

Benjamin Hoffman

Professor Sheri-Marie Harrison

English 4995

9 May 2013

The Humanity of Inaction: A Comparison of
Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* with Michael Bay's *The Island*

One of the most common reader responses to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* has been to question the passivity of the clones, claiming that this inaction reveals a lack of humanity in characters who are otherwise presented as psychologically comparable to normal humans. Presented with the prospect of donating all their vital organs until they die young, the clones do not even attempt to rebel. Some readers argue that real people would try to escape such an oppressive system or fight back: "To many of us, even a failed escape, even being killed trying, would be preferable to being harvested slowly and just accepting it" (qtd. in Ishiguro and Mullan). These readers assume there is a common "human spirit" that includes an unquenchable drive for freedom to the point that it overrides other human qualities. This value of independence at any cost can be so strong that it becomes the driving force in definitions of the human. From this perspective, individual agency holds a substantially larger amount of weight than other human traits, like interdependence and a desire for purpose. The clones in *Never Let Me Go* display the latter characteristics, but their shortage of rebelliousness leads some readers to perceive them as less than human.

Interestingly, this reaction usually comes from an American audience. As explained by Mark Romanek, the director of the film adaptation, "When I have shown the film to Russian audiences the question doesn't come up. When I show the film to Japanese audiences, in Tokyo, the question doesn't come up" (Pierce and Romanek). American audiences are more accustomed

to media that reinforces their cultural conceptions of individualism and freedom, like *The Island*, a 2005 Michael Bay production that explores the same premise of clone organ harvesting as an action-packed emancipation narrative. Representing a highly individualistic culture influenced by a historically-based value of freedom, members of American society often assume that a burning desire to be unique and independent exists in all humans. In a comment about passivity in *Never Let Me Go*, one reader claims that “rebellion and questioning authority are a part of the human experience” (qtd. in Jerng 382). Mark Jerng responds: “That the definition of the human that these readers resort to is so obviously a culturally or nationally specific convention of what people expect of the human (humans are people who rebel) highlights how certain socially held narrative expectations codify definitions of the human in advance” (382). He discusses rebellion and emancipation as part of the narrative expectations that *The Island* fulfills and *Never Let Me Go* challenges. *The Island*, drawing on conventions grounded in contexts such as “the legacy of slavery,” ultimately links rebellion with individuation and humanity (Jerng 377).

This link can be traced back to slave narratives like that of Frederick Douglass, in which rebellion can be seen as the reversal of the dehumanizing effects of slavery. Douglass must “assert his humanity through creative acts of resistance” against being “classified as thing or property” (Nielsen 251). The assumption is that if slavery and oppression strip individuals of their humanity, rebellion is a necessary step in the reclaiming of humanity. As portrayed in *The Island*, the clones develop unique human identities by escaping their oppressors and demonstrating their own agency. *Never Let Me Go*, on the other hand, subverts these expectations by depicting clones who come to accept their subjugation rather than fight back. During an interview with John Mullan, Ishiguro shares, “I didn’t want to write something that would ultimately become a kind of metaphor for slavery and rebellion” (Ishiguro and Mullan).

More interested in the subject of how humans “face up to the knowledge that [they] are mortal,” he wrote the novel to explore the process of understanding and accepting the inevitability of death (Ishiguro and Mullan). While clones are often associated with themes of rebellion in literature and entertainment, they also serve as liminal figures, perfectly suited to provoke discussions about what it means to be human. For some readers, however, the issue of independence has been too central to their definition of humanity to consider alternatives.

Despite such strong and common reactions from everyday readers, literary critics spend little time discussing the humanity present in the passivity of Ishiguro’s clones. Biopolitics and bioethics are often invoked to connect the novel with real-world debates about cloning, examining ethical arguments about the manipulation of biology and life itself. Tiffany Tsao draws connections between the use of language related to purpose in biotechnology and religion in her article, “The Tyranny of Purpose: Religion and Biotechnology in Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*.” Mark Jerng’s article, “Giving Form to Life: Cloning and Narrative Expectations of the Human,” examines the public’s responses to clone passivity as it relates to attitudes about cloning and common interpretations about what it means to be human. One aspect of cloning that has frightened some scientifically-illiterate individuals is the idea that clones are perfect copies, and, unable to act or think independently, would form homogeneous masses like robots coming off an assembly line. When a narrative intends to humanize a clone character, the character is usually shown to be an independent thinker willing to fight for freedom. The clones of *The Island* earn their humanity through this kind of individuation and rebellion. Ishiguro does not take this route, instead choosing to depict the clones as *interdependent* in the same way that natural-born humans are interdependent. Jerng notes this difference in individuation, but he does not address the processes through which the clones’ passivity develops as a reasonable human

