

# Life and Truth in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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ABSTRACT: Showing us a society in which questions about life issues cannot be asked, non-Christian Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* vivifies the prophetic observations of *Evangelium vitae*. Ishiguro immerses readers in the interrelation of technological threats to the family and to undefended lives. Despair rises from untruths about family and sexuality. The protagonists surrender to homicidal and suicidal meaninglessness. Both texts preach the sacredness of every being that comes from human ancestry, powerfully indicting the passion for power in biotechnology that overshadows the truth inscribed in the body. Although the novel makes the truths of *Evangelium vitae* painfully vivid, almost all its critics evade attending to the interrelated life issues in a way that curiously echoes the very accusation about complicity and falsehood that is at the heart of the novel's cultural critique.

**K**AZUO ISHIGURO'S *Never Let Me Go* puts readers into peculiar sympathy with its narrator.<sup>1</sup> We like and empathize with Kathy H., as she narrates her upbringing with others like herself: clones manufactured for what they call "donations" of organs. Placid, compassionate, sensitive and intelligent, she is enmeshed in a bureaucracy that condemns her, and her only friends, to be dismembered for parts by medical professionals. Unlike George Orwell's *1984*, which was set in a future into which we might descend if we did not take heed, Ishiguro's novel is not warning us of what might happen or what could happen. He sets the novel in the 1990s, with close-grained social detail, and with only one alteration in technology: that cloning has allowed for the production of human individuals. By its setting, Ishiguro's novel says: "This has happened and this is happening." The corrupted language about "donations" exemplifies the perversion of benevolence that has drained meaning from Kathy's life and soothed the consciences of "normal people."

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<sup>1</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (New York NY: Vintage International, 2005).

Ishiguro's novel brings home to readers the truth of the prophetic observations of *Evangelium vitae*, not through a theologian's insight but by imaginative attention to truth. Technological and social threats to the family, which John Paul II recognized as threats to human life in general, doom Kathy and slowly kill her friends. Ishiguro shows us, in Kathy's perky, businesslike despair, the way our culture has descended into homicidal and suicidal meaninglessness. Both the novel and the encyclical searchingly reveal the moral consequences of disregarding the sacredness of every being who comes from human ancestry. Both denounce – one openly, one subtly – the passion for power in biotechnology that overshadows the truth inscribed in the body. Both have also found evasion and resistance within their audiences. Although the novel makes the truths of *Evangelium vitae* painfully personal, most criticism of *Never Let Me Go* resolutely resists attending to the interrelated life issues. In fact, the criticism curiously reproduces the very complicity and falsehood that the novel critiques.

The English citizens in the story enjoy many incentives to deny the humanity of the young clones, whom readers follow from a protected childhood into the aspirations of adolescence. Their access to truth is carefully controlled. Isolated from “normal” people, muffled in euphemisms, the clones see no other horizon besides “donation” for their identity and purpose. The clones from less humane backgrounds envy the Hailsham clones who have had art, music, literature, and sports. But, lacking a future, the Hailsham clones find these pleasures ultimately empty. Each seems to choose when it is time to become a “carer,” Kathy's role as we meet her, but through Kathy's inner life we realize that it is a gesture of despair. The term's ghastly irony only slowly emerges: to be a “carer” is to help other clones acquiesce, without becoming “agitated,” to their slow, medically planned vivisections, and then to undergo the same deadly dismemberment oneself. Inspired by a rumor that a few years' “deferral” is possible, Kathy and her lifelong love Tommy seek it, an event that serves to reveal to readers the system of victimization. After they are rebuffed, she is resigned, and once her friends have been killed, Kathy says it “feels right” to die at thirty-one. She has nothing that she loves enough to call her to life.

As she prepares to “complete” – that is, to die – Kathy focuses on remembering her rivalry with her friend Ruth for the love of her life, Tommy. They have all been raised at Hailsham, which seems like a boarding school but is in fact a clone farm. Kathy and her friends all speak the language of the

bureaucracy that is destroying them, “using innocuous medical terms,” as *Evangelium vitae* puts it.<sup>2</sup> Horror gradually surrounds words like “complete,” “change of pace,” “donor” and “carer.” It very slowly dawns on readers that these are not donations of money or blood or even marrow but of vital organs. Ishiguro adeptly manages, in Kathy’s description of her life, an almost cozy assumption that her audience is comfortable with these terms and participates in what *Evangelium vitae* §59 terms a “network of complicity” that consumes human beings “specifically ‘produced’ for this purpose by in vitro fertilization – either to be used as ‘biological material’ or as providers of organs or tissue for transplants in the treatment of certain diseases.”<sup>3</sup>

