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THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

false, that only tells us what we know already, namely that a novel is a work of fiction. There must be some possibility of discriminating between truth and falsehood within the imagined world of the novel, as there is in the real world, for the story to engage our interest.

The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter. This need not be a conscious, or mischievous, intention on their part. The narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel is not an evil man, but his life has been based on the suppression and evasion of the truth, about himself and about others. His narrative is a kind of confession, but it is riddled with devious self-justification and special pleading, and only at the very end does he arrive at an understanding of himself – too late to profit by it.

The frame-story is set in 1956. The narrator is Stevens, the ageing butler of an English stately home, once the seat of Lord Darlington, now the property of a rich American. Encouraged by his new employer, Stevens takes a short holiday in the West Country. His private motive is to make contact with Miss Kenton, housekeeper at Darlington Hall in its great days between the Wars, when Lord Darlington hosted unofficial gatherings of high-ranking politicians to discuss the crisis in Europe. Stevens hopes to persuade Miss Kenton (he continues to refer to her thus, though she is married) to come out of retirement and help solve a staffing crisis at Darlington Hall. As he travels, he recalls the past.

Stevens speaks, or writes, in a fussily precise, stiffly formal style – butterspeak, in a word. Viewed objectively, the style has no literary merit whatsoever. It is completely lacking in wit, sensuousness and originality. Its effectiveness as a medium for this novel resides precisely in our growing perception of its inadequacy for what it describes. Gradually we infer that Lord Darlington was a bungling amateur diplomat who believed in appeasing Hitler and gave support to fascism and antisemitism. Stevens has never admitted to himself or to others that his employer was totally discredited by subsequent historical events, and takes pride in the impeccable service he rendered his weak and unamiable master.

"It is from Mrs Johnson, a companion of my aunt. She says my aunt died the day before yesterday." She paused a moment, then said: "The funeral is to take place tomorrow. I wonder if it might be possible for me to take the day off."

"I am sure that could be arranged, Miss Kenton."

"Thank you, Mr Stevens. Forgive me, but perhaps I may now have a few moments alone."

"Of course, Miss Kenton."

I made my exit, and it was not until after I had done so that it occurred to me I had not actually offered her my condolences. I could well imagine the blow the news would be to her, her aunt having been, to all intents and purposes, like a mother to her, and I paused out in the corridor, wondering if I should go back, knock and make good my omission. But then it occurred to me that if I were to do so, I might easily intrude upon her private grief. Indeed, it was not impossible that Miss Kenton, at that very moment, and only a few feet from me, was actually crying. The thought provoked a strange feeling to rise within me, causing me to stand there hovering in the corridor for some moments. But eventually I judged it best to await another opportunity to express my sympathy and went on my way.

KAZUO ISHIGURO *The Remains of the Day* (1989)

UNRELIABLE NARRATORS are invariably invented characters who are part of the stories they tell. An unreliable "omniscient" narrator is almost a contradiction in terms, and could only occur in a very deviant, experimental text. Even a character-narrator cannot be a hundred per cent unreliable. If everything he or she says is palpably

The same mystique of the perfect servant rendered him incapable of recognizing and responding to the love that Miss Kenton was ready to offer him when they worked together. But a dim, heavily censored memory of his treatment of her gradually surfaces in the course of his narrative – and we realize that his real motive for seeking her out again is a vain hope of undoing the past.

Stevens repeatedly gives a favourable account of himself which turns out to be flawed or deceptive. Having delivered to Miss Kenton a letter reporting the death of her aunt, he realizes that he has not “actually” offered his condolences. His hesitation about whether to return almost distracts us from his extraordinarily crass omission of any expression of regret in the preceding dialogue. His anxiety not to intrude on her grief seems to bespeak a sensitive personality, but in fact as soon as he finds another “opportunity to express my sympathy”, he does no such thing, but instead rather spitefully criticises her supervision of two new maidservants. Typically, he has no word more expressive than “strange” for the feeling he experiences at the thought that Miss Kenton might be crying on the other side of the door. We may be surprised that he should suspect her of doing so, just after noting with approval her calm reception of the news. In fact many pages later he admits that he has attached this memory to the wrong episode:

I am not at all certain now as to the actual circumstances which had led me to be standing thus in the back corridor. It occurs to me that elsewhere in attempting to gather such recollections, I may well have asserted that this memory derived from the minutes immediately after Miss Kenton's receiving news of her aunt's death . . . But now, having thought further, I believe I may have been a little confused about this matter; that in fact this fragment of memory derives from events that took place on an evening at least a few months after the death of Miss Kenton's aunt . . .

It was an evening, in fact, when he humiliated her by coldly rejecting her timid but unambiguous offer of love – *that* was why she was crying behind the closed door. But Stevens characteristically associates the occasion not with this private, intimate episode,

but with one of Lord Darlington's most momentous conferences. The themes of political bad faith and emotional sterility are subtly interwoven in the sad story of Stevens's wasted life.

It is interesting to compare and contrast Ishiguro's novel with another virtuoso feat in the use of an unreliable narrator – Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. This novel takes the unusual form of a long poem by a fictitious American poet called John Shade, with a detailed commentary upon it by an émigré European scholar, Shade's neighbour, called Charles Kinbote. The poem is an autobiographical work centering on the tragic suicide of the poet's daughter. Shade himself, we gather, had just been murdered when the manuscript of the poem came into Kinbote's hands. We soon realize that Kinbote is mad, believing himself to be the exiled king of some Ruritanian country resembling pre-Revolutionary Russia. He has convinced himself that Shade was writing a poem about his own history, and that he was shot in error by an assassin sent to murder Kinbote himself. The purpose of his commentary is to establish Kinbote's bizarre interpretation of the facts. One of the pleasures of reading it is to discern, by reference to the “reliable” narrative of Shade's poem, the degree of Kinbote's self-delusion. Compared with *The Remains of the Day*, *Pale Fire* is exuberantly comic at the expense of the unreliable narrator. Yet the effect is not totally reductive. Kinbote's evocation of his beloved kingdom, Zembla, is vivid, enchanting and haunting. Nabokov has invested his character with some of his own eloquence, and much of his own exile's poignant nostalgia. Ishiguro's novel in contrast accepts the limitations of a narrator quite without eloquence. If he had been reliable, the effect would, of course, have been incredibly boring.