

Comparing 'venus'  
and 'never let me go':  
sexuality,  
reproduction, and the  
inhuman...



Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* explore characters who are, due to scientific engineering or physical appearance, deemed inhuman by outside society. Their othering bars them from ordinary human experiences, but perhaps most notable is the ways in which the inhuman are prevented from engaging in traditional sexual and romantic relationships and from reproducing. Both *Never Let Me Go* and *Venus* display characters who, due to the ministrations of society and their categorization as "other", experience a deeply skewed version of sexuality and reproduction because their lack of acceptance into traditional human society prevents them from engaging in traditional human experiences, instead engaging in relationships that are a flawed imitation of the norm.

Ishiguro's clones were "copied at some point from a normal person" (Ishiguro, pg. 139) and exist solely to donate their organs to medical patients once they reach adulthood. Due to their unconventional origins and the strange conditions in which they are raised (in a boarding school in the middle of nowhere, with little exposure to the outside world), society deems them inhuman: when Kathy and Tommy confront Madame about the artwork she collected from them as children, she explains that she did so "to prove [the students] had souls at all" (Ishiguro, pg. 260). To outside society, especially the sponsors of the cloning project, the fact that the students of Hailsham were created from scientific engineering and not from physical parents, and the purpose for their creation, renders them entirely separate from the human race. They are considered soulless, even as children, and it is this marking as inhuman that initially prevents them from accessing the human experiences of traditional sexuality and reproduction. Saartjie

Baartman of Venus is dehumanized by her society based on her physical appearance, which departs from western beauty standards. In early nineteenth century England, a society populated almost exclusively by white people, she is South African, and presents a physical form that strays from the norm, namely large hips and buttocks. She is referred to as part of a "breed" known as "Big Bottomed Girls" (Parks, pg. 13)- her physical appearance allows for a dehumanization so strong that the vocabulary used to describe her is regularly used to discuss animals- and the men who categorize her as such see no issue in transporting her around Europe as a travelling spectacle. People who watch her within the play are told to "get [themselves] a good long look. Kiddies push yr ways up front... place your gifts at her feet and watch her feed (Parks, pg. 60). She is viewed as animalistic, which allows people to ogle her in ways that they would never approach someone they considered human. This condemnation by outside society bars Saartjie from ordinary human experiences.

The inhuman status assigned to Saartjie and the clones prevents them from learning about sexuality and reproduction in a safe manner. When the students of Hailsham are taught about sex, they learn the biology behind what happens, and are taught that sex can lead to children for "normal" humans. Beyond that, however, the guardians explain that the students have "to be extremely careful about having sex in the outside world, especially with people who weren't students, because out there sex meant all sorts of things" (Ishiguro, pg. 84). The students are also taught that the reason behind the emotions and conflicts associated with sex in the outside world occur because ordinary humans can have children, and explain that the

children won't experience those difficulties because they cannot reproduce. Students themselves maintain stigma surrounding sex: Kathy is uncomfortable with her sexual urges because Ruth told her that they were strange, and when porn magazines circulate the school, students pretend to ignore them and mock anyone who takes interest, likely because they have never been formally told that sex can cause emotions even if children aren't involved. As the students are deemed inhuman, and have been created exclusively as organ donors, the concept of educating them about sex as something pleasurable isn't one that is breached by teachers. Saartjie has a similar experience during her relationship with the Doctor. There are clearly consent issues in their relationship: he convinces her to come live with him with promises of " a clean room" (Parks, pg. 87) and " new clothes and good meals" (Parks, pg. 88), in exchange for sexual favors; he tells her that " yll sleep with me" (Parks, pg. 88), to which she agrees, because she wants to gain a better life. In addition to being coerced, however, she believes that their relationship is one of love and romance, because she has never been taught otherwise. She has no knowledge of birth control and as a result becomes pregnant twice, and remains in a relationship with a man who will ultimately betray her. All of this occurs because of her inhuman status in the eyes of outside society; there is no one to teach her about sexuality, reproduction and romance because no one in her society considers her enough of a human to bother. As a result of the ostracization of their traditionally human peers, Saartjie Baartman and the clones of Hailsham are denied a fully-rounded and healthy education in sexuality and reproduction.

The inhuman status assigned to the clones and Saartjie prevents them from engaging in ordinary romantic and sexual relationships. When Kathy discusses her first sexual partner, she explains that she went after Harry C because “ he’d definitely done it before... I didn’t fancy him that much, but I certainly didn’t find him sick-making” (Ishiguro, pg. 98). Hailsham has a culture of sexual pressure, where “ it felt like if you hadn’t done it yet, you ought to, and quickly” (Ishiguro, pg. 98), which makes Kathy feel that she needs to have sex quickly in order to fit in with the social order of the school. As a result, she gives very little thought to any potential sexual or romantic partners, and instead pursues someone solely based on the fact that she doesn’t find him hideous. In her book Rereading Heterosexuality, Rachel Carroll argues that the clones in *Never Let Me Go* engage in romantic relationships not out of love or desire, but out of a desire to assimilate into human society. She argues that Kathy’s research of the porn magazines “ seems more studious than sexual” (Carroll, pg. 141), and later argues that Kathy’s actions regarding romance “ seem to be symptomatic of the imitative schooling which she and her peers receive, in which they are encouraged to mimic the behavior of ‘ normals’” (Carroll, pg. 142). This links to the observation that Kathy makes of the “ veteran” couples at the Cottages, and the awkward ways in which they behave: “ many of their mannerisms were copied from the television” (Ishiguro, pg. 120). The clones are isolated from the outside world due to their dehumanization and lack realistic ideals of romantic love, and in an attempt to assimilate into the human world, they try to engage in traditionally human things like romantic relationships. In spite of this want to assimilate, however, the clones still aren’t exposed to healthy relationships. and so despite all of the effort that

<https://assignbuster.com/comparing-venus-and-never-let-me-go-sexuality-reproduction-and-the-inhuman/>

the Kathy and her peers put into normalizing their relationships, they continue to engage in relationships that are a pale version of the norm.

