

Human Exceptionalism and Dystopian Texts

While I was attending one of the literature courses at the university, we read multiple interesting books that had a focus on the gothic elements within these texts. There was one of these books that really stood out for me, and that was *Never Let Me Go* written by Kazuo Ishiguro. *Never Let Me Go* did not only stand out for being a good example of a gothic text, but because of its portrayal of the clones. The clones' tragic lives, how we slowly learn how the world has dehumanized the clones in an attempt to reduce their guilt, and how the world justifies the use of the clones. I was also recommended *Brave New World* written by Aldous Huxley. This was a book that had a lot in common with *Never Let Me Go* in the way it exploits certain people, and how it also dehumanizes certain groups.

This topic of dehumanization really stood out for me as an interesting topic, and while researching, this led me to an article written by Alessandra Boller and Eckart Voigts. In this article they discuss interesting concepts like human exceptionalism, anthropocentrism, and Judith Butler's concept of grievable death and livable life. They discuss, question, and re-evaluate these concepts through dystopian texts with clone narratives.

In this paper I will argue why dystopian texts like *Never Let Me Go* and *Brave New World* can be essential tools in understanding the concept of human exceptionalism. I want to explore what the article has to say about human exceptionalism and see how it fits with Judith Butler's concept of grievability.

Never Let Me Go, written by Kazuo Ishiguro, is a dystopian book that depicts England in the late 1990's, a world similar to our own, but where humanity has made advancements in medical technology and made cloning possible. The life expectancy is over a hundred years and many previously deadly diseases have now been cured. This might be beginning to sound more like a utopia than a dystopian society, it may well be for some. Ordinary people have a higher life expectancy, and do not have the same risk as falling ill and dying from diseases. However, there is a group of people suffering in this world, and that is the clones. The premise of *Never Let Me Go*'s utopian world is that a group of people, the clones, are used as organ farms in order to harvest organs for the ordinary people. The clones are essentially the life source that keeps the ordinary people from dying.

The clones grow up and become either donors or carers. All the clones eventually become donors, still some may choose to first become a carer for the clones who have already donated organs. They work with recovering clones and nurse them back to health in order to donate once more.

We see the story from the perspective of one of these carers, her name is Kathy H. She is now thirty-one years old and has worked as a carer for nearly twelve years. Kathy, as the narrator, remembers different parts of her life. We follow her from her childhood at Hailsham, to the cottages, and later as a carer where she got back in contact with her childhood friends, Tommy and Ruth.

Kathy and her childhood friends all grew up at a dormitory school, Hailsham. Miss Emily was the woman in charge of Hailsham. Miss Emily, Mare-Claude, and the staff named the Guardians were the people that ran Hailsham and kept the students safe, but restricted, to this dormitory school. Hailsham was a school for clones, but the students of this school were kept in blissful ignorance of this fact. They do however learn of their purpose in life at the school. They learn that they are clones and how they will be harvested for organs when they grow up.

At Hailsham there was a strong focus on creating art. Art that was considered outstanding and notable by the guardians were eventually taken away to something called the gallery. The students were never told what the purpose of the art gallery was, and they never saw the artworks again. The gallery consequently became a rumor mill for all sorts of conspiracies.

Eventually when Kathy leaves Hailsham, she ends up at a new place called the Cottages. Here the clones are busier themselves and do not have the guardians to turn to. At the Cottages they meet up with other clones that were not a part of Hailsham, this is where they met Chrissie and Rodney. One day while Kathy, Tommy, Ruth, Chrissie and Rodney were traveling to a town together they ended up having a conversation about a rumor Chrissie and Rodney had heard. The rumor that had been going around was that students of Hailsham were able to get a deferral on the donation program if the clones were truly in love. Kathy, Tommy and Ruth had never heard of this rumor before, but this conversation sparked their interest and Tommy began to speculate that this had something to do with the artworks that were taken away at Hailsham. Tommy came to the conclusion that the artwork showed who you were on the inside and could tell whether or not you were truly in love.

We then come to the final part of her life, the time she spent as a carer. She says in the opening of the book that she is very good at what she does and has excellent results with her donors and their recovery time, but it is a difficult job and a lonely job. She no longer has contact with her childhood friends Tommy and Ruth. But since she is so good at her job, she gets to choose her donors and mostly choose other former Hailsham students. It is from an interaction with someone from Hailsham she learns that it was shut down and that Ruth had a

bad first donation. Kathy reconnects with Ruth and becomes her carer, and they later meet up with Tommy who is on his second donation. They think back on what Chrissie and Rodney had said back in the day about the deferral. Kathy apologizes to Tommy and Ruth for keeping them apart and encourages them to ask for the deferrals.

