**Coping with Mortality – Never Let Me Go**

***Acceptance, denial, repression and deflection – these are just some of the ways in which the characters in the novel cope with the knowledge of death. Diane Crimp explores this theme, which the writer himself suggests is right at the heart of the work, its themes and structure.***

*[…] essentially, I structured the whole thing as a metaphor for how we face mortality […] by our very natures, we just get older and then we start to lose control of bits of ourselves, and then we die […] We can’t run away from that.
Kazuo Ishiguro in interview*

In many ways, Never Let Me Go is about how we attempt to run away from the idea of our own mortality. For most A Level students, ageing is, happily, a remote prospect that does not have to be given much thought; to the clones, however, whose lives are condensed into about thirty years, the end of life is far more imminent and they cope with this in a number of different ways.

**Acceptance**

One question my students repeatedly ask is why the clones make no attempt to escape or, at least, to rebel against their fate. The obvious answer is that, as the quotation above tells us, they are part of a metaphor and none of us can escape death. All the same, the clones’ willingness to go along with what has been ordained for them does seem unnatural. Kathy is one of the most accepting of the characters. She refuses to see her life in tragic terms and her calm response to the most heart-breaking aspects of her own life (beginning to donate will give her ‘a rest’ and a chance to listen to her tapes more often!) are, to us, almost incomprehensible. From the start, her unquestioning use of such euphemisms as ‘donor’ and ‘completion’ skates over the horror such terms hide. She is reflective, but does not let her thoughts go beyond certain boundaries any more than she does her emotions. She gives no further thought, for example, to Ruth’s anxieties about what happens after completion. It is significant that she comments, at one point,

*I wasn’t able, in my usual way, to let the emotional flurry just pass (my emphasis)*

and, at the very end of the novel, she tells us, with some pride, that

*though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn’t sobbing or out of control.*

The way in which she holds on to her self-control at all times possibly suggests her realisation that, if she once let go, everything would unravel and there would be no going back.

Tommy is a character we actually see learning to accept and conform. In Chapter 1, when the girls watch from the pavilion as the boys fail to pick him for their teams, it is his open display of emotion that make him so ridiculous in their eyes. If a hypothetically emotionless creature from another planet were to watch human beings reacting to hope, happiness, dismay and anger, their distorted features would no doubt look incomprehensible, and the girls’ response to Laura’s mimicry of Tommy’s expressions may lead us to wonder, uncomfortably, whether their own emotions are so deadened that his look absurd – or whether they are so afraid of revealing emotion that Tommy is a threat and their laughter a release-valve. Tommy learns not only to hide his feelings, but also that acceptance of bad things happening is the only way to survive emotionally intact at Hailsham. Arguably, this acquired passivity is what allows him to be drawn into a relationship with Ruth when he clearly prefers Kathy and, at the very end of the novel – after his final attempt to beat the system by getting a deferral fails – allows him to refer, with devastating understatement, to what has happened to him and Kathy as ‘a shame’.

**Denial**

Of course, the flip side of acceptance is denial and this can also be seen on many occasions. The rumours Chrissie and Rodney hold on to about former Hailsham students who are now leading normal lives, and Ruth’s behaviour and evident feelings all the way through the episode with her ‘possible’, show a deep-rooted reluctance to accept what they know to be inevitable.

Another example of denial comes on the occasion when Miss Lucy tries to spell out to the children what their future entails. The responses to this are strangely varied: Kathy obviously takes it all in, but some of the clones, presumably resisting her words, claim that Miss Lucy had ‘lost her marbles for a couple of minutes’, while still others seem only to have heard her telling them off for being noisy. This is, ironically, an illustration of her point about how the children have been ‘told and not told’, furthering Tommy’s theory that they are often given information before they are mentally ready to absorb it. It is also clear, however, that they are in denial.

**Repression**

It is now widely accepted that, if something is repressed, it will sooner or later emerge in some form or other. There are many signs in the novel that this is what is going on. Kathy’s language is generally considered to be bland and, as already noted, full of euphemism and understatement. It is somewhat startling, therefore, to realise that words like ‘furious’, ‘dreading’ and ‘desperate’ do feature in her vocabulary. These words, in fact, are generally applied to trivial childhood incidents. This may strike us as a form of displacement, where the truly frightening and fury-provoking things can’t be faced, so these strong emotions are, instead, projected onto things that young children can handle.

The woods surrounding Hailsham can be seen as a symbol of repression. Woods, after all, have long represented the subconscious in Western culture, with all their fairy-tale associations with danger, getting lost and general removal from civilised norms and values. Their description in Chapter 5 is highly revealing, the ‘dark fringe of trees’, ‘looming in the distance’, ‘cast(ing) a shadow over the whole of Hailsham’, just as the suppressed awareness of their ultimate fate overshadows their childhood. It is also no coincidence that myths surrounding them include the story of a boy tied to a tree with his hands and feet chopped off – no great leap from this to what will happen later when the clones are made to have their organs removed.

**Deflection**

As already noted, the Hailsham pupils as a whole seem to accept their lot unquestioningly, keeping rigidly to the ‘rules’ imposed from above or by themselves. They seem to need Tommy as a scapegoat, though. On one level, it is surprising that, with their culture of showing no emotion – Kathy describes ‘that deliberately langourous (sic) way’ in which the boys warm up before that first match – they should want to provoke him into his unrestrained outbursts. Doubtless, he is good entertainment value (as the parallel with a Shakespearean actor may suggest), but it also seems that they need him to make these furious protests so that they don’t have to: he expresses all their subconscious frustration and sense of outrage. It is a means of deflection, as they realise deep down that they are all, in a sense, being made fools of, metaphorically having worms put in their food and led on by promises that turn out to be cruel lies.

The essays they are set to write at The Cottages are indeed a ‘farewell gift from the guardians’, a kind bridge provided by their former teachers to deflect their attention from being in a new and alien world. The present-day Kathy, indeed, still uses hers as a sort of comfort blanket as she drives around the country as a carer:

*I think of a completely different approach I could have taken, or about different writers and books I could have focussed on.*

Unable to face regrets about what might have been different in her life, Kathy deflects all her unhappiness and anxiety onto the construction of an essay that has never mattered.

Even the focus on getting a deferral could be seen as a means of deflecting their attention from their increasingly imminent deaths. After all, even in their wildest dreams, such a deferral would bring them no more than ‘three, even four years’ more of life and love.

**Life Is Short**

In all this, we may recognise ourselves. We, too, live as though we will do for ever and, as sickness and death draw closer, try to buy a little more time (keeping fit, eating the right things, taking prescribed medicine?). We make up comforting myths about life after death, whether religious or the kind perpetuated in ghost films and stories, and, above all, we keep ourselves occupied so there is no time to think. Ishiguro draws all this to our attention not to make us despair or show us the futility of life but to keep us focussed on the things that do matter. Let’s end on a more positive note, with another quotation from Ishiguro in interview:

*I wanted to write about the good things about people […] When people know that time is short, what really matters to us is putting right things that we’ve done wrong by people who are dear to us, making sure that people we love know that we love them…*

By becoming more aware that life is short, we can benefit from the lessons the clones learn when, for them, it is almost too late.