

Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells the Story: Aesthetics of Existence in *Never Let Me Go*

Haoyue Chen *

College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Xiamen University, Xiamen, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 1586180630@qq.com

Abstract. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* published in 2005 is characterized by the cloned protagonist and narrator. Focusing on her relationship with Tommy and Ruth, the narrator Kathy recalls their childhood experiences as students in Hailsham and their adulthood as carers and donors. This paper argues that the covert progression of the novel reveals Kathy's growth in her comprehension of mortality. Through the aesthetics of narration, Ishiguro presents the aesthetic of existence using the art of language and creation to face limitations and mortality, throwing light on the redemptive power of art in shaping humanities.

Keywords: *Never Let Me Go*; Covert Progression; Aesthetics of Existence.

1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* published in 2005 is characterized by the cloned protagonist and narrator, who grows up in the boarding school Hailsham as "a model of aesthetic, humanizing education" (Snaza 8). The narrator Kathy places belief in the notion that art can save her, which is revealed to be a false faith near the end of the novel. Critics raise the question regarding the value of arts, humanities, and empathetic effects, which are central to Kazuo Ishiguro's novel.

Identifying the hidden political perspective and power relation under posthuman education, critics have regarded the aesthetic humanity education in Hailsham as deception and failure. Analyzing the way Kathy relates to her memory and mortality, Snaza concludes that art and education used as means to an end lead to the failure of humanizing education. Ishiguro makes the reader identify with clones who exhibit "all the traits of humanity" but who are never considered as human in the novel, and further criticizes "the implicit dehumanization in education and other form" (Snaza 4). Whitehead focuses on the second-person address and internal address, arguing that Ishiguro draws the reader toward a critique of the narrator Kathy's perspective, indicating the paradoxical function of art to "uphold social inequalities by producing consoling but false fictions of meaning" (73).

2. Presentation of the Study

Admittedly, in *Never Let Me Go*, power structures and relations underpin the education system rooted in art, which is meanwhile an organ-harvesting industry. The narrator Kathy's "limited perspective and understanding" raises an uneasy question: does the novel address art solving no problem and saving no soul in a material-driven culture (86)? In many fictional narratives, there exists a "covert progression", a "thematic-aesthetic undercurrent paralleling the plot development throughout the text" (Shen 47). The uncovering of "hidden dynamics" in the covert progression may provide "contrastive character images and thematic values" (47). This paper argues that the covert progression of the novel reveals Kathy's growth in her comprehension of mortality. Through the aesthetics of narration, Ishiguro indicates the aesthetic of existence using the art of language and creation to face limitations and mortality, throwing light on the redemptive power of art in shaping humanities.

Exploiting the device of covert progression, Ishiguro presents the aesthetic values of Kathy's growth in understanding mortality. The plot development of *Never Let Me Go* is concerned with growth and friendship, yet there is a hidden dynamic between life and death paralleling the plot. Running "at a

deeper and hidden level throughout the text”, the hidden dynamic exists in tension with plot development, with interrelated details and contrastive narrative language (Shen 48).

Writing the story through Kathy’s first-person narration, Ishiguro defers the revelation of her identity as a clone until near the end of the novel, which works toward readers’ empathetic identification with her. On the opening pages, the narrator Kathy looks back at her eleven years as a carer and reflects on her performance in this role. She acknowledges that she will stop her role as a carer after eight months and become a donor. Kathy’s “over-optimistic” tone immediately raises questions: preoccupied with her professional success, she “is not addressing either her imminent death or the larger injustices at work” (Whitehead 70). Many critics regard Kathy as an inadequate narrator “lack of maturity or growth” despite the aesthetic environment and activities in Hailsham (70). However, Kathy’s narration implicitly unravels the tension between life and death in daily activities and discussions in Hailsham, revealing her ability to have a thoughtful consideration of the real situation of existence. The students in Hailsham have “been told and not told” who they are, readers are also “told but not told” of the character’s predetermined fate (Ishiguro 42). As Heidegger points out, death is shielded in modern people’s daily lives; yet it is the evasion of death that reveals our comprehension of death, that it is uncertain and inevitable (40). The narrative mode enables readers to take up Kathy’s perspective and be drawn into her reflection. Meanwhile, as the covert progression unfolds, it creates aesthetic values in presenting the integration of death and life. Foucault proposes that death is not a “point” as the end of existence, but a vague “line”: people cross this line throughout their lives, making death also cross into life (220). In the first part of the novel, Kathy recalls Miss Lucy’s speech, which proposes that to have “decent lives”, the students need to “know and know properly”, namely understand their “dis-future” (81). As she reaches adulthood, Kathy’s frequent discussions about and search for “possibles” reflect her life desire based on the understanding of their dis-future and mortality. She explains, “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 something of what your life held in store” (127). Near the end of the novel, Kathy’s open discussion with Tommy regarding the clone’s completion marks her maturity to some extent. Her initial avoidance of mentioning death ends up with the contemplation of mortality through language. The narrative mode calls attention to Kathy’s growth in striving to “know properly” (81). This process of unraveling dynamics between life and death displays the aesthetics of existence that the uniqueness of human beings lies in “the possibility of understanding death” (Foucault 439).

