

English Honors, Class Mr. Ruppel

24 September 2018

Group Identities in The Sun Also Rises and The Remains of the Day

In Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises (TSAR) and Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day (TRODT), the reader is introduced to two very different experiences of the interwar period: one of a group of socially vagrant foreigners living in Paris, and one of a first-class butler and his lord in Great Britain. While one might expect these two groups, both influenced by the Great War, to behave similarly, this couldn't be further from the truth. Rather than one homogenous post-war society, there appear to be many unique group identities shown by each story. It seems that while group identities are influenced by major recent events, it cannot be overstated how fickle this relationship can be.

Perhaps the most obvious example of how the influence of events on people can change dramatically is how sizable the cultural changes in both novels are over a relatively short period of time. During The Sun Also Rises (1925) and the earlier flashbacks of The Remains of The Day (1923), both of which take place in the wake of World War One, everyone seems shaken and aimless. Most characters in TSAR lead meandering lives, working enough to get by and partying throughout the night. Lord Darlington, the only major character in TROTD who we know participated in the war, spends most of his time socialising with a German friend and is only spurred to action when said friend kills himself, as mused by his butler when he mentions, "As I recall, he had not been initially so preoccupied with the peace treaty when it was drawn up at the end of the Great War, and I think it is fair to say that his interest was prompted not so much by an

analysis of the treaty, but by his friendship with Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann.” When Darlington does act during this part of the book, it is in an attempt to provide humanitarian relief to Germany. In contrast, by the time the later flashbacks of TROTD roll around (1935) these sentiments seem distant history as Darlington becomes sympathetic with fascist movements. In a little more than a decade, Lord Darlington has shifted from a war exhaustion-fueled “It does us great discredit to treat a defeated foe like this. A complete break with the traditions of this country” to an anti-semitic “I’ve been doing a great deal of thinking, Stevens... And I’ve reached my conclusion. We cannot have Jews on the staff here at Darlington Hall.” That someone can be influenced so little by WWI after just an additional twelve year says a lot about how time can influence an event’s impact on people. They say ‘time heals all wounds’, it might be prudent to generalize this to ‘time “heals” all sentiments’.

Time isn’t the only thing to consider. Another, perhaps more immediate, variable is location. We view certain events (e.g. The World Wars) with the lens of them happening to everyone, but this isn’t the case. Spain, for instance, managed to avoid both world wars, and while they had gone through a military coup by the time TSAR takes place, it’s safe to say they had yet to experience a 20th-century war (Britannica). It makes sense then that one of the only characters in The Sun Also Rises who has a real purpose in his life is Pedro Romero, the Spanish bullfighter. Based on his age and residence, Pedro almost certainly did not participate in WWI and probably doesn’t know many people who did. His life is unburdened by the weight of the war and thus doesn’t share the group identity of the rest of the characters. When Pedro talks to Jake about bullfighting, Jake mentions, “He was not at all embarrassed. He talked of his work as something altogether apart from himself. There was nothing conceited or braggartly about him.”

Pedro seems to be the only character in the book who can talk about his job with genuine enthusiasm and (unlike Robert Cohn) not come off as a prick. And just as global incidents don't influence some group identities, some group identities seem wholly influenced by local events. Throughout the entirety of TROTD, Stevens mentions a lot of butler-related terminologies (the actions of Mr. Marshal and Mr. Lane, the Hayes Society, etc.) as if the reader is supposed to know them. Things make a lot more sense when the reader realizes that Stevens is assuming that they exist in similar circles as he does, and thus would know similar people. The fact that Mr. Marshall and Mr. Lane can be rockstars in the world of butlers and nobodies everywhere else shows how different group identities (even in the same time frame) can be.

Acknowledging how fickle and fast-changing social identities sometimes are, it's concerning that they should have such a large impact on social norms. Take, for instance, the characters from both book's tendencies to be openly anti-semitic. When characters in TSAR make anti-semitic comments, they are always directed specifically at Robert Cohn and are usually given in such a manner that the reader could write off the comment as a joke. A good example being when Bill says of Cohn, "He's got this Jewish superiority so strong that he thinks the only emotion he'll get out of the fight will be being bored." By the latter flashbacks of TROTD, these types of comments are obviously more serious and are usually directed towards the people as a whole, as when Lord Darlington justifies removing Jewish staff members by saying, "It's regrettable, Stevens, but we have no choice. There's the safety and well-being of my guests to consider. Let me assure you, I've looked into this matter and thought it through thoroughly. It's all in our best interests." Of course in modern times all of these sorts of statements are extremely taboo.

Another concerning property group identities often possess is that any 'shaping' event that caused the identity is rarely mentioned by the group itself. In the entirety of TSAR, World War One is only directly discussed once when Jake recalls bringing up the subject while the gang is eating at a restaurant: "'I got hurt in the war,' I said. [Brett said] 'Oh, that dirty war.' We would probably have gone on and discussed the war and agreed that it was in reality a calamity for civilization, and perhaps would have been better avoided. I was bored enough." That's it. Every other mention of WWI is as a time marker for when events happened. The main world events of the 30's (Hitler's rise to power, The Great Depression) are similarly absent from TROTD. There's a reason for this -When everyone's experienced the same events when everyone has the same context for what they're talking about, it is only logical that they'd never mention that context directly because there's no need. This is doubly true for events (like WWI) that might cause distress or discomfort to those they're talking to.

Putting this information together we reach a startling conclusion. Not only do group identities change and change fast, what is socially acceptable changes just as quickly. Combine this with a tendency for people not to mention the defining events of their current group identities and the result is a recipe for misunderstandings and miscommunication across cultural lines. There's no easy way to avoid such misunderstandings, but we can and should keep in mind that they are bound to happen. That's not to say we should forgive awful behavior simply because it happened in a different time (the message of The Remains of the Day is quite the opposite), but we should attempt to be a little more patient. Looking to the future, we might also consider doing what we know is moral over what is socially acceptable so that future generations don't have to exercise such patience with us.

Sources Cited

ISHIGURO, KAZUO. REMAINS OF THE DAY. FABER AND FABER, 2018.

Hemingway, Ernest, et al. The Sun Also Rises. Scribner, 2016.

O'Callaghan, Joseph F., and John S. Richardson. "Spain." Encyclopædia Britannica,

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 23 Sept. 2018,

www.britannica.com/place/Spain/Primo-de-Rivera-1923-30-and-the-Second-Republic-19

31-36.
