

“Back in the Shadows”: Passivity and Working-Class Injustices in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*

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A Quick Summary of the Novel

Set in a dystopian England in the 1990s, there is an elite and mysterious boarding school named Hailsham. Within these grounds live many children who are always told they are special and important, but they are never told why.

Their teachers (referred to as guardians) are there to keep them in the dark and unaware of the truth: they were made in test tubes in a lab. They are clones, and their sole purpose is to exist for organ harvesting.

Kathy H., the protagonist, has two best friends named Ruth and Tommy. Throughout the novel, they grow apart but are in different stages of their lives. The life of a clone is in three stages: a “carer”, a donor, and completing. A “carer” helps donors recover from each donation (removal of vital organs), donors “give” their organs, and completing is death. It is not a fair existence as they had no idea they were created for an awful life.

The clones are often treated as bugs and less than human by the humans in the novel even though the clones have feelings and emotions and act as the humans do. The only difference is they were created artificially.

Throughout the novel, Kathy H. and her friends Ruth and Tommy are reunited and spend their final days together. It is a heartfelt novel which speaks to real-life issues such as working-class injustice and the maltreatment of them by the elite humans. The novel ends with Ruth and Tommy’s death and Kathy preparing to become a donor and accepting her fate.

Secondary Materials and Sources

Louis Althusser: “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”
Hailsham is an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA).

Kathy H. is a product of this ISA.

At the school (the ISA), the students are taught how to behave, how to survive, and how to accept the system they live in as something normal and good.

The clones are constantly monitored by the guardians, their minds are heavily repressed by the apparatus, and students compete with each other to be selected as more special.

Anthony Giddens: “Power, the Dialect of Control and Class Structuration”

No matter how imbalanced the power relationship is between the worker (the clones) and the system (Hailsham), the clones retain a certain level of power according to Giddens’s theory of control. They have the power to smoke, harm their bodies, or kill themselves to escape their fate, but they never do.

The clones are the machine of production in this case. Their bodies are the product being sold.

The clones are made to be machines, and their lives were mapped out for them before they were even created. They are on a set path that they are unable to escape.

The Role of the Working-Class in the Novel

This project explores humanity’s passivity towards injustice within the context of modern labor in Ishiguro’s novel.

It also analyzes the dignity of human life as it relates to the working class and the willingness of others to minimize and ignore struggle.

Although a work of dystopian fiction, the lack of agency and enslavement to labor that the clones experience aligns to the real world.

Modern labor in society is explored through the novel.

The novel speaks to the struggle of the working class in a unique way while highlighting how capitalism trains children to believe the system they live in is normal and acceptable.

Although not traditional, the novel belongs to the working-class literature genre. Its focus on physical and emotional labor, an acceptance of unfair conditions, a sense of community among the students, and different class structures, make it a working-class novel.

“A page-turner and a heartbreaker, a tour de force of knotted tension and buried anguish.” — *TIME*



Never Let Me Go

A NOVEL

Kazuo Ishiguro

AUTHOR OF THE REMAINS OF THE DAY



The Injustices Endured by the Clones

There are many injustices endured by the clones in the novel. They have no autonomy or agency at all. The guardians at Hailsham make sure to teach them that adhering to the system is the only right path to follow. Their lives are predetermined and there is no way to escape their fate. They will be used by the elite, and they will die when their vital organs are taken from them.

Top Injustices:

- 1Lack of agency
- 2Inability to follow another path in life
- 3They are kept in the dark about the truth
- 4Enslaved to the organ harvesting system

The clones are exploited laborers who are unable to overcome their class standing and are taken advantage of in order for society to profit from their suffering. Their labor centers around caring for donors and then becoming donors themselves for the sake of protecting the upper class of humanity against disease. Their lives are mapped out and their futures are decided. Therefore, there is no room for change.



This is a still of Carey Mulligan, who played Kathy H. in the movie adaptation of the novel.



This is a still of Sally Hawkins, who plays Miss Lucy in the movie adaptation of the novel.

Passivity Towards the Clones in the Novel

This study creates a deeper understanding of what working-class writing is by analyzing the way capitalism trains the masses to accept and welcome the system they live in while conditioning others to turn a blind eye towards social inequity. The guardians have an ironic name because the term generally connotes caretaking and protecting. However, they do not care for the children as humans. They only care about defending and protecting the organ harvesting system that they are a part of.

They make the children compete against each other to earn their approval. Through art, the children are judged and ranked by the guardians. If they do well, that means they adapt to the system and are good at following instructions. They help train the children to not fight back.

The clones are never treated with any form of love by the guardians, and they are never shown any affection at all. The elite (humans) turn a blind eye to the suffering and injustice that the clones endure. They have no agency or free will whatsoever, and the guardians make sure that this system is maintained no matter how cruel it is.

This speaks to the real-world issues of the rich and powerful turning a blind eye to the suffering of impoverished or less than wealthy people in the world.

There is no compassion shown towards the clones because the guardians only view them as machines for organ harvesting.

Kathy H.

She is the novel’s protagonist and narrator. It is through her eyes that the story is told. When readers first meet her, she is a carer and is close to “completing,” or dying. Kathy H. is enslaved to the system and attended the special Hailsham school as a child.

Miss Lucy

She is one of the guardians at Hailsham. Her role is to keep the clones unaware of their fate. She is a slave to the system as well as an enabler of the injustices being done to the children. Unlike the other guardians, she feels the students deserve to know their unfortunate fate of being created for their organs.

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