



# A Study on *Never Let Me Go* from the Perspective of Ethical Criticism

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## Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro, winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in literature, is one of the most famous novelists in contemporary British literature. In his novel *Never Let Me Go*, the author constructs a post-human society, that is, a world of human cloning that transplant organs for human. This paper mainly explores the details of life in the post-human's tragic fate, and reveals the ethical dilemma faced by the post-human, and triggers readers to think about the ethical fetters between human and post-human.

## Subject Areas

Literature

## Keywords

*Never Let Me Go*, Imagery, Post-Human, Ethical Dilemma

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## 1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro (2005) [1] constructs a unique 20th century world in *Never Let Me Go*. In that world, technology serves for happiness, for health, and for longevity. Medical technology has made a breakthrough in the development of cancer and various incurable diseases can be cured. A large number of clonings were created for one purpose, that is, to provide their organs for people in need of medical treatment. At that time, there was widespread agreement that human cloning was only an organ provider and human cloning itself is soulless. Therefore, human cloning has never been treated as human being. However, some people sympathized with the miserable life of the cloned children, so they rose up in revolt and founded several schools to provide a good life and education for a small number of cloned children. They intended to prove that human cloning also has a soul and should be treated better through their efforts. And that the

school to verify whether the human cloning has soul was through the creative art of cloned children. Therefore, these children are encouraged to create diligently, and then these excellent works are used to display to the public. This, they say, was the best evidence that human cloning has soul.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the existence of post-human represented by human cloning is to carry out organ transplantation for human being at any time, and their lives will gradually disappear after several donations. Whether this kind of instrumentalism in the novel is humane and can be accepted by conventional ethics is a question worthy of further discussion. Identity confusion and ethical issues are the eternal themes in post-human novels. The ethical concepts we used to be familiar with are broken and even subverted, and the human cloning fall deep into the dream of finding their own identity and their own value, and the contradiction between the human and the post-human exploded. Since the birth of cloning technology has caused a variety of disputes in the academic community, the pros and cons of each side of the argument has not reached a consistent conclusion.

In a word, cloning technology as a hot topic in society, has been the subject of concern and controversy. However, in literature, the study of post-human's identity dilemma and of ethical relations between post-human and human in the clone novels is still relatively weak. *Never Let Me Go* shows the author's thinking and attitude towards the possible future prospect of the rapid development of biotechnology. In particular, the description of the hidden dangers of science and technology is full of the writer's worries and anxieties. This paper tries to reveal the ethical dilemma faced by post-humans from *Never Let Me Go*, discusses people's ethical attitudes towards post-humans, and thinks deeply about the ethical relations between humans and post-humans.

## 2. The Coming of Post-Human Era

Human beings create "post-human" such as human clones, android and Synthetic through biotechnology and information engineering, especially the gene interference. The clone in *Never Let Me Go* is one of the various post-human assumptions.

Dona Haraway (1991) [2], one of the representatives of post-humanism, defined post-human as "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction". In *Never Let Me Go*, humans create clones, hoping grow healthy replacement organs for curing their own diseases and prolonging their lives. The cloned human body has become an important "organ bank". Organ donation itself is to treat human's and cloned human's organs as machine parts, which can be replaced at will. When the cloned human's organs were embedded into the human body, the human race was no longer purely natural or biological, but a hybrid of technology. Different from the mode in which human beings pass their unique biological attributes to the next generation through sexual reproduction, cloning technology overturns the natural law of gamogenesis. The whole process can be completed by a single parent. In this

way, the disintegration of the biological human demonstrated in the novel revolutionized the arrival of the post-human era.

