



BYRONIC HEROES OF ISHIGURO

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Abstract: The Byronic hero, originating in Lord Byron's Romantic poetry as a figure of magnetic contradiction—proud yet tormented, rebellious yet affectionate, alienated by guilt—traditionally embodies grand passion amid isolation and moral complexity. This paper contends that Kazuo Ishiguro reimagines this archetype in his protagonists, Masuji Ono of *An Artist of the Floating World*, and Stevens of *The Remains of the Day*, transforming spectacular Romantic rebellion into subdued 20th-century tragedies of denial and self-suppression.

Ono, reflecting on his wartime propaganda collaborations and betrayal of student Kuroda, and Stevens, complicit in his employer's fascist sympathies while suppressing love for Miss Kenton, share Byronic hallmarks: unreliable narration masking inner turmoil, professional personas as emotional shields, subtle social ostracism, and paradoxical pride amid unrecognised errors. Through close textual analysis of their memories, narrative evasions, and late epiphanies, the study reveals Ishiguro's innovation: Byronic suffering persists not in defiance of gods or tyrants, but in ordinary lives entangled with imperialism and fascism, where autonomy yields to misguided duty.

Index Terms- Byronic hero, Kazuo Ishiguro, Masuji Ono, Stevens, unreliable narration, moral ambiguity, historical complicity, social isolation, guilt, denial, emotional suppression

When Lord Byron created the character type that would bear his name, he gave literature a figure of magnetic contradiction: proud yet tortured, rebellious yet deeply feeling, capable of great affection yet estranged from human connection. The Byronic hero, as literary historian Lord Macaulay famously describes, is 'a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection' (Christiansen 1989, 201). From Childe Harold to Manfred, from the Giaour to Conrad the corsair, these characters stride through Byron's poetry as figures of grand passion and grander guilt.

At first glance, Kazuo Ishiguro's protagonists seem unlikely candidates for such company. Masuji Ono is an elderly Japanese painter reflecting on his career in post-war Nagasaki; Stevens is an English butler driving through the West Country in 1956. Neither storms across battlefields nor seduces unwilling maidens; neither openly defies social convention nor proclaims his alienation. Yet beneath their measured exteriors and meticulously polite prose, Ono and Stevens embody the essential characteristics of the Byronic hero—transformed, as this paper will argue, into figures suited to the quieter tragedies of the twentieth century.

The Byronic hero archetype, which first reached wide public attention in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818), draws on earlier literary figures including Shakespeare's Hamlet, Goethe's Werther, and the Gothic villains of Ann Radcliffe. Its defining features include: a troubled past or dark secret; high intelligence combined with emotional intensity; social isolation or alienation; a proud, disdainful attitude; and the capacity for both great good and great wrong. Crucially, the Byronic hero is often "tortured by guilt or a secret from his past", and his suffering stems not from external circumstances but from his own nature and choices.

The term Byronic hero derives from the protagonist of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Though Byron himself insisted the character was fictitious, readers immediately associated Byron with his gloomy hero. The archetype developed through subsequent works, including *The Giaour* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), *Lara* (1814), and the closet drama *Manfred* (1817). Byron describes Conrad in *The Corsair* as:

That man of loneliness and mystery,
Scarce seen to smile, and seldom heard to sigh;
Whose name appals the fiercest of his crew,
And tints each swarthy cheek with sallow hue;
Still sways their souls with that commanding art
That dazzles, leads, yet chills the vulgar heart.

(*The Corsair*, Canto 1)

Scholars from such passages have derived the core characteristics of the Byronic hero as someone left in solitude, embroiled in mystery; emotionally intense but concealed beneath a cold exterior; guilt-conscious but has scorn for conventional morality with a paradoxical ability to inspire both fear and fascination. Later critics have emphasised the hero's high intelligence and emotional awareness, which tends to lead them to brood over choices made and be outsiders to society, which Peter L. Thorslev, in his 1962 book *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, calls 'the burden of the past'. The literary descendants of the archetype are numerous. Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) are often cited as classic Victorian examples. More recently, scholars have identified Byronic elements in characters as diverse as Batman, with his dark side of human possibilities and moral code that do not align with the law, and Anakin Skywalker of *Star Wars*. What unites these figures across centuries and media is their combination of grandeur and guilt, their isolation from society, and their capacity for both nobility and transgression.

Masuji Ono: The Artist as Reluctant Byronic Hero

Masuji Ono presents a distinctive variation on the Byronic hero who looks back on a career that began in the aesthetic floating world of nighttime entertainment and ended in the service of Imperial propaganda. Ono's secret, unlike the quintessential Byronic hero, is more mundane, rather than murder or piracy. He denounced his own student, Kuroda and reported his activities to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities, resulting in his arrest and destruction of his paintings. This act of betrayal was committed in the name of patriotic duty and becomes a hidden wound around which Ono's narrative circles without ever directly confronting it.

