

Consider the ways in which both writers explore the theme of failed communication in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and *On Chesil Beach* by Ian McEwan.

10 The drama of failed communication drives Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* and McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*. Inadequate communication triggers the breakdown of the central relationships in both novels and this inadequacy is rooted in the way the speakers use language itself. Ishiguro's Stevens and McEwan's yearning lovers Florence and Edward all deploy a contrived register that blocks authentic exchange perhaps as a symptom of the conservative eras to which they both belong. However, it is not just the protagonists who are blighted by silences or miscommunication. Communication between the speaker and the reader is partial and unreliable too. The novelists circumvent the characters' reserve and falsity by using the form and structure of language to betray deeper truth and unspoken emotion.

20 The stiltedness of Steven's language is apparent from the first pages of *Remains of the Day*. He describes his travel plans in his own journal in halting clauses: '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, [...] may keep me away from Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days.' The sheer sentence length is laborious, complicated by the number of clauses. Stevens uses self-important phrases such as 'I should say' and 'As I foresee it' which add an unnecessary note of rhetoric to an apparently simple situation. Even the structure of the sentence is self-conscious, with 'an expedition' emphatically placed and repeated, mimicking the exaggerated language of public discourse rather than that of a private journal. These factors combine to create a formalised, consciously crafted register. Such formality in a personal journal may be the symptom of a trend noted by Barry Lewis: Stevens' 'persistent displacement of the personal with the professional'¹. This tendency is painfully evident in the scene of his father's death, when Stevens stoically continues to serve Lord Darlington's guests, ignoring personal crisis. He evades his father's attempts at emotional reconciliation, mechanically repeating the phrase 'I'm so glad you're feeling better now' and insisting he must return to his duties as butler. For Stevens, professional duty outweighs personal expression, a trait which we might blame on the psychological costs of his roots in early twentieth-century service, which required 'a life given over to public service.'² 30 Though Stevens gives no acknowledgement of grief or distress, later Lord Darlington suggests, 'You look as though you're crying.' Stevens' only means of conveying emotion in his journal is through a third party. Arguably, it is this inability to acknowledge personal feeling or perhaps lack of self-knowledge that thwarts the communication of emotion to others.

40 The formal register that stilts and impedes communication in Stevens' journal similarly disables communication with Miss Kenton. This issue reaches crisis in Stevens' final recollection of her. Miss Kenton, on the verge of leaving to meet her 'acquaintance', reveals that he had proposed to her, but insists that she is 'still giving the matter thought'. Her pointed repetition of this line makes it evident to the readers that it is intended as a hint for Stevens. Indeed, her vague references to an unnamed 'acquaintance' betray him as at least partly a device to gain Stevens' attention. Miss Kenton is not rejecting Stevens, but rather inviting him to act and more importantly, to speak. But while Miss Kenton's communication may be indirect, she is met with

¹ Barry Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Manchester: Manchester, University Press 2000) p.86

² Lucy Letherbridge, *Servants: A Downstairs View of Twentieth Century Britain* (Bloomsbury, London 2013) p. 50

utter impasse. Whether or not he has understood her implicit meaning, Stevens seems utterly unable to respond in kind. His answer is curt and emotionally sterile: **'Indeed Miss Kenton'**. He repeats this phrase three times in their conversation, paralysing any communication. Ishiguro has admitted that he drew on the comic butler figure of early twentieth-century literature in creating Stevens, and through the use of the comic motif word, 'indeed', Ishiguro recalls the Jeeves-like butler figure of early twentieth-century fiction. Accordingly, this word signals Stevens' inability to forego the language of contrived butler archetype when faced with personal crisis. Thus the language Stevens uses with Miss Kenton is relentlessly impersonal and therefore hostile to personal communication.

