

Coping With Reality in *Never Let Me Go*:

Narrative, Memory, and Art.

The process of coping with a terminal illness is both complex and difficult. Although the characters of Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* are not terminally ill, they do face a similar inevitable and uncertainly looming death: all three characters are clones created to serve as organ donors for a society that otherwise ostracizes them. Throughout their journey from creation to donation, the trio use art, literature, and storytelling to cope with the reality that they were brought into the world for the sole purpose of dying. Ishiguro's presentation of art as a coping mechanism alongside a Benjaminian method of processing the past is crafted to suggest that these are the best methods of coping with inevitable loss and death (Bizzini 66-67).

In order to fully understand how Ishiguro is advocating artistic and Benjaminian coping in *Never Let Me Go*, we must first establish the way in which the clones of Hailsham and terminal patients relate to each other. Perhaps the most succinct description of the clones' fate can be found when one of their guardians, Miss Lucy, reveals that they were created to be organ donors. Miss Lucy explains to them, "Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do" (Ishiguro 81). Much like a cancer patient who has received their terminal prognosis, the clones live knowing fully well how they will die, and although they are uncertain of exactly when death will come, they know it will come far too soon. Another similarity between the fate of a clone and a terminal patient is how they both spend significant time awaiting their death in a sterile space surrounded by other terminal individuals. What we know as rehabilitation centers or nursing homes, Ishiguro labels "recovery centres" (218). In the *Physician's Guide to Coping with Death and Dying*, Dr. Jan Swanson and Dr. Alan Cooper discuss common fears of the terminal patient. They come to the conclusion that it is rarely death itself that scares the patient, but rather the prospect of a long, painful process. For Ishiguro's clones, their entire existence is part of this terminal process, and so coping mechanisms are even more vital from their creation.

Starting as early as Kathy and other clones can remember, the students at Hailsham are pressured to produce and value art. This pressure does not only stem from places of power—the students of Hailsham enforce the social norm through peer pressure. The desire of the community to be artistic is so intense that the students feel justified in their systematic bullying of Tommy because he "never even tried to be creative" (Ishiguro 10). In her article "Writing With Care: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*," Anne Whitehead properly identifies the importance of art in the development of empathy in the clones. To make this point, she draws upon the wisdom of American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, paraphrasing, "literature is seen to be valuable because it can help doctors and other health-care practitioners to nurture an empathetic response to the suffering of those who are in their care" (Whitehead 55). However, Whitehead is slightly misguided in her belief that this guided empathetic development is intended to "cultivate good 'carers'" (Whitehead 56-57). Instead, I posit a different argument: while clones with high emotional intelligence do serve as better carers when the time comes, they are more importantly better equipped to cope with the emotional hardships inherent in being

a clone. The true value of empathetic development through art and literature is revealed by one of Hailsham's primary guardians. The guardian defends raising the clones to value the arts, claiming, "You wouldn't have lost yourselves in your art and your writing. Why should you have done, knowing what lay in store for each of you?" (Ishiguro 268). The point the guardian is making to Tommy and Kathy is as follows: without a devotion to art and writing and therefore a way of coping, the reality of a systematic and inevitable death is unbearable.

Art alone, however, is not a sufficient coping mechanism when you consider the trauma caused by the clones' intimate relationship with their own death. To this same point, as the clones leave Hailsham and move on to intermediary housing like the Cottages, their drive to engage with the arts weakens. Kathy reflects on this loss of interest in writing, explaining, "it soon began to feel like a lost cause" (Ishiguro 198). However, even once she forgoes her artistic efforts, Kathy continues to be extremely mentally stable in spite of her fate. She achieves this stability through exploration of narrative and personal memory. Silvia Caporale Bizzini defines this method of coping as Benjaminian, named after the ideas of philosopher Walter Benjamin:

Benjamin stresses how storytelling originates in suffering, death, feelings of displacement and homelessness, while being at the same time the solution to overcoming such feelings. He sees stories as instrumental in surviving loss... the narrator's storytelling allows them to, painfully, become the active protagonists of their own life-stories while their tales fulfill the collective responsibility towards the voiceless victims of history. (Bizzini 66-67).

If we view Kathy's narrative in *Never Let Me Go* with Bizzini's definition of Benjaminian coping in mind, it becomes apparent that storytelling and recounting of memories is indeed therapeutic for Kathy. Ishiguro himself addresses the role storytelling plays in Kathy's coping during a 2009 interview with Sean Matthews, reasoning, "If you want to draw a parallel between how individuals come to terms with their past and decide what to do next. . . then the issue of storytelling is an important one" (117). In her effort to come to understand her past, Kathy lessens the blow of concepts or recollections that make her uncomfortable with series upon series of nostalgic digressions.