The post-human in *Never Let Me Go* is the human cloning created by human for the purpose of organ donation. The first problem post-human faced is the dilemma of ethical identity. Professor Du Mingye (2014) [3] pointed out that ethical identity refers to the attribution and positioning of individuals in certain ethical relations. How to define the ethical identity of human cloning? “Who am I?”—Human cloning represented by Kathy in the novel has never stopped asking this question, which shows the desire of the subject for his own cognition. Mary Shelley (1997) once created the “artificial monster” in *Frankenstein*, which has no name and no identity. The monster once asked Frankenstein—what am I? How was I created? Who created me? If the monster wants to confirm his identity and his origin, then in *Never Let Me Go* clones also want to know how they were created and who are their “the possibles”—the models of these cloning person (*Never Let Me Go*, p. 117) [1]. Are human clones human beings? Do they have souls? How are their lives different? In the view of the clone, only by finding their own model can they solve the mystery of identity. In the eyes of most human beings, human cloning is not the member of the human kind, and human cloning has no soul, only as the provider of human organ. The normal cognition of ethics has been broken or even overturned. Post-human fell into the dream of finding their own identity, the ethical disputes between human and post-human began to erupt.

In addition to post-humans’ identity confusion, their survival situation and destiny is also a big dilemma. Why did the clones not resist or escape, but also quietly accept the donation destiny until the death of the tragic fate of the arrangement? They feel ashamed if their first donation ended their lives, and proud when they made it to the fourth donation, even though they know that the fourth donation is actually the most painful. They die wondering why their lives are so different from the human they save. The ethical choice made by post-human to realize their self-value, and whether the instrumentalism thought of human beings is humane and can be accepted by traditional ethics, are questions worthy of further discussion.

In addition, how should human beings deal with the ethical relationship with post-humans? Since the birth of cloning technology, the greed of human nature makes the abuse of cloning technology continue despite repeated prohibition. If one day, post-human like Kathy, and Tommy really appeared in the human world, it will cause endless debate. The dilemma of whether human can live in harmony with them goes both ways.

### 3. Ethical Consciousness from the Perspective of the Narrator

#### 3.1. The Ethical Evolution of Narrator—Kathy

##### 3.1.1. The Awakening: The Life in Hailsham

James Phelan (2005) [4] pointed out that character’s narration is an indirect

communication, which realizes the communication between the author and the reader through the communication between the narrator and the receiver. *Never Let Me Go* is narrated by clone human Kathy. From her perspective, she shows a picture of post-human life with organ donation as their survival goal. Kathy reflected on her childhood, youth and adult life in flashbacks.

When Miss Lucy, the teacher, was giving a speech about smoking forbidden. Marge asked her if she had ever smoked. She admitted that she had, adding: “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.” (*Never Let Me Go*, p. 57) [1] Kathy, who was then nine or ten, was afraid to ask, “Why? Why is it so much worse for us?” (*ibid.*, p. 58) [1].

When Kathy and her friends were about eight years old, they pretended to run into her on the road when Madam, the guardian, came to the school as she always did to collect art work from the students. “...I’m sure. And I can still see it now, the shudder she seemed to be suppressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her.” (*ibid.*, p. 29) [1] When Kathy knew that she and her friends were different, she was deeply shocked and felt that they were marginalized and isolated groups. While she felt that she was the same as everyone else, the human are afraid of these human cloning, they exclude them, regard them as alien. So this particular experience changed her perception about herself, about her group.

### 3.1.2. The Developing: The Separation from Her Friends

Leaving Hailsham for the cottage, they arrived at a bankrupt farm, deserted and secluded. It’s here that Kathy is separated from Tommy and Ruth. To escape her feelings for Tommy, Kathy applied to work as a carer in a rehabilitation center. She traveled from one rehabilitation center to another every day, taking care of the organ donors. Since they live for donating, they are not the normals. For them, the crucialpoint that determines the nature and value of their destiny is that they are born for donation and then dead for donation. Their life trajectories had already been planned long before they came to the world. They are doomed. As a living subject of life, these clones can not choose their own way of life, can not dominate their own destiny, but only let others take their organs according to human’s needs.

