

SYNOPSIS

It is 1956 and an American millionaire, Mr Farraday (Christopher Reeves), has taken over the ownership of Darlington Hall. As a visitor to the Hall in the 1930's, he took part in the delicate political negotiations which were the fore-runner of the Second World War. Lord Darlington (James Fox), was a key player in these talks but took the stance of appeasement with the Germans and was seen as a pro-German traitor. Another frequent visitor at that time was Darlington's godson, Mr Cardinal, (Hugh Grant), who as a journalist commented on the political scene in a newspaper which Lord Darlington was finally forced to sue for libel, and lost. The shame of his Nazi sympathising and his financial loss led him to live as a recluse in his old age and on his death the family home was finally sold.

All these events are seen through the eyes of Lord Darlington's butler, Mr Stevens (Anthony Hopkins), who stays on when Mr Farraday takes over the house. In the fifties Stevens plans a journey to meet Miss Kenton, (Emma Thompson), who worked as the Hall's housekeeper in the thirties. As he journeys to meet her, the tale of their relationship and of Stevens' preoccupation with his job is revealed in flashback. Miss Kenton's marriage to Mr Benn (Tim Piggott-Smith), and her move to the West Country have been less than successful and Stevens hopes that he will be able to persuade Miss Kenton to return to Darlington Hall which has "never been the same since she left".

THE STUFF OF HOLLYWOOD?

Many of the films that Hollywood produces can be accused of denying their audience the opportunity to think for themselves. Entertainment has become equated with plots that unravel in a reasonably predictable fashion and with scenes of sex, violence and action aimed to keep viewers on the edge of their seats. All the information the audience requires in order to make sense of the film is provided either visually or verbally.

So what makes 'The Remains of the Day' different? In small groups, see if you can pinpoint what it is about this film that makes it different from mainstream Hollywood cinema. In order that you have a point of reference, it might be worth listing some of the Hollywood films that you have seen in the last year. Begin by considering the films in terms of character and plot (including scenes of sex, violence and action). At each stage, consider Hollywood and then 'The Remains of the Day': what are the similarities? What are the differences?

Perhaps one of the things that makes this film stand out is the character-driven plot. It is not a film that contains huge numbers of fast-paced sequences, or graphic sex scenes. Instead it is about the non-relationship of a butler and a housekeeper in a stuffy English hall. This is hardly Hollywood material!

A 'MERCHANT IVORY' FILM

For many people, the very mention of 'Merchant-Ivory' is enough for them to identify what 'type' of film this is. 'The Remains of the Day' (like 'Howard's End' and 'A Room with a View') has been adapted from a novel for the screen, produced and directed by a team which has earned its reputation making films that deal with the nostalgic British past.

The extracts printed below, taken from a variety of reviews, reveal what 'Merchant-Ivory' means to certain film critics:

Imagine you own the film rights to a Booker prize-winning novel that dissects English class and culture with subtle irony and literary precision. The film will require elite actors, country house clothes, plus a props list of shining cutlery, decanters, vintage cars, a billiard table and the occasional Chippendale chair. You have carte blanche to hire any production team in the world. Whose telephone number do you dial? Merchant Ivory's, of course....

Geoff Brown, The Times, November 11, 1993

Like Howard's End, last year's offering from Merchant-Ivory, this is a nice-looking nostalgia-fest that manages to have its cake and eat it. It presents itself as a criticism of British traditions at the same time as burying itself up to the neck in them....

Anne Billson, The Sunday Telegraph, 14 November, 1993

... the title of their production company, Merchant-Ivory, has become a sort of cinematic brand name - something that Ivory himself admits:

"I don't mind the expression 'it's a Merchant-Ivory film', because what that usually means is a film with a good script, good production values, an excellent cast and a budget that's often a third of the cost of the usual Hollywood picture

Douglas Kennedy, The Sunday Telegraph, 7 November, 1993

If Merchant-Ivory films have sometimes been accused of excessive reverence towards British culture, as though they were a branch of English Heritage, this one shows that the love affair is not uncritical.

Hugo Davenport, The Daily Telegraph, November 12, 1993

What aspects of the film do they pick up on as being 'characteristic' of Merchant Ivory productions?

Have you seen any of the other Merchant Ivory films that are mentioned? If so, do you feel that their

comments are fair? And if you have seen them, did you find any similarities between them and 'The Remains of the Day'?

One of the main criticisms lobbed at Merchant Ivory is that they are perpetuating an image of a mythical England. Do you think this is true? And if so, what 'myth' are they constructing? Can the same be said of Hollywood? Are we on the receiving end of a carefully constructed image of America?

