

Dignity in *The Remains of the Day* from the Lens of Ontology, Ethics, and Liberalism

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the concept of dignity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, contrasting the universal, ontological notion of inherent dignity with the limited, class-based view held by the protagonist, Mr. Stevens. The study argues that Stevens' narrow understanding of dignity, rooted in his service to his employer (a Nazi sympathizer), leads him to engage in immoral actions. This analysis draws on Kant's focus on good will as the basis of moral behaviour, proposing that although Stevens demonstrates a significant sense of duty and follows rules closely, he lacks the essential moral consciousness necessary for genuinely ethical conduct. The protagonist's actions, though ethically sound within his specific social context, are ultimately driven by a desire to maintain a rigid, hierarchical order. The research also analyzes Stevens' actions through the lens of John Rawls' liberalism, which emphasizes the influence of social institutions on individual values. The study concludes that Stevens' flawed definition of dignity serves as a tool to justify his service and evade personal responsibility. His reliance on a narrow notion of dignity allows him to rationalize his actions, even as they contradict a broader understanding of morality and human worth.

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INTRODUCTION

Dignity is a concept constitutive of human life in its core and, unsurprisingly, one of the cornerstones of ethical discourse. This pertains, most of all, to literature, where a character would have to face immense social hierarchies and deal with the consequences of their actions. This study examines the theme of dignity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* through ontological, ethical, and liberal standpoints, offering a new perspective on the seeming perpetual strength of this novel. While there has been a myriad of critical analyses written concerning the themes of memory, loss, and regret interwoven throughout this novel, far fewer have engaged more deeply with the philosophical underpinning of dignity as expressed in the person of Stevens. Much of the scholarship addresses Stevens's personal stoicism and self-deception, while less has reviewed the interaction between his sense of duty, his ontology, and his adherence to a strict social code via liberalism.

This study therefore seeks to fill the gap by interrogating Stevens's struggle for dignity through the frameworks of ontology, ethics, and liberalism. It will show how Stevens's perception of his being, morality, and conformity with an inflexible social order makes him prideful. Moreover, the present critical analysis will

examine how the insufficiencies in Stevens's rigidly held convictions lead to his failure to attain real dignity and fulfilment. By researching these complex interrelations, this study aims to shed new light on *The Remains of the Day* and contribute to the ongoing debate on dignity within both literary and philosophical discourses. The following are among several previous studies relevant to the topic.

David Medalie, in his article *What Dignity is There in That? The Crisis of Dignity in Selected Late-Twentieth-Century Novels* (2004), dealt with how Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* approach the concept of dignity in relation to servitude. Medalie claimed that in the aforementioned novels, "dignity is to be conducted within the context of an inequitable distribution of power" (p. 51). The term was tainted and affected by the exercise of power, particularly in relation to class and race. Medalie also highlighted that Mr. Stevens's conception of dignity was not in line with societal changes, which is why his definitions of self and service were not flexible enough to adapt to the complex social hierarchy of his time.

Another critical article which focused on the concept of dignity and *The Remains of the Day* is that of Zuzana Fonioková (2006) entitled *The Butler's Suspicious Dignity: Unreliable Narration in Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day*. Fonioková, as the title suggested, approached the term dignity from a narratological perspective. She claimed that the narrator's unreliability "can be understood from a couple of notions, one of which is dignity" (p. 90). By focusing on Stevens' problematic definition of dignity and the discrepancy it has with the other character's definition of the same term, she determined how the reader distanced from the narrator and sided with the other characters. While Fonioková acknowledged different facets of dignity, her primary focus was on demonstrating the unreliability of the narrator in *The Remains of the Day*. She argued that the narrator's understanding of dignity was skewed by his own biases and self-deceptions, rendering his perspective unreliable.

