

Mortality and Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

This article offers a reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as a meditation on human mortality. Set in an alternative England in the 1990s, the tragic love story revolves around the relationship between three human clones. The novel depicts the trio's growing awareness of their fate and the way they cope with the pressure and anxiety consequent on understanding what lies before them. The article investigates how the situation reflects human beings' confrontation with mortality. The discussion places an emphasis on the link between mortality and memory, which is posited as a function of the mind that can help assuage the psychic trauma of mortality in the story.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, cloning, memory, narrative, mortality, science fiction

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Introduction

As Walter Benjamin observes, at the heart of storytelling is man's fate of being mortal: 'Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.'¹ Death lies at the core of the novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro (born 1954). This tragic story, set in an alternative England in the late 1990s, centres on a trio of human clones who have grown up together, and hold close to each other again when they face their predestined demise.

Mirroring human experience in an intensified way, the characters live in the shadow of death. In their adolescent years, they first work as 'carers,' supporters of their kind who have started 'donating' their organs, and then begin their own 'donations.' Focusing on the characters' growing awareness of their fate and the way they cope with the anxiety, this article offers a reading of the novel as a meditation on human mortality. The story depicts the powerlessness of love, art and other human endeavours over death. Yet by foregrounding heroine Kathy's attachment to her past, it explores memory as a function of the mind that can help assuage the psychic trauma of mortality. The article investigates the link between mortality and memory perceivable in Kathy's autobiographical narrative. In writing this work, the author has, in his own dictum, aimed to examine 'the sadness of the human condition.'² It is worth exploring the novel from the perspective of mortality because human finitude is a crucial factor that leads to the 'sadness' of the condition.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999) 93.

² Kazuo Ishiguro, 'Future Imperfect,' *The Guardian* 25 March 2006, 17 May 2016
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/mar/25/featurereviews.guardianreview36>

The awareness of mortality

In many stories with a sci-fi touch or dystopian element, scientific terms are used to create a sense of authority or an illusion of reality in the narrative. This is not the case in *Never Let Me Go*. In place of scientific jargon, the author uses a handful of simple words to describe the characters' lives. They are referred to as 'students,' 'carers' and 'donors' during different stages of their lives while their childhood teachers are their 'guardians.' Euphemisms in the novel have a dual function of masking the enterprise of cloning as well as expressing death-related notions. Echoing the way human beings talk about death and its related concepts, positive-sounding words are used in the story to refer to such ideas. 'Donation' means enforced extraction of vital organs, and the clones 'complete'³ or die after the donations. Such euphemisms are closely linked to the notion of death because cloning is a science born out of human beings' wish to exercise control over their mortality.

The fictional clones' short, condensed lives magnify 'being-toward-death,'⁴ a mode in which all human beings live, according to Heidegger. The early part of the novel mainly describes the characters' childhood. One of the core areas of Kathy's recollection of her childhood is how the students at Hailsham, a boarding school-like institution for young clones, gain knowledge of their identity and unalterable fate.

The text positions the reader as someone with a similar background as the heroine, with Kathy interspersing her narration with phrases such as 'I don't know how it was where you were' (13, 67) and 'I don't know if you had "collections" where you were' (38).⁵ This setup spares the narrator the need to explain when she is talking about aspects of their lives that are unique to their kind. The result is an opaque text. It is only later in the story that information gaps are filled and earlier happenings become comprehensible to readers. For example, near the start of the novel, Kathy says that the students had to 'have some form of medical almost every week' (13). It is impossible for readers to know the significance of this until they obtain more knowledge later. The novel's intelligibility and effect relies heavily on what Brooks terms '*anticipation of retrospection*,' an awareness on the reader's part that 'what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings of the already read.'⁶ The way readers develop a full understanding of the story resembles the process by which the students comprehend their fate. It is a winding process with many happenings making sense only in hindsight.

Kathy recalls that she '*always* knew about donations in some vague way, even as early as six or seven' (81, italics original). It is a subject the children strictly avoid, as they notice that the guardians always get awkward when they come near such territory. In Kathy's description the subject '*embarrassed*' them (69, italics original). When they were nine or ten, they once punished a student severely for raising a question about smoking with a teacher called Miss

³ Subsequent references to words used in a special sense are not set off in quotation marks following usage in the novel.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1966) *passim*.