One such implementation of Kathy's use of nostalgia to investigate and analyze her traumatic past can be seen when she is telling the story of a tape that she loved as a child at Hailsham. While she is recounting the story of the tape, she encounters several uncomfortable truths that run throughout her childhood and follow her into adulthood; Kathy acknowledges these truths, admitting, "We certainly knew—though not in any deep sense—that we were different from our guardians, and also from the people outside" (Ishiguro 69). The boon of Benjaminian coping is that when these truths become too uncomfortable, Kathy is able to shift the topic back to her tape with segues such as "But, I wanted to talk about my tape," or "Anyway, that's why I was so secretive about my tape" (Ishiguro 67,69). In this way, Kathy is able to safely process one core fact of her life—that she and all other clones are classified as "other."

Ishiguro does more than present the methods of artistic and Benjaminian coping when illustrating how to effectively cope with terminal diseases; he also highlights the result of

ineffective coping in his depiction of Tommy and Ruth. Both characters neglect one of the two mechanisms that Kathy employs. In Tommy's case, his artistic ineptitude subjects him to torment at the hands of the other children. Without a proper outlet for dealing with the combination of short-term social trauma of bullying and the long-term trauma associated with being a clone, Tommy loses control, "raving, flinging his limbs about, at the sky, at the wind, at the nearest fence post" (Ishiguro 10). I concede that for a portion of Tommy's life he is able to control his outbursts and even develops a talent for art, but the temper he developed in his artless stage never leaves him. Shortly before Tommy's final donation and death, his hopes for an extension of his life are crushed. He responds by running into a field and screaming, once again "raging, shouting, flinging his fists and kicking out" (Ishiguro 274). Unlike Tommy, Ruth is artistically competent, but she suffers from an inability to cope in the Benjaminian sense. Instead of processing her own reality, she chooses to obsess over rumors and myths that give her a false sense of hope. At one point, she becomes obsessed with the idea that she has found her "possible," the person she was cloned from, in hopes that she could "have the same sort of life as [her] model" (Ishiguro 165). When this dream is crushed, Ruth responds by lashing out at her closest friends (Ishiguro 166-167).

The emotionally or physically violent responses of Tommy and Ruth are exemplary of what Bruce Robbins describes as "intimate cruelty" (Robbins 290). These cruel outbursts, which result from deficient coping mechanisms, further harm the emotional stability of both the individual and the community. Ruth's most damaging outburst, her mocking Tommy for his artwork and insinuating that Kathy thought it was equally laughable, resulted in Kathy leaving the cottages and cutting off communication with both Tommy and Ruth for several years (Ishiguro 203). Although I have not discussed the role that friendship plays in coping with a harsh reality, it is common enough to the human experience that we can conclude this only worsens the ability of Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth herself to cope with their bleak future.

It is not only through Ishiguro's portrayal of Tommy and Ruth struggling without the mechanisms of artistic and Benjaminian coping that we can conclude he believes these methods are superior in dealing with terminal afflictions. Perhaps the most persuasive argument that Ishiguro makes for these methods lies in the emotional and career success experienced by Kathy, who employs these methods best. As she transitions into the later stage of a clone's life where she must care for those in the process of being donating their organs, Kathy excels for an abnormally long time (Ishiguro 3). Carers are provided with a window into their future: very soon, they will be the ones being carted around from surgery to surgery until their fourth donation where their body can no longer function and they pass away. Kathy comments on the emotional tax of being a carer, lamenting, "For a while at least, you're demoralized. Some of us learn pretty quick how to deal with it. . . I've learnt to live with it" (Ishiguro 207-208). Although she is still affected and worn down by the system that she is trapped within, Kathy manages. On the other hand, the characters of Ruth and Tommy struggle to cope as effectively as Kathy and are harvested for their organs and die before Kathy even begins the donation process.

The connection between the clones found in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and the real patients discussed by Dr. Swanson and Dr. Cooper in their *Physician's Guide to Coping with Death and Dying* runs deep. In constructing, or at the very least allowing for, this parallel, Ishiguro tactfully advises those who are suffering from terminal illness and clearly establishes

artistic and Benjaminian coping as the best means of comprehending and processing inevitable death. In combination, these methods also help the patient to avoid damaging other support structures in acts of intimate cruelty—something that neither Tommy nor Ruth could do. With Ishiguro's insights in mind, perhaps the suffering of terminal patients could be lessened if we as a society placed more importance in the cultivation of art and narrative.