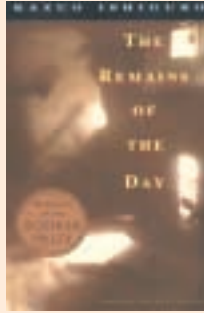




The Remains of the Day – “Quietly Devastating”

It is the summer of 1956. Stevens, an ageing butler, has embarked on a six-day motoring trip. The journey is interwoven with memories and reflections of his 35-year service to the late Lord Darlington. As he travels through the West Country of England, his life unfolds — a story of lost causes and sad waste.



The first question that we should consider is: Why is the protagonist Stevens, rather than his master? After all, it is Lord Darlington who has the crucial role in events of global significance in the run up to World War II. What makes Stevens the unheroic hero (in Dostoyevsky’s words) of this story? The well-meaning Lord Darlington’s story is also tragic: although he wants to see justice in this world, he is manipulated like a pawn by the Nazis. This might well have been the theme of an ancient Greek tragedy by Sophocles or Aeschylus.

I could not help wondering why the tragic tale of an English butler in the 1950s should evoke such a deep resonance in the modern reader.

The novel opens with a contrast between past and present. A mild sense of nostalgia and regret pervades throughout the book. The title reminds me of two famous lines from a Tang poem: *The setting sun appears sublime, / But oh, 'tis near its dying time!* (夕陽無限好，只是近黃昏)

What is most poignant about this book is that Stevens, a devoted and accomplished butler, looks back on his lifelong service to his master with a sense of futility. This prompts me to re-think the meaning of professionalism (even just skimming the novel, one cannot miss the word *professional*). Stevens’ lifelong aspiration is to be a great butler — one who serves with dignity (and by dignity he means emotional restraint). More importantly, a great butler should serve a

great gentleman, who plays a key role in furthering the progress of humanity, and thus make an indirect contribution to the creation of a better world. He sacrifices much to realise his aspiration. On two occasions he thought he had actually achieved it. Yet, his success is implicitly cast in doubt. His belief that a true professional should suppress his personal feelings in performing his duties is widely held in today’s business world. However, viewed from an individualist perspective, this amounts to dehumanising oneself in the pursuit of career goals.

What is even more striking is Stevens’ conviction that loyalty forms an integral part of professionalism. By loyalty he means unquestioning obedience with absolute trust in his master’s judgement. Twice in the novel Stevens’ belief is challenged. Mr Cardinal asks him if he has ever been curious about the perilous position of his master in his liaison with the Nazis. Later, Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, protests against his acquiescence when instructed by Lord Darlington to fire two Jewish maids, purely because of their ethnic background.

Even if you do not find the plot or the characters of this novel interesting, you will probably be charmed by the subtle and elegant language, in particular the vividly portrayed scenes. One can almost hear the voices of people from the different walks of life of this period: Stevens, Lord Darlington, Miss Kenton and the countryfolk in the pub. One can also vicariously enjoy the much more relaxed pace of life in this bygone era. What can be more gratifying than reading a beautifully written book with keen insights that bear relevance to today’s world?

Note:

The Remains of the Day, Kazuo Ishiguro’s third novel, was awarded the 1989 Booker Prize. It has been acclaimed as one of the most popular and most influential novels of recent years.

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954 and moved to Britain with his parents in 1960. He grew up straddling two societies, the Japan of his parents and his adopted England.

He does not seem to me to be a free man who does not sometimes do nothing.

Marcus T. Cicero

一點一畫不放過



最近兩期《文訊》都刊載“別字辨正”小測試，看看大家對常見別字是否敏感。這一期搞搞新意思，改以常見錯字為題。以下一段文字有十個字不是多了一點，便是少了一畫，大家有沒有興趣把這十個錯字挑出來？

清樂棋社月初舉行棋藝觀摩大會，邀得棋壇泰斗趙仲凱主持大師班。趙老縱橫棋壇凡四十載，可謂獨領風騷，桃李滿門，七十大壽剛過，仍然精神矍鑠。大會為了隆重其事，特地舉行了盛大的開幕禮，冠蓋雲集，好不熱鬧。壓軸一場，趙老與素有“神童”之稱的李凌對弈，慕名觀戰的棋友擠滿會場。雙方各竭神思，運智鬥

巧，最終和局收場，不分勝負。李凌畢竟年少氣盛，賽後出言不遜，幸而趙老寬宏大量，還稱讚李“睿智過人，真是少年出英雄”。如此胸襟，實在值得我輩好好學習。

社左方是“𠄎”，不是“𠄎”。甄右方是“几”，不是“凡”。騷右上方的“又”左方有一點，右方沒有。豈下方是“𠄎”上有一橫畫。陸右下方“生”上有一橫畫。冠上方是“一”，不是“一”。豈下方是“小”，不是“水”。豈上方“𠄎”下面有一橫畫。真與值框內皆有二橫畫。