When Kathy, Tommy and Ruth met again and learned that the cloning couple as long as they can prove true love can apply for three or four years to delay the organ donation. Kathy renewed weak hope. A new meaning has taken on for Tommy and Kathy to the continuation of life, even if it is only for a brief three or four years deferment. After the failure of the application for deferred donation, the hope of being alive has been shattered. Under the extremely hopeless depression and despair, Tommy finally broke out. He let out a roar of rage on the way back, questioning the morality and conscience of the whole society. This is the helpless perform not only for their love without future, but also despair of doomed fate. At this point, the narrator intentionally introduces the reader into

the mode of thinking that guardians give them education and care only to ensure that they provide healthy organs for human beings. The cold and evasive look of human beings shows that they believe human cloning does not deserve human rights, they are just a tool to delay death.

### **3.1.3. The Building: The “Completion” of Her Friends**

Ten years later, Kathy meets Tommy and Ruth again, and this time it means the final goodbye. Ruth is so sick because she has donated her organs twice, and is ready to donate her organs for the third time and reach the end of her life. At the end, Ruth stops breathing and all the surgical instruments and lights go out. Kathy, the narrator, strikes the reader to the heart with this tragic scene, which not only makes the reader indignant over Ruth’s tragic death, but also makes the reader deeply grieved over the cruel behavior and moral indifference of human beings.

From Hailsham to the cottage, to the rehabilitation center, human cloning has always been living under the strict control of human beings. No matter how they change, the location of their living space is hidden and mysterious. Kathy in her childhood, because of her childishness, exudes innocence and loveliness. Kathy felt helpless and lost when she was a teenager, which wiped out her yearning dream and human warmth. Adult Kathy found many long-buried secrets, also see clearly that the clone is the world abandoned foreign bodies, no right to ask their own identity, no right to look forward to a better future, no right to escape the arrangement of fate, only silently fulfill fate until death. Therefore, “donating organs until death is their inherent responsibility and destiny” is the interpretation and judgment made by the narrator Kathy.

## **3.2. The Consciousness Dilemma of Narrator—Kathy**

### **3.2.1. The Identity Anxiety as Post-Human**

As one of the key words of ethical criticism, ethical identity refers to the attribution and orientation of individuals in certain ethical relations. Professor Nie Zhenzhao (2010) [5] pointed out that in literary criticism, literary ethical criticism focuses on the analysis of character’s ethical identity. In the process of reading literary works, we will find that almost all ethical issues are related to ethical identity. The post-humans’ ethical identity, such as the narrator Kathy, is a focus of concern. They never stop questioning who am I, which indicates the subject’s desire for self-cognition.

As Kathy described it, the guardians just kept telling all of clones that they are special. In addition, all human clones have been imbued with the important idea and thought that they will donate their organs until death after they grow up. Even cloned children who receive a good education at school must still be told, as required, that health is the most important thing. They knew about donation when they were six or seven years old, even though they didn’t know what it was. This suggests their priority as organ donors. That’s what they were brought into this world for. Their only identity is to donate their healthy organs. Through

brainwashing and coercive indoctrination, they firmly believe that organ donation until death is their inherent responsibility and destiny, which is irresistible and must be experienced by every clone. They often console themselves with the hope of finding their own origin, the one to copy them, in order to glimpse their future, even if they know they don't have it. For clones without a sense of identity, it's exciting to imagine their own identity by peering into "the possibles". When they failed to identify themselves through their own models, they collapsed. They lose their sense of self, of belonging in the world.

From Descartes to Foucault, western philosopher has always been pursuing ego as the proof of subject. This is the embodiment of the rational center of western philosophy. Modern philosophy challenges this rational authority, focuses on human rational self, and then discusses the ontology of "who I am". The identity anxiety of post-human like Kathy also reflects this ontological problem.

### 3.2.2. The Ethical Choices of Post-Human

In the theoretical framework of literary ethical criticism, ethical consciousness is one of the core concepts. According to the critical point of literary ethics, the ethical consciousness of human beings began to emerge, and human gradually transformed from animals to human beings and turned into an independent advanced species due to the maturity of rationality. The essential characteristic that distinguishes humanbeings from beasts is that human has reason, and the core of reason is ethical consciousness (Nie Zhenzhao, 2014) [6].