Kathy’s moral sensitivity seems intact, but it has been distorted by the fundamental lie that her utility is the meaning of her life. She takes pride in being an efficient part of the system. She emphasizes the importance of empathy for “donors” and skillfully alleviates their psychological distress. Her tales of her childhood at Hailsham sound like a boarding-school story by a tenderhearted girl. For instance, she talks about how she feels ashamed of herself now for failing to intervene when other clones mistreated Tommy. As we slowly take in the fate of the deceived children, her memory reminds us of the degree to which we also are guilty onlookers. At the time, however, it seemed like an innocent childhood memory. Similarly, Kathy’s friend Ruth involves other clones in imaginative childhood play. As they grow older, Ruth moves from play to imagined conspiracies and half-believed rumors to self-deceptions, impostures for the sake of status, and even vicious lies. Eventually readers realize that something far darker than Ruth imagined was actually happening. We do not at first see our own cultural situation in our identification with the preteen Kathy, pressured by Ruth to avoid exposing her deceptions, duplicities, and false impressions. Gradually readers see the wider application. Lies are essential to the social corruption that the book exposes. The culture of death revealed here is intimately recognizable, even though Kathy wraps her language with clichés that lull us into understanding her feeling that it is even virtuous to cooperate with it.

It is only a third of the way through the book, when the children are entering puberty, that Miss Lucy, one of their teachers, finally blurts out the truth, and readers definitively learn that these schoolchildren were cloned to be

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<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* §11.

<sup>3</sup> EV §63.

slaughtered.<sup>4</sup> Hints begin on the first page, but readers are not equipped to understand them, like the betrayed children themselves. By the time Miss Lucy makes her risky speech, like the clones, we realize that we already knew, though it was “never really out in the open.”<sup>5</sup> Readers see the events through Kathy’s eyes. Other matters distract us, as they distract Kathy. She only tells the story about Miss Lucy to explain Tommy’s moodiness, for Lucy was one of his favorite teachers. The other children had tormented him because he was not being creative enough in his art, and Miss Lucy told him it did not matter. When Miss Lucy is dismissed, she rips aside the mask that is supposed to give the children a few years of happiness before they must learn their fate. Hailsham was founded for humane treatment of clones, whose humanity is denied by the surrounding culture.

The importance of the art also creeps up on the reader. Even late in the book, we may not understand the significance of the emphasis on the value of one’s art. The children are encouraged to artistic achievement, and their paintings and poems are sometimes taken away by the mysterious “Madame,” Marie-Claude. She is one of the founders of Hailsham. We learn that she sometimes held receptions for members of parliament and bishops in her attempt to start a movement to treat clones humanely. She tried to evoke admiration for the young clones by showing their achievements. One fairly cynical critic points out that the administrators use the students’ “artwork, ostensibly reflecting their interior character, their consciousness and souls,” as “an asset to be mined for its fungibility for nonprofit fundraising.”<sup>6</sup> When public opinion turns against their minority movement, the money runs out, and Hailsham closes. Kathy was one of the last humanely raised clones, and she is proud of her elite status, even though Hailsham’s cultural refinements never saved a single cloned child from butchery in the end.

As Kathy recalls the ending of her time at Hailsham, she recurs often to an image of a distant “lost corner,” in Norfolk perhaps, where the clones imagine that everything that they have lost can somehow be found. Ishiguro imbues this image with universal human spiritual yearning. As a child Kathy had lost a music tape – an event that gives the novel its title. It featured a cocktail-lounge singer crooning, “Baby, baby, never let me go.” The crooner

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<sup>4</sup> Ishiguro, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Ishiguro, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> J. Paul Narkunas, *Reified Life: Speculative Capital and the Ahuman Condition* (New York NY: Fordham Univ. Press, 2018), p. 233.

sings about the desire for permanence in a sexual relationship. As a child, however, Kathy only hears the word “baby” and imagines the situation of a barren woman finally granted a child. All the clones are sterile, and Kathy has never known a mother. Yet, she interprets “Baby, baby, never let me go” as the heartache of a mother.<sup>7</sup> Ishiguro said about the clones in this novel (in a statement that would be controversial today) that every child wants parents. He explained how important it is that the clones “express their longing for a parent.... At some deep human level they need to feel they belong to some sort of genetic line.”<sup>8</sup>

This desire is not a practical but a spiritual yearning, as is evident when we see the doomed children in their late teens, left at an old farm to idle in financial dependency. Socially isolated, they shift for themselves with junk magazines and a TV, until one at a time they become “carers” and begin the track towards their own slaughter. They are expected have sexual relationships, but without any of the teleological value that even the cocktail-lounge singer could indulge.<sup>9</sup> Their lives will be short and childless, and sometimes their couplings are merely “functional.” They have been left in an old farmhouse provided with inadequate heat but stacks of pornography.<sup>10</sup> Everything works against allowing their sexual encounters to manifest the self-giving that *Evangelium Vitae* sees in sexuality. Nevertheless, the clones long for that depth of meaning.

