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Reading *Never Let Me Go*
from the *Mujo* Perspective of Buddhism

RIA TAKETOMI

Gifu Pharmaceutical University, Japan

Abstract

This essay analyzes the children's imaginative play in Kazuo Ishiguro's various novels, with a special focus on *Never Let Me Go*. Children often engage in various types of repetitive imaginative play, acting out stories about things that do not actually exist in order to avoid the pain of confronting their problems. An exploration of children's play and the roles performed by the guardians and Madam helps us read the novel from a new perspective – the *Mujo* view of Buddhism. *Mujo* is the Buddhist philosophy which describes “the impermanence of all phenomena.” In *Never Let Me Go*, shadows of death weigh heavily on the reader as an unavoidable reminder of the nature of life. This brings *Mujo* to the Japanese readers' minds. The *Mujo* view of Buddhism has imbued Japanese literature since the Kamakura Era (1185), and a reading of *Never Let Me Go* from the *Mujo* perspective sheds light on the condition of its protagonists. My analysis aims to introduce the *Mujo* doctrine to anglophone literary studies by foregrounding the poignancy and resilience found in *Never Let Me Go*.

Keywords: memory, nostalgia, faith, impermanence, Japanese-ness, *Mono No Aware*, the *Mujo* view of Buddhism, comparative literature, mortality, aesthetic sense

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's sixth novel, *Never Let Me Go*, is a story about cloned children being reared at an institution called Hailsham. In the world of this story, cloned children are being raised to function as organ donors when they reach adulthood. The children refer to their teachers as guardians, and guardians provide these children with a decent education and enjoyable activities. The creation of comforting memories is one of the

most important tasks for the guardians, but the malignant intent behind their care only becomes evident at the end of the novel.

The guardians and children are emotionally attached to one another; therefore, unlike regular teachers at school, guardians start to tacitly censor out the darkness from a harsh reality as the children grow up. They distract the children from what they do not need to know. However, no matter how hard they try to disguise reality, the children sense that something is amiss. The children can never bring themselves to discuss this with the guardians. Instead, they learn that they need to avoid a certain emotional territory. When this attitude is examined from a broader perspective, one sees that these children are repressing their urge to know themselves and their situation fully.

One of the best ways to observe a child's psychological state is by watching them play. As psychologist Sandra Russ advocates, "Pretend play is important both in child development and in child psychotherapy. ... Pretend play involves pretending, the use of fantasy and make-believe, and the use of symbolism" (2). Russ also states, "Pretend play involves cognitive and affective processes that should be important in empathy and social functioning. There is some empirical evidence that play is related to social development" (29). This essay uses children's pretend play in Kazuo Ishiguro's novels, including *When We Were Orphans*, *The Unconsoled*, *Never Let Me Go*, and the short story, "Summer After the War," as illustrations of Russ's theory.

The investigation of the way in which Ishiguro treats children's pretend play in his various novels evokes the *Mujo* view of Buddhism. It is difficult to express this philosophy in words because it is as much a part of living as the air that we breathe in certain Asian cultures. In Japan, *Mujo* is known as a "sense of evanescence," a realization of life as impermanent and ever-changing. This is one of the fundamental principles of Buddhism, wherein phenomenal existence is said to have three interlocking characteristics – impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. *Mujo* is a view of life that acknowledges how all the things in the world are constantly changing. This concept has been a featured part of Japanese literature since the Kamakura Era. Discourse on *Mujo* features in Japanese classics such as *Heike Monogatari* [*The Tale of the Heike*], *Hakkotsu No*

Ofumi [Message on White Ashes], and *Hojoki* [The Tale of My Hut]. This essay compares similar aspects in these stories and *Never Let Me Go* by reading them from the perspective of the *Mujo* view of Buddhism.