⁵ All quotations of the novel are from Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

⁶ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 23.

Lucy, driving her to say that they must keep themselves healthy because they are '*special*' (68, italics original).

While information trickles down to the students from an early age, the topic is discussed more openly by the time they reach their teenage years. Teachers mix in matters about the donations during lectures on sex. Kathy and Ruth remember one that took place when they were around thirteen. The teacher, Miss Emily, first talked about sex and then shifted the topic to the impossibility of the students having babies. The information did not provoke a great reaction because the students' minds were focused on the sex lecture, a terrain which teens are naturally curious about. Knowledge about their identity is thus disclosed in a controlled way, building up an ambiguous feeling in the students of being 'told and not told' (79, 81, 82, 87). From when they were around thirteen, their attitude toward their future changed. It was still an awkward area but they started to make jokes about it 'in much the same way we joked about sex' (83). Kathy's memory of Hailsham includes two incidents that are pivotal to the characters' growth. To test the bold, perceptive Ruth's theory that Madame, who comes to Hailsham several times a year to collect the students' art works, always keeps a distance from them because she is scared of them, the students devise a ploy. They will move straight toward her as a group when she arrives. Madame's reaction proves that Ruth's hypothesis is correct. She is afraid of them, 'in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders' (35). The experience gives the eight-year-olds a 'cold moment' (36), alerting them to the fact they are 'something troubling and strange' (36) in the eyes of outsider. They face an even harsher moment of truth at the age of fifteen, a year before they leave Hailsham. Miss Lucy, who disagrees with the institution's policy of withholding information from the students, one day explains their destined path to them. With the 'told and not told' turned into explicit knowledge, the students' perception about their future changes again:

It was after that day, jokes about donations faded away, and we [the students] started to think properly about things. If anything, the donations went back to being a subject to be avoided, but not in the way it had been when we were younger. This time round it wasn't awkward or embarrassing any more; just sombre and serious. (87)

Hailsham provides the characters with a memorable childhood, a sense of prestige among clones from other institutions. The Hailsham experience is also a process through which the characters discover and learn to accept their identity. When they are small, they sense their destined role as a vague, childish embarrassment. In teenage years they adopt a joking, in other words, evasive attitude. When they grow into young adults, they understand it as something 'sombre and serious' (87).

The process parallels human conceptualisation of death. Piagetian research has established that children go through consistent stages in their understanding of death. When their cognitive development has reached a certain level, they are able to conceptualise death as a biological fact of life.⁷ The grown-up clones' 'sombreness and seriousness' when they ponder the donations reflects and highlights human beings' reaction toward mortality, the unconscious fear that sinks deep into the mind with maturation of the death concept. Heidegger argues that mortality is a

⁷ See Virginia Slaughter, 'Young Children's Understanding of Death,' *Australian Psychologist* 40 (2005) 179-186.

condition exclusive to human beings. He explains that ‘mortals are they who can experience death as death.’⁸ Being devoid of consciousness and language, it is impossible for animals to ‘experience death as death.’ Thus, they merely perish, without any prior awareness of finitude during their life-time. Following this vein, mortality can be interpreted as a privilege of humankind, a symbol of its superiority in being the only species endowed with an intellectual and emotional dimension. But mortality as knowledge has a downside. Unlike other living creatures, human beings face death not only once at the end point. Awareness puts them under the pressure of the prospect of death throughout their lives.

This pressure is subtly reflected through the male protagonist Tommy in the novel. He is described as being prone to temper tantrums since early childhood. Not being creative or talented in arts, an area that Hailsham highly values, he is often the object of teasing and student pranks which causes him to fly into frequent rages. In later years, he gains better control of his emotions and grows into a gentle, affable young man. But near the end of the novel, there is a scene that reminds us of his earlier disposition. Having heard the rumor that it might be possible for clones who are genuinely in love to get a deferral for completing donations, Tommy and Kathy, who have finally become lovers, go to Madame to make their request. The two leave in great disappointment after being told that deferral is impossible. During the drive back, Tommy asks Kathy to stop the car and let him get out for a while. Soon after, Kathy hears screams. She gets out and sees Tommy in a muddy field, ‘raging, shouting, flinging his fists and kicking out’ (269). The emotional outburst is a consequence of thwarted hope, yet it leads Kathy to a deeper understanding of his fits and tantrums:

