

## Narrative Unreliability In Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains Of The Day And Never Let Me Go

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### ABSTRACT

Narrative unreliability is a significant and powerful technique in fiction, playing a crucial role in shaping the reader's experience, deepening thematic exploration, and enhancing the complexity of characters. Kazuo Ishiguro is renowned for his masterful use of narrative unreliability, particularly in exploring themes of memory, identity, and self-deception. This paper aims to analyze use of narrative unreliability in Ishiguro's two famous works *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go* where concepts of unreliability and implied author offered by Wayne Booth will be used. The study attempts to analyze how this device of narrative unreliability is used to explore the themes of memory and identity.

**Key Words:** Narrative unreliability, implied author, memory, identity

### INTRODUCTION

An unreliable narrator is a first person narrator whose trustworthiness and credibility is exceedingly questionable. This narrator cannot be trusted; as they can mislead the reader through the narrative either for ignorance, extreme naivety, and inability to accurately observe the surroundings or, as in many cases; committing mistakes and lying. It is a storyteller who tells the reader a story that cannot be directly taken as true. In fact, they are not always deliberately liars, but we as readers can notice them by observing the contradictions they make to their own actions or sayings back and forth in the narrative.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Wayne Booth first recognized the critical concepts of the reliable and unreliable narrator. Booth's work on narrative theory introduced a framework for understanding how narrators can influence the reader's perception of a story, particularly when they are unreliable. Booth emphasized that the narrator's reliability is crucial in regard to how a story is received by the audience. A reliable narrator is one whose explanation the reader can trust, while an unreliable narrator's story must be questioned or scrutinized. This reliability hinges on whether the narrator's understanding and communication align with the implied author's intentions and the reader's expectations.

Booth introduced the idea of the "implied author," which is not the actual author but rather an idealized version constructed from the text. The implied author's perspective is considered as guiding framework of the narrative. The implied author is neither the real author nor the narrator but a "second self" that represents the values, intentions, and guiding principles embedded within the narrative. This concept helps readers navigate and interpret the story, especially when dealing with unreliable narrators. The reliability of a narrator is measured against this implied author. If the narrator's views or descriptions deviate significantly from what the implied author would approve, the narrator is considered unreliable.

According to Booth, a narrator may be deemed unreliable when there are noticeable gaps between what the narrator says and what the implied author suggests. This can be revealed through inconsistencies in the narrative, contradictions, or discrepancies between the narrator's interpretation of events and the reader's own understanding, shaped by the implied author. Booth highlighted the active role of the reader in detecting and interpreting unreliable narration. An unreliable narrator forces the reader to read between the lines, question the surface narrative, and often reconstruct the "true" story from the clues provided by the implied author.

In fact, Booth's concept of the unreliable narrator is foundational in narrative theory. It has shaped how literary scholars analyze and interpret narratives, especially in terms of understanding the relationship between the narrator, the implied author, and the reader.

Another critic, Shen Dan, the professor at the School of Foreign Languages of Peking University, in a review titled *What is "Unreliable Narration"?* pointed out that "No matter what situation, readers need to perform the 'double decoding' when reading: one is to interpret the narrator's words, and the other is to depart from or transcend the narrator's words to infer the true colors of things or infer what constitutes the correct judgment." (*Foreign Literature Review*, 133-143] Similarly, regarding the use of the device of unreliable first person narrator David Lodge in his *The Art of Fiction: Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts*, says that there is always "a gap between appearance and reality," (*The Art of Fiction*, 155) between what the narrator tells and what actually happens. As the narrator's utterance constitutes the only source of the reader's knowledge about the fictional world, unreliable narration emphasizes the epistemological uncertainty and the impossibility of deriving a single, unconcealed truth.

## DISCUSSION:

Kazuo Ishiguro, the British novelist of Japanese origin, is renowned for his use of narrative unreliability, which he employs to explore themes of memory, identity, ethics of human cloning and the subjective nature of reality. Like his contemporaries Ishiguro also uses unreliable first person narrator in his novels. His narrators often have limited or flawed perceptions, which deeply affect the way stories unfold and how readers understand them.

