

ELTE BTK Anglisztika MA II.

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## **The construction of otherness in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go***

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Otherness and the exploration of its ultimate meaning through perceptive and self-reflexive narrators is one of Ishiguro's most common recurring themes. It is usually deeply incorporated into the body of the text but often goes even further than a mere textual motif. The main aim of this essay is to show how this concept is contextualized and developed in the author's latest novel, *Never Let Me Go*. We can distinguish four levels in the construction of otherness moving from an extra-textual to a meta-textual level. Firstly, it is essential to understand the generic conventions thrust upon the book by the introduction of science-fiction elements and how these expectations are eventually subverted. At the same time, they also contribute greatly to one of the main themes of this essay: the construction of otherness via language. In the long tradition of speculative fiction, language has repeatedly proved to be a major factor in the creation of the new and very often alien world. Secondly, the essay will analyze this linguistic alienation by looking at specific examples and how they differ from the traditions and conventions of speculative fiction. Thirdly, the essay will discuss the question of strangeness and eventually the formulation of otherness in general and as perceived in the novel. Finally, it will be shown how these seemingly small changes in language and the perception of the self add up to a much greater scheme, namely that of the conditioning of the narrator and eventually the reader.

There are two ways to tackle the problem of the presence of speculative fiction elements in *Never Let Me Go*. One of the approaches, which shall not be discussed here at length would consider the paratextual features of the novel. *Never Let Me Go* was published in 2005 by Faber & Faber, one of the last publishing houses to resist publishing popular fiction and stick with what is commonly perceived as high literature. In this case, generic subversion occurs when an author of high literature publishes a book ridden with sci-fi elements at a rather traditional publishing house and thus surprises his readers.<sup>1</sup>

The other approach reflects on the relationship of this specific novel and the tradition of speculative fiction: the subversion of generic expectations (namely those of science-fiction and dystopia) occurs when the unsuspecting reader discovers that despite the presence of clones and an imagined, yet plausible world, *Never Let Me Go* is not a traditional science-fiction novel. It merely makes use of some speculative fiction elements in order to highlight a meaning that is beyond the scope of traditional sci-fi literature. By creating “science-fiction without the technological” (Jerng 381), Ishiguro sets out to confuse but at the same time to engage the reader in a process of self-knowledge and on a much larger scale, in the process of gaining more information about humanity.

The apparent lack of detailed descriptions of scientific inventions also shows that the author is only interested in the clone story as a backdrop to the real events. Griffin claims that Ishiguro has created a “critical science-fiction” (653) whose primary goal is to reflect upon the historical present. His singularity lies in the fact that his science-fiction is actually without science; what he does is merely to change the connotation of certain words and expressions to create a secluded, mystery-ridden alternative world.

This linguistic subversion is perhaps rather characteristic of the dystopian tradition. It is also crucial in works such as Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Orwell’s *1984* or even Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In a sense, Ishiguro follows in the footsteps of these decisive works but he also deviates from them in various aspects. Furthermore, Toker and Chertoff mention a number of recurring tropes in speculative fiction which are traceable in *Never Let Me Go* and also highly reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of anti-utopias.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the traditionally lower status of speculative fiction is highly prevalent in this interpretation. The essay treats this issue only marginally especially because of the difficulty such a distinction poses. (Thanks to Simon John James, Durham University for his valuable remarks in the topic.)

One such topos is the presence of surveillance (169), the undying attention of a superior group which prevents the protagonists from straying from the path assigned by the authorities. However, it is not obvious at first glance as there is no Big Brother or Eyes in *Never Let Me Go* but a seemingly benevolent and beneficial institution which recalls the typical British countryside boarding school. The surveillance is executed by schoolteachers who gently guide the students towards their purpose in life which remains hidden from the readers until the very end. Ishiguro exploits this trope in a very unique way: he keeps the basis of the motif but makes it much less intimidating by placing it in an everyday context, one that confuses the reader but at the same time allows him to sympathize with the characters in a much more profound way.

The presence of rigid social classes and the exclusion of certain members of society are also characteristic of numerous negative visions of our future. The way the clones are kept hidden from the rest of the world is reminiscent of the guilt of the scientifically evolved world: there is always a price to pay for utopias.<sup>2</sup> One such price is conditioning, one of the major characteristics of dysopias. Huxley writes in *Brave New World* that “all conditioning aims at [...] making people like their inescapable social destiny” (11). Ishiguro uses the motif of conditioning on several levels: it is not only the clones that are conditioned to accept their inevitable fate but the reader as well. This latter phenomenon shall be discussed in more detail in the fourth chapter.