‘I was thinking,’ I said, ‘about back then, at Hailsham, when you used to go bonkers like that, and we couldn’t understand it. We couldn’t understand how you could ever get like that ... I was thinking maybe the reason you used to get like that was because at some level you always *knew*.’ (270, italics original)

Tommy dismisses the idea at first, but after a moment he says: ‘... Maybe I did know, somewhere deep down. Something the rest of you didn’t’ (270).

The clones suffer a much crueller fate than human beings. But readers can resonate with Tommy’s feelings, given the impermanence of their own lives. The heroine’s placid narration has an intense undertone. Noticing the underlying tension and sense of existential angst that pervades the story, Harrison makes the much quoted comment that the novel is ‘about why we don’t explode, why we don’t just wake up one day and go sobbing and crying down the street, kicking everything to pieces out of the raw, infuriating, completely personal sense of our lives never having been what they could have been.’⁹

The novel leads us to contemplate our existence, ‘why we don’t explode,’ by making the characters totally passive. Ishiguro explains their passivity by saying that in all his works he tries to ‘create a situation where the characters are emotionally slightly eccentric.’¹⁰ One can recall

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) 107.

⁹ Micheal John Harrison, ‘Clone Alone,’ *The Guardian* 26 February 2005, 17 May 2016
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/feb/26/bookerprize2005.bookerprize>>

¹⁰ Sean Matthews, ‘I’m Sorry I Can’t Say More: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro,’ *Kazuo Ishiguro: Contemporary*

Etsuko's indulgence in an illusory past to try to survive her daughter's suicide in *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and Stevens's self-deception and repression in *The Remains of the Day* (1989). The clones are 'eccentric' in the sense that they 'lack volition and agency'¹¹ and they quietly accept the dark, brutal program without any spirit of rebellion or defiance. The author has created this attitude as a magnified version of human passivity with respect to the unalterable facts of life. He claims that 'we are much more passive than we'd like to think'¹² and he explains that he has imagined the clones' plight as a metaphor for the human condition:

I suppose, ultimately, I wanted to write a book about how people accept that we are mortal and we can't get away from this, and that after a certain point we are all going to die, we won't live forever. There are various ways to rage against that, but in the end we have to accept it and there are different reactions to it. So I wanted the characters in *Never Let Me Go* to react to this horrible programme they seem to be subjected to in much the same way in which we accept the human condition, accept ageing, and falling to bits, and dying.¹³

There are different reasons behind the clone characters' acquiescence in the face of brutality and human beings' quiet acceptance of death. The clones' passivity is a result of childhood indoctrination and close invigilation.¹⁴ Human beings embrace the notion of death because they know their physical limitations. The metaphorical relationship focuses more on the psychological tension that arises from facing an inescapable situation, an unalterable state that one has no hope of changing.

Confronting mortality

In an interesting account of how human will to immortality has driven the growth of civilisation, Cave offers four '*immortality narratives*' that he suggests explain the four basic forms of human attempts at everlasting life: preserving the physical body by searching for the elixir of life in the past and looking to medical science in the present; hoping for resurrection; belief in the immortal soul; and leaving a legacy, in such forms as cultural works and biological offspring.¹⁵ This section examines the will to life in the clones and compares it with the human condition.

Fully accepting their ultimate fate as organ providers, the clones understand that they can keep their physical body intact only until a certain time. Hence preserving the physical body through medical means is of no relevance to them. Living in a closed, godless world with neither a mythical tradition nor a religious dimension, the possibility of resurrection and an immortal soul are also not their concern. They are engineered in a way that biological reproduction is

Critical Perspectives, eds. Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009) 114-125.

¹¹ Wai-chew Sim, *Ishiguro Kazuo* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 81.

¹² Sean 124.

¹³ Sean 124.

¹⁴ In the film version *Never Let Me Go* (2010), the children have to scan their wristband when they move about in Hailsham, suggesting that they are being tracked and managed like a herd of animals.

