

ENGLISH – STASILAND & NEVER LET ME GO TEXT COMPARISON

Both texts explore the difficulties of accessing the past. Discuss.

Moderating the past through individual and highly personalised narration, Kazuo Ishiguro's 'Never Let Me Go' and Anna Funder's 'Stasiland' present the omnipresent nature of the past in human existence. The texts do not demonstrate a struggle to access the past, describing rather, the difficulty of evolving an authentic elucidation of historical reality. While both acknowledge the past as a "re-examination" of events, "accumulated debris" and "personal stories"; a "collection" which each protagonist must make "ordered" and comprehensible for the characters' interpretation of their own position in the narrative world, the texts contrast the existential consequences of pursuing retrospection. Such a condition is one which ultimately limits the present, as Ishiguro's Kathy describes as "a cosy state of suspension in which we could ponder our lives without the usual boundaries".

Incrementally revealing the context of the "Hailsham" microcosm, Ishiguro mirrors the process by which the reader develops an understanding of the text in a similar way "Hailsham students" comprehend their fate. Similarly to the way in which clones are "told and not told" of their "purpose" and "place in the wider world", the narrative intelligibility of Kathy's dialogue is contingent on the reader's 'anticipation of retrospection' -an awareness which acknowledges that the narrative's development will restructure the provisional value of the information being presented. The need for the reader to draw from an ensued understanding, accumulated as the text progresses, in order to comprehend the information presented earlier in the novel, the 'past', is particularly emphasized in the opening of the text: the narrator, "Kathy H", address the reader on an interpersonal level "If you're one of them..." and describes her situation in terms of "them" and what "they want". Immediately, Ishiguro distinguishes the position of the protagonist, the collective 'other' and the reader, "you", explicitly framing an unspoken social condition which must be investigated and understood by the reader. Ishiguro further disorients the reader's comprehension of the reality which is recalled by Kathy, by the frequent use of unexplained euphemisms surrounding the role of the 'clones', regarding their "donations", "carers" and the ultimate "completion" of their purpose. Ishiguro perhaps delineates the process of recounting and interpreting the past to an act of human construction, "like...in a play", by confusing the demarcation of the reader's narrative experience of the past and that of the fictional protagonist.

Paralleling Ishiguro's coalescence of human creative construction and the act of retrospection, Funder correspondingly draws a relationship with Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland' and the prosthetic memory of the text, as the fictional 'Anna Funder' pursues her own "adventures in Stasiland", in an attempt to define "the gap between the GDR's fiction and its reality". In the overt nature of control within "the GDR", where the political infiltrates the self and corrupts the psyche of a population ("the Wall in the Head"); Funder evokes an absurdist representation of the historical, "a place where what was said was not real, and what was real was not allowed, where people disappeared behind doors and were...smuggled into other realms". The use of 'Alice in Wonderland' as a literary trope in 'Stasiland' may suggest to the reader that the character 'Anna Funder' is hostage to her imagination in a similar way to 'Alice'. Funder's character injects her own narrative into her conceptualisation of a foreign past ("Sometimes, I wonder what it would be like to be German."), in an attempt to make tangible the abstract fragments of memory, "the accumulated debris of a lifetime" and disjunct "personal stories". The character systematically grafts individual stories of the GDR and her own interpretation of such, in order to satisfy a comprehensible narrative, and a similar phenomenon arises in 'Never Let Me Go', where Kathy notes that "the line would blur between what were [her] memories and what were [other's]".

Moreover the experience of exploring the reign of the Stasi and the trauma of the 'GDR' is framed to be largely disorientating: "this particular feeling...not knowing whether you...wanted to laugh or throw up", "tro[d] this line between seeing things for what they were in the GDR, and ignoring those realities in order to stay sane". The examination of the past is often presented by the narrator as surreal in a heightened sense of absurdity, a phenomenon which Funder is "no longer capable of making sense of". In this way, Funder may also suggest the malleability of reality and thus past experience, emphasized through her consideration of Julia's "Italian boyfriend", whom "had an image of [Julia] that didn't quite hit the mark". Here, the author may define human experience as being a permanently "the object of observation", Funder questioning "just how we can have such wrong ideas of what we look like, our colour and shape and the space we take up in the world". The idea of the past being a purely subjective and manipulatable condition is further paralleled in 'Never Let Me Go', where the transferrable memory of 'Hailsham' is "oddly crooked" when applied to Kathy's experience at "the Cottages", hauntingly "almost right but not quite". Likewise, through the frequent allusion to the "fictional" and the absurd, Funder ultimately presents the mutability of experience, an "epidemic" which allows for the narrator and the reader to participate in the reconstruction of the past -paradoxically, this perhaps destabilises the historical narrative, breaking "the barrier that held [the reader] in" and allowing the past to "open up like some strange and new dreamt-of thing".

While both texts employ the subjective exploitation of the past to satisfy a narrative, be it the personal narrative of "Kathy H." in 'Never Let Me Go', or the artefactual narrative of 'Anna Funder's' 'Stasiland', the contemplation of the existential consequences of the past is markedly different in each. The narrative of Stasiland functions as a kind of prosthetic memory, where the narrator derives from the experiences of both "violinist and victim" [from epigraph] in the German Democratic Republic and mediates these experiences for both the narrator and the reader. However, the blurring of the past and present in Stasiland equally evokes an existential dilemma of existence. Throughout the text, Funder is shown to emphasise the stagnancy of the characters she encounters; Miriam recounts her trauma "as if her existence is no longer real to her in itself", Julia remains "unable to go into her future" after suffering the effects of the Stasi's relentless surveillance, and Herr Winz, whom "wants to play spy games seven years after the fall of the Wall". The narrator too, seems to experience her own negative ecstasy during her encounters of the past, Funder left feeling "fallen and naked and pointless" -perhaps in her realisation of "how easy it is for an interviewer to assume moral superiority by virtue of the fact [she] gets to ask the questions". The stagnancy which Funder encounters may allow the reader to question the teleological reasoning of the text, where the "dangers of knowing" haunt the lives of individuals – "the present...belong[ing] to your past" - and ultimately allow for the regime to persist as the psychological "Wall in the Head", long after the physical manifestations of the GDR have been dismantled. In contrast, Ishiguro presents an alternatively positive consequence of indulgence and construction of the past. While characters encounter a similarly liminal state – "...it was possible to forget for whole stretches of time who we really were..." – Ishiguro demonstrates the past as a more so reflective medium, allowing 'clones' to contest a form of humanity in their "dream futures" and develop a greater understanding of self – "...this explanation only occurred to me now [Kathy on Ruth's behaviour] At the time I didn't look at the larger picture or my own part in it". The product of Kathy's narration is not one which alleviates 'clones' from their harrowing finitude, but one which structures her own past experience and attempts to understand memory as a unified whole, "the larger picture", establishing the character's identity and idea of self, introducing "her own part in it".

While both texts reveal the subjective and manipulatable nature of the past and suggest its illegitimacy through the construction of narrative, the two consider the existential product of retrospection contrastingly. Where Funder presents a retrospective stagnancy, which ultimately restricts the present and future and thus control of self, Ishiguro presents memory

as the psychological development of self, which consoles the narrator and confirms humanity, in the confrontation of death.