This same idea, language's hostility to genuine communication, is fundamental to McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*. As with *Remains of the Day* this underlying but crucial issue rears its head as the novel draws to a climax. After the disastrous events of the wedding night, the narrator muses bleakly – **'there were no words to name what had happened.'** The blunt absolute 'no words' suggests a fundamental inadequacy in the vocabulary our characters have access to. Lionel Shriver notes that the novel takes place in the conservative early 60s, *'before the sexual revolution'*³. So we can argue that their inability to communicate is a product of the conservative conventions of the era, which deny access to any sexual vocabulary. The disastrous effect on the couple's relationship caused by their backgrounds is emphasised by McEwan from the opening sentence: **'...and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible.'** However, McEwan immediately qualifies this in the next sentence: **'But it is never easy'**.

This same link between restricted communication and era is also present in *Remains of the Day*. Salman Rushdie has suggested that Stevens is an *'anachronism'*⁴; even in the 1950s, the elaborate hierarchy of domestic service was decidedly a thing of the past and we can see this manifested in the overly formalised language of a bygone era. Furthermore, just as Stevens' stilted language inhibits and perplexes, for the characters of *On Chesil Beach*, language increasingly becomes an impediment. After Edward, in a fit of fury, uses the slur 'bitch', he is described as having **'gone too far with his words ...now he was trapped with it.'** The word 'trapped' lends a physicality which emphasises the weight of the constraints language places on the couple, as well as characterising 'his words' as a hostile aggressor, an obstacle to overcome rather than a vernacular at his disposal.

Like Stevens, the young couple of *On Chesil Beach* react to personal crisis by clinging to the safety of conventional forms. Florence admits that she is **'conscious of play acting'**. This is evident in the language she uses; repetitive phrases such as **'get away from me'**, **'please go away'** and **'clear off'** are ultimately vacuous, rendered meaningless and over-dramatized by reiteration. When waiting for Edward to reach her in the final chapter, Florence "dreaded" the conversation ahead: **"As she understood it, there were no words to name what had happened, there existed no shared language in which two sane adults could describe such events to each other."** Tragically, when Florence finally breaches the real issue, using simple, distinct phrases that emphasise her sincerity – **'I don't like it, I don't like the thought of it'**, Edward is unable to forgo the 'play acting'. He uses the trite, exaggerated language of a lover's spat previously deployed by Florence: **'I mean, I mean'; 'how dare you?'**. Later, McEwan describes Edward as having a **'sense of himself as being ...tragically in the right.'** The word 'tragically' recalls this idea of 'play acting', indicating that he is ultimately carrying out an artificial performance of a lover's quarrel. Just as Stevens

³ Lionel Shriver, review, *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 April 2007

⁴ Salman Rushdie, 'Rereading *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro', *The Guardian*, 17 August, 2012

cannot forgo the idiom of his professional role, Florence and Edward are bound by the contrived dialogue of the young lovers, a register which is ultimately insincere. The 'mess' of the wedding night had destroyed the protection of **'the blanket of companionable near-silence that smothered their differences and blinded them as much as it bound them'**.

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In *Remains of the Day*, the failure of communication takes on another layer of difficulty in the novel's first-person narrative voice. Stevens' struggles to communicate with Miss Kenton, but the obfuscating language of Stevens' narrative voice is just as likely to mislead readers, as Ishiguro shrouds his real narrative purpose in meandering formalities. The novel ostensibly takes the form of a travel journal; each new chapter bears a place name and often Stevens will begin by musing on his current location – **'Tonight, I find myself in a guest house in the city of Salisbury.'**