Toker and Chertoff distinguish two more recurring topoi which are often characteristic of speculative fiction. They claim that there is always a “revelatory interview with the authorities” (174) which highlights the past events recounted by the narrator but at the same time shatters the hopes of the characters. This is particularly true in *Never Let Me Go* where the revelatory scene occurs after many hints have been postulated that deferrals are indeed possible and the two main characters might be saved at the end. However, it must be pointed out that Ishiguro is not much interested in mysteries and shocking rev-

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<sup>2</sup> N. B. the England envisioned by Ishiguro is only utopistic in the sense that terminal diseases no longer exist; the author does not mention that the world has changed in any other aspect. There might still be wars, poverty, famine and other important issues. Thus, in a sense, *Never Let Me Go* employs a common phenomenon in dystopian fiction: a transitory generation which has not yet fully comprehended the gravity of the change they are currently experiencing. The situation in *Never Let Me Go* is hence all the more enigmatic as one does not know whether to regard it as a fully-fledged dystopian vision of England or merely as its rudimentary version.

elations, therefore, the somewhat didactic speech of Miss Emily does not offer any surprise to the reader. On the contrary, it reinforces the futility of trying to subvert the system; something that could be anticipated from the very beginning precisely because of the speculative fiction elements in the novel.

Incidentally, this revelatory interview also provides the only occurrence of actual science in the book. When discussing the reasons for the existence of Hailsham and the rumours about possible deferrals, Miss Emily mentions several times the notorious Morningdale scandal:

It concerned a scientist called James Morningdale, quite talented in his way. He carried on his work in a remote part of Scotland, where I suppose he thought he'd attract less attention. What he wanted was to offer people the possibility of having children with enhanced characteristics. Superior intelligence, superior athleticism, that sort of thing. Of course, there'd been others with similar ambitions, but this Morningdale fellow, he'd taken his research much further than anyone before him, far beyond legal boundaries. Well, he was discovered, they put an end to his work and that seemed to be that. [...] It reminded people, reminded them of a fear they'd always had. It's one thing to create students, such as yourselves, for the donation programme. But a generation of created children who'd take their place in society? Children demonstrably superior to the rest of us? Oh no. That frightened people. They recoiled from that. (123)

This passage explains a fundamental conflict in Ishiguro's *England*. The basic struggle between humanity and the advance of scientific technology is also one of the major topics of speculative fiction. It would seem from the Morningdale scandal that the two are mutually exclusive. As soon as the improvement of scientific methods endangers the ontological position of humanity, they cease to regard the clones created specifically for the purpose of helping them as living and feeling creatures. Anything that is strange and unknown carries a potential threat for the position of mankind. Thus, the marginalisation of technological matters eventually reflects on a moral problem: "The world didn't want to be reminded how the donation programme really worked." (124). With this short note on scientific evolution, Ishiguro approaches the genre of science-fiction but at the same time uses it to draw on the importance of how otherness can create fear and ultimately conflict and exclusion.

The last element of speculative fiction to be mentioned by the authors is love as a subversive force (Toker and Chertoff 173). Dystopias tend to treat love and sexuality in different ways, whichever suits the newly created world. In *1984*, there is a complete restraint on sexual-

ity, while in *Brave New World* promiscuity and multiple relationships are encouraged and even expected of the citizens. However, as in *Never Let Me Go*, the different castes would never be allowed to mate with each other: just as an Alpha would never be allowed to make love to a Gamma, a clone would have no chance of having a relationship with a “normal”. Ruth, Kathy and Tommy are encouraged to experiment with their sexuality for one reason: all clones are sterile, thus, sex has no consequences for them. On account of this sexual liberty and their low life expectancy, the clones are usually not represented as being capable of profound feelings for each other or of having the capacity to feel real love. Nonetheless, the rumour circulates that couples who are truly in love and can prove it, might be given a deferral, i.e. their donations can be postponed a few years. Even though Kathy and Tommy’s love would never be able to demoralize the whole system as Julia’s and Winston’s might have done, the trope of subversive love links the novel once again to the tradition of dystopias and at the same time shows how chances and possibilities are inhibited by society.

The most unique characteristic of Ishiguro’s use of speculative fiction elements is that he defamiliarises the reader specifically through familiarity (Grishakova 194). There is no spatial or temporal displacement as in many works of science-fiction, the environment is familiar and the students seem perfectly normal. They are constantly occupied with everyday problems such as which team will win the game or which teacher is nicer. The subtle occurrence of science-fiction elements and dystopic topoi foreshadows the nature of the work but at the same time prevents it from becoming traditional speculative fiction. The only place where true displacement appears is language and vocabulary.

Thus, the first level of the construction of otherness occurs as early as “outside” the text when the reader tries to place the novel in different generic traditions. *Never Let Me Go* becomes unique and strange in the sense that it differs from both Ishiguro’s previous style and from the conventions of speculative fiction as well, which it nevertheless seems to follow at first glance. The alienation effect starts on an extra-textual level and eventually unfolds in the text itself, contributing to a greater scheme of the recurring topos of otherness.