Lisa Vikjord (2011), another researcher who has focused on the concept of dignity in the aforementioned novel, in her *Stevens's Journey Towards Dignity in Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day*, investigated Stevens' obsession with his profession and dignity as reasons for his immature and irresponsible behaviour toward the people around him. Vikjord argued that Stevens' strict adherence to a professional definition of dignity prevents him from forming genuine, intimate connections with others. Stevens' rigid adherence to his own narrow definition of dignity acts as a shield, allowing him to avoid confronting difficult situations. This unwavering commitment to his personal code creates a passive stance, hindering his ability to engage with the world in a more dynamic and responsive way. She further elaborated that the journey Stevens takes through the countryside is seen as a quest to find his identity as a man. Thus "the journey represents a liminal period in his life where he can leave behind his identity as a butler, and find his person that has been repressed behind his role as a butler" (p. 1). As one can understand, Vikjord did not refer to different meanings of dignity and did not tend to compare the protagonist's notion of dignity with the dominant notion of dignity of the time and merely focused on how Stevens' loyalty to that definition left him frustrated and regretful.

The last work to be reviewed here is that of Maya Barbera Gorlin (2019), titled *Class, Identity and Dignity in The Remains of the Day and The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. Gorlin studied Stevens' dignity concerning identity; thus, she described it as "the ability to practice self-restraint" (p. 23), the same self-restraint that he sees in the English landscape and for which he admires that. Stevens' definition of dignity, as a steadfast adherence to one's professional identity, compels a suppression of emotions and matters, ultimately sacrificing selfhood for the sake of professional decorum. Although Stevens seemingly found contentment in his rigid, professional life, Gorlin argued that by the novel's conclusion, he acknowledges his past mistakes and recognizes the missed opportunities he regrets. Thus, for Stevens, the meaning of dignity changes throughout his life. At first, it was defined as the "ability to contain and hide true feelings and emotions, to

hide his personality and to force himself to inhabit the role of a servant at all times” (p. 24). However, after he thought about the way this approach had destroyed his life, he came to the point that at least Lord Darlington admitted that he made his own mistakes and took responsibility for what he did, but Stevens even could not claim that. He was not to blame for those mistakes; they were his employer's doing. Gorlin ended here. However, the present article will elaborate more on the notion of responsibility and its relation to dignity.

While these researches are indicative of Stevens's failure to appreciate what dignity means, no overall theoretical delineation of the term is produced in any of them. More specifically, they fail to distinguish the ontological, ethical, and liberal dimensions of dignity. It is this gap that this research paper tries to fill by adopting a more multifaceted and theoretically based approach toward the expression of dignity in the novel.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since the invention of the word dignity in ancient Rome, the term has undergone different changes and has seen different meanings attached. It began its long list of denotations with ornament, distinction, honor, and glory; thus, the concept of *dignitas* in Rome denoted “a certain standing or rank in the community” (Debes, 2017, p.50) and indicated the relative standing of a person like a king or a senate or a thing. The term was not exclusively used for human beings; vines, houses, dogs, and the virtues themselves could also possess it.

The concept of inherent dignity for all human beings was first introduced by Cicero in his work *On Obligations* (44 B.C.E./2001). Cicero, in this text, not only elevated humans above animals but also emphasized the inherent dignity of all human beings, rejecting the notion of individual superiority. Cicero identified rationality and reflection as the foundations of human dignity. So, while once *dignitas* was “restricted to determining an individual’s standing within the Roman socio-political system, it was now used to address the wider ontological question of Man’s place in the universe” (Watson & Ernest, 2016, p. 48).

With the advent of Christianity, this notion of dignity as an ontology or something inherent and intrinsic was further developed. Human beings were considered to be created in the image and likeness of God, the *imago dei*, and their similitude to God denoted that there was something inherent in human beings which linked them to the Divine and elevated them above the rest of creatures. While most Christian philosophers, like St. Augustine and Pope Leo, viewed human dignity as an inherent, ontological quality, Thomas Aquinas saw it primarily as an ethical virtue: “As a person, a human being is naturally free. Dignity is lost when sin is committed. The rational human then assumes the status of a non-rational beast. Dignity, then, is an ethical, not an ontological category” (Lewis, 2007, p.93).

Nevertheless, it was Immanuel Kant who further looked at the idea of human dignity from an ethical point of view. For him, dignity is based on human beings’ “moral autonomy” (Kant, 1995, p. 95) through which they can give themselves direction. Kant’s shift from metaphysics to morality paves the way for the idea of human rights. Because individuals possess inherent dignity, they are entitled to inalienable rights. Violating these rights reduces them from ends in themselves to mere means, a violation of their fundamental worth. The Enlightenment's universal values and the French Revolution's ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity fostered a universal concept of dignity, laying the groundwork for the modern understanding of universal human dignity and rights.