Like students in a dorm for life, the clones are never trained for any adult role. They have philosophical conversations about matters like reincarnation and great literature. One topic spurs them to action: their genetic originals, whom they call the “possibles.” As Kathy explains, “We all of us, to varying degrees, believed that when you saw the person you were copied from, you’d get some insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you’d see

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<sup>7</sup> Ishiguro, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro and Sebastian Groes, “The New Seriousness: Kazuo Ishiguro in Conversation with Sebastian Groes,” *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, edited by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 260.

<sup>9</sup> The idea that the meaning of the body is “teleological” is articulated well in Carlo Lancelotti, “The Crisis of Modernity: an Introduction to the Thought of Agosto del Noche,” *Constitutional Studies* lecture at the University of Notre Dame (March 19, 2019), uploaded to Youtube March 23, 2019: Youtube.com/watch?v=jz\_aQlGE3xIY) Minute 29:01-29:30.

<sup>10</sup> Ishiguro, p. 127.

something of what your life held in store.”<sup>11</sup> They can expect no achievement beyond their use for parts at an early age. At thirty-one, Kathy is unusually old. Although they long for a future, that is not the most profound aspect of their yearning. They desire something that is, in principle, infinite. They want to know in whose image they are made. As John Paul II wrote, a child, “born of the conjugal union..., brings with him into the world a particular image and likeness of God himself.” Coming to understand that image is an inextricable yearning from one’s begetting, something “inscribed in the very biology of generation.”<sup>12</sup>

Ishiguro’s text clearly confronts the relationship between knowing one’s origin and finding meaning in one’s existence. Among the other things that they are denied, the cloned children are denied an important truth about themselves by being deprived of the knowledge of the connection that Ishiguro understands to exist between those of the same genetic line. They have been denied a father and a mother; in relation to *Evangelium vitae*, it must be noted that in the conjugal union the Church also finds an image of God’s relationship to his people.<sup>13</sup>

One of Ishiguro’s critics, Gabriele Griffin, uses a scientific authority to pronounce upon this moral and metaphysical question and dismiss it. She pours scorn on this reflection on the relationship between the person and the begetting of that person by quoting a famed biologist, Lewis Wolpert, who scolded those who think, like Ishiguro, that one’s genetic line means something:

[B]io-moralists’ obsession with the life of the embryo has deflected our attention away from the real issue, which is how the babies that are born are raised and nurtured. The ills in our society have nothing to do with assisting or preventing reproduction but are profoundly affected by how children are treated.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ishiguro, p. 140.

<sup>12</sup> EV §43.

<sup>13</sup> EV §43.

<sup>14</sup> Griffin’s citation for Wolpert’s moral scolding is Lewis Wolpert, “Who’s to blame?” in *The Guardian* (11 March 2002), at <http://education.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,4372308-108238,00.html>, accessed 22 May 2006. However, *The Guardian* no longer makes this article available at this address. A few years after its publication, *The Guardian* later issued a scathing article about Wolpert as a plagiarist: Nicola Davis, “Eminent scientist Lewis Wolpert sorry for using others’ work” (Saturday, January 18, 2014), accessible <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/19/lewis-wolpert-sorry-using-others-work>, accessed May 29, 2020. Considered in the abstract, his comments

Left to themselves, the clones do make an effort to act like “real families,” which they know only from television (pp. 123-24). These imitations Kathy finds embarrassing and awkward. Neither can the emotional support of the family be supplied by bureaucrats, hired “guardians,” “carers,” or even friends. All of these ultimately entrap the clones into cooperating in their own demise. No one defends them. These failures exemplify the fact that “techniques of artificial reproduction, which would seem to be at the service of life and which are frequently used with this intention, actually open the door to new threats against life.”<sup>15</sup> In his implicit condemnation of dishonest language and thought in the production of humans as commodities, Ishiguro echoes a passage from *Evangelium vitae*:

Life is indelibly marked by a truth of its own. By accepting God's gift, man is obliged to maintain life in this truth which is essential to it. To detach oneself from this truth is to condemn oneself to meaninglessness and unhappiness, and possibly to become a threat to the existence of others, since the barriers guaranteeing respect for life and the defence of life, in every circumstance, have been broken down.<sup>16</sup>

Parents naturally have good will toward their children and wish to lead them to the truth. Without knowing what is true and what is not, to some degree, no one can live. *Evangelium vitae* points out a manifestation of God, the Spirit of Life, in the family’s “nature as a community of love and in its vocation to be the ‘sanctuary of life.’”<sup>17</sup>

Kathy and her fellow victims have no sanctuary. Raised by “guardians” whose job it is to deceive them into false peace and docility, these doomed children have merely been copied, like the tape that Kathy misinterprets. Kathy makes the cocktail singer’s romantic song refer to procreation. Tommy, the love of her life, out of lasting devotion to Kathy, buys her another copy of the lost tape, but they cannot themselves participate in actual reproduction. Their sexual union has been condemned to barrenness by their manufacturer. Lacking parents, they will also forever lack children.

