

## **English HL Essay**

In what ways does Kazuo Ishiguro make use of flashbacks to explore the concept of nostalgia for  
one's past identity in *Never Let me Go*?

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In Kazuo Ishiguro's science fiction dystopian novel, *Never Let Me Go*, flashbacks play a major role in Kathy's narration and serve as a medium through which she can explore her past. While the novel begins when Kathy is 31 and has already served as a carer for nearly 12 years, the majority of all three sections of the novel are told through her flashbacks. They serve the dual purpose of allowing Kathy to provide commentary on her younger self while also allowing her to voice opinions on past matters. The actions of her younger self serve as example of direct characterization and everything else gives indirect characterization and it allows readers to observe her growth as a person. Ishiguro uses flashbacks to unveil Kathy's reliance on using her experiences for growth, how memories empower her and the implications of living in the past.

From the very beginning, Kathy is seemingly obsessed with reminiscing about her past by using flashbacks as an outlet. In the first chapter, she mentions how she had "started seeking out ... people from the past" (5). The desire to connect with familiar faces from her childhood leads her along the path of becoming engrossed with her old school, Hailsham. Further evidence is provided when nearly all of Kathy's flashbacks send her back to when she attended Hailsham. She claims to have "tried to leave Hailsham behind" (5) before; however, she still absent-mindedly "sees things that remind [her] of Hailsham" (6) in her current life. At first, Kathy's attitude and behavior towards her apparent inner conflict with leaving Hailsham behind can be inferred as simply a literary element for Ishiguro to progress the story. Nevertheless, it becomes evident that Kathy exhibits mild signs of nostomania, which is defined as an "irresistible compulsion to return home" (dictionary.com). The term "return home" rings true to both

returning home physically or mentally through daydreaming or flashbacks in Kathy's case. Additional evidence of Kathy's nostomania can be found when she drives past a building bearing minor resemblances to Hailsham and "[Kathy] actually turned the car and went for a second look" (6). Those who have nostomania often have a desire to return to familiar surroundings and it is through the use of flashbacks that Kathy can fulfill this. A common tone with nearly all of Kathy's flashbacks is that they are viewed through a positive lens as if her past had disproportionately more positives than her current life. This can be referred to as the physiological phenomenon, rosy retrospection (thedecisionlab.com). Though closely related to the concept of nostalgia, rosy retrospection can be treated as a cognitive bias in the sense that it distorts the person's view on reality, and in turn, both Kathy's memories and flashbacks. However, an inaccurate view of past events can potentially lead to misjudging future ones.

Throughout the novel, flashbacks tinted with rosy retrospection empower Kathy to make her decisions. They serve as a coping mechanism that allows her to exist as a great carer. There are few flashbacks that Kathy recalls with a negative tone, all are either neutral or positive. When Kathy is reflecting on how she and Ruth were going through hardships together, she hardly ever makes any spiteful comments regarding Ruth personally or how she treated Kathy. Even when Tommy injured his arm in a flashback, Kathy convinces herself that "It wasn't such a bad gash" (85). Regardless of the actual condition of the injury, which is unknown to the reader, Ishiguro's use of the word "such" in this context supports the claim that Kathy hardly ever recollects flashbacks with a gloomy tone. This altered view on the past can create conflicts in her memories when others are involved. From a literary perspective, this can create a lot of ambiguity as it plants the seed of doubt that Kathy is an unreliable narrator. One such example can be found

when Kathy claims to remember “that Tommy was always known for his temper, even in the Infants” (21). Yet, Tommy “claimed to [Kathy] that they only began after the teasing got bad” (21). Unbeknownst to the reader, Kathy at the beginning is a tragic clone. All her closest friends only exist in her memories and the home she grew up in has been closed down forever. Her work as a carer “wears [her] down” (4) and will eventually come to an end in “another eight months” (3). Being a clone means that she will have no choice but to become a donor afterwards, there is no alternative future. That being said, Kathy does not give up, she will continue being the best possible carer to her ability till the last of her days as it “means a lot to [her], being able to do [her] work well” (3). This is because Kathy draws strength from her memories. Even after losing everything, her most precious memories stay and “[she] [doesn’t] ever see them fading” (286). Her memories become almost a haven for her. “[Kathy] lost Ruth, then [she] lost Tommy, but [she] won’t ever lose [her] memories of them.” (286). Kathy has even come to terms with the closing of Hailsham. Hit with the realization that her time is running out and she “won’t be driving around” (286) “by the end of the year”, she “doesn’t go searching for it” (286) anymore. Additionally, she already has “Hailsham with [her]” (286). It’s stored “safely in [her] head” and “none can take [that] away” (286). Kathy’s sole means of dealing with her present and looking ahead to her future is to reminisce about her past.

Through Kathy, the implications of living in the past rather than simply remembering it become clearer. During her time as a carer for Ruth and Tommy, Kathy often treated them as the same people she grew up with during Hailsham. It is more evident when Kathy was caring for Ruth, and they spoke as if it were “the old days” (209), completely disregarding the fact that “[they] hadn’t met since the Cottages 7 years before” (209). Additionally, it was only when the

topic of Hailsham closing was mentioned, Kathy and Ruth were “suddenly brought ... close again” (211). During most of her flashbacks, Kathy repeatedly thinks over past matters and ponders about alternate meanings and different actions she could have taken. Regarding the incident when Madame Marie-Claude walked in on Kathy dancing to her tape of ‘Never let me go,’ she was unable to discover the “real meaning until years later” (70) as to why Madame shed tears. At the time it was something Kathy “couldn’t fathom” (72) and she “never linked the two events at the time” (73) when her tape disappeared after the incident though she also claims that she has “no reason to link them now” (73). Notwithstanding her second claim, the fact that she mentioned linking the two events in the first place could allow the reader to infer that the thought had crossed her mind at some point. Kathy acknowledges that her flashbacks all take place “a long time ago” (13) and even that she “might have some of it wrong” (13). Nonetheless, Kathy still decides to so deeply contemplate these past matters that she has “more or less forgotten all about” (13). As the past is no longer happening and cannot be changed, someone who repeatedly relives the past can be said to be doing nothing. Kathy’s obsession and exploration of her past through flashbacks render her as somewhat of a delusionist.

It can be said that Ishiguro’s usage of flashbacks enables Kathy to push forward through the hardships of her life; shown by her ability to constantly be producing her best work regardless of what stage her life is in. Though, she can be seen as misguided or even delusional when over-depending on them; an alternative perspective would be rather to view Kathy as a lost soul due to her constant flashbacks, her core identity now simply resides in them. Nonetheless, Kathy is still strong for being able to live and work the way she has even though her life will always be a shadow of her past.

## Works Cited

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