

Soon We'll Be Living in the Future: The Examined Life

I'm impressed by many aspects of *Never Let Me Go*. I love Ishiguro's writing style, his hyper-personal narration, the realistic depiction of the thoughts that run through an individual's head during social interactions (even if our access to those thoughts makes it far more difficult to think of the Hailsham students as anything less than human), and the oh-so-subtle ways he tweaks the England of "the late 1990s" until it's *just* a little different from our own. And I love the way he takes a plot that could be ploddingly straightforward – the students realize their true nature and go out to live life in the moments they have left – and fills it with so much life: the little drawings that recall Tommy's animals and the gifts the kids share in the Exchanges, the inner turmoil that stems from not knowing what sort of person provided the genes that make you *you*, and the final search for...well, that would be telling.

But if there's an element of the book that stands out *besides* all of that, it's in Ishiguro's commentary on how difficult we find it to separate ourselves from places, and how they then come to shape our identities. Modest Mouse was on to something when they wrote a song called "People as Places as People," and if your first blog in this class was any indication, most of you associate *home* with the person you've *become*. And Ishiguro does this in such a clever way, because he doesn't just sit you down and describe Hailsham in loving detail for page after page after page. That approach works for J.R.R. Tolkien when he writes about the Shire or the Old Forest in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, but it robs your story of urgency and momentum; *Fellowship's* narrative comes to generate its own momentum, but *Never Let Me Go's* plot is nowhere near as large in scale. Instead, Ishiguro swoops in and out of Kathy's memory so that we get little flashes of the place that nonetheless give us a real sense of what it was like, intense impressions of the place that shaped her over the course of her young life – indeed, impressions that derive their intensity from the way they're shared with us.

I have a fondness for stylistically tricky (though not impenetrable) works of art, as anyone who watched *The Fountain* a couple of times can attest. And I love that *Never Let Me Go's* structure only *seems* simple. In fact, by dropping us into a story that begins conversationally (as though we're familiar with the world, but not the person telling us about it), some of the things Kathy mentions – the things we're told, but not told – only become meaningful once you truly see the whole.

The thing is, though, that you cannot see the whole until you see the smaller moments for what they are. That's what *Down the Memory Hole* really does, or at least was designed to let you do: you give your audience access to disparate, unrelated memories (the parts), and thus allow them to see *you* (the whole) in a new light. Your thoughts' order displays itself on the page, regardless of whether you intend to show it; even the most apparently random arrangement reveals something about its creator.

It's a great but difficult skill to master: to read flexibly, to instinctively seek the patterns in seemingly small things. I strongly believe it's a skill that helps you live more effectively. After all, Socrates stated that the unexamined life is not worth living. While Twain believed that a life that's been too closely examined hasn't been lived, I fall more on Socrates's side. I agree with Twain's assertion that obsessive self-study can be myopic, but there are too many wonderful things about life that I would miss if I didn't stop to reconsider them. In short, I'd rather err on the side of reflection.

Over the course of the year, I've structured my work much the way the works themselves are structured. *1984's* and *Brave New World's* assignments tended to be fact-based and hyper-detailed, emphasizing the importance of cooperation, connection, and ethical behavior (i.e., don't leave your partners hanging). With *The Fountain* and *Never Let Me Go*, however, the emphasis shifts to reflect the works: they urge you to go out and feel alive, to appreciate every moment because, in the end, those

moments are what we keep. (Think of the *After Life* scenario.) You may not feel the same way, but it's the same feeling I get once I think about *1984*. I want to go explore and experience all that I can, all there is to know about life, the universe, and everything. All three allow us to treasure transcendent moments in largely miserable universes, those bits where everything is beautiful and nothing hurts. (I don't think our existences are largely miserable.)

I think creative art helps us appreciate our own lives because we tend to value things more once that art calls our attention to them. Three years ago, a student named Jackie Huynh made, of her own volition, a short film with her fellow seniors honoring the times they'd shared together. It was a quick montage of a harmless senior prank: taking messages and Post-it notes and just *covering* the campus with them. (I finally understood why I found a few stray pink Post-its attached to my car one night.)

When I watched the film, I suddenly realized just how fundamentally – and swiftly – my life had already changed since I was her age. I realized I would never again have what Jackie had captured with her camera: that time when your whole life seems to be opening up before you, when every considered possibility remains, well, possible.

I found I couldn't even remember what that had felt like.

It's neither easier nor more difficult to examine something once it's concluded: it's just *different*. You only have a few more weeks to contemplate this life you've led. After that, it/you will change forever, and you won't reflect on this time without separation (temporal and geographical) distorting your recollections. (If you don't believe me, ask those kindergarten teachers you remember so faithfully.)

So while you still have time, I want you to examine your life. Specifically, I want you to concentrate on all of the positive things and treasured moments that you can, and capture what you find in a structure that makes sense to you (and that you can explain to others around you). And yes, you can include some of the hardships as well...but I feel like I've given you plenty of opportunities for those already. This project, simply put, is meant to be a celebration.

I want you, and as many friends/teammates/peers as you can muster, to carry on in Jackie's footsteps, to make something transcendent and beautiful that captures your time together here. Whoever you work with should be someone who's close to you, regardless of whether they're in the class or not. (By close, I mean genuinely close – no marriages of convenience for the sake of reducing your responsibilities.)

The Examined Life Festival takes place on Wednesday, June 6th, and Thursday, June 7th. On those days, anyone who wishes to present their work should do so. Your presentation can take on any form (I suggest something other than a PowerPoint, since the Senior Project will give you your fill of those), and just as Jackie made her film because she wanted to, it should be the form that fits best for your purposes. After all, some of you needed help understanding *The Fountain*; if I'm going to need similar help, I'd appreciate the assistance!

Examine the things that brought you here. Celebrate them before they pass, fade, or change. Remember, one last time, before you have a chance to forget...for soon we'll be living in the future.