

Accepting Mortality in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* : A Thin Line between Fantasy and Reality

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's seventh novel, *Never Let Me Go*, was dramatized in Japan in 2016. Haruka Ayase, Haruma Miura, and Asami Mizukawa played the main roles, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth respectively. Haruka visited Ishiguro in prior to the drama release and she conducted an interview with Ishiguro. In the interview, Ishiguro says, "I've always felt there's certain Japanese-ness in the novel, *Never Let Me Go*. I've written some novels that are based in Japan, but this is more Japanese than any other novel. The story is based in England but it has a Japanese atmosphere."¹ (My translation) The question to be answered is why does Ishiguro think *Never Let Me Go* is more Japanese than *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*?

When comparing *Never Let Me Go* to other novels, there are two distinguished differences. One, the story is set in the science fiction genre. When the novel was released, there were arguments both for and against the genre among scholars and critics. The story is very realistic; however, the book lines up in SF section mainly because the protagonists are clones. Barry Lewis explains, "*Never Let Me Go* is not hard-core sci-fi, but rather a tale that borrows certain themes and trappings of the genre to explore perennial issues about the human condition."² and I cannot agree more. Second, the story proceeds in a very ambiguous atmosphere, better known as "told and not told" situation. Ishiguro has written some stories with characters telling stories in a roundabout way. They give us hints and inklings of what might have happened to them in the past but never disclose these events clearly. *Never Let Me Go* is one that proceeds along the same line. However, there is a slight difference. Ishiguro lets the characters speak what their conditions are like. Concerning the "you've been told and not told" situation, Andy Sawyer says, "this results in fantasies about finding their[clone children's] 'possibles', the originals from which they have been cloned, at large in the world beyond Hailsham. It also leads to hopes of 'deferring' their final donations."³ Furthermore, the children have hopes or dreams on top of an indescribable doubt they always feel because they have not been told directly about their future. This ambiguous atmosphere reminds us of the Japanese behaviour of taking a stance to avoid making direct remarks. Japanese sometimes communicate by inferring others' intentions.

Kathy H, the narrator of *Never Let Me Go*, deliberately speaks as if she wants us (or the reader) to infer her intentions of not wanting to spell out the detail of the story. From this perspective, the novel may have Japanese-ness as Ishiguro refers. However, as described in the latter part of this paper, the vague atmosphere was intentionally created by the children. Therefore, some of the words Ishiguro used in the interview, such as, “this is more Japanese than any other novel” or “it has a Japanese atmosphere” could be his way of showing gratitude to the Japanese audience for dramatizing the novel. Revealing the Japanese-ness in the novel may have been an interesting theme, but there was more to it. The children at Hailsham, the main characters, are willing to put themselves in this ambiguous situation to protect themselves and escape from harsh reality.

In this paper, I will study how this ambiguity was created and how children accepted and modified it. To analyze the novel in detail, I will extract major scenes from the novel, Japanese drama, and the movie to illustrate certain points. At the point of the interview with Haruka, Ishiguro said he had read the script of Japanese drama from episode one to five, so these scenes are discussed between them. Next, I will review Ishiguro’s plot of using “misunderstanding” and gradually turning it into “understanding” in *The Unconsoled*.⁴ Ishiguro also uses this tacit “understanding” plot in *Never Let Me Go*. There is a clear “understanding” among adults not to tell the children their awaiting fate. In conclusion, I will consider the meaning of “you’ve been told and not told” situation and the “understanding” in *Never Let Me Go*.

1. “You’ve been told and not told.”

Ishiguro has written characters who deny facing the truth and pretend to act as if the deceased still exist. For example, Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* talks to Keiko’s piano teacher about her daughter as if Keiko still lives in London, but Keiko is already dead, having killed herself:

“How is Keiko getting on now?” “Keiko? Oh, she went to live in Manchester.” “Oh yes? That’s a nice city on the whole. That’s what I’ve heard anyway. And does she like it up there?” “I haven’t heard from her recently.” “Oh well. No news is good news, I expect. And does Keiko still play the piano?” “I expect she does. I haven’t heard from her recently.” (50-51)

In *The Unconsoled*, Ryder, a renowned pianist, tells staff members at the Thursday Night that his parents, who are already dead, are coming to hear him play: “And my poor parents, coming all this way, to hear me perform for the very first time!” (272) or “Do you realize

what tonight is? My parents, they're coming tonight. That's right. They're coming at last, tonight! They may well be there at this very moment!" (444) The strange acts of both Etsuko and Ryder attribute to their mental state of avoiding admitting that their love ones are dead. Admitting their death is too harsh a reality to accept. In *Never Let Me Go*, the main characters are children who were given birth to serve as organ donors for humans, so the more exuberance of joy they display the more darkness of death pushes forward. The fate of the Hailsham students is not clearly announced by guardians or any other characters in the beginning. Readers can assume their fate but are not completely sure until one of the guardians reveals about the "donation." More interestingly, the children act as if they knew it from the beginning. They try to avoid using the term directly and whenever they need to talk about it, they use words that relate to or imply the "donation." The children voluntarily put themselves in this vague atmosphere, and this is how the "told and not told" situation was created.

