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The suffering of existence in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the British dystopian novel Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro, in which human clones are forced to donate their organs in an alternate reality set in 1990s England. Through the characters of the novel, various manifestations of suffering are examined from the viewpoint of existentialism. The whole concept of donation might be understood as a metaphorical expression for human life, as well as the omnipresent consciousness of its finitude. Ishiguro has prepared the ground for disturbing discussion where two ostensibly different groups of people – clones, whose only purpose is to donate their vital organs, and “normal people” as the recipients – suddenly appear to be indistinguishable in terms of mortality and the general experience of human existence. This paper focuses on the concept of existential anguish in the context of the novel's story. Using an unobtrusive science fiction narrative, Never Let Me Go encourages readers to contemplate the essence, meaning and purpose of human life, and it quietly points to topics that are usually treated as highly sensitive: the inevitability of death and apparent absurdity of human existence.

Contemplations on the notion of death have been burdening peoples' minds from the very beginning, regardless of gender, race, social status or religion. Death has become a subject matter which is discussed with solemn austerity and considerable concern. Although numerous approaches, viewpoints and beliefs regarding death can be found among various philosophical, religious and spiritual schools of thought, there is a pivotal point in the fact that all imaginable assumptions are mere speculation. As Martin Heidegger reminds us, there is no scientific method for empirical examination of one's death, and there is no possibility for objective experiments or analyses (Heidegger, 1962). Death is thus absolutely subjective and intimate, and the awareness of it dwells in the consciousness of every sentient human being.

In Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, where the protagonist Kathy H. gradually reveals the terrifying truth about the donation programme and portrays herself and her friends

as victims of the atrocious establishment of the alternative England, the author has opened numerous debates related to its theme: be it the moral and ethical aspects of cloning, subject identity, biopolitics or the problems of transhumanism. Ishiguro has successfully provoked literary critics and scholars into various readings of the text, interpreting it as, but not limited to, a depiction of social and political oppression, the abuse of marginalized groups, and a violation of human rights. Although the novel is commonly considered an example of trauma narrative, I suggest that the book is not primarily a trauma narrative about human clones being exploited and eventually killed by “normal people”. Rather, I understand the novel to be highly metaphorical and symbolic. My approach comes from the premise that, in accordance with Viktor Shklovsky’s defamiliarization, familiar things can be depicted in a rather unfamiliar way to place emphasis on the familiarity itself. In this case, clones might be perceived as the representation of human beings in a basic, existential sense, while the futuristic concept of cloning functions only as an aesthetic device to disguise that the novel deals principally with a realistic theme – the questioning of life’s meaning and purpose and the awareness of its certain end. I argue that even though the clones suffer corporeal pain, the remarkable aspect of the novel is rather their psychological and/or emotional suffering (although not expressed explicitly). On the one hand, there is physical suffering, as clones are forced to undergo dangerous operations, often with painful side effects, during which their vital bodily organs are removed. But strangely (and ironically), attention is paid to their health, as surgeons (called “whitecoats”) try to ensure that they survive as many operations as possible, paradoxically prolonging their lives. Kathy H. states that clones are usually able to make at least three donations, while the fourth is generally considered the final one; after that, the clone either dies or falls into a coma-like state in which the donations may continue until the donor’s body collapses. On the other hand, there are their dreams, hopes and beliefs, which are, as they are grow older and become less naïve, roughly juxtaposed with the impossibility of their realization and fulfilment. This – what I call existential – suffering might be represented by a state of anxiety and despair, stemming from the awareness of an unfulfilled life and consequent, inevitable death. In this paper, I propose an existential reading of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, where, in my opinion, the perception and experience of life’s finitude is the key theme of the novel.

I concern myself with the assumption that via the narrative and the characters of the novel, crucial existential questions emerge: the meaning and purpose of life, and the consequent, but rather subconscious, anxiety and fear of inevitable death. Such a reading of the novel requires an approach in which the novel is not considered a typical trauma narrative. As

Titus Levy puts it, a trauma narrative generally contains “jarring memories of abuse, predation, and scarring violence” (Levy, 2011, p.10). Trauma narrative generally places emphasis on two strictly differentiated entities or social groups, divided into “victims” and “oppressors”, creating the oppressor-oppressed distinction, where the oppressed is usually represented by a subjected, exploited or abused individual or group. Such a definition indeed partly corresponds with the character of the narrative – it depicts the submissive and exploited protagonists and apparent iniquity and cruelty. Numerous critics have decided to interpret the novel through the prism of ethics, psychology, sociology or politics, as they liken the relationship between the clones and the normal people to a kind of socio-political clash that arises from a particular political situation; such interpretations of the novel are quite popular in contemporary academic discourse. However, I argue that the narrative lacks an insight into the fictional world of “the oppressing group”, information about which is almost completely omitted. Readers do not get the knowledge about the background, intentions or motives of the “normal people” (except for that basic fact that they manage the donation programme with the purpose of gathering vital organs to provide medical treatment with them), and the “social conflict” itself is basically described solely from one point of view. There is no introduction into the political and social situation of the country, no explanation who, how, and why, and the motives of the “normal people” seem to be rather selfish than hate-driven.

