

An Exploration of the Ford Within *The Remains of the Day*

Cassidy Forbing, *Ball State University*



Vehicles cross borders every day, carting people and objects across time and space. Vehicles also propel people across mental borders, taking the act of moving across time and space and making it tangible and real to those it moves. In this essay, I will investigate the prominence of the Ford within Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, taking into consideration the previous yet minimal scholarship already completed, and break down the symbolism of mobility and the lack of it, wealth and status, and freedom that the Ford exudes in this text. In doing this, the Ford's obvious prominence parallels America's own upcoming prominence in Britain and influences not only Stevens's own story, but a historic narrative as well, as it mentally, physically, and metaphorically crosses borders. Looking at this specific vehicle in this specific text can help others see the

usability of writing vehicles as characters, characters that can cart people across both physical and metaphysical borders. text can help others see the usability of writing vehicles as characters, characters that can cart people across both physical and metaphysical borders.

Vehicles, both in real life and in literature, are seen as agents to move people from one place to another, both physically and metaphorically. A vehicle within literature is not an uncommon happenstance in the 20th and 21st century; vehicles have become a part of life, so it makes sense to include them in literature. It is the symbolism that the vehicle gives to advance the plot, give context, and add depth to a text that matters. Which brings us to Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 Man Booker prize-winning novel, *The Remains of the Day*. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the*

Day tells the story of an old English butler by the name of Stevens and his motoring trip across the country. He takes his new American employer, Mr. Farraday's, Ford to visit his old friend, Miss Kenton. The Ford is the vehicle of the text, both carting Mr. Stevens around the country and functioning as the vehicle that moves the plot forward. In a novel that is founded in British culture, why is an American vehicle, specifically a Ford, the vehicle used to advance the plot both physically and metaphorically? I will investigate the prominence of the Ford within Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, taking into consideration the previous, yet minimal, scholarship already done, and breaking down the symbolism of mobility and the lack of it, wealth and status, and freedom that the Ford exudes in this text. Doing this, we will see how the Ford's obvious prominence parallels America's own upcoming prominence in Britain and influences not only Stevens's own story, but also a historic narrative as it mentally, physically, and metaphorically crosses borders.

Mobility

Obviously, any vehicle can be seen as a symbol of mobility in any text. What is interesting about the Ford in *The Remains of the Day* is that not only does the Ford physically move Stevens from one side of the country to the other, but the Ford is what moves the plot forward, crossing borders both physically and metaphysically. Within the first short chapter of *The Remains of the Day*, the audience quickly learns of the expedition that Stevens is about to venture onto: "An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone, in the comfort of Mr. Farraday's Ford...[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" (Ishiguro 3). Mr. Farraday is Stevens's new-money *and* American employer. He is the one who encourages Stevens to go cross-country to visit his friend, offering both his own vehicle and even to "foot the bill for the gas" (Ishiguro 4). However, Stevens takes this opportunity with a grain of salt, believing that his employer's generosity is due to his American sensibilities and his failure to understand professional British standards. Chuchueh Cheng's article titled "Cosmopolitan Alterity: America as the Mutual Alien of Britain and Japan in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels" explores Ishiguro's various novels and how America is the alien "other" within them all. Cheng observes that "employment under an American businessman unsettles Stevens's belief that professionalism entails absolute loyalty because the new situation obliges him to abandon his previous commitments" (237). Nevertheless, Stevens goes on his journey, crossing borders, grateful for his employer's generosity.

The first day of Stevens's motoring trip is successful. He compares his leaving Darlington Hall with that of first setting sail on a ship, feeling the unknown, fear, and anxiety:

[E]ventually, the surroundings grew unrecognizable and I knew I had gone beyond all previous boundaries. I have heard people describe the moment, when setting sail in a ship, when one finally loses sight of the land. I imagine the experience of unease mixed with exhilaration often described in connection with this moment is very similar to what I felt in the Ford as the surroundings grew strange around me...The feeling swept over me that I had truly left Darlington Hall behind, and I must confess I did feel a slight sense of alarm—a sense aggravated by the feeling that I was perhaps not on the correct road at all, but speeding off in totally the wrong direction into wilderness. (Ishiguro 23-24)

