord Darlington is wrong, he still defends him. His defense seems logical and methodical, but in reality, he has already made a mental preconception - he is not wrong to follow Lord, and his career aspirations are justified. His reflection is a tool to gain a brief peace of mind, to cover up fundamental mistakes by admitting some minor ones, which has no substantial meaning for his own growth. In the end, Stevens recognizes the absence of his ego in his professional aspirations, but once again he deludes himself that he has no choice and that life is as it should be. "He gives up love and the right to be human all by himself." [1] Once again, he makes an excuse for his misdeed, and his self-will eventually degenerates.

#### **4. Reflection of People Living in Modern Times and the Realization of the Significance of Life**

Both Stevens and his father are butlers, but their professional philosophy and life ideals are different. The father maintains his master's dignity; Even at the end of his life, he still wants to dedicate himself to his master. Such behavior can reflect his strong initiative as a butler, and he has practiced his understanding of the responsibilities of a butler. However, this was not the case with Stevens. Firstly, Stevens ignores the fact that his father's efforts to work for his master during his deathbed are still in line with the noble character of a butler, and he only recognizes the peak of his father's career when he was in good physical and mental condition. Secondly, he believes that it must be right to follow his master's orders, and his ideal of life should be attached to the great man who can determine the fate of the age. Finally, at the end of the novel, he makes it clear that serving the great man is the only choice, and he is willing to give up his ego.

"A butler, in any capacity, must abide by his duties in the presence of others." [3] The quote clearly confirms that Stevens has been limiting himself to a presumed single and solidified persona. The author uses writing devices such as unreliable narrative to portray Stevens as a seemingly flat character, but in reality, this is a persona that the character himself has framed for himself. Stevens rarely reveals his emotions and deeper psychological consciousness in his memories because he wants to portray himself as a person who does not change his beliefs and temperament, which is his idea of what a butler's profession requires, his fantasy of a perfect self, and his path to a sense of belonging.

Thus, the absurdity of Stevens' life is that he tries to realize himself in a state of self-absence. This leads to his ridiculous and pathetic end: even when he finally awakens, he still chooses to fall, attributing his lack of ego to a predestined choice.

Stevens' psychological crisis and reflection mechanism epitomizes the spiritual situation of human beings in the post-modern era. The twentieth century began with the emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis, Nietzsche's "death of God" theory, the two world wars, which had a tremendous material and spiritual impact on human beings. Great changes in various ethical concepts and diversified ways of realizing the value of life make it seem that human beings have more choices, but in reality, the so-called freedom that comes with more choices is something that most people do not have. This is because after choosing freedom, there is no force behind the individual that can support them, and people realize that they are fully responsible for their own destiny. The lack of faith, the loss of meaning in life, and the fear of facing one's true self come into play.

Modern people are pursuing self-independence on the one hand, and seeking a support point for the meaning of life on the other. Many people seek a sense of belonging from the outside world, and their individual personality is thus constrained without knowing it. They are sometimes questioned by others or by themselves, but they still insist that this is for a legitimate reason or is in line with the way to realize the meaning of their life, which is a kind of invalid reflection. The subject of this

reflection is to maintain a sense of belonging. Self-analysis is a way to convince oneself that one's choice is in accordance with one's own will, so as to conceal the external intrusion and assimilation of independent personality, and to alleviate the self-confidence and doubt. The act of reflection itself can give the ego a psychological implication that since it has already examined its own choices to a certain extent, it will naturally form a default: the independent personality has not been lost. Since the purpose of reflection itself is not to solve the problem, the answer after reflection is also subconsciously predetermined, namely, that one's choice is in line with the requirements of self-value realization.

"The individual personality is sensitive to pain, and in a certain sense, the individual personality is pain" [4]. It is human nature to seek a sense of belonging, but self-will is also a human trait, and the ability to perceive pain is a capability. But in fact, the sense of belonging and the realization of self-will are not completely opposed to each other, because the world is always changing and all the sense of belonging is temporary. If one can treat the sense of belonging as an additional factor rather than a necessary condition in the process of pursuing the significance of life, dare to cope with changes, do not presume to be stable and unchanging, and maintain the initiative of thinking and exploring, the sense of belonging and self-consciousness will naturally exist together harmoniously. Effective reflection and self-will are closely linked. That is, people are constantly looking at their own life choices from the perspective of their self-independence. They try to identify the source of their sense of belonging, finding a balance between the other and the self, and ultimately have the courage to approach true freedom infinitely.

## References

- [1] Ren, Y.M., & Qu, S.J. *A Study of English Postcolonial Literature*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2003:189.
- [2] Freud, S., *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. Lin, Keming, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2015.
- [3] Kazuo, I., *The Remains of the Day*, trans. Mao, G.A. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2008: 137.
- [4] Berdyaev, N.A. *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. Xu, Liming. Guiyang: Guizhou People's Publishing House, 1994: 11.
- [5] Fromm, E. *Escape from Freedom*, trans. Liu, Linhai. Beijing: China Int'l Culture Art Publishing House, 2007.
- [6] May, R. *Psychology and the Human Dilemma*. trans. Guo, Benyu & Fang, Hong. Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2010.
- [7] Bu, Z.X. The Paradoxical Nature of Life in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. *Journal of Henan Normal University*, 39.1 (2012): 3.
- [8] Bu, Z.X. *The Remains of the Day as an Anti-Growth Novel*. *English and American Literary Studies*, 1 (2013): 12.
- [9] Ding, S.H. The Sorrow and Salvation of Imperial "Adherents": The Cultural Reflection of *The Remains of the Day*, *Zhejiang Social Sciences*, 12(2013): 7.
- [10] Deng, Y. L. On the Remembering Narration Strategy in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 4(2016):67-72.