reaction. In order to address the definition of the human that causes readers to react with confusion towards the clones' passivity, I will examine facets of the characters' lives that both demonstrate human traits and lead to an unwillingness or inability to consider rebellion. Through gradual habituation and a desire for purpose and belonging, Ishiguro's clones come to terms with their fate and fail to consider full escape as a possibility; in the real world, humans derive meaning from their own lives and accept their eventual deaths through similar strategies. Meanwhile, the film *The Island* represents a conventional American depiction of the strength of the human spirit by setting up the clones' developmental experiences as nearly opposite those of Ishiguro's clones, leading to inevitable rebellion. The definition of the human supported by this type of depiction values individuality and independence above all else. *Never Let Me Go* challenges this definition by presenting a more nuanced view, considering how various aspects of the human condition can interact to foster passivity.

Habituation and the Passage of Time

Because Ishiguro's clones find out about their future and progress towards it so gradually, they are lulled into passivity and fail to act against their fates in a meaningful way. Any perception of danger that could have potentially caused them to fight or flee is softened by its gradual discovery and familiarity. As the Hailsham students slowly realize their purpose over many years, they have time to let each piece of information settle and become familiar, diffusing the impact and decreasing the chances that they will rebel. Sociologist Charlotte Wolf argues that "the passage of time" and "routine" can cause oppressed individuals to "become accustomed to the way things are; and the life pattern and relations between superior and subordinate come to seem normal, even inevitable" (Wolf 221). This process of habituation is part of a larger pattern

she calls the “legitimation of oppression,” or an oppressed group’s acceptance of the oppressive system (Wolf 221). As an example of the effects of habituation, Wolf cites an interview with former slave Allen V. Manning:

I was born in slavery, and I belonged to a Baptist preacher. Until I was fifteen yers [sic] old I was taught that I was his own chattel-property and he could do with me like he wanted to, but he had been taught that way, too, and we both believed it. I never did hold nothing against him for being hard on Negroes sometimes, and I don’t think I ever would of had any trouble even if I had growed up and died in slavery. (qtd. in Wolf 223)

Like Ishiguro’s clones, Manning was so accustomed to the system of slavery that rebellion was not a serious consideration. The clones never articulate any intention of opposing the system beyond a polite request for a temporary deferral, and Ruth’s claim that “we’re modelled from *trash*” suggests an acceptance of subordination on some level (Ishiguro 166). Having grown up with the gradual understanding that the trajectory of their lives has been predetermined by the natural-born people in control of society, the clones accept their roles as donors.

In contrast, Lincoln Six Echo, the protagonist of *The Island*, discovers his fate suddenly while exploring for curiosity’s sake. Shortly after a man and woman are selected via “lottery” to travel to “the island,” described to the clones as the last pathogen-free location on earth outside of their current facility, Lincoln Six Echo wanders into a restricted area. He sees the woman, who has just given birth, and watches as doctors inject her with lethal drugs. Soon, he witnesses the man being chased down the hallway and violently dragged back to the operating room from which he has escaped. Though Lincoln does not yet understand the reason for this violence, the

shocking discovery that “the island” is a lie prompts him to run back to save his friend Jordan Two Delta and escape the facility. Had the Hailsham students’ futures been revealed to them all at once--and so violently--they might very well have run away in terror, but their gradual comprehension of the truth numbs them to the impact.

Vital to their gradual habituation is the fact that the students are never explicitly deceived about their futures. The children at Hailsham are “told and not told” about their purpose; guardians “smuggle” hints into the children’s heads by attaching the information to sex talks, for example. “If, say, they were telling us how we’d have to be very careful to avoid diseases when we had sex, it would have been odd not to mention how much more important this was for us than for normal people outside. And that, of course, would bring us onto the donations” (Ishiguro 82-3). If this information about future donations is successfully smuggled, it gets planted in the child’s brain nearly subconsciously. Nothing is shocking by the time Miss Lucy spells out their situation explicitly. It helps that the guardians start revealing the truth to the children at a young age so they feel that they “*always* knew about donations in some vague way, even as early as six or seven” (Ishiguro 83). The students may not fully understand the situation as young children, but the information will stick on some level and become familiar. By the time they come to a complete understanding, the students will be unable to remember ever not knowing; the slow drips of information over time have created the illusion that this knowledge was there all along.

