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This is the second in a three-part series examining the “usefulness” of creativity through the lens of Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2005 novel Never Let Me Go. In Part 1, we looked the students’ attitudes toward artistic “Exchanges,” the Romantic ethics of art and the soul, and the mythology surrounding the Gallery at Hailsham. Here, we deep-dive into the novel’s climactic confrontation between the now-grown students and their teachers.

Ishiguro reveals in the novel’s climax that the true purpose of the Gallery is far more sinister than anything the students could anticipate. Kathy and Tommy, now grown, track down Madame to ask for a deferment of Tommy’s final donation. Ishiguro emphasizes the Gothic horror elements of this encounter. The hall of Madame’s house is “dark [and] narrow” (Ishiguro 249), dividing into “a staircase going upstairs” and “an even narrower passage leading deeper into the house” (Ishiguro 249). Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, reads the verticality of the staircase as pointing to “the rational zone of intellectual projects” (18), that is, the Enlightenment tradition of liberation through rationality. The “narrower passage” (Ishiguro 249) recalls what Bachelard calls “the labyrinths of the corridor” (21). Like the Labyrinth that hid the Minotaur, the passageways of Madame’s house contain a dark secret. Kathy and Tommy “wander forward” (Ishiguro 249) at Madame’s insistence to explore the deep psychological significance of their role in society rather than follow Madame upstairs to rationality. Like characters in a Gothic novel, Tommy and Kathy are subject to the whims of a seemingly supernatural force, in this case, Madame.

Ishiguro uses a number of techniques and tropes to enhance the uncanny atmosphere of the house. He repeatedly emphasizes the house’s “dark” and “narrow” aspects with “dim table lamps” (Ishiguro 249), creating an oppressive atmosphere. Kathy hesitates to define anything with certainty. Instead, she describes noises “maybe from somewhere upstairs” (Ishiguro 249) but maybe from somewhere else entirely. This uncertainty stresses what is unknown to the conscious mind and further emphasizes the frightening aspects of Tommy and Kathy’s situation. The décor of the room in which Kathy and Tommy find themselves is “possibly Victorian” (Ishiguro 249), recalling Shameem Black’s analysis of liberal humanism growing out of nineteenth century artistry (787) while simultaneously suggesting that the furniture may “possibly” be of another provenance. Ishiguro thus refuses to provide Kathy, Tommy, or the reader with clarity, preferring instead to shroud them in half-light.

Art itself is prominently displayed in this room, though in subversive and disturbing forms. The fireplace, symbolic of the central hearth of family and the passion of life, has been “sealed up with a board” (Ishiguro 249). In its place hangs a “painting, woven like a tapestry” (Ishiguro 249) of a “strange owl-like bird staring out” (Ishiguro 250). Ishiguro’s use of simile is particularly apt here. In the half-light of “dim table lamps” (Ishiguro 249), Kathy cannot quite articulate the image by the fireplace. In being both painting and tapestry, it is neither. Similarly, the “strange owl-like bird” (Ishiguro 250) is undefined, producing an uncanny effect on Kathy, Tommy, and the reader by “staring out” (Ishiguro 250) as though it were sentient. The passion that drives artistic creation has here been repressed and replaced by an artistic work that resembles what it is not. Kathy’s uncertain perception further symbolizes her unclear understanding of the purpose of art at Hailsham.

Hailsham, overarchingly present throughout the novel even after the protagonists graduate, is equally present in this oppressive space. Tommy notices a “framed picture” (Ishiguro 250), which he describes as Hailsham. Kathy, already unsettled by the painting-tapestry, is more cautious in her interpretation. She notes that the framed picture is “a pretty nice watercolour” (Ishiguro 250) but resists Tommy’s insistence that it is “the bit round the back of the duck pond” (Ishiguro 250). In other words, Kathy cannot bring her current, half-understood perception into what she remembers as the reality of Hailsham. She attributes her inability to see the picture fully to the situation of the room. The nearby lamp, which ought to bring clarity to the picture, has “a crooked shade covered with cobweb traces” (Ishiguro 250) and thus merely obscures the picture by “put[ting] a shine over the murky glass” (Ishiguro 250). Together with the painting-tapestry by the fireplace, the picture of what might be Hailsham—or might not—creates an unsettling, uncanny effect.

The sinister atmosphere deepens when “the wall at the back of the room began to move” (Ishiguro 250). The supernatural effect of moving walls dissipates when Kathy realizes that “it wasn’t really a wall, but a pair of sliding doors” (Ishiguro 250). The disguised nature of objects in this house is clearly not limited to works of art. The very structure of the house is elusive, foreshadowing the impending explanation of Madame and Miss Emily, which will destroy the protagonists’ assumptions about the meaning of their artwork and their lives.

