

The societal consequences in ishiguro's novel



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Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro is a dystopian novel set in London, focusing on the lives of special humans called donors. These donors are actually human clones, who are raised in private schools until adulthood, when their vital organs can be used for transplants to normal humans with health issues. Not only is Ishiguro's novel dystopian, it's also uncanny, offering "the revelation of what is private or hidden: that which should have stayed secret but has been revealed" (Marks 341). The novel can be considered an uncanny one because "bioethical alarm at the prospect of human cloning is clearly linked to a fear of the uncanny, in the sense that the clone constitutes a crisis of the 'proper' and of the 'natural'; a comingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar" (Marks 341). The uncanny nature of the novel is significant because it creates a sense of discomfort for the reader; the emotional and moral implications of this discomfort force the reader out of his comfort zone. In Never Let Me Go, Ishiguro uses the genre of the uncanny to subtly criticize the modern-day class system and general ignorance of suffering. This is done with the use of a clone's perspective to tell the narrative, the humanization of the clones, and the societal implications of the existence of the clones.

Ishiguro's use of Kathy's perspective in Never Let Me Go allows for the readers to sympathize with the clones. The readers are introduced to the frame story with a greeting from older Kathy (Ishiguro 13), which puts the story into reference. Because Kathy is the central voice of the story, Ishiguro inherently grants significance to the clone's perspective. This "[has] the virtue of presenting the cloned life, however problematically, as an imagined and embedded social and psychological experience" (Marks 333). Because

the readers are faced with the reality of clone-living, they are forced to consider the depth of the implications of societal class, and likewise apply the implications to their own lives, in the real world. Further, Ishiguro has Kathy tell the story by “[drawing] upon autobiographical conceits—that is, the memory of education. However... [it] is an autobiography drained of its usual depth and acknowledgment of a fuller life outside of the textual boundaries... fixated instead on what little experience the protagonist holds” (McDonald 78). Not only is the story from the perspective of a clone, it is a telling of a clone’s life within a clone society. In fact, the story’s scope is generally limited to the clone culture. Kathy discusses the social and romantic aspects of her life, but spends little time discussing the events of the world outside her private school, Hailsham. Her naiveté of the world contrasts sharply with the harsh nature of her looming future: “ You’ll become adults, then before you’re even middle-aged, you’ll start to donate your vital organs. That’s what each of you was created to do” (Ishiguro 364). Even when faced with this reality, her character avoids any discussion of tragedy or equality for most of the novel. This tugs at the sympathy of the reader, who sees the injustice objectively and thus reacts with appropriate anger. Overall, “ Kathy simply does not seem to recognize the full horror of what she is telling the reader: ‘...It is in this sense that Kathy H. s voice can appear uncanny, a term that captures the disturbing mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar characteristic of nonhuman automata and doubles, to which Sigmund Freud first attributed the term ‘” (Marks 348). Kathy’s apparent apathy in regards to her tragic future creates discomfort for the reader, who wonders why the main character is breaking a binary and treating injustice with passivity. This breaking of the heroic protagonist

archetype by an objectively likeable character allows for the reader to sympathize with the oppressed, but does not directly attack the position of the reader. Essentially, Ishiguro utilizes a theoretical world to make her protagonist universally likeable, no matter the background of the reader, and thus have a reader sympathetic to the plight of Kathy.

Ishiguro further allows the reader to sympathize with the clones by humanizing them as a group. Kathy is kind and sensitive, as seen in her dealings with the bullied boy Tommy (Ishiguro 390-3). So, "The reader is left to wonder why Kathy H. - an otherwise apparently perceptive, sensitive individual, who clearly has a recognizable interior life (a 'soul') - can accept her difference and her fate with such equanimity" (Marks 348). Because the clones in the book show traits of normal humans- sensitivity, creativity- their sense of otherness is diminished. The possibility of a soul means the clones are no different than humans; it turns the act of donation into systematic genocide. Kindness is not the only proof of soul: "the pupils from Hailsham cultivate the hope that they might be able to locate their 'possibles', in other words the individuals from whom they were originally cloned... We, too, are copiers, and their vain search for 'possibles' constitutes an affecting parallel with our own efforts to give narrative coherence to conventional biological kinship relations" (Marks 349). Most of the clones hope for a sense of family; they want to feel like legitimate beings in a world which tells them they are unnatural. Loyalty and sense of family is a central motivator within biological beings. Because the clones are largely isolated from the outside world, this act of seeking relations is not a mimicking of normal humans. It is an inherent component of their sense of self. The society within the novel

