The Potential of Art as a Means to Keep Inner Freedom in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential of art in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* as a way of keeping inner freedom used by clones that are grown to harvest vital organs. In a facility called Hailsham, they are taught the importance of art. One of the teachers tells them that art shows the inside of their souls. However, the fact is different from what they are told. The works of art by students do not tell the details of their souls but just prove that they have a soul. These facts seem to indicate that art is not a direct medium to reveal the creator’s inner life.

According to Walter Benjamin’s discussion, there are two different functions of language: the communication and the symbolic functions. He firstly points to the function of language as a medium to convey what a person has in his or her mind. He supposes that another function of language is to represent what is indescribable directly. Benjamin initially names this “the language of sculpture or painting.” Therefore, if we consider the function of art in *Never*, we can define that it can represent what language fundamentally cannot tell. In other words, one can indirectly express the inner truth of him/herself without being known directly by others. In this sense, this novel shows a possibility that art works as a means to keep one’s inner truth hidden from others.

One of the critical terms most commonly applied to Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels is that of “unreliable narration,” though at times this can sound cliché. When readers find a narrator’s words unreliable, they cast doubt on them “retrospectively” (Rimmon-Kenan 101). The narrators of Ishiguro’s novels are never reticent, but sometimes they are too eloquent about their duties, values, or lives. However, their words have meanings beyond their literal meaning, which produces a disconnection between the words and the intentions of the
narrators. This disconnection can ultimately cast doubt on the author. Wareing refers to Ishiguro's tendency to dress in black whenever he appears in public, and points out that his words and manner in interviews are both "clear cut" and "complex" (Interview, Wareing) like the narration of his novels.

When we consider whether a narrative is reliable or not, we focus mainly on the credibility of the language as a medium through which inner thoughts or feelings are represented. In addition, as discussed in detail below, creative activity sometimes plays an important role in Ishiguro's novels. Emphasis is put not only on the power of works of art to move people but also on the way a piece of work represents the internal world of its creator, which seems to have a deep connection with the nature of the narratives in his novels.

In order to explore the relationship between the narrator and his words, we will examine Ishiguro's sixth novel, Never Let Me Go. The choice of subject may seem unconventional because Ishiguro explains that the narration of Never is far from unreliable\(^2\). Furthermore, the conditions in which the characters find themselves do not allow them to develop their singularity. Many of the characters are clones who are produced from the cells of people outside their community for the purpose of organ transplantation. All of them are raised in a facility under the supervision of administrators, and there is never any exception to the clones' fate. It seems difficult in such a situation to imagine how the uniqueness of each person might be expressed. However, I would like to focus on the small but significant resistance the clones show to their fate in Never, which is seen in the curious episode concerning a rumor about the deferral of a donation, in which artworks play an important role. This seems to infer the possibility of art as a means of offering resistance on behalf of the subjects to the domination of the rulers in order to keep inner freedom of a person.

As discussed later, I would refer to Walter Benjamin's theory of language concerning the representative function of art to clarify how artwork acts as a medium through which the content of the creator's mind is represented and kept safe from outside.

**Clones' Moderate Resistance in Absolute Passiveness**

Some commonly heard negative comments on Never are about the passive nature of the characters, which could also be perceived in a more positive light as tolerance. It is possible that many readers of this novel are puzzled by the stoicism of the clones who calmly accept their peculiarly cruel fates of organ transplantations.
These clones, including the narrator Kathy and her friends Ruth and Tommy, are raised as children in an institution called Hailsham, which is a facility designed to develop the clones to make them suitable donors. For instance, children are taught by the teachers, who are called “guardians” in the novel, not to smoke in order to keep their insides clean. The curriculum includes informing the children about their futures as organ donors, but despite the stunning truth, they calmly accept the reality and live apparently normal lives.