The Japanese drama starts where Tatsuko Horie (Miss Lucy in the novel) arrives as a newcomer at Yoko Gakuen (Hailsham in the novel). Tatsuko looks around the premises and sees children having their physical check-up. It is expressly noted that smoking is strictly banned, as Emiko Kamikawa (Miss Emily in the novel) preaches to children at an auditorium:

We found this [cigarette bud] at the back of this building. Smoking is all evils without doing any good at all. [...] Staying healthy, keeping healthy inside is an obligation. If this nasty act doesn't stop, and this obligation of yours is not fully conducted, I cannot grant you any prerogative rights. I might have to deprive your rights and expel you from Yoko. (My translation)

The principal uses difficult terms, such as obligation, prerogative rights, or deprive and shows her power. She is using these terms deliberately so that children will not thoroughly understand. In the movie, Miss Emily stands in front of the children and says, "I must emphasize once again that it is much, much worse for a student of Hailsham to smoke cigarettes than anyone else. Students of Hailsham are special. Keeping yourselves well, keeping yourselves healthy inside is of paramount importance." In the novel, this scene is written in a slightly different way. After some exercise, one of Miss Lucy's, a Hailsham School guardian's, students asks her if she had ever smoked before. Then she answers to her students as follows:

It's not good that I smoked. It wasn't good for me so I stopped it. But what you must

understand is that for you, all of you, it's much, much worse to smoke than it ever was for me. [...] You've been told about it. You're students. You're ... *special*. So keeping yourselves well, keeping yourselves very healthy inside, that's much more important for each of you than it is for me. (68; Ishiguro's emphasis)

In the movie and novel, the guardians do not mention "punishment" like Emiko Kamikawa did in the drama. Instead, Miss Emily and Miss Lucy say how important it is to keep healthy inside. They say "you are special" but they do not explain why they are special.

When considering how adults conveyed important information to children, it is unclear in all of the media, the drama, movie, or novel. In the novel, Kathy recalls her memory and says, "[The guardians had] timed very carefully and deliberately everything they told us, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information." (81) Therefore, Kathy cannot recall when exactly she knew the fact that she was a clone.

[I]t feels like I *always* knew about donations in some vague way, even as early as six or seven. And it's curious, when we were older and the guardians were giving us those talks, nothing came as a complete surprise. It *was* like we'd heard everything somewhere before. (81; Ishiguro's emphasis)

She also says, "One thing that occurs to me now is that when the guardians first started giving us proper lectures about sex, they tended to run them together with talk about the donations." (81) This tells us that the guardians elaborately planned to imprint information so that students acknowledge it indistinctly.

In the drama, principal Kamikawa tells the secret of children's birth as follows:

You are not an ordinary human. You are different from teachers, people in the cafeteria, me, or any other people outside. People living outside have no purpose; they were just born. However, you have a particular mission, a mission to complete as you were born. The mission is called the "donation." [...] You are special. You were born to provide a part of your body to the sick or the injured. In other words, you are "angels." [...] You are special humans who were born in this world to bring people happiness. That's why you are being reared safely here. The prerogative right I always say is this. [...] I hope you will have dignity and be proud of yourselves that this mission was granted to you. (My translation)

