

“Possibles” and Dream Futures

The clones take refuge in daydreams and preoccupation with other things and thus avoid having to confront the reality of their situation. This reflects a universal human response to death – all of us face death and might die at any time, and we react to that central fact of our existence in much the same way they do.

“Foil characters” are secondary figures that find themselves in a situation similar to that of the protagonist but make different, either braver or more foolish, choices. These characters are an object of projection. In NLMG these are the “possibles”. The students project onto their possibles all sorts of fantasies about their future careers as postmen, farmers, office workers and try to look for them to catch a glimpse of their own “unlived lives”.

“One big idea behind finding your possible model was that when you did, you’d glimpse your future. Now I don’t mean anyone really thought that if your model turned out to be, say, a guy working at a railway station, that’s what you’d end up doing too. We all realised it wasn’t that simple. Nevertheless, we all of us, to varying degrees, believed that when you saw the person you were copied from, you’d get *some* insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you’d see something of what your life held in store” (140).

“We all know it. We’re modelled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so they aren’t psychos. That’s what we come from. We all know it, so why don’t we say it? A woman like that? Come on. Yeah, right, Tommy. A bit of fun. Let’s have a bit of fun pretending. That other woman in there, her friend, the old one in the gallery. *Art* students, that’s what she thought we were. Do you think she’d have talked to us like that if she’d known what we really were? ‘Excuse me, but do you think your friend was ever a clone model?’ She’d have thrown us out. We know it, so we might as well just say it. If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that’s where you’ll find where we all came from” (166).

1. Why are they searching for their possibles? What do they represent to them?
2. Why do they have different ideas about whether finding a possible is a positive or negative and who their possibles are?
3. How does this search align with the search for their identity?
4. Is it better to dream/hope or face reality? Support your answer with evidence from the text. Does your answer change for Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth?

Kathy never had a choice. The awareness she gains through self-reflection is a chilling one: her destiny was from the beginning determined by forces beyond her control, and her story was silenced by those same forces. When it becomes evident that none of those alternative paths was ever available to her, that she never had any agency in determining her personal trajectory, the narrator finds solace in memories of her actual life, rather than in speculations on the unlived one.

1. How could Kathy’s description of “looking but not looking” for Hailsham (287) reflect her subconscious desires? Is Kathy really searching for a ‘home’?
2. How are the clones trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? To what extent can they transcend their fate?
3. As time starts to run out, what are the things that really matter? Consider this answer for Ruth, Tommy, and Kathy. How do their characters *develop* as they near death. Support your answer with evidence from the text.
4. Generate a (minimum of one) theme statement from your work over these two pages.

'There are things I am more interested in than the clone thing. How are they trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? To what extent can they transcend their fate? As time starts to run out, what are the things that really matter? Most of the things that concern them concern us all, but with them it is concentrated into this relatively short period of time. These are things that really interest me and, having come to the realization that I probably have limited opportunities to explore these things, that's what I want to concentrate on. I can see the appeal of travel books and journalism and all the rest of it and I hope there will be time to do them all one day. But I just don't think that day is now.' (Kazuo Ishiguro in an interview with Nicholas Wroe in *The Guardian*, 19 February 2005).

How far do you agree with the author's perception of his novel? To what extent do you think that the world Ishiguro creates reflects the concerns of our human world? How would you answer the questions Ishiguro poses?

The Unlived Life

The text offers a parallel reality with some science-fiction features that further stresses the counterfactual nature of the story. This allows Ishiguro to question the nature of memory both from an epistemological perspective, through the sophisticated use of an unreliable narrator that ultimately questions the notions of personal and historical memory, and from an ontological one, challenging the very notion of individual identity.

The text maintains a sustained focus on retrospection and regret. Narrative focuses of what could have been, a "counterfactual course of events". Kathy obsesses and wonders if things could have been avoided. These, however, seem to revolve around minor incidents. By looking back at their life through the lens of alternative choices, the characters ultimately gain a greater degree of self-awareness. The unlived lives invite a broader reflection on the connection between memory and agency (or lack thereof).

The novel proposes memory as consolation; going over memories of a happy past becomes an important source of solace in the face of disempowerment.

"What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood. He knew he was close to completing and so that's what he was doing: getting me to describe things to him, so they'd really sink in, so that maybe during those sleepless nights, with the drugs and the pain and the exhaustion, the line would blur between what were my memories and what were his" (5-6).

"Yes, in many ways we fooled you. I suppose you could even call it that. But we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods. Lucy was well-meaning enough. But if she'd had her way, your happiness at Hailsham would have been shattered. Look at your both now! I'm so proud to see you both. You build your lives on what we gave you. You wouldn't be who you are today if we'd not protected you" (268).

"Once I'm able to have a quieter life, in whichever centre they send me to, I'll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that'll be something no one can take away" (287).

1. Discuss the obsession with the past of these children who have no future. If the future is non-existent, why does the past matter?
2. How might Kathy's description of the value of memories reflect someone in their old age looking back on life? Discuss the significance of this as Kathy nears donations.
3. Is it meaningful that the clones were given a childhood? How does this help them?
4. Reread the novel's final paragraph, in which Kathy describes a flat, windswept field with a barbed wire fence "where all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled." She imagines Tommy appearing here in "the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up" [p. 287]. What does the final sentence indicate about Kathy's state of mind as she faces her losses and her own death—stoicism, denial, courage, resolution?
5. How do the final two sentences of the text summarize the clones entire 'way of being' in the text?

Conformity and Identity

Passivity in the face of authority and the group – the clones are reluctant to go against the course that has been set out for them; they have been indoctrinated to believe that it is “right” for them. Conformity – the system works because the clones accept their fate. They conform to society by fulfilling their “purpose” – don’t we as well?

“I was like you, Tommy. I was pretty much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it’s what we’re supposed to be doing, isn’t it?” (227).

1. Consider the three stages of the clones’ lives: Hailsham, cottages, carer/donor. While their lives are considerably shorter than ours, how do these stages parallel human maturation from childhood, through adolescence, to old age?
2. One of the most notable aspects of life at Hailsham is the power of the group. Students watch each other carefully and try on different poses, attitudes, and ways of speaking. Find at least one quote from each part of the novel exemplifying conformity. How does conformity change with each stage of life?
3. Is this behavior typical of most children/adolescents/adults, or is there something different about the way the students at Hailsham seek to conform?
4. Generate a theme statement based on the topic of conformity.

“So you’re waiting, even if you don’t quite know it, waiting for a moment when you realize that you really are different to them; that there are people out there, like Madame, who don’t hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you – of how you were brought into this world and why – who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. This first time you glimpse yourself through the eyes of a person like that, it’s a cold moment. It’s like walking past a mirror you’ve walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange” (36).

Identity is a central topic as the clones struggle with understanding their place in society. Kathy regularly questions and fears her own identity.

5. Find examples of the clones searching for identity. Is this futile or is it what brings meaning to their lives?
6. Which do you believe is stronger, each character’s individual identity or their collective identity as Hailsham students? Find evidence to support your answer.
7. Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth have very different personalities. Is this evidence of their humanity?
8. When Kathy is reflecting on her fate at the end of the novel she says, “once I’m able to have a quieter life, in whichever centre they send me to, I’ll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that’ll be something no one can take away” (287).
 - a. Does Kathy have an identity without Hailsham? How does this parallel human experience?
 - b. Kathy implies that her memories are the most important part of her. As we all face death, does the role of memories and identity take on greater significance?
9. Generate a theme statement based on the topic of identity.