

# The everlasting grip of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*: empathy, narrative and a bureaucratic system

## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to analyze and exhibit how the narrator and clones in *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro are unable to break out of a bureaucratic system. I will also be looking at how the specific narration makes us see the clones as human and furthermore deem them entitled to human rights. Scholars such as Karl Shaddox, Emily Johansen and Shameem Black argue that sentiment, a bureaucratic narrative and the identification of the so called inhuman in the clones is what provides us with the tools to understand and appreciate *Never Let Me Go* to its fullest. I will be looking at conflicting scenes in *Never Let Me Go* to highlight and deliberate how a bureaucratic narrative and inhuman qualities offer a clarification for the clones' behavior and reaction. I will be using these elements to demonstrate how they provide a clarification for the readers confusion in places where empathy is not enough.

When considering the impact of the characters on the reader in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, it is essential to consider the narrator's ability to provoke sentiment. In "Generic Considerations in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*" (2013), Karl Shaddox does just that by arguing that fixating on the bureaucratic decisions of cloning conceals a more important theme in the workings of the narrative, namely sentiment. Although Shaddox concludes that debating the morals behind the cloning is not Ishiguro's main intention, a key part of this argument is that the role of sentiment heavily influences the reader's ability to connect and feel for the clones. Underpinning Shaddox's argument is the sense of individuality that is central to the portrayal and sentiment of the clones as humans to the reader, one which is built on the focus upon memories and experiences. Put simply, it is sentiment that provides us with the tools to begin exploring what makes a human/someone to whom that morals apply.

In discussing the importance of sentiment, Shaddox's main evidence to what makes us see the clones as human is the connection Kathy has with the readers. Through her narrative, readers struggle to find any evidence of her being a clone. This further highlights the horror of the situation. Such a view is expressed with Shaddox's reading that:

Through the intimate disclosures and confessions of a young cloned woman, Ishiguro proposes an account of human individuality that distances itself from philosophical traditions that essentialize feeling and the faculty of reason as inherent indications of the soul (453).

In other words, Shaddox argues that through the narrative of Kathy, Ishiguro suggests a different way of seeing human individuality, that is to say, one that looks beyond that of just thoughts and opinions about what makes a human and goes to highlight the importance of feeling for others and using reason as proof of the existence of a soul. Put simply, Shaddox argues that Kathy's experiences and memories provide a form of concrete proof of her "emotional singularity". Shaddox furthers his argument by pointing to the bafflement that

readers experience in discovering that the narrator is a so-called clone and not a human.

Shaddox argues that the individuality Ishiguro places on these clones does not lie in inherent assets of a soul but on each “clone's emotional singularity” (453). This is important because as replications of another human, the clones are perhaps not considered to have any individual experiences. What they experience appears to be the result of someone else`s life. Yet by having individual emotions, the clones prove that they are more than copies of another person. In other words, their lives are their own. Moreover, even though the guardians have proof of the clone`s individuality, it does not work to sway the novel`s decisions regarding the clone`s life. The clones still end up donating their body parts. It is not until Kathy has captured the readers empathy that the readers can begin to pinpoint what it is that makes a human and can start to form ideas of what is a morally correct treatment towards someone that they deem entitled to morality.

While I agree with Shaddox, that it is our ability to feel for others that makes us take action in matters we deem morally wrong, I would take this further by pointing at the specific use of narrative and its impact. We as readers and humans can feel easily for characters we relate to.

While I agree that sentiment and empathetic resonance are vital parts in starting the process, I believe that being a part of a capitalistic society hinders us in coming to that point. I would argue that capitalism turns us into objects and numbers that others can profit from, as exhibited by the clones in the text. Shaddox states that it is through the clone`s memories and singular experiences that we come to the conclusion of them being human. Yet I would add that it is also their not so singular experiences and memories that make us see them as humans. Meaning that their life is their life and not an exact copy of someone else`s.