¹⁵ Stephen Cave, *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012) 3, italics original.

impossible, but they believe in love and creativity, and they attempt to leave a legacy by building an identity through structuring and narrating their past experience.

Ishiguro has not written the novel with the intention of representing a discussion of the ethical justifications of human cloning. But the story inherently raises the philosophical question of whether the clones can be defined as human. They differ very little from normal human beings in all perceivable aspects, yet readers are from time to time reminded of their alien quality. For example, Miss Emily confesses that 'We're *all* afraid of you' (264, italics original). Critics who read the novel as a criticism of social injustices and prejudices explicitly or implicitly are acknowledging the clones' human qualities. McDonald defends Kathy's humanness by describing the human world as one that 'goes so far as to disenfranchise her from the human mass.'¹⁶ On the other hand, Menand notices something 'animatronic' about them.¹⁷ If a human-like physicality and an emotional and intellectual faculty do not sufficiently prove humanness, in the novel the Hailsham teachers try to show that the clones are in no way 'less than fully human' (256) by showcasing their artistic talents.

Gastil proclaims that 'all forms of life behave as if persistence into the future – immortality – were the basic goal of their existence.'¹⁸ Artistic works have a special place in the human world because they are born out of the human desire to transcend physical life. They prove that humankind has interiority which is not subject to decadence and demise as the physical body is, and hence that there is a timeless dimension in human existence. In a comparable manner, the teachers encourage the students to engage in artistic creation so that they can prove to the outside world that they possess something deeper inside, that they have a soul. Their intellectual life is further evidence of their 'human' quality. Kathy remembers that in their years in the Cottages, a place that bridges Hailsham and the outside world, she reads a lot and the students would spend time 'arguing about poetry or philosophy,' and having 'meandering discussions around the table about Kafka or Picasso' (117). Their aspiration for a life enriched by arts and culture manifests volition, a will to live despite their obedience and passivity.

As the story progresses the theme of art and creativity takes on further significance, being entangled with the theme of love. A memorable event that takes place during the Cottages years is a trip to Norfolk. During the expedition, Ruth, Kathy and Tommy learn from their fellow travellers that the privileged Hailsham students stand a chance of being granted deferral of donor operations if they are really in love. Following their visit to a store, where they find a *Never Let Me Go* tape, similar to the one Kathy had when she was small, Tommy and Kathy hold a conversation. Tommy proposes a theory that seems to logically connect the deferral and their teachers' practice of taking away their best art works to the mysterious Gallery when they were young. He conjectures that the works were taken away because they revealed the students' inner self. The teachers needed them when they judged whether or not a couple was really in love and whether or not a deferral should be granted. Tommy and Ruth are still a couple at that time, yet the acquisition of the tape and Tommy's supposition mark the beginning of a series of changes

¹⁶ Keith McDonald, 'Days of Past Future: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as Speculative Memoir,' *Biography* 30.1 (Winter 2007) 74-83.

¹⁷ Louis Menand, 'Something About Kathy,' *The New Yorker* 81.6 (28 March 2005) 78-79.

¹⁸ Raymond Duncan Gastil, 'Immortality Revisited,' *Futures Research Quarterly* 4.3(1993) 51-64.

in the trio's relationship – their drifting apart soon after, and Kathy and Tommy becoming lovers years later.

The moment of *anagnorisis* – the transformation from ignorance to knowledge – comes late in this work. It arrives when Tommy and Ruth confront Madame and Miss Emily near the end of the novel. This is when the two clones understand the true purposes of the Gallery and that deferral is a fabricated tale. In their discussion of *Never Let Me Go* as a dystopian novel, Toker and Chertoff cite the theme of love as a case in point as to how Ishiguro reshapes the topoi of dystopian fiction in his work. In sci-fi novels such as *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*, love is 'a subversive force that threatens the stability of the system'.¹⁹ But in Ishiguro's dystopia, love not only fails to pose any challenge to the system, it 'becomes a narcotic, one that goes a long way to reconcile Hailsham graduates with their predicament'.²⁰ The novel does not portray love and art as meaningless and futile. It highlights the warmth Kathy and Tommy draw from their transient yet supportive and genuine relationship. That Tommy carries on with his animal drawings after the meeting with the old ladies also shows that he has not created them solely in the hope of gaining a deferral; he has developed a real interest in the art.

