



## SPECULATIVE FICTION, MEMORY AND GENETIC ENGINEERING IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S "NEVER LET ME GO"

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### Abstract:

This article analyses the narrative structure of Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go*. In investigating the use and narrative depiction of memory, this article demonstrates how Kathy's lapse in memory and unreliability communicates the denied humanity and sense of agency that she and her fellow "carers" experience within the biopolitical regime in which they are subject to. As clones raised to harvest vital organs, Ishiguro's characters are involved in a complex mediation and reflection upon the limits of genetic engineering. I argue that Ishiguro's narrative configuration embodies and critiques the ethics of the genetic modifications his characters undergo by revealing and questioning their humanity in a world that deprives them of free-will.

**Keywords:** memory, speculative fiction, narrative structure, uncanny

### 1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* [1] is a dystopian novel with a "speculative memoir" that is set against a backdrop in genetic engineering [McDonald, 2, 74]. In terms of critical science fiction, it follows the protagonists; Kathy, Ruth and Tommy as they come to accept the realisation that their sole purpose is to harvest their "vital organs" [1, 73]. Raised in an insular boarding school, the characters have "been told and untold" their chilling destiny and the reality of their position within "a world that has come to regard cancer as curable" [1, 240]. In Ishiguro's setting of an alternative "late 1990s" England, with its medical and technological advances, there is an increased life expectancy which in turn necessitates the characters being "brought into this world"; to ensure that societies' "children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease" [1, 240]. The three central characters are thus victims of the "dehumanised social stratum" in that they "provide a source of spare parts that are used to cure" the ailing populace [Beaumont, 3, 151]. Eugene Thacker classified the genre of critical science fiction according to its comment on cultural and ethical

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dimensions of science [4, 155]. *Never Let Me Go* explores aspects of the uncanny, as although Ishiguro reveals the characters to be clones, they embody the idea of the "familiar and the unfamiliar" [Royle, 5, 1]. The main character, Kathy, has a retrospective monologue which is stilted due to the decay of her memory. This means that the credibility of her understanding and the redemption she seeks from the past is compromised as a result of her nonlinear summary. As such, the knowledge Kathy gains from her past is problematic. It is Kathy's desire for order that fuels her narrative, a literary strategy common in Ishiguro's writing. Rachel Cusk argues that the limited point of view within the narration announces itself through the "persistent theme[s]... [of] the psychological aftermath of childhood" [6, n.p]. This implies that the narrator cannot be held accountable for the perception of her memories due to the merciless ordering of the reality found in Kathy's past. In this article I will argue that the limited narrative perspective mirrors the protagonist's struggle in ordering memories, establishing Kathy as an unreliable narrator. Ishiguro uses the issue of the uncanny to explore the relationship between perspective on knowledge of reality and the ethics surrounding the advances in genetic technology. Kathy's inability to make sense of her own reality undermines the reader's interpretation of what it means to be human.

The novel uses geographical setting to question the relationship between memory and understanding in the first person monologue. The limited understanding of these memories reflects Kathy's desire for knowledge of the "outside world" [1,76]. Moreover, her recollection of the stranded boat hints at the inability to verbally construct an interpretation of long-term memories. Although breaking away from the confines of Hailsham, Kathy's misconception of this poignant experience in the "fantasy land" of real-life undermines the reliability of the narrative voice [1, 66]. For example, the line explaining how "beyond the dead trunks, maybe sixty yards away, was the boat, sitting beached in the marshes under the weak sun" [1, 220], connotes images of decline. The use of the adjective 'beached' suggests the boat has been forgotten, which evokes a sense of waste and meaningless, implying material structures eventually waste away. Kathy reinforces this sense of regression when explaining how her own feet are actively "sinking beneath" the sand [1, 220]. Here, the dark reminder of the characters' future foreshadows the inevitable decline they will suffer as a result of their upcoming donations. For instance, Miss Lucy, in revealing the Hailsham students to be "all clones" [1, 239], explains how their "futures, all of them, have been decided" whereby "before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs" [1, 73]. In the end, they will cease to exist. As Alexander Beaumont puts it, once "their bodies are raided for replacement biological material until...they 'complete', [and] die" [3,152]. Therefore, the gradual regression of the character's own meaning, as well as their purpose in society, Ishiguro in this scene, demonstrates through the image of the stranded boat. However, Kathy fails to recognise this imagery. Ishiguro uses a juxtaposition when she interprets the scene as aesthetically pleasing, using the hyperbole "painted" to describe the sky [1, 220]. The inability to construct an accurate account undermines the authority of her narration. This is because there is a clear distinction between what the language implies and Kathy's lapse in meaning. Therefore, we cannot trust her memories when Kathy herself cannot make sense of them. In particular, Sebastian Groes states that "*Never Let Me Go* is an investigation, and criticism, of the destruction of imagination, memory and language" [7, 219]. Within his critical essay, Groes