The idea of dignity as universal connotes that *all* human beings have an inherent and inviolable dignity and that it should be respected, does not admit of degrees, and is not dependent upon individual merit or circumstance. The Enlightenment era also saw a deepening connection between human dignity and human

rights. Human beings have rights because they have dignity. The modern era focuses on violations of dignity, dehumanization and the dignity of the other, rather than that of the self. The understanding of human dignity has evolved. While earlier thinkers like Cicero, Leo, Pico, and Kant focused on the inherent dignity of the individual, modern discussions often prioritize the dignity and rights of others within the context of our interconnected moral communities.

By mid-twentieth century, the idea of dignity as something universal was quite well established and to deny it would raise more eyebrows than to affirm it. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights served as a powerful affirmation of the basic rights and fundamental freedoms that belong to every person, recognizing their universal and inalienable character (Stetson, 1998). Therefore, dignity, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is “inseparable from the human condition...something that all human beings possess by the mere fact of being human” (Andorno, 2014, p. 50). In this way, dignity is thought not to be determined by any kind of merit or social position and rank, nor is it something which comes in degrees, but is shared equally among all human beings.

Contemporary liberalism, influenced by postmodernism and its emphasis on relativism, has moved away from the idea of inherent human dignity. For many liberals, human beings are viewed as social constructs, shaped by their cultures and historical contexts. The liberals assert that we have dignity because we have rights. For them, dignity is a weapon to be used whenever they are not given their rights by claiming that our sense of dignity has been violated. Dignity can be strategically employed as a tool and a universal justification (Stetson, 1998, p.10) to advance one's goals, even silencing opposing viewpoints. However, they must know that if man does not have a stable center or core, there can be no enduring place for human dignity. The liberals' belief in the flexibility of human nature and their insistence on rights has gone so far that they have ended up being a relativistic right-based tradition and have made everything so much subjective and individualistic. By placing such a strong emphasis on individual rights, freedom, and choices, there is a risk of dehumanizing people. This is because it can lead to valuing individuals based on their possessions and choices rather than their inherent worth as human beings. Also, due to their insistence on tolerance and lack of judgment, the liberals are unable to recognize the manifestation of dignity in people's behaviour.

The ontological approach to dignity was first offered by the Judeo-Christian tradition reflected in the thoughts of Pope Leo I. Later on, the ontological dignity was dominated by the natural law. Dignity was determined by an individual's nature, not by their social or racial background. It fits to mention here the difference between dignity and honor. In his work, *On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor*, Berger (1970) asserts that the concept of honor presupposes a connection between identity and institutional roles, suggesting that these roles play a crucial part in shaping who we are. Unlike the older understanding of honor, the modern concept of dignity posits that one's identity is not determined by their position in society or their roles within established institutions (1970). In this sense, concerning honor the person is tied to one's role in society but concerning dignity the person's identity is to be attained when he/she liberates himself/herself from the social roles. This study examines how the protagonist's own understanding of dignity and honor, or lack thereof, shapes his character and choices.

As far as ethical dignity is concerned, the study first makes a distinction between ethics and morality. Even though today, ethics and morality are often employed interchangeably, they differ in certain factors. According to Bernard Williams, “by origin, the difference between the two terms is between Latin and Greek, each relating to a word meaning *disposition* or *custom*” (1985, p. 6). The etymological roots of ethics come from Greek and means ‘character’, while the etymology of morality comes from Latin and means ‘custom’. Ethics are governed by professional rules and legal principles. Thus, they are accepted and applied within the

framework of specific space and time such as professional ethics (medicine, law, etc.). On the other hand, morality is accepted and applied by the rules determined by culture. Therefore, compared with ethics, it is more variable by region. Whereas ethics rely on the ideals of a specific community, morality is a more or less individualistic concept. That is why, in *The Remains of the Day*, some of the behaviors of the protagonist, Mr. Stevens, seem to be ethical (based on the social and professional codes) while not at all moral in the eyes of the reader.