Beyond having Kathy take a lover’s pet name of “baby” so literally,

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insisting that origins are unimportant gain some irony from the discovery of his plagiarisms at about the time this declaration was published.

<sup>15</sup> EV §63.

<sup>16</sup> EV §48.

<sup>17</sup> EV §6.

Ishiguro over and over again brings up the connection of sex with having babies. The clones' "guardians" make an effort to explain modesty away as a by-product of anxiety about pregnancy, but they remain uneasy about merely ignoring all sexual boundaries. They also fail to quite convince the clones that sex is merely a fun "experience" to "share."<sup>18</sup> Kathy finds that sex, approached in that way, "had done funny things to my feelings."<sup>19</sup> In fact, the sheltered children are rather prudish, despite engaging in plenty of "functional" sex with multiple other clones. They scorn homosexuality, and one of the ways in which Ruth manipulates Kathy is by shaming her about promiscuity.<sup>20</sup> Ruth's lie that Tommy will not ever think of Kathy romantically because of her unchastity provides the final push to get Kathy to sign up to start her suicidal path toward being a "carer" and eventually a "donor."

Kathy's way of using pornography makes for a striking image of the desolation that stalks sexual activity in her world, so deliberately like our own. Tommy is puzzled by the fact that Kathy is clearly not using pornography for its sexual thrill. Readers learn that she is looking for her "possible." She believes that because she is unchaste, she must come from the people who inhabit these magazines. Kathy is the product of riving procreation from the sexual act. She looks for her origin in the separation of sex from its unitive aspect. The vileness of the latter sheds light on the vileness of the former. Kathy's friend Ruth speaks fiercely of where the clones, throwaway people, come from:

We all know it. We're modeled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe.... If you want to look for your possible, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in the rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all came from.<sup>21</sup>

Kathy recalls that it was only when she and her fellow clones could "forget who we really were" that they could aspire to such lofty ambitions as becoming farm workers or delivery drivers or retail clerks.

Then again, at her clone farm-cum-school, Hailsham, the clones learned art and music and literature. The founders were using their art to try to prove they had souls, as part of a campaign for better treatment of clones. Yet the

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<sup>18</sup> Ishiguro, p. 98.

<sup>19</sup> Ishiguro, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup> Ishiguro, p. 201.

<sup>21</sup> Ishiguro, p. 166.



founder of Hailsham, “Madame” Marie-Claude, shrinks away from the children “like spiders.” She is part of a movement that seeks humane treatment for clones, yet she is not telling the clones such truths as would inspire them to attempt to escape the deaths planned for them. Marie-Claude wants the system to be better. She may even, privately, oppose it, though she never says so. When the readers meet her, she feels that she has been defeated by a tide of bad publicity. Public opinion turned against clones because of mass media activity. As *Evangelium vitae* warns, “[T]he mass media are often implicated in this conspiracy, by lending credit to that culture which presents recourse to contraception, sterilization, abortion and even euthanasia as a mark of progress and a victory of freedom, while depicting as enemies of freedom and progress those positions which are unreservedly pro-life.”<sup>22</sup>

Neither Marie-Claude and Miss Emily, her partner, are unreservedly pro-life for the clones. They feel sorry for them, but they are very conscious of public opinion, and try to avoid going afoul of it. The public wants to deny the clones’ humanity in order that they may be sacrificed for others’ health. Miss Emily apparently believes the clones have souls, but feels that there is nothing they can do to stop them from being butchered, slowly, as needed. She no longer struggles once she concludes that certain things cannot be believed any more, because of the social atmosphere.<sup>23</sup> As she puts it,

[H]ow can you ask for such a world to put away that cure, go back to the dark days? There was no going back. However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die.... People did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren’t really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn’t matter.<sup>24</sup>

In practice, the officials at Hailsham cooperate with the medical establishments, delivering their charges at the age of sixteen to the “farm” from which they go to be “carers” and thence to be scattered body parts.

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<sup>22</sup> EV §17.

<sup>23</sup> Again, Carlo Lancelotti’s discussion of the philosophical positions that resulted in a hedonist “bourgeois” society points out the deep roots of this commodification of everything. He attributes the aberration to the idea that we construct or produce what makes us valuable. That in turn is based in the failure of faith in truth metaphysically: the delusion that there is no ontological truth but rather all truth is socially conditioned. Lancelotti attributes the idea to Karl Marx. See Lancelotti, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Ishiguro, p. 263.