TEXT INTO FILM

The film 'The Remains of the Day' is based on the book of the same name, written by Kazuo Ishiguro. The film has been praised for remaining very true to the spirit of the original text. It carefully juxtaposes great detail about the everyday running of a 'great' house with fragmentary information about the momentous political events which happen in the front of the house. It is this which earned the book its critical acclaim and which won it the Booker Prize in 1989.

THE OPENING

Read the following opening paragraphs of the novel.

PROLOGUE: JULY 1956

Darlington Hall

It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days. An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone in the comfort of Mr Farraday's Ford; an expedition which, as I foresee it, will take me through much of the finest countryside of England to the West Country, and may keep me away from Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days. The idea of such a journey came about, I should point out, from a most kind suggestion put to me by Mr Farraday himself one afternoon almost a fortnight ago, when I had been dusting the portraits in the library. In fact, as I recall, I was up on the step-ladder dusting the portrait of Viscount Wetherby when my employer had entered carrying a few volumes which he presumably wished returned to the shelves. On seeing my person, he took the opportunity to inform me that he had just that moment finalized plans to return to the United States for a period of five weeks between August and September. Having made this announcement, my employer put his volumes down on a table, seated himself on the *chaise-longue*, and stretched out his legs. It was then, gazing up at me, that he said:

'You realize, Stevens, I don't expect you to be locked up here in this house all the time I'm away. Why don't you take the car and drive off somewhere for a few days? You look like you could make good use of a break.'

'The Remains of the Day'
by Kazuo Ishiguro,
published by Faber and Faber Ltd.

The opening paragraphs of any book are vital for introducing the feel of the story, and setting up elements of the plot, and characters.

What do we learn here about:

- The narrator of the story?
- The location of the piece?
- What is going to happen? If you were to film this opening section, what elements would you want to keep and/or stress⁷ And how would you establish from whose point of view we are going to hear the story?

Next, consider the opening of the film. Roughly speaking, the sequence of events is as follows:

- the film opens with the auction of Darlington Hall and its contents.
- We are introduced to the American buyer.
- We see the house as it was in the thirties whets it was thriving and full of artefacts superimposed over what it is in the fifties. When the former layer is faded out we see how desolate and quiet the latter time has become.

How does this opening differ from the opening of the novel? For instance, why are we told at the beginning about Lord Darlington being considered a traitor? In the book this is not revealed until much later. And why do we see Miss Kenton in the 'ghostly flashbacks' to the thirties? What do these changes add to our understanding?

PORTRAYING CHARACTERS

STEVENS: AN UNLIKELY HERO

The character of Stevens is, perhaps, an unusual centrepiece for a film: his deep reserve and formal restraint may seem at odds with the dynamic qualities of many protagonists. His attitude is typified by the section in the novel where Lord Darlington expounds his views to Stevens:

'I ask you, Stevens. Here we are in the midst of a continuing crisis. I've seen it with my own eyes when I went north with Mr Whittaker. People are suffering. Ordinary decent working people are suffering terribly. Germany and Italy have set their houses in order by acting. And so have the wretched Bolsheviks in their own way, one supposes. Even President Roosevelt, look at him, he's not afraid to take a few bold steps on behalf of his people. But look at us here, Stevens. Year after year goes by, and nothing gets better. All we do is argue and debate and procrastinate. Any decent idea is amended to ineffectuality by the time it's gone half-way through the various committees it's obliged to pass through. The few people qualified to know what's what are talked to a standstill by ignorant people around them. What do you make of it Stevens?'

'The nation does seem to be in a regrettable condition, sir.'

I'll say. Look at Germany and Italy, Stevens. See what strong leadership can do if it's allowed to act. None of this universal suffrage nonsense there. If your house is on fire, you don't call the household into the drawing room and debate the various options for escape for an hour, do you? It may have been all very well once, but the world's a complicated place now. The man in the street can't be expected to know enough about politics, economics, world commerce and what have you. And why should he? In fact, you made a very good reply last night, Stevens. How did you put it? Something to the effect that it was not in your realm? Well, why should it be?'

It occurs to me that in recalling these words that, of course, many of Lord Darlington's ideas will seem today rather odd - even, at times, unattractive. But surely it cannot be denied that there is an important element of truth in these things he said to me that morning in the billiard room.

'The Remains of the Day'
by Kazuo Ishiguro,
published by Faber and Faber Ltd.

How does Stevens' reaction here reflect his public and his private attitude?

Try to recall how this section was filmed: can you remember how Stevens' awkwardness was portrayed? Did he stand still or busy himself carrying out his butler's duties at this time?

Later on in the film, we see in detail the section where he is questioned by Mr Spencer, one of the guests at the Hall, and cannot reply. What do we infer about Stevens from this? And again, how does the way that this scene is filmed add to the awkwardness of the situation?

