

## Film Review: *The Remains of the Day*

This is a sophisticated but sadly unsettling 1993 film that strikes a powerful blow at Britain's system of peerage. It examines pre-World War II Britain from the perspective of an English butler, who is *in service* to the influential and powerful **Earl of Darlington** (James Fox.) While it's been said that "*no man is a hero to his butler*," **James Stevens** (Anthony Hopkins) has devoted most of his adult life to serving *Lord Darlington*, a devotion that borders on idolatry. Sadly, *Stevens* recognizes much too late that his misguided loyalty and devotion have forced him to subordinate his own life and any possibility of happiness.

The film begins in 1958 as *Stevens* is driving to England's west coast to reacquaint with a former Housekeeper at Darlington Hall named **Miss Sarah Kenton** (Emma Thompson.) As he drives west across England to their rendezvous, he reminisces about the intervening years in flashbacks but his recollections aren't nostalgic. *Lord Darlington* has recently died a broken man, with his reputation forever damaged by his pre-war support of German National Socialism. In fact, some of his activities could easily have been interpreted as collaboration or treason. In one scene, *Lord Darlington* has invited several like-minded peers to a secret meeting with Hitler's Foreign Minister, **Joachim von Ribbentrop** (Wolf Kahler) at Darlington Hall.

The devotion *Stevens* showered on *Lord Darlington* prevented him from establishing his own identity, independent of his role as Butler. Thus, he turned a blind eye to *Lord Darlington's* sympathies for Hitler, and once callously carried out *Darlington's* merciless order to dismiss two recently hired Jewish maids who were German refugees. In another scene, *Stevens* stoically endured humiliation at the hands of *Lord Darlington's* peers, who amused themselves by asking his opinion about some esoteric detail involving global trade, merely to demonstrate how the

lower classes are too ignorant to govern themselves. This crushing insult was coldly uttered within earshot of *Stevens*.

In another scene, *Lord Darlington* has organized a secret meeting at Darlington Hall between British Prime Minister **Neville Chamberlain** (Frank Shelley) and German Foreign Minister *von Ribbentrop*. When *Darlington's* godson, a journalist named **Reginald Cardinal** (Hugh Grant) shows up "*unexpectedly*" at Darlington Hall on the very day of the meeting, he is appalled when he learns of what is about to take place. Wrongly assuming that *Lord Darlington* might take *Stevens'* counsel, *Cardinal* desperately tries to convince him that *Lord Darlington* is being used by the NAZIs, and begs him to warn his employer. However, *Stevens* replies that it's not his place to interfere with *Darlington's* politics.



**Secret Meeting at Darlington Hall**

The willingness of *Stevens* to subordinate his own life in order to serve *Lord Darlington* also prevented him from developing a personal relationship with *Miss Sarah Kenton*, although they had developed a respect and fondness for one another in the course of working together over several years. They were both prevented from showing affection to

each other by the repressed and strait-laced *Stevens*. Desperate for companionship, *Miss Kenton* ultimately accepts a proposal of marriage from another co-worker and leaves Darlington Hall. However, before leaving, she gives *Stevens* one last opportunity to grasp whatever happiness they might find together. All *Stevens* can do is sputter congratulations on her engagement and deflect the conversation by tersely directing her to some banal task requiring attention.



***Miss Sarah Kenton and James Stevens***

While he is in route to his rendezvous with *Miss Kenton*, *Stevens* runs out of petrol but a *good samaritan* helps him refuel. *Stevens* is then invited into a local pub, where he is initially mistaken for a gentleman because of his elocution and the *Daimler-Benz* his new employer has generously loaned him. The *good samaritan* soon surmises that *Stevens* is actually a butler rather than a lord, and that he is in service to the new owner of Darlington Hall, a former U.S. Congressman named ***Jack Lewis*** (Christopher Reeve.) When the *good samaritan* mentions *Lord*

*Darlington's* pre-war NAZI sympathies, *Stevens* denies ever meeting *Lord Darlington* in a manner reminiscent of Peter's denial of Jesus Christ. Begrudgingly, *Stevens* eventually acknowledges that *Darlington's* pre-war sympathies were naive and misguided.

As he is leaving, *Stevens* tells the *good samaritan* that while *Lord Darlington* was unable to correct *his* great error, he (*Stevens*) intends to correct his own. (By this he clearly meant his rendezvous with the former *Miss Kenton*.) When they eventually meet for tea, *Miss Kenton* pointedly informs *Stevens* that she is now separated from her husband. They also discuss how *Lord Darlington's* health declined after he sued a newspaper for libel, eventually losing both his lawsuit and his reputation. *Stevens* tells her that *Darlington's* godson, the journalist *Reginald Cardinal*, was killed in the war. She declines his offer to resume her position at *Darlington Hall* in order to remain with her pregnant daughter. The reunion is brief and bittersweet because both still harbor feelings for one another, and recognize they will probably never meet again.



**Their Bitter-Sweet Departure**

This is a brilliantly-acted, thoughtful and nuanced film that doesn't require zombies, nudity, or harrowing car chases. It's a glimpse into the culture, politics and system of peerage that dominated Britain prior to World War II. The film's title, "***the remains of the day***," can be interpreted in many ways: it might refer to the damage visited upon Britain by NAZI Germany during the *Battle of Britain*, the little that remains of *Stevens'* private life after decades of loyal service, or the remnants of affection that *Stevens* and *Miss Kenton* once harbored for one another. Yet, more than anything else, it probably refers to the fading splendor of Darlington Hall, and by inference, Britain's system of peerage.

After his return to Darlington Hall following his rendezvous with the former *Miss Kenton*, *Stevens* is asked by its new American owner, *Jack Lewis*, if he recalls anything that was said at *Lord Darlington's* conference with *von Ribbentrop* in the 1930s. *Stevens* deftly evades the obvious by replying that he was too busy serving guests to hear the substance of any speeches that were made. Just then, a pigeon flies down the room's chimney, which Darlington Hall's new owner deftly scoops up and gently releases through a window, thus symbolizing the end of an era of powerful and wealthy British aristocrats, and the feudalism that it took two world wars to finally tame.

-- by Earl P. Holt III