The liberal notion of dignity will be highlighted with regard to the individual's responsibility. However, the influence of postmodernism on liberal thought led to a rejection of a fixed human nature, consequently undermining the notion of ontological dignity. Dignity serves as a mask for their true intentions, allowing them to manipulate others into following their plans. Additionally, liberals, and specifically egalitarian liberals, mistakenly believe that people are "not responsible for their non-intentionally evil actions. Although the actions are evil, they are not allowed to reflect on evildoers because the actions were not chosen by them or because they were unable to understand them" (Kekes, 2003, p. 25). This doctrine is closely entwined with John Rawls's understanding of human identity (1971).

Rawls (1971), in line with many other liberal theorists, does not subscribe to the belief in an essential human nature. He draws a distinction between the human self and its attributes or traits. However, it is a grave error to suggest that only resources are being exploited; the person is being treated as a means to an end. This undermines the role the individual plays in life. Although Rawls seems to place significant emphasis on the individual, he "eclipses the individual by depriving him of the personal particularities that are constitutive of individuality. Behind Rawls's veil, genuine humanity recedes, and those situated there are nonpersons" (Stetson, 1998, p. 46). For Rawls, all the assets of a person are the result of social environment and fortuity.

This is one of many criticisms offered toward Rawls' theory (1971). Even though Rawls aims to promote a high view of human dignity and the intrinsic worth of the individual, he ends up implying that one has no intrinsic worth at all, except for what social institutions attribute to them, and that there is no ontological status as human beings. Based on this view, the individual becomes "a means by other people" (p. 61) in society to follow their programs rather than their own. This leads to a tendency to avoid responsibility and a refusal to hold individuals accountable for their actions.

The concept of human dignity, with its multifaceted and sometimes contradictory interpretations across historical eras, has become a central theme in the works of many authors and novelists exploring the modern world. Notable works exploring the complexities of human dignity in the modern world include Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956), and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981). However, none can rival Kazuo Ishiguro's masterpiece, *The Remains of the Day* (1989), for its profound exploration of human dignity through the protagonist's struggles. Ishiguro masterfully places human dignity at the heart of the story, making it a central theme in the protagonist's anxieties and experiences. By exploring the concept of dignity through ontological, ethical, and liberal lenses, this research analyzes the depiction of dignity in *The Remains of the Day*, highlighting the limitations and inaccuracies within the protagonist's narrow definition.

The study posits that the butler-protagonist's ethical conduct is guided by Kant's (1995) principles, which emphasize reason as the sole foundation for morality and assert that right action is determined by universally applicable rules that delineate the boundaries of obligation and prohibition. Thus, actions should be justified by principles that can be universalized. Kant calls this the "categorical imperative." He believed that the true measure of an action's worth is not its outcome but the good will that motivates it. This concept is referred to

as “deontological theory” (Kant, 1995, p. 90). Based on this theory, one should act only because it is right, not because it will produce a good result.

Kant (1995) argues that things commonly seen as good, such as wealth, intelligence, or courage, might not always be inherently good. The study suggests that Mr. Stevens embodies Kantian ethics in his unwavering adherence to rules throughout his life. However, by prioritizing reason over personal desires, he finds himself isolated and regretful at the novel's conclusion. His steadfast commitment to doing what he believed was right, according to his Kantian framework, has cost him significant happiness and human connection. The novel highlights the potential pitfalls of a purely rational approach to ethics, demonstrating how prioritizing rules can lead to unintended consequences and a profound sense of personal loss.

METHOD

This research employs a textual methodology, involving a close reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* concerning the concept of dignity as reflected in Stevens's actions and personal reflections. This analysis is complemented by applying three philosophical frameworks: ontology, ethics, and liberalism. It considers an ontological clarification of intrinsic worth, arguing that all human beings possess intrinsic value irrespective of social class, profession, or beliefs. This perspective is contrasted with the protagonist's understanding of dignity, which appears as a class-based construct rooted in absolute loyalty to Lord Darlington, even as his political beliefs become increasingly loathsome to the rest of liberal society. Such a comparison highlights the gap between a common concept of dignity and Stevens's restricted vision. The analysis draws on Immanuel Kant's (1995) ethical theory, particularly his conception of good will as the source of morality.