Like the subject of donation for Ishiguro’s clones, the concept of death is gradually “told and not told” to children in the real world as they grow up until they learn to accept it. Child development specialist Clarissa A. Willis writes, “adults often use socially acceptable rhetoric such as saying that someone has ‘gone on,’ ‘passed away,’ or ‘left us.’ These abstract terms

have little meaning for most children” (223). In using euphemisms and describing death as a process of simply “leaving,” parents tell and do not tell their children about death. As children develop their understanding--Willis describes multiple stages based on age and comprehension of different aspects of mortality such as “irreversibility” and “causality”--they will be able to express their grief about dead loved ones in different ways. Willis notes that a variety of signs of grief “are especially important to recognize in young children who cannot express their emotions and do not necessarily know why they are angry or sad” (224). In this light, Tommy’s tantrums can be interpreted as those of a child struggling to understand death. After his final rage as an adult, Kathy hypothesizes, “maybe the reason you used to get like that was because at some level you always *knew*,” to which Tommy responds, “don’t think so, Kath. No, it was always just me. Me being an idiot. That’s all it ever was . . . But that’s a funny idea. Maybe I did know, somewhere deep down” (Ishiguro 275). The release of Tommy’s bottled-up frustration can be interpreted as a venting of subconscious emotion, anger and confusion without an understanding of the source. The connection is only made when he screams as a result of finding out that deferrals are nothing more than a groundless rumor. His ultimate powerlessness in the face of death can only be expressed by a directionless, raw anguish.

As Matthew Eatough notes, the narrative itself is structured in such a way as to “allow the reader, like the students themselves, gradually to become acclimated to the system of cloning and organ harvesting” (135). Though the terminology introduced at the beginning of the book--“donor,” “carer,” etc.--does not clearly define the extent of the situation, it feels a bit unsettling due to its unfamiliar context, and it sets the groundwork for a later understanding. Kathy narrates as though she is speaking to a fellow clone from a different school, making comments like, “I don’t know how it was where you were” (Ishiguro 13). Finding themselves in the

position of someone who is apparently supposed to understand these references, readers must rely on subtle hints to figure out what Kathy is talking about. This narration style simulates on a small scale the process by which Hailsham students are “told and not told” about the lives that have been set out for them.

In contrast, the clones in *The Island* are fed an outright fabrication. Rather than being “told and not told” about their futures, they are simply not told. Having been given false memory implants, they believe they are survivors of a worldwide contamination and that a lottery win will grant them a one-way trip to the last remaining paradise on earth: the island. Lincoln learns that “lottery winners” are actually being taken upstairs for death by organ harvesting, which is a sudden and shocking discovery that serves as the catalyst for further action. His horror at having been manipulated destroys his trust for the authorities and compels him to escape, but Hailsham students remain trusting and docile because they have not been told an overt lie.

In addition to the gradual realization of their purpose, Ishiguro’s clones make slow progress toward donation and “completion.” The threat looms in the distant future, and the reality of it is difficult to process from such a distance. Kathy explains, “we certainly didn’t think much about our lives beyond the Cottages, or about who ran them, or how they fitted into the larger world” (Ishiguro 116). An inability or unwillingness to think about the future allows the clones to slip closer and closer to the end without fighting back. While they avoid thinking much about their real futures, they occasionally entertain half-serious “dream futures” as a distraction, sharing their desires to work on a farm or in an office. Kathy reflects:

I’m not sure what was going on in our heads during those discussions. We probably knew they couldn’t be serious, but then again, I’m sure we didn’t regard

them as fantasy either. Maybe once Hailsham was behind us, it was possible, just for that half year or so, before all the talk of becoming carers, before the driving lessons, all those other things, it was possible to forget for whole stretches of time who we really were. . . (Ishiguro 142)

