

# The role of Hailsham in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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## Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro often explores the past of his elderly protagonists and how their pasts shape the present and future. For example, Masuji Ono struggles with the memory of his wartime actions and its repercussions in *An Artist of the Floating World* while Stevens in *Remains of the Day* tries to justify his passive and supportive role of his Nazi sympathizer employer. In later life, they experience regrets for their pasts but they both have had the ability to make their own choices. In *Never Let Me Go*, however, Ishiguro chooses to explore the point of view of a much younger protagonist who also happens to be a clone, a product of genetic engineering. Clones are created for the purpose of surrendering their organs to extend the lives of normal human beings. Kathy H. has a predetermined fate where she becomes first a carer of donors and then a donor herself, likely to die at an early age. In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro makes his foray into the genre of science fiction yet chooses to set the story not into a distant future but the recent past of the 1990's. Liani Lochner sees this as Ishiguro's deliberate avoidance of the science fiction genre's tendency to serve as a cautionary tale against a "scientific 'utopia' by projecting present developments imaginatively into the future" (226). Instead, Ishiguro admits that he "was interested in the *human* capacity to accept what must seem like a limited and cruel fate" (my italics). Through Kathy's early life at Hailsham, Ishiguro reveals her humanity, what defines her, shapes her, and allows her to accept her destiny. Hailsham is what makes her into what she is and how she sees herself.

## I. Hailsham versus the Outside World

To any reader of Dickens, the name of "Hailsham" immediately brings to mind Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations*, and the idea of something being a sham, a fake. Indeed, Margaret Atwood in her review of *Never Let Me Go*, comments about the name, "As in 'sham'; as in Charles Dickens' Miss Havisham, exploiter of children." Additionally, the word "hail" meaning "Look!" in combination with "sham," suggest that the sham is a recognized reality as in "Hail the sham!" The teachers are called "guardians" while their charges are called "students" which mixes an aspect of family and home with education. The guardians are referred to by their first names preceded by "Miss" which gives them the authority of a titles of respect, but they also have the same anonymity as the students, since their surnames are not used. The first name of a mysterious French or Belgian woman, called "Madame" by the students, is not revealed until the end of the story. We can speculate that this may be that they do not want to be known to their students since Kathy knows of no other way to call them nor to the outside world as being associated with Hailsham. Indeed, the students have to track down Madame's whereabouts later to find out the truth about a rumor and discover Hailsham's true purpose. The absence of surnames for the students carries different meaning in that they have no parents and no family. Thus, there is nothing to distinguish them from other clones with the same first names except that they are students from Hailsham.

Hailsham is located somewhere in England but even Kathy cannot recall the precise place. In her role as a carer, she has opportunities to drive around England, and at these times she looks for Hailsham which has since been closed, but can never find it. She describes Hailsham's location in the following way:

Hailsham stood in a smooth hollow with fields rising on all sides. That meant that from almost any of the classroom

windows in the main house—and even from the pavilion—you had a good view of the long narrow road that came down across the fields and arrived at the main gate. The gate itself was still a fair distance off, and any vehicle would then have to take the graveled drive, going past shrubs and flowerbeds, before at last reaching the courtyard in front of the main house. (34)

While the physical location of Hailsham offers a clear view from the house to the outside, the main building is somewhat removed. However, the most impressive and frightening feature Kathy describes is beyond its walls:

The woods were at the top of the hill that rose behind Hailsham House. All we could see really was a dark fringe of trees, but I certainly wasn't the only one of my age to feel their presence day and night. When it got bad, it was like they cast a shadow over the whole of Hailsham; all you had to do was turn your head or move toward a window and there they'd be, looming in the distance. Safest was the front of the main house, because you couldn't see them from any of the windows. Even so, you never really got away from them. (50)

Students talk amongst themselves about rumored horror stories about what happened to students that went beyond the boundaries of Hailsham into the woods. Kathy recalls hearing about a young boy who ran off and was later discovered mutilated and tied to a tree and of a girl's ghost wandering in the trees when she was locked outside as punishment. The guardians never dispel such rumors as they serve the purpose of instilling fear of the outside world. From childhood, the students view Hailsham as a safe place and the outside world as a scary, dangerous place. This ensures that the students remain compliant and reluctant to run away from Hailsham. The shadow over Hailsham that cannot be escaped can be seen as a metaphor for the students' equally unescapable fates and for where the students live, hidden on the outskirts of normal human society.

