

Rooms with a View in *Middlemarch* and *The Remains of the Day*

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In our lives, the places we live are expressive, not just of our taste, but also of our characters. In a similar way, novelists frequently use setting to tell us about the characters they have created. As Anna Jewers shows in this insightful essay, both George Eliot and Kazuo Ishiguro bring out central themes of their novels through the settings they create for their protagonists. Both Eliot's Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* and Ishiguro's Mr. Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* retreat to private spaces that initially represent their entrapment: Dorothea's yearnings for a spiritually meaningful life are stifled by her disastrous marriage, while Stevens can't (or won't) see past his narrow perspective as a man content to serve, rather than to live for himself. As they each undergo a painful process of personal development, their relationship to these settings also changes. Anna's essay shows how even very small details in the authors' descriptions help us to understand much larger issues in the novels.

— Dr. Rohan Maitzen

A novel oftentimes uses its setting as a device to influence its characters. However, the ways in which characters regard their surroundings and how this perspective evolves throughout a novel can, conversely, influence the novel's setting. As a result, settings can exhibit dimensions of a character's personal growth. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* both exemplify how characters absentmindedly shape their environments to reflect their moods. Rooms are used in both novels – such as Dorothea's boudoir in *Middlemarch* and the rooms of

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Darlington Hall in *The Remains of the Day* – as objective correlatives to the main characters' innermost feelings.

The interiors of Dorothea's boudoir in *Middlemarch* and Stevens's pantry in *The Remains of the Day* are described with special attention to the fine details that their respective characters dwell on. Chapter 9 of *Middlemarch* depicts Dorothea's first impression of the room that will become her boudoir at Lowick Manor.

[T]he furniture was all of a faded blue, and there were miniatures of ladies and gentlemen with powdered hair hanging in a group. A piece of tapestry over a door also showed a blue-green world with a pale stag in it. The chairs and tables were thin-legged and easy to upset [...] A light book-case contained duodecimo volumes of polite literature in calf, completing the furniture. (Eliot 69)

This subjective description incorporates colour imagery that expresses blandness with diction such as "faded," "powdered," and "pale," as well as feeble descriptors like "miniatures," "piece," "thin-legged," "easy," and "light" (69). Dorothea is not aware at this point in the novel of what is to come with the disappointment from her marriage to Casaubon, but already the boudoir hints at a sense of lifelessness and decline – not unlike Casaubon himself. When he and Dorothea arrive back to Lowick Manor after honeymooning in Rome, Dorothea enters her "blue-green" boudoir to find "[t]he very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before: the

stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world; the volumes of polite literature in the bookcase looked more like immovable imitations of books" (256). The room has come to represent her despair and feeling of being trapped in her marriage to Casaubon, as it is stated, "The duties of her married life, contemplated as so great beforehand, seemed to be shrinking with the furniture [...]" (257).

When one considers the interior of Stevens's pantry in *The Remains of the Day*, one also recognizes the same sense of blandness and entrapment: "It seemed such a pity your room should be so dark and cold [...] surely, Mr. Stevens, there is no need to keep your room so stark and bereft of colour" (Ishiguro 60). The common saying "like father, like son" fits well within this context with how Stevens describes being "struck by the smallness and starkness" of his own father's room at Darlington Hall, like he had "stepped into a prison cell [...] with the size of the room [and] the bareness of its walls" (76). Stevens is the same way, and his father is a figure who represents the man he may very well become. The pantry is a representation of Stevens's life as he always lives by the same principles, no matter how flawed they may be. Whenever someone tries to get closer to him - like Miss Kenton's attempts to "brighten [his] parlour a little" with "a large vase of flowers" (60) - his pantry always ends up being as bland as it has always been, just as with himself and his own brand of blandness.

The views from Dorothea's boudoir in *Middlemarch* and the windows of Darlington Hall in *The Remains of the Day*

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communicate the character's emotions, through how their perspectives can alter these views. Dorothea's boudoir is stated to supposedly have a view of the "happy side of the house" on page 67 of *Middlemarch*, but in Chapter 28, the landscape from the bow-window of Dorothea's boudoir is displayed as a reflection of her sinking mood and feelings of confinement: "[S]he saw the long avenue of limes lifting their trunks from a white earth, and spreading white branches against the dun and motionless sky. The distant flat shrank in uniform whiteness and low hanging uniformity of cloud [...] a moral imprisonment [...]" (Eliot 256-258). This scene occurs in mid-January, so the repeated use of the word "white" refers to the snow (256). This natural element connotes the cold isolation Dorothea feels after realizing the mistake she made in marrying Casaubon, which is emphasized even more so by her interpretation of the landscape as "chill, colourless, [and] narrowed" (258). The landscape from her boudoir's window takes on a new interpretation in Chapter 80.

