

Fonioková, Zuzana

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Brno studies in English. 2006, vol. 32, iss. 1, pp. [87]-98

ISBN 978-80-210-4558-3

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104077>

Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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ZUZANA FONIOKOVÁ

**THE BUTLER'S SUSPICIOUS DIGNITY:
UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S
*THE REMAINS OF THE DAY***

As many other contemporary British writers, Kazuo Ishiguro makes use of the literary device of the first-person unreliable narrator in his novels. Applying this method results in what David Lodge (1992: 155) refers to as “a gap between appearance and reality,” 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 highlights the epistemological uncertainty and the impossibility of finding out a single, unchallenged truth.

In this kind of narrative, the narrator’s version of the story gets into conflict with another version, which is not narrated directly (often the narrator does not even know about this alternative version) but the reader discovers it with the help of “implizite Zusatzinformationen” [implicit additional information], unconsciously provided by the narrator himself/herself (Nünning 1998: 6; my translation). In other words, the narrator’s version becomes suspicious because of “the narrator’s unintentional self-incrimination,” which, according to Bruno Zerweck (2001: 156), constitutes a necessary part of unreliable narration. Without these hints on the part of the narrator, the reader would not be able to recognize an unreliable narrator. The tension between the narrator’s conscious version, the story they want to tell, and the one s/he conveys without intending or even realizing it gives the device of the unreliable narrator its meaning and value because it allows the reader to discover the plot in an interesting way. The reader, however, does not always find out what ‘really’ happens in the fictive world; in many cases, no single correct version exists.¹ In addition, the use of an unreliable narrator draws attention to the character’s psychology (cf. Wall 1994: 21).

Unreliable narrators are mostly autodiegetic, which holds true for Butler Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* as well. Stevens also constitutes a good example of a narrator who engages in long monologues about himself, becomes as if obsessed by himself and his story and whose narration amounts to a highly ego-centric account of events. Ansgar Nünning (1998: 6) considers such preoccupation with the topic of oneself one of the possible symptoms of the narrator’s unreliability².

This self-centred kind of narrator actually provides a picture of himself, and as the (unreliable) narrator of another of Ishiguro's novels, the painter Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World*, admits, it proves difficult to remain objective when one's own features are concerned: "I cannot recall any colleague who could paint a self-portrait with absolute honesty; however accurately one may fill in the surface details of one's mirror reflection, the personality represented rarely comes near the truth as others would see it" (67). The reason for the inaccuracy of self-portraits is the personal involvement in such a report: one wants to hide the disgraceful facts and emphasize the positive traits. However, the biased depiction of oneself and of one's story often happens without the awareness of the concerned person, in this case the narrator. The narrator of Ishiguro's first novel (*A Pale View of Hills*), Etsuko, makes a comment about the limits of human capacity to reproduce events: "Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing" (156). Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* warns about the deceptiveness of memory too: "It is possible this is a case of hindsight colouring my memory" (87). These and many other similar metanarrative remarks illustrate the psychologically interesting fact that Ishiguro's – and other – unreliable narrators do not intend to lie; they deceive themselves as well as the reader. In Amit Marcus's (2005: 188) words, these narrators are "self-deceivers," who "are unaware of the strategies they employ to convince themselves of the veracity of the lie, and therefore their state of mind is not a consequence of an intentional act of deception, as opposed to the state of mind of the other-deceivers". The self-deceiving narrators' memory becomes unreliable because it sorts out memories and erases those that do not fit into the desirable picture of themselves. Repressing certain memories helps the narrators evade such parts of the story that would give rise to unpleasant feelings, such as regret, shame and guilt. In this way, the unreliable memory deforms the narrators' sense of reality and it is this twisted version which they present in the narration. Most of us have experienced the same play of one's memory: we tell a story, convinced that it is true, and then become unsure of its veracity when confronted with a different version of it or when we realize that it contradicts our other memories. The majority of people have therefore been 'unreliable narrators' in their lives. The quality of unreliability thus makes the narrator a realistic image of a human being.