The narrative begins with an introduction which tells readers how donors and “normal people” live alongside each other in an alternate England, where seemingly no one questions its bizarre system and politics. This *in medias res* strategy produces many gaps in the narrative and these consequently incite diverse interpretations. Ishiguro may have decided not to focus on the “normal people” to not divert attention away from the clones, who, after all, are depicted simply as humans. Because the depiction of the “normal people” is neglected these two groups are not juxtaposed properly, thus the clones play the main role, the role of normal people – people who love, hate and mourn, who are happy, sad, wishful or desperate, but most importantly, of people who question the meaning of their existence and who are afraid of their own end. Thus, after considering these aspects, it might be difficult to distinguish clones from normal people, as they actually wish for the same thing – to stay alive as long as possible with their loved ones and to achieve particular goals during their lifetimes. In other words, clones are the characters that readers can be empathetic about, and this is the reason why the clones could be considered a representation of humans in general. The notion of death plays a distinctive role in the novel’s narrative, and it, again, wears the mask of estranged ordinariness. Incidentally, the novel’s text does not contain the word ‘death’ itself. Yet, there are specific

terms which substitute other words. Ishiguro introduces the term ‘completion’, referring to both the end of the clone’s participation in the donation programme and simultaneously to the clones’ demise. Here I propose a point of view where the ‘completion’, together with the concept of the fourth donation, function as synonyms and, at the same time, euphemisms, for death. In addition, there are more words which may be perceived in a similar way, as they are directly related to the theme of death. The clones’ label ‘donor’ might be interpreted as a euphemism for words which could have been used instead, in regard to the context of the story (for example ‘subject’, or ‘condemned’). However, readers have no information regarding what normal people call donors in different social circles. The second interpretation is ironic, where the actual word ‘donor’ means the opposite of its denotative meaning. Clones-donors do not act willingly, because they have

their organs taken from them. Calling such a taking a “donation” is a cruel misnomer, a catachresis in the sense of abuse. Such a reading is bolstered by a consideration of what the final donation—the one in which the “donor” gives all her organs, including the ones she cannot live without—is called: “completing.” (Snaza, 2015, p. 224)

For this reading, I suggest an interpretation in which the word ‘donor’ simply stands for a human as a mortal being, while the ‘donation programme’ stands for existence, or, less abstractly, life. At this point, it is interesting to ask whether it would make any difference if the narrative did not include clones, but other normal people. The answer is perhaps not much, because the dividing line between these two groups is already remarkably thin. Using the topic of cloning, Ishiguro has wrapped the novel’s existential theme into the metallic, fashionable cover of science fiction which casts reflections of an unlikely but not impossible future. Its dystopian character is moreover rather relative, and it overlaps with the utopian future, where (normal) people are suddenly able to significantly improve their quality of life, and are able to live longer, however at the expense of someone else. There are aspects of the clones’ lives which might be likened to those of human life from the view of the philosophy of existentialism.

When comparing the life of clones and normal people, it is important to start with a contemplation on the essence of the clones, or, on their “donoriness”. Even though it might be assumed that clones can simply be considered humans, an alternative view might be seen in what existential philosophy calls the *essence*. One of the central claims of existentialism comes from Jean-Paul Sartre’s statement that existence precedes essence (Sartre, 1946). This idea reverses the classic metaphysical statement that the essence precedes existence, so to speak, the

essence is more important than (its) existence. In Sartre's formulation, which placed emphasis on human beings, people are thrown into existence without any predetermined essence, which is subsequently created by their very own values and decisions, through which they give their life a meaning and purpose. As he puts it, "[m]an is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism" (Sartre, 1946, p. 3).