Imaginative Play

In novels such as *The Unconsoled*, *When We Were Orphans*, *Never Let Me Go*, and the short story “Summer After the War,” Ishiguro frequently inserts children role-playing or mimicking. By examining children’s pretend play, Ishiguro helps reveal not only his characters’ joys, but also their frustrations and experience of past trauma. He also gives us a clue to understand the characters’ current psychological state. For example, in one scene in “Summer After the War,” Ichiro watches his grandfather practicing Judo, and then mimics his actions and makes up an imaginative story about fighting with thugs. A similar motif is used in *The Unconsoled*. In this novel, Boris also admires his grandfather and develops an imaginative storyline about the defeat of gangsters. Both stories show how the boys mimic their beloved grandfathers. According to *Fundamental Knowledge of Psychology*, this mimicking is “one of the socialization processes, which children go through when they are little. Through this practice, children internalize social culture and acquire behavioral patterns” (248). They also involve cognitive and affective processes, as Russ states. However, the imaginative play in *When We Were Orphans* contains a different factor. The protagonist, Christopher Banks, lives in Shanghai’s International Settlement, where he leads a sheltered life until his father disappears. Even after he becomes a real detective in his adulthood, he retains his childhood memories so that the Settlement is always available as an escape from harmful circumstances. In the Settlement of his early memories, Christopher imagines himself, his parents, and his best friend living together in happiness. The protagonist will come to use his memories as a defense mechanism, despite the fact that most of these memories are fantasies. He will eventually live in his own imaginary world.

The pretend play in *Never Let Me Go* evinces certain similarities with *When We Were Orphans*. For example, Ruth plays a game of

imaginary horses with Kathy. Ruth has a horse named Thunder, and she lets Kathy ride Bramble. In Kathy's evocative description of the game, she recounts: "I accepted the invisible rein she was holding out, and then we were off, riding up and down the fence, sometimes cantering, sometimes at a gallop" (47). As another part of her role-playing, Ruth forms a group of six to ten girls, whom she refers to as the secret guard. Their task is to protect Miss Geraldine from being abducted. No one questions whether the story of abduction is true or not. Instead, they are happy to be working and playing together. This allows them to bond and strengthen their relationships.

Ruth makes up another story. This time, however, Kathy reacts differently from the earlier imaginary play scenarios. Initially, Ruth hints to Kathy that Miss Geraldine has given her a red dotted pen case, and Kathy asks Ruth where she got it. Ruth replies: "Let's just agree. Let's *agree* I got it in the Sale" (56, emphasis in the original). Ruth says this in such a way that Kathy can infer the rest of the story. However, this time, for no particular reason, Kathy wants to expose Ruth's lie. She is annoyed and disgusted by Ruth's behavior: "There was a certain smile, a certain voice Ruth would use – sometimes accompanied by a finger to the lips or a hand raised stage-whisper style – whenever she wanted to hint about some little mark of favour Miss Geraldine had shown her" (56-57). Later, Kathy goes to Ruth and hints that she has seen the register book in which it is written who bought which item: "I was just turning over the pages of the register, just for something to do" (58). Ruth thinks that Kathy knows she bought the pen case at the Sales and becomes obviously flustered. Kathy then becomes uneasy and decides to leave the story unresolved.

All the children in Kathy's group know these stories are make-believe. They even call them "Ruth's made-up things" (55). It is a tacit understanding that they all join in her fantasy and play their roles. However, as the children grow up, some of them start to have doubts about such things, and Kathy is no exception. She has the opportunity to expose Ruth's lie, but in the end, she does not. The fantasy they are playing is clearly artificial. However, it is their only mental safe haven in which they can escape from the harsh reality.

2. Hailsham

Wojciech Drag describes Hailsham as “a place of systematic deception, however nobly conceived” (168). Liani Lochner comments that “Even though the clones are exact genetic copies of humans and, therefore, human, the world has actively to construct them as members of ‘genetic underclass’ – through their solution, but calling them clones – in order to continue with the donations programme” (230). Nathan Snaza describes how the children at Hailsham are “never recognized as human, they are only spare parts for humans” (215). Barry Lewis opines that “the clones are little more than educated cattle” (199). In sum, students at Hailsham are not considered humans, but rather animals or human-made “stuff.”¹ In order to sustain the organ donations program, as noted by Lochner, the children are treated as livestock. As Miss Emily tells Kathy at the end of the novel, “[P]eople did their best not to think about you [clones]. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you [clones] weren’t really like us [humans]” (258).