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MR STEVENS AND MISS KENTON

Consider the following statements about Mr Stevens and Miss Kenton.

MR STEVENS

He reads romantic novels to improve his knowledge of the English language.

He leaves his dying father to resume his duties.

He does not know how to make small talk or call his equals by their first names.

His attitude to the dismissal of the Jewish girls is governed by Lord Darlington.

He is disappointed about the future under-butler's relationship with the maid.

MISS KENTON

She thinks the book he is reading may be 'racy'

She tries to speak to him on several occasions about his father.

She acts as confidante to the rest of the staff.

She does not want the Jewish girls dismissed.

She is concerned about the relationship of the maid and the footman because they are too young.

What aspects of their characters do these statements reveal? And how much of the real truth of their characters can you read between the lines' here?

THE 'FLESHING OUT' OF CHARACTERS

One of the most memorable features of the book is that we see all the characters through Mr Stevens' eyes. He is the narrator and so his very restricted viewpoint on life becomes a natural filter through which all the characters are seen. Obviously a film director has to flesh out these characters - the mere fact that they appear as flesh and blood and are dressed in costumes of the appropriate period means that decisions have had to be made about their character and appearance.

However, the film is very faithful to the ideas of the text. Only the scenes between Miss Kenton and Mr Benn in the pub before they are married, and in the hotel before her final meeting with Mr Stevens are invented.

What happens during these scenes? And what does the fact that the filmmakers have concocted scenes involving the only real physical contact between people in the film tell you about the film industry itself?

DETAIL AND REFERENCE

THE BACKSTAIRS OF A GREAT HOUSE

One of the key differences that you may have noted in your work on 'The Remains of the Day' and Hollywood films is that much of the film concentrates not on the glamorous lives of the owners of the Hall, but on what goes on 'below stairs'. The picture of the lives of the servants is built up in great detail.

What did you learn about the workings of a great house? Think of scenes showing:

- Cleaning

- Laying the table

- The backstairs rooms for the servants.

- The servants' corridor.

- The servants eating together.

- The kitchen.

- The footmen and under-butlers waiting in corridors. These are shown in great detail. How effective are they? How do they relate to the overall message of the film? How do these moments in the film contrast with the glamorous life that we are shown going on elsewhere in the house?

Different houses were used for the different interiors and exteriors of Darlington Hall. Why do you think this was done?

BEYOND THE HOUSE

Important events are just referred to in the film and the book. For example:

- We do not see the downfall of Lord Darlington.

- Mr Cardinal's death is only reported to Miss Kenton by Stevens.

- We do not see any events of the war outside of the Hall.

Why do you think that we are not shown these events in the film itself? What does it say about the point of view of the film? How effective is this juxtaposition of detail and reference?

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE FILM

There are many instances in films where it is obvious that a decision has been made to give the audience information to help them place a film. For example, in a film with an unusual historical setting a character might suddenly say: - "After all we don't do things like that in the France of 1640." This is a very extreme example but you may be able to think of others.

However, few external details are given in 'The Remains of the Day'. The world of Darlington Hall is Stevens' world and, if the outside world does not affect his existence, then he pays no mind to it. But there are elements of the wider world that infiltrate the Hall.

Outsiders arrive for secret meetings and political negotiations: we see the various representatives of the countries involved in the political negotiations which preceded the Second World War: - America, England, France and Germany. However, each one is given a very human face and in doing so we see how they have to be treated by Stevens and his staff.

Consider the following: -

- The American will eventually take over Darlington Hall.
- The Frenchman is having trouble with his feet
- Lord Darlington is acting as host.
- The German is a beautiful woman who sings a Schubert song.

To what extent are these individuals turned into symbols for something larger: for their countries and their political persuasions?

Whilst it is possible to watch 'The Remains of the Day' knowing little of events at that time, there are moments in the film where prior knowledge of events might be useful, though not strictly necessary. For example, we see the 'blackshirts' arrive for a meeting. We are never told who they are.

Did you know who they were and what they represented?

Lord Darlington's nephew, Mr Cardinal, is a journalist and invites himself to Darlington Hall when the Germans meet the Prime Minister, but we do not see the meeting or what happens to Mr Chamberlain. Again, do you know?

THE AUDIENCE FOR THE FILM

In working through this study guide, we are sure that you will have come to some conclusions as to what the film is about and how it may differ from other films that you have seen. You will have examined the ways in which the film differs from other Hollywood films.

Every film needs to find an audience and the publicity campaign of every film will try to give an image of what the film is about. Look at the poster for 'The Remains of the Day' on the next page. How does the poster portray the film? At whom do you think the marketing people are aiming the film? What seem to be the major selling points of the film? Are there any specific words or images that are aimed at different people?

