**Dystopian Futures and Never Let Me Go - Why Kathy H Doesn’t Rebel**

***A Level teacher Kimberley Wyatt explores dystopian themes in Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel Never Let Me Go.***

*The breakthrough in medical science came in 1952. Doctors could now cure the previously incurable. By 1967 life expectancy passed 100 years.- Opening of the film Never Let Me Go*

If you had read the book before seeing Never Let Me Go you might have enjoyed a challenge: at what point in the book do you realise that this is a novel about cloning? Those who read the book before all the publicity may have suspected early on that there was something unusual about Hailsham school, where Kathy H, Ruth and Tommy first meet. The reference to Kathy H's memories in 'the Infants play area' on page 45 suggests that they have been institutionalised since birth. Alert readers may also have guessed from the heightened disapproval of smoking and regular medicals that their healthy bodies were more important than their education. For most people, however, it depends on how attuned they are to the euphemistic references to 'donations,' 'carers', 'possibles' and 'completions'. In fact, the first explicit mention of cloning isn't until page 137 when we are told in Kathy H's distinctive matter-of-fact tone that 'each of us was copied at some point from a normal person.'

The recent film, directed by Mark Romanek, does not allow us the pleasure of guessing. Ishiguro never wanted the film to be an exact replica of the novel, but the stark image of Tommy, played by Andrew Garfield, prostrate on an operating table, has a very different impact to the subtle realisation of the true horror of the clones' limited lives that the reader experiences in the novel. The film even seeks to explain how the situation came about, whereas the novel refuses to offer any details. We are told from the opening titles that 'it began in 1952' so Ishiguro's setting of 'England, late 1990s' is put into context. In effect, the film provides a backstory to show how a dystopian world in which humans are harvested for their organs could be possible. This is a classic dystopian technique.

**Fearsome Future**

Another term for dystopian literature is the 'fearsome-future' genre and a backstory is often used as a means of reminding the reader or audience that a nightmarish, anti-utopian world is possible if we don't mend our ways. The opening of Nineteen Eighty-Four, the most famous dystopian text, lets the reader know the dire new world should be feared both through oblique references to the fictional 'Big Brother', 'telescreens', 'Ministry of Love' and 'Hate Week', and historic images of London directly after the Blitz when resources were rationed and conditions were hard. The reader is immediately able to recognise the polemic: a warning that 1948 Britain could become the imaginary 1984 with just a few small steps.

By including the backstory in the opening credits of Never Let Me Go, Alex Garland, who wrote the screenplay, suggests the story is a simple warning against the quest to extend life at all costs. In this way Garland seems to be aligning the novel to the dystopian tradition in a way that Ishiguro does not.

One comparison would be the film of Garland's own novel, The Island, released in 2005, the same year as Ishiguro's novel. The scenario is virtually identical: clones are kept in a state of happy ignorance that they are merely 'insurance policies' for the wealthy, believing they will gain access to a mythical island if they win the lottery. Yet where this film has a hero who comes to recognise the truth and rebel against it, no such moment of recognition occurs in Never Let Me Go, nor is there any sense of rebellion by Kathy H, the narrator. In The Island, the central characters, played in the film adaptation by Euan MacGregor and Scarlett Johanssen, are aspirational figures, whose rebellion is something the audience will desire to emulate.

In contrast Kathy H, the narrator of Never Let Me Go, feels privileged with her 'bedsit' and her role as a 'carer' and never questions her function as a clone. She does not even have the charm or linguistic virtuosity of other dystopian anti-heroes such as Alex in A Clockwork Orange: her language is as limited as her ambitions and her world-view. Even the bland opening, 'My name is Kathy H' reminds us less of a futuristic world where individuality is forcibly removed, than of a primary school-aged child who defines herself in relation to another Kathy in the class. She assumes that her audience has the same background as herself:

*I don't know how it was where you were but at Hailsham we had to have some sort of medical every week*

and in this way proves herself incapable of the sort of rebellion depicted in The Island. If an alternative is unthinkable then rebellion is impossible. Ishiguro's novel therefore confronts the reader with a more challenging vision of the future than is seen in the more conventional dystopian visions of The Island or the film adaptation of Never Let Me Go.

Many readers have been dismayed both by Kathy H's acceptance of her fate and her ordinariness but for Ishiguro this is precisely the point. He reminded the audience at a Q&A session after a film showing that 'most people do not rebel'. What is startling throughout history is how readily ordinary people accept and adapt to terrible atrocities. It would be tempting to distance ourselves from Kathy H and her fellow Hailsham students by defining their lack of rebellion as a feature of their condition as clones. They are copies of human beings and their futures can only be considered in relation to their 'possibles'. Images of 'copies' are abundant in the book. We see the clones copying what they see on television, imagining life in an office through the copied image from a magazine article, finding copies of tapes and visiting 'second-hand' stores. We could read this as a symbolic depiction confirming that the students' limitations are due to their being 'copies' of the real thing. Yet if we look to the philosopher Baudrillard then we can see that the feeling that we live in a copied world is a condition of our own world, not an experience unique to fictitious clones.

**Desert of the Real**

Baudrillard is a difficult philosopher to read and the best starting point for his ideas can be found in 'The Desert of the Real' depicted in The Matrix. If you are familiar with the film you will remember the image of Morpheus explaining to Neo that what he believes to be real is a construct of computer-generated images while the real world has been destroyed. The Matrix is a film reworking of Baudrillard's idea that we live in a time where media images (television, film and computers) are more real than the non-media physical reality. Taking Plato's idea of the simulacrum (a term to describe the idea that what we experience as real is merely a copy of something else) Baudrillard developed a theory of simulacra which suggested that the postmodern condition is one where our experience is so dominated by copies that the real is missing or irrelevant. If you consider your own life through Baudrillard's eyes then ask yourself how 'real' is your existence? Do you wear clothes that are mass-produced, go to chain stores, 'Facebook' rather than meet your friends, listen to your iPod rather than go to a concert? We are all so immersed in simulacra that we fail even to see it, let alone rebel against it.

We should not dismiss Kathy H as inadequate because she fails to recognise or fight against the limitations of her existence; we should instead recognise that we are no different from Kathy H. We accept our copied existence just as much as she does and we fail to rebel because an alternative is unthinkable. Frederic Jameson argued that dystopian literature allows us 'to apprehend the present as history'. It is a type of polemic, a thought experiment that imagines a future world as a logical extrapolation of our own. If we read Never Let Me Go as a dystopian text we can see the clones as warnings, not of the cruelty of unthinking doctors desperate to preserve life, as the film's backstory would encourage us to do, but as images of ourselves in the current 'hyperreal' technological age where we accept our 'copied' existence without question or rebellion.

***Definition of terms***

*Dystopia: The word 'utopia' refers to an ideal society. The homophone eutopia is derived from the Greek ('good') and ('place'); 'good place'. Dys + utopia is the opposite and refers to a 'worst-case' scenario that often acts as a warning.*

*Hyperreal: A hypothetical inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from fantasy, especially in technologically advanced postmodern cultures.*

*Simulacra: Originally the term just meant copies of the original but postmodern theorists, such as Baudrillard, describe it in negative terms as an image which has become so far removed from the original that it bears no relation to reality.*