Stevens's first time in years leaving Darlington Hall is all thanks to Mr. Farraday's Ford and the surrounding outdoors surprises him because he has not left that property in so long. The scenery is not the only thing that Stevens is shocked by, but also his own realizations about himself that he has while on his trip. As Stevens motors along, the audience learns of his past at Darlington Hall through his meta-thoughts over the span of the trip. Stevens shyly discloses, "But I see I am becoming preoccupied with these memories and this is perhaps a little foolish. This present trip represents, after all, a rare opportunity for me to savour to the full the many splendors of the English countryside, and I know I shall greatly regret it later if I allow myself to become unduly diverted" (Ishiguro 67). Although Stevens is aware of his "foolish" memories resurfacing, he continues to spill his darkest thoughts and secrets with the audience. The motoring trip allows Stevens to cross boundaries within his own mind, exploring emotions and vulnerability like he never has before. Without going on this trip, Stevens would have never made revelations about his past. The Ford not only moves Stevens from town-to-town, but also gives Stevens the mental space to think about and reconsider the choices he has made in his life. By "avoiding almost entirely the major roads" in the Ford, Stevens also avoids the major roads he has typically taken in his thought process, allowing for the "backroads" of his thoughts to flourish and give him something new to ponder (Ishiguro 67). On his second day of motoring, after a little hiccup with the Ford, Stevens finds time to walk around the beautiful landscape of England and confesses, "It is no doubt the quiet of these surroundings that has enabled me to ponder all the more thoroughly these thoughts which have entered my mind over this past half-hour or so" (Ishiguro 121). Again, this trip has given Stevens the mental space, without the clouding of morals and propriety that happens in Darlington Hall, to think over the decisions of his past. At the end of the novel, and the end of Stevens's motoring trip, there is a new light in Stevens's beliefs of his profession and the world in general. The audience sees that Stevens has a new perception of his American employer, and is even willing to practice the techniques of bantering to please him. In his article titled "The End of (Anthony)

Eden: Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Midcentury Anglo-American Tensions," John McCombe ascertains that it is through Farraday's classic Ford that "has finally set Stevens in motion, both through his brief reunion with Miss Kenton and in his desire to think less about the ghosts of the past" (96). Without the mobility that the Ford provides as a vehicle, Stevens would not have been able to come to these new conclusions in his life.

Lack of Mobility

The lack of mobility from the Ford is just as important as its mobility in *The Remains of the Day*. Multiple times throughout the text, the Ford breaks down for various reasons, usually halting Stevens from continuing on his journey. The first time the audience sees an issue with the Ford is when Stevens is on day two of his trip, just outside the border of Dorset, when he exclaims, "it was then I had become aware of the heated smell emanating from the car engine. The thought that I had done some damage to my employer's Ford was, of course, most alarming and I had quickly brought the vehicle to a halt" (Ishiguro 117). Stevens, for fear of breaking his employer's prestigious Ford, pulls into the nearest house to see if he can find help from the house's owner. The man obliges to help Stevens, saying "Water, guv. You need some water in your radiator" (Ishiguro 118). After inspecting the Ford, the man confides to Stevens that he thinks of him to be one of those "top-notch butlers" from one of the "big posh houses," mostly because of the condition and prestige that the Ford gives (Ishiguro 119). The man then tells Stevens to visit a pond just outside where he is stationed, and this where Stevens has time for silent reflection. Without the Ford being out of water, Stevens would have never obtained the opportunity to check out Mortimer's Pond and allow himself the time and space to reflect. Again, the Ford allows Stevens the chance to cross mental borders within himself, borders that Stevens always chose to keep guarded and to never be crossed.

On the third day of motoring, the Ford has yet another hiccup. In fear, Stevens prays that the Ford breaking down is not another radiator problem; however, "the Ford was not damaged, simply out of fuel" (Ishiguro 161). Without any gas and with the Ford sitting patiently at the top of a hill, Stevens makes his way down a hill into the village of Moscombe, near Tavistock, Devon and finds the Taylors. The Taylors and their guests made quite a scene for Stevens, regarding his position higher than it actually is. The Taylors and their guests tell Stevens that they are surprised and honored for someone with "the likes of yourself" had come and visit their small village (Ishiguro 182). Stevens, therefore, blurs the border line of what an actual gentleman is, and what one simply looks like. After spending some time with the Taylors and their intruding neighbors, Stevens is back on the road with a Dr. Carlisle to fill up his tank with gas. Stevens still fears there is some deeper trouble

afflicting the Ford but then his anxieties “were laid to rest when I tried the ignition and heard the engine come to life with a healthy murmur” (Ishiguro 211). This stop again calls Stevens for reflection, permitting him to turn “over certain recollections of the past,” specifically his treatment towards Miss Kenton (Ishiguro 211). Although, physically, the Ford breaks down multiple times, there is purpose for the mishap, allowing time and space for Stevens to reflect upon his life. Thus, the Ford moves the plot of *The Remains of the Day* forward.