There are two important facets of the creation of linguistic otherness in *Never Let Me Go*. Firstly, there are explicit changes in language use and terminology which alienate language from what is perceived to be normal by the average reader. This phenomenon also works within

the fictional world on several levels, thus it is not only the readers that are alienated but some of the characters as well. Then there are very subtle instances where language simply denotes clones as “we” and normal people as “them”, creating a confusing and often very eerie atmosphere. This is strongly attached to the question and importance of naming and marking the individual and his otherness, which shall be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

When it comes to the systematic changes in language, part of the invention of Ishiguro is that – unlike traditional speculative fiction – he does not create a specialised scientific vocabulary (Griffin 649). Linguistic alienation occurs by the use of everyday language and the only curiosity is the alienation effect employed by Ishiguro: he makes ordinary language strange and uses common words in an uncommon manner (651). In this sense, he does create a whole new vocabulary which is all the more effective since there is a huge discrepancy between the readers’ and the clones’ perception of these words. Of course, the term “ordinary language” can be interpreted from several different points of view. It might reflect on the readers’ linguistic competence but a perhaps more interesting aspect is how “ordinary” is understood within the novel. It might refer to the already altered language of the fictional world but there are very subtle distinctions within this concept as well.

Words like *donor*, *veteran* and *deferral* all receive a special connotation in *Never Let Me Go*. In a sense, Ishiguro recreates the process of language acquisition on several levels. Kathy, Tommy and Ruth were not only raised isolated from the rest of the world, they were also cut off from the rest of *their* world, i.e., the world of the other clones. Therefore, when they move to the Cottages, they are forced to learn words that are completely new to them and that relate to concepts completely unknown to them beforehand. The same phenomenon occurs on the level of the readers as they are also forced to familiarise themselves with the new terminology of Ishiguro’s world in order to understand Kathy’s narrative. Thus, the extra-textual effect of linguistic alienation is transferred into the fictional world as well and there used to contribute to the general atmosphere of otherness.<sup>3</sup>

The other very effective device of linguistic alienation is the frequent use of euphemisms which serves once again to give moral justification for the treatment of clones. It is not only their existence that

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<sup>3</sup> This time, the construction of otherness refers to at least three groups which are differentiated specifically by their different use of language: the normal people, the clones and the clones who grew up in Hailsham-like institutions.

is condoned by society but their whole life cycle as well, thus the system that is organised around the clones. Words such as “donor” and “carer” commonly refer to actions willingly executed. A “donor” is normally someone who is willing to donate and a “carer” refers to a person who chose to take care of someone. In *Never Let Me Go*, however, they both refer to people who did not choose to become “donors” or “carers” but rather had these titles thrust upon them to make their deaths seem voluntary and this way perhaps more ethical. The ultimate euphemism is “to complete” which marks the end of the clones’ life cycle but makes it sound like the noble ending to a life well lived. It also lessens the edge of what is being done to them by reducing their entire life to a task that needs to be completed.<sup>4</sup>

These euphemisms do not only contribute to the sense of difference already created by the alienation of common words but they also represent the unacceptable truth that nobody dares to utter. As a result of their conditioning, the clones are not even aware of this truth but for the ordinary people, the euphemisms offer a last moral justification. Kathy’s reserved narrative further reinforces this strange ignorance:

For the most part being a carer’s suited me fine. You could even say it’s brought the best out of me. But some people just aren’t cut out for it, and for them the whole thing becomes a real struggle. They might start off positively enough, but then comes all that time spent so close to the pain and the worry. And sooner or later a donor doesn’t make it, even though, say, it’s only the second donation and no one anticipated complications. [...] For a while at least, you’re demoralised. (95)

Kathy’s personal take on being a carer is almost completely without emotions, she talks about the completion (thus death) of her donors as an unpleasant trifle which even though makes her said, is still part of life. This reserved storytelling creates the illusion that clones do not possess as intricate emotions as humans (hence, a reason for their inferiority) but in reality it is merely a proof of the success of the con-

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<sup>4</sup> It has to be pointed out that according to Puchner (48) “donor” and “carer” are not actually euphemisms as they denote people who really donate and care. However, my point is that it is the lack of deliberateness that alters the quality of these two words and makes them euphemisms. It should be nonetheless taken into account that these words are completely natural to the clones, they only possess a misleading quality for regular people. Kathy, Tommy and Ruth would not know the difference between “donor” and “victim”. Puchner also argues that the verb “to complete” differs from the previous two words in that it clearly “displaces and replaces” (48) death and even makes a subtle reference to what might follow death, a vegetative state that Kathy occasionally refers to.

ditioning system. Their preferred life cycle is so deeply incorporated into the thinking of the clones that this process seems perfectly natural to them. Besides, there is marked difference between Kathy and several other characters as Kathy is practically the only one who manages to remain so level-headed throughout all her life. She is in very strong contrast with the outspoken manners of Ruth who is the only character to dare to utter the truth about the purpose of their existence and eventually to question it: “Why train us, encourage us, make us produce all of that? If we’re just going to give donations anyway, then die, why all those lessons?” (121) She is also the only character to use the word “die” instead of “complete”.

Apart from the direct changes in language, there are very subtle and almost unperceivable ones which operate on the level consciousness and naming. Before referring to the clones as the conspicuous others or inventing a whole new vocabulary to describe their existence and function, there is already a perhaps unconscious differentiation. Difference is inevitably created when the clones are constantly referred to in animalistic terms (Whitehead 64). The teachers constantly use the verb “to rear” when talking about the education of the clones instead of “to raise”, which would be the normal term when referring to human beings. The students of Hailsham are never directly mentioned as lesser creatures or described with any such insulting terms but it is nonetheless clear from such instances that there is indeed a heavily implied sense of difference.