If the Hailsham foundresses do not believe the children are fully human, they are defrauding the financial backers of Hailsham. But if they do believe it, they are betraying the clones to their killers while giving them fairly pleasant conditions in which to await their dismemberment. It is better than misery, perhaps, but it keeps the clones from rebellion, because of their faith that someone has good will toward them. The Hailsham staff do, to some degree, but not to the point of fully rejecting involvement in the system.

Part of Ishiguro's point in giving the reader these puzzling characters may be to expose the pointlessness of an inconsistent stance on saving humanity. The application to abortion is obvious, but Ishiguro does not draw it out. Miss Emily and Madame Marie-Claude are philanthropists, but they are no heroes. They have not the internal consistency that would support them in the face of a disapproving public. The women say they can do nothing to help the clones, and that they never had more power than would suffice for them to set up Hailsham. They never seem to think of suggesting to the clones some means of escape, despite the fact that the clones have the freedom to drive themselves places and appear to be able to blend in with the general population.

Madame Marie-Claude always wants the Hailsham clones to remember that they have been privileged, but since she sends them on to slaughter all the same, it is hard to judge how much of her motive is beneficence and how much is self-congratulation. Madame Marie-Claude remarks to Miss Emily with bitter disappointment about the ingratitude of the children of Hailsham: "They think it's all God-given" (p. 265). In an inarticulate way, they do, and rightly, if one thinks in terms of the encyclical. Existence, however humans distort it, is always a gift of God. Not only does the language of ingratitude echo American justifications for chattel slavery. It demonstrates that Madame Marie-Claude conceives that all good in the clones' lives has been given by her – that she has taken the place of God.<sup>25</sup> She interacted with the children very rarely, and so they are to some degree an abstract political cause to her, more than to her partner, Miss Emily. Miss Emily treated the clones rather differently than one would treat children with a future, but she interacted with them directly.

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<sup>25</sup> Although I do not find convincing Tiffany Tsao's assertion of allusions to *Paradise Lost* in Ishiguro's novel, and her definition of religion as "purpose-driven life" accords with nothing in Milton, her discussion of the assertion of a divine status among the human manufacturers of the clones is suggestive. "The Tyranny of Purpose: religion and Biotechnology in *Never Let Me Go*," *Literature & Theology* 26/2 (2012): 218.

Still, when Tommy and Kathy come to plead their case before the women, Emily congratulates herself on making the clones cultured and educated before giving their organs to be harvested. This is not much comfort to the pair facing their own death. It is virtuous to treat farm animals well rather than cruelly before slaughtering them, but it is not proper to treat children as meat, even if one is very kind to them, because children are the moral equals of their elders. This is a truth that the two women evade by attending to the comparative value of their own moral accomplishments rather than to the reality of the children before their eyes.

It constantly surprises critics that, despite learning to drive and being able to walk to towns, despite good education and an appearance that does not differ from that of normal people, the clones never try to flee. Only Tommy expresses resentment at the unnamed authorities, and he does so inarticulately. They seem brainwashed into acceptance, an element of the horror particularly noted by critics.<sup>26</sup> It seems that even at Hailsham the clones are taught that it is virtuous to embrace “donating,” for it is “what we’re supposed to be doing.”<sup>27</sup> Tommy expresses pride that he has taken care of his health and will be a good donor.<sup>28</sup> The clones are almost – almost – completely convinced to see their betrayal as their personal purpose. The medical personnel act congratulatory toward the clones facing their fatal “fourth donation.” Before they start to become “carers” by special training, the unstructured and futureless years after Hailsham ensure that aimlessness, isolation, and loss of friends exacerbate the clones’ despair until they willingly accept their roles as “carers.” Thereafter, long hours, broken sleep, and constant contact with dismemberment and death (p. 208) leave them feeling that “it’s a natural course” to give their bodies over as commodities. They all know that they are cooperating in the deaths of their friends, whom they mourn. By the time they are ready to “donate,” they have sent several peers to the operating tables, and they also consider themselves largely worthless, except for utilitarian purposes. Their self-hatred is never explicitly acknowledged as guilt, though readers are horrified at their complicity. *Evangelium vitae* points out why it is a moral horror: “[N]o one can

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<sup>26</sup> “Science and the Cultural Imaginary: The Case of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*,” *Textual Practice* 23/4 (2009): 657-58 (accessed online <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=ab7e9233-abbf-4041-863c-3734d68b5d6e%40pdc-v-sessmgr05>).

<sup>27</sup> Ishiguro, p. 227.

