

Semiotics of English Stately House in the Early Twentieth Century: Darlington Hall in Novel by Kazuo Ishiguro «The Remains of the Day» and in Film by James Ivory

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ABSTRACT

The Stately-house novel takes a special place in the English classical literature. The estate here is of key importance in the image-structure of the work. The world of an English estate is reflected as a multifaceted text, extremely enriched with cultural signs. Novel by Kazuo Ishiguro «The Remains of the Day» can be regarded as one of the examples of typical British aristocratic prose. The narrator and protagonist of the novel is a butler, who serves in the large English Stately home Darlington Hall. The family estate is considered by the hero as a symbol of order and harmony, and at the same time it personifies the ideal world of the past that is gradually fading away after the Second World War. In 1993 the director James Ivory made a film based on the Ishiguro's novel. He created different visual images of an English estate on the screen with particular accuracy. Fictional Darlington Hall is a combination of several Stately homes located in the south-west of England. The novel by Kazuo Ishiguro and the film by J. Ivory are memories of a bygone era of British Empire.

Keywords: K. Ishiguro, J. Ivory, «The remains of the day», English estate, the Stately-house novel, psychological novel, semiotics.

In English classical literature special attention has been given to the novel about the family estate (Stately-house novel), in which the main role is assigned to the patrimony, and the main action is determined by the mansion chronotope. The world of the English stately-house is considered here as a multifaceted text, extremely saturated with cultural signs. Here the mansion is not just a place of action, but a key image in the structure of the work, a scale model of England itself with its established moral principles and concepts.

At the beginning of the 20th century, when rural life was gradually becoming a thing of the past, the image of the family estate was mythologized and has been impersonated the forever lost world of the former. The coherence of the country-house world has largely vanished after the Second World War, many houses were destroyed and aristocracy didn't stand up well to misfortune. As English historian David Cannadine rightly remarked in his monograph «The Pleasures of the Past», devoted to the history and culture of Britain, «for some mystical reason the world of rural estates, with which most of British were not familiar, suddenly became a world that they have lost and at the same time the world they desperately want to find again» (Cannadine, 1997, p. 100). Cannadine believes that this nostalgic view into an English past creates an illusion of order and harmony in contemporary unstable society.

The novel by Kazuo Ishiguro «The Remains of the Day» (1989) can be considered one



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of the examples of typically British aristocratic prose.

Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki in 1954. When he was 5 years old, the family moved to Britain. Ishiguro, who has been described as a British Asian author, explained in an interview how growing up in a Japanese family in the UK was crucial to his writing, enabling him to see things from a different perspective from that of many of his English colleagues (Gompertz, interview). Kazuo graduated from the University of Kent with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Philosophy, and later from the University of East Anglia, Norwich, where he received a Master of Arts degree. After the publication of his first novel «A Pale View of Hills» Ishiguro was nominated for a Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize (1982) by the Royal Society of Literature. His second novel «An Artist of the Floating World» was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Whitbread Book of the Year award for 1986.

Ishiguro's third novel «The Remains of the Day» won the Booker Prize. For the first time the author focuses on England at the beginning of the 20th century. The narrator and central character of the work is the butler Stevens, who serves in the large English mansion Darlington Hall. After the death of his master, Lord Darlington, Stevens remains in the house, which is bought by the wealthy American Mr. Farraday. One day the new owner invites Stevens to go on a short car trip, which marks a turning point in the plot of the novel and creates a context for memories of the past – about the time of serving as a butler, the former owner and the golden age of Darlington Hall.

Two different time dimensions can be distinguished in the narrative: context of the present – the chronotope of the journey (landscape sketches and descriptions of sights), and context of the past – the chronotope of Darlington Hall family estate (description of events taken place from 1922 to 1936–1937).

Three images of the main characters gradually appear before the reader at the borderland of these two chronotopes: Stevens himself, Lord Darlington and Miss Kenton – the former housekeeper of the hall, to whom the butler goes in the hope of returning her to the service, but currently to the new owner.