This article deals with Stevens as an unreliable narrator in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and with the way he shows his unreliability by various contradictions in the text and with the motives for this narrative strategy. The novel provides a great number of signals of the narrator's unreliability both in content and in form. I will concentrate on those inconsistencies of content related to Stevens's views about his profession, by which he tries to mask certain feelings concerning his past life. They often appear in the text as a "conflict between the scenes he narrates and the interpretations that he gives to those scenes" (Wall 1994: 25).³ The article starts with a reflection about the meaning of the book's title in connection with unreliability and then focuses on three thematic areas, in which Stevens's account proves problematic: his notion of dignity, his relationship to his father and his attitude to Miss Kenton. I consider the first topic the most impor-

tant of the three in terms of Stevens's unreliable narration; it influences the other two spheres as well. The analysis demonstrates that the significance of narratorial unreliability transcends the field of a descriptive narrative theory: the reader's detection of the narrator's unreliability influences his/her notion of the narrator as a character, of the other characters and of the events in the fictional world.

Remains of the Day

The novel's title probably symbolizes the 'evening of life,' the phase Stevens has entered and in which he looks back at his past life. However, one can attach these words another meaning. Renata Salecl (1994: 15) points out an interesting "analogy between remains of the day and the Freudian 'day's residues'". According to Freud (1952: 237–38), the unconscious processes of "dream-work" combine experience from the individual's waking life – the "residues of the day," that is the memories of the previous day – and the unconscious impulses to form the "manifest" version of the dream. In the dream, in which the unconscious content of our minds becomes accessible, the memories of the day and the dreamer's wishes and thoughts therefore appear distorted, disguised as something else. Salecl's interpretation of the title thus implies the narrator's unreliability: if Stevens's recollections of the past correspond to the 'day's residues' (where we consider 'day' his life), then the reader has to expect to see them transformed by the narrator's unconscious into the distorted 'manifest' version – the story he presents to us. In addition, Freud (1986: 399–400) says that dreams underlie an additional "secondary revision" when the dreamer in his/her presentation of the dream strives to provide it with an acceptable meaning and so alters the dream by the interpretation s/he puts on it. These modifications to the dream resemble Stevens's adjustments to the story and his additional explanations of various situations in an attempt to present a coherent story, whose individual parts do not contradict each other. For example, Stevens presents his life as dedicated purely to his profession, therefore he has to correct his comment "I was not actually engaged in professional matters" regarding his reading a romance (165). Viewing the event in retrospect, he assigns a professional motive to this activity – he claims to work on improving his "command of the English language," which he holds for a duty (167).

Stevens's real journey has a metaphorical parallel in the trip his mind makes to the past. His recollections aim to refigure his life as well: the butler attempts to create a new account of his past life, one more acceptable to himself than his real life-story. He tries to narrate his life in a way that conceals the "terrible mistake[s]" of his life and that imparts his existence a greater importance (239). In order to achieve this goal, he omits some details of what happened and what he did in his life and stresses some other events. Ishiguro comments on this feature of his narrator: "[Stevens] ends up saying the sorts of things he does because somewhere deep down he knows which things he has to avoid... Why he says certain things, why he brings up certain topics at certain moments, is not random.

It's controlled by the things he doesn't say. That's what motivates the narrative" (qtd. in Shaffer 1999: 8). In other words, it is not primarily the pronounced that makes up the story of Stevens's life, but the withheld, the facts that the reader finds as if between the lines. The apparent – told – version appears as a result of what the narrator hides. In this way, for example, Stevens emphasises his former employer Darlington's qualities of a gentleman and the butler's own role in various dealings, but refuses to deal with Lord Darlington's proved – although possibly well-meant – support of the Nazi regime. I will now try to demonstrate what leads Stevens to this selective and therefore unreliable account of the past.

