

Why hope if there's  
none?



In Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's discovery of her world occurs simultaneously with the readers'. Except for the beginning, the readers travel through the same journey of discovery, excitement, and then the steady erosion of hope as the students of Hailsham learn of their fate. Interestingly, their journey involves questions about the future just as the readers are learning about a potential future they may encounter. Thus, Ishiguro pushes the readers to empathize, not just sympathize, with the characters presented in the novel through hope of a normal life, or love, and of freedom. In this way, he challenges not only the usage of clones as organ donors, but the conflicting role of hope as well.

One element of the novel's science-fiction nature that builds up hope for the reader is the accessibility of the world. The story begins with a date, "late 1990s" while the book itself was published in 2005. Thus, it presents a world that the readers are familiar with but then adds organ donors for the future. Furthermore, in the beginning of the novel, the readers are unaware that the characters are clones, and Hailsham is represented as a pleasant place just as it was for Kathy and Tommy. Thus Ishiguro isolated one potential issue of future scientific innovation and forced the readers to experience the potential consequences for themselves.

A perhaps larger issue Ishiguro confronts the readers and characters with is how to react and confront the unknowns with particular attention to hope. During grade school children in the current society and Hailsham are blissfully ignorant regarding adulthood. Many of them have dreams of becoming an NBA star, an actress, or an astronaut. Unlike children at Hailsham, however, children in the readers' society are unlikely to die at a

young age with no chance of doing anything besides becoming an organ donor. Consequently, Ishiguro presents contrasting viewpoints on how to treat the clones, with one of them being the sheltered environment of Hailsham. Miss Lucy, however, has the other opinion, and reacts after hearing some children talk about their dreams, “None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day. Your lives are set out for you” (81). When Miss Lucy finally cut off her outburst, Kathy felt relieved and believed her classmates felt the same way. For readers, this is the first time that they explicitly learn of the Hailsham children’s fates, and perhaps it was for other children in the novel as well.

As the Hailsham children transition to adulthood, they react to their impending fate differently. In the beginning of the period at the cottages Kathy describes living in a “cozy state of suspension in which we could ponder our lives without the usual boundaries” while some people such as Ruth would talk about their “dream futures” (142). Therefore, they were able to find solace in hope and dreams for the future since it was still relatively distant from them. Similarly, both Kathy and Ruth liked looking for a “possible” or the real person from whom they were cloned. Nevertheless, when Ruth’s hope grows too large, she actually further examines her “possible” in order to find out if her dream is a reality. This is a painful moment for both Ruth and the readers as her little glimpse of hope fades away, and she directly confronts her status as an undervalued person or in her words, modeled after “trash” (166). Other characters deal with this

knowledge differently, and although Tommy is one of the most hopeful throughout the novel, at the end even his hope completely corrodes.

After the last glimmer of hope dies for Kathy and Tommy, the readers feel the desperation of their lives. Ruth's final wish is for Kathy and Tommy to prove that they are in love and therefore delay their donations. However, rather than even having the chance to prove that they are in love, Miss Emily says the rumor is "something for them to dream about, a little fantasy. What harm is there?" (258). More than conveying the hopelessness of the situation, Ishiguro conveys the lack of empathy in many humans. Miss Emily's unfeeling response also questions her authority for starting Hailsham in the first place. Throughout the novel the "creatures" who as the readers know as Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth are not given a voice regarding their freedom, their time spent as a carer, or even their time spent before they become a carer. For Ruth, she has accepted this destiny and finds contentment in happy little memories. For Tommy, he bursts in uncontrollable rage but then as he starts his fourth donation, he gives up fighting for a voice. It's clear that Ishiguro does not give a right or wrong answer, but rather aims for the readers to actually experience these marginalized people's feelings and lack of hope.

Following the novel, the question still remains for how to treat people who do not have any hope for the future. Although it's cruel to tell young children not to dream does the disappointment overpower the misery? Kathy describes the feeling as walking past a mirror with a cold moment that there is "something troubling and strange" in your reflection (36). Although Kathy seemed the most content with her situation, she still is troubled and sad at

lost memories that she cannot let go and forget. Nevertheless, without any hope, it's likely that Kathy and Tommy would not have enjoyed time together in love. Similarly, her connection to Hailsham is also rooted in that moment of blissful ignorance. Yet for some perhaps the cold moment shatters those memories and erodes any hope, leaving an even more lifeless being.