Joseph Jacobs: Third Place Fall 2006

Never Let Me Go vs. The Island

With today’s modern technological advances in biology and chemistry, the idea of cloning a human being is within the realm of possibilities. Such a feat would elevate man to godlike status in terms of mimicking the very complex genetic make up of the human body. Creating life in this way would provide endless opportunities for further scientific experimentation and surgical procedures as well as provide a limitless supply of organ donors. This would truly be man’s greatest accomplishment, and yet it would be completely overshadowed by the vast moral dilemmas, ethical debates and new fear of the scientists in possession of a power once thought to be exclusive only to God. Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go and the film “The Island,” document the events of a world where cloning is a reality. Though Never Let Me Go and “The Island” are similar in their portrayal of a clone’s life, they differ in several aspects concerning the origins, personalities, and destinations of these clones.

As can be expected, the origins of the clones in both the book and the film are shrouded in mystery at first. Kathy, the narrator of Never Let Me Go, never makes any mention of the means by which each of the clones is created. Of all the memories Kathy does note, the earliest was of her meeting with Ruth for the first time. She states, “And that’s all I remember of Ruth from that early time. We were the same year so we must have run into each other enough, but aside from that sandpit incident, I don’t remember having anything to do with her” (Ishiguro 46). Kathy never gives any other detailed recollections of a time prior to this event. However, “The Island” provides a bit more depth into the actual creation of the clones. There are several scenes that show the clones being grown in a holding chamber and a particular instance where the lab workers bring one of the full grown clones to life.

Aside from the actual creation of the clones, there is the issue of who had the clones made. Ishiguro never states who was responsible for the mass production of the ‘students’ at Hailsham or at any other ‘school’. There are rumors that float around among the clones such as the rumor mentioned by Ruth, “We all know it. We’re modeled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren’t psychos. That’s what we come from. We all know it, so why don’t we say it?” (Ishiguro 166). Although this rumor isn’t explored any further, if there is any credence to it, then these clones vary greatly from those of “The Island.” The characters Lincoln and Jordan of “The Island” discover that they are, as are all the clones in the movie, modeled after the most prestigious people in the world and are grown as a life insurance policy.

Since the financial contribution to make the clones in “The Island” is five million dollars, it comes as no surprise that the lifestyles of these clones are ideal in terms of health care and lodging. Never Let Me Go had a similar environment in that everything seemed controlled in regards to health evaluations, and there is evidence early in the story that supports the idea that Hailsham was slightly different than
any other haven for clones. As a ‘carer’, Kathy described Hailsham to the donors who grew up at different ‘schools’. Recalling one such case, she comments, “I asked where he’d grown up, he mentioned some place in Dorset and his face beneath the blotches went into a completely new kind of grimace. And I realized then how desperately he didn’t want to be reminded” (Ishiguro 4). The patient didn’t want to relive the unpleasant events surrounding his childhood, but seemed to be engrossed in any story involving Kathy’s childhood at Hailsham. Knowing about the environment these clones were raised in opens the door to understanding the development of these characters’ personalities.

There is a very noticeable contrast between the character traits of the clones in Never Let Me Go and the clones in “The Island.” Although both are kept from knowing too much about their purpose, the reactions toward finding out this information differs greatly. As can be expected from a clone that has the education of a child, Lincoln is naturally inquisitive about the nature of his existence and never yields in asking ‘why’. However, the quest to educate oneself at Hailsham seems to be met with hostile attacks. When Marge innocently asked Miss Lucy about ever having a cigarette, Kathy talks about how they treated her for asking such a question. “And for days afterwards I remember how we made Marge’s life an utter misery, in fact, that incident I mentioned before, the night we held Marge’s face to the dorm window to make her look at the woods, that was all part of what came afterwards” (Ishiguro 68). This conversation quickly led into the topic of how these ‘students’ were special. The treatment Marge endured after the incident reveals a repressed fear felt by all the clones at Hailsham in dealing with the uncharted territory of who or what they really are; a fear of questioning that was not felt by Lincoln of “The Island”. However, this fear was similar to what he experiences once he finds out too much.

Both environments play a significant role in shaping how each clone reacts to such information. The underground lab in “The Island” was run in the strictest way. Outbursts, such as the one on the elevator early in the movie were immediately responded to with the reprimanding of the offender. However, no punishment was needed because the undeniable fear in the character’s eyes was sufficient enough to make him apologize for his eruption...

Similar authority is shown in Never Let Me Go, but not nearly to the same degree. The clones of Hailsham are kept under control with the fear of reprisal, but such consequences never see the light of day. Kathy recalls several situations in which one or more of the clones broke some well-known rule, yet there is no mention of any form of punishment. In reference to Miss Emily, Kathy states, “But usually with Miss Emily nothing too awful would come out of it. She hardly ever put you in detention, made you do chores or withdrew privileges. All the same, you felt dreadful, just knowing you’d fallen in her estimation, and you wanted to do something straight away to redeem yourself” (Ishiguro 44). Therefore just the thought of being punished, though the actual act was more of a manifestation by the students, shaped a more obedient personality in the students than the strict rules
and disciplinary measures in “The Island”. In fact, the extent of the rules in “The Island” seemed to instead guide Lincoln towards a more rebellious personality. Ultimately, the influence of each stringent authority directly affected how the clones dealt with their final destination.

There is an appreciable discrepancy between the fate of the clones in “The Island” and the fate of clones in Never Let Me Go. The times by which each clone completes their journey or fulfills their true purpose differs. In “The Island,” the point at which the clones must donate their organs is based solely on the medical demand of the clone’s sponsor. Winning the lottery denotes the time that the clone must fulfill its destiny and donate for whatever reason they were created. The lottery itself is not random and the winners are therefore selected based on any recent development dealing with their sponsor’s medical condition. On the other hand, Kathy begins her story with “My name is Kathy H. I’m thirty-one years old, and I’ve been a carer now for over eleven years” (Ishiguro 3). This further separates the two sets of clones in the sense that those grown in “The Island” are for a specific reason and when that particular reason becomes most urgent, they ‘win’ the lottery. However, in Never Let Me Go the time before the clones must donate is more arbitrary, so it can be assumed that they are grown to fit more generic needs. These clones are essentially a grab-bag of organs and they are squeezed for as many organs as possible before they ‘complete’.

This is confirmed again through the variance in the number of donations each clone undergoes before ‘completing’. The discussion about Chrissie, between Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, displays that there is no real standard by which each clone ‘completes’. “I’ll tell you something I heard. I heard about Chrissie. I heard she completed during her second donation” (Ishiguro 225). In contrast, the clones of “The Island” donate once, for their specific purpose, and it is assumed, if not vividly shown in the scene where the pregnant clone gives birth, that they are disposed of afterwards. This leads to a very interesting difference between the clones in regards to their acceptance or rejection of their destiny.

Upon discovery of the truth of his purpose, Lincoln, who was already perturbed about the restrictions on food and female contact, daringly escaped the clutches of the institution and his would be fate. Strangely enough, the clones of Never Let Me Go, who have the freedom to have sex and drive wherever they want, never have any thoughts of just leaving to escape their donations. They calmly go through the stages of being a student, living in the cottages, becoming a ‘carer’, beginning their donations, and eventually completing. The only real evidence of any type of defiance is shown when Kathy and Tommy attempt to get a deferral, and even if such a thing was a reality for them, it would only be to delay what they inevitably give in to; donation until completion.

Though it is obvious to see that the premise of both Never Let Me Go and “The Island” focuses on the harvesting of clones for organs, the two stories seem to differ extensively in terms of the origins, personalities, and final destination of the clones.