However, the bulk of the book is taken up in contemplation of the past – Steven's fraught relationships with his father, Miss Kenton and Lord Darlington. Increasingly, the 'travel journal' seems to be a vehicle for Steven's exploration of past regrets. We must assume that he either lacks the self-awareness or is simply unwilling to disclose narrative purpose outright. But arguably even Stevens' obfuscation communicates unknowing truths to the reader, as Kathleen Wall argues: *'Ishiguro is speaking to us over Stevens' voice'*.⁵ For example, the very fact that Stevens obscures the aim of the journal betrays a deep-seated guilt and regret. More specifically, we can find patterns within the text through which Ishiguro exposes the truth. Stevens has a number of verbal tics: these include the overuse of the word 'professional', a repeated motif throughout the novel and ostensibly a tribute to Stevens' staunch professionalism. However, if we examine its placement in the narrative, it reveals itself as a screen for emotional significance. For example, Stevens describes his cocoa meetings with Miss Kenton, to whom we increasingly realise he has formed a romantic attachment, as **'overwhelmingly professional in tone'**. The comic hyperbole of 'overwhelmingly' exposes a defensiveness which speaks to the real emotional charge of Stevens' feelings towards Miss Kenton. We can see this same pattern – Stevens' displacement of personal romantic motives for the professional – with his use of 'one'. Before his final meeting with Miss Kenton at the end of the novel Stevens admits his trepidation: **'for one may as well declare it, one was in a condition of some preoccupation with the thought that...one would be meeting Miss Kenton.'** In having Stevens use 'one' to express genuine feeling, Ishiguro emphasises 'I' and therefore the entirety of the first-person narrative as false. Through the stiff peculiarities of Stevens' language, Ishiguro creates a code through which readers can detect moments of emotional sincerity.

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There are moments of self-awareness in Stevens' narrative; he admits he may have 'exaggerated' what evidence there was **'regarding Miss Kenton's desire to return to Darlington Hall'** which he originally labelled as 'unmistakeable'. This tentative questioning of his own perception of events and growing recognition of his own unreliability have led Kathleen Wall to suggest that Stevens has *'some degree of conscious awareness'*⁶ of the way he manipulates his memoirs. Stevens may be consciously authoring his own tragedy.

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Unlike *Remains of the Day*, *On Chesil Beach* is written in the third person, with an omniscient narrator. Nevertheless, the full reality of Florence's repulsion to sex is obscured until the end of the novel, so McEwan uses description in the first part of the novel to pre-empt anything we are explicitly told. The **'garden vegetation'** is **'sensuous and tropical in its profusion'**, description which suggests the oppressive fecundity of the landscape, an implicit challenge to the main

⁵ Kathleen Wall, 'The Remains of the Day And Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration', *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 1994 p. 25

⁶ Ibid p. 32

130 characters. Even the weeds they can see through the hotel windows are described using undertones of sexuality: “a way linked by weeds of extravagant size... with swollen stalks, more than six feet tall, bending under the weight of dark, thick-veined leaves.” The sea’s ‘steady motion of advance’ is menacing and relentless, an early portent of the inescapable wedding night. Thus McEwan achieves through description the truth of their fears without ever explicitly stating them, recalling Ishiguro’s use of the landscape at Mortimer’s Pond and later near Moscombe to suggest Stevens’ emotional blindness: ‘I found myself in a narrow lane, hemmed in on either side by foliage so that I could gain little idea of what was around me. Neither could I see far ahead, the lane winding quite sharply’; ‘the daylight had all but faded, and the mist growing ever thicker.’

140 However, the ultimate tragedy of *On Chesil Beach* is that although Florence finally succeeds in communicating the entire truth, Edward still rejects her. Truth and clarity are not enough, an essential issue also seen in Stevens’ ‘epiphany’ at the end of the novel. He finally admits, in straightforward language, his guilt: ‘You see, I trusted. I trusted his lordship’s wisdom.’ As with Florence’s admission, Stevens’ short, uninhibited sentences convey his sincerity. Yet despite achieving clarity, Stevens is unable to translate this to a positive change in his life. He is still hopelessly bound to his profession, as is depressingly clear in the closing lines of the novel: ‘I should hope, then, that by the time of my employer’s return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him.’ He will practise his ‘bantering’ in order to make him a more effective servant to Mr Farraday.