As Puchner points it out (45), the language, the gestures and even the forms of interaction between the three friends are imitations of what they perceive to be the normal modes of social interaction. Kathy, the most perceptive of them notices how the veterans’ “[...] mannerisms were copied from the television”. (56) Similarly, they attempt to construct their own personal and communal identity following the pattern of ordinary people. The clones recreate the life cycle of humans using the new vocabulary. They start out as “students” of Hailsham which at first sight does not seem to imply anything different from ordinary British schoolchildren. However, the aim of their entire education is conditioning them to accept the purpose of their existence and, therefore, they do not learn anything about living in the outside world. They continue their lives in the Cottages where they eventually become “veterans”, a term designating older students with what they think to be real life experience but as it has already been pointed out, they merely copy human behaviour. The next station in the life of the clones is being a “carer”, directly preceding the

“donor” stage and eventually dying. Ishiguro deliberately imitates the normal stages of human life in order to show how limited and closed down the existence of clones is and also to draw attention to the monotony of a conditioned and a pre-designed life.

The irony is that by trying to imitate human beings, they create a marked difference between themselves and normal people. Just as Hailsham seems to be a regular English school, they also seem to be regular English children and later young adults, but their social awkwardness and the difference in their linguistic expression betray them. The more Ruth and Tommy try to resemble the veteran couples, the bigger gap they create between themselves and normal people since what they are imitating is itself already an imitation.

Jacques Lacan introduces the psychoanalytic theory of two kinds of others (the small other and the big Other), claiming that otherness as such is not a singular concept. Drawing on Freud’s concept of the ego and his own mirror stage theory, Lacan claims that otherness can be perceived in (at least) two ways. The small other is actually a projection, a mirror-image of the self which can nevertheless be found in another being. When we recognise this similarity in the “fellow being” (244), we tend to use ordinary language. However, he does not deny that true intersubjectivity, thus true dialogue could exist; he creates the concept of the Other specifically for the designation of such a phenomenon. Lacan’s main idea is that whenever we make truth-claims we direct them towards the Other, which, however, can never pierce the wall created by language. The great paradox is that even though speech is founded on the existence of the Other, we cannot use ordinary language in our communication with it. Consequently, we have to keep returning to the small other, which however does not represent real communication precisely because it is as if we were talking to ourselves. Lacan further claims that “When we use language, our relation with the other always plays on this ambiguity. In other words, language is as much there to found us in the Other as to drastically prevent us from understanding him.” (244)

Similarly, there is no true dialogue between either the normal people and the clones or the readers and the fictional world. Language could be the only means of communication but it is precisely what prevents the occurrence of real and meaningful interaction between the two parties. It marks the stepping stone in the construction of otherness by indicating an inherent difference between people and clones which eventually results in a lack of motivation for understanding each other.

Furthermore, Toker and Chertoff (166) speak of an emotional gap caused by the absence of parents, which serves as a background to the games of imitation Kathy, Ruth and Tommy play first as children, later as young adults as well. This is also mentioned by Lacan who postulates that the first significant Other in our lives is actually the mother. Thus, the clones are really emotional orphans whose linguistic skills are even more limited since they had only self-projected others to “practise on”. The systematic alienation of common language and the use of euphemisms clearly show that this emotional gap is reinforced by a linguistic gap that stretches between the clones and normal people. This boundary marks the otherness of the three protagonists but at the same time – as is evident from Kathy’s narrative – takes it to an even higher level.

The alienated vocabulary created by Ishiguro both subverts and strengthens the system. While the clones clearly stay outside the system and remain isolated as a result of the differences created partially by them, they also reinforce the social consent (or perhaps denial) and, therefore, they contribute to the integrity of society. The changes in language constitute one of the main tools in the construction of otherness which permeates the whole novel and is very intricately interwoven into every aspect of the story.

**The nature and construction of otherness**

The most obvious occurrence of otherness can be detected in the way the clones are situated and perceived in the new world of *Never Let Me Go*. One of the main issues of this chapter is whether their position as the conspicuous other is the result of a semi-conscious linguistic alienation and the subsequent conditioning or it is rather a pre-existing, ontological difference. It is commonly perceived, especially at Hailsham that the clones are inherently different and that there is something uncanny about their very existence. Before looking into the actual construction of otherness, it would be interesting to see how the construction of the individual and eventually the self occur in the novel.

The primary question is whether the clones are able to define themselves as independent beings or it is always in relation to someone else that their identity is constructed. In order to answer this question, we have to draw a clear separating line between the Hailsham period and what came afterwards. During their Hailsham years, the students are completely separated from the rest of the world, the only interaction they have with it is through their guardians. Nevertheless, they manage to construct themselves as others with Cathy claiming that

“We certainly knew [...] that we were different from our guardians” (32). This feeling of self-otherness exists from the moment they are capable of perceiving their own situation and of formulating complex opinions about the world. However, it has to be pointed out that for the clones, especially Kathy, their own activity and use of language represents no strangeness, this is the natural way for them. She even assumes a similarity between the reader and themselves.