These dream futures, neither “serious” nor “fantasy,” seem to pacify the clones more than inspire them. Kathy hypothesizes that the discussions serve to distract them from the reality of “who we really were,” and these distractions work because the students have “whole stretches of time” during which they do not have to think about donations. When this luxury disappears and they start training (and later working) as carers, they are still one step removed from the donations. They become intimately familiar with the donation process from the safety of their carer positions, so they are never thrown directly into a frightening situation all at once. Even when the donations start, the clones have plenty of time to chat casually with one another; the gradual process of donating one organ at a time means that their lives are not in immediate danger, so they have no clear stimulus for action. In contrast, the clones in *The Island* either die without learning their fate or wake up on the operating table in a panic, as does the man Lincoln witnesses being chased down the hallway. There is no time to come to terms with death; the immediate threat prompts a fight-or-flight response. Hailsham students, on the other hand, are not being chased around medical facilities by doctors with skin-grappling hooks. They are able to gradually, passively accept their long-term purpose as a result of the sheer amount of time they are given to understand it.

Humans progress toward death in general in much the same way; while they may not be enthusiastic about having to die, they can come to terms with it over long periods that allow familiarity and distractions. With this in mind, the clones’ ability to calmly move toward death

can be interpreted as all too human. A definition of humanity that focuses exclusively on rebellion ignores the fact that real humans are behaving passively toward death every day thanks to gradual habituation.

Language and Purpose

Over time, the details of donation in *Never Let Me Go* are made more palatable through euphemisms that give clones a sense of purpose. The terminology used in reference to their future all seems very sanitary and comfortable. Words like “donor,” “carer,” and “complete” all have two functions: as pleasant substitutes for unpleasant realities, and as symbols of meaning for clones’ lives. “Donor” implies a willing gift-giver, graciously providing help to those in need. This meaning lends a certain benevolent purpose to clones’ lives; essentially, they live to give. The suggestion of willingness is designed not only to encourage clone participation but also to reassure the natural-born humans who want the “donated” organs. Uncomfortable about the questionable ethics of organ harvesting but unwilling to give up the scientific advances in healthcare, humans could settle for the notion that clones are knowingly donating, not simply being harvested. In contrast, clones in *The Island* are commonly referred to as “products” and “insurance policies,” terms which take euphemism in the opposite direction and strip the clones of humanity. Their lives are given no more purpose than that of a spare oxygen tank, and even this is hidden from them. This language, usually not used in the presence of clones, is designed to deny clone humanity to employees and prospective clients (the latter of which are told they are investing in an “agnate” that neither looks human nor attains consciousness). None of these words would normally be applied to a human, but “donor” implies human consciousness and generosity.

Even the final consequence of vital organ donation is framed as desirable in *Never Let Me Go* because of the language used. “Completion” both cloaks the unpleasant term “death” and marks the final donation as a kind of goal or accomplishment. Natural-born humans must find their own purpose in life, with death often serving as the deadline for this purpose rather than being the purpose itself. Religion can sometimes fill this need. Psychologist Robert A. Emmons notes that “the possession of and progression toward important life goals are essential for long-term well-being,” and that religion is about ultimate goals (734-7). Some cannot imagine living without the ultimate meaning that comes with religion: “Without meaning and purpose, there is little reason to do what is necessary to live and to endure the inevitable suffering and trials that come with life” (Emmons 735). Tiffany Tsao makes connections between human and clone desires for purpose, using Rick Warren’s massively popular religious book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, as an example. She writes of Ishiguro’s clones: “Ironically, the comfort the clones derive from fulfilling their purpose bears an all too unsettling resemblance to what we ourselves might say when we have discovered a sense of purpose for our own lives” (224). Readers might react with shudders to the idea that the clones were created for a specific purpose, but this same language gets used in the context of religion with the opposite effect. Tsao argues that Ishiguro is making a case against the “purpose-driven life” through this comparison; whether or not this is the case, the fact remains that the clones are following very human behavioral patterns by finding comfort in goals and ultimate meaning. While they may seek other meaningful ways to spend what little time they have, they ultimately already have a predestined purpose. Their lives have been set out for them. The clones are not simply dying as a result of forced organ removal, but fulfilling the reason for their existence by willingly giving their organs away.

In contrast, Lincoln Six Echo feels that his mundane existence is devoid of meaning, expressing a desire for “more”: “I wish that there was more...than just waiting to go to the island” (*The Island*). The lottery seems arbitrary; even though it is secretly rigged to select the individuals who are needed for organ donation, the name suggests random selection with no meaning whatsoever. To win the lottery is the one goal of his fellow clones, and with the unpredictable lottery serving as the primary focus of the clone facility, Lincoln feels directionless. There is no progression of donations leading to “completion;” there is no higher meaning or direction from religion. There is simply “waiting.”