Dignity

Stevens often re-interprets some events in order to display the way he acted as inevitable and as the only appropriate possibility he could have chosen. This feature of the narrative suggests that Stevens attempts to justify his acts and behaviour. The profession of butler serves him as the directive determining his action, by which he explains much of his behaviour. He presents a kind of "butler-science" that includes many rules, which must be followed by everyone who wants to become a perfect butler.

He regards having "dignity in keeping with his position" as the most important condition for becoming what Stevens calls "a great butler" (33). Stevens explains that this dignity "has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits" (42). In other words, butlers must stay butlers all the time, under all circumstances, which demands considerable "emotional restraint" (43). They must suppress their personality and they must never reveal their feelings. The profession of a butler then includes repression of all wishes, emotions and opinions that – according to Stevens – do not fit in with the profession. He calls such repression of oneself 'dignity'. He takes great pride in possessing such 'dignity,' which, however, on many occasions contrasts with the usual use of the word. His interpretation of this term fails to match dignified behaviour as such. Gradually it becomes obvious that his ideal of butler equates blind loyalty to the employer.

Stevens's recollections of the incident of discharging two Jewish servants demonstrate this fact especially clearly. He remembers that he disagreed with the dismissal of the Jews but suppressed his opinion. More importantly, he considers not revealing his doubts an act of dignity. When Miss Kenton, by contrast, shows her shock, he scolds her for expressing her opinion and tells her to "conduct [herself] in a manner befitting [her] position" (149). He agrees to something wrong but with 'dignity,' in his understanding of the word, whereas Miss Kenton refuses injustice, thus abandoning her professional self, which is always loyal to the master and the rules of the household, for her own personality. Form proves more important to Stevens than content, and dignity can be displayed for its own sake. In this case, his pursuit of 'dignity' serves him as an aid for repressing his self – his opinions

and feelings – and for evading responsibility. He believes that servants are not fit to make “judgements of such a high and mighty nature” and diminishes the meaning of protests against Anti-Semitism by labelling them “foibles and sentiments” that should be suppressed in compliance with the employer’s wish (149). Stevens shows his lack of his own identity in the response he gives to Miss Kenton’s question about his contentment: “The day his lordship’s work is complete, the day *he* is able to rest on his laurels, content in the knowledge that he has done all anyone could ever reasonably ask of him, only on that day, Miss Kenton, will I be able to call myself, as you put it, a well-contented man” (173). He has transferred the responsibility for his own life onto Lord Darlington. Serving his employer stands for the meaning of his life; he does not need to look for it on his own. His blind dedication to Lord Darlington makes something similar to a slave out of him, and, as a villager’s common sense says, “there’s no dignity to be had in being a slave” (186). Stevens refuses this opinion in that he reveals his negative attitude to democracy, which serves him as an excuse for disposing of responsibility:

There is, after all, a real limit to how much ordinary people can learn and know, and to demand that each and every one of them contribute ‘strong opinions’ to the great debates of the nation cannot, surely, be wise. It is, in any case, absurd that anyone should define a person’s ‘dignity’ in these terms. (194)

He tries to justify his attitude to life as he sees it threatened by a different view, one that shows his life-long dealings as mistaken and, above all, empty of dignity.

However, it is rather Stevens’s own definition of ‘dignity’ that the reader will find absurd.⁴ This clash of notions becomes most evident at the point when Darlington and his guests use Stevens to prove the correctness of their view of democracy as of an inadequate system: the butler lets them ridicule him and claims this situation to be a demonstration of dignity on his part. By showing the butler’s lack of knowledge, the gentlemen want to demonstrate that opinions of people like him should not have any weight in the society. Stevens has no other self than that of a servant, whose importance lies merely in serving the employer; he is not expected to make his own decisions and have his own opinions. It is this kind of people, who repress their identity and who can be made unquestioningly loyal, whom totalitarian regimes need to pursue their goals. Furthermore, butlers who happily sacrifice their own life to serving their employer contribute to maintaining the social hierarchy: it is a matter of ‘dignity’ for them to blindly fulfil the wishes of a person who stands higher in the hierarchy.