In *The Remains of the Day* (1989), narrative unreliability is central to the novel's exploration of memory, dignity, and self-deception. The story is narrated by Stevens, an elderly English butler, who reflects on his past service to Lord Darlington, particularly during the interwar period. As Stevens recounts his life, it becomes increasingly clear that his narrative is marked by significant unreliability, which shapes the reader's understanding of the events and themes in the novel. Similarly, in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro uses narrative unreliability through Kathy H., the protagonist and first-person narrator, to craft a story that gradually reveals its darker, dystopian undertones. Her storytelling approach invites readers to question the reliability of her memories and interpretations, cleverly reflecting broader themes of self-deception and memory.

## SELF-DECEPTION AND JUSTIFICATION

Throughout the whole narrative of *Remains of the Day*, we observe that Stevens denies emotional truth. Stevens is a deeply repressed character who has spent his life adhering to an ideal of professional dignity. Throughout the novel, he entirely denies his own emotions, particularly those related to his relationships with his father and Miss Kenton, the housekeeper. His recollections are often colored by a refusal to acknowledge the depth of his feelings, leading to a narrative that is emotionally unreliable. For example, Stevens frequently dismisses or rationalizes moments where his emotions might have conflicted with his sense of duty. Besides, it is noticed that Stevens rationalizes his moral choices. Stevens continually justifies his unwavering loyalty to Lord Darlington, even as it becomes clear that his employer was involved in morally questionable, if not outright reprehensible, activities, such as supporting appeasement policies towards Nazi Germany. Stevens's narrative attempts to put these actions in background by emphasizing his belief in the importance of duty over personal judgment. This self-justification leads the reader to question the integrity of his account and the choices he made.

In *Never Let Me Go* too self-justification plays a significant role in the narrative unreliability of Kathy H., the protagonist. Kathy's narrative often covers the horror of the reality she and her friends face, which is one of the ways she justifies their passive acceptance of their roles as organ donors. Her narration is marked by a calm, almost resigned tone that suggests she has come to terms with her fate. However, this acceptance is actually about self-justification, a way to avoid the emotional and psychological burden of their situation. It is noticed that throughout the novel, Kathy rarely questions the ethics of their existence or the system that dictates their lives. Instead, she focuses on her memories of Hailsham and the small, personal concerns of her youth. This selective focus can be seen as a form of self-justification. By concentrating on the normalcy of her childhood, she justifies the acceptance of her ultimate fate. Kathy's narrative unreliability also serves to justify her inaction and complicity in the system that exploits her and her friends. When Kathy discusses her role as a carer, she describes her work with a sense of pride and fulfillment, even though it involves preparing her friends for their eventual deaths. This portrayal of her role allows Kathy to justify her involvement in the system, presenting her actions as caring and compassionate rather than as a form of collaboration with an oppressive regime. While the implied author is critical of the oppression and abuse for corrupt exploitive purposes in that dystopian world, Kathy and the other characters are entirely submissive, because of their lack of awareness and devotion to duty. Ruth says: "I was pretty much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?" (*Never Let Me Go*, 223) This shows, she is made to expect it, to accept and to understand that this is her goal and her completion.

## SELECTIVE MEMORY

**Use of Omissions and Revisions** is a significant tool of unreliable narrator. Stevens's account of the past is marked by selective memory. He often omits or revises events in ways that protect his self-image as a dutiful and dignified servant. For instance, when recalling Lord Darlington's political meetings, Stevens tends to gloss over the details or express uncertainty, which suggests a reluctance to confront the full implications of his service. His narrative is filled with moments where the reader must read between the lines to discern the truth that Stevens himself is either unwilling or unable to fully acknowledge. **In addition to these**, Stevens's narration involves a constant reconstruction of events that casts him in a favorable light. He reinterprets past incidents to align with his idealized view of his role as a butler, often at the cost of acknowledging the personal and moral consequences of his actions. This reconstruction becomes particularly evident when Stevens reflects on the dismissal of the Jewish maids, an event he initially portrays as a minor administrative matter but later reveals to be a significant moral failure.

1.1. Like Stevens, Kathy in *Never Let Me Go* frequently reflects on her past, but her memories are fragmented, often contradictory, and sometimes vague. She revisits key events multiple times, offering slightly different details or interpretations, which signals the unreliability of her recollections. Kathy recalls moments of tension with her close friends, Tommy and Ruth, but her accounts are not always consistent. She sometimes revises her memories, leading the reader to question whether she is consciously or unconsciously shaping her recollections to protect herself from painful truths.

