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## The Pathology of Memory: Manipulation and Blockage in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between memory and identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* through the lens of Paul Ricœur's philosophical framework on memory pathologies. The study analyzes how the protagonist Stevens employs two primary forms of memory distortion: manipulated memory, where painful experiences are selectively edited to maintain professional self-image, and blocked memory, where traumatic events are repressed through compulsive repetition of duty-bound behaviors. Through close textual analysis, this research demonstrates how Stevens' narrative serves not as genuine recollection but as a defensive mechanism that prevents authentic engagement with his emotional losses. The paper argues that Ishiguro's novel illustrates the fundamental vulnerability of memory when pressed into service of ideological commitment rather than personal truth, revealing the tragic consequences of using professional identity as a shield against psychological trauma.

**Keywords:** Memory pathology, Kazuo Ishiguro, manipulated memory, blocked memory, narrative identity,

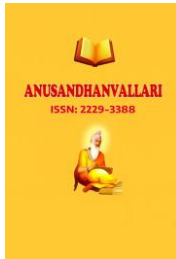
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### Introduction

The study of memory not only is involved in psychology, but it also establishes itself as a core idea with challenges, truth, history, and identity. This posits that memory is not simply a capacity but an aspiration defined by its claim of being faithful to the past. Central to this idea is the profound enigma of *eikon*: memory is inherently a present representation of an absent thing.

A literary narrative explores this delicate truth claim. It frequently reveals the mechanisms by which personal history is constructed, justified, or tragically distorted. Kazuo Ishiguro, in his novel *The Remains of the Day*, stands as a powerful, sustained integration of this philosophical challenge. It explores the narrative of Stevens, who is a dedicated English butler attempting to vindicate a life defined by unwavering loyalty to his former employer, Lord Darlington.

The entire narrative revolves around the self-recollection of Stevens, where he commences during a rare expedition in 1936 to Mr. Faraday's ford. His journey is motivated by a professional duty to create an improved



staff plan, a rather trivial error that has been compounded by urgent mistakes. Stevens rationalizes that when he recruits his old staff member, Miss Kenton, all his problems will be resolved.

However, the memoir functions on a deeper level as a recollection. This is defined as the active and often arduous effort to recall “a work of remembering” as critic Ricœur elaborates. His active quest for the past, which he calls “praxis,” differs from the simple, passive evocation of memory, which he calls “pathos.” Both are broadened by the narrative.

Stevens’ attempts to appropriate his past, establishing the “mindness” of his memories, are evident throughout. Yet his efforts are constantly refracted, which serves primarily to enforce his constricted identity as a great butler. This paper argues that Stevens’ narration demonstrates the fundamental vulnerability of memory, exhibiting two primary pathological forms: manipulated memory and blocked memory.

### Manipulated Memory

The narrative structure of *The Remains of the Day*, characterized by the retrospective self-accounting of Butler Stevens, shows how it brings about manipulated memory. As he narrates, he consciously leaves out parts that are not in the past in order to achieve a coherent understanding of the tale. In this way, one can see how memory has been manipulated.

For critic Paul Ricœur, memory carries an inherent claim of being faithful to the past, but it is constantly threatened by the possibilities of abuse. Stevens’ recollection, though presented as an honest effort to recall the past, becomes a case study in this grafted abuse. Rather than achieving the ideal happy memory, Stevens engages in manipulated memory of his personal history in service of his professional ideology.

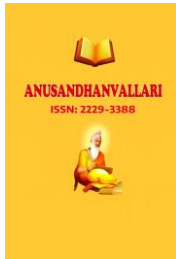
This manipulation is chiefly exercised through the selective function of the narrative. Stevens systematically filters painful or contradictory episodes to maintain coherence. For example, a notable incident illustrates this: Stevens’ lengthy attempt to define and rationalize his relationship with Lord Darlington regarding bantering. In seeking to justify his incapacity for light human conversation, Stevens invents a need to prove that his lack of personal warmth is actually a function of elevated professionalism.

This retrospective editing is a form of idealizing memory. The narrative configuration he imposes, which he reserves as the necessary habitat of a great butler, is designed to justify his entire past.

Stevens’ manipulation lies at the intersection of memory and identity. The critic Paul Ricœur notes that efforts to maintain or manipulate memory are easily traced back to the mobilization of memory. Stevens attempts to appropriate his past, establishing the “minors” of his memories, but his self-attribution is tainted because it is used to bring out emotional sacrifice.

This quest for self-justification is starkly visible in the incident involving his father’s death. Stevens recalls being unable to leave his duties during a critical conference. He provides a cold, brief, professionally appropriate response. As Hofer observes:

Stevens’ memories are carefully selected and narrated not to disclose the truth of his past but to maintain the coherence of his professional self-image. The recollection of his father’s death, for instance, is not an act of mourning but one of self-disciplining, where emotional expression



must be suppressed in order to reaffirm his devotion to duty. The narrative thus exemplifies how memory is pressed into the service of ideological commitment rather than personal truth (101).

This painful event, where emotional truth clashes violently with imposed duty, is recounted through Stevens' protective, professional lens. This recollection acts less as an exercise of remembrance and more as a demonstration of ideological commitment. Stevens also insists that his actions were rational and necessary according to his self-imposed conduct.