When considering the overall impact of the narrative in *Never Let Me Go*, it is essential to also consider the specific kind of narrative used. In “Bureaucracy and narrative possibilities in Kazuo Ishiguro`s *Never Let Me Go*” (2015), Emily Johansen does just that by exploring the

impact and use of a bureaucratic narrative through the use of the clones. Johansen defines a bureaucratic narrative style as “one that poses the subject as an administrative subject and emphasizes the depersonalized and routinized repetition of formulaic rhetoric” (416). What interests me with this definition is how the narrative reduces the clones to objects. In other words, it is a narrative that is effected by a system in which all the important decisions are made for you. One in which you do not question such narratives because you are a part of a system that works against said questioning. Johansen argues that *Never Let Me Go* makes room for everything from interpretation to manipulation. She, perhaps similarly to Shaddox, argues that Ishiguro’s form of narrative address aims to put the reader in the characters shoes and therefore having a more thorough impact on us. Key to Johansen’s argument is how the clones refer to those in power that essentially control their lives. Johansen also points to specific situations to show how bureaucracy controls their reactions in moments that we would consider horrific. A point on which I will further elaborate later.

Johansen points to how this narrative shapes the clones and their decisions. Such a view is expressed with Johansen’s reading that:

*Never Let Me Go* demonstrates particularly effectively the way that the surface rationality and security of bureaucracy might extend beyond our working lives, into subject formation itself and interpersonal interactions more largely (419).

In other words, Johansen says that *Never Let Me Go* shows how a system of government in which decisions are taken by state officials can extend beyond our professions and affect who we become as people, as well as how we react in situations where there might be some kind of injustice. To illustrate this, Johansen points to the opening lines of *Never Let Me Go*, particularly Kathy’s repeated use of “they”. The lines function to naturalize and defuse what one might call a self-governing power. The narrative is further working into the hands of bureaucracy.

Johansen comments on how the narrative is working into the hands of bureaucracy with how there is “no language to express affects outside those which are bureaucratically administered” (420). They cannot put into words their own experiences and what can sometimes be interpreted as hesitation for their so-called destiny. Language is power and it further highlight their lack of it in situations like these. To further stress the point of their lack of power, Johansen points to how the clones will always make the best of a bad situation. Although the situation will always in itself be bad because of the system, Johansen points to this in exhibiting the clone’s upbringing and further bureaucratic narrative of the novel. In terms of the clone’s reactions on being informed of their inevitable futures, they were not shocked because it is a fact that has been known for long.

Johansen therefore argues that the bureaucratic narrative puts you into the shoes of the narrator and enhances the overall impact of *Never Let Me Go*. She also states that a bureaucratic narrative works to keep those under its influence from questioning their destinies. As we for example witness the clones in *Never Let Me Go* go along with the donations. Johansen’s argument of the clones and *Never Let Me Go* being a under a bureaucratic narrative is vital in understanding the behavior of the clones. And it is important to pinpoint the specific kind of narrative to begin explaining and understanding the clones.

While Shaddox argues that the most important theme to consider in *Never Let Me Go* is sentiment and Johansen highlights what a bureaucratic narrative does in the novel, Shameem Black takes on a slightly different approach. In “Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics” (2009), Shameem Black argues that the question of what it means to be a human being dominates Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go*. The key element of Black’s argument is the issue of empathy, in particular how the novel engages with morals that take a different approach to empathy. Underpinning Black’s argument is the concept of narrative empathy. She states that

the act of being able to identify with an individual— in this case Kathy and the clones - is a vital part in our understanding of what it means to be human. Black also argues that *Never Let Me Go* suggests that the empathy of the text lies on the identification of the so called inhuman. She states that the only solution to escaping “the barbarities committed in the name of preserving purely human life” is to recognize what in us is mechanical, manufactured and replicated (786). Put simply, to see the clones as human one must realize the parts in us that are inhuman to be able to prevent them.

In discussing the importance of narrative empathy in the workings of the text, Black points to the various ways the narrator addresses the reader. The first key way is speaking to the reader as if the reader knows more than they actually do about the rules of her world. Black furthers this argument by pointing to the equal importance of how this trust and familiarity with the reader draws out empathy. The ignorance and somewhat naivety of the narrator further wins the sympathy of the reader. This connection and appreciation of the narrator’s voice is expressed with this element of Black’s reading:

We come to value Kathy's voice not in spite of her affiliation with automata—her role as a "speaking clock"—but because of such seemingly inhuman characteristics that bespeak her life as simulacrum (803).