The novel is narrated in the first person, from the point of view of the butler himself. This is his subjective truth, told through his memories. According to the philosopher Gordon Graham, to a large extent Stevens travels down memory line in order to create *an apology*, a justification for his past actions and views (Graham, 2004, p. 168; italics G. Graham). At the same time other characters' points of view are conveyed in dialogues that Stevens recalls and reenacts. Therefore we can talk about a multi-layered representation, where the narration is built in such a manner that the reader can see the events from several lines of sight.

The novel clearly traces two storylines that are closely related to each other. The first one is internal – the story of Stevens's love for Miss Kenton, to whom he could not confess his feelings, and the second is professional, combined with a sense of duty. The fundamental question the hero constantly returns: «What is a “great” butler?». Stevens devotes himself entirely to work and sees the meaning of life in complete self-denial in favor of serving his master: in keeping order in the house, arranging duties among the servants, and most importantly, in the ability of the butler to maintain his professional appearance in any situation. Stevens' restraint and self-control meet, in his opinion, the highest requirements of the profession:

«The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a gentleman will wear his suit <...> It is, I say, a matter of 'dignity'» (Ishiguro, 1989, pp. 42–43).

The period that Stevens describes in his memories is a period of great history – a turning point, a time of foreboding war. Lord Darlington is eager to participate in the main political events of the country, he is a supporter of the appeasement policy of Chamberlain cabinet and sympathetic to Nazi Germany, which was strongly facilitated by the British upper class, including royalty, big business and media. Darlington Hall is visited by leaders of many countries, leading ministers and diplomats. The task of chosen political context in the novel is maximum revelation through the main characters their personal tragedy and historical turning point. One of the most dramatic examples of this kind is Stevens' recollection of the night when his father died. Important events are taking place in the life of Darlington Hall during this night (International conference 1923). Even the personal tragedy of the butler is not able to change his course of work – he cannot go to the bedside of his dying father, because he serves an important dinner and makes all necessary arrangements for the servants. For Stevens principles and duty are more significant than any personal preferences. It is also worthy of note that this is a conscious choice of the hero, his responsible renunciation of personal affairs in favor of professional ones:

«Of course, it is not for me to suggest that I am worthy of ever being placed alongside the likes of 'great' butlers of our generation <...> Let me make clear that when I say the conference of 1923, and that night in particular, constituted a turning point in my professional development, I am speaking very much in terms of my own more humble standards. <...> For all its sad associations, whenever I recall that evening today, I find I do so with a large sense of triumph» (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 110).

The phenomenon of English Stately house as a real fact of life and culture produced a special text in the space of English literature, which we encounter in novels by Charlotte Bronte, Walter Scott, Jane Austen. The authors give us an example of particular world of vast estates with picture-galleries, green meadows, parks, pastures, and even hunting grounds. Darlington Hall from Ishiguro's novel is one of such estates, which served as cultural space and had capacity for literary, philosophical and visual associations.

In tradition of Stately-house novel mansion plays an integral role in the development of the plot and builds the imagery system around itself. It is a kind of sacred place where the action is concentrated. The researcher of British post-colonial novel O.G. Sidorova believes that «one of the important components of this image is, without a doubt, the myth of an English country house, a mansion as a concentration of the best features of the nation, a sacred space where national, material and spiritual culture flourishes ...» (Sidorova, 2005, p. 212). Accordingly, in Ishiguro's novel the central place is given to the Darlington Hall estate, in which the manor house is conceived as a symbol of harmony and order, the guardian of national culture and social ranking. Ishiguro uses in the work the entire traditional set of characteristic and attributes of the topos: an estate with a beautiful house, living room, portraits of ancestors, pantry with silverware and luxury porcelain, fireplaces, library, rooms for servants on the top floor, a garden with alcoves and flower beds and much more. The

characters are drawn along the same line: the owner of the estate – an exemplary gentleman Lord Darlington, his nephew, his guests, his butler, his housekeeper Miss Kenton, a huge staff of servants. Details of their life are described with scrupulous accuracy – who to serve at the table, which of the two Chinese figurines should stand in the living room, how to clean silverware.