However, at Hailsham, the clone children are treated almost in the same way as other children. They have sports, art, geography, and sex education lessons. Many years after leaving Hailsham, Kathy and Tommy visit Madam and Miss Emily in order to ask for a reprieve from the donations. They learn that deferrals are impossible, but Miss Emily tells them:

You see, we were able to give 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. I suppose you could even call it that. But we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods. (262-263, emphasis in the original)

Miss Emily justifies herself by saying that the guardians needed to deceive the students (as she likes to call the children) in order to give them sustaining memories. In his interview with Cynthia Wong about the book, Ishiguro admits that the guardians had a secret but clear motive: “They deceive the students, but they gave them something better, not to be better

donors, but to be better humans” (205). Ishiguro puts forth the idea that most of who we are is based on our memories. He further adds: “If they [the students] had known they would die in the way they do, would they have embraced this arts education? They might say, ‘What’s the point? Why are we making all this effort?’” (218). Undoubtedly, the students would have been skeptical and neglectful of many things, including the events and education provided at Hailsham. Osamu Nishitani states that “Hailsham needed to provide work that asked nothing in return, ignoring the timeframe, beyond which the children cannot go, but giving them dreams and hope for the future” (53, my trans.).

Kathy recalls how the guardians strictly monitored and controlled information at Hailsham. Nonetheless, the students suspected that something was wrong:

We certainly knew ... we were different from our guardians, and also from the normal people outside ... If we were keen to avoid certain topics, it was probably more because it *embarrassed* us. We hated the way our guardians, usually so on top of everything, became so awkward whenever we came near this territory. (69, emphasis in the original)

Nobody tries to know the truth by asking the guardians about what is bothering them. Instead, the students closely watch “the guardians’ manner” (113) or seek non-verbal clues, and learn about the murky territory of their destiny. They do not want to make the guardians feel “so awkward” (69) by stepping into that territory. On the other hand, the guardians sometimes notice how the children react to certain rules or actions and adapt to them. For example, Madam overhears students discussing how she collects some of the fine work that is praiseworthy. Years later, Madam recalls it and says, “My *gallery*, as all of you always called it. I laughed when I first heard that’s what you were calling it. But in time, I too came to think of it as that” (248, emphasis in the original).

In Hailsham, there are some guardians whom Kathy remembers vividly and about whom she often talks. These are Miss Geraldine and Miss Lucy. Kathy says that Miss Geraldine was “everybody’s favourite guardian” (19). Miss Geraldine played the role of consoling students whenever they were in trouble: “She was gentle, soft-spoken, and always

comforted you when you needed it, even when you'd done something bad, or been told off by another guardian" (19). When Tommy drew a clumsy picture and was laughed at by the others, Miss Geraldine comforted him "with kindness and understanding" (20). However, this ignited the students' jealousy and the bullying "grew bigger" (20). Miss Lucy then came and supported Tommy. Miss Lucy was one of the most active guardians at Hailsham. When she discovered that some of the guardians had said Tommy's artwork was poor, she called him to her office and told him not to worry. Later, Tommy recounts to Kathy what happened that day. He remembers Miss Lucy telling him, "There's at least one person here at Hailsham who believes otherwise" (28). He realizes that Miss Lucy was angry and describes how she was, "Shaking. With rage" (29). We can deduce that Miss Lucy was furious because all the guardians were hiding the truth. She had begun to question what was happening at Hailsham. Bruce Robbins interprets the scene as follows: "Getting rid of anger, Tommy's anger, is what the scene supposedly accomplishes. But rather than vanishing, anger is displaced to Miss Lucy" (298). We see this as Tommy's embodiment of anger. As Robbins puts it, Tommy could not handle his repressed anger well enough to keep it for himself and thus his anger displaced Miss Lucy's feeble bewilderment. In either case, the source of anger is the same: Hailsham's philosophy of concealing the truth.