The fact that love and art cannot add a few more years to the lovers' lives in a sense parallels the human condition. It is generally believed in our world that love and art can be immensely transformative and uplifting, but despite all they can do to make our lives fulfilling and meaningful, they have little power and influence over our physical mortality.

Mortality and memory

Kathy's autobiographical narrative begins with a self-introduction: 'My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years' (3). The main story starts from her childhood. The temporal distance between the narrating and experiencing self, or the protagonist-narrator at a younger age, gradually narrows, and the narration closes with the narrator's description of a recent experience, a trip she takes alone to Norfolk after Tommy's death. Before recounting her childhood, Kathy mentions a donor who was once under her care. Having come through a series of operations and being close to death, the donor asks Kathy about Hailsham over and over so that he can '*remember* Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood' (5, italics original). Kathy says that this man who tried to graft her childhood memory into his own mind has made her stop resisting the temptation of looking back on her Hailsham days.

The donor's request makes explicit two things: the consolatory power of memory and the link between memory and death. Memory is an important theme in all of Ishiguro's novels. His works often highlight the subjective and reconstructive nature of human memory. In *Never Let Me Go* Kathy starts her narration after losing her best friend Ruth and lover Tommy. Her autobiographical account is a reaction to the trauma of these experiences and also to the fact of her own death, which has become imminent with her life as a carer drawing to a close. This section discusses Kathy's use of memory to alleviate the horror of finitude. It aims to show that

¹⁹ Leona Toker and Daniel Chertoff, 'Reader Response and the Recycling of Topoi in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*,' *Partial Answers* 6.1 (2008)173.

²⁰ Toker and Chertoff 173.

if the ‘allegorical power’ of the novel ‘has to do with its picture of ordinary human life as in fact a culture of death,’²¹ memory is an important part of this culture because it is a psychological phenomenon inherently linked to human fear of death.

Kathy tells her story with great emotional restraint and honesty. When she is not totally confident about the accuracy of her memory, she states clearly that ‘I might have some of it wrong’ (13), ‘I don’t remember exactly’ (25). Phrases such as ‘the way I remember it’ (138), ‘my memory of it is that ...’ (146) imply the possibility of a gap between memory and truth. The fluid and fragile nature of memory is further highlighted in places where Kathy disagrees with Ruth and Tommy about what happened, and where Kathy’s interpretation of the past is shaped by her friends’ remembrances. Pointing at the uncertainties in Kathy’s memory, Mullan describes her as ‘an inadequate narrator.’²² However, unlike the unreliable narrator who purposefully hides the truth or misleads the reader or listener, the uncertainties in Kathy’s narration have more to do with her inability to fully grasp the situation.

Currie points out certain features in Kathy’s narration in his analysis of the time structure of the novel. First, as illustrated in such expressions as ‘I’d more or less forgotten about it when ...’ (13), Kathy often recalls events she says she has forgotten for a long time. Currie calls such rediscovery of lost memory ‘remembered forgetting.’²³ Another temporal feature is ‘recollected anticipation’ (Currie 97). An example is Kathy’s description of Miss Lucy getting into trouble after exposing the truth to the students: ‘After that morning I became convinced something else – perhaps something awful – lay around the corner ... What I didn’t know at the time was that something pretty significant *had* happened only a few days after I’d seen her in Room 22’ (90, italics original). The fact that Miss Lucy had been dismissed is known by the mature narrator, but not the young Kathy, who only vaguely anticipates that something awful is going to happen.

Whether it is ‘remembered forgetting’ or ‘recollected anticipation,’ Kathy’s nostalgic remembrances can be connected to a deeper psychological mechanism. Nostalgia is, to a number of researchers, a positive emotion. Sedikides and his co-researchers assert that it is a mental exercise that fulfills such functions as ‘enhancement of the self, support of the cultural worldview, and bolstering of relational bonds.’²⁴ Kathy’s recollection, ‘a deliberate response to an uncomfortable psychological state’,²⁵ deepens her understanding of herself and her social environment. It also allows her to reconnect emotionally with her friends, creating a sense of warmth and secure attachment.