Kathy and Tommy visit Marie-Claude and Miss Emily in an attempt to get one of these deferrals. They are greeted by Marie-Claude and are taken inside. Marie-Claude listens to what they have to say about the deferrals. Kathy and Tommy state that they are truly in love while Marie-Claude questions them with the tiniest tear in her eye. They ask about the gallery, but she remains cryptic about the truth behind the deferrals and the gallery until Miss Emily comes down to talk to them. She reveals what the gallery was truly meant for. She informs them that the rumors are false, created by the clones. However, what Tommy said about the gallery was not completely false. Tommy speculated that the gallery was to determine if someone was in love, or to see inside of a person. To this, Miss Emily replies and reveals the entire purpose of Hailsham. “We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to prove you had souls at all.” (Ishiguro, 255).

Hailsham was created to prove to the world that the clones had souls and were human but lost their funding and were shut down by an incident named Morningdale scandal, involving a controversial scientist. The Morningdale scandal was where a scientist attempted to create clones with augmented abilities. This seriously scared the population and began even harsher treatment of the clones. In this conversation with Miss Emily, Kathy, and us the readers, learn the truth about this world. The clones that extend the lives of people are not seen as humans.

Brave New World, written by Aldous Huxley is also a dystopian book that shows a far-away future where a totalitarian government is running the world. People are not born naturally in *Brave New World*. They are mass-produced in hatching and conditioning facilities, and this is where we open the story. The Director of Hatching and Conditioning is having a tour around the facility for a bunch of students. The Director and his assistant, Henry Foster, give an explanation of the caste-system that is in use and how the embryos are designed for the different castes. There are five castes, Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon. The hierarchy goes from Alpha being the highest, to Epsilon at the bottom. The students are told and shown how the embryos receive less and less oxygen the lower they get on the caste in order to weaken them mentally and physically. Lack of oxygen first affects the brain then the skeleton, they dumb down the lower caste to minimize revolts and to pacify

them to do more mundane work. The people in this caste system get conditioned to the different jobs and climates they are assigned to. They get conditioned to like their mundane jobs and to hate things that are seen as unproductive.

Epsilons are destined to do basic work whereas Alphas are destined to become leaders of the world state. The World State is the governing power of the world and only has 10 people that run it, called world controllers. We get introduced to Mustapha Mond, one of these world controllers, while on the tour with the students. He tells the origins of the World State to the students and explains why the old way of living needed to change. The old world was filled with war, suffering, and strong emotions, while the World State wanted to achieve total control. They halted visible aging and developed a drug called Soma to help calm down the population and to keep everyone in blissful ignorance.

Bernard Marx is our main character for the beginning of this book until we meet John at the savage reservation. Bernard Marx is an Alpha, still he is seen as different from everybody else. Bernard Marx is shown to be a person capable of love and independent thought. Mond preaches that everyone experiences only soft emotion, yet Bernard is constantly shown to have strong emotion and is not content with what he has. Bernard invites Lenina Crowne, who works at the Hatching and Conditioning center, to the Savage Reservation and they go to this reservation together.

Bernard goes to the Director to get the permit for the trip to the reservation and while he is there he gets the permit, but also a story from the Director. He says he once took a trip to the reservation with a woman, but during a storm she was lost and never seen again. After sharing a bit too much he threatens to exile Bernard because of Bernard's abnormal behavior.

The Savage Reservations are places that are mostly left alone by the World State, except for occasional tourist visits. Inside the reservations they live life as in the old days. At the reservation they have religion, disease, they grow old, practice monogamy, etc. Bernard and Lenina reach the reservation and Lenina do not like the experience, she sees the old people and think they are disgusting. They then experience a religious ritual where a person gets whipped and Lenina, sobbing, responds with saying it's awful while wishing for the soma she didn't bring.

At the reservation they meet a young man named John who surprisingly speaks English. He explains his origin and Bernard realizes that this is the son of the Director. The woman who was lost was Linda. She was pregnant when she was lost and was forced to have the baby. She never returned back to the civilized world because of the shame brought by

motherhood. Bernard invites John and Linda to come back to London with him and they both accept.

There are a lot of things that happen when Bernard comes back to London. Bernard confronts the Director with Linda and his son ending in the Director's resignation. Bernard became famous because of John the Savage. John makes a friend in this new world who is called Helmholtz. John resists constant temptation from this new world and then his mother dies from a soma overdose. Because of his mother's death, John instigates a riot, Bernard and Helmholtz try to help John but they all eventually get confronted by Mustapha Mond.