### Blocked Memory

The concept of blocked memory shows a critical abuse of natural mnemonic functions, as discussed by Paul Ricœur. He addresses this phenomenon at a pathological, therapeutic level of analysis. Drawing heavily on psychoanalytic theory, Ricœur defines this abuse as a disturbance rooted in the compulsion to repeat.

In this pathological state, the painful or traumatic past is not processed or genuinely recalled. Instead, it manifests through actions or patterns. The individual reproduces it not as a memory but as behavior.

In *The Remains of the Day*, there are many profound illustrations of this psychic phenomenon. Stevens' unwavering professional dedication serves as the primary mechanism for blocking and acting out traumatic personal history.

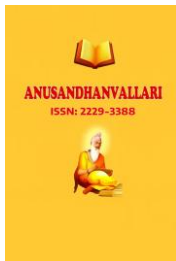
For Stevens, his entire identity is connected with being a great butler, which is his singular commitment and demands the sacrifice of all kinds of emotions in life. This relentless pursuit of technical perfection functions precisely as the compulsion to repeat, and he substitutes rigid adherence to duty for the difficult work of remembering. Stevens' meticulous narration of his past service is not merely recollection but a continuous reenactment of the professional core that has cost him his most profound emotional losses.

This process blocks access to underlying trauma. The consequences of blocked memory are evident in Stevens' psychological reluctance to acknowledge critical situations. Human need and professional duty are often in conflict. For example, when his father dies, Stevens prioritizes his obligation as a butler over being beside his father in his final moments.

The failure to mourn lost relationships and opportunities leads to a chronic state akin to melancholia. As Wong observes,

“Stevens' obsessive insistence on professional dignity masks a profound inability to mourn his own losses. His refusal to grieve—whether for his father, for Miss Kenton, or for his own wasted life—translates into a melancholic attachment to the ideal of the perfect butler. In this sense, his narration operates less as memory-work than as a compulsive repetition, a way of endlessly rehearsing the codes of duty that prevent him from confronting the trauma of emotional deprivation” (162).

In this state, the repressed emotional truth remains active and demanding but is perpetually channeled back into the same repetitive framework of professional self-justification.



A clear instance of Stevens' memory resorting to repetition and avoidance occurs during his travel memoir, particularly when he encounters Miss Kenton (now Mrs. Benn) in the summerhouse. The stated purpose of his visit to her, and of his entire trip, is couched in professional terms: correcting "trivial" errors and improving the staff plan. However, the real emotional anxiety stems from his profound loneliness and regret concerning their shared past.

As Stevens recounts the event, he focuses intently on the surface details of the setting and their conversation: "I recall a mist starting to set in as I crossed the lawn that afternoon." He describes their interactions as exchanging "a few pleasantries, perhaps discussed one or two professional matters." This meticulous focus on external, non-emotional data the fog, the view, her "needlework" (a domestic detail sanitized by professional observation) functions as a defensive maneuver.

### Conclusion:

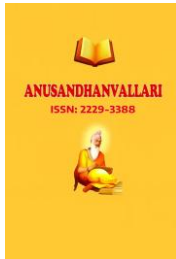
Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* presents a profound meditation on the pathological dimensions of memory through the character of Stevens, whose narrative exemplifies both manipulated and blocked memory as defined by Paul Ricœur's philosophical framework. Stevens' retrospective account reveals how memory can be corrupted when subordinated to ideological commitment rather than serving the pursuit of truth and authentic self-understanding.

The analysis of manipulated memory demonstrates how Stevens systematically edits his past, filtering out contradictory or painful episodes to maintain the coherence of his professional identity. His selective recollection of events, particularly surrounding his relationship with Lord Darlington and his father's death, illustrates the dangerous potential for memory to become a tool of self-deception rather than genuine remembrance. This manipulation serves not the cause of truth but the preservation of a constructed professional persona that demands the sacrifice of emotional authenticity.

The examination of blocked memory reveals an even more troubling pathology, where traumatic experiences are not processed but instead manifested through compulsive repetition. Stevens' unwavering dedication to duty functions as a defense mechanism that prevents him from confronting the profound losses that define his life. His inability to mourn—whether for his father, Miss Kenton, or his own wasted opportunities—traps him in a melancholic state where the past remains unresolved and continues to exert its destructive influence through repetitive behaviors.

The tragic irony of Stevens' narrative lies in his belief that memory serves his quest for self-justification, when in reality, his pathological relationship with the past prevents any genuine self-knowledge or healing. His meticulous attention to professional details and surface observations masks a profound inability to engage with the emotional truth of his experiences. The novel thus serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of allowing ideology to corrupt the natural functions of memory.

Ishiguro's masterful portrayal of these memory pathologies offers broader insights into the human condition, particularly the ways in which individuals construct and maintain identity through selective engagement with the past. The novel suggests that authentic selfhood requires the courage to confront painful truths rather than retreating into the false comfort of ideological certainty. Stevens' tragedy is not merely personal but representative of a broader human tendency to sacrifice emotional truth for the illusion of coherent identity.



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*The Remains of the Day* stands as a powerful literary exploration of Ricœur's philosophical insights into the vulnerability of memory. Through Stevens' pathological relationship with his past, Ishiguro illuminates the profound consequences of memory's corruption and the tragic cost of choosing professional duty over human connection. The novel's enduring power lies in its ability to reveal how the very mechanisms we employ to protect ourselves from pain can become the sources of our deepest suffering.

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