Aside from nostalgic emotion, Kathy has tried to recreate the ‘bygone world’ to better understand her past. Structuring one’s past experience and attempting to understand it as a unified whole is essentially an act of establishing an identity. Lockean philosophy holds that

²¹ James Wood, ‘The Human Difference,’ *The New Republic* 16 May 2005, 36-39.

²² John Mullan, ‘On First Reading Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*,’ Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes eds. *Kazuo Ishiguro: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 104-113.

²³ Mark Currie, ‘Controlling Time: Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*,’ Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes eds. *Kazuo Ishiguro: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 91-103.

²⁴ Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut and Denise Baden, ‘Nostalgia: Conceptual Issues and Existential Functions,’ Jeff Greenberg, Sander L. Koole, and Tom Pyszczynski eds. *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2004) 200-214.

²⁵ Sedikides 210.

consciousness constitutes the self and ‘as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person.’²⁶ Locke’s theory emphasises the innate link between personal identity and memory, a ‘consciousness that can be extended backwards to any past action or thought.’ In line with this thinking, many modern memory studies highlight the interrelationship between memory and the self. Cohen considers the defining characteristic of autobiographical memory to be ‘its relationship to the self,’ and she states that the personal events one can remember are ‘the building blocks from which the self is constructed.’²⁷ Through these ‘building blocks’ one can achieve a clearer self-understanding and awareness. A better understanding of the self and its relation with the external world offers psychological comfort in the face of the horror of finitude. Psychologist Pyszczynski and his co-workers state that ‘conceiving of oneself as a valuable participant in a meaningful reality buffers the anxiety associated with the awareness of the inevitability of death.’²⁸ It has the effect of buffering one against death anxieties.

In contrast to Kathy’s seriousness about the preciseness of the ‘bygone world’ she recreates, Ruth believes that the past can be manipulated to one’s own ends. Toward the end of their days together at the Cottages, tension has built up in the relationship between the two girls. A short while before she moves out, Kathy mentions in a conversation with Ruth an old Hailsham rule that students were not allowed to use a certain route in the school area. When Ruth insists that she has no memory of such a rule, Kathy is greatly irritated and she observes that Ruth speaks in a way ‘suddenly so false even an onlooker, if there’d been one, would have seen through it’ (198). The two relate to their pasts in markedly different ways. Kathy is never embarrassed about her collection box, used by Hailsham students to store mementos they acquired in childhood. On the other hand, Ruth throws away her collections having noticed that none of the older residents in the Cottages possesses such a box. Worrying that the past might stand as an obstacle to the present, she discards her treasures in a determination to adjust to the new life. Yet Ruth is not unaware of the emotional support that can be drawn from the warmth of memory. Many years later, when she has become a donor, she confides to Kathy at the medical centre that she wishes she had kept her collection box as well.

In these ways memory is presented as a mental activity with a positive value. It offers something mortals can fall back on when they come face to face with the eventuality of death. Ishiguro again shows his interest in ‘how one uses memory for one’s own purposes, one’s own end.’²⁹ But unlike its role in his other novels, memory in *Never Let Me Go* is not used as a means of self-deception, denial or suppression in this story. It serves a pathetic and yet worthwhile function of being soothing and consolatory. Near the end of the novel, the theme of remembering and forgetting is again foregrounded. In the climactic scene of Kathy and

²⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Vol. One (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995). The quotation is in Book II, Chapter XXVII, 11, no. 449.

²⁷ Gillian Cohen, *Memory in the Real World* (East Sussex, U.K.: Psychology Press, 1996) 147.

²⁸ This is according to a study done by Greenberg et al. in 1986. See Pyszczynski et al. ‘On the Unique Psychological Import of Death: Theme and Variations,’ *Psychological Inquiry*, 17.4 (2006) 328-356, 344.

²⁹ This is taken from Brian Shaffer, *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1998) 9.

Tommy's confrontation with the aged Madame and Miss Emily, the latter explains to the couple that the public's attitude toward the organ-harvesting business was a kind of voluntary forgetting before they started their campaign: 'And for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a type of vacuum ... So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you' (257, 258). They achieved some success in raising public concern for the clones' plight but with the closure of Hailsham 'they [the public] wanted you [the clones] back in the shadows' (259).