Presenting tensions facing limitations and mortality in Kathy and Tommy’s relationship, Ishiguro explores the art of language in the aesthetic judgment of death. The interrelated details throughout the covert progression constitute a “contrastive thematic significance” (Shen 53). The reoccurrence of water images in Kathy and Tommy’s relationship becomes the symbol of their existential situation, drawing a fuller picture of the aesthetics of existence facing limitations. In Hailsham, their dialogue regarding the relation between artworks and donation happens near a pond. Sheltered in Hailsham, their childhood is like a still pond without strong winds and currents on the sea. As children in Hailsham grow up and move closer to the roles of the donor, they are preoccupied with the rumor of “deferral”: if two Hailsham students can prove they truly love each other, they can request to delay their donations for a few years. When Ruth proposes that Kathy and Tommy should apply for “deferral”, the “beached ship” symbolizes the hope for deferring their death (224). While the detailed description of the ship presents the power of time, indicating their inevitable mortality: “its paint was cracking”, what once is painted “sky blue” now becomes “almost white under the sun” (224). The disillusion of their faith in deferral through art seems to negate the redemptive power of art, yet art still saves them indirectly leading them to the aesthetic judgment of death. Through the aesthetic environment in Hailsham, they gain the ability to “judge in the aesthetic sense” and “evaluate” (Snaza 7). As they approach completion, this ability is applied to their aesthetic judgment of death. On being told that there is no hope of deferral, the imaginative narrative language entails their aesthetic judgment of death, which is contrastive to the prosaic language in the overt progression. Tommy imagines they are “two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, holding as hard

as they can". But the current is too strong, and "they've got to let go, drift apart" (282). These images and the appearance of "let go" reiterate the title of the novel, *Never Let Me Go*. The characters seem to be forced to "let go" by the "current" of external power, yet their imaginative language "holds on" to dialogue with death and create aesthetic values. Before Tommy's last donation, he shares with Kathy his secret imagination when he was a child in Hailsham. Each time he scores in a football game, he imagines "splashing through water", which makes him "feel good (285). Foucault proposes in his aesthetics of existence the relations between "discourse" and "immortality", for those who truly understand life, they can realize the existence of death and discover the continuation of existence through language (250). Through the art of language, the narration draws a fuller picture of the characters' life experiences, integrating their lives into a broader expanse of human lives, and becoming a part of history and culture.

The interaction of language, time, and death in Kathy's narration indicates the art of language blurring the boundaries between life and death. The "deferral" and retrospection in narrative mode, bring Tommy and Ruth back to life in Kathy's memory. Kathy's narrative language catches the "arrow of time", and brings the flying arrow back into its space (Foucault 250). The artistic power of language is crystalized in the closing paragraph, where Kathy's narrative language becomes imaginative as she memorizes Tommy. She stands at a field in Norfolk, imagining this is the resting spot where everything she has lost or misplaced. Children in Hailsham convert to the belief that Norfolk is a "lost corner" where "all the lost property found in the country ended up" (60). Kathy addresses that if she waits long enough, Tommy's figure would "appear on the horizon across the field...and he'd wave, maybe even call" (263). Kathy's narrative, like the wire on the field, not only catches and holds the things she has lost in her life but also catches and holds the lives of the cloned students like Ruth and Tommy, who are regarded as disposable "trash" in the "materialist logic" of the dystopic society depicted by Ishiguro (Whitehead 80). Though art itself is used as a "means to an end" in Hailsham, Kathy uses the art of language to redeem the value and dignity of lives rejected by a utilitarian society (Snaza 220). With language and creation, people have the potential to cross their limited life boundaries, have dialogues with others, and gain new life through these dialogues. Addressed to intended listeners and grappling with the relationship between language, time, and death, Kathy's narration shows that language can bring death back to life, and introduce life into death.

3. Conclusion

The overt and the covert progression exist in tension with each other in *Never Let Me Go*, which complicates the character image and readers' reactions. The stylistic uncovering of the covert progression conveys a fuller picture of the narrator's growth in understanding mortality and further creates aesthetic values. Ishiguro meditates on the role of art within a materialist culture and implies the aesthetics of existence facing limitations and mortality. The art of living lies in language and imagination, through which man has the potential to contemplate and dialogue with death, integrating one's life into a broader picture of human experiences.

References

- [1] Foucault, Michel. *Dits et écrits*. Paris: Gallimard, Vol. I, 1994, pp. 250-251.---*The Birth of the Clinic*. Paris: P.U.F, 1963, p. 220.
- [2] Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York: SUNY Press, 1996. p. 258.
- [3] Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005. pp. 1-288.
- [4] Shen, Dan. "What is 'Covert Progression' and How to Uncover it?" *Foreign Literature Studies*. Vol. 35(5), 2013, pp. 47-53.
- [5] Snaza, Nathan. "The Failure of Humanizing Education in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vol. 26, 2015, pp. 215-234.
- [6] Whitehead, Anne. "Writing with Care: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 52, 2011, pp. 54-83.