

# Memory, Nostalgia, and Ishiguro's Childhood in *Never Let Me Go*

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## Introduction

'Never Let Me Go' is a dystopian novel with a perfect annex of both visionary and nostalgic edges. Kazuo Ishiguro, the author of the novel, is a Japanese-born novelist who has spent his life in both Japan and the UK, which gives his literary works a palpable consistency of Britishness. He is a renowned writer with a prestigious global accolade in the contemporary world of novelists and fiction writers. Ishiguro has also written several other award-winning works of literature, such as *The Remains of the Day* (1989). His literary prowess has won him several slots among the Nobel Prize winners. *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro's sixth novel, has won more than three prizes, including the German Corine International Book Prize and the Italian Serono Prize. Various critics have also accorded favorable responses to the film adapted from the story. Furthermore, the novel made it to television shows in Japan in 2016 as a drama directed by Yukio Ninagawa, one of Japan's preeminent theater directors. The novel has therefore intrigued many researchers, scholars, and critics.

## Prospectus

The purpose of this research paper is to explore the role of memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as a tool by which he recreates his own childhood life in Japan. Based on this thesis statement, the argumentative paper seeks to answer two research questions: the first question is whether nostalgia improves the quality of life, and the second question is on how the author's childhood memories influence his writing in the novel. In order to achieve these objectives, the paper shall first recap the story and then look into the author's life through the narrator's recollection. The research shall rely heavily on the novel *Never Let Me Go* as the primary reference material, and it shall also exploit secondary sources, especially scholarly articles, to buttress its positions and assertions.

## Recap of the Novel

In *Never Let Me Go*, just like in his other novels, Ishiguro employs the narrator's voice to give an anecdote on the life experience of three clones, Tommy, Ruth, and Kathy. The three clones are among other clones created to serve as donors for human organs. At the outset of the story, Kathy has been a 'carer' for one complete decade and two years. She vividly remembers their life at Hailsham, a fictional boarding school, where their teachers always emphasized the significance of healthy living. The school was committed to experimenting and proving that clones could become like

humans if exposed to humane environments and education. This was against the backdrop of a common belief that clones were less human. Hence, Hailsham used to encourage students to work in the vegetable garden and to practice art, which was then exhibited for Madame to choose the best art and keep it in a gallery.

Subsequently, the school allows Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth, who are all 16 years old, to move to the Cottages, a residential complex, so that they can experience the outside world. At the cottages, Tommy and Ruth continue with the love affair that they began in school, while Kathy gets into superficial sexual relationships with other men. In the meantime, Kathy and Tommy discover that they have a mutual affection for each other, and they begin a clandestine love affair that breaks the relationship between the three friends. After their life at the Cottages, Ruth and Tommy begin to donate their organs right away, while Kathy begins to care for other donors as she awaits her turn to donate. Ruth's life deteriorates after her first donation, and she has to die after her second donation.

Before her demise, Ruth encourages Kathy to defer her donations so as to spend time with Tommy, her true love. Tommy and Kathy rekindle their romantic relationship, and following Tommy's theory that *Madame* used the arts to read their souls and discover which students were in love, they visit *Madame* to ask for a deferral of their donations. But to their dismay, *Madame* had no such powers: She only collected the arts to attract funds for the school. This heartbreaking revelation comes to the duo at a time when Tommy has only one more donation to 'completion.' It follows that Kathy stops caring for Tommy, and the novel ends with the lonesome Kathy, who is the narrator, awaiting her donations, which are soon to start.

## Memory and Quality of Life

It is easy to imagine that the novel is science fiction due to the fact that the harsh dystopic society that Ishiguro envisions will use rapidly advancing medical technology to make human clones that will support human lives through the donation of vital organs like kidneys. However, despite the fact that cloning is quite conspicuous in the novel, I think it is just a plausible theme that the author exploits to conceal his core message. I believe that the main theme that Ishiguro wants to convey is the importance of precious childhood memories. The narrator's childhood memories are the main theme in the novel, which imparts nostalgia to the reader. According to (), childhood memories are quite momentous and have a consequential bearing in shaping our lives. Generally, reminiscence makes people realize the bliss of their childhood environment and the serenity thereof.