The job title of “carer” makes empathy an explicit part of the clones’ first contributions to the donation system. Clones are more likely to be able to empathize with each other, as will be discussed later, so they make the perfect candidates for carers. The job can even add to their sense of self-worth, as shown by Kathy’s attitude toward her performance: “it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well, especially that bit about my donors staying ‘calm’” (Ishiguro 3). Kathy values the sense of calm she can give donors; even though they will eventually die from the donation process, she can care for them psychologically and make their experience as comfortable as can be expected. This care simultaneously gives clones a sense of accomplishment and prepares them for their roles as donors by familiarizing them with the kind of empathy they can expect from their carers. Eerily enough, the clones in *The Island* are also given jobs “caring” for other clones in a way, but as in every other area of their lives, they are kept in the dark about this. Lincoln Six Echo’s job involves maintaining a supply of liquid nutrients to the transparent tubes that run along his table and then dip out of view. He wonders where the nutrient lines go and questions his job supplying these tubes because he wants to know whether his work has value; his curiosity partially stems from a desire for meaning.

Unbeknownst to him, the tubes actually lead to rooms full of clones still being grown, giving Lincoln a job technically similar to that of a carer, but without the sense of meaning and pride evident in Kathy's understanding of her job.

This difference in meaning leads to dissatisfaction for Lincoln and the opposite for Kathy, highlighting the importance of life purpose in keeping Ishiguro's clones complacent. As long as they feel that their lives have meaning through caring, donating, and completing, they are content to follow these goals. Because Lincoln can derive no meaning from his current existence, though, he becomes restless. The clones search for purpose to drive their lives just as humans search for purpose in personal goals and religion. For Ishiguro's clones, a rebellion would mean a loss of purpose. The definition of the human being presented in the text is one of balance; freedom itself is not the most important marker of humanity, and it must be weighed against other interests. Readers who claim that a lack of resistance signals that the clones are not "fully realized people" (Jerng 382) make the mistake of narrowing the definition of the human to the point of uselessness.

Interdependence and External Support

Because Ishiguro's clones grow up together at what is essentially a boarding school and continue to surround themselves with other clones as they move toward donation, they develop intense bonds with each other that have no parallels in their interactions with natural-born humans on the outside, who rarely show compassion to the clones. Their strong interdependence leads them to follow in each other's footsteps to avoid cutting themselves off from the only family they have ever known. Family and ingroup bonds have been important to humans for as long as humans have existed; where there is no biological family, people create social families as

a replacement. The clones' need to belong is a clearly human experience that unfortunately leads to their acceptance of their conditions.

While the boarding school structure of their early lives is a contributing factor, one of the main limits to their ability to branch out and form new social groups with natural-born humans is the fact that most natural-born humans are uncomfortable with the very idea of them. From Kathy's perspective, "there are people out there, like Madame, who don't hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you" (Ishiguro 36). The clone organ harvesting operation is no secret; the natural-born humans know about cloning, but they do not want to consider leaving behind the scientific advancements in health and life expectancy. The only way to reconcile the desire for improved health with the knowledge that this health comes at a cost is to avoid being confronted with the details of the system, especially if this means seeing clones or being reminded of their human qualities. Despite--or perhaps because of--Madame's attempts to convince the rest of society that the Hailsham students have souls and should therefore be treated humanely, Hailsham ultimately gets shut down. As Miss Emily explains to Kathy and Tommy, "however uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease" (Ishiguro 263). Even before they understand exactly why, the clones have a sense that outsiders do not want to be around them. Ruth and a few other clones go on a trip to see her "possible," a human who could potentially be the source of her genes, and she later vents about their experience in an art gallery:

Art students, that's what she thought we were. Do you think she'd have talked to us like that if she'd known what we really were? What do you think she'd have

said if we'd asked her? 'Excuse me, but do you think your friend was ever a clone model?' She'd have thrown us out. (Ishiguro 166)