The children react to the terms “angels” and “special human.” One teacher starts clapping hand after listening to the principal’s speech and the children follow. The new school guardian, Tatsuko, seems to be the only person who is upset, and she leaves the premises. Kyoko, one of the children, sees Tatsuko leaving and recalls Tatsuko’s words, “You haven’t been told the truth.” In the drama, the principal uses more child-friendly terms like “angel” or “special human” to soften the inhumane term “donation” and talks about it as if it is a treasure. Perhaps the children do not understand why they are clapping hands. In the movie, Miss Lucy steps a little further and talks about the “donation” and what happens after that to students: “You’ll become adults, but only briefly. Before you are old, before you are even middle-aged, you will start to donate your vital organs. That’s what you are created to do.” In the novel, the same character Miss Lucy, confesses it to children. One day, Miss Lucy and the students were waiting for the rain to stop at the pavilion, and Miss Lucy overhears her students discussing their dreams. She could not tolerate hearing the stories and interrupts them saying, “The problem is that you’ve been told and not told. You’ve been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way.” (79) or “Your lives are set out for you. You’ll become adults, then before you’re old, before you’re even middle-aged, you’ll start to donate your vital organs.” (80) However, as far as Kathy could recall, Miss Lucy did not mention further, what happens after third or fourth donations. Maybe she did, but it could be Kathy’s intention not to say it. However, what is interesting is the children’s reaction after hearing her story.

It is only written in the novel, but Miss Lucy’s story of “donation” spreads quickly throughout Hailsham; however, the story spreads while distorting the fact. For example, the children say, “the talk mostly focused on Miss Lucy herself rather than on what she’d been trying to tell us.” (81), “she’d lost her marbles for a moment.” (81), “she’d been asked to say what she had by Miss Emily and other guardians.” (81), or “Miss Lucy had been telling us off for being too rowdy on the veranda.” (81) The last one has nothing to do with the “donation.” Kathy reveals that children stopped talking about “donation,” or if someone brought up the subject, they would say, “Well so what? We already knew all that,” (81) and change the subject. Kathy describes that when they were small, they already sensed some awkwardness when the subject came close to a certain “area.”

We certainly knew [...] we were different from our guardians, and also from the normal people outside [...] If we were keen to avoid certain topics, it was probably more because it *embarrassed* us. We hated the way our guardians, usually so on top of everything, became so awkward whenever we came near this territory. (69, Ishiguro’s emphasis)

However, when the truth was exposed, the children tried even harder to disassociate themselves from that “area.” They tried to avoid using the term “donation” altogether and used indirect terms as much as possible, such as, “we’d been ‘told and not told’” (81), ‘told and not told’ idea,” (81), “the other stuff” (82), or “‘told and not told.’” (82) This behaviour shows the children’s rejection of “donation.” Mention of which would make them admit the fact. They invoked a kind of defence mechanism so that they can enjoy the fantasy and stay away from the reality, even though they knew the ending of the fantasy is brutal.

2. “Understanding”

Ishiguro has used a plot of “misunderstanding” in his past novels. However, in *The Unconsoled*, the misunderstandings turns into a tacit understanding between father and daughter of not speaking to each other and this continues until the father dies. One day, Gustav, the father, starts ignoring his daughter completely. The daughter, Sophie, misunderstands him, thinking that he hates her. This “misunderstanding” changes to a tacit “understanding” of not speaking to each other directly. They only converse through Boris, Sophie’s son. Gustav retrospectively says, “[A]fter that, our understanding became, well, cemented, and even in these present circumstances it doesn’t seem to me appropriate I should suddenly break such a long-standing arrangement.” (85) Furthermore, there is another child-and-parent “misunderstanding” that turns into a tacit “understanding” in the novel. It is between Stephan and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman. Stephan’s parents once heard him play the piano from the beginning to end and are disappointed. They believe that their son has no talent whatsoever. However, Ryder tells Mr. Hoffman, “Stephan is a very gifted young man ...,” (354) but Mr. Hoffman will not listen. Stephan recalls at the time and says, “[T]hey first realized how short of the mark I was. They listened very carefully to my playing—it was probably the first time they *really* listened—and they realised I’d only humiliate myself and the family by entering[the program].” (74; Ishiguro’s emphasis) This “misunderstanding” turns into a tacit understanding between Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman that they will never listen to Stephan’s piano. In fact, when the piano recital, Thursday Night, was held, they go to the venue but they leave before Stephan’s part in the program starts. They never get to mend the misunderstanding and his parents die.⁵ The “misunderstanding” in *The Unconsoled* is attributed to a lack of conversation. Parent(s) avoid having a thorough conversation with their children. It started as a trivial act and perhaps it was easy to solve at the beginning, but they left it unsolved and thus became estranged. What is more is that if you leave the “misunderstanding” unsolved it becomes an ordinary way of life.

