

## Double-Consciousness in *Never Let Me Go*

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The struggle to develop identity and to understand who you are is one of the most essential aspects of growing up. In his novel *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro highlights this identity development in his characters as they progress through their lives. The desire to find oneself and find belonging is arguably the paramount conflict the characters face. While the main characters Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth all must come to terms with their inevitable disturbing donations and untimely death, the most emotionally traumatic moments in their lives are centered in this lack of belonging. In emphasizing the identity crisis in Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth's lives as a form of double-consciousness, Ishiguro forms an analogy for the psychological struggles of injustices in the past and present involving racial discrimination.

Double-consciousness is a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* and it refers to the effect that being considered an "other" has on an individual. In his book, Du Bois states "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (3). The individual must learn their own identity while coming to terms with the negative identity the world projects upon them. Du Bois published his work in 1903, about forty years after the Civil War, and was addressing a new hardship in the lives of African-Americans after slavery was abolished. The United States did not support the rights of African-Americans and although they were no longer slaves, they still were denied any true freedom. Jon Cruz writes in his historical essay of Du Bois' book, "Freed from slavery, blacks remained largely frozen within a political economy that extended the norms of racial oppression and segregation" (2). Similarly, in the world of *Never Let Me Go*, the characters seem to have some sort of freedom to explore the land and acquire an education, but in reality they are still seen as substandard to "real" humans in the world, and they will never escape their mortal exploitation. Most importantly they remain bound to an endless struggle to find identity. Their souls are like those in Du Bois' work, as he states "One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged

strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (3). Instead of experiencing their unitary identities as individuals, Ishiguro's characters are torn between the identity they establish for themselves, and the identity that the world projects upon them. It is this "twoness" Du Bois speaks of that tears the characters apart in *Never Let Me Go*, more brutally than the literal tearing of the flesh through donations.

Throughout Ishiguro's novel the characters come face to face with many realizations that they are different from the rest of the world, and through these experiences their double-consciousness is formed. Kathy first comes to this realization when she tells the reader of her first encounter with Madame. When the children run up to her to see her reaction, they become aware of the utter dread she has of them. Kathy describes Madame's fear of the children as "the same way someone might be afraid of spiders" (Ishiguro 35). Madame has a bitter disgust for these children because she regards them as "others". At the mere age of eight, Kathy comes to the cold realization that she may not be who she perceives herself to be, writing "the moment when you realize that you really are different to them; that there are people out there, like Madame, who don't hate you or wish you 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" (36). Here the double-consciousness is established in Kathy's mind. She realizes that the rest of the world looks down upon her kind, and that she will always be fighting a preconceived identity that the world has formed for her. Kathy goes on to give us an exact depiction of double-consciousness as she says "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 gives you something else, something troubling and strange" (36). This is precisely what Du Bois describes in his book. Like Du Bois, Kathy is forced to recognize her dual identity: she sees herself in her own eyes as well as in the eyes of others, and is torn between these two beings.

Childhood schooling is a tumultuous time for anyone and it plays a large role in the construction of social identity, and Ishiguro focuses his plot on academia to reinforce the identity crisis and double-consciousness in his characters. In his essay on *Never Let Me Go*, Keith McDonald identifies the importance of the setting, saying "This social construction is fundamentally involved in a nexus of ideological forces, where the notion of childhood is often bound up in a register of nurturing, benevolence, and protection that can also reveal social injustices

and discourses of power" (77). This is precisely why Ishiguro includes so many scenes from the characters' childhoods. In these scenes, the characters discover who they are and what their place in the world is; for Kathy, this means slowly coming to terms with the life and identity the world has chosen for her. When speaking of Madame, Kathy tries to identify with the audience, saying "I'm sure somewhere in your childhood, you too had an experience like ours that day; similar if not in the actual details, then inside, in the feelings" (Ishiguro 36). Here she draws the reader's attention to a moment they may have had in their own lives where they felt their own identities being established without them. Those who have experienced racism, homophobia, sexism, or simply bullying or other forms of discrimination in our youth are reminded of these moments and our own double-consciousness, and feel a deeper empathy for Kathy.

Another indicator of the identity struggle the characters face can be observed in the concept of "possibles" that the characters seek to find. The characters constantly grasp at a sense of belonging throughout the novel, as they have no family or understanding of their origins that they can cling to. In her essay on the novel, Anne Whitehead astutely observes that Hailsham and the Cottages are "for Kathy, all there is: she does not have a surname because she does not have a family, and her relationships with her fellow students accordingly take on the strength and ambivalence of family relations" (69). The characters cling to each other because they are each other's only means of support and belonging. Whitehead also notes that the only outside sense of belonging that the students have is the supposed existence of "possibles" or "originals". Whitehead says "Particularly powerful in the novel is the myth of 'possibles' that circulates at the Cottages [that] speaks eloquently of the clones' desire for a sense of origin and belonging" (68). This search for "possibles" is a desire to find belonging in the outside world, and through this sense of belonging the students can establish an identity. The students search for the people they have been cloned from in order to gain insight on what type of people they originate from. Kathy tells the reader that "all of us, to varying degrees, 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" (Ishiguro 140). If they can understand where they come from perhaps they can understand who they themselves are as well, and what their place in the world truly is. The "possibles" are the only window into the outside world, or the world of the observer, and through them the students believe they can find belonging in the masses that look down upon their very existence, thus ridding themselves of the burden of double-consciousness.

The ongoing plight of double-consciousness culminates in the scene where Kathy and Tommy go to speak with Madame and Miss Emily about attaining a deferral. Throughout the entire novel there is absolutely no mention of race or ethnic background of any character up until this point. Miss Emily curiously tells Kathy ““You glanced at George, the big Nigerian man pushing me. Oh yes, you had quite a look at him and he at you”” (Ishiguro 257). This statement is peculiar because of the fact that she very explicitly mentions his racial identity, and she dwells upon the matter a bit oddly as if she seems to see some sort of connection between Kathy and George. The reader can see the similarities in both of their situations fairly clearly: Kathy is required to care for the weak and must give her life in service of others deemed superior to her, while George cares for the now weak Miss Emily. Nigeria was one of the leading exporters of slaves during the colonial era and the British Empire, and by declaring George’s race, Ishiguro connects the past objectification of individuals during the slave trade to the potential future objectification of individuals via cloning. Ishiguro draws attention to the similarities between these characters as another way of generalizing the experience of double-consciousness to encompass a broader feeling of disenfranchisement. Both suffer from monstrous exploitation and both are torn apart by double-consciousness, and Ishiguro draws attention to this similarity in this strange moment.

In an advancing technological world with some injustices and prejudices still plaguing our countries and people, we must look upon Ishiguro’s world in *Never Let Me Go* to understand the potential injustices of the future and how they can be avoided. Ishiguro refrains from attaching race or ethnicity to the main characters in order to let readers feel empathy for the characters regardless of what race the reader may be. The reader can understand the torment of double-consciousness with respect to any discrimination, race-related or not. We are approaching a new world where technology races ahead faster than it has ever done before. In this imminent world where genetic modification, groundbreaking electronic devices, and perhaps even cloning will be present, it is crucial to understand the deep conflict involved in those discriminated against and its toll on the soul. If we can observe the injustices of the past and feel empathy for those afflicted by double-consciousness in the present, then perhaps we can prevent the injustices of the future.

**Works Cited**

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