[T]here was light piercing into the room. She opened her curtains, and looked out towards [...] the road [where] there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving-perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere

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spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish
complaining. (741)

Dorothea has an epiphany in this moment, choosing to not mourn her feelings for Will Ladislaw after seeing him with Rosamond. She has grown to realize the overall message of *Middlemarch* here, the fact that it is not all about her, when she decides to not wallow in self-pity; rather, she chooses to act in the world based upon this newfound principle.

The act of turning to glance out windows also offers a sort of escape. When Dorothea first enters the room that is to become her boudoir and Casaubon does not give her as much insight as she had hoped for into the miniature of his Aunt Julia that resides in the room, she “turn[s] to the window to admire the view. The sun had lately pierced the grey, and the avenue of limes cast shadows” (Eliot 70). This is similar to when Stevens goes to his father’s room early one morning to cut down his workload after he fell with a tray in hand, entering to find his father “had opened his curtains and [...] had been watching the sky turn to dawn [...][-] there being little else to view from his small window other than roof-tiles and guttering” (Ishiguro 76). These instances illustrate how one looks out a window to find a distraction from the room’s emotional atmosphere and, in turn, the views outside reflect these thoughtful, poignant perspectives.

There is even the occasion where Stevens is in the second landing of Darlington Hall, walking down a corridor that has each bedroom door ajar, when he spots “Miss Kenton’s figure, silhouetted against a window” (Ishiguro 57). Miss Kenton quietly calls him in to join her

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and, from the view of the window, they can see his father “walking back and forth in front of the summerhouse, looking down at the ground as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there” (57). The significance that this event holds varies, depending upon whose perspective you view it from in this scene. From the second-landing window, Stevens watches his father – someone whom he had considered a great, dignified butler – try to find, perhaps, the greatness or dignity he lost when he tripped with a tray in hand while walking up to the summerhouse. Miss Kenton watches from the same place as Stevens, but her perspective is possibly altered by the pity she feels for Stevens’s father and perhaps also for Stevens himself, as she is well aware by this time of Stevens’s professional mannerisms and views on what it means to be a good butler – so she must realize what Stevens must be feeling while watching the same scene from by her side. However, Stevens’s father in this moment is determined to not let his fall be the end for him, as no longer being allowed to work as a butler would be just that since his career has been an extensive part of his life. As well, how Miss Kenton and Stevens look down at him through the window resembles how he must fear everyone in Darlington Hall looks down on him now, as though he truly did lose his greatness and dignity the moment he fell.

Rooms can also be considered refuges – private spaces for personal growth; this is why it is so significant when someone else is allowed into that space. For Dorothea, however, her boudoir is where she goes to be alone-to

contemplate the mistakes she has made and the choices she has yet to make. When she comes back to Lowick after her honeymoon, she retreats to her boudoir as “[t]he ideas and hopes [...] in her mind when she first saw this room nearly three months before were present now only as memories; she judged them as we judge transient and departed things [...] in which every object was withering and shrinking away from her” (Eliot 258). Dorothea realizes the mistake she made in marrying Casaubon and the imagery of the room’s furnishings “withering and shrinking away” comes back again to represent her despair (258).

In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens’s pantry is his private refuge; Miss Kenton enters this space multiple times, but the time that Stevens considers a “turning point” is when she tries to pry the book he was reading out of his hands (Ishiguro 199). Stevens does not want to admit he has interests apart from butlering, and yet he says he did consider himself “off duty” (204). The fact that Miss Kenton had gotten so far into Stevens’s private space illustrates the closeness of their relationship. The evening sessions that Stevens and Miss Kenton spend together in her pantry over cocoa also emphasize their closeness, and when Stevens stops these sessions on page 213, he is closing himself off from being close with someone in what he would consider an unprofessional manner. Additionally, when Stevens makes his exit from Miss Kenton’s pantry after finding out that her aunt has passed away, he does not go back in to offer his condolences – even when he is sure she is crying – because “it occurred to [him] that if [he] were to do so, [he] might easily intrude

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upon her private grief" (215). Standing outside her door as she cries, Stevens does not want to enter that place of emotions; this incident is Stevens's biggest regret as one learns near the end of the book – the fact that he never allows himself to fully open up to another person. Nevertheless, both novels present rooms as intimate spaces that portray personal growth for the characters through the evolving perspectives of these settings.

The ways in which characters from *Middlemarch* and *The Remains of the Day* perceive their surroundings and how this perspective changes throughout the novels influences those settings. Both the interiors of the rooms and views from the windows of Dorothea's boudoir in *Middlemarch* and the rooms of Darlington Hall in *The Remains of the Day* act, through how rooms are private spaces of refuge, to depict these rooms as dimensions of their personal growth. Ultimately, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* are both novels that exemplify how characters absentmindedly shape their environments to reflect their moods, as their rooms act as objective correlatives to their emotions.

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