

A Study of Unreliable Narration in *The Remains of the Day*

Simeng Shan

College of Foreign Languages, Northeast Forestry University, Harbin, Heilongjiang, China

Abstract: *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro's masterpiece, takes the journey of Stevens, a butler at Darlington Hall, as the main line, and unfolds a mixed narrative of scenes along the way and memories of the past from Stevens's point of view. In retrospect, Stevens tried to find the values and ideals of the individual at Darlington Hall in those past years. The work is based on Stevens's personal memories, reflecting the writer's thinking and writing about individual living conditions. This paper mainly focuses on the unreliable narrative in *The Remains of the Day*, by which analyses the writing purpose of Ishiguro. Eventually, this paper shows the writer's ultimate reflection on the pursuit and futility of life.

Keywords: Narration; Unreliable narration; *The Remains of the Day*.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2017, Ishiguro, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, gave the novel a different voice part of the "long day" with a repressive word grammar and an "unreliable" narrative technique. In this novel, the author, like the conductor of the concerto, fully mobilizes the dialogue between the voices. And unreliable narration is an important concept in narratology, which is very important for us to understand the author's intention and thematic significance in literary works.

1.1 Introduction of Unreliable Narration

The concept of "unreliable narration" originated from the American literary critic Wayne Booth's novel rhetoric. In the book, Booth points out that there is a common "norm" of behavior advocated by the second author, that is, the "implied author", in literary works. This kind of measure is composed of many factors, if the narrator in the novel is consistent with it, it is called reliable; if it does not match, it is unreliable. (Wayne Booth, 1983:158) Shen Dan further pointed out that readers need to perform "double decoding" in reading: one is to interpret the narrator's discourse, and the other is to infer the true nature of things from or beyond the narrator's discourse, or to infer what constitutes a correct judgment. (Dan Shen, 2006:134)

As a narrative technique of the author, "unreliable narration" has gradually begun to participate in the construction of the theme, that is, it no longer exists only as a form, it also has a certain thematic significance. (Dan Shen, 2004:175). As Abbott said, when some novels hand over the responsibility of narration to a narrator who cannot be trusted by readers, an extremely important advantage of this narrative technique is that its narration itself - the difficulty of narration and the responsibility of narration have been destroyed by personal interest, prejudice and blind obedience - has become a part of the theme.

Booth put forward the concept of "unreliable narration" and distinguished two types of unreliable narration: one is the unreliable narration on the axis of "factual events", that is, the narrator reports the facts wrongly; the second is the unreliable narration on the axis of "value judgment", that is, the narrator may have deviation when making value judgment, which leads to the unreliable narration. In the narrative works, there are many reasons for unreliable narration, which are not only related to the narrator's sexuality, psychological characteristics and age, but also to the narrator's narrative intention, values, intelligence and knowledge level. For example, in *The Sound and the Fury*, Jason and Bangui lead to unreliable narration due to moral and intellectual factors respectively. When readers judge the unreliability of the narrator in the text, especially in the narrative text of the same story, there are four main steps: first, beyond the specific discourse of the narrator, through the narrative discourse of the work or the evidence shown in the larger narrative context, to determine the existence of unreliability; secondly, determine the specific types of unreliability such as fact, value, perception or all three; thirdly, the unreliable narration is connected with the narrator's inference as a character. Finally, the communication between the implied author, the narrator and the reader is considered. Not all unreliable narrators need to be judged according to this step. For those works with clear unreliability narrative features, the judgment steps can be simplified. In some

specific narrative works, in order to shape the characters and express the theme, the author deliberately makes the narrator's reliability and unreliability complicated or dynamic, which requires readers to pay special attention to the change of the narrator's reliability.

1.2 The Introduction of *The Remains of the Day*

The Remains of the Day mainly describes the protagonist Stevens's memories of his stewardship career. The novel begins with the protagonist's meditation on whether to travel to the west of England. After he served Lord Darlington for more than thirty years, Mr. Farady, the new owner of Darlington Hall, suggested him to go out of the mansion to travel once, and to enjoy the British natural scenery at the same time. Therefore, the journey to the west becomes the clue of the novel. The narration of the novel shuttles back and forth between Stevens' six-day journey to the west and his stewardship career of more than 30 years. Centering on the discussion of outstanding stewards, it revolves around his relationship with his father, Lord Darlington and Miss Kenton.

2. THE RELIABLE NARRATION IN *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*

Narrative is fundamentally a kind of communication activity, which is a process in which information senders convey information to information receivers through various expression media. There is at least one narrator in any narrative work. The narrator is the most important part of the narrative work, and the narrative work must rely on the narrator. In the narrative works, the narrator relies on the fictional audience-the narrator tells one story after another to highlight his own existence.