By this unrestricted loyalty Stevens contributed to Lord Darlington’s collaboration with the Nazi regime. As he devoted all his life just to serving Darlington, the knowledge of the consequences of the master’s activities discloses the uselessness of the butler’s life. It is this strong sense of waste that Stevens tries to conceal from himself and which motivates his twisted view of dignity. He

wants to convince himself that living up to the criterion of ‘dignity’ gives his past life a meaning. However, he exhibits inconsistency in presenting the criteria for a ‘great butler.’ First Stevens disagrees with the criterion of being “attached to a distinguished household” (113), later he introduces the “*moral* status of an employer” as vital to professional prestige (114). Apart from possessing dignity, great butlers must also be employed by great gentlemen, through whom they “make our own small contribution to the creation of a better world” (116) and achieve “serving humanity” (117). Stevens probably adds this condition to the definition of the perfect servant because he feels the need to assign the profession of butler an importance that would help him justify his life devoted wholly to the duties of this job. Such revisions of the narrated often signal unreliability of the narration because they imply either the narrator’s uncertainty about the story or, as in this example, his attempt to produce a story without contradictions.

In order to make himself believe that he spent his life attached to a “distinguished household” (113), “Stevens struggles to reconcile his own private memories of Lord Darlington [...] with the public vilification of Lord Darlington after the war” (Lang 2000: 145). He forces himself to erase the knowledge of his master’s wrong deeds from his mind and wants “to avoid any possibility of hearing any further such nonsense concerning his lordship,” which would bring to his consciousness just the repressed information (126). If Stevens accepted that serving Lord Darlington amounted to the opposite of “serving humanity” (117), he would have to admit that all his life was wasted on serving the wrong man. Therefore he presents his employer as a gentleman, which enables him to maintain the feeling of importance that he had as a butler in a good house. But this version, showing Lord Darlington as contributing to the goals of humanity, does not correspond with the narrator’s description of events in which Lord Darlington participated, such as the dismissal of Jews. Furthermore, he delights at the thought that an important meeting between Lord Halifax and Herr Ribbentrop turned out a success with his contribution and that he therefore had some importance in “the course of history,” although he knows that he contributed to evil (139). What is more, his blind devotion – demonstrated, among others, in the incident with the Jewish servants – makes it impossible for him to question the “moral status of an employer” (114). Therefore, he is unable to judge if he meets one of the prerequisites for becoming a great butler – that of having a noble employer. This inconsistency in his theory of great butlers contributes to the reader’s perception of Stevens’s unreliability as a narrator.

The reader can observe another instance of a clash between Stevens’s comments on the one hand and depictions of events on the other hand in the butler’s preoccupation with choosing the right clothes to represent his house, opposed to the butler’s reports of his actual action. Although he claims to be prepared to represent his house with dignity because “one never knows when one might be obliged to give out that one is from Darlington Hall, and it is important that one be attired at such times in a manner worthy of one’s position” (11), he describes three occasions on which he denies having worked for Lord Darlington three

times: when a chauffeur whom he meets asks him directly, when Mr. Faraday's guest inquires and when he pretends to be a gentleman among villagers. Such discrepancies strongly contribute to the reader's suspicion about the narrator's reliability. As Mike Petry (1999: 6) puts it, "Ishiguro [...] often reveals his narrators' attempt to hide, by having them stumble over their own contradictions and inconsistencies". Stevens 'stumbles' over the incongruities in his narrative because he tries to tell the truth but his view is distorted by his unreliable memory, which has eradicated the memories that do not fit into the picture he wants to have of himself and of his life. These discrepancies lead to a kind of dramatic irony, that is to "a contrast between the narrator's view of the fictional world and the contrary state of affairs which the reader can grasp" (Nünning 1999: 58–59). In other words, through the incongruities in his tale, Stevens himself provides the reader with signals about the existence of a different version of the story and thus about his narratorial unreliability.