In other words, Black argues that we trust and value Kathy’s voice despite her being a clone or because she appears to display “inhuman” qualities. Put simply, we come to value her voice even more because of her mechanism as we recognize those aspects as a part of being human. This narrative empathy is made possible through Kathy’s way of addressing the readers.

Black argues that pointing out the inhuman elements of a human makes way for morals that take on a different approach to empathy. One where empathy lies in the identification of the

so called inhuman. One important element of this argument is how the narrative shapes our perspective. This element is neatly encapsulated in Black's statement that, the "act of identifying with someone else's experience is deeply tied to our everyday understanding of what it means to be human" (786). In other words, readers gain Kathy's empathy because they are able to relate and see themselves in her.

Thus, Black argues that the readers must recognize and acknowledge the inhuman elements as part of what it means to be human. She concludes that the reader is able to do so. I am inclined to agree and disagree. While I think that readers are able to eventually pinpoint this inhuman part in the clones, I am unsure as to whether they agree that it is a part of what makes a human. Or that they might understand this element yet still believe that as humans the clones should have acted different when faced with their fates. A counterargument to this statement would of course be Johansen's point of a bureaucratic narrative. The narrative hinders the clones from seeing the injustice of their situation and furthermore prevents them from rebelling against it.

While Shaddox, Johansen and Black's articles have in common their use of narrative in evoking empathy for the narrator and how that makes us see her as human, I want to continue this point by pointing to specific scenes in which we might argue that it is the submissiveness of the clones in the novel that evoke not simply empathy, as argued by the scholars above, but may well lead to a sense of confusion in the reader. Put simply, why do the clones allow these atrocities to be committed on them? This point is perhaps most closely tied to Johansen's argument of a bureaucratic narrative in terms of how the clones react to the situation. I will forward on from elements of Black's article to explain why we perhaps might be confused to the clone's reactions in specific situations. Perhaps we as readers have not acknowledged the inhuman parts in defining a human and can therefore doubt the clone's humanness when their inhumanness is being displayed. Yet on the other hand, we need to look more closely at

Black's conclusion that the reader is able to recognize the inhuman in humans as a part of what it means to be human. Doing so will exhibit the parallels between narrative empathy and possible empathy in such bureaucratic narratives and point to how a combination of these two seemingly conflicting narratives is what makes the impact of *Never Let Me Go* so powerful on the reader.

To do this, I will be looking at conflicting scenes in *Never Let Me Go* to highlight and discuss how the dual workings of the bureaucratic narrative and the apparent inhuman qualities of the clones provide a possible avenue into interpreting the clones' behavior and reactions in *Never Let Me Go*. Such an approach will provide an explanation for the reader's confusion in places where empathy appears not to be enough.

From the very first page the novel, this confusion is apparent for the reader. This begins with the narrator making the reader aware of an outer power referred to as "they". Right off the bat we get a sense of her life being in the hands of someone else. Johansen referred to this particular point by arguing how the narrator makes this outer controlling power seem natural and non-threatening. Like an innocent unknowing child in the care and guidance of their parents. I would like to take this "they" power further by showing other key moments in *Never Let Me Go* in which the clones never question their fate and how the brainwashing comes out in particularly symbolic situations in the overall outcome of the clone's lives.

From very early on in the text, Kathy explains to the reader how the students at Hailsham have in a way always known about their fates:

Tommy thought is possible the guardians had, throughout all our years at Hailsham, timed very carefully and deliberately everything they told us, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of



information. But of course we`d take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly (81).

In other words, specific people were chosen to relate instructions to the clones about the life they were to have. Put simply, the clones had been told and at the same time not told about their futures. The guardians had not until this point told them straight out what the reason for their making was. This is important because, the idea of the guardians putting such doubt into their minds until it became a fact that they did not question tells me that the guardians knew that what they were doing was not entirely morally correct. The guardians themselves were empathetic to the clone`s situation. The guardians are important because they function as a kind of representation of the humans in the novel that also were raised to believe that making clones was not immoral. Yet by seeing them show empathy and be pained by the clone`s situation it further highlights the element of empathy as the device for seeing the clones as human.