2.1 The Unreliable Narrator in *The Remains of the Day*

There are eight chapters in *The Remains of the Day*, which adopts the first-person internal focalization narrative mode as a whole, that is, to tell Stevens's own story from his own perspective. The first-person narrative has two different perspectives: one is the narrator's "I" recalling the past, that is, the narrative self, and the other is the recalled "I" experiencing the event, that is, the experience self. Stevens is the protagonist of the novel and the only narrator of the novel. He is the fusion of experience self and narrative self. The narration and performance of Stevens at different moments constitute a complete artistic image. Experience self tells his work and life experience in the past thirty years. Narrative self tells the story of six days of travel and the views and evaluation of the past. Stevens's narration is divided into eight serial scenes, each of which is related to different places. Except for the first part of the preface and the last part of Weymouth's narration, most of the rest are the narration of the experiencer's "I", and the narration of the experience self always brings the narrative self into the right.

The novel begins with whether Stevens travels to meditate. While Stevens was worried about finding new employees for Darlington Hall and making mistakes in his work, he received a letter from his old colleague Miss Kenton. After reading this, Stevens told the reader that Miss Kenton spoke bitterly about her marriage and life and had plans to return to Darlington Hall. Readers cannot read the content of the letter personally, so they cannot determine whether Stevens's narrative is reliable. They can only trust his interpretation temporarily and continue reading. After receiving Miss Kenton's letter, Stevens decided to accept Mr Farady's suggestion to travel to the west of England.

For it had occurred to me that the proposed trip in the car could be put to good professional use; that is to say, I could drive to the West Country call on Miss Kenton in passing, thus exploring at first hand the substance of her wish to return to employment here at Darlington Hall. I have, I should make clear, reread Miss Kenton's recent letter several times, and there is no possibility I am merely imagining the presence of these hints on her part. (Ishiguro,1989:52)

In the above account, Stevens reaffirms his understanding of Miss Kenton's letter and emphasizes that the trip was mainly to solve the problem of Darlington House employees. At this time, readers still cannot question the authenticity of his narrative and his travel motivation. From the perspective of work, Darlington House did need to recruit new employees. Miss Kenton had worked as a housekeeper in Darlington House and had rich work experience. From the perspective of personal relationship, Stevens has worked with Miss Kenton for more than ten years and has established a profound relationship. When Miss Kenton needs help, she should give a hand in time. No matter from which perspective, Miss Kenton is the best choice for new employees. In this way, Stevens has won the recognition of readers on the ethical axis. Readers seem to believe that Stevens's narration is true and reliable. The image of a loyal and responsible, caring and righteous old housekeeper and good colleague is

presented in front of the readers.

It is of course tragic that her marriage is now ending in failure. At this very moment, no doubt, she is pondering with regret decisions made in the far-off past that have now left her, deep in middle age, so alone and desolate. ...She begins one sentence: "Although I have no idea how I shall usefully fill the remainder of my life ..." And again, elsewhere, she writes: "The rest of my life stretches out as an emptiness before me." (Ishiguro, 1989:69)

This part of the narrative Stevens directly quotes the original words of the letter to further prove his good motivation to travel, so that the reader is convinced of his narrative, and his thoughts and behaviors have been recognized and appreciated by the reader. With the progress of the trip and the deepening of the memories, from the intermittent signs of Stevens, he gradually felt that his interpretation of Miss Kenton's letters did not conform to the original text, and he became less and less confident about the purpose of the trip. Thus, in his account of Dorsetshire on the third morning, his interpretation of the letter changed: "Of course, you must remember that there was no particular elaboration in Kenton's letter... I must confess that I was a little surprised last night at how difficult it was to point out exactly what was said in her letter that clearly expressed her desire to return. This part of the narrative is contradictory to the previous narrative, and readers have doubts about the reliability of Stevens's narrative and the true motivation of his travel. The last part of the novel, the sixth night in Weymouth, Stevens tells the story of his meeting with Miss Kenton. When he confirms the content of the letter to Miss Kenton:

"Well, for instance, Mrs Benn," I said with a laugh, "at one point in your letter, you write - now let me see - 'the rest of my life stretches out like an emptiness before me'. Some words to that effect."

"Really, Mr Stevens," she said, also laughing a little. "I couldn't have written any such thing."

"Oh, I assure you you did, Mrs Benn. I recall it very clearly."

"Oh dear. Well, perhaps there are some days when I feel like that. But they pass quickly enough. Let me assure you, Mr Stevens, my life does not stretch out emptily before me. For one thing, we are looking forward to the grandchild. The first of a few perhaps." (Ishiguro, 1989:171)

From this conversation between Stevens and Miss Kenton, it can be told that Miss Kenton didn't plan to come back to Darlington Hall and her marriage is not as despair as Stevens described, on the contrary, Miss Kenton feels a lot of happiness.

