

Worthiness of life

The worthiness of life depends on our ability to accept our fate or to ameliorate it.

Under the asphyxiating confines of a totalitarian governance, the worthiness of our lives may be threatened. Subsequently, in order to restore meaning to our reality, it is up to us to either accept our fate and choose to be optimistic, or to challenge the authorities and ameliorate our state of living. In *Never Let Me Go*, although the clones are exposed to the beauty of human connections and creativity, they are in fact unable to free themselves from their expected fate as organ donors. They accept the reality with which they are presented and consequently, their lives are atrophied. In contrast, despite living under an oppressive regime, *Stasiland* explores the power of the citizens' rebellion to promote human continuity. In this way, Anna Funder and Kazuo Ishiguro explore the different ways in which life can be meaningful and worthwhile.

An omnipotent totalitarian state endeavours to unrelentingly employ physical and psychological torture, quashing the value of our lives as we are rendered victim to dehumanisation. Yet, this can only be successful if we choose to accept our reality, and refrain from using our own strengths to subvert the controlling body. Barred by the gates surrounding Hailsham House and the Wall dividing Germany, the clones and the East Germans are entrapped by structures that symbolise repression of freedom and manipulation by despotic leaders. Initially, as Kathy articulates, "my name is Kathy. H", Ishiguro unlocks the door to an unjust world where something as essential as a name and therefore identity, is denied, exposing the underlying rejecting of the clones' existence by the rest of their society. Realising she is "different to them", Kathy divulges her stultifying and burdensome existence, in which she and the rest of the clones allow themselves to be shunned to the peripheries of society; they fail to question their actuality and are subsequently vulnerable to being controlled. Like the inhumane oppression imposed upon the clones, Funder explains that after months of "solitary confinement", deprived of any "contact with the outside world", Miriam, internally wounded and scarred, describes herself as "locked in an interminable present"; through these vivid descriptions, she encapsulates the barbaric and ruthless nature of the GDR, a state that fetters and suffocates the freedoms of its people. However, unlike the

clones' passivity, it is Miriam's tenacity to defy the GDR that leads to the Stasi confining her to a prison cell. In the harsh realm of subjugation by a draconian government, we are often left demotivated and helpless, and our lives may seem devoid of purpose. And yet, we might understand that by actively seeking the beauty in our surroundings, or by harnessing our awareness, we can revive the worthwhileness of our lives.

Despite the tendency for autocratic rulers to use censorship as a tool for obfuscating reality, our awareness of our milieu may enable us to rectify the bruised quality of our lives. Even when tyrannical figures of authority aim to pervade the fabric of society and encourage absolute obedience to the dominant ideology, there may still be a chance for us to retrieve the meaning we have lost. In Ishiguro's alternative England, the clones are constantly monitored, convinced that "there was always someone likely to be passing within earshot", reflecting the paranoia bred by the omnipresence of the ruling force. Contrarily, although the GDR is labelled as the "most perfected surveillance state" and equally scrutinises the citizens' every move, its overt and visible army of informers is in fact limited to the public sphere. The citizens of the GDR are fortunate enough to live with an awareness of "what could be discussed" in the home, rendering possible the whispers of protest and the fuelling of treasonous fires behind closed doors. Consequently, as they have access to a private life hidden from the Stasi's prying eyes, the quality of their lives is strengthened. Contradistinctively, the guardians insidiously "timed very carefully and deliberately" everything they tell the Hailsham students, as a means of maintaining subservience and unquestioning acceptance of their fate. As the guardians try to ensure the clones are "told and not told", they use elusive language which contributes to the clones' uncertainty and ensuing passive acquiescence. Subsequently, the clones' lives becomes an ontological reality in which they are inculcated to believe that their role in the organ donation program is indispensable. In stark contrast to Funder's realistic historical fiction, Ishiguro's alternative dystopian past is fantastical and instead unveils a hypothetical perfected autocracy, in which there is no freedom from the all-pervasive control. However, as the Stasi "couldn't control" people's access to "western television", the East Germans have a point of comparison that provides them with insight into an alternative lifestyle, serving as an open window through which critical and individual thought can drift. We can acknowledge that cognisance is inextricably linked to a worthwhile life, and thereby increases our ability to defy the rigid paradigms of mass oppression.