While Stevens demonstrates a heightened sense of responsibility and adherence to his professional code, his actions are examined for the presence of genuine moral consciousness. This research challenges whether Stevens, within the narrow bounds of his social environment, is committed to good will or merely desires to maintain order and the social hierarchy he represents. The study interprets Stevens' behavior in terms of the liberalism theory advanced by John Rawls (1971), emphasizing how social institutions and societal structures shape values. This framework allows for a review of how Stevens' social upbringing and the rigid pre-war English class system drive his beliefs about dignity and duty. The combination of these three philosophical frameworks fosters a deeper understanding of how Stevens' defective definition of dignity serves as a tool to justify his actions and avoid personal responsibility. By focusing on the interplay between Stevens' internal thoughts, his actions, and the novel's social context, this study contributes to a richer understanding of the concept of dignity and its complex relation to morality and individual responsibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Set in England shortly after WWII, *The Remains of the Day* focuses upon an English butler, Mr. Stevens, who works at Darlington Hall and who, at the beginning of the novel, is making himself ready for a journey, he claims, is merely for professional reasons and due to the lack of staff at Darlington Hall which has caused him to commit minor errors. In order to solve this problem, he has in mind to ask Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper, to return to Darlington Hall to be a help. Throughout this journey, Stevens delves into his memories, aiming to come to terms with his life choices and ultimate direction. On several occasions in his life, Stevens is forced to choose between his profession and personal feelings. Driven by a deep sense of loyalty to his employer and a rigid belief in dignity, the protagonist prioritizes his professional obligations over his own personal desires and needs. He believes that a great butler is a man of dignity, a trait he repeatedly claims

to possess and prioritizes at the expense of his human feelings. In the next section, we will study how he defines dignity as quite contrary to the ontological and inherent notion of dignity and how it makes all the difference.

The Absence of Ontological Dignity in *The Remains of the Day*

The repeated mention of "dignity" in the novel, over 50 times, emphasizes its centrality to the narrative. However, Stevens' interpretation of dignity, as illustrated by his reference to the Hayes Society's criterion that applicants possess "a dignity in keeping with his position" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 33), aligns more closely with Peter Berger's (1970) concept of honor than inherent dignity. Berger argues that honor is tied to one's social role and external recognition, whereas dignity is an intrinsic quality independent of societal position. Stevens' adherence to this role-based view of dignity reflects his failure to embrace the ontological perspective of dignity as something inherent and universal, as proposed by Cicero (44 B.C.E./2001) and further developed in modern human rights discourse (Stetson, 1998).

Stevens further states that "dignity has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits" (p. 42). Or somewhere else, he says dignity means "not removing one's clothing in public" (p. 210). He repeats this definition many times throughout the narrative. It is evident that he defines one's dignity in relation to his/her occupation or social standing. According to sociologist Berger, there is a crucial difference between dignity and honor. Dignity is inherent, a quality everyone possesses simply by being human. Honor, however, is earned and bestowed through social roles and actions (Berger, 1970). In the story, Stevens seems to be more focused on honor than dignity. He views himself through the lens of his profession, believing that his role as a butler defines his worth and gives him a certain level of respect within the social hierarchy. One enters the world of dignity exactly when he/she liberates himself/herself from our social vocations. His notion of dignity is strongly tied to his social role, while in the time the story is taking place, the idea of dignity as something universal and inherent was reasonably well-established.

Stevens reflects on his own understanding of dignity, contrasting it with the view of another butler, Mr. Graham. Mr. Graham believes that dignity is elusive and undefinable, like a "woman's beauty and it was thus pointless to attempt to analyse it" (p. 33). Stevens, however, was of the view that "dignity' is something one can meaningfully strive for throughout one's career" (p. 33). The study argues that these two views represent the ontological versus deontological aspects of dignity: Mr. Graham views dignity as a fundamental quality inherent in all men, much like beauty is an inherent quality in women. He sees it as something that cannot be defined or dissected, just as one cannot fully explain the allure of beauty. However, Stevens' emphasis on striving shows that he believes dignity is open to degrees; some have more and some have less, which is against the ontological notion of dignity, which emphasizes its innate nature.

The study indicates that Mr. Stevens exemplifies Kantian "deontological theory" which states that one should act only because it is right, not because it will have a good result (Kant, 1995). By placing reason above his own desires, he ends up feeling isolated and remorseful by the end of the novel. His unwavering commitment to what he perceived as morally right, according to his Kantian perspective, has resulted in a considerable loss of happiness and meaningful relationships.