While Bernard was forcefully sedated with Soma, Mond has a conversation with Helmholtz about the exile and considers Helmholtz lucky to be exiled to an island with likeminded free people. John and Mond also have a philosophical discussion about the World State. John is not allowed to be exiled with Bernard and Helmholtz and chooses to live in solitude at a lighthouse. John is not left alone at this lighthouse and he ends up taking his own life.

The main concept that I look at throughout this paper is the concept of human exceptionalism. Human exceptionalism, according to Oxford Reference, is "The view (paradigm) that humans are different from all other organisms, all human behaviour is controlled by culture and free will, and all problems can be solved by human ingenuity and technology." (Oxford Reference). This concept of human exceptionalism is a complex one with multiple different angles to perceive it. It can be a positive belief to have if it is for the right cause. Humanity is a species that is naturally evolving, whether it is through building of infrastructure to improve lives, to cure diseases, or to simply improve and develop technology. Without this belief of being superior and different compared to other organisms, the story of humanity and how we have developed so far, could be incredibly different. However, on the other hand, this concept of human exceptionalism can be an extremely harmful belief. It can often have the undesirable effect of devaluing and belittling anything that is not human or does not benefit humanity. Instead of focusing on fixing issues in the present and trying to avoid or minimize problems that happen, we can get the idea that it's the future problem, and that future technological advancements can fix previous disastrous events.

Human exceptionalism can also cause interspecies discrimination through dehumanizing groups of people through factors of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and race to name a few. Another concept that ties in with human exceptionalism is anthropocentrism. Simply put, this is the belief that humans are in the center and are "the most significant

entities in the world” (Boslough). This concept has the same positive and negative effects as human exceptionalism and both of these concepts are explored heavily in the article, written by Alessandra Boller and Eckart Voigts, through the clone narratives.

Alessandra Boller and Eckart Voigts wrote and published an article in 2019 named, “*What Counts as a liveable life and a grievable death?*” - *Critical Posthumanism and Cloning in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go and Caryl Churchill’s A Number*. In this article, Boller and Voigts focuses on the “re-evaluation of concepts of humanity in posthumanist dystopias” (Boller and Voigts, 153). They have two main focuses that are at the center, these are language in the form of world-building and power, and death through Judith Butler’s concept of grievability.

Although the article does not have a main focus on the concept of human exceptionalism, it is explored while on the topic of language and death. One of the more notable parts of this article is the usage of Judith Butler’s concept of grievability, “What counts as a liveable life and a grievable death?” (Butler, 9). The article uses Butler’s idea in order to deconstruct notions about “the human” and its connected concepts of human exceptionalism.

Judith Butler is an American philosopher who is extensively featured in the article written by Boller and Eckart. In 2004 Butler released a book of essays called *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, it was written as a reaction to the terrorist attack of September 11th, 2001. In this book of essays, she explores and questions topics of governmental censorship, wrongful prejudice, and the notion of unlivable lives and grievable deaths.

Boller and Voigts refers to Judith Butler’s concept of grievability. The quote they use is “What counts as a liveable life and a grievable death?” (Butler, 9). Butler explored the ideas of what life can be considered grievable. She refers to the United States as an example of when a governing power can have an effect on what lives can be grievable or not. The prisoners of Guantanamo Bay have arguably lost their humanity by being indefinitely locked up, not protected under international law, “are not entitled to regular trials, to lawyers, to due process.” (Butler, 9). The prisoners can be seen as unlivable lives, but the United States can also have the power of who can be grieved. A governing power has the ability to amplify the grievability of lost soldiers, but also have the power of making other deaths ungrievable.

The clones of *Never Let Me Go* are not treated as equals in the world that Ishiguro created. The purpose of the clones is to grow up and eventually donate their organs to who the world considers to be real humans. Throughout the book and Kathy’s childhood, we do get

glimpses of how this world views the clones, we especially get a clear view towards the end of the book. In Kathy's last interaction with Miss Emily. Here they are told the real purpose of Hailsham, and Emily reveals how the people view the clones: "We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to prove you had souls at all" (Ishiguro, 255). A soul is known to be the spiritual part of somebody or something, what gives something life (Cambridge). Therefore, when someone is out to prove that this something, or in our case someone, has a soul, it must mean that the society's view of them is that they lack a soul.

