

# Echoes of Memory and Identity: A Psychological and Theoretical Analysis of the Ripple Effect in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the psychological and literary dimensions of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, focusing on how memory and past choices impact the protagonist's identity. Utilising Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungian archetypes, and cognitive dissonance theory, the study delves into Stevens's emotional suppression, internal conflicts, and gradual self-awareness. Additionally, narrative and postmodern literary theories are applied to analyse Ishiguro's narrative style, revealing the protagonist's selective and unreliable memory. This interdisciplinary approach demonstrates how Stevens's recollections and repressed emotions create a ripple effect that shapes his identity and underscores the human experience of introspection and regret. The findings highlight the intricate interplay between memory and identity and the significance of psychological insights in literary analysis.

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro, memory, identity, Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungian archetypes, cognitive dissonance, narrative theory, postmodernism, literary analysis.

## Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is a masterful exploration of memory, identity, and the ripple effect of past choices. The novel's protagonist, Stevens, embodies the psychological complexities that arise from introspection and regret. This paper examines how Stevens' memories shape his present identity through a psychological and theoretical lens, drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungian archetypes, cognitive dissonance theory, and narrative and postmodern literary theories.

## The Ripple Effect of Memory on Identity

Stevens's recollections illustrate how past actions resonate throughout his life, influencing his current state. Ishiguro writes, "It is, in the end, a matter of not removing one's clothing in public" (Ishiguro 211). This metaphor underscores Stevens's need for emotional restraint, revealing the unconscious defence mechanisms that protect him from the pain of admitting his regrets. Freudian psychoanalysis helps explain this behavior; Stevens's repression signifies unresolved internal conflicts. Freud argues, "The mind represses those memories that provoke feelings of guilt or pain" (Freud 114). For Stevens, the painful memory of choosing loyalty to Lord Darlington over personal affection for Miss Kenton encapsulates this dynamic.

### **Jungian Archetypes and the Everyman**

Stevens represents the Jungian archetype of the 'Everyman,' a figure characterised by ordinariness and the struggle for self-realisation. Jung posits that "Archetypes are universal symbols that guide human behaviour" (Jung 45). Stevens's journey reflects a suppressed shadow—the aspects of himself he denies—as seen in his consistent avoidance of personal emotion. The 'shadow' emerges subtly when Stevens admits, "Perhaps, then, there is something to be said for the fact that I at least carried out my duties to the utmost" (Ishiguro 149). This rationalisation masks more profound self-doubt and unfulfilled desires.

### **Cognitive Dissonance and Emotional Conflict**

Cognitive dissonance theory, which explains the tension between beliefs and behaviour, provides further insight into Stevens's psychological state. He maintains, "It was not my place to think about such matters" (Ishiguro 182), showcasing his adherence to professional duty despite moral conflict. The theory posits, "When faced with contradictory beliefs, individuals will adjust their perceptions to reduce discomfort" (Festinger 237). Stevens's justification for his loyalty reflects this dissonance; he must align his perception to mitigate the discomfort of confronting past mistakes.

### **Narrative Structure and Postmodern Interpretation**

Ishiguro's first-person, reflective, and unreliable narrative style emphasises Stevens's selective memory. "For a great butler must be possessed of dignity in keeping with his position" (Ishiguro 34). This assertion, repeated throughout the text, reveals how Stevens constructs his identity around an idealised concept of dignity. Postmodernism challenges this narrative, suggesting that "truth" is subjective and constructed. Lyotard's idea that "Grand narratives are met with incredulity" (Lyotard 81) aligns with the fragmented recollections in the novel. Reader-response criticism further amplifies this subjectivity. As readers, we are positioned to question Stevens's reliability. His recounts invite multiple interpretations, demonstrating that memory is not a fixed repository of truth but rather an evolving narrative shaped by the psyche.

### **The Psychological Ripple Effect**

The ripple effect in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* refers to how Stevens's past decisions continue to influence his present life and identity. This analysis draws from psychological studies and detailed textual evidence to explore this theme. Despite moral and emotional misgivings, Stevens's loyalty to Lord Darlington creates a profound and lasting impact on his psychological state. Ishiguro writes, "Indeed – why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking" (Ishiguro 173). This confession illustrates the delayed recognition of pain, a phenomenon well-described by Freud: "Repression is a defense mechanism by which individuals push distressing memories and emotions out of conscious awareness" (Freud 118). Stevens's stoic demeanour masks deep emotional wounds, which only surface through fragmented recollections.

The ripple effect is further evident in Stevens's reflections on Miss Kenton. "I do not believe I am mistaken in thinking that the hard, bitter fact is that in the end, I failed to make my own decisions" (Ishiguro 256). This realisation, years after Miss Kenton's departure, highlights the enduring consequences of his choices. Cognitive dissonance theory explains Stevens's behaviour: "When confronted with actions that contradict core beliefs, individuals experience discomfort and rationalise those actions to align with their self-

concept” (Festinger 237). Stevens’s repeated justifications of his loyalty show his struggle to maintain a consistent self-narrative despite inner conflict.

Freud’s idea of repression can be seen in Stevens’s interactions and denials. For instance, when he discusses his relationship with Miss Kenton, he says, “It is not for me to pry into other people’s lives” (Ishiguro 197). This detachment is not mere professionalism; it reflects his avoidance of emotional vulnerability. Freud posits that “the unconscious mind houses thoughts that are distressing due to their content” (Freud 114), an apt description of Stevens’s concealed emotions.

The ripple effect is not limited to Stevens’s emotions but extends to his identity. His ideal of dignity shapes every decision, often at significant personal cost. “Dignity” becomes a mantra that closes his eyes to human connections, echoing Jung’s concept of the shadow—unacknowledged traits that influence behaviour. Jung notes, “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious” (Jung 45). This struggle embodies Stevens’s journey, marked by suppressed desires and rationalisations.

The narrative’s climax exposes Stevens’s more profound realisation: “All those years I wanted nothing more than to serve Lord Darlington’s wishes. And now, what do I have to show for it?” (Ishiguro 243). This belated awareness demonstrates the long-term psychological impact of his choices—the ripple effect—and aligns with Festinger’s claim that “the tension of cognitive dissonance often leads to profound self-evaluation” (Festinger 242).

### Findings and Implications

The analysis reveals that Stevens’s identity is built on a foundation of repressed memories and internalised ideals. His eventual, though partial, acceptance of regret underscores the human tendency to reevaluate life choices through the lens of memory. This study shows that psychological theories enhance our comprehension of character motivations and personal evolution within literary texts.

The implications for literary studies are significant: an interdisciplinary approach combining psychology and literary theory deepens our understanding of complex characters like Stevens. When read through this lens, Ishiguro’s work becomes a poignant exploration of identity, self-delusion, and the inevitable reckoning with one’s past.

### Summing Up

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* provides a fertile ground for analysing the ripple effect of past choices through psychological and literary theories. Stevens’s journey, marked by repression, archetypal struggles, and cognitive dissonance, illustrates how memory continuously shapes identity. The interplay of narrative techniques and psychological insights reveals a timeless truth: the echoes of the past persist, influencing who we become. Future research could extend this framework to comparative analyses with other Ishiguro characters or similar protagonists in contemporary literature.

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