<sup>28</sup> Ishiguro, p. 108.

renounce the right to self-defence out of lack of love for life or for self.” Moreover, “legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another’s life.”<sup>29</sup> With good reason, those clones already mutilated and hastening toward death express resentment of “carers” who don’t know what it is like to be “on the table trying to cling to life.”<sup>30</sup>

The one attempt by Tommy and Kathy to defer their fate springs from a sort of children’s legend that has grown up among the clones, a rumor that some couples have been allowed to delay their slow butchering if they can show they are truly in love. That is the reason for their visit to Miss Emily and Madame Marie-Claude. Under the illusion that art will prove the quality of their souls and win them a few years’ stay of execution, Tommy has been making drawings. He is hoping that the art will be empirical data about the existence of a soul that can love. Indeed, Miss Emily claims that with the funding sources (bishops and members of Parliament) their art was used mainly as evidence that they had souls. Insofar as moral sensitivity might be proof of a soul, the drawings that he makes in fact do show his moral dignity. He cares for them for their own sake even after he finds them to be useless for ensuring his survival. His pieces are little imaginary animals. In ironic contrast to his own “guardians,” he considers as he creates them “how they’ll protect themselves.”<sup>31</sup>

Before their trip to meet the foundresses, in order to strengthen their case that they are truly in love, Kathy initiates sex with Tommy while she is his “carer” after his third mutilating surgery. Tommy is not eager to initiate sex, and they both know that their love does not point toward a future family. The founders of Hailsham inform the petitioners that there was never any way that art or sexuality or professional excellence could give them value enough to escape death. Indeed not. One does not earn one’s life, because human life is a gift. Their corrupt culture chooses to ignore the truth about their identity as human. The originates most deeply in flouting the moral law that unites life and love. *Evangelium vitae* asks: “Even if the presence of a spiritual soul cannot be ascertained by empirical data..., how could a human individual not be a human person?”<sup>32</sup>

Miss Emily cannot understand how Tommy and Kathy have picked up the

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<sup>29</sup> EV §55.

<sup>30</sup> Ishiguro, p. 226.

<sup>31</sup> Ishiguro, p. 178.

<sup>32</sup> EV §60.

rumor that because of love they might be granted life. It keeps rising among the young at Hailsham spontaneously (p. 258). Certainly the directors never promulgated it. She has met many couples who sought her intervention and has had to tell them all that there was never any truth in the rumor. There was no practical truth, but nevertheless there was truth. Here Ishiguro plants the insight that love is the source of life – biological life. The legend springs, of course, from the youngsters’ infinite yearning toward life, love, parenthood, and, in fact, God.

Once their plea for being allowed to escape vivisection is rejected, as something that was always impossible, Tommy and Kathy continue as lovers. Yet they do not stay together to the end. This decision of Ishiguro’s, that Kathy cannot be there when Tommy dies, has thematic consequences. Kathy has always been more ready than Tommy to compromise or hide the truth. She has deceived him, sometimes just to make him feel better. Tommy deceives no one. He alone resents their having been kept under illusions of goodwill at Hailsham.<sup>33</sup> Ruth had claimed Tommy as her lover in their early teens, and Tommy did not seek another, even when Ruth “completed.” Nevertheless, Tommy was always emotionally close to Kathy, and her most faithful friend. He looks for what she has lost in both a literal and figurative sense. Tommy’s insight into love impels him to send Kathy away before his fourth and final “donation.” He claims that she does not understand what he is going through. The fact is that he can no longer escape that he is about to be murdered. He really does love her, and while he is willing to have her tend him in a state of mutilation – significantly, she never prepares him for a “donation” – he protects her from becoming an active accessory to his murder, helping him into the room where the doctors will destroy him. The novel ends with Kathy obediently going off to “wherever I was supposed to be.”<sup>34</sup>

The novel could scarcely be more thorough in its condemnation of the roots of every abomination enumerated in *Evangelium vitae*: reproductive technologies void of respect for the children conceived; the selling of human body parts, the killing of the innocent in euthanasia, assisted suicide, the corruption of the medical profession into servants of death, utilitarianism, hedonism, pornography, the disintegration of the family, contempt for parenthood, and, finally, our cultural and economic complicity in all of this evil. His characters enact profound insights about the interrelation of life and

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<sup>33</sup> Ishiguro, p. 273.

<sup>34</sup> Ishiguro, p. 287.

truth, homicide, and suicide. The novel writes upon hearts to tell us of the ways reproductive technology destroys the divine and human good of the family.

It seems almost as if Ishiguro had read the encyclical. In fact, Ishiguro is hostile to Christianity in the carelessly misinformed way that is currently fashionable. He even speculated in an interview that the Christian idea of forgiveness is at fault for the existence of political empires.<sup>35</sup> We can be grateful that his skills as a novelist do not depend on his accuracy as a historian. In the way in which literature is more powerful than history or philosophy, he gives his readers the benefit of the insights that John Paul II reaches through religion – though the only religious character in the novel is a crusty old man stereotyped as an enemy of sex. While the character is not cold-hearted, he also works for the murderous system.