Later, Miss Lucy discloses to the students, "Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do" (80). She soon leaves Hailsham. When, many years later, Kathy and Tommy visit Miss Emily, she remembers Miss Lucy and recalls that time, saying: "We had run Hailsham for many years, we had a sense of what could work, what was best for the students in the long run, beyond Hailsham. ... She [Lucy] had no grasp of practicalities" (262). Hailsham closed down some years after Kathy and Tommy "graduated" from the institution. Miss Emily admits there was "an internal matter" (262), so it is more than natural to assume that people like Miss Lucy stood for closing it down. Hailsham disappeared and "they all vanished" (259).

However, it was not only the students who performed imaginative role-playing games. When one examines the bigger picture, the guardians also played roles in what was essentially a sham boarding school, Hailsham. Drag comments that “the Hailsham guardians and the institution itself ... served the role of their respective substitutes [parents and a family home]” (169-70). According to Wong, “The school fostered a sense of liberal innocence while maintaining its dark goals. ... While the guardians have idiosyncratic behavior, they also serve in the children’s minds and hearts as loving patrons of their intellectual, emotional, and artistic selves” (97-98). Both the students and the guardians have roles in an illusory play: Miss Emily’s is a strict role of preaching rules to the students, Miss Geraldine is a soft talker, Miss Lucy is a strong-minded woman, and Madam stimulates the students to work more industriously. Miss Emily boasts at the end of the novel, “[I]t might look as though you were simply pawns in a game. It can certainly be looked at like that” (261). She knows she was also a pawn in the game, playing the role of the head guardian. She says, “you have to remember that to us, at that stage in our lives, any place beyond Hailsham was like a fantasy land” (66).

The children are protected in an “Eden-like place” at Hailsham. Ishiguro calls this protective time and place a “childhood bubble.”² However, as Bruce Robbins states, “the school fails to recognize the children’s genuine creativity, which expresses itself not in the artwork itself but rather in this mythmaking about the artwork and its ability to transform their lives” (294). However, the world outside of Hailsham is looking for organs rather than humanity or creativity from the children. As Snaza puts it, “What the guardians at Hailsham protect is, first and foremost, the ‘donations,’ by which is meant almost the same thing within the novel as without: it names a giving of organs” (224). In order to protect children from this unpleasant knowledge, the guardians cultivate, as Drag, argues, “an illusory vision of a more benevolent world” (169). From this perspective, Hailsham may indeed “be read as a metaphor for the basic need to resist unwelcome knowledge” (169). Compassion grows as the readers learn about these crucial facts of Hailsham. However, the children, including Kathy, still recall their childhood days at Hailsham as a warm and comforting time and place.

The *Mujo* View of Buddhism

Most of Ishiguro's novels rely heavily on the protagonists' memories. Haze and instability hang in the air surrounding these stories. However, in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro adds death into it. This distinguishes it from his other novels. Ishiguro started using the phrase "childhood bubble" in interviews soon after releasing *When We Were Orphans*. He mentioned this phrase in relation to "a remembering of a time in your childhood before you realized that the world was as dark as it was. It's a kind of Eden-like memory of a time when you were in that childhood 'bubble' when adults and parents led you to believe that the world was a better, a nicer, place" (Shaffer 166).

A bubble is transient. It evokes an image of vanishing or being swept away, like a soap bubble bursting in the sky. This transience, drawing with it shadowy intimations of death, echoes the *Mujo* view of Buddhism. This philosophy is the key to understanding *Never Let Me Go*. As one of the Buddhist scriptures states, "When a human accepts the fact of and reality that 'all living things are bound to die,' it makes a deep impression and evokes profound admiration" ("About *Mujo*").