Ruth's belief that the clones are "modelled from trash" causes her to imagine that the gallery manager would react with anger at the very thought of her friend being a clone model (Ishiguro 166). Even though their extensive art background at Hailsham makes it understandable to call them art students, Ruth believes that an outsider would never have made that assumption of known clones. The past experience of their "ambush" of Madame at Hailsham has irreversibly changed their expectations. Curious to see whether Madame is scared of them, a group of young clones decide to put her to the test by casually swarming past her all at once. As they pass, they all notice "the shudder she seemed to be suppressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her" (Ishiguro 35). Kathy compares Madame's reaction to the fear of spiders and explains that after the incident, "we were a very different group from the one that had stood about waiting for Madame to get out of her car. Hannah looked ready to burst into tears. Even Ruth looked really shaken" (Ishiguro 35). This interaction causes the clones to imagine human discomfort with them as a certainty, and they decide to keep their clone identity a secret from outsiders. They take comfort in each other because of this shared experience and lack of support from outside the group. Because of this bond and continued exposure to other clones during their work as carers, it becomes difficult to break out of the system.

Conversely, when *The Island's* protagonists Lincoln Six Echo and Jordan Two Delta escape into the real world, they discover that the cloning operation is being carried out in secret and that outsiders think the organs are essentially being grown in unconscious sacs. They are determined to find the people who served as the genetic base and paid for their creation (known as "sponsors" or "originals") and make an appearance on TV to show the world the truth. The

assumption being made here is that the rest of the world will be on their side; all that the clones need to do is make their predicament public and they will have enough support to end the harvesting system. In this way, the individuals running the organ harvesting facility are depicted as outside the norm and outside the law; Dr. Bernard Merrick, the man in charge of the operation, must be careful about whom he contacts to track down and eliminate the escaped clones. Even his carefully-selected mercenary ends up turning against him and helping the clones after revealing a similar past of dehumanization and rebellion. The clones' hope for and ultimate acquisition of outside support sets them apart from the Hailsham students. The students never reach beyond Hailsham leaders for support, and while the Hailsham leaders do seek support from the larger society, these attempts are unsuccessful. Madame tries through her gallery to demonstrate to the outside world that clones have souls, but her influence in this movement can only temporarily give them a higher quality of life, not free them. Hailsham's founders represent an ultimately failed attempt to "square the circle" by redefining the way clones are perceived (Ishiguro 263). Miss Emily explains to Kathy and Tommy: "However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die of cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease" (Ishiguro 263). The outside world is aware that cloning and organ harvesting is going on, but it would rather keep the system in place for all its benefits.

In response to this total lack of empathy from outsiders, the clones can trust only each other, creating a strong sense of solidarity among them. If they do not belong to the larger culture and they do not belong to a biological family, they must create their own group of belonging. The resulting powerful feeling of obligation compels them to follow in each other's footsteps. As Tommy progresses through his donations, he begins to make Kathy feel guilty by

claiming that she cannot possibly understand the experience of a donor until she starts donations herself. Kathy describes feeling a “little prickle of resentment each time he told me I didn’t understand something or other because I wasn’t yet a donor” (Ishiguro 278). These small stings collectively build up and threaten to break down the former bonds with fellow clones, leaving the carer feeling empty and alone. Unlike Kathy, most carers do not even have the luxury of choosing familiar donors. While donors stay at specific recovery centers and form small communities of friendship, carers travel across the country to care for a variety of donors at separate locations. Kathy senses this change and makes comparisons to pleasant memories of Hailsham when she sees the way Tommy and a group of other donors interact:

I’d felt an unexpected little tug; because there was something about the way these donors had arranged themselves in a rough semi-circle, something about their poses, almost studiously relaxed, whether standing or sitting, as though to announce to the world how much each one of them was savouring the company, that reminded me of the way our little gang used to sit around our pavilion together. (Ishiguro 277-8)

While Kathy can enjoy some level of interaction with donors on an individual basis, she does not have access to the group, and there is no equivalent community of carers. Having grown up entirely in a context similar to that of a boarding school, her identity is inextricably linked to her interconnected relationships with others, so she feels lost and left out without being part of a cohesive group. She feels a “little tug” as though the appeal of a community is drawing her towards donation, and the explicit pressure from Tommy strengthens this tug. “All the rest of us, we became donors ages ago,” he reminds her (Ishiguro 281). Even though Kathy is not intentionally avoiding donations, there is some resentment and exclusion occurring because she

is not yet fulfilling her purpose with the other clones. The clones rely on each other for support, and it hurts to feel excluded from the one group that does not shudder at the thought of accidentally brushing hands.