Because Ishiguro's writing has such power in relation to life issues, one would expect a chorus of execrations against him, like the vilification of David Daleiden and the other heroes of the struggle to end abortion. Instead, critics practice the very technique that is such a deep betrayal of the clones at Hailsham. They acknowledge that, of course, the novel is about clones whose organs are removed for others' use until the clone dies. Then, like the clone Kathy, they divert attention to issues that they present as more pressing. Much of the criticism is stylistic, finessing the moral issues entirely. Some, emphatically deny that there is any chance of such injustice occurring because the trajectory of science is elsewhere, and therefore feel free to speculate instead on the issues surrounding "transhumans" and "companion species." Perhaps there is not much to surprise anyone in the academic capacity for evading the obvious. Nevertheless, the critics of *Never Let Me Go* elude moral questions with particular creativity.

When the moral evil is addressed, it is most often taken as a symbol, most often of some "real-world" political issue, such as postcolonial injustices, the alienation of homosexual youth, or the capitalist exploitation of the poor. For instance, Manuel Botero Camacho and Miguel Rodriguez Perez discuss how "the novel has been analysed primarily from the angle of postcolonial criticism"<sup>36</sup> and then segue into a discussion of the novel as the search for

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<sup>35</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, interviewed by David Barr Kirtley, "Why Are So Many People Snobby about Fantasy Fiction?" – podcast series *Geek's Guide to the Galaxy*, *Wired* online magazine (April 2014): <https://www.wired.com/2015/04/geeks-guide-kazuo-ishiguro/>, accessed May 28, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Manuel Botero Camacho and Miguel Rodriguez Perez, "Recreating

identity, presumably among colonized peoples. There is, of course, an analogy among many forms of injustice, but the analogical reading evades the central moral concerns of the book. In a similar instance of political reductionism, Bruce Robbins's article "Cruelty is Bad: Banality and Proximity in *Never Let Me Go*" acknowledges the "pervasive censorship" that robs the clones of their agency against the system of foully named "donations," but the article insists that the real moral heart of the novel is utterly different: "The organ-donation gulag, tucked away from public view and yet not kept secret, has its obvious real-world counterpart in what we call class."<sup>37</sup> This may be less obvious to some of us, but Robbins then proceeds merrily with a Marxist analysis. Queer theorist Rachel Carroll at least admits that she is imposing a meaning on the book when she says that the rejection of the clones by characters like Marie Claude illuminates "the heteronormative denial of the reality of homosexual existence and identity," especially by the way in which cloning "challenges the heterosexual prerogative to reproduction."<sup>38</sup>

There are indeed some critics who take up the novel as a more direct critique of active evil that bears some likeness to the situations in the book, rather than making it an airy analogy to be unlocked by academic minds. Among this minority, moral outrage against the exploitation of third-world organ donors comes up relatively often. It is a life issue, but one unlikely to touch many in the audience in a direct way. Unless the critic's reader has bought a kidney in some third-world location, the targets of the moral outrage seem remote. It is even the case that writers have used the novel to illustrate how the current system of organ harvesting from live donors is far more humane than that which Ishiguro imagined.

In 2011, J.H. Villiers and M. Slabbert explained, in contrast to Ishiguro's dystopian fantasy, the "legal reality" surrounding organ donation, in order to argue that when poor third-world people sell their kidneys, "one party is exploited but both benefit from the transaction."<sup>39</sup> Another researcher

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Scheherezade and Odysseus in *Never Let Me Go*," *ATLANTIS: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies* 40/1 (2018): 97-115 at 99.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce Robbins's article "Cruelty is Bad: Banality and Proximity in *Never Let Me Go*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 40:3 (2007): 289-302 at p. 292.

<sup>38</sup> Rachel Carroll, "Imitations of Life: Cloning, Heterosexuality and the Human in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*," *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2012), p. 144.

<sup>39</sup> J.H. Villiers and M. Slabbert, "*Never Let Me Go*: Science Fiction and Legal Reality," *Literator* 32/3 (2011): 85-103 at p. 99.

discovered that in Pakistan at least, the donors often sickened enough to permanently damage their earnings, resulting in net financial and personal loss, that 90% of the “donors” were illiterate, and that 69 % of them were slaves.<sup>40</sup>

Gabriele Griffin contends that we need not worry about such scenarios as we see in this novel becoming reality: “The point here is that just as *Never Let Me Go* presented one version of how organ donation might occur – through raising human clones for that purpose – scientific developments were moving in another direction to create different forms of organ production.”<sup>41</sup> Other scientifically-minded critics agree, as she points out, but by 2009, the date of the article, international condemnation had arisen about China’s sale of the organs of executed prisoners, a financial incentive for filling prison camps with people already tissue-typed for easy matching to recipients. The effect of the international outrage upon China was nugatory, and prisoners continued to be “prepped” for organ donation before execution.<sup>42</sup> It was not much later that Planned Parenthood’s abuse of the term “donations” for the sale of children’s body parts became public. The revelation spurred media condemnation, and even prosecution – not of those who practiced the sale of children’s body parts, but of those who had revealed it.<sup>43</sup>