This Byronic quality of Ono emerges not from what he says but rather how he says it. His narration is marked by what critics call denial and a high degree of unreliability. He presents his memories elaborately, but often with uncertain details. He recounts the episode with Kuroda's arrest while focusing on his own attempt to mitigate the brutality of police, a detail that may be a retrospective fabrication devised to avoid his own responsibility or may reflect genuine self-deception. In either case, the narrative itself becomes the site of Byronic torment: the consciousness that knows itself guilty yet cannot fully acknowledge its guilt. In this, he aligns with Byron's Manfred, who declares:

My injuries came down on those who loved me—
 On those whom 'twas impossible to love;
 I never quell'd an enemy, save in my just defence—
 But my embrace was fatal.

(Manfred, Act 3 Scene 4)

Ono's embrace, too, proves to be fatal; if not physically, then morally and professionally. His patronage of Kuroda culminates in betrayal. The embrace of the teacher-student relationship becomes the instrument of destruction.

The Byronic hero is typically isolated from society, either by choice or by circumstances. Though Ono experiences a subtle isolation as he remains physically present in his community but exists at an angle to it, conscious of glances that linger too long and conversations that fall silent at his approach. The failure of the marriage negotiations of his younger daughter is attributed to his wartime activities, which Ono never quite admits and attributes the cancellation to other causes, while his narrative inadvertently confirms his family's fears. This social isolation coexists with profound pride as Ono repeatedly presents himself as a figure of importance, a man whose artistic choices mattered, whose political commitments were serious, whose influence shaped younger artists.

At the end of the novel, there is a faint admission of his past errors, which may or may not be considered as a public confession of error when Ono reflects:

I feel a certain optimism for the new generation... I have witnessed many changes over these past few years, and I like to think I have been as receptive as any man to these changes. I have no regrets for my past actions.
 (An Artist of the Floating World, 190-91)

The pride that sustains this self-assessment is thoroughly Byronic: it is the pride of one who has erred greatly because he aimed greatly, who has been wrong but never trivial.

Perhaps the most Byronic feature that can be identified in Ono's nature is his moral ambiguity. Ono shares a similar moral territory with Byron's heroes as The Giaour, who is a murderer but also a lover betrayed; Lara, a figure of mysterious violence but also of unexplained suffering. Ono definitely can't be called a villain, though he collaborated with villains; not a monster, though his actions had monstrous consequences. His crime can't be defined as malice but was rather a misguided idealism swept up in the current of a great historical crime, entangled with his genuine artistic achievement, cultural loyalty, a generation that chose wrongly in good faith.

Stevens: The Butler as Suppressed Byronic Hero

If Masuji Ono is the Byronic hero adapted to the context of post-war Japan then Stevens of *The Remains of day* is his English counterpart. Where Ono is an artist with great art pieces to his name, Stevens is an artist whose medium is service with suppression of his humanity being his masterpiece.

Stevens devoted his life to becoming what he calls a "great butler"—a professional ideal defined by "dignity" and the ability to inhabit one's role completely. The project required the systematic denial of personal feeling, the subordination of private self to professional persona. Yet beneath Stevens's measured prose, one can detect a stream of incandescent lava that flows passionately underground. This volcanic interior, concealed beneath a frozen surface, is precisely the condition of the Byronic hero. Byron describes Conrad as "That man of loneliness and mystery, / Scarce seen to smile, and seldom heard to sigh" —a description that could be applied to Stevens, whose emotional life can only be inferred from what he does not say. The only difference is that Conrad's repression serves the purposes of a pirate chief, whereas Stevens's serves the purposes of a country house. But the psychological structure is

remarkably similar: a conscious self that presents a controlled facade to the world, and an unconscious self that seethes with suppressed feeling.

The cost of suppression is clearly visible in Stevens's relationships, especially with Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, who not only shares his professional world but, it becomes clear later, even his unacknowledged affections. Miss Kenton's attempts to provoke an emotional response by entering the pantry uninvited, challenging his professional decisions, and even eventually offering him an ultimatum of her departure, but Stevens only retreats into his role. He doesn't admit his feelings and only offers his congratulations when she announces her engagement. This is not the coldness of a man without feeling but the rigour of a man who has trained himself to feel nothing and suffers for it.

The question of moral responsibility haunts Stevens throughout the novel. He opines that a butler's duty is to serve and not to judge his employers' choices. Yet with the progress of the narration, his defence becomes increasingly weak. When Miss Kenton challenges him about the dismissal of two Jewish maids, dismissed at Lord Darlington's insistence to please visiting Nazis, Stevens insists that it is not his place to judge his employer. The moral vacuum at the heart of professional duty becomes Stevens's equivalent of the Byronic hero's guilty secret.

Explaining his position, Stevens later in the novel says:

"Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man. He wasn't a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it; he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that." (*Remains of the Day*, 243)

These lines reveal the Byronic dimension of Steven's character with clarity. He, in his own estimation, is less than the man whose errors he served. It's not because he is less guilty but because he is less autonomous. His tragedy is not that he chose wrongly but that he chose not to choose at all.