argues that the various landscapes the protagonists visit, act as a way to gain self-knowledge. The inability, however, to synthesize knowledge and modernity mean the characters cannot achieve this. Here, the reliability of Kathy's narration is problematic. In particular, Groes implies that Kathy's accuracy of recalling is impossible due to her fragile distinction between knowledge and consciousness. For this reason, Ishiguro's geographical repositioning of the protagonists in the outside world, not only highlights the nonlinear form Kathy's memoir follow, but suggests that her desire for order is futile due to a lack of comprehension. The effect of this is that the arbitrary nature of the characters rearing, whereby they have been institutionalized in isolation of the "*biopolitical regime*" leads to a sense of ignorance [3, 151]. Thus, the process by which Kathy tries to derive meaning from her past is a hollow one. This is because the character's sheltered upbringing causes them to develop a false sense of humaneness in a world that distinguishes them as mere replicable biological matter. The passivity inherent in the narration further questions the relationship between the intimate memoir and Kathy's unnatural reality.

The narrator's compliance to the process of genetic engineering causes the reader discomfort. This is because the unsettling tone of Kathy's narration raises existential issues associated with the progressive nature of science. The continual placid tone Kathy uses in her recollection creates shock. An example of this includes when she describes her role within the institution; "*My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years...they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year*" [1, 3]. The banal description of such a role that implements "*a barrier against seeing [her] as properly human*" [1, 240], and renders her a biological slave, subject to an existence characterized by the donations' physical "*pain and ...exhaustion*", creates confusion and anxiety for the reader [1, 5]. This is because the absence of complaint in her narration suggests Kathy does not feel distraught by her fate. Instead, the contrast between the precise time period of 'eight-months' and the vagueness of 'they', renders Kathy as passive in her acceptance. This establishes Kathy as uncanny as she does not conform to the expected reaction of rebellion to the violations placed upon her as a result of her simulacra existence. The limited narrative perspective provides the reader with only subtle indicators of the biological service they exist in. One example includes how, the euphemism of the 'carer' is the only direct insight Kathy reveals through her narration, to the social order she abides by. This naturalization of the progression of scientific augmentation suggests that Kathy does not desire escape because she does not fully understand the attack on her sense of autonomy [Lochner, 8, 225]. Wai-chew Sim further explores this when he states that "*science is arguably pushed to the background in this novel so that it can explore what human-ness means*" [9, 83]. This is suggestive of the individualistic memoir having a purpose in raising more issues than it addresses. Lack of questioning on Kathy's part is achieved through the structure of her narrative. She is restrictive in what she *does* reveal and what she does not. The fact that her memory is individual to her means the reader lacks an understanding of the objective ordering of society. Therefore, the subjective narration of memory, within the novel, is a mechanism Ishiguro uses to demonstrate the difference in the emotional involvement of the narrator and the reader. Beaumont posits; "*in its representation of human cloning, Ishiguro's novel plainly anticipates*" and presents an "*identification of emerging biogenetic technologies as a potential site for*

*ethical consternation*" [3, 151]. We as readers indirectly gain an understanding of Kathy's world through her narration's non-progressive format, encouraging curiosity about critical science fiction. For instance, the lack of coherence in Kathy's' narration mirrors her inability to conceive of a future involving self-determination. The way Kathy edits her own memories further illustrates, the extent to which the unnatural clones challenge the concept of the uncanny, through their display of humanness.

Ishiguro uses the episodic recall of the cassette tape to humanize Kathy. Kathy's attempt to derive meaning from her past is reductive. In editing and organizing her memories, Kathy compresses the events surrounding the various cassette tapes. For instance, she summarizes the placement of these three tapes, in only six lines:

*"The album called Songs After Dark and it's by Judy Bridgewater. What I've got today isn't the actual cassette, the one I had back then at Hailsham, the one I lost. It's the one Tommy and I found in Norfolk years afterwards- but that's another story I'll come back to later. What I want to talk about is the first tape, the one that disappeared."* [1, 59].