Although they are not allowed to explore the outside world during their time at Hailsham, Miss Emily teaches them about the different counties of England, using maps and photographs, in preparation for when they become carers. However, when it came to Norfolk, Miss Emily shows no pictures. Although these lectures were repeatedly given, she never bothered to find photos of Norfolk and she only vaguely describes it as "(v)ery nice" and, oddly enough, "something of a lost corner... where all the lost property found in the country ended up" (65-66). Norfolk becomes a magical place to Kathy and her friends, Ruth and Tommy, and because they could imagine the place for themselves. They had a theory that Norfolk was simply a grander version of Hailsham where "vehicles moving all over England, delivering anything left behind in fields and trains to this place called Norfolk." Kathy continues her description in the following way:

(A)t that stage of our lives, any place beyond Hailsham was like a fantasy land; we had only the haziest notions of the world outside and about what was and wasn't possible there... What was important to us... was that 'when we lost something precious, and we'd looked and looked and still couldn't find it, then we didn't have to be completely heartbroken. We still had that last bit of comfort, thinking one day, when we were grown up, and we were free to travel around the country, we could always go and find it in Norfolk (66).

Kathy ties Hailsham and Norfolk together as homey places where lost things can be found again. When Kathy loses her precious tape, she jokingly assumes it is in Norfolk. Ironically, when she takes a trip there with Ruth and Tommy to search for Ruth's "possible" (the human being whose DNA was used to create her) Tommy finds a copy of the same tape in a second-hand store. However, Norfolk is also the place that proves to the Hailsham students that they are not as special as they were taught. The outside world forces upon them knowledge which they cannot get from Hailsham.

## II. Hailsham's Guardians and Unspoken Rules

The guardians at Hailsham represented the chief exposure of the students to non-clone human beings. Since the students did not have parents or relatives, they were raised by the guardians who were also their teachers. Looking back at her time at Hailsham, Kathy sees the guardian's work was to prepare them for their role in society as involuntary donors of organs. The job of teaching was of lesser importance and as Andy Sawyer remarks, their "early education was highly controlled" (241). The guardians control both the flow of information regarding their futures and how it is conveyed. Kelly Rich in her paper about Hailsham as a part of infrastructure, refers to the use of euphemisms such as "donor," "carer," and "completion" as "a means of masking the cold reality of the clones' lives" (633). In addition, the students implicitly understand that they are not to discuss or ask about certain topics with the guardians. Kathy

understands these unspoken rules by watching for the negative reactions of the guardians when other students bring up the taboo topics. Since she fears breaking these rules because this would upset the guardians, she does not actively pursue the truth. Instead, she recognizes and simply accepts that some things are simply "told and not told." In short, the major role of guardians is to keep them from the truth. In this sense, the word "guardian" is accurate because they guard the students from a truth that is too terrible to discuss. Also, by guarding them from this knowledge, the students can live happily in a kind of Garden of Eden, innocent of the truth and doomed to learn it once they are sent away from Hailsham. This is the rationalization that Miss Emily and Madame later give for their silence.

Miss Emily is the head guardian and the oldest one and, while the strictest, she was the one that made them feel most safe at Hailsham (39). She is the main disciplinarian who scolds the students into good behavior, warning them for being "unworthy of privilege." This kind of phrase is incomprehensible to the students until after they leave Hailsham. Miss Emily's consistent message to the students is that they "were all very special, being Hailsham students" and tries to instill them a sense of pride of who they are (43). Although Hailsham is supposed to be a place of learning, the students are not allowed to develop critical thinking skills, such as the ability to separate facts from misinformation so they can come to reasonable conclusions. Instead, they are encouraged to focus only on insignificant topics that directly relate to their current lives at Hailsham. For example, Miss Lucy willingly accepts a change of topic from discussing a play-reading in favor of the students' more practical desire to debate the issue of tokens. However, they are not allowed to discuss why they are required to produce art or where the art taken by Madame eventually goes. Instead, the students speculate that Madame has a gallery where their work is exhibited. They do not speculate as to the purpose of their art being exhibited. Later, the students hear a rumor that if a couple can prove they are truly in love, they will be given a few years together, a deferral, before beginning the path from carer to donor. They also suspect that the art they are creating has some connection to obtaining such a deferral. The students attempt to fill in the gaps in information with rumors and speculation which the guardians do not confirm or deny.