The fact that the clones are seen as lacking a soul, speaks highly for how the people have made clones ungrievable. In this world, people live longer and there are more cures for disease, but the price is paid by the clones sacrificing, or donating, their working organs in order to sustain the aging populace. It would not make sense for a perfectly healthy adult to donate their vital organs, and if the clones were viewed as fully human this would still be the case. The clones are made unlivable in life and ungrievable in death by the society they live in. It is easier to justify the use and sacrifice of the clones, when they are not viewed as human.

The successful attempt to dehumanize the clones is confirmed through the dialogue with Miss Emily. She says that the people were uncomfortable with the clones' existence, but they were more afraid of their own family dying of heart disease, cancer, motor neuron disease. Eventually when the clones couldn't be kept in the dark and people began to learn about the clones "They tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter." (Ishiguro, 258). The clones are now used as a resource that is consumed and benefits the population that made them, and in their eyes the clones are now lesser ungrievable beings.

This is how the world of *Never Let Me Go* has taken the negative effects of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism to the extreme. Humans are in the center of this world, and all considered non-human are destined to enhance the human and only have value for its usability to benefit humanity. The clones have been dehumanized and are seen as creatures unworthy of pity. You can see how this idea of human exceptionalism is in the bedrock of this society where even people fighting for the rights of the clones still have difficulties viewing them as fully-fledged humans. People who have sacrificed a great deal for the clones like Miss Emily and Marie-Claude still struggle viewing them as anything but poor animals. When Kathy leaves Miss Emily at their final conversation, Marie-Claude approaches Kathy after their last conversation saying "You poor creatures" (Ishiguro, 267) as tears fill her eyes. We

are also told how Emily has struggled in the past with how she viewed the clones. These interactions show how they are seen in a better light, on the other hand it shows how deep these prejudices go.

One of the steps taken in order to further push down the clones is in the way language is used. The clones are taught to use words with pleasant connotations to describe the awful events that are happening to them. The act of taking away a clone's organ is given a pleasant connotation with the word donating. Instead of dying, they complete. Instead of sacrifice, they are donors. The use of this friendly vocabulary can be seen as a way for this world to gaslight the clones into believing that they are doing this out of their own volition. The awful events that are happening to the clones are being normalized by how it is referred to.

Hailsham was at some point in the story shut down. In the final interaction between Kathy and Miss Emily we learn how big of an effect that the Morningdale scandal, the reason for Hailsham's shutdown, had on the future of the clones. The attempt by the scientist Morningdale to create children with enhanced abilities had the predictable effect of making people afraid. Afraid for their children's future and for their perceived exceptionality. Human exceptionalism is the belief of the human being special and at the center, the Morningdale scandal threatened this belief with creating humans that are more enhanced, more exceptional than an ordinary human. If the enhanced clones were to be made, that would question what made the people exceptional.

In their article Boller and Voigts write about how humanity is the only world-building species and this can inflate the belief of human exceptionalism, but "If fully-fledged human beings can be artificially created, instead of springing from the (sacred) union of man and woman, does that make mankind less exceptional?" (Boller and Voigts, 152). This question can already be asked in the world of *Never Let Me Go*, however the Morningdale scandal would bring this question to the forefront and unavoidable. Just as it was about to be asked, Morningdale was shut down, and as a result Hailsham lost funding. The questions that would've been brought up by the existence of these enhanced beings are quickly dropped and swapped with more injustice towards the clones. People got scared of the clones and dropped funding from Hailsham, leaving the hard work done by Miss Emily, Marie-Claude, and the other activists undone.

Brave New World did not take the same approach to its world as *Never Let Me Go*. The citizens of the World State are not clones, however, many of them do look the same, but this is only because of the way humans are mass produced. Although the book does not use the clone explicitly, it still draws a lot of comparisons with the clone narrative found in *Never*

Let Me Go. Huxley has created a society in which the people are divided into a caste-system and you can find the comparisons in how the different castes are treated and what lies under the caste-system.

Margaret Atwood, the writer of *The Handmaid's Tale*, wrote an introduction to *Brave New World*. In her introduction she writes about how this World State is portrayed in a different light compared to most other dystopian fiction. While famous dystopian fiction like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has a totalitarian governing power that has achieved its total control through brutality, Aldous Huxley proposed a "softer form of totalitarianism, one of conformity achieved through engineered, bottle-grown babies and hypnotic persuasion." (Atwood, vii). Instead of taking control by force, the World State has built in discrimination into every facet of their society. This interspecies discrimination starts at the Hatching and Conditioning facilities.