The clones seemingly have no intention of attempting to escape their fate even though they are not completely confined inside Hailsham. They can go outside if they wish. In fact, Kathy, Ruth, Tommy, and some of their seniors drive to the east of Norfolk to look for the original source, called “possible” in the novel, of the cells used to clone Ruth. This seems the ideal chance to escape their destiny. However, they go back to Hailsham after their pursuit of the possible of Ruth. Even when they start “donations,” none of the clones intends to refuse. Their only concern is how many operations they will undergo before they become “complete.” Some of them feel they will be heroes if they can survive a fourth operation.

Critics have confessed to feeling unsettled by the ethics governing the clones’ actions and judgment. Bev Vincent describes the oddness of the situation:

The students develop theories and propagate rumors. Their best artwork is spirited away to a mythical Gallery by a woman they call Madame. They fantasize about their “possibles” and wonder if their own lives might follow the same track as these hypothetical people. Students who demonstrate they are truly in love believe they might get a deferral. They debate among themselves, but rarely ask the most fundamental question: Must they follow blindly like sheep the course society has set for them?

(Vincent, underline mine)

Another review of Never observes that they “have access to cars and money, but it never occurs to them to run away. They face it all with stoicism, a distressing dedication to the donor ethic” (Daily Telegraph).

Kazuo Ishiguro has explained the so-called obedience of the characters, and he does not think it important that the clones in the novel do not rebel against their fate: “I was much more interested in the extent to which we accepted our fates, the kind of lives we were allowed to live as people, rather than focus on the rebellious spirit we gain and try to move out of our lives” (Shaffer 215).
Ishiguro is rather more interested in how they cope with the situation in which they find themselves. He also considers the lives of the clones to be essentially similar to those that all of us lead—neither more nor less limited.

I didn’t want them to worry about how to escape. I wanted their concerns to be more or less the same ones that all people had. What are the things important to us while we are here? How do we fit things like love, work, and friendship into what is a surprisingly short period of time? (Shaffer 214)

The only resistance the clones show to their destiny in the novel is that they try to get “deferrals” of their donations. When they hear the rumor about a deferral, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth are not especially interested in it at that time. However, nearly twenty years after leaving Hailsham, Kathy and Tommy try to get a deferral by presenting to evidence that proves they are really in love. They locate and visit Madame, the principal of Hailsham during their time there, and ask for the truth about deferral. To their disappointment, Madame and Miss Emily, one of the former guardians, who now lives with her, tell them there is no such thing:

Then Tommy said:

‘So there’s definitely nothing. No deferral, nothing like that.’

‘Tommy,’ I murmured, and glared at him. But Miss Emily said gently:

‘No, Tommy. There’s nothing like that. Your life must now run the course that’s been set for it.

(Never 243)

Even after this dismaying revelation, Kathy and Tommy return to the medical facility, where Tommy is prepared for a donation. Then Tommy receives a fourth operation and dies. We imagine Kathy’s life will take the same course.

It seems reasonable to consider the clones’ attempt to obtain a deferral as a gesture of moderate resistance to their fate. While the clones do not intend to escape from their “donations,” Kathy and Tommy take artworks that Tommy has drawn as evidence that they are truly in love when they ask for a deferral. How does the artwork of the clones represent a form of resistance to their destiny? The view of art that Ishiguro cultivates in Never seems to be one in which art offers the potential of freedom under extremely limiting conditions.
The Importance of Creative Imagination

In their confined situation, the pupils at Hailsham develop their imaginations in order to go beyond the geographical boundaries of the institution. They make up many kinds of horrible stories about the woods or the fences surrounding Hailsham (Never 46–47). Furthermore, the curriculum at Hailsham emphasizes on art forms such as literature and drawing. The children have a gathering called “the Exchange” at which they trade each other’s artworks such as “[p]aintings, drawings, pottery; all sorts of ‘sculptures’ made from whatever was the craze of the day—bashed-up cans, maybe, or bottle tops stuck onto cardboard” (Never 15). Through the Exchange these things may become “private treasures” (Never 15) for them. The power of imagination and creativity of each individual is considered important and affects the relationships among students: “A lot of the time, how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at ‘creating’” (Never 15). In other words, if a student at Hailsham is a poor artist, he or she will tend to be disregarded. Actually, Tommy was once such a child, and he was bullied because he was not good at drawing (Never 18–19).