One part of his life that Stevens feels the need to explain and justify is made up by his personal relationships to two people: his father and Miss Kenton. Here again the inappropriateness of Stevens's interpretation of the word 'dignity' surfaces.

Father

The main condition for 'dignity' – the complete suppression of emotions – appears bizarre and unnatural when Stevens points out as an example to follow his father who, while serving a man guilty for the death of his elder son, managed not to show anything of the pain and anger that dwelt inside him. Since Stevens admires his father as someone who "not only manifests, but comes close to the personification itself" of dignity, this example exposes the butler's conception of dignity as at least highly unnatural, if not completely inhumane (42). This suppression of human emotions on both sides shows itself in Stevens's relationship with his father. They do not speak with each other about other than professional matters, and even the little communication they have takes place "in an atmosphere of mutual embarrassment" (64). They have repressed their emotions with the aim of becoming 'great' butlers. Their striving for dignity, paradoxically, leads to embarrassment: they have lost their ability to pursue human conversation. Consequently, the son just conveys the message about the restriction of his father's duties and is not able to discuss the problem. Although he admires his father as a former butler, he does not manage to tell him anything less cruel than that he does not cope any more: "The fact is, Father has become increasingly infirm. So much so that even the duties of an under-butler are now beyond his capabilities" (65). That Stevens mostly addresses his father in the third person, too, symbolizes the coldness and impersonality of their relationship.

The narrator admits that he "may have given the impression earlier that [he] treated [his father] rather bluntly over his declining abilities" but he quickly finds an excuse: "there was little choice but to approach the matter as I did" (69–70).

Typically, the excuse bears the form of a professional matter again – the outcome of a coming conference would have been jeopardized if he had allowed “indulgence or ‘beating about the bush’” (70). Once again, Stevens tries to justify his action by presenting it as the only possible way of dealing with the situation and uses his devotion to profession, therefore to the ideal of a ‘great butler’ having ‘dignity,’ as the authority dictating him what to do. His ‘philosophy’ of dignity serves him as a means to rationalize his suppression of emotions.

The same excuse enables him to repress his feelings of guilt about the way he treated his father on the deathbed. He avoids dealing with the emotionally difficult situation of his father’s dying under the pretext of urgent professional duties and thus escapes from unpleasant feelings into the safety of his job: “This is most distressing. Nevertheless, I must now return downstairs” (104). He refuses to interrupt working in order to go to see his father after he has passed away, claiming that his father “would have wished me to carry on just now” (106). Here the gap between the butler’s father as a model – the ‘personification’ of ‘dignity’ – and his father as a person becomes visible.⁵ While the father as an example of a ‘great butler’ demands him to ‘carry on,’ his real father would have appreciated a personal conversation, which he attempts to start by saying, “I hope I’ve been a good father to you” but which his son evades (97). It appears absurd that while he does not manage to exchange a few sentences with his dying father, Stevens converses and even laughs with his employer’s guests in such a sad situation. In addition, it seems suspicious that the narrator goes into great detail in depicting some of the scenes (such as his conversation with young Mr Cardinal), but omits any of his feelings about the father. The reader learns about Stevens’s grief or sadness not directly from the narrator but through other characters, such as Lord Darlington, who tells Stevens: ““You look as though you were crying”” (105). This is another occasion on which the narrator chooses to dwell on one topic in order to hide something else and on which “what is *not* told turns out to be as, if not more, significant as what is told” (Petry 1999: 10). This kind of evading the theme that the reader perceives as vital corresponds to what Tamar Yacobi (1987: 34) calls the “exegetical deflection”. This situation involves “the speaker’s misfocusing” rather than “any direct misjudgment on his part: the issue most central or relevant [...] is passed over in silence throughout the mediator’s discourse, while side-issues receive liberal commentary” (Yacobi 1987: 34). Once again, Stevens conceals his suppressed emotions behind the mask of a ‘great butler’. This gap in the story allows him to view his action as dignified and thus remember the night his father died “with a large sense of triumph,” because he managed to suppress his feelings and dedicated himself fully to the duties of his profession even in a complicated situation (110). Seeing the night in the light of his success as a butler, as the rules of ‘dignity’ enable him, helps Stevens avoid his sense of guilt or mistake regarding his treatment of the ageing father. Again, the narration proves unreliable because Stevens fails to admit certain feelings.