One comes to the point that Stevens' notion of dignity is not only outdated but also quite contradictory. In another conversation he has with a character called Harry Smith, he states that dignity is something that only "gentlemen have" (p. 185). Moreover, by this, he limits dignity to the matter of class. Previously, Stevens viewed dignity as an aspiration, something one could achieve through hard work and dedication. Now, his understanding has shifted. He sees dignity as an inherent quality reserved for the elite, a privilege exclusive to gentlemen. To this, Harry Smith replies:

Dignity isn't just something gentlemen have. Dignity's something every man and woman in this country can strive for and get... there's no dignity to be had in being a slave. That's what we fought for and that's what we won. We won the right to be free citizens. And it's one of the privileges of being born English that no matter who you are, no matter if you're rich or poor, you're born free and you're born so that you can express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament or vote him out. That's what dignity is really about. (pp. 185-86)

While Ishiguro tries to show Stevens the error of his ways regarding dignity through Harry Smith, a deeper issue remains that undermines the very concept of inherent dignity. Although, Harry Smith liberates dignity from the limitation of class, he maintains it within the limit of race and nation by considering dignity as something that only the English people have. Moreover, there is no dignity in being a slave. A similar tendency could also be seen in Stevens when he states that “butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is used, have only manservants...continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race is capable of” (p. 43).

Thus, Stevens’ definition of dignity does not align with the ontological and inherent notion of dignity. It seems that he is not following the current trends on dignity. Stevens's denial of an inherent, universal dignity, coupled with his conflation of dignity with his social role, leads to questionable actions that will be explored in the context of ethical dignity in the following section.

The Ethical Notion of Dignity in *The Remains of the Day*

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, there is a difference between ethics and morality. While the former is tied to social norms, the latter is more or less individualistic. Stevens’ obsession with dignity and his social vocation urges him to behave in a manner that may not seem moral according to other characters or the readers but is ethical because he is following the ethics of the Hayes society. His beliefs align with Kantian ethics and the categorical imperative, emphasizing that morality is fundamentally rooted in reason, not emotion or personal circumstances. The correct action is the one that is done according to the principles and rules that indicate what is obligatory and what is forbidden. This section examines how Stevens's rigid adherence to his personal definition of dignity, which dictates his every action, ultimately leads to morally questionable behavior. His actions, driven by this narrow view, not only shock and offend others but also leave him deeply regretful by the novel's conclusion. Moreover, the reason is that although he believed he is doing the right thing, he did not consider the outcome of his actions.

The following quotation exactly shows why he behaves in the way he thinks is correct:

The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing...he will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze... It is, as I say, a matter of 'dignity'. (pp. 42-43)

In upholding this principle in his life, Stevens makes decisions that portray him as an unethical individual in the eyes of other characters. For instance, when Lord Darlington, his employer, with his anti-Semitic beliefs, insists that Stevens dismiss the Jewish girls on staff, Stevens promptly carries out this directive, going against Miss Kenton's wishes. Later on, when Lord Darlington admits his mistake and wants the Jewish girls back, Stevens reveals to Miss Kenton how he was offended by the firing of the Jewish girls. Miss Kenton is shocked about how he has changed his attitude toward the incident: “As I recall, you thought it was only right and proper that Ruth and Sarah be sent packing. You were positively cheerful about it.” Stevens replies, “Now

really, Miss Kenton, that is quite incorrect and unfair. The whole matter caused me great concern, great concern indeed. It is hardly the sort of thing I like to see happen in this house” (p. 153). It is evident that Stevens is unable to go against the directives of his employer. His profession and his employer define what is right and wrong for him. He follows Kant’s (1995) concept, that ethics are based solely on reason. As Khosravi (2022) has pointed out, “The butler’s plunging into his professional tasks ended up in a life devoid of any meaning and joy within which he suppressed a probable love affair he could have with the housekeeper” (p. 24). This shows that he equates morality with emotion and thus deems it unprofessional and disreputable.

A similar occasion happens on the night of the international conference, which coincides with the time Stevens’ father was on his deathbed. The story revolves around a generational conflict: Mr. Stevens, an elder figure upholding strict, traditional ethical values, and his son, who faces the constraints of those values. It is the father who taught Stevens how to be professional and how to own dignity. Stevens considers his father mainly as a great butler than a father. However, on his deathbed, the father, ready to shed his professional persona, longs to connect with Stevens as a father, not just a servant. Nevertheless, Stevens persists in following the ethics of his vocation. The reason, according to Fonioková (2006), is that “They have suppressed their emotions with the aim to become great butlers. They have lost their ability to pursue human conversation” (p. 93).

