

Untold and Unlived Lives in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff*

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In his article on "Unlived Lives," Burkhard Niederhoff examines the trope of the "unlived life" in two rather different works of literature, namely Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* and Tom Stoppard's play *The Invention of Love*. In my response, I will focus on the use of this theme in another novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005), that deals with similar themes and expands on them in an unexpected direction by transposing them into a science-fictional framework.

All of the four criteria that Niederhoff lists as typical of the motif of the unlived life, namely the presence of a counterfactual course of events, a retrospective focus, a sustained concentration on the retrospective reflection about the alternative life, and a deep involvement of the character or characters in such reflection, apply to this novel. At the same time, *Never Let Me Go* takes the notion of "unlived life" into an unexpected direction by situating the work within a non-realistic framework, a parallel reality with some science-fictional features, that further stresses the counterfactual nature of the story. This allows Ishiguro to question the nature of memory both from an epistemological perspective, through a sophisticated use of an unreliable narrator that ultimately questions the notions of personal and historical

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memory, and from an ontological one, challenging the very notion of individual identity.

In his essay, Niederhoff argues that, while the narrators' obsession with their past and lost opportunities in "unlived life" narratives may appear to be a "backward-looking, unproductive and unhealthy activity" (Niederhoff 179), this kind of narrative presents us with more than simple navel-gazing. By looking back at their life through the lens of alternative choices, the characters ultimately gain a greater degree of self-awareness. In my essay, I will build on Niederhoff's analysis and expand on it to consider the way in which in Ishiguro's more recent novel the protagonist's and other characters' retrospective look at their "unlived lives" invite a broader reflection on the connection between memory and agency (or lack thereof). In particular, I will focus on two apparently contradictory yet interrelated concepts: the idea of the inherent unreliability of memory, and the idea of memory as a source of solace in the face of disempowerment.

1. Those Aren't Your Memories

In the opening passage of *Never Let Me Go*, the narrator describes how one of the men in her care, on the verge of death, asks her to retell her childhood stories over and over again, as if he wanted to make them his own:

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 were my memories and what were his. (*Never Let Me Go* 6)

The connection between recollection and narration is a recurring theme in Ishiguro's oeuvre. As I discussed elsewhere, most of his works feature what can be described as an "unreliable narrator," and

such unreliability is generally premised on the idea of memory as an opaque filter between the narrator and his or her past (Suter).

With the exception of *The Unconsoled*, all of Ishiguro's novels are narrated retrospectively several years after the events, and the narrator makes repeated references to the act of remembering and its selective, biased nature. The texts are both reflective and self-reflexive, and the narrators constantly oscillate between downplaying and exalting the accuracy of their account, admitting that some of their recollections are very vague yet insisting that others are indisputably correct, which makes the reader doubt their overall reliability.

This creates a general sense of epistemological uncertainty, which sets the tone of the retrospective narrative and constructs a particular relationship with the reader, built on a tension between sympathy and distrust. One peculiar feature, which Niederhoff points out in his analysis, is that the narrators often retell episodes in completely different versions, something that further undermines their narrative reliability, while also ultimately questioning the possibility of any objective account of "facts." This retelling is an integral part of the process of reassessment of the narrator's life trajectory, and of the retrospective questioning of his choices. Yet this narrative strategy also leads to further confusion, both for the narrator and for the reader. Rather than shedding light on events, these reiterated accounts envelop them in layers of reticence and repression, making it impossible to reach any solid conclusion.

Never Let Me Go goes a step beyond the other novels in this respect, proposing memory also as a source of consolation for its disenfranchised characters. Going over memories of a happy past, even if, like in the case of the aforementioned patient, those memories are ostensibly manufactured, based on his "unlived life" rather than his actual one, becomes an important source of solace for the novel's protagonists in their attempt to cope with a tragic fate.

At the same time, similar to *The Remains of the Day*, the text also creates a peculiar connection with the reader through its use of narrative strategies, by assuming that the narratee, too, would perceive the

narrator's account "just like it had been his own childhood." This has a paradoxical effect of involvement and detachment on the reader, who cannot coincide with the implied narratee, yet is repeatedly addressed as such. *Never Let Me Go* constructs its narratee as someone who not only belongs to the diegesis, but is also a peer of the narrator. Such effect is enhanced by the general lack of information about the context, which is gradually revealed to be a fanta-historical parallel reality.