Wealth/Status

It is evident that Mr. Farraday’s Ford in *The Remains of the Day* exemplifies wealth, status, and class. As detailed in the previous section, various people have complimented Stevens vicariously through the Ford. The first instance of this is when Stevens comes to his first stop at Salisbury, where “the landlady, a woman of around forty or so, appears to regard [him] as a rather grand visitor on account of Mr. Farraday’s Ford and the high quality of [his] suit” (Ishiguro 26). The man who helped fix the Ford’s radiator, too, holds Stevens up to a high status, calling him a “posh-geezer” (Ishiguro 119). It is important to note here that Ishiguro has other vehicles within *The Remains of the Day*, and calls them by proper name, too. The man who helped Stevens had a Bentley outside of his house, a nicely-made British car, yet compliments Stevens on his American Ford. John McCombe ascertains that “the Ford has become an emblem of social prestige as well as a measure of America’s global economic predominance” (88). The Ford, an American vehicle, is the car that is being complimented in a way adjacent to gentility and status, even when British cars are present. The Ford breaks borders of class, destigmatizing the greatness of British products while also granting a servant the chance to be treated as a royal gentleman.

On Stevens’s third day, when he is at the Taylors’s, everyone in his general vicinity is in awe of him. Not only are they honored to be housing “the likes” of himself, but try their best to impress him. Everyone around the town has heard about his journey, and knows about the Ford being parked at the top of the hill. In Mr. Harry Smith’s conversation with Stevens, he says that the Ford is an “absolute beauty” and that it “put the car Mr. Lindsay used to drive completely in the shade!” (Ishiguro 183). Again, the Ford is being compared to the other vehicles in the novel, and is always the most impressive one. Mr. Taylor, the man who has allowed Stevens to lodge with him says “You can tell a true gentleman from a false one that’s just dressed in finery. Take yourself, sir. It’s not just the cut of your clothes, nor is it even the fine way you’ve got of speaking. There’s something else that marks you out as a gentleman. Hard to put your fingers on, but it’s plain to see that’s got eyes” (Ishiguro 185). What could be the final piece that makes Stevens a gentleman, other than the Ford? His dress and his speech aids him to be regarded highly, but as Mr. Taylor points out, that is not

only it. There is something more that allows Stevens to present himself as a higher status. It is the Ford that makes Stevens look like a “posh-geezer.”

The irony, though, is that it is the American Ford that symbolizes Stevens’s status in this novel, yet Stevens himself believes that Americans do not have the same genuine dignity as British people. Cheng speaks on how Stevens’s way of talking about the Americans within the novel is in an othering way; “Whenever [Stevens] uses ‘American’ as an adjective, he intends it to be an antonym of ‘English’” (232). Cheng then goes on to say, “when remarking that only an ‘American gentleman’ would enjoy ‘bantering’, he uses ‘American’ to stress the strangeness of Americans” (233). This American otherness is visibly present throughout the novel and so is the assumption that America equals wealth and an up-and-coming status; both of these statements ring true.