does not recognize this evidence, though. Within the society, “ The children (or captives) are described as “ special” and “ gifted” by their guardians (or wardens), and their murders are described as “ completions,” a jarring reminder of their sole purpose in the eyes of society, and of the ways in which language can normalize atrocities deemed necessary in a given ideology” (Mcdonald 78). The society within the novel uses language as a barrier between themselves and their immoral activity. In the novel, “ special” carries the implication that the clones are sub-human, and so they do not have essential human rights. They are different, so they are not equals. The term “ completion” is a mechanical interpretation of death; it implies the clones are machines whose lives are not fulfilled or useful unless they are sacrificing it for the good of normal humans. Language, as a component of the culture of the book, is used to manipulate public opinion and discredit the claims of those who are suffering. Because the culture has been shaped to approve this activity, the people of that society are trained not to question the nature of the activity. The fact that the argument that clones are sub-human is not based on any behavioral evidence does not bother the society which benefits from the lie. The society within the book is willing to live in dishonesty as long as it is comfortable.

In order to make the plight of the clones more personal to the reader and consequently criticize modern society, Ishiguro utilizes mirroring of behavior within her story. Within Hailsham exists the Exchange system, in which students trade their crafts and belongings with each other (Ishiguro 390). This “ aesthetic economy of exchange at Hailsham is not mirrored in the outside world, where the students’ organs are regarded, precisely as ‘

donations'" (Marks 349). In this case, the lack of mirroring gives more significance to the sacrifice of the clones; the clones appear to be the only individuals who are giving in a society which seems to like taking. Simply put, the clones are giving up everything for the improvement of the lives of others; they are not being treated fairly. The balance of sacrifice and reward is put into question: Does the severe immorality of the donation system equal out with the benefits of an otherwise healthy society? This question applies to the real world too: Here and now, in the absence of segregated clones or a system of obligatory organ removal masquerading as voluntary "donation," it is almost equally certain that the futures the vast majority of children dream of will not be realized. The organ-donation gulag, tucked away from public view and yet not kept secret, has its obvious real-world counterpart in what we call class (Robbins 292). The reader must ask themselves of the real world: Does the severe immorality of the class system equal out with the benefits of a wealthy upper class? This mirroring is direct and personal; with the realization of this reflection, the reader is taken from his seat of objectivity and placed in the figurative hot seat.

Ishiguro's novel forces readers, especially those of wealth or living in the western world, to question their own position in life, and their sources of contentment. Ishiguro, in a way, puts the reader through a journey of emotional maturity as they learn to sympathize with a powerless and oppressed minority. Contemporary readers need to read the perspective of the clones and see the mirroring of the clones with the humans, as well as the society in the novel with real life society; they need to be completely immersed in the story in order to fully sympathize with the clones and make

the connection between the clones as an oppressed minority and real-life oppressed minorities. The combination of the breaking of the binary, the humanization of the clones, and the uncanny nature of the clones creates discomfort for the reader, forcing them to critically consider their own biases. Specifically, that perhaps Ishiguro's depiction of passive clones is not an attack at the oppressed who do not fight, but a poignant appeal to the oppressors to consider the effects of their actions. Additionally, Ishiguro argues that distancing the mind from unpleasant oppression with tainted language and false argument does not make the systematic oppression any less tragic.

Finally, instead of turning the tables on the reader by making the story of oppression a personal one, Ishiguro turns the figurative scales, forcing the reader to question the value of his own happiness in the balance of sacrifice and gain. Ultimately, it is the uncanny nature of the novel which grants it appeal and melancholy nature- "The world we are presented with is disturbingly similar to our own, and crucially, the practice of harvesting has become a largely unspoken but widely recognized fact of life, drawing parallels with the everyday human injustices witnessed in contemporary culture" (McDonald 76). *Never Let Me Go* is a call to action, with the unhelpful underlying understanding that it is the oppressors who are most in need of changing, yet it is the oppressors who will keep perpetuating a cycle of oppression as long as they are reaping the benefits.