These reconstruction of events and revisions of memory can be paralleled with Sigmund Freud's concept of "secondary revision" where he opines that the dreamer in his/her presentation of the dream tries hard to depict it with an acceptable meaning and therefore, alters the dream by the interpretation the dreamer puts on it. These modifications to the dream resemble Stevens's and Kathy's amendment to their respective stories and their additional explanations of various situations in an effort to present a coherent story,

## GRADUAL UNVEILING OF THE TRUTH

As the novel progresses, Stevens's unreliability becomes more apparent, and the reader begins to understand the gaps and inconsistencies in his narrative. Through subtle clues and the gradual accumulation of details, Ishiguro allows the reader to piece together a more accurate picture of Stevens's past, revealing the extent of his self-deception. By the end of the novel, Stevens himself starts to confront the reality of his life, though his revelations are tinged with regret and a recognition that it may be too late to change. Here again, we listen to the voice of Booth's implied author. The implied author is guiding the reader to see the flaws in Stevens' narration. Through careful structuring of the narrative, the implied author reveals the tragic consequences of Stevens' unquestioning loyalty and his emotional repression. For instance, the implied author allows moments of self-doubt and emotional slips to emerge in Stevens' otherwise composed narrative, hinting at the deeper truths Stevens is unwilling to confront. Ishiguro uses irony to heighten the tension between Stevens's narrative and the reader's understanding. Stevens's attempts to maintain his dignity and uphold his ideals are often undercut by the reader's awareness of the tragic consequences of his actions. This irony adds depth to the narrative, making Stevens a poignant figure whose unreliability stems not from malice but from a deep-seated need to preserve his self-respect. This technique of gradual revelation is continued in case of Kathy too. Kathy doesn't withhold information maliciously, but the slow unveiling of the true purpose behind Hailsham and the clones' lives reflects how she herself has processed these revelations over time. The true nature of Hailsham as an experiment in creating more humane clones is revealed late in the novel through Miss Emily and Madame. Even at this point also, Kathy's narration does not directly confront the ethical horror, leaving it for the reader to interpret. This gradual revelation of the truth heightens the novel's emotional impact, as readers come to realize the full weight of the story along with Kathy. Here, the implied author uses Kathy's selective focus and the calm, detached tone with which she narrates her life to highlight the dissonance between her perception and the reality of her situation. This contrast is a key used by the implied author to shape the reader's understanding and encouraging them to see beyond Kathy's narrative to the broader ethical questions the novel raises.

### 1.1. THEMES EXPLORED THROUGH UNRELIABILITY:

The theme of dignity is central to Stevens' self-concept and his narrative unreliability. His unwavering belief in the importance of duty leads him to suppress his own emotions and moral judgment, which in turn shapes the way he recounts his past. According to Stevens, the profession of a butler must entail repression of all wishes, emotions and opinions as these things do not match with the profession of a butler. In his view such repression of oneself is 'dignity'. This is particularly evident in Stevens's memories of the event in which two Jewish servants were terminated from their works. He recalls that he repressed his opinion of disagreement in that decision. Though he objected with the dismissal of the Jews, he could not utter a single word as a sign of dignity. On the other hand, When Miss Kenton shows her astonishment at their dismissal, he scolds her for expressing her opinion and tells her to "conduct in a manner befitting her position" (*The Remains of the Day*, 149). However, the readers can find an irony in Stevens's concept of 'dignity'. This is evident in the scenes when Darlington and his guests talk about the system of Democracy and make use of Stevens to prove the accuracy of their view of democracy as of an inadequate system. The butler lets them ridicule him and asserts that it is a situation which demonstrates dignity on his part. By showing the butler's lack of awareness and understanding, those people wish to display that opinions of people like a butler should not have any influence in the society. This theme is closely tied to the British class system and the roles expected of servants, which Stevens internalizes to the point of denying his humanity. It seems Stevens has no other self than that of a servant, whose importance lies merely in serving his employer Lord Darlington. By this unquestionable loyalty to Lord Darlington Stevens also indirectly contributed to Nazi rule. As Stevens devoted his whole life to his employer Lord Darlington, towards the later part of his life he realizes the futility of his own life as he sees the consequences of his employer's activities. It is perhaps his feelings of repentance for wasting his life which makes Stevens to offer a different view of dignity so that it will convince the reader that he was a perfect butler.