Another example for this kind of guilt and awareness from the guardians is when one of them finds Kathy clutching a towel to her chest pretending that it is a baby and singing along to a song. Her humanity is vividly clear in this moment. If she was as automatic as her society pinned her out to be then she would not be feeling the need to create life. The scene brought one of the guardians to tears. It evoked empathy and pain from her. Kathy wanting a child could be another way for the clones to say that they want a long life. A life without donations because they want to live long enough to see their children grow and live alongside them. The guardian breaking down in tears might be a gentle reminder of the tragedy of the situation. And it further evokes empathy in the reader as well. We might perhaps have come to a silent acceptance of the situation as well because of the narratives utter lack of resistance. Yet moments like these in which we are reminded of the shortness of the narrator`s life brings back rage and confusion in us.

In many scenes and reactions in *Never Let Me Go* the subconsciousness of the clones can be found as the root of their halfhearted questioning and resistance. The clones see themselves as human. They think that being donors is normal and that they aren't experiencing some sort of injustice. And they therefore go about living their lives as normal humans with somewhat unfortunate futures. Scenes like the one in which Kathy is holding a towel and singing about a baby may therefore come as a shock to those who have deemed the clones as some sort of objects to be used. The impact of the narration is made clear in moments like these because we are just as confused as Kathy. She doesn't understand why someone would be saddened by her not being able to have a child. If it is a given that clones do not have children than there should not be anything to be sad about. Considering we are from the outside and looking in one might think we would be more accepting of the lives we read about. We know how they have been raised and why they do not rebel against the donations. We are not under a bureaucratic rule and therefore do see the injustice they are faced with. Yet when the clones see themselves as human and aren't treated as such, we feel their confusion. A bureaucratic narrative therefore provides an explanation for the clones behavior and reaction here because it is made clear through their interpretation and reasoning of the situations. Though we might be confused when Kathy is surprised by the guardian's reaction, the narrative makes us see how Kathy does not see something wrong because of the way she was raised.

Another point that is made clear in *Never Let Me Go* is the constant seeking of proof of the clone's humanity and individuality. Perhaps because it is not a given for everyone in the novel that they are human. And the ones that believe that they are, want to provide every single evidence they can find. Shaddox mentioned the need for individuality in defining a human. The guardians in *Never Let Me Go* might have been thinking along the same lines. They use the ability to be able to prove the existence of souls as a means to defend the existence of humanity in the clones. In other words, the guardians would collect the clones' best works of

art as a way to look their souls. The art would represent how each of them are individuals with their own thoughts and ideas about the world and their own lives.

This idea of the soul functioning as proof of the clones' humanity could easily be tied to Black's argument of the inhuman. In terms of collecting the clones' art to prove their humanity, the bureaucratic system is seeking proof of what they deem to be human elements. The people that support the making of clones in *Never Let Me Go* might be arguing that the clones are not human because they do not care about being used. The clones lack of reaction however is not due to them being objects with no feeling towards their doom, but rather because of the indoctrination they've been put under. There are however moments where the clones themselves feel a disconnection and that is made evident with their subconscious actions. This disconnection and subconsciousness is expressed in lines such as:

So you're waiting, even if you don't quite know it, waiting for the moment when you realise that you really are different to them; ... It's like walking past a mirror you've walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange (36).

In other words, the narrator touches on this theme of the subconsciousness. That there is a part of the clones that are waiting for a moment of confirmation of them being different. Of them not being like the guardians or people out of Hailsham. The narrator has a specific view of herself one in which she is human. Yet under the treatment of the guardians and their reactions when they are in close proximity, make them start to question who they are. Put simply, Kathy uses a mirror as a metaphor for not being able to recognize who you see. I think this is where the bureaucratic narrative is very evident. There are these underlying moments in Kathy in which she in a way questions who she is. There is a part of her that slightly questions her fate. You can tell in these kinds of moments that she wishes she didn't

have to donate. Yet the indoctrination is too deep, and she ends up going along with it anyway.

The underlying resistance in the clones comes out in different ways. Kathy is curious and continues to ask questions throughout *Never Let Me Go*. She uses objects such as a cassette, as Black referred to as well, to identify with. The cassette is, as Black stated, a “copy of a copy” (803) and so is Kathy and the clones. One might also argue that the art they are producing is another way of preparing them for their fates. The art is supposed to represent their souls and it is taken away from them just like their body parts will as well. They are taught to think of themselves as things to be used and taken for the benefit of others.