Miss Kenton

Even more obviously, Stevens tries to hide from himself the mistake he has made in his relationship to the housekeeper, Miss Kenton. In order to do so, he evades acknowledging any feelings towards her other than professional. However, his typical inconsistencies of the unreliable narrator betray his real state of mind. The discordance concerns, among others, Stevens's interpretation of Miss Kenton's letter.

After receiving the letter, Stevens decides to accept Mr. Faraday's offer to go for a trip, because the letter provides him with what he believes to be a professional reason for the journey. He claims to have discovered "distinct hints of her desire to return" to the house and assumes that the return of the former housekeeper to the house would solve his recent problems – that is the errors which have been occurring in his work for some time now (9). The letter leads him to realize that the errors result from the low number of staff in the house. The fact that he found the reason for problems in the house only after being "prompted accidentally by some external event" creates a suspicion that he is just making up excuses for his mistakes (9). Furthermore, this excuse enables him to go to see Miss Kenton: he sees that the trip "could be put to good professional use" (10). However, Stevens does not seem completely certain about this reason for his trip. His remark "and why should I hide it?" when admitting that it was Miss Kenton's letter that made him decide to make the journey shows that he is not quite willing to unveil the reason – maybe it is not entirely professional after all. Also, after taking into account various aspects of the planned trip, he says: "But all in all, I can see no genuine reason why I should not undertake this trip" (20). This conclusion suggests that he feels the need to justify the journey – convince himself that he is not doing anything which does not fit in with the demands of 'dignity' – as romantic emotions towards a woman certainly do not.

However, the case of Stevens's attitude to Miss Kenton differs from that of his relationship to his father. He denies having made a mistake in a large part of his narrative, but towards the end he starts to suggest his discontent with the outcome of his acquaintance with the housekeeper, as when he sums up the possible "turning points" in their relationship (175). The 'turning points' refer to events in which the butler somehow refuses Miss Kenton's indirect offers of a more personal relationship, as when he cancels their cocoa meetings, or when he shows an inappropriate reaction, as when he scolds her instead of expressing his condolences. Through these incidents Stevens prevented his "professional relationship" with the housekeeper from deviating from the "proper basis" and therefore ruled out the possibility of romance between them (169). Stevens admits that by his behaviour during these events he ruined "whole dreams forever irredeemable," but he does not explain what he means by these dreams (179). If he conceded that they stand for the fulfilment of love between him and Miss Kenton, then he would have to admit his feelings towards her and therefore accept the huge mistake of his life. To do so would cause him pain and so he represses this knowledge and

briskly explains his “becoming unduly introspective, and in a rather morose sort of way” by “the late hour” (179). Similarly, he acknowledges the subjectivity of his reading of the letter – “I might have well read more into certain of her lines than perhaps was wise” – but he does not examine the reasons for his misinterpretation (180). Only after his meeting with the former housekeeper does he recognize his feelings towards the woman and when she tells him that “there’s no turning back the clock,” he admits that “at that moment, my heart was breaking” (239). Then it becomes clear that what he believed to be Miss Kenton’s “unmistakable nostalgia for Darlington Hall” expressed in the letter (9), which he interprets as her regret for having left the house and as a “desire to return,” in fact belongs to him (48). He himself desires the housekeeper’s return because he sees in it another chance to “sort out the vagaries of one’s relationship with Miss Kenton” and fulfilling of the aforementioned ‘dreams’ (179). The supposition of this hope on Stevens’s part is further supported by the narrator’s ignorance of the woman’s real name, gained from the marriage (Mrs Benn): he still calls her by her maiden name and “her letter has given me extra cause to continue thinking of her as ‘Miss Kenton,’ since it would seem, sadly, that her marriage is finally to come to an end” (48). Using her maiden name helps him retain his faith that there might still be a way to compensate for the mistake he made years ago. Yet Mrs. Benn’s remark “there’s no turning back the clock” (239) robs him of his “vain hope of undoing the past” and makes him accept his true feelings (Lodge 1992: 156).