The feeling that she is losing her only family is further reinforced by the closing of Hailsham. Even though the closing does not technically affect her life, she thinks of Hailsham as a symbol that connects her to other clones. When Hailsham closes, Kathy reflects: “it was like someone coming along with a pair of shears and snipping the balloon strings just where they entwined above the man’s fist. Once that happened, there’d be no real sense in which those balloons belonged with each other any more” (Ishiguro 213). If Hailsham is the hand that connects past students even in their donating years, its removal seems to send them floating away into the atmosphere individually, which makes Kathy feel lost. This effect works because of the harmless nature of Hailsham. Unlike *The Island*, in which the facility that ties the clones together is also connected to violent murder, and unlike historical slave narratives like that of Frederick Douglass, in which masters brutally whip and maim their slaves, *Never Let Me Go* depicts a group of people who feel connected through pleasant memories of a school associated with the donation system. Individuals in the former narratives cut their balloon strings themselves, so to speak, because the hand that holds them is too poisonous to foster a sense of belonging. This escape, when interpreted as a claim to independence, can lead to the cultural understanding that individual freedom is the most desirable outcome--the pinnacle of humanity. Ishiguro challenges this notion by demonstrating the extent to which humans desperately need to feel a sense of belonging.

Perceived Impossibility of Full Rebellion

While the lack of rebellion may make Ishiguro's clones appear to completely accept their subordination, they do resist in subtle ways that do not threaten to overturn the system. Daniel Brook, a sociologist, describes a process of "everyday resistance" that underprivileged groups can use to smooth their experiences without challenging the existing social order: "Open conflict rarely produces material benefits; indeed, most often it produces repression and severe punishment. Everyday resistance, on the other hand, may garner just enough material reward and social satisfaction to make life a little more bearable" (Brook 266). Ishiguro's clones are not supposed to visit carers before becoming carers themselves, but Ruth, Chrissie, and Rodney break the rules in an act of everyday resistance. Theoretically, this rule may be in place to prevent clones from learning the uncomfortable details of donation before they become implicated in the system, but breaking the rule does not seem to push the students to further action. The most they ever hope for is a "deferral," putting off their donations by a few years. Kathy and Tommy ask Madame politely and do not demand freedom because they believe (with good reason) that they are not in a position to do so. Whether or not the clones actually have opportunities to break out of the system, they have learned to perceive themselves as powerless. The concept of "surplus powerlessness," as described by the political scientist Gonick and psychologist Prilleltensky, "pertains to feelings of personal impotence beyond and above the actual limitations placed on the individual by the social context" (134). Related to learned helplessness, surplus powerlessness often prevents oppressed groups from taking action simply because they do not believe they have the power to do so.

As evidenced by their attitude toward the beached boat in the marshes, the clones simply do not perceive full freedom as a viable option. In this scene, Ruth, Tommy, and Kathy climb through a barbed wire fence on the way to the boat, making a symbolic escape, but they only

view the boat from a distance. While a boat could be a symbol of freedom in the right context, here it serves as a representation of the clones' inability to escape. Like the boat, they are hopelessly mired in their circumstances. Perhaps anticipating different expectations from moviegoers, the film adaptation of *Never Let Me Go* makes some revisions to the boat scene. Rather than situate the boat in an endless marsh, the film places it directly on a beach within view of the ocean, as though escape is within the realm of possibility. Tommy runs to the boat and climbs onto it, his excited face framed by the open air, until abdominal pain forces him back. This new setting and Tommy's behavior suggest a stronger yearning for freedom than is present in the novel. He appears to be acting out the fantasy of taking the ship and sailing away, a fantasy that becomes reality in *The Island* when Lincoln Six Echo commandeers a ship named *Renovatio* (explicitly explained as Latin for "rebirth" in the film) to find his own version of the island. Since the beginning of the film, Lincoln has been experiencing nightmares about being thrown off this boat and drowning, though he does not recognize the symbolism due to his lack of awareness of his own captivity. The boat turns out to be real, manifesting itself in his dreams through a fragment of his "original's" memories. In the closing scene, Lincoln and Jordan sail away on the boat for a new beginning.