Stevens's unreliable narration ultimately reveals a life filled with missed opportunities for personal fulfillment and moral courage. His refusal to acknowledge his emotions, particularly in his relationship with Miss Kenton, results in a profound sense of loss by the novel's end.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the theme of memory is explored through Kathy's unreliable narration. Her narration is a reflection of how memory is often selective and subjective. Ishiguro uses this to explore how individuals and societies choose what to remember and what to forget, especially when dealing with traumatic or morally troubling events. Kathy's memories are often hazy, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory. Her unreliable narration suggests that she, like many others, unconsciously edits her memories to manage her emotions and cope with the reality of her situation. This selective memory serves as a metaphor for societal amnesia, where uncomfortable or unethical realities are ignored. Kathy's unreliable narration also explores the ethical implications of human cloning and the exploitation of human beings. By filtering the story through Kathy's unreliable lens, Ishiguro forces readers to engage more deeply with the ethical questions at the heart of the novel. Kathy's calm, almost indifferent recounting of the donation process, and her failure to express outrage or horror, highlights how the clones have been conditioned to accept their exploitation. This narrative approach mirrors real-world situations where systemic injustices are normalized, and those affected may not fully comprehend or articulate the wrongs they suffer. The unreliability thus serves as a critique of how societies can become complicit in unethical practices, particularly when those practices are shrouded in normalization.

### ROLE OF LANGUAGE:

Above and beyond, language also plays a vital role in creating unreliable narration in *Remains of the Day*. Here, the narrator uses a lot of ambiguous words and sentences which makes the narration unreliable. The very first sentence of the novel is ambiguous: "*It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days*". (*The Remains of the Day*, 3). The very use of the word "seem" makes it uncertain. The word seems refers to a situation when we are not certain about something but we have to make our statement. Again, "increasingly" and "likely" are words which are used contradictorily in the same sentence by the narrator. While increasingly refers to constant growing, likely refers to possible. So use of these two words together in the same sentence makes the unreliability more prominent. Similarly, the word expedition suggests a planned journey with a particular purpose based on facts; but the narrator again uses the word imagination which refers lack of real existence. So, by using such ambiguous sentences at the beginning of the novel by the narrator Kazuo Ishiguro gives the reader a hint of the unreliability of the narrator.

Same is the case with Kathy. H. She uses the literary device of euphemism in her narration. The choice of language reflects how she copes with the harsh reality of being a clone destined for organ donation. The terms "completion" and "donations" are euphemisms for death and organ harvesting, respectively. Kathy uses these terms without questioning them, which subtly reveals how she and the other clones have internalized the language of their oppressors. By using such euphemisms Kathy's narration avoids the emotional weight of those tragic experiences and makes those events routine work. Besides, Kathy often speaks in vague or ambiguous terms, especially when discussing complex emotions or the broader implications of her life as a clone. This vagueness contributes to the narrative unreliability, as it leaves much open to interpretation, forcing readers to fill in the gaps themselves. She frequently uses phrases like "I suppose," "maybe," and "I think," which signal her uncertainty and reluctance to definitively interpret past events.

### 1.1. CONCLUSION:

In both novels, Ishiguro uses narrative unreliability to explore the themes of self-deception, memory, and moral responsibility. However, the function and impact of this unreliability differ in both the novels. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens' unreliability is rooted in his need to justify his past actions and maintain his self-image as a dedicated butler. His unreliability serves to highlight the tragic consequences of his emotional repression and his inability to acknowledge his moral failings. The reader is invited to see the deeper emotional and ethical truths that Stevens himself cannot fully confront. On the other hand, in *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's unreliability stems from her limited understanding of her world. Her narrative puts less focus on the horror of her situation, reflecting the social conditioning that has shaped her life. The reader must look beyond Kathy's account to grasp the full implications of the story, particularly the dehumanization and moral questions surrounding cloning and organ donation. To conclude it can be said that Kazuo Ishiguro masterfully employs narrative unreliability in both *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go* to explore complex themes and to engage the reader in a deeper examination of the characters' inner worlds and the ethical dilemmas they face. In both novels, the unreliable narrators reveal the limitations of human perception and understanding, and the narrative invites readers to critically engage with the stories being told, uncovering the deeper truths that the narrators themselves may not fully grasp or are unwilling to acknowledge.

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