Like many Byronic heroes, Stevens too experiences a moment of late recognition; a glimpse of what life might have been after meeting Miss Kenton for the first time in decades. He had to accept the fact that she would not return to Darlington Hall and that their lost possibilities would never be recovered. The stranger's words on the pier to put his feet up and enjoy himself in the evening, for the day's work has been done offers him the wisdom that forces the revelation. The 'remains of the day' becomes a metaphor for his life: the hours that remain after the work is done, the years that remain after choices are made. His decision in the novel's final lines to improve his bantering with his American employer represents not his triviality but a tentative step towards the emotional life he had denied himself all these years. It is perhaps the Byronic hero's first gesture towards ordinary humanity.

Both protagonists carry guilt that they cannot fully acknowledge. Ono's guilt concerns his active collaboration with militarism; while Stevens's concerns his passive complicity with fascism. One acted; while the other served. Yet both share the characteristic Byronic condition of knowing and not knowing simultaneously—of carrying a truth too painful to confront directly.

This condition showcases itself in their narrative styles. Both employ what critics have called "unreliable narration," but their unreliability differs in texture. Ono's narration is marked by what one scholar terms "denial" and the psychological mechanisms... to erase, revise, and reconstruct his past. He claims uncertainty about events that his own account makes clear, as if memory itself were a site of moral struggle. Stevens's narration, in contrast, is marked by omission—the feelings he does not report, the significance he does not grasp. His unreliability is the unreliability of a man who has trained himself not to see.

Both protagonists hide behind their professional identities. One as an artist of the floating world—a phrase that describes his phase in the pre-war pleasure district and later commitment to political art. Stevens, meanwhile hides behind his dignified demeanour as butler of Darlington Hall, using the professional vocabulary to hide his own narrative. Critics refer to this as a ‘mask’ that silents reveals, and conceals at the same time. The masking of these two characters aligns with the Byronic tradition. Byron’s heroes, including corsair, giaour, and lord, have a role that proves inadequate to contain their inner lives. The mask these characters adorn is both a protection and a prison. Ono's identity as an artist allows him to discuss his propaganda paintings in terms of technique rather than politics; Stevens's identity as a butler allows him to discuss his life in terms of service rather than choice. In both cases, the professional vocabulary enables evasion while hinting at what is evaded.

Moreover, the Byronic hero's characteristic isolation takes different forms in the two novels. Ono remains in his community but exists at its margins, conscious of changed attitudes and averted glances. Stevens, by contrast, experiences isolation as a function of his role: the butler serves but does not belong, observes but does not participate. Yet both forms serve the same narrative function. They create the space for retrospective meditation, for the circling of memory around the wound. Both novels are, in essential ways, studies in solitude—the solitude of men who have outlived their contexts and must reckon with what they have done and failed to do.

Neither Ono nor Stevens achieves conventional redemption. Ono's ambiguous filled confession towards the end of the novel could either be a genuine acknowledgement or could be further self-deception, as the text leaves the question open-ended. Stevens's decision to improve his bantering is at once a capitulation to American superficiality and a tentative step toward emotional honesty. In both cases, Ishiguro refuses the satisfactions of clear moral resolution.

This refusal is itself Byronic. Byron's heroes rarely find peace; Manfred dies refusing the consolations of religion; the Giaour ends his days in monastic isolation, still tormented; Lara falls in battle, his secrets unconfessed. The Byronic condition is one of sustained tension, of guilt neither fully expiated nor fully denied. Ono and Stevens inherit this condition, translated into the quieter idioms of mid-century Japan and England.

Masuji Ono and Stevens, the protagonists of Kazuo Ishiguro's two great novels of the 1980s, represent a distinctive variation on the Byronic hero archetype. They possess the archetype's essential features—the dark secret, the social isolation, the proud self-concealment, the moral ambiguity—but render them in a minor key suited to the twentieth century. Their crimes are not the spectacular sins of Byron's pirates and nobles but the quieter tragedies of complicity with historical evil and emotional self-betrayal. Their suffering is not the grand passion of Manfred confronting the elements but the persistent ache of memory circling what cannot be confronted.

In adapting the Byronic hero for these characters, Ishiguro demonstrates the archetype's remarkable flexibility and enduring relevance. The Byronic hero need not stride through exotic landscapes or defy the gods; he may simply drive through the English countryside, remembering, or sit in a Japanese house, remembering. The essential condition is the same: a consciousness divided against itself, carrying knowledge it cannot fully acknowledge, isolated by guilt it cannot fully expiate.

Ishiguro's achievement is to have recognised that this condition is not limited to romantic rebels but pervades the ordinary lives of those who lived through the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Ono and Stevens are Byronic because their century was Byronic—an age of grand ambitions and catastrophic errors, of good intentions serving evil ends, of individuals swept up in currents beyond their control yet responsible, somehow, for where those currents carried them. In their quiet, desperate narratives, the Byronic hero finds his appropriate modern form.

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