**Holding on and Letting Go – The Tangible World in Never Let Me Go**

***Stephen Dilley shows how physical objects, from clothing to childhood possessions, take on a huge significance in a book in which the characters’ grip on their world is so fragile and where holding onto things is the only way of resisting their inevitable fate.***

At the heart of Ishiguro’s novel is a sense of the intangibility and transience of life, memories and relationships. The novel’s title speaks of a longing for the sensation of touch and physical connectedness and, given the many things which the clones must ‘let go’, the concrete objects which they can hold on to take on a peculiar significance across the novel. Ishiguro uses the clones’ interactions with these often meagre objects to evoke pity for them and to illustrate their futile attempts to avoid their fate by clinging on to whatever they can. 

‘**Something Special’**

We first become aware of the importance of physical objects in the first chapter through Kathy’s repeated references to Tommy’s ‘light blue polo shirt’ (mentioned nine times). It is common for children to have favourite items or clothes, but there is something strangely obsessive about the insistent anxiety with which she frets about Tommy getting mud on this which alerts us that items of this kind are unusually ‘precious’ and ‘prized’.

As we find out more about the ‘Sales’ and ‘Exchanges’ which seem to dominate Kathy’s memories of Hailsham, we start to develop a clearer sense of the reasons for these possessions being ascribed such importance. To read Never Let Me Go is to experience a series of realisations about the characters’ lives, and one of the earliest and most poignant is a sense of how unloved they are as children, objects of fear rather than tenderness from other adults. The items they squirrel away in their ‘collections’ thus become a substitute – albeit an inadequate one – for the parental love they long to receive. The children’s excitement at the prospect of ‘a bumper crop’ and the knowing way in which the workmen refer to these cast-offs as ‘a lot of goodies, sweetheart’ only heighten the pity we feel for them; even Kathy admits with hindsight that ‘usually the Sales were a big disappointment.’ Nonetheless, these objects offer the only means of feeling ‘special’ that the clones can experience as children.

Ishiguro uses two specific objects to show how Kathy and Ruth attempt to simulate parental affection, and both take on a significance which transcends their physical function. Ruth uses her pencil case in a characteristically manipulative way to suggest that it is a gift from Miss Geraldine in order to imply a degree of ‘favouritism’ in lieu of ‘a spontaneous hug, a secret letter, a gift’ which the clones all long for. Kathy tries to create the illusion of affection in a more touchingly private way through her ‘favourite tape’. Kathy’s repeated playing of the song ‘Never Let Me Go’ in the privacy of her dormitory, ‘holding an imaginary baby to my breast’, is suggestive of the way in which she longs to be held (observed by a tearful Madame in one of the novel’s most haunting moments). We understand more about the importance of this cassette to Kathy when she loses it and ‘mustn’t give away how panicked I was’ as it is one of her

*little private nooks created out of thin air where we could go off alone with our fears and longings.*

Despite its concrete form, Kathy senses an intangibility about what the cassette represents and through this, Ishiguro highlights the ultimate insubstantiality of these ‘private nooks’.

**Memories**

These childhood possessions remain significant into adulthood – as a donor, Ruth confides her regret at getting rid of her collection, which horrifies Kathy. Kathy by contrast ascribes an almost sacred value to her chosen objects – her replaced Judy Bridgewater cassette is ‘one of my most precious possessions’ which she no longer plays for fear of it being chewed up. She uses exactly the same words to describe the Twenty Classic Dance Tunes cassette which Ruth gives her, even though the music means nothing to her:

*It’s an object, like a brooch or a ring, and especially now Ruth has gone, it’s become one of my most precious possessions.*

The clones’ tactile relationships with these objects are important precisely because of the lack of physical connection they feel to the places where they grew up. Hailsham and the Cottages have the same elusive quality as the ‘unplottable’ locations in the Harry Potter novels. Rather like the boat in the marshes or the old bus shelter where ‘the buses had stopped coming ages ago’, they are totally cut off from the world of motorways and service stations which Kathy now inhabits. Hailsham is therefore only preserved through her unreliable memories, and in some ways, she is no more connected with Hailsham than the donor who makes her describe it so that he can

*remember Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood.*

These little souvenirs thus become a surrogate for the connectedness the clones want to feel; when Ruth disposes of her collection, she is severing her ties not only with the memories these specific objects hold but with her entire past.