In the beginning of this novel, the letter of Kenton is one of the most important reasons to make Stevens start his travel with a thought of hoping Miss Kenton will come back to Darlington Hall with him and maybe Miss Kenton was still in love with him. But in the end, it is Stevens who tricks himself all the time, and he also tricks the reader too. What's more, the emotional relationship between Stevens and Miss Kenton was not depicted by the narrator, instead of plot of working. For their true relationship, the narrator only uses "the appropriate degree of fit" to confuse readers. Therefore, either based on fact or emotion, Stevens, a first-person perspective, is an unreliable narrator.

Except the main plot, there are other illusory descriptions. Stevens's narration is full of indefinite, ambiguous and contradictory words. These words often make readers puzzled, but in fact, as long as readers carefully scrutinize, they can find that there are problems in Stevens's narration, and most of them are untrustworthy. For example, in the first sentence of the opening, Kazuo Ishiguro seems to imply the reader through a variety of uncertain words. Stevens's own deceptive mindset in the narrative:

"It **seems increasingly** likely that I **really will** undertake the **expedition** that has been **preoccupying my imagination** now for some days." (Ishiguro, 1989:5)

In this sentence, whether it is an adverb or an adjective, it gives people an erratic fuzzy feeling. The second word of this sentence is the non-substantive verb "seem", which appears in the main sentence, greatly weakening the stability of the meaning of the whole sentence and giving people a sense of drift. Then read on, this feeling continues to increase. For example, the adverb "increasingly" and the adjective "likely" are put together, and the former means "slowly and gradually". The latter means "possible", which is translated into Chinese as "more and more possible." In addition, the nouns "expedition" and "imagination" contain more indeterminacy, because the former refers to a journey full of surprises and unknowns, while the latter means unreal ideas in the mind. On the whole, this sentence reflects the characteristics of uncertainty in the narrator's thinking. Kazuo Ishiguro is warning readers and letting them be alarmed.

In the novel, readers can also find a phenomenon that the pronouns in Stevens's narration are often ambiguous. For

example, in his narration, he calls his audience “you” or includes them in “we”, which reflects at least two problems.

First, Stevens deliberately uses this technique to narrow the narrative distance between readers and him, such as the following words:

“Now naturally, like many of us, I have a reluctance to change too much of the old ways.”(Ishiguro,1989:8)

Here Stevens uses the word ' we ' to pull in the distance between him and the reader, making his statement more reasonable, but the alert readers do not necessarily agree with this conclusion.

Second, with tunnel vision, Stevens indulged himself in his own life that mistaking his career to any profession in the world.

“The fact is, such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of those such as you and I [...] that is to say, by devoting our attention to providing the best possible service to those great gentlemen in whose hands the destiny of civilization truly lies.” (Ishiguro, 1989:43)

Another kind of "speech strategy" is that Stevens uses parentheses in his narration. Readers' thoughts are constantly interrupted by these parentheses, and they are also aware of the problems they reveal. For Stevens himself, the role of these parentheses is sometimes counterproductive. For example:

The fact that my attitude to this same suggestion underwent a change over the following days—indeed, that the notion of a trip to the West Country took an ever-increasing hold on my thoughts—is no doubt substantially attributable to—and why should I hide it? ———the arrival of Miss Kenton’s letter... (Ishiguro, 1989:6)

When Stevens spoke about Miss Kenton’s letter, he used “and why should I hide it?” This kind of parenthesis is used to explain the reason why he delayed introducing this matter. At this time, readers may not doubt the reliability of Stevens’s narration when they did not see this parenthesis. On the contrary, Stevens believed that sincere confession inevitably attracted suspicion. This negative speculation mainly stems from the verb “hide”.

3. CONCLUSION

Memories are the most important themes and narrative methods in Kazuo Ishiguro’s works. Kazuo Ishiguro said: “I like memories, because memories are our filter to examine ourselves.” Most of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels are composed of first-person recollection narration. The narrator is often surrounded by loneliness or dislocation, unable to accept the painful things in the past, and his narration is unreliable. However, under the unreliable narration, the narrator’s painful struggle and cruel real life are revealed. “Long Day Remains” examines Stevens’s life through his memories, examines British traditional culture, national characteristics and history, and examines the survival confusion faced by human beings.

With the using of unreliable narration, the novel was surrounded by loneliness and Stevens was isolated by his memories as well. In fact the deceptive narrative leads Stevens to be haunted by the past, because every time he deceived readers himself was deceived too. And in the end, readers see through his tricks, that is, behind all his self-deceiving, it is unspeakable pain and helpless, to console the unconsolated.

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