The importance of the role of the students’ works of art in Hailsham is revealed when a guardian says to the children, “things like pictures, poetry, all that kind of stuff, she said they revealed what you were like inside. She said they revealed your soul” (Never 160, emphasis original).

In Hailsham, many of the students believe that these works of art are connected to the creators’ inner life and show their inner truth to some degree. Furthermore, some of their best works are said to have been taken away and collected by Madame. Tommy mixes this rumor with another about the deferral of the operation and conjures up a “gallery theory”:

Madame’s got a gallery somewhere filled with stuff by students from when they were tiny. Suppose two people come up and say they’re in love. She can find the art they’ve done over years and years. She can see if they go. If they match. Don’t forget, Kath, what she’s got reveals our souls. (Never 161)

His gallery theory emphasizes the function of art to compress and reveal a part of the creator’s soul. However, the true relationship between art and soul remains uncertain while the children are living in Hailsham.
Art is considered important in Hailsham, but the true reason for this differs in a small but crucial way from what Tommy and Kathy assume. At their reunion with Madame years later, Tommy explains what he thought about her gallery and the deferral. After listening to Tommy, Madame tells them the true reason why the students’ artworks were collected:

You said it was because your art would reveal what you were like. What you were like inside. That’s what you said, wasn’t it? Well, you weren’t far wrong about that. 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.* (Never 238, emphasis original)

Her correction in the last sentence cited above implies an important fact about the function of art, or the relationship between an artwork and its creator in the novel. Madame suggests that an artwork simply shows that a person has a soul, but it does not reveal its inner depths. This means that the paintings Tommy has brought never prove he and Kathy are really in love as they expected. Madame suggests that they have expected too much of art. Ishiguro has expressed similar ideas about art in interviews:

I’ve always been aware that art is one of the major ways in which we try to give meaning to our lives. In this book the art doesn’t do that; it doesn’t help them in a practical sense. It’s the same with love, because love and art—and by art I mean anything that’s a vehicle for expression or that gives people a sense of meaning—are two things in life that we focus on because they give us a sense of dignity and achievement. Sometimes we try to believe that they can achieve more than they actually can. (Interview, Gleeson)

It seems appropriate to state that art is an imperfect medium through which to represent the interior life of a person. However, we want to believe that, though art cannot directly reveal the inner nature of a person, it does at least offer the possibility of representing his or her soul.

As we have seen, Tommy was bullied at Hailsham because he was not good at painting. However, his talent for drawing blossomed when he grew up and moved to another educational facility called the Cottages with some other students, including Kathy and Ruth. One day Kathy finds Tommy laboring at drawing “imaginary animals”:
The first impression was like one you’d get if you took the back off a radio set: tiny canals, weaving tendons, miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive precision, and only when you held the page away could you see it was some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird. (Never 171)

They are so descriptively drawn that Kathy is really impressed with them, but however well-drawn they are, we cannot say, according to Madame, that these paintings are connected to or represent some part of Tommy’s soul. Tommy keeps his imaginary animal drawings after he has grown up and become a donor. Kathy feels that his drawings have lost a certain aura:

It came to me that Tommy’s drawings weren’t as fresh now. Okay, in many ways these frogs were a lot like what I’d seen back at the Cottages. But something was definitely gone, and they looked laboured, almost like they’d been copied. So that feeling came again, even though I tried to keep it out: that we were doing all of this too late. (Never 221)

It may be inappropriate to assume that his paintings at this time are flawed compared to what they used to be because, according to what Madame says to Tommy, art is never essentially suited as a medium to directly represent the inner depths of one’s soul. In other words, even countless paintings of imaginary animals cannot be integrated into some part of Tommy’s soul.