In an attempt at self-justification, butler Stevens unconsciously distorts the narrative of his life. His theory of great butlers, involving his subjective perception of the notion ‘dignity,’ should help him excuse his life-long passivity, his life spent as a servant. It should also cover the mistakes he made in the relationships with his father and with the housekeeper, the only woman he could ever love. However, Stevens indirectly reveals the falsity of this mask and the reader discovers a different version of the story. The reader’s recognition of narrative unreliability therefore throws a different light on the plot. Furthermore, the narrator’s unreliability draws attention to the personality of Stevens as a character and to his inner fight, making the novel interesting in terms of human psychology.

Notes

- 1 This is the case in *The Remains of the Day*, too: Stevens’s revisions, corrections and re-orderings of some events, such as Miss Kenton’s crying (first explained by her aunt’s death, later by her engagement), connected with his psychological projection of his own feelings into other figures and his own doubts about his statements, leaves the reader unsure of the final version of the story: Is it really Miss Kenton who cries? Stevens admits that “there was no real evidence to account for this conviction” (226).
- 2 These symptoms on their own, however, just raise the reader’s suspicion about the narrator’s unreliability; they must appear in combination with other signals to become a clearer indication of this phenomenon. The final decision about the narrator’s trustworthiness depends on the reader and the way s/he chooses to interpret the text (Nünning 1998: 29).

- ³ Wall (1994: 25) correctly notices that this kind of unreliability “depends largely upon the unreliable narrator’s reliable report of the story” that fails to harmonize with his commentary upon the story. She argues that Stevens’s scenic presentations are “reliable because they are so frequently naively critical of his own behaviour” (Wall 1994: 26).
- ⁴ To be more precise, I should write ‘an average contemporary reader from the West’. The theorists advocating the cognitive approach to the unreliable narrator (notably Ansgar Nünning and Bruno Zerweck) claim that – apart from textual signals of narrative unreliability – extra-textual realities play an important role in assessing the possible unreliability of the text. As it is the reader who decides if the narrator is reliable or not, one of these contextual factors is the reader’s society, its “moralische und ethische Maßstäbe, die in ihrer Gesamtheit das in einer Gesellschaft vorherrschende Werte- und Normensystem konstituieren” [moral and ethical standards, which as a whole constitute the system of norms and values prevailing in a society] (Nünning 1998: 30; my translation). Therefore I admit the possibility that a reader of a cultural background different from mine might find Stevens’s notion of dignity in accordance with their understanding of the word, as well as that there exist individuals sharing the same culture with different notions of the term. The reading might also change with time, because, as Zerweck (2001: 158–59) argues, “[t]he interpretation of narrative unreliability largely depends on a complex of contextual historical factors such as values, norms, real-world models, literary competence and conventions, or even on the cultural understandings of what comprises literature.”
- ⁵ Cf. Molly Westerman (2004: 162), who also points out the difference between Stevens’s father as an exemplary great butler and as a real person, and stresses the imaginary – constructed – nature of the father as an ideal butler: “Despite his warm relationship with the construct of his father as paradigmatic butler, Stevens’s relationship with his father, the actual person, is unhappy and contradictory.”

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Mgr. Zuzana Fonioková
Department of English and American Studies
Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University
Arna Nováka 1
602 00 Brno
zuzuzuzu@email.cz