One of the main dilemmas of individuality resides in the act of naming and denominating. It would be tempting to claim the undisputable individuality of Kathy, Ruth and Tommy based on the fact that all of them have proper names and, therefore, constitute independent individuals. The common belief that individuals are singular and unrepeatable creations manifests in the fact that they possess proper names which are unalienable from them. However, as Ricœur claims, “[...] this designation, which is at once singular and permanent, is not intended for description but for empty designation.” (29) On the other hand, proper names mark that the individual is different from everyone else (thus, in this sense, they do create otherness) and they confirm identity and selfhood. The problem is that they do not really characterise the designated one, they merely place it in relation to something. This relational classification is even more prevalent in the case of pronouns: when Kathy says “we”, it is by definition understood as “not them” or as the closer group.<sup>5</sup>

The possibility and nature of individualisation is highly dependent on the development of the individuals. Eatough reads the novel as an example of traditional bildungsromans, with the clones’ exemplary progression to adulthood (141). They exhibit all the traits that are needed for this quest for selfhood, yet it somehow still differs from traditional bildung stories. For instance, their yearning to find their “possibles” might seem like a legitimate human desire at first sight as they “[...] 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”. (63) But in

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<sup>5</sup> Ricœur bases his ideas on Strawson’s theory of individualisation. Strawson claims that individualisation cannot be based on either auto-reference (thus, personal pronouns are empty in this sense, they are unable to truly describe the individual) or selfhood (*ipséité*) for fear of solipsism. Instead of selfhood, he constructs the process of individualisation using the concept of sameness (*mêmeté*). He postulates that selfhood and sameness are not identical since sameness might refer to both numerical and qualitative identity, as well as uninterrupted continuity. (116–117) Selfhood, on the other hand, refers to the identity which belongs to an individual self. The crucial question in both cases is permanence and the capacity for change.

reality, this desire does not amount to anything since it is inherently paradoxical: the clones simply do not have a future to look into.

Eatough further claims that “organs must represent concrete manifestations of time available to *one’s own* pursuit of *Bildung*”. (150) This phrase is problematic from several points of view. Firstly, it is dubious if we can even name this quest a *bildung* since the end goal is already set, there is no room for actual improvement and eventual individualisation. Consequently, there is no space for a numerical identity – resuming Ricœur’s terminology – since it becomes pointless and unable to stand on its own. Secondly, time does not seem to be a contributing factor in the process of individualisation as Kathy’s perspective does not change during the novel. Her childlike mindset is both the result of her conditioning and her lack of interest (and perhaps capacity) in developing. Thus, individuality and the perception of the self *are* constructed as early as during the Hailsham years as the clones already define themselves as opposed to their guardians.

The construction of otherness is further developed when leaving Hailsham, Kathy, Ruth and Tommy find themselves confined to the Cottages, separated from the rest of society. While their difference is not so marked while they stay at school since they have barely any contact with the outside world, as soon as they are old enough to live on their own and occasionally visit the cities, their otherness becomes conspicuous and truly constructed. There has always been a sense of difference in the air but it is during the cottage years that it becomes undeniably verbalised on several occasions. In a sense, there is a demystification of the existence of clones, which, as with all rites of passage, comes with painful revelations about themselves:

We’re modelled 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? [...] 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? What do you think she’d have said if we’d asked her? ‘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. (76)

Even though the clones might be perceived as normal human beings (they might even be mistaken for art students), their difference, which is not quite obvious for them either for a long time, is undeniable. Their social awkwardness constructs them as different and it is

precisely in this passage that their inferiority (which is another obviously constructed image) is first alluded to. Although Ruth's quest for her possible might have contributed to her individualisation, this opportunity is lost in the painful recognition that they are actually no more than the remnants of the lowest of humanity.

The clones' individual otherness is, hence, not so much ontological as constructed, although there are instances where the presence of an inherent difference seems rather convincing. However, there can always be detected "others" on both the individual and the collective level compared to whom the clones feel different and even more often, compared to whom they are perceived as different. This feeling of otherness also proved to be crucial in the perception of the self, thus, they cannot be constructed as independent individuals, only as in relation to someone else.

Moving away from individual perceptions, it would be interesting to see how their otherness is constructed on a collective level. Discussing the Copernican turn<sup>6</sup> in Freudian psychology, Jean Laplanche puts forward a strong relationship between inner and outer otherness by saying that "internal alien-ness [is] maintained, held in place by external alien-ness; external alien-ness, in turn, [is] held in place by the enigmatic relation of the other to his own internal alien [...]" (81). There is not only an interdependent relationship between the two concepts but a hierarchical one as well. While inner otherness is constructed through an external sense of difference, this latter in turn refers back to the "internal alien", a recurring concept in psychoanalytic criticism which contributes excessively to the construction of otherness.