Next, I will consider the possibility that the function of art is to represent the creator’s inner truth. As we have seen, the idea that art reveals what the creator’s soul is like tempts Tommy to bring his drawings of imaginary animals to Madame to ask for a deferral. Tommy and Kathy’s attempt to obtain a deferral may seem a failure if we expect art as a medium to directly or partly reveal the creator’s inner life. However, art offers another possibility as a medium of representation and communication in Never.

The clones believe what a guardian says to them about art as representation, but such statements have already been gainsaid from the beginning. In addition, the author seems not to place any emphasis on the power of art as a direct representation of a person’s inner life. Despite this, there remains the question of the characters’ attachment to their works of art. As the Exchange shows, there is something that makes the children enthusiastic about other people’s artworks, even though they are not directly connected to the creators’ inner being.
Some students at Hailsham still keep poems or drawings made by others as treasures after they have grown up.

These works of art become tokens of the life they spent there with other people, although they cannot directly be connected to the inner life of their creators. It could also be said that an artwork is tightly woven into another person's subjectivity despite the fact that the other's inner reality cannot be communicated. Such a relationship seems at first to be a superficial and self-righteous one, based on a misunderstanding of other people, but another unusual potential of communication with the other exists beyond this gap.

Representation and Communication

Walter Benjamin defines the two functions of language as the communication and the symbolic functions. In an essay entitled “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” he points to the function of language as a medium to convey what a person has in his or her mind. He supposes that another function of language is to represent what is indescribable directly. Benjamin initially names this “the language of sculpture or painting”:

There is a language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry. Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the name language of man, it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into infinitely higher language, which may still be of the same sphere. (Benjamin 330)

As he carefully compares the language of sculpture and painting to that of poetry, Benjamin neither intends to differentiate the function of language from other art forms of representation, nor insists that sculpture and painting can represent what language cannot. He persists in classifying the functions of language in terms of a communication function and a symbolic function. In this sense, even a simple expression can have two ways of meaning: lateral meaning and symbolic or metaphorical meaning. The expression “thing-language,” suggests that Benjamin is attempting to introduce a significant factor into language that we usually utilize to communicate in lateral way:

Language is in every case not only of communication of the communicable but also, at
the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable. This symbolic side of language is connected to its relation to signs, but extends more widely—for example, in certain respects to name and judgment. These have not only a communicating function, to which, at least explicitly, no reference has here been made. (Benjamin 331)

These communicative and symbolic functions of language can be related to the theme of art in Never that we have been studying.

Benjamin explains that the symbolic function of language implies something indescribable beyond it. In other words, people touch each other indirectly through this function of the language of art. We can say an unconventional style of communication is formed here. It is different from the communicative style in which the inner contents of a mind can be transferred to another person. In addition, it also seems possible to relate this function to the works of art in Never, which, according to Madame, simply show that the creator has a soul but does not reveal its depths. This shows that even a small piece of expression, a poem or a drawing, can have two different processes of telling meanings. The lateral process directly tells what the sender of the message has in his or her mind as well as the symbolic one infers that there is a different possibility that lateral way of communication cannot solely handle.

In the symbolic function of language, one cannot assume that what he or she receives from an artwork accords with what is inside its creator’s mind. This type of communication eccentrically connects the sender and the receiver of the message over the distance between them. We can find an example of this in Never in an episode concerned with a song titled “Never Let Me Go.” One day little Kathy was dancing to the song by herself in her room at Hailsham. She had an image in her mind of a woman who held a baby at her breast, a baby she had wanted to have for a long time. Then Kathy suddenly noticed that Madame was watching her, and Kathy saw that she was crying:

She [Madame] was out in the corridor, standing very still, her head angled to one side to give her a view of what I was doing inside. And the odd thing was she was crying. It might even have been one of her sobs that had come through the song to jerk me out of my dream. (Never 65)

When Kathy later talked with other pupils about this incident, they concluded that Madame read Kathy’s mind and was touched by the image she saw there.
When they meet again long after Kathy has left Hailsham, she asks Madame what she had been thinking that day, but their discussion reveals that they had different things in their minds at that time. Kathy tells Madame she had made up an original story of her own:

Because whatever the song was really about, in my head, when I was dancing, I had my own version. You see, I imagined it was about this woman who’d been told she couldn’t have babies. But then she’d had one, and she was so pleased, and she was holding it ever so tightly to her breast, really afraid something might separate them, and she’s going baby, baby, never let me go. That’s not what the song’s about at all, but that’s what I had in my mind.