The term *Mono No Aware* is frequently used to describe an aesthetic sensitivity to this transience of reality. *Mono No Aware* expresses one's most profound thoughts and one's deepest sorrows through natural scenery. For example, a woman's sadness at aging and being alone may be suggested by means of flower blossoms fading in endless rain. *Mono No Aware* and *Mujo* seem similar, but *Mujo* expresses one's emotions in the face of death. *Mujo* is more about appreciating life through an awareness of death. Texts that encompass the *Mujo* view of Buddhism in Japanese literature include *Heike Monogatari* [*The Tale of the Heike*], *Hakkotsu No Ofumi* [*Message on White Ashes*], and *Hojoki* [*The Tale of My Hut*].

In the first chapter of *Heike Monogatari* [*The Tale of the Heike*], one of the most famous verses reflects the *Mujo* viewpoint: "The Jetavana Temple bells ring the passing of all things. Twinned sal trees, white in full flower, declare the great man's certain fall. The arrogant do not long endure. They are like a dream one night in spring. The bold and brave

perish in the end. They are as dust before the wind” (3). Since Medieval times, the word “flower” has stood for “cherry trees” in Japan. Because a cherry tree blossoms, and its petals fall quickly after full bloom, it symbolizes the transience of life. In the interview with John Freeman, Ishiguro acknowledges that he “concertinaed the time span through this device [the book’s premise as a ‘metaphor for how we all live’]. A normal lifespan is between sixty to eighty-five years; these people [in *Never Let Me Go*] artificially have that period shortened” (197). As the reader comes to realize that the children will only live for a limited number of years once they reach adulthood and that they are forced to end their lives at the height of their enjoyment, an understanding of *Mujo* seeps through. As Ishiguro puts it, everything, all the memories from childhood days, “ends up in dust” (Wong and Crummett 219).

In the final part of the story, Kathy visits Norfolk after losing Tommy and Ruth. She knows that the countdown timer has started ticking toward the end of her life. She describes Norfolk as “the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up” (282). While Kathy waits, she fantasizes about Tommy appearing from the horizon, walking towards her and waving at her: “[I]f I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I’d see it was Tommy, and he’d wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn’t let it” (282). Kathy abruptly stops her fantasy there. It gives one the impression that she has made a decision to accept her death. This tranquil scene provokes profound sadness as well as admiration, and this is evocative of the *Mujo* view of Buddhism.

The importance of accepting fate and the impermanence of life was preached by Saint Rennyo (1415-1499) in *Hakkotsu No Ofumi* [*Message on White Ashes*] in the following terms:

Now, when I observe the impermanent nature of human beings, I find nothing more unreliable than our life, which is like an illusion from birth to death throughout. We have never heard of a person who has lived for ten thousand years. Our life passes quickly. How many people in the present world of degenerate Dharma can live even one hundred years? “Am I to go first? Or is it somebody else who goes before me?” We never know when we die – it might be even today or tomorrow. Some go earlier, and others

go later, but, as an old saying goes, every day more people die than drops of water falling from the stems of grass or dew drops falling from the tips of leaves.³

This Mujo perspective which imbues Renny's *Message* is evoked at the end of the movie version of *Never Let Me Go* when Kathy addresses the audience, saying, "What I'm not sure about is if our lives have been so different from the lives of the people we save. We all complete. Maybe none of us really understand what we've lived through or feel we've had enough time". By using the pronoun "we", Kathy includes both humans and clones. She is being ironic about how much extra time the humans actually gain through the sacrifice of clones, and she asks herself whether these humans really feel satisfaction at the end of their lives. In this scene Kathy does not talk further, she just stands and gazes into the open field. To Kathy's query, the viewers are challenged to find a decent answer.