There are, however, only a few occasions where this difference is explicitly articulated, thus, when the unconscious linguistic differentiation is manifested in very conscious thoughts about the unique position of clones. There are occasional, though often very vague statements from Kathy about their sense of otherness which rather manifests in eerie and highly disturbing situations. When a bunch of schoolgirls decide to unexpectedly circle the unsuspecting Madame to extract a genuine reaction from her, and eventually the reason for her coldness, they are shocked to see her actual reaction: "[...] she

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<sup>6</sup> The Copernican turn is a major tenet in Freud's psychoanalysis, referring to the period in early childhood when the child decentres his own universe by discovering things other than his own ego. This is an extremely important concept in theories of otherness since it represents the period when the individual turns to the other with interest, marking the first, rudimentary steps towards the construction of the image of the other.

seemed to be suppressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her. [...] she was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders.” (16) What they sense in Madame is the strange mixture of repulsion and fear, a very complex feeling which seems to be aroused in every normal person when they encounter a clone. It is only towards the very end that the truth about this strange sensation is revealed by Miss Emily: “We’re all afraid of you.” (126)

The strategy of Kathy as a narrator is to recount a short episode from their lives and then retrospectively reflect on it. The strange experience with Madame raises very important issues and concepts which are uttered by Kathy in an analyzing manner:

Thinking back now, I can see we were just at that age when we knew a few things about ourselves—about who we were, how we were different from our guardians, from the people outside—but hadn’t yet understood what any of it meant. [...] you’re waiting, even if you don’t quite know it, waiting for the moment when you realise 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—and who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. The 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. (16–17)

In Kristevan terminology, such a feeling towards the other is called troubling strangeness (*inquiétante étrangeté*). She claims that the fear of the other actually means that we are afraid of discovering the strangeness or otherness in ourselves. Similarly to Laplanche’s idea about the internal alien, this concept is also grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis. Kristeva also draws on Freud’s theory when she claims that what we perceive to be the other is actually that part of our ego that we had formerly rejected and this is precisely why it is all the more frightening.<sup>7</sup> In *Never Let Me Go*, this idea receives a strong moral connotation: the clones represent that shameful part of humanity which is hidden away in the dark by collective consent. From this, it directly follows that the “other is inside us” (284) and that when we

<sup>7</sup> It is Freud’s famous distinction of *heimlich/unheimlich* that has founded this idea. The original German word designating “uncanny” allows a double interpretation: *unheimlich* means both unknown and familiar which creates an atmosphere of doubt and fear. How can something be strange and familiar at the same time? Strangeness is not troubling because there is anything repulsive or frightening about the other but precisely because it is so close to the self.

are fighting the other, we are actually fighting our unconscious. Kristeva further invites us not to regard the other and ourselves as fixed points in the universe, but rather as changing concepts which can be analysed parallel to each other.

In her retrospective musings, Kathy adds a twist to the idea of troubling otherness: the most frightening part of being the conspicuous other is when “you glimpse yourself through the eyes of a person like that”. The real problem is not that the clones are perceived and consequently treated differently but rather the fact that their very existence is threatened by the construction of otherness. It is no longer the repulsion or fear of the normal people that they perceive but themselves, creatures who are capable of inciting such feelings. This recognition is precisely what makes Kristeva’s concept of troubling strangeness all the more effective in *Never Let Me Go*.

Laplanche draws considerably on Freud’s seduction theory as well. He claims that the other is perceived in its radical alterity from us, which is somehow still attractive to us (after all, the other is a rejected, yet very tempting part our identity). We are, in fact seduced by this other, a phenomenon he calls “adult seduction” (139). Interestingly enough, this works both ways in *Never Let Me Go*. Kathy, Ruth and Tommy are seduced by the prospect of possibles and of a life they will never be able to fulfil. The reason why they imitate and copy the behaviour of normal people is because it seems all the more fascinating than their own existence. Similarly, normal people are also fascinated by the clones, although they fail to recognise their ultimate similarity. Or rather, they are frightened of admitting any trace of similarity, however obvious it is. The prospect of clones, as a proof for the evolution of science and the exciting new ability to lengthen lives might seduce normal people but the fear to maintain their ontological position and the repulsion they feel when confronted with clones eventually prove more powerful.

The sense of otherness seems to be deeply incorporated into the fabric of the world of *Never Let Me Go*. It is visible not only in the unconscious use of alienated linguistic terms but also on a psychological level. Most problems remain unsaid or very vaguely articulated but their presence is nonetheless clearly discernible. Kathy’s subsequent attempts at explaining what the small incidents in their lives might mean offer a unique point of view for the reader. In fact, it is precisely this narrative technique that allows the reader to actually take part in the creation of otherness.

**The meta-level of otherness**

The last level of the construction of otherness in *Never Let Me Go* can be best grasped in terms of the consciousness of Kathy, the narrator-protagonist. Her maturely reserved and at the same time childlike narrative is a key element in the reader's perception of otherness. Her storytelling opens up new possibilities of interpretation and simultaneously creates a new level of differentiation by constantly making the reader switch between sympathies. Perhaps the most interesting instance of the construction of otherness occurs at this level: it is not only Kathy's but also the reader's identity that becomes alienated.