Here, the nonlinear progress is evident in the interruption that takes place through memory, whereby Kathy jumps from talking about the first tape that she lost, and then onto the tape Tommy found in Norfolk. This suggests that Kathy's memory is questionable as the act of condensing involves the omission of information. This reflects Kathy's reoccurring sense of decaying memory as she herself claims *"maybe I'm remembering it wrong"* [1, 8]. In particular, Barry Lewis argues that the summary of the cassette tapes demonstrates how *"narrative is linked with the notion of folding, and the unravelling of this coiled series of episodes [that] helps us to become more involved... in Kathy's world"* [10, 207]. For Lewis the issue of morality and value express themselves through the 'concertina effect' of unfolding Kathy's various compressed memories. This is relevant to the issue of the uncanny within the novel, as the structure of the compressed narrative is a *"defamiliarization device"* [Lewis, 10, 201], exploring the issue of the human condition of the characters. Although unreliable, this is a key aspect of Kathy's humanity as it demonstrates the need for sentimentality and the inevitable decay of memory over time. In particular, Silvia Caporale Bizzini states: *"the organization of the novel as a memoir humanizes the situation of characters who are not even thought of as being human"* [11, 75]. Caporale Bizzini's observations reinforce Kathy's need for self-knowledge in her examination of the past, by asserting how a critical understanding of Kathy's life experience is essential. For instance, this implies that Ishiguro's use of literary strategy establishes a relationship between the character's disordered memory and the unresolved past. As such, the structure of Kathy's narration, although unreliable, is what makes her human. She is not an omniscient narrator; she is a narrator who instead makes errors in recollection. Therefore, Kathy's desires to make sense of the humanistic fear of death establish her as 'familiar' [5]. Indeed, contemporary criticism, as illustrated by Virginia Yeung in 2017, states that *"Kathy's attachment to her past ... explores memory as a function of the psychic trauma of mortality"* (12, 1). Yeung reads Kathy's *"autobiographical narrative"* as centring on a human-like *"psychological tension that arises from facing an inescapable situation, an unalterable state that one has no hope of changing"* (5). For Yeung, memory and subsequent

narrative configuration, reflects how Kathy grapples for meaning in both her past and present existence, in a society that Miss Emily categorises as containing people who "*did their best not to think about*" the injustice of the biological clone's state-orchestrated transience [1, 240]. The use of foreshadowing that the displacement of the cassette represents, further examines this notion. Kathy's first loss of the cassette tapes at Hailsham anticipates the many losses she will have to endure throughout the rest of the memoir. In particular, Kathy will be deprived of friendship once both Ruth and Tommy reach their completion. However, the fact that Kathy, in fact, finds another version of the tape in Norfolk, suggests that even though something becomes lost, it can still be found again. The meaning behind the novel consequently addresses this further as although the process by which the characters have been created; simulacra, suggests they are sub-human; they *are* able to find their own sense of humanity through the importance they place on memory. For Kathy, memory is not only a faculty she possesses; it is a source of meaning and identity.

In conclusion to this, Kathy's narration addresses the scientific issue of what it means to be human. This is because the limited point of view exposes the humanness of her memories. The unreliability of her narrative voice demonstrates this, whereby Kathy restricts the amount of information she provides the reader. For instance, this occurs through the inclusion of problematic knowledge of reality as well as the compression of memories. In Ishiguro's realistic portrayal of the undependable form of retrospect, it becomes difficult to estimate the extent to Kathy's bias. Kathy's fragmentation of memory suggests certain aspects have been overemphasised during their retelling and we consequently do not know what information has been left out. Although we rely solely on Kathy's subjective account, it provides the reader with a restricted understanding of the world she lives in. Instead, Ishiguro explores the importance of Kathy's memory in terms of sentiment, in that the reader interprets the familiarity of the narrator's desire for knowledge as an indicator of her human likeness, as opposed to the subtle contextual information Kathy provides that contradicts this. Without this deeply personal tale, we would fail to understand Kathy in any terms other than that of a biological clone. Therefore, memory serves as a more significant indicator of Kathy's human characteristics.

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### **About the Author**

I am a current postgraduate student in United States Literature and Cultural Values at the University of Edinburgh. I received my undergraduate degree from York St John University in 2018. My research interests include postcolonial literature and scholarship, for which I have had work published in, and America's foundational mythologies and perceived anxiety of cultural inferiority. I also write regularly for the University of Edinburgh's *The Student* newspaper and peer review for the student-led postgraduate publication, *Forum*.

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