(Never 248)

Then Madame denies that she directly read Kathy’s mind and tells her she was weeping for a “different reason” (Never 249).

When I watched you dancing that day, I saw something else. I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sickness. 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.

(Never 249)

The difference is that Kathy’s image of a baby is future-oriented, while Madame’s image of a girl holding the world of old values is retrospective or nostalgic. However, Madame insists that she was moved by the scene of Kathy’s dance in spite of the difference: “That is what I saw. It wasn’t really you, what you were doing, I know that. But I saw you and it broke my heart. And I’ve never forgotten.” (Never 249)

As we have discussed, Kathy’s dance has two processes of communication. Kathy and Madame can verbally explain what they had in mind at that time. Furthermore, her dance could jerk Madame’s tears in a different sense that Kathy did not intended. Their explanations reveal there was a misunderstanding between Kathy and Madame, but we cannot easily deny that there is also an emotional bond between them. Indeed, the emotional tie is built beyond such misunderstanding, which infers deep potential of communication that the lateral process cannot draw.
The Function of Art as a Way of Keeping Inner Freedom

If we assume that the language of art indirectly symbolizes what is unnarratable, as Benjamin has shown, we can more easily explain the forms of representation and communication presented in Never; especially the possibility that art can become a form of resistance for the clones to keep their inner self safe against their exploitation at the hands of the administrators.

The misunderstanding between Kathy and Madame over the song “Never Let Me Go” reveals that Madame and the guardians cannot grasp the experiences of the clones they have confined and controlled. In addition, Madame’s emphasis on the impossibility of reading people’s minds (Never 247) suggests the failure of such control. Therefore, it is quite natural for the administrators to think of art as an imperfect medium through which to seek to know what a person’s soul is like.

However, if Madame’s comments are considered from the clones’ perspective, art seems to hold out the hope of becoming free from the control and harsh conditions imposed by the administrators. Art can intimate that the clones have souls, but it cannot reveal those souls in any depth. In other words, the more works they create, the more the creators’ inner secrets are kept safe. In addition, after she lost Ruth and Tommy, Kathy emphasizes that she cherishes her own memories of Hailsham: “I’ll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that’ll be something no one can take away” (Never 262). Her memories are inner secrets, like her soul, and they can only be intuited through art, which is all that Kathy, who is deprived of everything and destined to have her vital organs harvested, is allowed to possess.

Ishiguro’s explanation that art does not work in a “practical sense” in Never can be contrasted with the ideal sense of art as a medium through which to represent the inner life of a person. However, when we introduce the notion of art as a means to symbolize what is unnarratable, we can gain a better understanding of the textual dynamics of this novel.

Notes

1 For the structural analysis of unreliable narration of each individual novel, see critics such as Wall on The Remains of the Day or Finney on When We Were Orphans.

2 “You see, in the past, my narrators were unreliable, not because they were lunatics, but because they were ordinarily self-deceiving ... Self-deception of that sort is common to most of us, and I really
wanted to explore this theme in my earlier books. But Never Let Me Go isn’t concerned with that kind of self-deception. So I needed my narrator to be different. An unreliable narrator here would just have got in the way.” (Interview, Random House, Inc.)

3 Rebecca Walkowitz points out that the mechanical descriptions of animals disable Kathy’s ability to see them as animals but as mere mechanisms (224–25). I referred to Tommy’s imaginary animals in a different context from hers. However, her discussion on them is profound because it infers the reduction of a whole organism into a collection of parts, like a clone that can be seen as an assembly of vital organs.

**Works Cited**


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