The complexity of the interrelations that John Paul II perceived is rarely addressed but by critics, despite permeating the novel’s text itself. Among Ishiguro critics, only J. Paul Narkunas has taken seriously Ishiguro’s indictment of the way our culture’s “instrumentalization of the body” has produced a world like the novel’s. In fact, Narkunas says, Ishiguro’s dystopia is “nowhere near as horrific as the actual intersection of organ transplantation and uneven global development in our neoliberal present. Ishiguro’s invention stirs our uncomfortable awareness that there are humans who, like the clones in his story, live among us unseen and unheard, and that conceiving of organ donation solely as an act of altruism may render us blind.”<sup>44</sup> Narkunas takes the

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<sup>40</sup> Floraidh A.R. Corfee, “Transplant Tourism and Organ Trafficking: Ethical Implications for the Nursing Profession,” *Nursing Ethics* 23/7 (2016): 757.

<sup>41</sup> Gabriele Griffin, “Science and the Cultural Imaginary: The Case of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*,” *Textual Practice* 23/4 (2009).

<sup>42</sup> Narkunas, p. 238.

<sup>43</sup> Ellen Reynolds, “New Video Shows Planned Parenthood Officials Sworn Testimony about Payments for Fetal Tissue Trafficking,” *The Federalist* online (May 27, 2020) at <https://thefederalist.com/2020/05/27/new-video-shows-planned-parent-hood-officials-sworn-testimony-about-payments-for-fetal-tissue-trafficking/>.

<sup>44</sup> Narkunas, p. 228.



lies about the benevolence of commodified humans as seriously as Ishiguro does. But he weakens his case by expanding Ishiguro's insights analogically to other forms of exploitation that are not implied in the denial of the unity of procreation and relationship in sexuality. Like others uneasy with the "neoliberal present," he moves on to general condemnation of international economic exploitation, even though Ishiguro does not address this question in this novel. With similar insight, neither does John Paul II address it in the encyclical. The biomedical threat is of a different order than mere greed, on however large a scale. No critic I have seen refers to the fact that in our midst are corporations, some supported by our taxes, that sell the body parts of children, conceive children for money, enlist people to help kill those they love, and disrupt the family so as to leave people rootless, blandly murderous, and suicidal.

These things happen, even though not in the precise location of a clone farm called Hailsham. By natural reason and rigorous imaginative work, the novelist has identified an interrelated knot of abominations. Like John Paul II, Ishiguro recognizes the connection of truth to life. In his novel, the disconnection of sex from reproduction in sterilization, as in cloning, is intrinsically tied with the disconnection of sex from fully human relationships, in the characters' utilitarian rather than relational approach to sex and pornography. The yearning for babies, so evident in the song lyrics of the title, show how Ishiguro understands the yearning for infinite good, for truth, for love, as all bound up in the desire for faithful sexual connection, family, and marriage. His secular philosophy frames it in the worldly form of connection to the chain of life on earth. The utilitarian production of humans outside those bonds, as commodities, is an inevitable consequence of the seductions of morally unchecked biomedical technologies that claim to serve life, as John Paul II says, but in fact threaten it.

Madame Marie-Claude and Miss Emily explain that the medical changes came too fast for people to recognize their moral implications. The temptation was, they think, beyond human strength. Therefore, in the novel as among us, people are made to order, sold, exploited as objects of sexual prurience, vivisected for spare parts. To evade guilt, humans must redefine the truth of our identification with our bodies and the bodies of those we came from. That redefinition of the human, that godlike assertion of control over the order of the world, Ishiguro presents in all its misericord consequences. Deceived, or partly deceived, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth find themselves entangled in murderous

corruption and self-contempt before they understand its full evil. Meanwhile medical professionals, philanthropists, and philosophers produce a blizzard of euphemism. Thus life comes to be defined by “experts” -- human authorities with no loyalty to a higher truth. There is no limit to the evil that can be done once by a person who acknowledges no truth that can be invoked to prove that a human being is a human being and must be so treated. A person without a grip on the truth of the body can scarcely stand against pressure to cooperate in the killing of the innocent. One who is so deprived has no grounds, for Ishiguro’s clones well understand, for defense of even one’s own life. This disloyalty to truth is the origin of the horrific acquiescence of the clones, and in many ways our culture shares it. Ishiguro has laid it bare in two ways: the novel itself and the flurry of evasion in the criticism, as it flees from the truth of the human body and human dignity – exactly as Ishiguro diagnoses in *Never Let Me Go*.