The care and tender protection accorded to our childhood environments against any harm from the outside world is just so bewildering when we recollect, as the author clearly brings out through Kathy's narration. () asserts that *Never Let Me Go* demands of the reader a keen and honest reflection of the past to help them introspect. In one interview, Ishiguro reveals that Hailsham is a metaphoric construct of childhood. The bliss of childhood is unparalleled. Miss Emily reveals to Kathy that "you'd not sleep for days if you saw what still goes on in some of those places [called 'homes']" (Ishiguro

260). In recognition of this ecstasy, Kathy remarks, “How lucky we’d been – Tommy, Ruth, me, all the rest of us” (Ishiguro 6) to spend their childhood at Hailsham. Kathy’s nostalgic attitude, against the backdrop of the horrible reality of death, is an explicit exhibit of how people can fulfill their lives even in the midst of daunting yet inescapable circumstances. Even though all of Kathy’s friends have died after the completion of their donations, reminiscence makes them alive yet again in Kathy’s mind.

## Ishiguro’s Childhood and His Literature

### First-Person Narrator

Ishiguro prefers using the first-person narrator for his postmodern fiction literature. Apparently, the first-person narrative style, which transcends all his literature, serves to expose Ishiguro’s identity. According to (), Ishiguro pictures himself as an itinerant writer who has come face-to-face with an identity crisis during his childhood. He, therefore, uses Kathy’s idyllic reminiscence to parallel his own childhood memories, memories of the short time he spent in Japan. All his novels have an edge of first-person narration. So, can we possibly assume that it is a matter of coincidence that Ishiguro consistently uses the first-person narration by protagonists, who use nostalgia as an escape from their implicitly appalling present situations? Commentator after commentator holds the position that this level of consistency stretches beyond mere coincidence. So, Ishiguro’s life history is crucial for a proper argumentation of his novel *Never Let Me Go*.

### Author’s Life

Ishiguro was born barely a decade after the atomic bomb incident. He was born in 1954 in Nagasaki to Mr Shizuo Ishiguro. His father, being an oceanographer, was offered a research job on the North Sea by the British government. This made the family move to southern England and live in Surrey. At that time, Kazuo was just five years old. Since the father’s job was meant to be a temporary one, the family always remained buoyed up with the hope of returning home soon. In England, they lived more like visitors than immigrants. So, while Kazuo could learn British grammar at school, the Japanese touch at home remained as fresh as when they left their motherland. His parents could give him Japanese literature and teach him his homeland culture, efforts which all heightened his longing for home. He only got an opportunity to return to Japan 29 years later.

### Ishiguro’s Reminiscence

As he describes through Kathy’s narration, “Any place beyond Hailsham was a fantasy land.” (Ishiguro 66). Indeed, Kazuo lived the whole of his life not knowing a real home. They lived like pilgrims in Britain, with an earnest yearning for Japan, which always remained a fantasy land to him. After returning to Japan, Ishiguro had an interview with Kelman Suanne, wherein he revealed the real

motive behind his first novel. He said that he grew up thinking he would return to Japan any day. And so he had this very powerfully imagined country in his head. This Japan in his head, Ishiguro reveals, he needed to elucidate as scrupulously as possible through his writings. It is palpable how accurately he executes this endeavor in this sixth novel. Look, for example, at how Kathy's longing and the quest for Hailsham parallels Ishiguro's description, in the interview, of what propels him to write:

[...] I might pass the corner of a misty field or see part of a large house in the distance as I come down the side of a Valley, even a particular arrangement of poplar trees up on a hillside, and I'll think: *'Maybe that's it! I've found it! This actually is Hailsham!'* [...] (Ishiguro 5)

Furthermore, it comes out clearly from the clones' insatiable groping to find the real meaning of life that Ishiguro's most earnest endeavor was to discover himself and the true meaning of his life. Speaking of Ishiguro, () points out that 'the meaning of life' is apparently the underlying question that he tries to answer throughout his writing career. In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro paints this picture on the canvas of human clones, unsatisfied with Miss. Emily's explanation of the purpose of their lives. They try to find out the real meaning of their lives by interacting with the outside world in any way they can: falling in love, developing theories, doing artwork, participating in sports, trying to find their 'possibles,' and so on. Ishiguro himself struggled with this quest for the meaning of life and search for identity before becoming a novelist: He tried sending out audition tapes to establish himself as a musician, and also tried to just live carefree through hitchhiking around the West Coast. In reality, such an identity crisis is something we all resonate with.

## Conclusion

It is clear, through a keen exploration of the novel *Never Let Me Go*, that Ishiguro exploits memory as a medium to recreate his own fanciful childhood. He has personally experienced living in two totally different worlds, just the way he describes through Kathy's nostalgic narration. In this novel, he tries to recreate the Japan he knew as a child, and it appears that his conclusion is like that of the dying donor, *Hailsham. I bet that was a beautiful place.*' (Ishiguro 5). Therefore, even though the novel does not possess any noticeable Japanese elements, I strongly believe that Kathy's nostalgic reminiscence of an idyllic childhood at Hailsham is something that has a direct connection to the author's own memories of his childhood in Japan.