The first person narrative of *Never Let Me Go* allows for an added sense of peculiarity within the clones' experiences of sexuality. As the novel follows Kathy's thoughts directly, it's impossible to avoid her thought process regarding her sexual and reproductive identity. At a young age, she mentions that "we all knew... that none of us could have babies" (pg. 73), a fact that she readily accepts when she realizes it, because she knows in her head that she is different from regular humans. Her thoughts extend past reproduction to ideas of sexual and romantic relationships, notably after she begins her relationship with Tommy, one that seems to be based on genuine affection: when considering deferral, she thinks that if "we did find ourselves going for a deferral, it might prove a real drawback if we'd never had sex... my worry was that it would show somehow, in a kind of lack of intimacy" (Ishiguro, pg. 238). Obviously sex and romance do not have to be linked, and not having a sexual relationship doesn't mean that two people aren't in love, but Kathy's lack of education due to her dehumanized state prevents her from learning this. Ishiguro's first-person narrative grants readers a glance directly into Kathy's head, which further show her skewed ideas regarding sexuality.

Saartjie Baartman's deformed experience of sexuality and reproduction is furthered more by the style in which *Venus* is written. As it is a play format, the text literally places her on display for others to observe: in engaging in the play, audience members and readers alike become part of the spectatorship and objectification of the Venus. The unique format of the play <https://assignbuster.com/comparing-venus-and-never-let-me-go-sexuality-reproduction-and-the-inhuman/>

does not allow for a break in this objectification. While Venus has an intermission, a scene plays throughout the entirety of it, where the Baron Doctor takes detailed scientific notes on the body of the Venus: "The great amounts of subcutaneous fat were quite surprising. On the front of the thigh was for instance fat was measured 1 inch in thickness" (Parks, pg. 92). Spectators of the play must consider whether to stay and watch the scene or leave and return, either way continuing to participate in the objectification. The mother showman's language makes it impossible to ignore that readers and viewers of the play are engaging in the objectification of Saartjie; she is told to "let [the audience members] see you in yr alltogether... lets give these folks their moneys worth" (Parks, pg. 46). The play's genre contributes to the oversexualization of Venus due to her appearance: she's put on display for people to ogle and grope, as a sexual object existing solely for the viewing pleasure of white people. The mother showman enhances this oversexualization within the context of the play, but it also draws the readers into this oversexualization: they are watching the objectification of another human, meaning that Venus experiences a skewed sense of sexuality from multiple sources of scrutiny.

Saartjie Baartman isn't exposed to romantic ideals either: she's brought from South Africa with no education about British culture, and is forced to navigate England on her own. As a result, she enters into a deeply problematic relationship with a man who holds a position of power over her and ultimately brings about her downfall. When they're together she constantly asks "Love me" (Parks, pg. 106), in a manic effort to reaffirm the doctor's love for her. In an ordinary relationship, this constant, one-sided

need for reaffirmation would not be necessary. The doctor also has difficulty looking at her during sexual activity: he masturbates in their bed but refuses to look at her and insists that she not look at him, saying " don't look! Don't look at me" (Parks, pg. 106). He is disgusted by her, yet she still clings to him and believes that he loves her. That unwavering loyalty doesn't fade even at the end of the book, when the doctor has her sent to prison so that she dies and he can harvest her organs. English society deems Saartjie inhuman due to her physical appearance, and that lack of humanization prevents her from being brought into the folds of European culture. As a result she lacks an understanding of healthy romantic relationships, and enters into a toxic relationship which she thinks is built on love.

The right to reproduce is stripped from both Saartjie and the clones due to their dehumanized status. As they are biologically engineered, the clones aren't able to have children, something that their guardians take great care in expressing: when first explaining sex to the students, Miss Emily says that " the reason [sex] meant so much... was because the people out there... they could have babies from sex" (Ishiguro, pg. 84)." Their inability to reproduce is simply an accepted fact, one that further distinguishes them from the outside world. Saartjie Baartman experiences a similar lack of choice when it comes to her own reproduction. She becomes pregnant twice over the course of her relationship with the baron doctor, and both times aborts the pregnancy. It is never stated whether she wanted to become pregnant in the first place, or if she had any choice regarding the outcome of the pregnancy. Both she and the clones experience a loss of their reproductive rights due to their inhuman status: the clones' biological



makeup prevents them from having children, and Saartjie's dehumanization strips her of access to reproductive choices.

Both Saartjie Baartman and the clones of Hailsham are subjected to marginalized treatment due to their inhuman status, established by their biological creation and physical appearance. As a result, they find themselves barred from traditional human experiences of sexuality and reproduction, which leads to them engaging in toxic, skewed versions of romantic and sexual relationships that cause more harm than good as they desperately try to assimilate into a society that has rejected them.