From Kathy's memory, we can know that Kathy, Ruth and Tommy also had a friendship, and they also received various forms of education in Hailsham. Everything shows that there is not so much difference between human cloning and ordinary people. In the novel, it is very sad and unacceptable to donate one's own organs until death, but this is the only reason why clone people come into this world, which is their inherent responsibility and irresistible destiny. Human cloning in the absence of any right and ability, still do kind thing. In Kathy's description, they were also ashamed that their lives ended with their first donation, and proud that they could make it to the fourth donation, even though they knew that the fourth donation was actually the most painful. Human cloning don't understand until they die, why there is difference between their lives and the people they save? They don't expect to be real people, and they don't expect to live forever. Their biggest dream in life is just to delay donating their organs a few years later. They just hope that their short life can be enriched, so that they can have a good experience of this wonderful world. From their innocence and selfless dedication, we see the noble soul of post-human clones and the ethical choice in line with their identity as organ donors.

In this fictional world, these post-humans become more human than humans because of their choice of death. Through Kathy, it can be found that what the students of Hailsham are told and cannot understand is not the donation itself but the unfair donation and the fear of facing death. With friends and beloved

gone, Kathy, with fond memories of Hailsham, calmly chose to go to her “place” where she is supposed to be and continue to fulfill her donation mission...

## **4. Ethical Judgment from the Implied Author**

### **4.1. The Implied Author’s Choices of Imageries**

#### **4.1.1. The Gallery: The Symbol of Limited Humanistic Care**

Booth (1961) [7] points out that the implied author is the real author’s second self. According to Shen Dan (2010) [8], implied author writes in a specific way and creates his own text image through his various writing options. As far as text is concerned, implied author is the core of paradigm and choice; In the case of the author, the implied author is his implied version; As to the reader, the implied author is the image the reader gets. In narrative works, the author’s voice is never really silent (Booth, 1987) [9]. The implied author Kazuo Ishiguro makes his own interpretation and judgment through the selection of images in the text.

Gallery stands for limited humanistic care of those few clone protection organizers. Through the exhibition of the art works of human cloning, it shows that they also have souls, arouses people to be kind to these clones, and informs the world that although the clones have a special origin, they are still real life. Gallery has gone with the disappearance of Hailsham. It is implied that the minority of human cloning protection organizers cannot completely change the fate of human clones’ organ donation. This society has abandoned the discussion on the ethical issue of human cloning, and human cloning has completely reduced to resources and commodities.

The reason the gallery was closed was humans were afraid. According to the novel, though, the gallery once made a small wave in society, this wave was quickly silenced by the successful experiment of a scientist. In order to enable human beings to give birth to children with higher intelligence, as well as better physical quality, the scientist created a clone that is obviously superior to human beings. At this time, humans felt panic, all people no longer care about the clones, and reluctant to believe that they have soul. All the sponsors disappeared, and all the clone schools and galleries were shut down.

#### **4.1.2. The Stranded Ship: The Emblem of Dead Hope**

The ship is the ark, mostly symbolized sailing for other side of ideal. And the ship in this novel, that the three look for together, is a symbol of what’s called hope, the opportunity to postpone. Kathy is the carer, taking Tommy and Ruth, who have donated, to look for a ship stranded on the beach. It was the first reunion of the three after years apart. When Kathy, Tommy and Ruth are reunited at the seaside, Ruth apologizes to Kathy and Tommy and takes out a note with Miss Emily’s address on it, encouraging them to get a deferral. Finally came to the seaside, three people were blocked by the mud. They could only watch from a distance, but could not get there. At this point, it seems reasonable to say that the ship on the beach represents the hope of Kathy and Tommy, which they can

never hold it.

But it can be noticed that the implied author deliberately bogs them down so that they can't touch the ship. When we contact with the fact that they found out that ask for deferred donation with true love is just a rumor, and then we found out that the ship which could not be reached was actually a symbol of dead hope and represents these three people can not reach the other side of the yearning together.