As Madame speaks to Tommy and Kathy, mocking their liberal humanist assumption that “art will reveal [their] inner selves...display [*their*] souls!” (Ishiguro 254; his italics) and thus save them, Kathy has a “faint suspicion” (Ishiguro 254) that there is something more sinister behind Madame’s words. Her suspicion, and the reader’s, grows into “something more substantial” (Ishiguro 255) as Madame continues to speak. Just as the reader has been slowly led to understand the dark truth behind Ishiguro’s seemingly innocuous terms like “donation,” “caring” and “completion,” Kathy slowly realizes that Madame is speaking not to Kathy and Tommy but to “someone listening behind us in the darkened half of the room” (Ishiguro 255). Her first intimation of this shadowy figure is the “mechanical” (Ishiguro 255) sound of what turns out to be a wheelchair. In this house, at least, sound rather than sight is the most effective way of knowing. Though this might be an uncanny reversal of the usual hierarchy of senses for the average reader, the importance of sound is

not unusual for Kathy, as her strongest artistic attachment has not been to painting but rather to the fictional torch song that gives the novel its title. Indeed, it is “the voice more than anything” (Ishiguro 255) that enables Kathy to recognize Miss Emily in the wheelchair. Miss Emily’s physical form, “frail and contorted” (Ishiguro 255) and wheelchair-bound, makes her appear grotesque, very different from the earlier description of Miss Emily as a woman “carried herself, always very straight with her head right up” (Ishiguro 39). In contrasting the descriptions, the reader senses the fall of liberal humanism’s social cachet, even before Miss Emily tells her story.

Miss Emily herself is a device for Ishiguro to layer his Gothic and fantastical tropes. Indeed, the name “Miss Emily” recalls William Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily,” a Southern Gothic tale about another “Miss Emily” who poisons and taxidermies her lover. Just as Faulkner’s Miss Emily transgresses the boundary between the dead and living human body, Ishiguro’s has devoted her career to proving that clones have souls. The location of her grand social experiment is Hailsham, a name that suggests overtones of Dickens’ Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. Miss Havisham, who never leaves her own garden-chair, revenges herself on an unfaithful fiancé by adopting and warping Estella into a heartbreaker. Similarly, Miss Emily states that Hailsham was designed as a “humane, cultivated environment” (Ishiguro 261) which would turn out clones “as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being” (Ishiguro 261). Although Miss Emily’s goals appear nominally more compassionate than Miss Havisham’s, both women manipulate the lives of others in order to prove their point. Thus, Ishiguro demonstrates the slippage between the three texts is not merely linguistic but thematic.

In using these tropes of Gothic fiction, Ishiguro places his work in a tradition that stretches back several centuries. One of the primary goals of this literary tradition, as Black points out, is to emphasize “a utopian alignment among art, empathy, and human ethical development” (788). Black further suggests that by creating a *dystopia*, Ishiguro “indicts humanist art” (790) on the grounds that art “serves to prepare [the students] for lives of exploitation” (790). Indeed, the examples of Madame and Miss Emily, who have explicitly liberal humanist goals, demonstrate that attention to art does not necessarily translate into empathy. When confronted with the first time with the students, rather than their art, Madame seems to feel “a real dread that one of [them] would actually brush against her” (Ishiguro 35). To her, the students are “spiders” (Ishiguro 35, 248), inhuman, horrifying beings that could contaminate her with a touch. Miss Emily, too, subconsciously thinks of the students as subhuman. She “reared” (Ishiguro 261) them, as one would rear an animal. Like Madame, Miss Emily had to “fight back [her] dread of [the students] almost every day” (Ishiguro 269). The intense revulsion that Madame and Miss Emily feel toward the students undermines their theoretical position of liberal humanist empathy. To Miss Emily, the students were “simply pawns in a game” (Ishiguro 266) and that the art they thought would gain them a deferral was merely a fund-raising tactic. Kathy protests, “For us, it’s our lives” (Ishiguro 266), but Miss Emily, blinded and twisted by her theory, cannot acknowledge that Hailsham students were anything other than “better off than many” (Ishiguro 266). According to a liberal humanist position, the students *were* better off, in that they were “educated and cultured” (Ishiguro 261) at Hailsham. Yet by creating grotesque, sinister, “mechanical” (Ishiguro 255), and

hypocritical liberal humanists as Miss Emily and Madame, Ishiguro demonstrates the failure of the liberal humanist enterprise in the postmodern age.

Works Cited

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