

Themes, Issues, Motifs, and Symbols in *Never Let Me Go*

Themes, Issues, Motifs:

1. commentary on human psychology/human nature through the donors:
 - the behavior of the donors as people who for the most part seem to accept their fates: one could almost say that they are complicit in their own deaths; they don't do much to question the path that has been laid out for them—very few couples even make much of an effort to get deferrals
 - reasons for their failure to fight harder for themselves are deeply rooted in human nature:
 1. the fear of death and their willful ignorance in not wanting to confront the facts of their lives
 2. passivity in the face of authority and the group—they are reluctant to go against the course that has been set out for them; they have been indoctrinated to believe that it is “right” for them
 3. depression and sense of futility in the face of what seems to be inevitable: many of them seem ready to die at an unnaturally young age because their sense of its inevitability has been deeply ingrained in them by experience
 - they take refuge in daydreams and preoccupation with other things and thus avoid having to confront the reality of their situation
 - in fact, this reflects universal human responses to death—all of us face death and might die at any time, and we react to that central fact of our existence in much the same way that they do

2. the paradox of Madame's behavior; inherent irony in her and Miss Emily's fight on the donors' behalf:
 - her apparent disgust at the sight of them is more complicated than it first seems to the children: on the one hand, she does seem to see them as different than “regular people”; on the other hand, she is dedicated to fighting for their rights and is clearly moved by them—so part of her “disgust” reflects her sense of horror (and perhaps guilt) at how her society is cruelly exploiting them
 - for all of their good intentions and sense of self-righteousness, they have accepted the practice of creating organ donors; what they crusade for is simply improved conditions for the donors, not an end to the practice

3. the question of “soul”: what “soul” really means is consciousness, a subjective awareness that feels and experiences—an “inner life”
 - things that demonstrate its existence through the richness of an apparent inner life (the artwork reflects many of these things):
 - imagination
 - creativity
 - complex reasoning
 - passion
 - emotional attachment
 - the capacity for love
 - new ideas
 - the capacity to question and seek answers
 - conflict within oneself
 - mental initiative: generating ideas and desires on one's own as opposed to simply reacting to prompts like an automaton
 - dishonesty and manipulative behavior
 - goals and sense of the future
 - capacity for morality and self-discipline
 - a desire for redemption: e.g. Ruth's desire to right her wrongs at the end of her life
 - behavior that indicates self-consciousness: e.g. awareness of others' perceptions of oneself

- behavior that indicates the continuation of internal impulses in the absence of a controlling environment or awareness of an audience: e.g. Kathy's "Never Let Me Go" dance, which she performs not knowing that she is being watched

4. How are the author's narrative choices appropriate and effective?

- Kathy's effectiveness as narrator: objectivity and strong sense of ethics (confirmed by the other characters' comments and various aspects of the plot); subtle and understated emotions—deep and powerful, but not overwrought (her words are measured and considered, not hasty and crude); the normality and simplicity of her narrative voice reflects the author's overall narrative strategy;
- first-person narrative reflects the question of the existence of their souls—the existence of the story itself is eloquent proof of the existence of her soul
- Hailsham as the primary setting: demonstrates the normality of their emotional lives and the potential within them to be just like any other children—more poignant and revealing than a glimpse at inhumane conditions would be; also adds to the atmosphere of mystery and suspense
- flashback approach: Kathy has had time to process her thoughts about her life and present them in a carefully considered way that reveals things slowly; the fact that she is telling this as someone who has lost those close to her and is confronting her own death adds to its power
- the very sense of normality with which she presents it all, instead of confronting us up front with what to us are shocking truths about her life, emphasizes the horror of what has become completely accepted in her society—How could something so cruel and inhumane be normal?
- use of omission and implication

5. historical/social/ethical parallels:

- slavery: also justified with the argument that those enslaved were less than human, as well as the unwillingness to sacrifice the easier life slavery provides
- the exploitation of the underclass: those who benefit are reluctant or completely unwilling to let go of the benefits they derive, so they avoid facing the fact of the suffering of working class and poor people throughout the world
- animal research/animal agriculture: also justified by some people with the argument that animals do not have "souls"
- elitism and segregation: the notion that different standards are acceptable for different groups of people
- the cost of comfort: most things that extend our lives have some kind of ethical, environmental, or social cost, yet we accept these improvements without thinking much about the consequences—our lives now are very different than the lives that humans evolved to live within a natural ecosystem (we and our world aren't "designed" for the way we live now)

Symbolism:

1. Hailsham: symbol of innocence

- loss of innocence parallels destruction of Hailsham—Ruth wants to preserve memories of innocence, so she doesn't look for it

2. the boat: like Charon's boat to the Underworld, represents mortality

- dialogue in the scene suggests that the characters are catching a glimpse of their impending deaths, which they are fascinated by but don't want to confront for too long
- imagery also reflects the motifs of helplessness and loneliness
- like the donors, the boat seems to have been forgotten by society, and its origin is a mystery

- boats and water travel are associated with freedom; thus the beaching of the boat is symbolic of a lack of freedom

3. lost corner: cast off/abandoned by society, the donors are like the things left there

- reflects the human tendency to want to hold on to things, resist change, avoid death (thus the title is about more than Kathy and Tommy's relationship and their desire to remain together)
- could be seen as "heaven" in a certain sense: the possibility of continued existence
- imagery in last scene is especially important: donors are like the cast-off things and rubbish she sees
- appropriate that they should search for Ruth's "possible" in Norfolk

4. forest behind Hailsham: future realities of which the donor children have a vague awareness