After spending an evening at the Taylors’s, Stevens and Dr. Carlisle, who is one of the more esteemed men living in Moscombe, find gas and make the trek towards the Ford at the top of the hill. It would not be surprising for a small village to make a fuss over a foreign and seemingly new car in the 1950s in Britain, but the fact of the matter is that everyone comments on the vehicle, even Dr. Carlisle. It is true that Dr. Carlisle calls Stevens’s bluff and recognizes him as manservant, perhaps because he is a man of higher status himself. He knows the true differences between a gentleman and a servant. Everyone else, on the other hand, does not have that experience nor knowledge to make that distinction. Still, Dr. Carlisle does not blame Stevens for the name that he has seemingly made for himself, even when Stevens tries explaining himself: “‘Oh, no need to explain, old fellow. I can quite see how it happened. I mean to say, you are a pretty impressive specimen. The likes of the people here, they’re bound to take you for at least a lord or a duke.’ The doctor gave a hearty laugh. ‘It must do one good to be mistaken for a lord every now and then’” (Ishiguro 208). Like the man who helped Stevens fill his radiator with water, Dr. Carlisle also owns a British car, this time a Rover. Again, we can see how the American Ford is the vehicle that gets complimented and crosses the borders of class, wealth, and status, even though British cars are in production and in abundance in England.

Freedom

Freedom can be interpreted in various different ways, especially within *The Remains of the Day*. The Ford symbolizes freedom because it not only allows Stevens to be on the open road, away from Darlington Hall, but also symbolizes the freedom of Stevens understanding and accepting his past. More specifically, the freedom the Ford exemplifies additionally underscores the prominence of America in Britain, and overall, the world, during the time period *The Remains of the Day* takes place. It is this point—the Ford being equal to America—

that many scholars have written about when talking about the Ford's prominence in *The Remains of the Day*.

It is interesting to think about Stevens's relationship to America. Though there is significant change in the way that Stevens views America and Americans by the end of the novel, at the beginning, there is uncertainty. For instance, at the very beginning, Stevens cannot come to believe that Mr. Farraday would offer him his Ford to travel the country in, let alone "foot the bill for the gas." Stevens, pondering Mr. Farraday's kindness as an employer, tells the audience "As you might expect, I did not take Mr. Farraday's suggestion at all seriously that afternoon, regarding it as just another instance of an American gentleman's unfamiliarity with what was and what was not commonly done in England" (Ishiguro 4). At the novel's start, the audience learns that Stevens has a difficult relationship with his employer, because Stevens is not accustomed to America's professional culture. One of the biggest struggles Stevens has is the idea of bantering with his employer. This fear and unfamiliarity of bantering persists throughout much of the novel. Stevens comes back to the dilemma many times to enlighten his audience with new techniques that he has learned for it. On the third day of his journey, Stevens makes a lodging stop outside of Taunton, Somerset, and practices his bantering with the villagers he lodges with (Ishiguro 130). However, it is not until well into the novel where Stevens begins to accept this new professional culture that his American employer has bestowed upon him. The last paragraph in *The Remains of the Day* is this:

It occurs to me, furthermore, that bantering is hardly an unreasonable duty for an employer to expect a professional to perform. I have of course already devoted much time to develop bantering skills, but it is possible I have never previously approached the task with the commitment I might have done. Perhaps, then, when I return to Darlington Hall tomorrow—Mr. Farraday will not himself be back for a further week—I will begin practicing with renewed effort. I should hope, then, that by the time of my employer's return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him.
(Ishiguro 245)

It is a compelling choice for both Ishiguro and Stevens to end *The Remains of the Day* with this paragraph on bantering. Other than the fact that it rounds out the novel—the beginning, too, mentions this issue of bantering—this paragraph leaves the readers with one final call to America. Compared to the beginning, Stevens has grown and changed throughout his journey in the Ford across the country. Previously not understanding and resenting his American employer and his bantering techniques, Stevens now has a renewed effort to want to please and surprise his new boss. In a sense, Stevens has crossed the boundary of uncertainty and unfamiliarity and into an area with more vulnerability with his employer.

McCombe describes the comparisons of Stevens and Britain by saying, “by the end of the 1950’s, a cultural (and political) détente between Britain and the US emerged, and by the end of *Remains*, Stevens also seems to rethink his antipathy toward America (and Americans)” (96). Perhaps this is because Stevens has learned the new role that America is now playing globally and, after taking the Ford cross-country, has accepted it. Belau and Cameron, in an article about the uncanny dialect within *The Remains of the Day*, assert that Ishiguro “shows how imperialism has a way of catching up with England,” prefiguring “the Americanization of British culture,” and showing how “the British are slowly becoming threatened by American encroachment. Stevens’s drive through England itself is made possible by way of his new master’s American-made Ford automobile” (77-78).