The heroine's clinging on to her memories is a struggle against the public's desire to forget. In Levy's terms, Kathy's autobiographical narrative is a 'subversive act of protest,' an attempt to 'make sense of the traumatic past and to assert some form of autonomy in the face of a brutal regime.'³⁰ The protest becomes more powerful by positing the existence of a listener. This narrative setup places the autobiographical narrative in a communicative and social framework. The act of narrating turns the heroine's personal memories into a historical account, something that will remain in people's memory and thus outlive the narrator's life on earth. Memory holds no power against death, but it allows human beings to exist beyond their lives in a symbolic form. An extreme case in point is among the Swahili, a culture where the deceased who remain in the thoughts of other people are called the 'living dead;' they are not considered completely dead until the last to have known them are gone.³¹ This cultural belief suggests that human mortality can be understood as an idea covering a wider meaning than corporeal existence, and in a comparable manner, Kathy's story allows her to live on even after her physical body comes to an end. This attribute of memory is an important factor behind the consolatory warmth that the unique mental activity brings to human mind.

Conclusion

Holding on to and finding solace in memories, Kathy accepts her tragic fate with tranquillity: 'I'm glad that's the way it'll be. It's like with my memories of Tommy and of Ruth ... I'll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that'll be something no one can take away' (281). Citing ideas such as Ricoeur's happy memory, Teo observes that Kathy's longing for her past and her wish to reunite with her deceased lover 'offer a strange sense of hope that brings a spiritual element to the novel's final moments'; the remainder of her life will be imbued with 'a profound happy memory and peace' (Teo 136).

It is possible to detect a spiritual dimension in Kathy's serene attitude toward death. But the calm and placid tone also offers a more powerful expression of the extent of the heroine's suffering. If we take the clones' story as a metaphor for the human condition, the heroine's silent acceptance of her situation poignantly expresses, in the author's own words, 'the human capacity to accept what must seem like a limited and cruel fate.'³² Human fate is, in a sense, predestined

³⁰ Titus Levy, 'Human Rights Storytelling and Trauma Narrative in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*,' *Journal of Human Rights* 10 (2011) 1-16.

³¹ See David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 195, note 57.

³² This is taken from an interview: 'SPIEGEL Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro: "I Remain Fascinated by Memory,"' SPIEGEL Online, 10 May 2005, 5 Feb 2016 <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel-interview-with-kazuo-ishiguro-i-remain-fascinated-by-memory-a-378173.html>>

to be 'limited and cruel.' Forster famously said that 'we move between two darkneses.'³³ Birth and death are two great unknowns to us, being 'at the same time experiences and not experiences'.³⁴ No matter how much effort is put into the subject, the 'darkness' of death will still elicit horror and remain an area humans cannot feel hopeful about, that they despair of achieving a clear understanding of on a logical and intellectual level. The 'spiritual hope' in the novel can be interpreted in a different light. Despite its emphasis on the inevitability of death, the story's ending indicates the possibility of creating meaning in a finite existence. Asked by Tommy about the point of going on with her exhausting work as a carer when all donors will complete or die in the end, Kathy answers that the work is important because it 'makes a big difference to what a donor's life's actually like' (276). Kathy's reply hints that one can create value in life even though it is transient, and impermanence does not necessarily equal futility or meaninglessness.

Artistic works are, on one level, aesthetically created *memento mori*. Within the realm of fiction, a character's death – actual or figurative, as represented by the story's end – is one of the elements that most powerfully provoke readers to reflect on life. It is beyond human capability to fully fathom the meaning of death, but the seemingly fruitless labour of contemplating death is not without a constructive side. As stated by Brombert, 'confronting mortality paradoxically implies being alive, questioning how to live, raising moral issues.'³⁵ Ishiguro's tale of human clones raises a range of humanistic and ethical issues. The backdrop of mortality, the characters' sense of urgency knowing that they cannot hold on to each other for long because death will force them 'to let go, drift apart' (277), and the mixed feeling of sadness, sympathy and unease it creates in readers who can identify the characters as their own shadows, contribute to the story's inspiring, thought-provoking potential.

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³³ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1976) 57.

³⁴ Forster 57.

³⁵ Victor Brombert, *Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2014) 165.

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