150 In both novels, disabled communication precipitates the breakdown of the central relationships through evasion, deception and delusion. In the first-person narrative voice of *The Remains of the Day* inadequate communication even extends to the reader. One might read this as a symptom of self-deception by Stevens even in the midst of a text which presents itself as confessional. In both texts, the characters’ failure to communicate reflects a struggle to engage with personal emotion and guilt or shame. The entire truth of each situation is only vocalised when Florence and Stevens have achieved some recognition of their own failings. The nineteenth-century English realist tradition is based on this movement towards self-knowledge and we can see both *The Remains of the Day* and *On Chesil Beach* as a continuation of this tradition. Yet as is so clear in both, 160 the achievement of truth and clarity is not enough. The damage of silence and evasion has already been done to human relationships.

2,175 words

AO	Comments	Band	Mark
AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sophisticated and creative. Individual response. <input type="checkbox"/> Focused, fully engaged with clear, line of argument rooted in conceptual understanding and thorough knowledge. <input type="checkbox"/> Highly accurate expression with flair achieved through precision of vocabulary and application of relevant literary terms. Academic register sustained and impressive. <input type="checkbox"/> Well organised but some imbalance between texts and rather brief at 2,175 words 	5	
AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Strong emphasis throughout on literary approach to texts in sustained focus on the writers behind the texts, their literary choices and intentions linked to wider themes. <input type="checkbox"/> Confident, apt textual support. <input type="checkbox"/> Confident discussion of implied meaning. <input type="checkbox"/> Perceptive analysis of language in both texts. <input type="checkbox"/> Strong sense of generic awareness in appropriate focus on prose techniques. <input type="checkbox"/> Some opportunities to probe use of language/devices and evaluate effects in closer detail at times (especially as response is 2,175 words). Could 'dig in' further to key quotations to secure full marks. 	5	
AO3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sound, secure understanding of significance of contextual influences on both texts. <input type="checkbox"/> Considers relevant social/historical and literary contexts and links effectively to texts. Clearly aware of how to make use of context as a way of informing and enhancing literary appreciation of texts. <input type="checkbox"/> Stops short of perceptive discussion and confident analysis of relationship between context and texts. Scope for more consideration of importance of context in both writers' choice of historical settings. <input type="checkbox"/> Good to see context is not allowed to drive response but AO3 a little neglected here (especially as response is 2,175 words at present). 	4+	
AO4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sound and secure connections between texts throughout linked confidently to task. Precise and carefully worded introduction establishes main point of comparison between texts from outset. <input type="checkbox"/> Links always purposeful and relevant. Moves confidently between texts <input type="checkbox"/> Stops short of <i>illuminating</i> links: further scope to demonstrate how reading of one text has extended and enhanced literary appreciation of the other through contrast as well as comparison. More detail about <i>On Chesil Beach</i> needed. <input type="checkbox"/> Again potential to develop key literary connections already raised: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • both writers' use of topography/setting to convey meaning to reader which characters do not/cannot articulate; • effects of first versus third person narrative viewpoints; • novels' endings, etc. 	4+	

AO5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Confident, purposeful use of other relevant readings, well integrated and linked to central argument <input type="checkbox"/> Clear awareness of ambiguity in both texts and effective use of tentative language appropriate to literary response <input type="checkbox"/> Some evidence of autonomous reader <input type="checkbox"/> Scope for more <i>discussion</i> of views, especially in relation to <i>On Chesil Beach</i>, as most of quoted critical opinions relate to Ishiguro's choices. <input type="checkbox"/> Also potential for further exploration of complexity which is at heart of both texts and writers' presentation of key characters and relationships. 	5-	
Total Mark	<p>Confident, independent and solidly literary response with evidence of sophistication and definite strengths, especially in AO2.</p> <p>This is clearly a work in progress. As it stands, the response meets high Band 4 criteria in all AOs and some Band 5.</p> <p>However, it is rather brief at 2,175 words and there is an imbalance between the texts with more detailed focus on <i>The Remains of the Day</i> (60:40).</p> <p>There is scope within the recommended 2,500 to 3,500 words for the candidate to develop key points already raised, to even the balance between texts a little, and to achieve full marks in each AO.</p>	4+/5-	