The novel begins as the account of a thirty-one year old woman, who introduces herself as a "carer" named Kathy H. While apparently not fitting Niederhoff's claim that "the retrospective criterion also entails the advanced age of the protagonists in works dealing with the un-lived life" and therefore the characters "tend to be somewhere between middle age and their deathbed" (Niederhoff 165), the narrator maintains a similar "sustained focus" on retrospection and regret. As we will later discover, she is in fact reaching the end of her life and has outlived most of her peers, of whom only memories are left. For Kathy H, thirty-one is in fact somewhere between middle age and her deathbed.

The main object of the narrator's recollection are her childhood years in a place called Hailsham. This initially appears to be a boarding school in the English countryside, and the narrator's references to experiences that may be shared by the reader seem to construct the narratee as someone who also went to a boarding school. Thus some of the addresses to the reader seem simply aimed at producing a realistic effect, such as the following: "I don't know if you had 'collections' where you were. When you come across students from Hailsham, you always find them, sooner or later, getting nostalgic about their collections" (38); "I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we definitely weren't at all kind towards any kind of gay stuff" (96).

Other addresses to the reader, however, begin to introduce an uncanny note in the description of the school, for example referring to highly frequent health checks and extremely strict policies on any-

thing potentially harmful to the body: "I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we had to have some form of medical almost every week" (13); "I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham the guardians were really strict about smoking" (67). The attention of the guardians to the students' health, which borders on the maniacal, and the strict policing of anything concerning their physical activities, contribute to arousing suspicions that this is no ordinary school, and the effect is paradoxically reinforced by the appeal to an experience supposedly shared by narratee, highlighting the distance between implied and actual reader.

2. Told and Not Told

The theme of the obsession with students' health is a first hint at the true nature of the school. Similarly vague intimations appear throughout the first half of the novel, until in chapter seven one of the "guardians" of the school, Miss Lucy, explains in a long emotional speech that Hailsham "students" are being raised in order to donate vital organs, which will be extracted from them one after the other shortly after they graduate from high school. Miss Lucy's monologue seems to be there more for the benefit of the reader than that of the characters, who are not surprised by her speech, as they already knew about their destiny.

Miss Lucy, however, explains that she felt the need to spell it out because she believes they were somehow "told and not told," made aware of the details of their tragic fate only indirectly and in installments, in such a way that, as Kathy's friend Tommy puts it, "we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course we'd take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly" (82).

We also discover, as late as chapter twelve, that the students are clones, created specifically for the purpose of organ harvesting. This,

too, is not directly explained either to the children or to the reader, but is hinted at through discussions of sexuality and reproduction and the way they set the students apart from “people out there.” As a result of such convoluted and indirect way of offering information, several rumors and theories arise among the students regarding their origin as well as their future, as they try to make sense of their lives and cope with their inescapable fate. One of these in particular has a major impact on the narrator’s life, and the novel’s development, as we will see.

Tommy’s description of the guardians’ way of “telling and not telling” is an intriguing *mise en abyme* of the narrative mode of the novel itself: the reader, too, is constantly “told and not told,” given hints whose significance s/he can only understand retrospectively. We thus find ourselves in the same situation as the narrator, looking back at her life through the filter of incomplete and biased information, unable to fully trust anything, yet eager to discover the untold truths that are gradually offered us.

Within this context, the narrative focuses on a reflection on “what could have been” in the narrator’s life, or what Niederhoff would describe as a “counterfactual course of events.” Kathy obsessively revisits specific moments in her past in which events took an unpleasant turn, wondering if this could have been avoided. These, however, seem to revolve around minor incidents, mostly conversations that took a wrong turn, making her lose an argument, or upsetting a friend. Behind these, there slowly begins to emerge the picture of another, greater regret, namely Kathy’s unrealized romance with her schoolmate Tommy, who instead dated her best friend Ruth. Again, we are reminded of *The Remains of the Day* and Stevens’s unrealized affair with his colleague Miss Kenton.

Interestingly, towards the end of the novel, Kathy seems to be offered a second chance to live out this unspoken wish, her untold and un-lived life. After leaving the school, Kathy begins to work as a “career,” providing psychological and practical assistance to the other clones in between their organ donations. This is something many of

the clones do for a few years, until they are notified that it is time to become donors themselves. Being a carer is emotionally and physically daunting, but Kathy takes pride in performing this task at the best of her abilities, and as a result she is not only able to defer the onset of her donations until the age of thirty-one, but is also occasionally given the opportunity of choosing which donors she will take care of. Taking advantage of such privilege, she becomes Tommy's carer, and the two finally begin a romantic and sexual relationship, despite the fact that he has already donated three of his vital organs and is now mostly confined to a hospital bed.