Because the film adaptation of *Never Let Me Go* makes the boat a clearer symbol for the hope of escape than the novel does, director Romanek tempers this fantasy by adding a subtle detail to the everyday life of a clone: the characters are occasionally seen scanning their wrists at small devices positioned next to doors, presumably checking in and out whenever they enter or leave their places of residence. The devices are never mentioned or explained, but they serve as a reminder that the clones are never left completely on their own. It is unclear to what extent the clones are kept under surveillance, but the mere suggestion would complicate any attempts to

slip away quietly, presumably making the lack of escape attempts more understandable to viewers. On its own, though, it has not been enough to satisfy American audiences. Clones in *The Island* have electronic wrist bracelets, after all, and Lincoln has even been implanted with tiny robots that send information back to the facility. The difference is in the psychological factors that cause Ishiguro's clones to never consider the possibility of escape while Lincoln Six Echo perceives escape as a necessity.

Conclusion

Through demonstrating the humanity of the behaviors that lead the clones to inaction, *Never Let Me Go* sheds light on the ways passivity itself can be seen as distinctly human. Their strategies for facing death, like becoming gradually habituated, finding purpose in life, and seeking solace among friends, are frequently employed by humans in their struggles with mortality, and the resulting effects outweigh the need for resistance. Indeed, rather than diminishing the clones' humanity, their inaction functions to redefine the popular notions of humanity through a potentially disturbing reflection. While the rebellion and "triumph of the human spirit" depicted in *The Island* is certainly a part of the human experience (a brief look through history reveals enough evidence to support this claim), it is not *the* singular human experience; if the circumstances are right, people can and will remain passively complicit in their own suppression just as they become resigned to their own mortality. Kazuo Ishiguro's exploration of the human psyche goes where many people are unwilling to look, and for that reason it becomes unfamiliar and uncomfortable. It is important to be able to recognize vulnerability and interdependence, characteristics that are as much a part of being human as the contrasting strength and individual agency.

Works Cited

- Brock, Daniel. "The Continuum of Collective Action." *Peace Review* 13.2 (2001): 265-271. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 25 Nov. 2012.
- Eatough, Matthew. "The Time that Remains: Organ Donation, Temporal Duration, and Bildung in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Literature and Medicine* 29.1 (2011): 132-160. *Project Muse*. Web. 14 Nov. 2012.
- Emmons, Robert A. "Striving for the Sacred: Personal Goals, Life Meaning, and Religion." *Journal of Social Issues* 61.4 (2005). 731-745. *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 3 Apr. 2013.
- Gonick, Lev and Isaac Prilleltensky. "Politics Change, Oppression Remains: On the Psychology and Politics of Oppression." *Political Psychology* 17.1 (1996): 127-148. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 Nov. 2012.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo and John Mullan. "Kazuo Ishiguro talks to John Mullan." *The Guardian*. n.p., 23 Mar. 2012. Web. 14 Nov. 2012. <http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/culture/culture/archives/2006/03/23/guardian_book_club_kazuo_ishiguro_talks_to_john_mullan.html>.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. 2005. New York: Vintage Books, 2006. Print.
- The Island*. Dir. Michael Bay. Dreamworks, 2005. DVD.
- Jerng, Mark. "Giving Form to Life: Cloning and Narrative Expectations of the Human." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 6.2 (2008): 369-393. *Project Muse*. Web. 14 Nov. 2012.
- Never Let Me Go*. Dir. Mark Romanek. Fox, 2010. DVD.
- Nielson, Cynthia R. "Resistance is Not Futile: Frederick Douglass on Panoptic Plantations and the Un-Making of Docile Bodies and Enslaved Souls." *Philosophy and Literature* 35.2 (2011). *Project Muse*. Web. 3 Apr. 2013.

- Pierce, Nev and Mark Romanek. "Mark Romanek: Never Let Me Go." *Empire*. Bauer Consumer Media, n.d. Web. 14 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.empireonline.com/interviews/interview.asp?IID=1192>>.
- Tsao, Tiffany. "The Tyranny of Purpose: Religion and Biotechnology in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Literature and Theology* 26.2 (2012). 214-232. *Oxford Journals*. Web. 15 Feb. 2013.
- Willis, Clarissa A. "The Grieving Process in Children: Strategies for Understanding, Educating, and Reconciling Children's Perceptions of Death." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 29.4 (2002): 221-226. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.
- Wolf, Charlotte. "Legitimation of Oppression: Response and Reflexivity." *Symbolic Interaction* 9.2 (1986): 217-234. Print.