In the 1950s, America began to emerge as the superstar country, superseding Britain for the first time ever. In an interview about *The Remains of the Day* with Allan Vorda, Kazuo Ishiguro describes what Britain was like when he was writing this novel: “There was an awareness that Britain was a more international place, a more cosmopolitan place, but it wasn’t the center of the world. It was kind of a slightly peripheral, albeit still quite wealthy, country. It started to be aware of its place within the context of the whole international scene” (134). Even before then, when World War II was in full swing, America switched from global assistance to self-interest, leaving Britain to drown by herself in the midst of war. Aside from the Ford, we can see America’s self-interest peeking through in *The Remains of the Day*, specifically with the American senator Lewis who visits Lord Darlington. Lewis tries to sabotage the dinner and the supposed interpersonal relations that Lord Darlington was trying to make, but comes to no avail. Being the only American in a room full of Europeans, Lewis is called out for his antics, “My only question concerning Mr. Lewis is this. To what extent does his abominable behaviors exemplify the attitude of the present American administration?... Such a gentleman capable of the levels of deceit he has displayed over these past days should not be relied upon to provide a truthful reply” (Ishiguro 101). This quote suggests that America, in whole, is the perpetrator of all the bad events happening in Europe. It also infers that most Europeans, especially in the setting of such a place like Darlington Hall, have a negative association with America/Americans. Putting that in conversation with Tomo Hattori’s quote, “*The Remains of the Day* is not so much about the relations between the colonizer and the colonized as much as the relations between different levels within the imperial social hierarchy” furthers the confusion as to if America is the enemy or the friend in *The Remains of the Day* (277).

Placing the question of America as either friend or foe aside, the fact of the matter still stands: America is replacing Britain in all her glory. The Ford embodies the impending doom over Britain that America is going to take its power away. It is always

in the background of the novel. Sometimes the Ford, like America's influence, makes a grand appearance, other times it sneaks into the narrative to remind you it is still there, still waiting, and still the first choice. Ian Davidson makes the claim that the "cultural and aesthetic concepts of automobility become inextricably linked to the materiality of the petroleum driven car with implications that include global territorial disputes and world economies as well as the ecological impact of the production of cars and their use" (472). Vehicles symbolize more than freedom; they symbolize the new-world order of production and capital in the face of freedom. The Ford within *The Remains of the Day*, an ever-present image, signifies America in the 20th century. Even Ishiguro, in his interview with Allan Vorda, confesses, "it has gotten to the point that some people say America culture is invading or taking over everywhere you go in the world" (Vorda 183). The Ford as a metaphor for America, symbolizing Stevens's freedom of being on an open road, crossing boundaries and borders, finally facing and accepting his past.

Conclusion

Investigating the Ford within Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* sheds light on the historic cultural significance that Ford has within the world. A constant force, driving not only Stevens, but the plot forward, the Ford symbolizes mobility, the lack thereof, wealth and status, and freedom, or more synonymously, America. By reading into the text and most of the instances the Ford is mentioned, we can see just how prevalent the Ford's ability is to cross borders not only locationally, but also mentally for Stevens. While other scholarships only briefly mention the Ford within *The Remains of the Day*, the vehicle deserves more credit in the overall reading and understanding of text, and vehicle imagery as a whole. And maybe the next time you go on a vacation, one that crosses borders, you too, will be able to come across a mental clearing.

Works Cited

- Belau, Linda and Ed Cameron. "Writing in Translationese: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and the Uncanny Dialect of the Diasporic Writer." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 16 no. 2, 2007, p. 67-91. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/dsp.2007.0007.
- Cheng, Chu-chueh. "Cosmopolitan Alterity: America as the Mutual Alien of Britain and Japan in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 45 no. 2, 2010, p. 227-244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989410366892>.
- Davidson, Ian. "Automobility, Materiality and Don DeLillo's 'Cosmopolis.'" *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2012, pp. 469–82. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44286991>.
- Hattori, Tomo. "China Man Autoeroticism and the Remains of Asian America." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1998, pp. 215–36. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1346199>.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*. Vintage International, 1993.
- McCombe, John P. "The End of (Anthony) Eden: Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Midcentury Anglo-American Tensions." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2002, pp. 77–99. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3175979>.
- Vorda, Allan, et al. "An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro." *Mississippi Review*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, 1991, pp. 131–54. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20134516>.