Kathy is a traditional first-person narrator who is homodiegetic at the same time, therefore, even more unreliable than such narrators tend to be. Even though she is a retrospective narrator who adds several possible explanations to her memories or the events she thinks to be true, she is not omniscient. Her unreliability is not intentional as she does not know more than she shares with the reader. It is rather her different status as a clone that gives her a unique perspective and consequently renders her narrative meandering and difficult to piece together.

As much as Kathy proves to be an archetypal unreliable narrator, the techniques with which she becomes one are uncommon in the sense that they provide a further frame for the main topos of the novel: the possible manifestation and reasons of otherness. She relates her story without a greater scheme as if she was telling about a discontinuous string of childhood memories and she herself is unable to grasp the significance of the events of her life. She frequently corrects herself as if the information she is providing was not correct or not the suitable one, not the one she originally intended to mention. She also digresses a lot and ends up supplanting the "important" pieces of information with seemingly unimportant ones. Consequently, Kathy's narrative is not linear in the sense that she haphazardly suspends it in order to mention some trivial episode, like the story of Tommy's injury:

[...] I remember, around that age, a marked change in the way we approached the whole territory surrounding the donations. [...] We still didn't discuss the donations and all that went with them; we still found the whole area awkward enough. But it became something we made jokes about, in much the way we joked about sex. Looking back now, I'd say the rule about not discussing the donations openly was still there, as strong as ever. But now it was okay, almost required, every now and then, to make some jokey allusion to these things that lay in front of us. A good example is what happened the time Tommy got the gash on his elbow. It must have been just before my talk with him by the pond; a time, I suppose, when Tommy was still coming out of that phase of being teased and taunted. (39)

Although at first sight, it seems that Kathy will further develop the idea of donations and supply the reader with more in-depth information, she cuts her original narrative short by the introduction of an unimportant episode from the past. Her natural verbosity and objective narration renders her story somewhat over explicative and this way, more distant. Even though she mentions very intimate details of her own and her friends' childhood, she remains a down-to-earth and analyzing storyteller. She is further alienated by her incredible perceptiveness with which she discerns the "marked change" in their lives but rather chooses to discuss something else. These small episodes represent an attempt to resemble normal people and to create a shared past with them. Her unreliability originates from precisely this: Kathy becomes increasingly dominated by her desire to be perceived as a normal person which eventually overrules her almost philosophical interest in their constructed position. The fact that she constantly refers to herself and the others as "students" instead of "clones" also reinforces this desire (Griffin 654).

McDonald (2007) calls this kind of narrative a "speculative memoir", a term that –similarly to Ishiguro's topos of otherness– operates on several levels. It is not only the reader who needs to speculate about the complete truth surrounding the clones but very often, Kathy herself speculates about the meaning of her own existence. As not everything is laid bare, Kathy must meditate on the purpose and eventually the truth-value of certain customs and events. Consequently, the reader is forced to infer truths exclusively from a doubly speculated narrative.

This self-analyzing retrospective text creates another narrative layer (Whitehead 73), thereby allowing for the establishment of sympathy between the reader and the clones. The feeling that the clones are by definition different from the rest of the world permeates the whole novel but what is more interesting is how Kathy alienates her narrative and eventually makes the reader feel different as well. The readers are conditioned to read between the lines and to infer information instead of directly hearing it from the narrator. Like several of Ishiguro's narrators, Kathy also uses a "language of self-deception and self-protection" in order to suppress meaning that would be too painful to hear (Shaffer 24). The readers are further conditioned to regard the existence and purpose of the clones as natural, just as Kathy meekly accepts her fate without an instant of doubt.

The primary tool of this conditioning through narration is the recurring "told and not told" motif. As Miss Lucy puts it, the students have "been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say,

some people are quite happy to leave it that way.” (37) On a meta-level, the readers are also supplied with certain pieces of information but true understanding comes only gradually to them and in this sense, their consciousness remains on the same level as that of Kathy and the other students. It is interesting how the readers are made to sympathize not with the normal people but with the clones, therefore, they are also made to share their sense of otherness. The more Kathy, Ruth and Tommy are made to look real in the beginning, the greater is the surprise of the reader to find that the protagonists are actually the conspicuous “others” in the story, whom one should be afraid of. This is where the alienation of the students is transferred onto a new level which is precisely that of the reader.

It is not only that Kathy identifies the reader as her preferred audience, she further creates a strong sense of hesitation in him (Whitehead 61) by constantly reprising and thereby lessening the edge of what she is saying. The identification becomes complete when Kathy explicitly constructs the readers as her listeners (Black 790):

I don't know if you had “collections” *where you were*. When you come across old students from Hailsham, you always find them, sooner or later, getting nostalgic about their collections. At the time, of course, we took it all for granted. *You* each had a wooden chest with *your* name on it, which you kept under your bed and filled with your possessions—the stuff you acquired from the Sales or the Exchanges. I can remember one or two students not bothering much with their collections, but *most of us* took enormous care, bringing things out to display, putting other things away carefully.<sup>8</sup> (17–18)

With the constant use of some personal pronouns “you” and “us”, Kathy both directly addresses the reader and presupposes a common past with them. She is telling her story to fellow clones as this seems to be the only way she is familiar with. Even though she does realize that they may not share the exact same experiences, she “helps” the reader put her story into perspective by creating a more or less common frame of reference which will eventually enable the readers’ conditioning to mirror that of the clones (792). Black goes as far as to claim that *Never Let Me Go* – the concept, that is – becomes a copy within itself when Kathy mentions the episode with Madame from her childhood. (803) Similarly, there are also multiple layers of the construction of identity and eventually otherness which are strongly

interwoven with the multiplicity of the narrative and the different facets of conditioning.