In the first decades of the twentieth century English society becomes multicultural and, accordingly, the concept of aristocracy becomes more and more complex and confusing. The most important historical events of this period (the First World War, the ruin of the British Empire, the beginning of the Second World War) had a direct impact on the idea of the British about themselves. The significance of the Second World War was especially intense. During this period national values were tottering to their fall. The feeling of safety associated with geographical position of the country, as well as with the estates – homes of ancestors, their traditions and history of the family, were lost. In the time of war many estates with their centuries-old heritage were either destroyed or used as hospitals, and later passed into the hands of new owners. If the estate has had a chance to be kept safe, then this happened primarily as the preservation of its external architectural character and material setting, but not traditions and way of life. Some owner gave up and emigrated, some were forced to turn to the stately-house business, the majority were obliged to auction their once-great houses.

For the new owner of Darlington Hall, Mr. Farraday, this house becomes nothing more than a property to be bought and sold:

«I mean to say, Stevens, this *is* a genuine grand old English house, isn't it? That's what I paid for. And you are a genuine old-fashioned English butler, not just some waiter pretending to be one. You're the real thing aren't you? That's what I wanted, isn't that what I have?» (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 124; italics K. Ishiguro).

Mr. Farraday's house seems to be nothing else but expensive purchase for his guest, Mrs Wakefield, who considers many details of the mansion's furnishings «a kind of mock period peace done only a few years ago» (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 123): «Oh, Stevens, perhaps you're the one to tell me. This arch here *looks* seventeenth century, but isn't it the case that it was built quite recently? Perhaps during Lord Darlington's time?» (Ishiguro, 1989; italics K. Ishiguro).

As a result, Mr. Farraday remarks with regret:

«You know, Stevens, Mrs Wakefield wasn't as impressed with this house as I believe she ought to have been. <...> In fact, she seemed to think I was exaggerating the pedigree of this place. That I was making it up about all these features going back centuries. <...> She kept asserting everything was "mock" this and "mock" that. She even thought you were "mock", Stevens» (Ishiguro, 1989, pp. 123-124).

A key role in creating the novel's atmosphere is played by the contrast that the author builds between two owners of Darlington Hall – Lord Darlington and Mr. Farraday, a British aristocrat and an American businessman. Many details that at first glance may be of no consequence make significance in the eyes of protagonist, Stevens, and provide for the readers insight into two different pictures of the world: «The study doors are those that face one as one comes down the great staircase. There is outside the study today a glass cabinet displaying various of Mr. Farraday's ornaments, but throughout lord Darlington's days,

there stood at that spot a bookshelf containing many volumes of encyclopedia, including a complete set of the *Britannica*» (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 82; italics K. Ishiguro).

The decline of the estate in England was accompanied by a great human tragedy. Stevens subconsciously feels that his whole life has changed, and Darlington Hall becomes for him a symbol of the past, a memory of the former greatness of Britain, a place where human history was made:

«...the great decisions of the world are not, in fact, arrived at simply at the public chambers, or else during a handful of days given over to an international conference under the full gaze of the public and press. Rather, debates are conducted, and crucial decisions arrived at, in the privacy and calm of the great houses of the country. <...> To us, then, the world was a wheel, revolving with these great houses at the hub, their mighty decisions emanating out to all else, rich and poor, who revolved around them» (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 115).

It is noteworthy that at the end of the twentieth century a similar picture occurred in Russia. The death of the estate was perceived as the death of Russian culture, which had been being replaced by chaos and urbanism. After the abolition of serfage, land became a commodity for persons of all classes – estates or manor houses could be sold, leased or pledged. This process intensified even more in future and was associated with the further ruin of the nobility.

In 1993 director James Ivory made a film based on Ishiguro's novel. The film, which brought together a star cast (Anthony Hopkins, Emma Thompson, James Fox, Hugh Grant, Christopher Reeve), was a great success. The director of the film quite accurately followed the text of the novel, trying to keep the atmosphere created by the author as much as possible. Although the plot has been somewhat transformed – the romantic relationship between Stevens and Miss Kenton comes to the fore in the film.