The guardians do not have a completely united front in terms of their policy of "told and not told." Miss Lucy is the rebel among them, and she struggles with hiding the truth. When she admits the hypocrisy of lecturing the students not to smoke even though she herself has smoked in the past, she adds "But what you must understand is that for you, for all of you, it's much, much worse to smoke that it ever was for me" and finishes by weakly parroting the words of Miss Emily "You've been told about it. You're students. You're... *special*" (68). She uses this euphemism instead stating the brutal fact that they are future organ donors and as such are required to take extra care of their physical health; their regular weekly checkups at Hailsham serve to emphasize this point. Miss Emily believes that she is doing the right thing in not telling them the truth, as she later explains to Kathy and Tommy. They learn about the difference of opinion between Miss Emily and Miss Lucy which resulted in Miss Lucy's termination:

You see, we were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by sheltering you. Hailsham would not have been Hailsham if we hadn't. Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. Yes, in many ways, we fooled you... But we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods. Lucy was well meaning enough. But if she'd had her way, your happiness at Hailsham would have been shattered... You wouldn't be who you are today if we'd not protected you. You wouldn't have become absorbed in your lessons, you wouldn't have lost yourselves in your art and your writing. Why should you have done, knowing what lay in store for each of you? You would have told us it was all pointless, and how could we have argued with you? So, she had to go. (268)

At first, Miss Emily struggles to justify her actions, asserting that she has given them "something" valuable but as she continues her explanation, she points out that this something was their happy childhoods and that they would have been unable to have such an interlude where they could focus on their studies and their art. However, this is a self-serving comment in that had they been frank with the truth, the students would not have been so well-behaved and would certainly have rebelled and tried to escape. By lying to the students through omission, their jobs as guards was easier. In this way, Hailsham was a gilded cage or prison to hold the students until they came of age for becoming carers and donors.

The original intent for Hailsham was to show the public that clones were human and should be treated humanely. The guardians required the students to produce art as a proof that they had souls and were human. Ordinary housing

facilities for clones had by implication much more squalid conditions as Miss Emily tells Kathy and Tommy that they “grew up in wonderful surroundings and... were kept away from the worst of those horrors” (261). Establishment of places like Hailsham were promoted by people with more liberal and humanitarian views toward clones or crises of conscience considering that society was breeding a group of people forced into self-sacrifice. People like Miss Emily wanted to provide them an existence beyond simply supplying medical science. This explained why the students were required to produce art and thus prove that if clones were “reared in a humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being” (261). Though Ishiguro does not dive into the morality of cloning and using clones as donors, the fact that alternative facilities like Hailsham where clones were treated more kindly certainly would demonstrate that such debates were taking place. Rich asserts that the closure of “privately funded ‘privileged estates’ signals an imminently bleak future, one stripped of all acculturating facilities and left with only the barest form of infrastructure” (633). Thus, the closure of Hailsham shows that the debate over more humane treatment of the clones was over. The Morningdale scandal concerning manipulation of genes to create children with superior abilities, “a generation of created children” ensured the loss of support for more humane treatment of clones because as Miss Emily explains “(t)he world didn’t want to be reminded how the donation programme really worked. They didn’t want to think about you students, or about the conditions you were brought up in. In other words, my dears, they wanted you back in the shadows” (264). This idea reminded people of the fear they had always had, even about the very clones that could save their lives. Thus, while Madame and Miss Emily represent the more sympathetic members of society and, as much as they worked to do what they considered best for the students, they could not get over their true feelings toward them. In defense of Madame, Miss Emily tells Kathy and Tommy:

Marie-Claude has given everything for you. She has worked and worked and worked. Make no mistake about it, my child, Marie-Claude is on your side and will always be on your side. Is she afraid of you? We’re all afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you all almost every day I was at Hailsham. There were times I’d look down at you all from my study window and I’d feel such revulsion... But I was determined not to let my feelings stop me doing what was right. I fought those feelings and I won. (269)

The guardians knew that the students were clones and had to fight their own feelings to do the right thing. Kathy instinctively knew this as she remembers waiting for that defining moment “when you realise that you really are different to them; that there are people like Madame, who don’t hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you—of how you were brought into this world and why—and who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. (36) However, people in the outside, such as in Norfolk, did not recognize them as clones. In fact, they could not distinguish Kathy and Tommy from other people, as one woman at the art gallery asks them if they were art students. The clones are clearly segregated from normal human beings, living in a different world where they occasionally encounter non-clone human beings. Since only guardians and other employees at Hailsham have contact with them, people on the outside know little about the clones; it is thus easy not to care about what circumstances they are living under or to see them as individual human beings. In the society of clones, the thing that sets Kathy and her classmates apart is that they are from Hailsham.

### **III. How Hailsham and Its Teachings Define and Influence Kathy**

Kathy starts her story about her early life in the present as a carer and she immediately defines herself through her job and through her affiliation with Hailsham. Once she has left the shelter of her old home, she realizes that being a student of Hailsham carries some prestige:

... I’m a Hailsham student—which is enough by itself sometimes to get people’s backs up. Kathy H., they say, she gets to pick and choose, and she always chooses her own kind, people from Hailsham, or one of the other privileged estates. No wonder she has a great record. (2)

While she is deprived of a surname and the sense of identity that it entails, being a graduate of Hailsham has meaning because it is a “privileged estate” and therefore students from there are a kind of upper class that others immediately respect. Clones from other institutions feel both awe and envy toward Kathy.

Kathy first realizes the reputation of Hailsham when she leaves to live at the Cottages. There she first encounters

other clones that came from other institutions. Chrissie, a veteran at the Cottages, appears to have both an interest in and an inferiority complex towards Hailsham. Kathy notices that "(t)here was something odd about the way she was always mentioning the fact that we'd come from Hailsham, like that could explain almost anything to do with us. And she was always asking us questions about Hailsham—about little details, much like my donors do now—and although she tried to make out these were very casual, I could see there was a whole other dimension to her interest" (141). Chrissie listens to Ruth's dream of an alternate future as an office worker and assumes that it might be possible given that Ruth was from Hailsham. Ruth feeds Chrissie's false assumptions, deceiving her in a similar way that the guardians had done to the students at Hailsham by implication and lack of denial (145). Kathy notices this behavior but does not contradict the misinformation about Hailsham and its students. Both Kathy and Ruth are reluctant to say anything that goes against the idea that they are special and end up being faithful to the lies in which they were brought up.

On the other hand, Ruth does not hesitate to throw away her personal belongings from Hailsham and shows a desire to move on from Hailsham, "to grow up and leave Hailsham behind" while Kathy clings to her collection of things from Hailsham and tends to socialize mainly with Hailsham students. Hailsham is a part of her and she never wants to let it go. A metaphor for Kathy's feelings toward Hailsham is the scene in which she dances around with a make-believe baby in her arms, singing the lyrics to her favorite song "Never Let Me Go." Miss Emily who witnesses Kathy dancing weeps and explains her reaction to Kathy later:

I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go. That is what I saw. (272)

Miss Emily saw it as her responsibility to preserve that kind world and to protect children like Kathy. A lot at Hailsham is make-believe and unsubstantiated rumors, but Miss Emily's rationalization that not refuting them they could enjoy a harmonious childhood cannot be denied. The "told and not told" policy at Hailsham normalized the fates of the students, rendering them unable to conceive of any other alternatives other than a slim hope of a short reprieve. Even in smaller scale conflicts, Kathy is unable to stand for herself. When Ruth attempts to alienate Tommy from Kathy by revealing a confidence, Kathy first considers arguing, but ultimately finds that "something in (her) just gave up" (195). This passive acceptance and refusal to fight for herself is what she has learned at Hailsham. Instead of confronting Ruth, Kathy chooses to leave the Cottages and become a carer.