In Ricœur's terminology, we have to differentiate between identity in a somewhat general, even lay sense and narrative identity, which is a completely different concept. He claims that it is in relation to the plot that we can define narrative identity, which is in fact a concept "oscillating between sameness and selfhood" (151). The characters in a literary work are not defined by their own experiences but as part of the narrative, by their actions as members of a specific fictional world. Ricœur further claims that "[...] the character draws his or her singularity from the unity of a life considered a temporal totality which is itself singular and distinguished from all others. [...] this temporal totality is threatened by the disruptive effect of the unforeseeable events that punctuate it (encounters, accidents, etc.)" (147). Thus, this temporal totality, constituted by the narrative, is actually what constructs the individuality of the character. Similarly, otherness is formulated in relation to the narrative: when the unity of the plot is threatened by "disruptive effects", the work writes itself out of the generic and receptive traditions.

If "the genuine nature of narrative identity discloses itself [...] in the dialectic of selfhood and sameness" (140), it would be worthwhile to see how these concepts eventually contribute to the construction of otherness on the reader's level. Ricœur postulates that "sameness" is prevalent mostly in tales where the characters keep their basic personality despite of all character development. Interestingly enough, he cites the example of science-fiction by claiming that the imaginative variations of science-fiction are with regard to "sameness" (150) because there is a constant invariant (the body).<sup>9</sup> Even though there is no invariant in the case of "selfhood", the self also remain the same despite the (not only physical) changes in the character.

In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's narrative identity seems to be grounded more on sameness than on selfhood. Even though she goes through the transition from child to adult, her basic personality does not change. The dialectic between sameness and selfhood are internal to characters and becomes externalised in the temporal unity which is the narrative. Thus, when Kathy has trouble defining her identity and eventually becomes alien in her own fictional world, she "drags" the

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<sup>9</sup> Ricœur actually claims that in science-fiction and technical fiction, the human is replaced in a sense by a *clone*, representing an invariant interpretable in bodily terms. While the basic characteristics of the human remain, the new ones are incorporated into the clone (the bodily projection of the original human being).

reader with her. The “disruptive effects” mentioned by Ricœur subvert the traditions and conventions of reception and alienate the reader. The readers are not only made to identify with the clones, they are also forced to take part in the construction of otherness.

This can partly be explained by Freud’s seduction theory as put forward by Laplanche. It has been stated that this theory works within the fictional work in both directions: it is not only the clones that are fascinated by the strange world and habits of normal people, but normal people are also intrigued by the mere existence and possibility of clones. However, seduction occurs outside the text as well when the unsuspecting reader is slowly drawn into the mind of Kathy and made to see the world through her eyes. This is not a simple instance of sympathising with a character as there is unconscious and sometimes even conscious conditioning in Kathy’s narrative that operates on both an emotional and an intellectual level. Both her use of language and her reserved manners contribute to the reader being seduced into an alien world and eventually being made alien himself.

The meta-level of otherness is constructed once again outside the text and is related mostly to the perception of the self and the individualisation of the reader. While there are numerous indices in the text that prompt the reader to at least contemplate his own place in the world as opposed to that of the clones, he is also implicitly conditioned to see Kathy and her friends as the conspicuous others. At the same time, he will inevitably sympathise with them as well because the narrative voice contains a personal address pertaining to the subconscious of the reader. This dual perception of the protagonists will eventually result in the identification of the reader and the clones and consequently the realisation that he himself has become the other or that the other is nothing else but a part of his own personality.

Ishiguro’s 2005 novel makes use of one of oldest literary topoi: “the self” and what is stranger to it, “the other”. Otherness is one of the main topics of Ishiguro’s oeuvre as well and *Never Let Me Go* further elaborates it by experimenting with the different levels on which this topos can be manifested. By seemingly placing his novel in the long tradition of speculative fiction and more precisely dystopia, he already sets up readerly expectations which, however, will never be fulfilled. The novel is alienated from the generic tradition but the construction of otherness also occurs on the level of linguistic expression which further contributes to the invention of the students’ identities. The conscious and unconscious changes in language use

are also indicative of a psychological sense of otherness which seems more constructed than ontological. Kathy's difference as a narrator is also projected onto the readers who are conditioned both to perceive the otherness of the clones and also to experience it themselves. Thus, there is a circular movement in the construction of otherness: it occurs first on an extra-textual, then on a linguistic and textual and finally on a meta-textual level, all three of them being very closely interwoven.

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