Though there is a quiet acceptance of their fate, the mourning aspect in the narrative of the clones of *Never Let Me Go* does not go unnoticed. Kathy mourns the death of her friends and the oncoming sadness of her own. I would argue that her passing on her memories to us is her way of wanting to be remembered. Since Kathy`s life is so short lived she wants to know that she mattered, in other words, that her sacrifice did not go unnoticed or unappreciated. Another aspect of this are Tommy`s uncontrollable rages. These reactions seem to flare up each time he is reminded of his fate, for example when he and Kathy talked to one of the guardians right before his last donation. If the clones were so accepting of their fate, then why feel sadness and rage at the nearing of their so called “completion”? While the bureaucratic narrative provides an explanation to this aspect as well, it does not succeed in making the readers feel any less angry and frustrated over the clones` fates.

Although Kathy starts out *Never Let Me Go* by telling us that she only has a limited time left, the readers might be hoping that this fact will change by the end of the novel. Perhaps her looking back and retelling her memories to us makes her think differently and break out of the system. I would argue that this hope from the readers side is what keeps them engaged and

eager to read on. As well as our need and perhaps naive wish for justice. Yet *Never Let Me Go* does not end with Kathy and the clones` resistance. It ends in a silent rageless acceptance.

As Johansen mentions, the narrative is very effective because these horrific situations are not happening to faceless characters, but, due to the use of the narrator in the story, the reader is also engaged in this narrative. Put simply, the way the narrator has addressed us throughout *Never Let Me Go* makes us have a strong bond with her. Our empathy goes beyond that of just imagining the narrator going through her emotions and decisions. It puts us in her shoes and makes us picture it happening to us. Though we might understand how the narrator has come to this decision we are likewise in disagreement. This silent acceptance is made clear in the ending scenes with lines such as:

The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn`t let it – and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn`t sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to where it was I was supposed to be (282).

In other words, at the end of *Never Let Me Go* the narrator encapsulates every point I have made about her and the clones. The points being the impact of bureaucracy and their somewhat resistance that always end up in silent acceptance. In these few lines Kathy shows how her resistance to her fate is still there. Put simply, how the bureaucratic narrative makes her put said resistance away again. On the other hand, she also exhibits emotion and sadness over her and the other clones fates with tears. However, the specific words in the text do not go unnoticed here. Instead of the narrator breaking down completely, she simply lets out a few tears. This detail goes hand in hand with Kathy the narrator`s thoughts and behavior throughout *Never Let Me Go*. She shows emotion, as any human would do, over the loss of Tommy, and yet she is also accepting. Furthermore, she turns back and drives off to where she is “supposed to be”, that is to say, not where she wants to be. Kathy feels that she must go to where “they” have decided that she has to be. A bureaucratic approach to reading Kathy`s

role in the text therefore provides an explanation in this scene as well. We would not have understood Kathy`s lack of resistance were it not for the narrative. We empathize and see her as a human and are therefore confused and saddened when she ends up going along with the donations at the end.

Hints of change and hope come out in different scenes and reactions in *Never Let Me Go*. One that is very clear is Kathy and Tommy`s hope of getting a deferral, that is a way for them to win a few more years before their so called inevitable “completions”. Ruth calls the deferral a “real chance” (228). She thinks that Tommy and Ruth can escape their fate for a couple of years. This is where Kathy`s wish to live comes out. They are not, as mentioned, completely accepting of their fates. This element of the deferral is a consistent metaphor for resistance and a possible change of opinion. Tommy and Kathy keep looking into visiting the place and taking the right steps to be approved. The fact that Tommy and Kathy want a sort of brake from their fates tells me that they are considering other ways of living their lives. Ways in which do not involve early deaths at the hands of those who claim their rights to their lives. Therefore, the parallels between seeing the clones as humans and thus beings entitled to morals and the bureaucratic narrative sets *Never Let Me Go* up to be impactful. The readers connect with the narrator and feel empathy for her and the tragic life of the clones. In moments where there might be confusion over the lack of rebellion faced with their fates, readers look to the narrative and the element of the inhumanness as an explanation. Although we come to understand why Kathy and the clones did not rebel, the tragedy of their lives is a matter that will never let me go.

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