The film is visually beautiful. James Ivory skillfully creates effects and imagery of the English mansion on the screen, using all the necessary attributes for it: the picturesque scenery of England – beautiful, restrained and, at the same time, majestic landscape; gardens and parks of old Country-houses; luxurious interiors; clever detailed costumes of the characters themselves.

The plot of the novel is centered around the butler Stevens and his relationship with the housekeeper Miss Kenton. At another point the film is built around the consummate work of Anthony Hopkins and his interactions with his partner Emma Thompson. Mr. Stevens is actually a very sensitive, kind and sensible person. He knows what emotions and deep feelings are, but in his reality expression of sentiments is possible only on paper. That is why the film is framed as Miss Kenton and Mr. Stevens are reading letters of each other.

The film was shot in the South West of England. The fictional Darlington Hall is a combination of several great English Country-houses, which were used as locations for the film. Among them was Dyrham Park for the exterior of the house with its vast surroundings and the driveway. Here is how Miss Kenton describes the view from the window on the park:

«I was so fond of that view from the second-floor bedrooms overlooking the lawn with the dawns visible in the distance <...> On summer evenings there was a sort of magical quality to that view and I will confess to you now I used to waste many precious minutes standing at one of those windows just enchanted by it» (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 49).

The interior of the house contains works of art and furniture from all over the world, in particular a huge collection of paintings by Dutch Masters. The current house was built for William Blathway in stages during the 17th and early 18th centuries. The Blathwayt family owned the house until 1956, when the government acquired it, but during the Second World War it was used for child evacuees. Currently, the estate belongs to the National Trust of Great Britain.

This trust was created to protect mansions and stately house throughout England. A significant part of the objects passed to the foundation not through purchase, but according to the owners will. This was due to the fact that throughout the 20th century, many aristocratic families lost traditional sources of income and, being unable to maintain their country estates in good condition, decided to transfer their family heritage to the National Trust. The creation of such funds allows us to talk about the continuation of Stately house life in the following years. This is an attempt to reconstruct and preserve everything that is connected with the past, and at the same time – acquiring new forms of survival and transformation.

Most of the interiors of Darlington Hall were filmed at Badminton House, also located in Gloucestershire. First of all, this is an octagonal Inner hall looking out the magnificent Great Hall with a fireplace; so-called «Chinese bedroom»; the Conservatory; Mr. Stevens' parlour; Miss Kenton's quarters; service corridor, kitchen (with its pass-through into the Old servants' Hall), servants' rooms (with the back/servants' stairs), including the father's attic room, which Stevens describes in the novel as follows:

«I had rarely had reason to enter my father's room prior to this occasion and I was newly struck by the smallness and starkness of it. Indeed, I recall my impression at the time was of having stepped into a prison cell...» (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 64).

This darksome memory is a reminder of the past and gives reference to the image of a manor as a phantom, a manor as a prison, a manor is a ruin, at the same time with a touch of nostalgia, and a firm understanding that the old must die.

The novel by Kazuo Ishiguro and the film by J. Ivory are memories of a bygone era of British Empire that ended with the Second World War. The fate of Lord Darlington's estate is typical for many English Country Houses. Most of them were sold, completely demolished, rented out or partially reduced in size, and many aristocratic artefacts went under the hammer. But most significantly – the noblemen way of life as British have known it, will never be reviewed.

After the Second World War, life in a classic English manor house would never be the same. The ups and downs broke the usual way of life, ruined the former landowners, and led to the decline of many famous houses. At the same time in classical English literature in the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, the Stately house novel remains a popular genre. Old stories are being rethought, the main question becomes the question of self-identification – finding not a home as oneself, the estate becomes the embodiment of a dark past, unrealized hopes and dreams.

Stevens becomes a tragic character, for until the very last pages he forces himself to believe in the greatness of Britain, in the greatness of Lord Darlington, in the dignity of his mission. However, everything has been passing and changing and nothing is secured from extinction. The authors of the film have transformed the ending of the novel in their own way.

At the end of the film, together with Mr. Farraday, Stevens opens the windows of a huge hall and releases a dove that has flown into the room and symbolized a new life stage.

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