That night, Stevens was torn between duty and desire, his professional obligations clashing with his personal feelings. Furthermore, one can easily understand which one he prioritizes. After briefly visiting his father upstairs, he says, “I did not really have a moment more to spare” (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 93). somewhere else he says, “I’m afraid we’re extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning” (p. 97). However, there was no morning. His father died that night without him having a decent last conversation with him. The reader’s surprise, however, culminates when Stevens claims that the night of the international conference:

[C]onstituted a turning point in my professional development... if you consider the pressures contingent on me that night, you may not think I delude myself unduly if I go so far as to suggest that I did perhaps display, in the face of everything, at least in some degree a 'dignity' worthy of someone like Mr. Marshall - or come to that, my father. Indeed, why should I deny it? For all its sad associations, whenever I recall that evening today, I find I do so with a large sense of triumph. (p. 110)

The dignity that was intended to uplift humanity, following Kant's (1995) categorical imperative, has instead led to a sense of alienation from essential human qualities. Stevens adheres to universal ethical principles that overlook the unique complexities inherent in human relationships. If he had prioritized the wellbeing of individuals over the collective good, he would have found himself in a more favourable position. Since he followed a single absolute system based on an alleged supremacist truth, he did not consider the outcome of the actions but merely what he thought was right. As he confronts the outcomes, his responses shift; in other words, he rejects the notion of personal freedom in making choices. This puts the novel on the route which leads to the liberals’ emphasis on the irresponsibility of the individual.

The liberal Irresponsibility in *The Remains of the Day*

Although, as K. A. Appiah (2001) claims, Stevens, with his fixed and rigid life patterns, seems to be the most “illiberal” (p. 316) character one can find, this section is going to prove that at least when it comes to the consequences of his actions, he turns out to be the most liberal of all. The experiences he had and the individuals he interacted with offered him valuable perspectives on his decisions. The most significant of these moments was his encounter with Miss Kenton towards the conclusion of the novel, which left him with a profound sense of emptiness and loss. What has been done cannot be changed, but the key question is whether he truly holds himself accountable.

Kazuo Ishiguro, in his commentary on *The Remains of the Day*, describes the condition of his main character in the following way:

The story I just finished was about an English Butler who realizes too late in his life that he has lived his life by the wrong values, that he has given his best years to serving a Nazi sympathizer, that by failing to take moral and political responsibility for his life, he has in some profound sense wasted his life... (qtd. in Elikoglu, 2001, p. 35)

Responsibility is a key term here. Nearly at the end of the story, Stevens reveals something that is vital to the discussion of responsibility:

“Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man [...] at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he *made his own mistakes*. [...] He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. [...] I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. *I can't even say I made my own mistakes*. Really- one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?” (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 243, emphasis added)

At the end of the novel, Stevens feels such deep regret that he is unable to acknowledge his own mistakes. However, how can one not make his own mistakes? Is it possible to make another person's mistake? There is a distinction between being a servant and an enslaved person. The former is free to choose not to serve his master—he can resign—the latter, however, does not have such an option. Stevens is a servant and could easily resign if he thought what he was forced to do was a mistake. Nevertheless, he did something else instead. He employed his concept of dignity to rationalize his actions, regardless of whether they were ethical or unethical. His sense of dignity is simply a cover to justify his passivity and weak moral character. As it was mentioned earlier, it is the technique of the liberals to use dignity as an all-purpose justification for their goals in order to shut the mouths of their opponents (Stetson, 1998). In the course of his actions, Stevens wielded dignity as his tool, but when confronted with the fallout from those actions, he would shift the blame onto figures like Lord Darlington. After sacking the Jewish girls, he told Miss Kenton, “If his lordship wishes these particular contracts to be discontinued, then there is little more to be said. [...] Our professional duty is not to our own foibles and sentiments, but to the wishes of our employer” (p. 149). Somewhere else, he states a similar point: “The fact is, such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of those such as you and I” (p. 199). It appears that he does not comprehend that his duty as an ideal butler is tied to the position itself rather than the individual filling it.

