**School and Schooling, Humanism and Posthumanism in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go***

**Introduction**

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, a speculative novel set in England between the 1970s and 1980s, presents an alternative history in which artificial reproduction is viable and human clones are mass produced. Drawing on technological capabilities already available in today’s reality, the novel envisions a world in which embryonic stem cells are grown and developed into “live” entities for the sole purpose of exploiting these entities in the service of a healing technology.

Scientists and lawmakers in this fictional world share an overriding ambition to alleviate the human suffering caused by diseases and injuries. To advance this goal, human clones are created and grown to serve as organ donors. Their lives end prematurely, as they are designed to exist only until reaching maturity, at which time the process of donorship begins. Donorship entails the harvesting of the clones’ organs one after another, making all their organs available for curing human diseases. Indeed, the clone’s entire body is used to this end. The clones are perceived as artificial human beings, "born and raised to be professional nonhumans" (Kadouki pg. 208), other than human, "as if humans" (Carrol, pg. 63) and therefore, less than humans, as the novel’s narrator expresses it: (Ishiguro, pg. 263) CITE. “For a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think of you and if they did, they tried to convince themselves that you weren’t really like us. That you were less than human” (Ishiguro, 2005, 258).

In the world of Ishiguro’s novel, posthuman conceptualizations enable society to legitimize the distancing and isolating of the clones and to justify its indifference to the fact that the clones face certain death already near the end of their twenties. This imagined scenario is based on the challenges arising from biotechnological progress, which is driven by capitalist motivations and nurtured by human beings’ fantasies of transcending the limitations of biology, illness, suffering, and death. These forces interact with biotechnological efforts to create an improved and empowered trans-human human being.

The clone is neither a citizen or a human being endowed with rights, nor is the clone considered part of the “state’s population.” As children, the clones are transferred from one breeding camp to another until they reach maturity. Reaching maturity, however, does not mean becoming independent adults. Rather, adulthood means that they have become mature enough to begin fulfilling their role as an instrument for achieving specific ends.

Ishiguro’s novel has been interpreted as an allegory about the issue of human rights, and as a narrative about exploitation and injustice told through the voices of different excluded and weakened social groups struggling in the margins of developed democratic societies. *Never Let Me Go* has also been seen as a novel raising the paradox between human rights and societal exigencies (Levy 2011), a novel dealing with the reproduction of the logic of heteronormativity, and as an allegory of the welfare state, in which class origin determines and predicts one's future (Robbins, 2007).

Viewing Ishiguro’s novel not as an allegory but on its face value reveals that it grapples with the ethical implications of biotechnology: the possible ethical and moral ramifications of life-intervening techniques made possible by technological advancements, including the prospect of artificial reproduction becoming the origin of life (Lecourt, 2003, pg. ---). Significantly, Ishiguro’s treatment of these issues does not result in a dystopia, the common setting for such themes. Ishiguro’s speculative England is not an apocalyptic world annihilated by catastrophe. Rather, his fictional future reflects our own progressive world.

One of Ishiguro’s main poetic devices for foregrounding this topic is placing the Hailsham boarding school at the center of the narrative as a specific configuration of time and space—thus utilized as a chronotope (to use the term employed by Mikhail Bakhtin). The school is the spatio-temporal arena invoked by the narrative, where the two discourses of humanism and posthumanism collide.

The autobiographical nature of the narrative contributes to the authenticity of the themes and the realism of the motivations. Most of the story takes place at the Hailsham boarding school, where the childhood story unfolds. In fact, the school is referred to frequently throughout the novel. The narrator relates the story of the formative childhood years, a time when the school is naturally a central arena in which a human being’s individual and social development occurs. Moreover, Hailsham is much more than a school, as the clones have no home other than the boarding schools in which they are raised. Hailsham is not a mere boarding school where students live during the school year and from which they return home for holidays. The school is, in fact, home.

School as a concept is a quintessential humanist institution, the purpose of which is to develop the individual’s subjectivity to its full capacity. School is an institution built on the acknowledgment of human beings’ essential values and human rights and founded on ideals of justice, equality and every human being’s right to an education. Even as education has become more “industrialized” and responsive to economic and social needs, its humanist core remains. In addition, school is a social instrument for constructing the future or the foundations for the future through socialization. This role corresponds with the notion of the child as a future citizen, at whom the full array of the state's institutions is directed. The nation is obligated to these citizens-in-waiting through “state intervention in shaping healthy minds and bodies of future citizens” (King, pg. 394). By protecting and nurturing the young, the state is investing in its future strength.

Let us take a glimpse of Hailsham school from a significant scene in Chapter 7.

**We will view the film version from director Mark Romanek’s 2005 adaptation of the novel. In this scene, Miss Lucy decides to discard the mask of falsification and tell the children the truth about their future after she witnesses the event (in the film)** in which **the children avoid retrieving a ball that had fallen outside the school fence. The norm at Hailsham until this point was not to reveal to the clones the** true purpose of their upbringing or the real reasons for their being forbidden to leave school grounds, which involved fears of hybridization and of escape. Instead of sharing the truth with the children, the school concocted harrowing stories about the outside world which it circulated among the children.

