IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

THE ARCHITECT AND THE ARTIFACT: MASUJI ONO AND STEVENS AS VICTIMS OF STRUCTURAL COLLAPSE

Name of 1st Author: Dr. Sidharth Tanmoy Dash

Designation of 1st Author: Teacher

Name of Department of 1st Author: English Department

Name of Organisation of 1st Author: KT Global, Khurdha, India

Abstract

This paper explores the profound thematic and structural parallels between Masuji Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* and Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*. Both protagonists function as high-level stewards of crumbling ideologies—specifically the imperialist fervour of Shōwa-era Japan and the rigid class hierarchy of the British landed gentry. By examining their roles as unreliable narrators and "victims" of their own professional devotion, this study argues that both men are casualties of a "falling structural world." In this context, the moral frameworks they served have not only collapsed physically and politically but have been retroactively condemned by the very societies they aimed to improve. Their tragedy lies in the irreconcilable gap between their subjective sense of "dignity" and the objective historical reality of their complicity.

Index Terms- Kazuo Ishiguro, Masuji Ono, Stevens, unreliable narration, moral ambiguity, historical complicity, social isolation, guilt, denial, emotional suppression

Kazuo Ishiguro's primary protagonists often find themselves standing in the wreckage of a social order they spent their lives upholding. In *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Masuji Ono and Stevens serve as mirrors of one another, representing what critics describe as "sequent repetition-with-variation" (BAKAR). Both men are elderly, retrospective, and deeply invested in the "dignity" of their respective professions—art and domestic service.

However, they are victims of seismic historical shifts that render their life's work not merely obsolete but morally reprehensible. They are anchored to a "falling structural world"—a term describing the disintegration of the cultural and political systems that provided them with identity and purpose (Nahid). As the structures of the British Empire and Imperial Japan dissolve into the post-war reality of Americanization and democratic reform, these men are left as artifacts of a bygone era, struggling to justify their existence.

The Professional Ideal as a Moral Shield

For both Ono and Stevens, professional excellence serves as a substitute for individual moral autonomy. Stevens defines dignity through an unwavering commitment to his role within the British social hierarchy, famously positing that a "great" butler never wavers from his professional persona (Cerchio). He defers all moral and political judgment to his employer, Lord Darlington, viewing himself as a tool rather than a moral agent. As Khosravi notes, Stevens's ontology is tied to the "house" as a microcosm of the world; if the house is orderly and the master is influential, Stevens believes his service is intrinsically noble (149-160).

Similarly, Masuji Ono's identity is inextricably linked to his transition from an artist of the "floating world"—the transient, hedonistic aesthetics of the pleasure districts—to a propagandist for Japanese expansionism (Azeem). Ono views his decision to put his art at the service of the state not as a betrayal of aesthetics, but as a mark of courage and "real world" ambition. He distinguishes himself from his former mentor, Mori-san, by claiming he was willing to "take chances" for the sake of the nation (Nahid). In both cases, the protagonists believe they are contributing to a stable, noble structure. The "falling" of this world occurs when the external political reality shifts, leaving their professional pride exposed as a hollow shield for fascism and colonial expansion.

Unreliable Memory as a Psychological Buffer

As the structures around them collapse, both narrators resort to "unreliable reporting" to protect their self-image from total disintegration (Karttunen). This unreliability is not a malicious attempt to deceive the reader, but rather a psychological defence mechanism—a "buffer" against the realisation of their own obsolescence and moral failure.

- **Masuji Ono and Temporal Dislocation:** Ono utilises selective memory to smooth over the "painful ruptures" of his past, such as the betrayal of his student Kuroda to the Committee on Unpatriotic Activities (Azeem). He frequently prefaces his recollections with phrases like "I cannot be sure," or "It is possible my memory is playing tricks," allowing him to distance himself from the more shameful consequences of his nationalist influence. By casting doubt on the details, he softens the impact of his guilt.
- **Stevens and Technical Obsession:** Stevens uses the meticulous details of his profession—the polishing of silver, the management of staff, the "science" of a banqueting table—to avoid confronting the fact that Lord Darlington was a Nazi sympathiser (Cerchio). He focuses on the *form* of his service (the "how") to avoid the *substance* of its impact (the "why"). His narrative is a catalogue of trivialities meant to drown out the silence of his wasted emotional life.

Their narratives are characterised by "analepsis" (flashbacks), where the truth is withheld or delayed to allow for "moral deferral" (Azeem). They are victims of their own memories, trapped in a cycle of self-justification because they cannot reconcile their "best intentions" with the resulting "catastrophe" (Nahid).

The Tragedy of Aftermath: Living in the Rubble

The ultimate victimhood of Ono and Stevens is found in their "post-structural" existence—living in a world that has discarded the values they sacrificed their lives for. In the post-war era, the younger generation, represented by Ono's son-in-law Taro or the American Mr. Farraday, views the old world with either contempt or bemused indifference.

Ono is viewed by the youth as a "war criminal" whose art helped lead a generation to its death. He is forced to navigate a Japan that is physically and culturally rebuilding in the image of its former enemies. Similarly, Stevens's devotion to Lord Darlington is viewed as a relic of a bygone, slightly absurd era. His

trip to the West Country is a journey through a landscape that no longer recognises the authority he once served.

While Stevens eventually acknowledges his past mistakes during his encounter with Miss Kenton at Weymouth, admitting his heart is "breaking," he remains a figure of "mental stagnation" (Cerchio; Khosravi 149-160). He returns to Darlington Hall to practice "banter," a pathetic and performative attempt to adapt to the new Americanized structure. Ono, conversely, attempts to find peace in a "fake sense of himself," sitting in the "Bridge of Hesitation" and watching the new skyscrapers rise where his pleasure districts once stood (Nahid). He tries to convince himself that at least he *tried* to do something significant, even if that significance resulted in ruin.

Conclusion: The Hollow Victory of the Servant

Ono and Stevens are not world-historical figures, but "ordinary men" caught in the gears of shifting history (BAKAR). They are victims of a structural world that demanded total loyalty but offered no protection when that loyalty became a liability. Their stories serve as a meditation on the fragility of human identity when it is built upon the shifting sands of political and social structures.

The tragedy of Ishiguro's victims is not that they were inherently evil men, but that they were "good servants" to evil or misguided masters. They are casualties of a specific kind of blindness—one that mistakes a temporary social structure for an eternal moral truth. Their legacy is a quiet, devastating realisation: they succeeded perfectly in roles that history eventually judged as hollow, leaving them as the lonely architects of a collapsed world.

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