As well as the imperative for us to be educated and vigilant under the immobilising bounds of pervasive control, as human beings, we also crave meaningful relationships with others, that contribute to shaping a meaningful life. And yet, endemic to the maintenance of a totalitarian state is the attempted destruction of these very relationships, that isolates individuals in order to impede challenging the regime. However, prior to Kathy and Tommy learning the demoralising truth behind their existence, Kathy reflects on how she and Tommy are able to become “close again”, as they firmly believe they can achieve “three years just to themselves” if “they could prove they were properly in love”. Their belief in the power of love to protect them from their fate, by means of the rumoured deferrals, temporarily unites them through an icon of hope, that enhances their potential for an enriched and fulfilling future. Conversely, Frau Paul sorrowfully admits that she had to “decide against [her] own son”, highlighting the Stasi’s determination to break families apart, in order to crush the human spirit and leave the individual susceptible to dominion by the authorities, resulting in a dismal existence. Nevertheless, Frau Paul’s decision is not made in vain, as she justifies, “I couldn’t let myself be used in this way”, demonstrating immense courage and resilience that signify her attempt to ameliorate her life. In opposition to Funder’s optimistic outlook on finding meaning through resilience, Ishiguro instead focuses on how Kathy and Tommy are forced apart by their society’s overwhelming power to vanquish their existence. Kathy watches as Tommy “slipped and fell out of view into the blackness”, conjuring an image of death as he is suppressed and vacuumed into an abyss of nihilism. Contrarily, Miriam hopes that “the puzzle women in Nuremberg find out something about Charlie”, offering a snapshot of hope that expresses determination, courage and a firm belief that the truth will hold the state accountable for destroying her love and leaving her emotionally scarred. We may recognise that it is our genuine human connections that provide us with hope, and contribute to the worthiness of our existence, enabling us to maintain our ambition and motivation for standing up to the adversity of tyranny.

In order to successfully achieve a rewarding lifespan, we should strive to harness our individual abilities and oppose tyrannical forces through acts of sedition, so that we may progress forward in a fight for future prosperity. In Stasiland, Hagen Koch steals a plate from his prior office as “a final small defiance” that signifies his personal freedom from the Stasi’s suffocating bounds. As it hangs on his wall, it serves as a symbol of his courage and perpetuates the triumph in him seizing his own life again. Moreover, as the East Germans are “aware their lives [are] observed,

manipulated and sometimes ruined”, they are propelled to revolt “against the communist dictatorship”, emphasising the imperative of unity to stand up to a regime and reach liberation. Differing from the GDR citizens’ strength and determination to triumph over the totalitarian government, Kathy decides “to drive off to wherever it was [she] was supposed to be”, accepting her fate and remaining a passive and weak product of her society’s conventions. However, Miss Emily reassures Kathy and Tommy that the Hailsham clones have “good lives” and are “educated and cultured”, ultimately reinforcing that despite their shortened quantity of life, their time is in fact worthwhile. Indeed, it is through creating pieces of art that the clones learn the power of the imagination, and this enables them to find the strength to keep believing in their relationships and the deferrals. Nonetheless, Ishiguro ends his novel devoid of any hope for long term survival, while Funder highlights how there can be no peace “until Miriam has some kind of justice”, signifying Miriam’s determination to seek the truth about Charlie’s death, despite living in a world of obfuscation. Accordingly, Miriam epitomises resilience and resistance to the subjugation of the intimidation and falsehood established by the GDR despite the pervasive injustices committed, all of which are absent in Kathy’s somnambulistic gravitation towards her expected role in society. Essentially, we need to understand that totalitarian states and autocratic bodies only prevail if dissent is prevented, ignorance maintained and our personalities quashed and moulded into passive automatons. It is up to us to be aware and actively harness our awareness to instigate change, reflecting our capacity for ameliorating a bleak reality in order to reach a meaningful life.

Delving into the nature of life controlled by totalitarian hegemonies, Funder and Ishiguro explore the potential for resistance to free us from the immobilising bounds of state control and rejuvenate the significance of our lives. In Stasiland, the East Germans have exposure to the West, which provides them with the awareness and courage to overthrow the destructive government, and resist the nightmarish era of subjugation. Contrarily, in *Never Let Me Go*, despite their exposure to imaginative thought, the clones lack external awareness, rendering them incapable of dissent as they remain nothing more than marionettes of unexplored potential. Our ability to thrive and live worthwhile lives hinges on our individual capabilities, shaped by our knowledge of the world, our scope for active change, our relationships and our sense of hope. Together, these qualities may contribute to our long-term prosperity, paving the way for a world that blossoms and sparkles with every unique human spirit.