#### 4.1.3. The Tape, the Fence and the River: The Transformation from Post-Human to Human

而夫人却说：“那天我看着你跳舞的时候,我看到了某样别的东西。我看到了一个新世界的迅速来临。对于以往的疾病有了更多的治疗方式。那非常好,却又是一个非常无情和残忍的世界。我看到一个小女孩,她紧闭双眼,胸前怀抱着那个仁慈的旧世界,一个她的内心知道无法挽留的世界,而她正抱着这个世界恳求着:别让我走……”。In Hailsham, Tommy gives Kathy a gift of tape, which is a very sign of their budding romance. When Madame saw that 11-year-old Kathy danced with her pillows to the song *Never Let Me Go* on the tape, tears came to her eyes. Many years later, when Kathy mentioned this to Madame, Kathy explained, “I imagined it was about this woman who'd been told she couldn't have babies. But then she'd had one, and she was so pleased, and she was holding it ever so tightly to her breast, really afraid something might separate them, and she's going baby, baby, never let me go.” (*Never Let Me Go*, p. 235) [1] But Madam said, “I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go.” (ibid., p. 235) [1].

In addition, the implied author also asks Kathy, Tommy and Ruth to step over the school fence that they once dared not approach. As they searched for the boat, they climbed over the fence and trudged to the sea. The symbol of fence shows that all the three of them break through the shackles. In particular, Ruth is reluctant to climb over the fence, but Kathy and Tommy encourage her to do so. The relationship between the three is always the same, that is, Kathy and Tommy are always willing to find out the truth, Ruth is always willing to believe, always willing to obey the rules. In the old days, Ruth would stay over the fence and keep Tommy close to her. Now she was willing to work harder for them.

Tommy, who always imagined he was splashing through water while playing football, grew up thinking that the river was in such a hurry that “these two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, ... The current's too strong. They've got to let go, drift apart.” (*Never Let Me Go*, p. 245) [1] That's how Tommy think it is with them. The implied author, Kazuo Ishiguro, shows us the rich emotions of post-humans like human beings by means of repeated narration and multiple mentions of these images.

## 4.2. The Implied Author's Judgment toward Ethical Dilemma

### 4.2.1. The Ethical Development of Post-Human

Aristotle (Trans. by Robert C., Susan D, 2011) [10] believed that humans are different from animals because of their moral capacities. In order to prolong their lives, the human beings in the novel would not hesitate to use the human cloning as a tool for manufacturing, and then abandon them like garbage. They also tried to convince themselves to deny the human nature of human cloning, to excuse the brutal slaughter of their own utilitarianism. By contrast, post-humans in the fictional world appear to be more humanization than humans. When they realize the true meaning of death, they still choose to take their own responsibility and accept the short fate of life, even if the responsibility is unfair. Death is a ritual of deembodiment for the clones, whereby the clone gets rid of the bondage of the body itself through self-management and selection.

These clones did not choose to resist and escape, but choose to sacrifice themselves, bring hope of rebirth to so-called "natural human". In the opinion of the implied author Kazuo Ishiguro, these brave cloned lives are nameless, but their death is great, which is only a high-level ethical behavior. If the death of Ruth and other clones is a kind of deceived and ignorant death, then Tommy and Kathy still choose organ donation rather than escape after knowing all the truth, which reflects what Nietzsche (1995) [11] calls "Die at the Right Time!". Tommy and Kathy's choice of death and responsibility proves the profound understanding and active choice of human cloning for the meaning of life. This noble sense of generous sacrifice for the happiness of others, brave and firm in danger and can withstand the test of loyalty, makes clone's life can be sanctified. At this moment, human cloning with altruistic death and the spirit of self-commitment to obtain human dignity, highlights the meaning of life.

### 4.2.2. The Ethical Fading of Human

Through the description of these images, the implied author further indirectly reveals the inadequacy of the interpretation and judgment made by the narrator Kathy. Due to her personal limitations, she made the interpretation and judgment that donating organs until death is their inherent responsibility and destiny.