If we consider the abovementioned, a question might be: if (normal) people can make themselves what they will to be (although such statements are rather relative and disputable), does the same apply to the clones? Apparently, their lives are predetermined more than in a sense of mortality – from the beginning of their origination (I use the word 'origination' intentionally because Ishiguro does not provide any information how the clones come into the world), they are designed as clones/humans with a purpose, which results in an early death. It suddenly seems that the clones' finitude is somehow more inevitable than that of normal people; both groups are naturally mortal, but for clones, this mortality is not only an inherent part of a basic biological principle, but it seems to be an inseparable part of their very essence. One could say that, in this regard, the clones' essence precedes their existence, and so it allows comparison with, in a sense, tools or goods (according to Sartre's example of manufacturing of a paper-knife, where the essence of a paper-knife is known before it comes into existence to fulfil a specific, desired purpose) (Sartre 1946). I thus assume that such deprivation of the fundamental ability of creating one's own meaning of life (however disputable this creation of any meaning is), might be a primal reason for the clones' existential suffering, as they simply cannot choose anything else without accepting the fact that their lives will be miserably short and painful.

Since the publication of the novel, various critics and academics, as well as readers, have been thinking about the same problem regarding the freedom of the clones: even if their life is highly organized, controlled and predetermined by a dominant group, it is evident that they do not think about any kind of escape, resistance or revolution. Unlike movies with a similar (or almost identical) theme, such as *Parts: The Clonus Horror* (1979, dir. R. S. Fiveson), or *The Island* (2005, dir. Michael Bay), where in both cases clones actively resist against abuse and oppression, clones in *Never Let Me Go* (both novel and movie) stay calm and are resigned to their fate. Why is this so? Again, this appears to be another of Ishiguro's intentional omissions which leaves a gap in the narrative and deliberately does not provide a full picture of the clones' situation. As the reader does not have a full picture of how clones live, this offers a wide range of interpretations as to why they remain apathetic. One explanation might be related to their "donorship", so clones consider their donations a natural act, as something for which they were designed and raised; as Ruth states: "I was pretty much ready when I became

a donor. It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?" (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 223). From the existential point of view, the fact that clones do not try to escape or revolt against the system that condemns them to certain death might not be seen as so surprising. If we liken mortality and the consequence of the fourth donation, the result is practically the same. Thus, metaphorically (and philosophically) speaking, running away from a completion would only get a clone some extra time before he or she reaches the same destination. Of course such a statement might sound severe and even nihilistic, however no intention to disparage the amount of time one has before he or she dies is meant. It should only serve as a demonstration of a basic principle that clones would naturally "complete", even if they had been spared from the donation programme. At the same time, it might serve as an example of clones' possible self-explanation for their adherence to the role of donor; it might be perceived as the source of their very own meaning, which gives them relief. The debate about possible escape or revolt brings us to the sensitive topic of suicide. Tabooed by many religions and a problem in many societies, it is perhaps one of the most dominant topics of the novel. *Never Let Me Go* mentions the word 'suicide' exactly once; it is, interestingly, mentioned in relation to fences, one of the recurring objects (or symbols) in the text:

One of the boys asked if the fences around the camps had been electrified, and then someone else had said how strange it must have been, living in a place like that, where you could commit suicide any time you liked just by touching a fence. (Ishiguro, p. 77)

Considering the fact that the Hailsham School was completely surrounded by fences, this statement by a – as then unaware – boy is ironic to readers who know the situation of the clones and might think that suicide could be one possible solution to end the suffering of a perspectiveless life. Nevertheless, the clones – despite their apparent freedom – do not speak about the possibility of self-annihilation. This supports the assumption that the clones' life could be read as a metaphor for the human condition. People, despite the inevitability of life's end, do not usually think about committing suicide. However, there are still several reasons when people do decide, and these reasons range from financial crisis to love-life troubles, from mental health problems to unbearable physical pain.

One might then say that clones do have a reasonable right to commit suicide. As Arthur Schopenhauer argues, it is one's very own right to do so. It offers a stoppage to any form of suffering, which is, according to him, an inherent part of human existence, and the act of self-murder should not be then by any means considered immoral; however, he does not directly

recommend it, as he calls it an experiment which annihilates the consciousness that puts questions and waits for answers (Schopenhauer 1891). But still, the characters in *Never Let Me Go* rather live their lives to the very end, ignoring the possibility of this ultimate escape which would, in fact, also be a kind of revolt against normal people who control and are responsible for the donation programme. Only if one, as previously suggested, overlooks this ethical aspect and rather understands the event of completion as a biological death (as a simple consequence of mortality), the decision regarding whether to commit suicide or not applies exactly the same way for both clones and normal people. And that simple thing, clones' rejection of suicide, might be understood as an act of rebellion itself if we consider it in the context of Albert Camus's philosophy of the Absurd.