The romance however is not the ultimate aim of Kathy's life story, but rather a trigger to reveal another, more daunting untold tale of the novel, another un-lived life. This is disclosed gradually through what Niederhoff would term "foil characters," secondary figures that find themselves in a situation similar to that of the protagonist but make different, either braver or more foolish, choices. According to Niederhoff, these characters are an object of projection on the part of the narrators, who talk about themselves indirectly by discussing the lives of others (Niederhoff 173).

In *Never Let Me Go*, these coincide with what the students call their "possibles," i.e. the real-life people they could have been cloned from. The question of "possibles" is a source of endless speculations among the characters, who become convinced that "when you saw the person you were copied from, you'd get *some* insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you'd see something of what your life held in store" (140).

3. Possibles and Dream Futures

The obsession with "possibles" relates to another central topic of conversation among the students, which the narrator calls their "dream futures" (138). Even after becoming fully aware that they are clones created for organ harvesting, the characters still fantasize about

the existence of exceptions to the rules, which would allow them to defer the onset of donations and enjoy a “normal” life for a few years. Thus, the students project onto their “possibles” all sorts of fantasies about their future careers as postmen, farmers, or office workers, and whenever they have a chance to go into the outside world, they look eagerly for “possibles” to catch a glimpse of these “unlived lives.” The harsh reality of their short life as prospective donors makes the characters’ emotional investment in these fantasies all the greater. Yet their “dream futures” are ultimately revealed to be mere illusions.

The most persistent rumor about delays in the beginning of donations is that couples may be offered a few years together if they can demonstrate that they are genuinely in love. To Kathy and Tommy this seems to explain one of the most puzzling aspects of their life at Hailsham, namely the fact that teachers attributed great importance to their creativity. Once again revisiting her past, Kathy remembers how producing artwork was a central part of the students’ education, and how their best drawings, sculptures, and poems were regularly collected by a mysterious authority figure known as “Madame.” Kathy and Tommy become convinced that the students’ artwork was collected as evidence to draw upon in case a couple later applied for a deferral to live out their romance. In such an instance, the students’ creative work will allow Madame to look into their souls, and determine whether they are genuinely in love or simply pretending in order to be granted a few more years to live.

Their hope is soon crushed, however, when, towards the end of the novel, they finally reach Madame and present her with their drawings. In an emotionally charged dialogue, the reader is offered the last untold truth about Hailsham and its students. The school, we discover, was created as part of a broader effort to raise public awareness and establish more humane conditions for the “farming” of clones. This was the ultimate purpose of giving the children an education and encouraging them to be creative: the works they produced were used not to look into their souls, as they naively believed, but, as the school principal puts it, “*to prove that you had souls at all*” (260; original italics).

The experiment ultimately failed, as it raised ethical questions about cloning and organ harvesting that the general public was not willing to face. The school was closed, and the unpalatable truth of the students' humanity remained untold.

We thus come to realize that, unlike Stevens, the narrator of *The Remains of the Day*, Kathy never had a choice. While she may wish now that she had acted differently on small matters such as engaging in pointless arguments with her friends, or letting her friend Ruth steal her sweetheart, in the broader picture she never possessed any agency. Her unlived lives, both the "dream future" as an office worker and the romance with Tommy, were never a possibility. The awareness she gains through self-reflection is a chilling one: her destiny was from the beginning determined by forces beyond her control, and her story was silenced by those same forces.

However, interestingly, the novel ends on a less desperate note, presenting memory as the ultimate source of consolation when all else is lost. The narrator notes how, after the closure of Hailsham, many former students went looking for it in the English countryside, and new rumors and legends developed around it, speculating that it had been turned into a hotel or a regular school. However, Kathy does not feel the need to find out where the school was located or what happened to it. It is her memory of Hailsham that she treasures, not its ruins:

But as I say, I don't go searching for it, and anyway, by the end of the year, I won't be driving around like this any more. So the chances are I won't come across it now, and on reflection, I'm glad that's the way it'll be. It's like with my memories of Tommy and Ruth. Once I'm able to have a quieter life, in whichever centre they send me to, I'll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that'll be something no one can take away. (287)

Throughout the novel, the narrator had used "foil characters" in the form of possible sources of cloning as an object onto which to project her fantasies of alternative paths she could have taken and fantasize about her "unlived life." Yet when it becomes evident that none of those alternative paths was ever available to her, that she never had

any agency in determining her personal trajectory, the narrator finds solace in memories of her actual life, rather than in speculations on the unlived one. While Hailsham's attempt to reveal the clones' inner soul ultimately failed, and their story remained untold to the larger audience, the memory of her fellow clones' lives survives in Kathy's mind, and it provides her not only with greater self-awareness, but also with a last source of solace as she accepts her hard fate.

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