Kathy has some pride about her abilities as a carer, and it gives her life meaning. She is skilled enough that she has continued to this job for 11 years, which is unusual. Kathy admits that her work is important to her and how she finds her own self-worth from it:

So, I'm not trying to boast. But then I do know for a fact they've been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have, too. My donors have always tended to do much better than expected... (I)t means a lot to me, being able to do my work well, especially that bit about my donors staying 'calm.' I've developed a kind of instinct around donors. I know when to hang around and comfort them, when to leave them to themselves, when to listen to everything they have to say, and when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it (3).

In this capacity, she has many opportunities to take care of donors both from Hailsham and other institutions. When she becomes acquainted with her donors, she mentions coming from Hailsham. Kathy recalls a donor, struggling from his third donation, and his interest in Hailsham:

He could hardly breathe, but he looked towards me and said: 'Hailsham. I bet that was a beautiful place.' ... I asked where he'd grown up, he mentioned some place in Dorset and his face beneath the blotches went into a completely new kind of grimace. And I realized then how desperately he didn't want reminding. Instead, he wanted to hear about Hailsham... What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to remember Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood. He knew he was close to completing and so that's what he was doing: getting me to describe things to him, so they'd really sink in, so that maybe during those sleepless nights, with the drugs and the pain and the exhaustion, the line would blur between what my memories were and what were his (5).

Although this young man had never been there, he has a romantic image of Hailsham as being a wonderful place to grow up, in stark contrast to where he has come from. He wanted Kathy to fill in the details, so that he could imagine



that those memories were his, instead of his actual ones. Just as the guardians had insisted to Kathy and her classmates, other clones have heard that Hailsham is a special place, and Kathy realizes just how lucky she had been to grow up there.

### Conclusion

The sham of Hailsham with its dismissal of truth and policy of guarding the clones with misguided kindness deprives them of any agency in their lives. People with good intentions like Miss Emily and Madame argue for better treatment of clones and recognition of their humanity; however, this does not change what will happen to them nor does it change how non-clone human beings feel repulsion towards this lower-class of people living on the fringe of society. For Kathy, the only control she can exercise in her adult life as a carer is to carry out her duty with as much empathy as possible and choose ex-Hailsham students as donors. Even though it is a minuscule amount of freedom, it is meaningful to Kathy because it allows her to relive the idyllic days of her childhood. Although her childhood home is closed, she can still cling onto those memories, just like the young donor who requested that she share every detail of her life there. Kathy is not the only Hailsham student who has not forgotten:

You still hear stories about some ex-Hailsham student trying to find it, or rather the place where it used to be. And the odd rumour will go around sometimes about what Hailsham's become these days—a hotel, a school, a ruin. Myself, for all the driving I do, I've never tried to find it. I'm not really interested in seeing it, whatever way it is now." (286)

It is not the physical buildings or place that she misses as she prefers her image or memory of Hailsham. Although she will never return to the actual site, she is determined to hold onto her memories to give her strength in the coming days. Kathy's view of her future is that once she is a donor "I'll have Hailsham with me safely in my head and that'll be something no one can take away." (287) Hailsham has an irresistible hold on Kathy, defines who she is and how she lives her life, and symbolizes the happy and innocent memories of her youth with Ruth and Tommy. Knowledge and truth can be a double-edged sword and, while she is disappointed when she discovers that the hope of a reprieve was merely a long-standing rumor, she accepts it in the fatalistic manner she has always done from her childhood experiences at Hailsham. She has never truly left Hailsham behind: Kathy's attachment to Hailsham is perfectly summed up by the title *Never Let Me Go* and she bravely lives within the confines of her pre-determined fate with calm acceptance.

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