In the novel, the only purpose of human cloning is to wait for them to grow up, and then obtain their organs, in order to cure cancer and various incurable diseases, and prolong human life. The guardian of Hailshem, however, the responsible clone protector, even though they know that any efforts cannot ultimately change the tragic fate of clone's organ donation, they still stubbornly struggle to the outside world, helping human cloning for more rights, to provide good accommodation and humane care to human cloning. From this perspective, the implied author highly appreciates the protection for human cloning by the guardians. However, human cloning at that time is only the organ can be transplanted, and the panacea can cure cancer. When the whole society has been accustomed to "cancer is curable", they will only hope to receive organ trans-

plant surgery as soon as possible to save lives as their children, lovers, relatives and friends are suffering from cancer. No one will care about those who provide organ. When they learn that the clone also has soul, even better than themselves so as to is able to replace them, they can not accept this fact, they instinctively resist and self-protection.

“We are *all* afraid of you,” Miss Emily said, even though she had sheltered the cloned children in those years, giving them their own childhood. “I myself had to fight back my dread of you all almost every day I was at Hailsham. There were times I’d look down at you all from my study window and I’d feel such revulsion...” (*Never Let Me Go*, p. 233) [1] In the eyes of ordinary people represented by Miss Emily, donors such as Kathy, Ruth and Tommy are full of frightening characteristics, and they seem to be regarded as Landscape of Fear (Yi-Fu Tuan. 2013) [12]. The emergence of this sense of fear, to a large extent from the psychological representation of escape. In view of the ethical identity of human cloning in the post-human era, the implied author has made a judgment of ethical decline at this time.

## 5. Conclusions

In the novel, a detailed description of the living environment of post-human has displayed through the narrator Kathy, and effectively explains why post-human represented by Kathy with normal intelligence never cross the school’s fence. It is precisely in this way that post-human’s creators suppress their eager desire to contact the outside world with multiple barriers of environment and consciousness, making them unable to understand the true value of life. It is impossible to imagine where they would go and how to survive if they left Hailsham. Therefore, they have no way to know any other options are available besides donating themselves? Then they are forced to accept the right discipline by the creator institution, and identify with their ethical identity of “organ donor” and the ethical consciousness of donating their organs to human beings. Thus, their lives are set out for them: “You’ll become adults, then before you’re old, before you’re even middle-aged, you’ll start to donate your vital organs. That’s what each of you was created to do.” (*Never Let Me Go*, p. 68) [1].

Then the implied author reveals that the novel ends up with Kathy’s despair of facing donor surgery alone. Her fate is uncertain. With the closure of Hailsham and the fall of the position of human cloning, the future of post-human is confusing. Morningdale scandal, was mentioned in the novel, “Even during the best of times, we always knew what a difficult battle we were engaged in. And sure enough, the Morningdale business came along, then one or two other things, and before we knew it all our hard work had come undone.” (*Never Let Me Go*, p. 227) [1]. The several sentences have not disclosed the details, but associate with the Hailsham’s closure and the headmaster’s helplessness discourse, we can know that this society has abandoned the discussion of the ethical issues of human cloning, and human cloning has been completely become resources and com-

modities since then. Because there can be no intersection between post-human society and real human society, capitalists can transfer human cloning from the public perspective for the sake of their interests, while the general public can still enjoy the benefits of organ transplantation. This tragic story reflects the two sides of cloning technology. It can not be blamed for the progress of human science and technology, but that will involve a series of problems with the coming of post-human era.

From the biblical myth that God created life to the sci-fi narrative of artificial life, then to the emergence of gene-edited babies in real life in the real 21st century world, modern technology has proved the possibility of artificial life. In short, human clones and other post-humans are the products of biotechnology at different development stages. Karl Jaspers (1989) [13] once pointed out that technology is only a means, and itself has no good or evil. It all depends on what people create from it, what purpose they serve people for, and under what conditions they place it. The questions about the human relations in post-humans, as well as the timely return to the old philosophical proposition of who I am, should be the ethical basis for contemporary human beings to predict and reflect on the crisis of cloning technology.

The discussion of post-humans warns the world that the issue of post-human is indeed very complex. We can't touch the bottom line before we are ready to avoid the repetition of Kathys' tragedy. As Schweitzer (2010) [14] appealed, Reverence for Life!

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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