Hojoki [The Account of My Hut], written by Kamo No Chomei (1153 or 1155–1216), opens with a famous verse that also elicits the *Mujo* view of Buddhism, "The river flows unendingly. Its waters pass and shall never return. Where the water eddies and pools, bubbles form only to vanish the next moment, while others are born in their stead. So, it is with man and his dwelling in this world" (2). This river current is reminiscent of the scene where Tommy says to Kathy as his "completion" (or death) approaches, "I keep thinking about this river somewhere, with the water moving really fast. And these two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, holding on as hard as they can, but in the end it's just too much. The current's too strong. They've got to let go, drift apart. That's how I think it is with us" (282). Kathy then recalls the night, soon after visiting Madam and Miss Emily: "I remembered the way I'd held onto him that night in the wind-swept field on the way back from Little Hampton" (282). In the teachings of Buddha, a river is considered a symbol that divides life and death. Despite being young and still active, nowhere near death, Kathy and Tommy know that their lives are destined to end soon. The river and the wind are metaphors for their fragile life. Lochner points out that "the Hailsham clones have no desire to escape. Even when they leave the school, living at the Cottages without

supervision and driving freely across the country as carers, the clones submit to what Hailsham taught them to be their purpose” (233). As Ruth says, “After all, it’s what we’re *supposed* to be doing, isn’t it?” (223, emphasis in the original). The clone children know their lives are short, and in the end, they are ready to depart this world and accept their fate.

In the same novel, Kamo No Chomei also writes that all living things and their environments are impermanent:

Some die in the morning, some are born in the evening. All are so destined, just like the bubbles. From where humans, who are born and die, come and to where they go, I know not. Nor have I any idea for whom they take such pains... nor for what reason in this transitory life they love to decorate those dwellings. The ways in which the owners and houses so readily fade away, as if they compete on fragility, are like the dew and the morning glory: Sometimes the dew falls and the flower remains. Though it may remain, it will perish in the sun of the following morning. Or the flower may wither, while the dew remains. Still it will evaporate by the evening. (2-3)

The world that Kathy and the children had created functions as an impermanent safe haven where the doomed children can daydream and play together. There is always a fragile understanding among them regarding who is playing what role to keep their lives going. Andy Sawyer correctly states, “Kathy is engaged with understanding her place in a world in which she and her friends exist, but which is fundamentally not theirs” (239). *Never Let Me Go* is “like the dew and the morning glory.” We can visualize children playing in the imaginative bubble, waiting for their time to burst and disappear. However, the “turning of the tide” (259) and the way in which Hailsham disappears evoke a deep sorrow in the face of death.

4. Conclusion

After the students hear from Miss Lucy that no ideal future awaits them, they begin to avoid using the word “donation” as much as possible. Instead, they “make some jokey allusion to these things that lay in front

of” them (83) or use allusive terms or phrases, such as “the not so great things” (76); “We’d been ‘told and not told’” (81); or “the donations and all that” (83). Kathy notes that “there was this discreet agreement among us all” (95) and “some parallel universe” existed. This vague understanding also leads the children to fantasize about their origins, holding out hope for some kind of loophole, such as a “deferral.” The use of evasive language can be interpreted as a reflection of the students’ unspoken desires. They want to live, but they know they cannot, so they create a fantasy. This pretend play not only helps the clone children deal with their suppressed emotions, but also maintains their sanity in the face of imminent death. The students play their roles in the make-believe stories and are willing to live and keep death as far away as they can. However, ultimately, they all accept their destiny. Fantasy never lasts.

Rennyo knew that talking about the inevitability of death is an effective means to make people question themselves about the meaning of life. Therefore, he encouraged people to think about death as a way to highlight their present and future lives. The death the clone children silently accept has no future. However, they have memories to lighten their present. Kathy contemplates the moment when she becomes a donor, and is prepared to accept the end by resorting to her memories for solace: “I’ll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that’ll be something no one can take away” (281). In this way, Ishiguro raises the question of what is valuable in life, as he explained in an interview: “By having this rather negative, bleak scenario, I thought it might highlight what is actually quite positive and valuable about being alive” (Wong and Crummett 220). Thus, reading *Never Let Me Go* from the perspective of the *Mujo* view of Buddhism opens up new vistas for interpretation.

Notes:

¹ It is worth noting that in *Never Let Me Go*, the word “stuff” is used over 60 times. Ishiguro ascribed meaning to it, as did the clone children.

² Ishiguro mentions the “childhood bubble” in an interview with Brian Shaffer in 2001 (“An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro”).

³ See Arai.

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