Never Let Me Go adopts a similar plot line. The children had never been outside of

Hailsham nor beyond into the unknown institution behind the curtain. They never question the guardians. Literally, they live in a closed “told and not told” environment. When people become about the same age as the children in Hailsham, an urge of curiosity, such as, learning and knowing more about the world grows. However, these children’s interests were to play in the fantasy and not to see the real world. For example, in the novel, Ruth creates a horse name Thunder and lets Kathy have one called Bramble. They play riding these invisible horses: “Okay, we’ll ride them here. You take Bramble” I accepted the invisible rein she was holding out, and then we were off, riding up and down the fence, sometimes cantering, sometimes at a gallop. (47) Moreover, Ruth forms a group of secret guards to protect Miss Geraldine, a kind guardian, from kidnappers. Kathy recalls, “There were between six and ten of us, the figure changing whenever Ruth allowed in a new member or expelled someone.” (49) The children knew, of course that this was Ruth’s made-up story, but no one tried to convince her of this fact. Instead, they become part of her fantasy and enjoy it together. The children enjoyed the bond of having the same purpose and do something together, which gave them a feeling of connection. The scary ghost story or the killer in the woods is enacted in the same way. Despite the guardians’ intention, the children are using the scary stories to feel bonded. The fantasy is the mental safe-place for children to escape from the harsh reality.

There is another episode where Ruth makes up a story or gives a hint to Kathy that Miss Geraldine has given her a special gift. One day, Kathy spotted a red dotted pen case. She asks Ruth where she got it. Ruth replies, ““Let’s just agree. Let’s *agree* I got it in the Sale.”” (56; Ishiguro’s emphasis) Ruth says it in an unfinished way so that Kathy can infer the rest of her story. However, this time, for no reason Kathy wanted to expose Ruth’s lie. Kathy annoyingly observes Ruth’s behaviour and gets disgusted: “There was a certain smile, a certain voice Ruth would use—sometimes accompanied by a finger to the lips or a hand raised stage-whisper style—whenever she wanted to hint about some little mark of favour Miss Geraldine had shown her.” (56-57) Later, Kathy goes to Ruth and hints to her, “I was just looking through the book. You know, the register thing.” “Why were you looking at the register?” Ruth asked quickly. [...] “Oh, no reason. Christopher C. was one of the monitors, so I was just talking to him. [...] And I was just turning over the pages of the register, just for something to do.” (58) Notice the way Kathy is giving inklings to Ruth. However, when Ruth becomes flustered, Kathy becomes uneasy and decides to leave the story unsolved: “I don’t know what I’d expected; for all my fantasies of the past month, I’d never really considered what it would be like in a real situation like the one unfolding at that moment.” (59) She decides to leave it unsolved by saying, “I did my best, meanwhile, to take any opportunity to imply to Ruth she had a special place in Miss Geraldine’s heart.”

(61)

In the Japanese drama, there is a similar episode. Instead of a pen case, it is a bottle of perfume. Miwa, Asami Mizukawa is playing the role of Ruth, is showing off the bottle in front of two girls. The girls are admiring her asking, "Is it a thing called perfume? Where did you get it? At the Sales?" "No, it can't be. I never saw anything like that. Did Jiro Sensei (Miss Geraldine in the novel, but he is a male teacher in the drama) give it to you?" Then Miwa deliberately raises her voice and says, "It can't be. Right?" and turns her head to Kyoko and two other girls who share the same dorm room with her for concurrence. One of the girls shrugs her shoulder. Miwa stares sharply at her. Sensing Miwa's intention, Kyoko rises to her feet, smiles and says, "Well, it can't be, but why do you have it?" and she pokes her arm gently with her finger. Miwa gives the girls a knowing smile and says, "Don't! Stop it." One day, Manami (perhaps Moira in the novel) who is a roommate of Miwa and Kyoko, tries to disclose Miwa's lie. Just as Kathy did in the novel, Manami throws a notebook in front of Miwa saying it is a notebook that lists who bought what at the Sales. Miwa shows agitation. Kyoko then walks towards Manami and defends Miwa. "She never said she has relationship with a person outside (human), we misunderstand it at our own discretion. [...] What's wrong with that? We all want to see the same thing. We knew it, felt it, yes. But we want to hold on to it until it is told. We want hope. Don't you get it?" (My translation) The fantasy ends if the girls admit it is a lie. They knew Miwa made up the story, but they wanted to become a part of it and share the girly dreams together.