Even though *Brave New World* is not a clone narrative, it still fits well within the talking points of Boller and Voigts article. Boller and Voigts write about "the human" as not only a biologically defined species, but as an idea. An idea that can lead towards hierarchization within the species according to different factors like race, class, gender, etc. (Boller and Voigts, 153). This interspecies discrimination is how the society of *Brave New World* is built up. The World State has created a caste-system where the lower you go on that caste-system, you are not only seen as lesser, you are mentally and physically lesser.

At the beginning of the book, the director of one of these hatcheries explains why and how the act of making the lower castes lesser is done. He boasts about the lower number of revolutions that happens because of this, and explains that "The lower the caste, the shorter the oxygen" (Huxley, 131) The first organ to fail when not given enough oxygen is the brain, damaging them mentally, and the second is the skeleton, damaging them physically. The discrimination of the lower castes is not only built into the society through social pretense or governmental interference and segregation, but built into their births and being. They harm the lower castes mentally and physically before birth, and after birth they harm them through conditioning. Everyone in this world is forced into the World State's fixed roles. Like Boller and Voigts wrote, "While human exceptionalism distributes power and value on the level of species membership, it also serves as a basis for interspecies discrimination" (Boller and Voigts, 154).

The idea of human exceptionalism in *Brave New World* is shown through this interspecies discrimination between the different castes. Even though the Epsilons might be seen as humans by the Alphas, there is still this huge disparity between the two physically,

mentally and socially. This is in fact a society where you do become more exceptional the higher you are placed in the caste due to how humans are born with the deficiencies. Even though Epsilons are the lowest on the World State's caste-system, there is a group of people that are not even placed on that caste-system to begin with.

There is a group of people in *Brave New World* that are effectively beneath the entire caste-system. This group are the savages of the savage reservation. Bernard and Lenina visit the reservation towards the beginning of the book and we see how the normal people of this world react to the savages through Lenina. Lenina is more like the average person than Bernard, her reaction would therefore most fit with how the majority would view the savages. She continuously notes how everything is horrible, disgusting, and is shocked by their culture and how old they look. Lenina is disgusted by how they smell, the flies, the rubbish, dirt, and says that "cleanliness is next to fordliness"(Huxley, 94) a hypnopaedic line from their upbringing. Bernard continues ironically with "Yes, and civilization is sterilization" (Huxley, 94). This quick interaction between the two heavily enforces how Lenina, and effectively the world, have become hyper focused on sterilizing everything. Keeping everything organized and civilized to the point where the best way to do this is by dividing people into a caste-system. While Bernard, a person who is tired of the norm, has opened up more to the ideas deemed taboo by the World State.

The savages are in ways degraded to the same level of animals by the World State, we see this through Lenina. Firstly, they are called savages, savage is most commonly used to describe animals. Secondly, they live in a reservation and are visited like animals at the zoo, a view for the civilized people into the uncivilized world of the animals.

These two dystopian texts give us two slightly different versions of the same concept of human exceptionalism and the horrible effects it can have for different groups of people. *Never Let Me Go* shows us a world where people have created clones for the benefit of harvesting them for organs. They have then dehumanized these clones to justify the killing, and one group suffers for the other to live longer. *Brave New World* gives us a world where groups of people are designed to be inferior from the moment they start living and through their upbringing. Both of these versions have the same results of discriminating, dehumanizing, segregating, and hurting groups of people. These are not new concepts to humanity, but seeing them from a new perspective, although heightened, can help keep people questioning real life equivalents and helps to inform people on how things can escalate and change.

Never Let Me Go and *Brave New World* give us two distinct dystopian worlds that both heavily feature the concept of human exceptionalism. Human exceptionalism is not a concept that the average person can define by the word alone, however, everyone knows its effect. Discrimination and dehumanization is not an uncommon thing in the real world, millions experience it daily, but these two texts presents perspectives that not everyone would think of. Through these types of dystopian texts, you get room to analyze and reflect on the situation of others. To understand concepts of human exceptionalism, it is important to have a frame of reference and examples of how it can go. *Brave New World* and *Never Let Me Go* shows us the extreme lengths a society can go to with the wrong beliefs. It shows the pitfalls of the ideas of exceptionalism by letting us view the story from the perspective of the dehumanized.

I think that human exceptionalism is a concept that everyone should be aware of. It is a concept that can have destructive tendencies when going unchecked. Dystopian fiction like the two books written by Kazuo Ishiguro and Aldous Huxley that explores humanity in different circumstances can be essential tools in helping understand these concepts and ideas.

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