Hailsham’s strategy is covert and obscure; its modus operandi tell-and not-tell, thus keeping the children in a state of constant awareness of being told and not being told. As a result of their obscured consciousness due to such education, the clones can no longer fully comprehend what they are indeed told. This obfuscation is underscored in the novel particularly through wordplay in the semantic context of light and darkness and intermittent flickers of awareness. In this chapter the selection of words clearly constructs interchanges and dualities of covert and overt; light and darkness; clear and blurry; and, in metaphorical terms, sunshine and rain. The language is laden with literal and metaphorical linguistic signals derived from identical semantic fields. Paradoxically, the more the text is brighter, clearer, and more lucid, so too is it more somber; and vice versa: the more the text is murky, so too is it sunnier and brighter. Hailsham is in fact a preparatory school for the subsequent "organ-donation gulag" (Robbins, 2007: 292) and is designed to segregate the clones during childhood.

Miss Lucy explains that she tells the truth to the children so that they can live decent lives. The question then arises as to what is the meaning of a “decent life.” The word “decent” suggests something satisfactory, respectable, good, proper. While not a legal term, “decent” pertains to the quality of life to which all human beings are entitled. Indeed, helping create a decent life is perhaps the ultimate objective of education. Education is meant to promote the values of individuality, freedom, progress, rights (Mahon, pg. 3), justice, and upward social and economic mobility, as well as to encourage the development and nurture of human agency, all of which are required for leading a decent life.

These goals of education were not met at Hailsham, where the school’s methods destroyed the children’s agency and prevented them from leading decent lives. Even before their first days of school, Hailsham students’ genetic programing obliterated their rights as humans. Because the clones cannot have children, they have been denied the right to parenthood, and their status in society has denied them their right to life. In concrete terms, they lack a future. The purpose of Hailsham school, therefore, is to not to help create a decent life for its children, but rather to guarantee the internalization of a life without rights and civil status. In fact, it is an "imitative schooling by which the clones are taught to pass as 'normals.'" The school is similar to Umberto Eco’s *City of Robots*: a simulacrum of a school.

Hence, as a chronotope, Hailsham serves a compositional role as well, referring to the importance of the motif of the advanced society that is moving backwards in terms of humanism. The posthumanist discourse claims to free mankind of any misery stemming from illness and death. Transactions between humans and non-humans can enhance human agency and our bodies can reclaim their essence through technology, enabling us to become more than human. However, posthumanism simultaneously engenders the unjust distribution of human legitimacy. Thus, the school in *Never Let Me Go* represents the new discursive order of posthumanism that reveres technology but never considers the full extent of the ethical issues accompanying the new techniques. At Hailsham, the most advanced humanist discourse on human rights is ironically metamorphosed into a reactionary discourse of exploitation and exclusion.

Hailsham is a school that takes pride in being an advanced institute, as opposed to other schools for less fortunate clones. The school participates in an experiment designed to prove the clones’ creativity and, hence, their humanity. But even so, their instrumental purpose is certain. Thus, the question of whether the clones are human is not presented as a moral question, nor as a question of human rights law. It is merely a question of semantics. Had it been a moral or legal question, its answer would carry moral and legal obligations for the state toward the clones, as well as the clones’ right to life, or as Miss Lucy coins it, to a decent life.

Later in the novel, the mature clones arrive at the home of Miss Emily, the former principle of Hailsham. Ultimately, she claims that human beings will refuse to revert back to the “days of darkness” when they were vulnerable to different types of terminal diseases, regardless of the causes. Therefore, whether these posthuman human beings, differing from humans only in that they were born through artificial reproduction, will lead decent lives remains a question that is not asked, as educators, lawmakers and scientists continue to maximize their ability to prolong life and prevent aging, terminal diseases, and deformations.

As Miss Emily observes, CITE 258

**Conclusion**

In his book *Critical Children*, Richard Locke (2011) suggests that novels for adults that focus on children and adolescents use the younger voices to function as critics of their worlds, as “vehicles of moral and cultural interrogation” (p. 4). Such novels often employ children to highlight certain ideas more effectively.

The images of children caught in atrocious situations are especially effective in delivering powerful ethical messages to the readers: “They invite us to follow the story of a child’s imperiled growth and development and thereby to participate in a process of discovery […] an attempt at liberation or the restoration of a just order” (Locke, p. 5). Novels such as *Oliver Twist*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Portnoy’s Complaint* all use children to address contemporary dilemmas,

Ishiguro encourages us to consider more appropriate and credible conceptual tools for analyzing and evaluating today’s rapid changes and the alterations that humans will undergo as a result of radical technological advancement. Ishiguro’s novel contributes to the discussion arising from the fact that new technological possibilities, the new posthumanist forms, and the new relationships developing among man, biology, and technology are leading to redefinitions of differentiation and identity.