Camus claims that when a man, who naturally seeks for the meaning of his/her existence, realizes the impossibility of finding one, it strikes the individual with a feeling of futility that might completely overwhelm him/her (Camus 1955). The absurdity of human existence (and the realization of it) might be that one reason why a person thinks of suicide, even if he or she does not suffer physically or mentally. It might be said that in the novel, clones experience this absurdity even more than normal people/we do, because of the feeling of futility is artificially emphasized by the donation programme and eventual completion. And still, however pointless the attempt to find the meaning of one's existence is, clones do not surrender and in a Sisyphean manner, and as most of us do, they choose the daily suffering of their (meaningless) existence.

Avoiding ethical discussions, the fact is that all living organisms are subject to time, causing an unstoppable, gradual decay. In our understanding, time does not serve only as something that gives us space for our realization in life, but it, metaphorically, represents also our arch enemy, a phenomenon that affects completely everything, which destroys and gives an opportunity for (re-)creation. People understand and experience time as something that flows one way unstoppably and relentlessly, moving them towards permanent cessation, without any possibility to slow it, stop it, or turn it back. We often refer to time as to some tangible material that we do (or do not) possess, and to which we have assigned the highest possible value (or at least we place it on the same level as money, according to the popular idiomatic expression "time is money"). People have divided life into smaller sections of time – days, months, years, decades – and by these they have set the mileposts that show them where on the imaginary axis they are currently located at the specific point of their lives. In other words, apart from all the pragmatic applications of time we use in everyday life, we basically unconsciously measure the distance between our existing, actual being and the point in which we will cease to exist.

Before using Heidegger's terminology, it is important to understand the concept of being-towards-death not as a literal, linear approaching of an individual towards a state of clinical death, although we, simplistically, slowly die over the time of our lives, and that from the very beginning – it could be said even before we are born. Rather, it should be understood as an essential quality of an individual, where death is always present as a possibility, which will eventually become a necessity. Because of the certainty of one's death, the individual is forced to protect himself/herself to avoid an early, unnatural death, and by this act and via a series of future possibilities he or she constitutes the existence in the world. Heidegger emphasizes that the authenticity of Dasein comes from true understanding of the being-towards-death in a sense that death is not something which is at the end of the line, but instead it is already and always present and one does not know when he or she will die (Heidegger 1962); people are already dead, only, to put it figuratively, the moment of death is not present at the time when they are still alive – as in the famous Epicurus quote, “when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not.” (Epicurus).

However, it might appear that the clones anticipate the end of their lives in a different manner from normal people/we do, although the principle remains the same: there is a limited amount of time given, which, through a sense of inevitable death, emphasizes life's value. People calculate the years of their lifespan that are basically not threatened by anything else but their health condition and various unpredictable, but mostly improbable, phenomena, such as lethal accidents or murders. Yet, clones are certain that sooner or later (depending on their choice to or not to become a carer), they will be required to make a set of donations, which will eventually cause their unnatural death, often in their early 30s. These donations could be understood as “mileposts”, metaphorically speaking, marking the location of an individual clone on the imagined line of life, and so they can be used to measure the approximate lifespan of clones.

In the novel, we can see that clones often refer to themselves according to the number of donations they have already made. But as these donations may occur, in fact, anytime, clones live in a state of permanent suspense, and the amount and frequency of donations is more important for them than their lifespan measured in years. The same anticipation is, after all, familiar to us, as we are aware not only of the inevitability of natural death, but also of the possibility of sudden death in every moment. The symbolic exaggeration of the event of death in the form of completion (as for clones, the completion is somehow more certain than their/our natural death) thus shows the fragility of human life. Assuming that clones adhere to their role of donor to the extent that they basically do not question the predetermined purpose of their

lives, they try to live the fullest possible life they can. And despite the donations and short lifespan, they apparently do not give up their hopes and dreams, although they are aware of the impossibility of their fulfilment. The characters of the clones seldom speak about unpleasant feelings; they do not explicitly express misery, despair, anger or anguish. Still, such emotions are inherently related to the novel's themes, as well as to human life in general, due to unfulfilled plans and desires, gradual degradation of health, losing family members, close friends and acquaintances, the never ending pursuit of meaning, and the fear of the ultimate unknown – our own death. It can thus be concluded that human existence itself generates the very special kind of trauma that lies in silence within all of us. In other words,

[t]rauma can be located not just in extreme contexts, but in aspects of the quotidian, the commonplace, the seemingly ordinary experiences that mask the dark horrors lying just below the surface of normalcy, knitted into the very fabric of everyday life. (Levy, 2011, p. 10)

However uncomfortable these subject matters are, they constitute an inseparable part of human life, and they represent subjects about which we do not want to think and speak, but around which we are anxious the most.

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