**Trying to Hold On**

The clones’ longing for physical connectedness is subsequently expressed through their pursuit of sexual intimacy, but due to their sterility, this too is unfulfilling. Kathy describes sex at the Cottages as ‘a bit functional’ and her one-night-stands leave her feeling unsatisfied and ‘unsettled’. Even Kathy and Tommy’s eventual sexual encounters are ‘tinged with sadness’ and a ‘nagging feeling’ which they attempt to dislodge by

*holding each other very tight after times like that, as though that way we’d manage to keep the feeling away.*

Indeed, holding on to each other seems to be their only way of experiencing love and their only defence against their fate, as we see again after Tommy’s rage at the failure of their deferral:   
for a moment it seemed like we were holding on to each other because that was the only way to stop us being swept away into the night.

This unfulfilled desire for physical sensation and connection is also expressed through the recurring motif of water. As he bids Kathy farewell, Tommy confides how, after scoring goals at Hailsham,

*I always imagined I was splashing through water. Nothing deep, just up to the ankles at the most [...] Splash, splash, splash.*

This sensory evocation of the feeling of water echoes Kathy’s allusions to the ‘powerful tides tugging us apart’ and Tommy’s description of

*two people in the water, trying to hold on to each other, holding on as hard as they can but in the end it’s just too much.*

The immersive and elusive qualities of water are both important here – water can hold and embrace them, but cannot be held or retained, and these allusions thus signal a desire to be immersed and to belong in a world in which they feel constantly alienated, and perhaps even a desire for the comforting safety of the womb which they have never felt.

It is therefore apt that the two most significant (but unsuccessful) quests they undertake are both to the coast – to Cromer to search for Ruth’s ‘possible’, and to Littlehampton to seek a deferral. Conversely, two of the images which seem to express most accurately the reality of the clones’ existence are notable for the absence of water – the boat ‘sitting beached in the marshes under the weak sun’, and ‘the Square’ at Tommy’s Recovery Centre. The latter is, in reality, a concreted swimming pool, where Kathy ominously pictures

*a swimmer taking a dive off the top board only to crash into the cement*

– an uninviting successor to the pond at Hailsham. In both cases, the absence of water conveys a void in the clones’ lives which they attempt to fill by holding on to what they have – their possessions and each other.

**Letting Go**

It is tempting to see this tenacious obsession with objects as unique to the clones, but a moment’s introspection suggests that it is only a slight exaggeration of our own behaviour. Ishiguro thus reminds us of the essential humanity of the clones and how their lives and choices are simply a compressed version of our own. In Tommy and Kathy’s climactic encounter with Madame and Miss Emily, Ishiguro deliberately shows their former guardians also coming to the end of their lives and no more able to face up to their mortality and the failure of their plans than the clones are. They too have sought solace in objects – to the extent that their house feels oppressive and claustrophobic with its dark and narrow passageways, invaded by decorators as they prepare (presumably) to sell up. Miss Emily, now frail and wheelchair-bound, cuts short her interview with Tommy and Kathy in order to travel with her bedside cabinet which is being sold –

*it’s a beautiful object, I had it with me at Hailsham, so I’m determined to get a fair price.*

It is not just the clones who are struggling to keep their grip on a physical world which they are about to lose.

It is only in the novel’s understated conclusion that Kathy relinquishes her grip as, now alone, she returns once more to Norfolk and looks out across ‘acres of ploughed earth’, mirroring her own sense of barrenness, with ‘all sorts of rubbish’ caught up in the trees and barbed wire fence. Briefly reliving the fantasy of the ‘lost corner’, she allows herself to believe that

*this was the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up*

– but then turns away ‘to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be’, finally letting go of the ‘debris’ of her dreams and submitting to her fate.