This is indeed very Rawlsian. As noted in the theoretical framework, for Rawls (1971), the individual exists primarily as a tool for society to pursue its own objectives. This leads to the tendency to avoid responsibility on the part of the people and the refusal to hold them accountable for their actions. Rawls “has pushed the distinction between person and attributes so far as to eliminate any meaningful or intelligible role for the person” (Stetson, 1998, p. 63). Rawlsian liberals constantly excuse individuals from accountability and find external causes for the moral failure of the person. In a comparable way, Stevens, bound by the expectations of the Hayes society and his employer, perceives himself as a tool for them to achieve their goals. Because his employer has been a crucial figure in the history of the world, Stevens sees his public acts as part of what gives meaning to his own life. Looking from this perspective, one can say that if he had given the same service to Churchill, he could say his life was not a waste, but now that he had given the service to Lord Darlington, his life is meaningless.

The issue of responsibility is closely tied to the issue of choice. Because if one chooses something, he/she has to take responsibility for it. Stevens does not believe that he has any choice concerning his actions. The

following quotation illustrates this point: “The hard reality is, surely that for the likes of you and I, there is little choice other than to leave our fate, ultimately, in the hands of those great gentlemen at the hub of this world who employ our services” (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 244). By such claims, he tries to exonerate himself as if there was no choice for him to do otherwise. However, an intriguing aspect is that despite Stevens' regretful tone at the conclusion of the novel, he remains eager to please his new employer's penchant for light-hearted banter. That is why the novel ends with such lines:

I have of course already devoted much time to developing my bantering skills, but it is possible I have never previously approached the task with the commitment I might have done. [...] I will begin practicing with renewed effort. I should hope, then, by the time of my employer's return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him. (p. 245)

Although the preferences of the two employers differ, Stevens' tendency toward them has not changed. He still sees himself obliged to please them. As long as he can escape responsibility by putting the blame on his employers, this procedure will go on and on.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to examine the concept of dignity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* from three viewpoints: ontological, ethical, and liberal. The opening section demonstrated through pertinent examples from the text that Mr. Stevens' understanding of dignity is influenced not by intrinsic or fundamental dignity, but is significantly affected by factors such as race, class, and nationality. From an ontological perspective, dignity is an intrinsic worth that is independent of a person's talents, achievements, social class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or moral standing. However, the protagonist's interpretation of the term consistently associates it with one's profession, social status, race, and being of English nationality.

In the next section, under the ethical notion of dignity, the study discussed how such a limited definition of the term dignity led him to behave in immoral ways concerning Miss Kenton, his father, and some staff members. The study suggested that Stevens adheres to Kant's categorical imperative, focusing solely on moral correctness rather than the outcomes of his actions. He believes there is only one morally right course of action, which is determined by the expectations of the Hayes society and his employer. The last section of the study deals with how Stevens encounters the consequences of his actions. Once he comes to the understanding that his life has been wasted, he shifts the blame for his actions onto his employer, suggesting that he had no alternative and that both his decisions and the resulting events were out of his hands. The study suggests that his perspective aligns with the Rawlsian liberal belief that individuals should not be held accountable for their actions. By putting the blame on his employer and deeming himself no more than a means, Stevens deprives himself of the dignity that he emphasizes throughout the narration.

One can see that Stevens' attitude toward dignity followed a logical pattern that led to this liberal irresponsibility. His lack of belief in ontological dignity paved the way for deeming himself irresponsible. Believing that all individuals, irrespective of their profession, race, or social class, are equal would imply a rejection of irresponsibility. In this context, a person's destiny would depend on their abilities and performance. Instead of merely conforming to societal norms and ethical standards, individuals would feel compelled to assess the consequences of their actions. That is precisely what Stevens did not do.

By showcasing the flawed perspectives of his protagonist and presenting him as an unreliable narrator, Ishiguro emphasizes that his message goes beyond simply distinguishing between good and bad choices. Instead, it reflects the tragedy of viewing oneself as irresponsible while concealing behind a façade of so-called dignity.

The study concludes that liberalism's condemnation of the institutions has made society look for causes outside an individual for his/her misbehaviour. The escape from responsibility is also an escape from human freedom and, to put it in Stevens' terms, if one does not have a choice in life, "what dignity is there in that?" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 243).

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