In the novel, the children refer to it as "Ruth's made-up things" (55). It is a tacit "understanding" of joining in her fantasy. Some of the children started to have doubts about things like that, as they grow up and Kathy was no exception. She acquires a chance to expose Ruth's lie, but in the end, she did not. Kathy recalls, "What it was, I suppose, is that Moira was suggesting she and I cross some line together, and I wasn't prepared for that yet. I think I sensed how beyond that line, there was something harder and darker and I didn't want that. Not for me, not for any of us." (55). The line Kathy refers to is the line between the fantasy and reality. In other words, the line between the warm protected childhood and the harsh adulthood, which reminds them of their death. Kathy or Kyoko and the girls knew the meaning of rejecting Ruth's or Miwa's fantasy well.

3. Conclusion

The future of the children in *Never Let Me Go* is covered in darkness and lies next to death. Some of them "complete" their short life donating organs from the beginning while others serve some years being a "carer" like Kathy before starting the "donation." Liani Lochner explains, "[T]he Hailsham clones have no desire to escape. [...] Within the

limits of their predetermined futures, the clones therefore try to give meaning to their lives by fulfilling what appears to be abstract conception of duty.”⁶ The duty Lochner means here is of course the duty as a carer. However, before “crossing the line” to become a carer or a donar as I mentioned earlier, the children learn ways to keep the darkness away and live happily in Hailsham. As proof, they try to avoid using the word “donation” directly. Instead, they start to use indirect term, such as “stuff.” Mark Wormald says, “Kathy uses it[stuff] often, [...] to express, roughly, things she either can’t or doesn’t wish to name more precisely, or that she’s casual with, or trying to be casual with.”⁷ The word “stuff” was roughly used 50 times in the novel. In fact, there are other terms or phrases that are used in the same way, such as, “the tokens controversy” (39), “let’s say no more’ expression.” (57), “Norfolk theory” (66), “the not so great things” (76), “We’d been ‘told and not told’, as she’d put it.” (81), “the whole territory surrounding the donations.” (83), “the donations and all that.” (83), “the whole area awkward enough.” (83), “the whole area around sex” (93), “this ‘natural successor’ business.” (99), “The ‘Norfolk effect’” (183), “The Norfolk thing” (189), or “Tommy’s big Gallery theory!” (191) This can be the characteristics of *Never Let Me Go*. When children do not want to say things directly, they tend to add stuff, thing, business, idea, or theory at the end of the word or phrase. Kathy deliberately uses these terms to imply that she does not want to talk further and want us (the reader) to sense it. This includes when the children describe the awkward subject areas as “the big hush” or “something dangerous.” (205)

However, it is natural for humans to settle a matter. We have urge to know what is right and wrong. Before telling the truth to the children, Tatsuko or Miss Lucy must have thought, “You’ve been told and not told, so I’ll tell you,” but this is only humanistic ego. Clone children are likely to answer, “We’ve been told and not told, so what?” For these children, making it “told” is equivalent to receiving a “death sentence,” so they want to leave it as vague as possible. The children are trying to find “happiness” or “hope” in the vague fantasy. They know some of the stories are made-up but are willing to become part of it and play their roles. They want to live and keep the death as far away as they can.

In the novel and the movie of *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy visits Norfolk where it says everything lost from childhood days washes up at the end. While Kathy awaits, she fantasizes that Tommy will appear from the horizon, walks towards her and waves at her:

[I]f I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I’d see it was Tommy, and he’d wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that—I didn’t let it—(282)

Kathy stops her fantasy there—it's the moment she accepted her death.

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- ¹ “Heisei No Hara Setsuko Sekaiteki Sakka Ni Aini Iku (Actress who is called “Setsuko Hara of Heisei Era meets the international novelist),” Bungei Shunju (94), Feb. 1, 2016, p.214.
 - ² Barris Lewis, “The Concertina Effect: Unfolding Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*,” in Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis ed. *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, p.200.
 - ³ Sawyer, Andy, “Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* and ‘Outsider Science Fiction,” in Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis ed. *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, p.239.
 - ⁴ Refer to Taketomi, Ria, “Misunderstandings in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*—What Does Brodsky’s Loss of Leg Imply?” *Comparatio* (20), Society of Comparative Cultural Studies Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies Kyushu University, 2016, p. iv-xii.
 - ⁵ Gallix, Guignery, Veyret, “Kazuo Ishiguro at the Sorbonne, 20th March 2003.” *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaries* 27, 2004, p. 1-22.
 - ⁶ Lochner, Liani, “This is what we’re supposed to be doing, isn’t it?: Scientific discourse in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*,” in Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis ed. *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, p.232.
 - ⁷ Mark Wormald, “Kazuo Ishiguro and English Literature,” *Hikaku Bunka*, 8, Humanistic Department of Fukuoka Jogakuin Daigaku Daigakuin, March, 2017, p.117.

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