

Time, Energy and Mortality: A Never Let Me Go Analysis

著者	HANSON Lorna
journal or publication title	The Journal of Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies
number	17
page range	13-20
year	2013-12-30
URL	http://id.nii.ac.jp/1165/00000077/



*The Journal of
Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies
No. 17 2013*

Time, Energy and Mortality:

A Never Let Me Go Analysis

Lorna HANSON

時間、生、死への思い
-『わたしを離さないで』に関する一考察-

ローナ ハンソン

長崎外大論叢

第17号
(別冊)

長崎外国語大学
2013年12月

Time, Energy and Mortality: A *Never Let Me Go* Analysis

Lorna HANSON

時間、生、死への思い
－『わたしを離さないで』に関する一考察－

ローナ ハンソン

要約

イシグロカズオの作品の中でも扱われているが、1952年頃にクローン人間の研究成果が発表された。そこでは、人々が自分の臓器を提供して人生を終わっていく姿が描かれているが、臓器提供者として30年の人生を終わるとすれば、それはどのような人生であろうか。大切な人と最期を過ごすのであろうか。イシグロカズオの『*Never Let Me Go*』という小説は、力強く、繊細なタッチで描かれた作品である。この作品では、時間、生、死、といった特別なテーマが取り上げられている。映画化されたものは、原作とは違ったものになっているが、本論文では、原作と映画の内容の違いを基に、時間、生、死に対するイシグロカズオの考え方やその表現の仕方について考察を行う。

Keywords : Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, narrative

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is a poignant novel which is gripping in its narrative, yet full of soulful and quiet moments between characters. It is a story with two central ideas: time and energy. It is a story of how time is used, the regrets of time wasted, and the fruitless wishes to turn time backwards. It is a story of repressed energy, all of which will be discussed. As with many successful books, *Never Let Me Go* has been adapted into a film version. Going from book to film is always a difficult process. The two artistic mediums are different in the way a story is told; books transform words into thoughts and films use sight and sound. Once works leave the author or production company, it is left for the readers and audience to interpret. With *Never Let Me Go*, the book and movie ultimately make the same thematic statements, but the methods and emotion behind those statements are different. However, they work seamlessly together to show Ishiguro's vision. It is a perfect example of how movie and book is different, but manages to equal each other and exceed every expectation.

The backdrop of the story is simple enough. In an alternate reality, in 1952 there was a great advancement concerning medical science which eventually resulted in human life expectancy passing 100 years of age by the 1960s (*Never Let Me Go*). The advancement was the replication of human DNA, or cloning. This led to the production of humans whose sole purpose was to be brought up as "spare parts" for humans of natural birth who might need vital organs and incurable diseases became curable. The story of

the book lies in the experiences of those clones that start life out at the seemingly idyllic English boarding school of Hailsham, unaware of their destiny. The focus is on three students, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy and their transitions from childhood to completion, which is the term used for their eventual and inevitable deaths.

To any casual reader, the thought may arise of “why don’t they try to escape?” Many have asked this question. There have been other books and movies with similar stories in which the characters do try to escape and much of the narrative focuses on that journey. Alex Garland, the film’s screenwriter has said that the story “has the gimmick, but doesn’t dwell on the gimmick...doesn’t become all about the gimmick” (DP/30). The gimmick he refers to is how the characters usually come to the realization of their situation, their negative reaction to it, which then leads them to make an attempt to escape. This gimmick is shown in films such as *Logan’s Run*, *The Island*, and books such as *The Hunger Games Trilogy*, *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?*, *Divergent*, and many more. All of the media mentioned involves a group of (mostly) young people who are living out their lives in a state total, sometimes government, control. In some fashion, they become disillusioned and try for an escape. Such is not the case with *Never Let Me Go*. With *Never Let Me Go*, the story is not about escape and desperate attempts at life, but rather an honest look at life and the end of life, which no one can escape. This is the most obvious and unique aspect of the novel, that the characters accept rather than reject their situation. It is, in essence, what Ishiguro has called repressed energy.

Ishiguro himself has not specified what he means by repressed energy other than it is something that “I try to go for in my own writing” (“Meet the Author”). One interpretation could be that a story of repressed energy is a story that takes place inside a person. It will be about a character’s “internal journey” (Gregg) as we witness their consciousness of the world around them morph from one idea to another, each idea affecting their emotions, outlook, and opinions of their own life. While all this is happening inside the character, they have no agency to act on their thoughts. The energy that is surging through them, that of their consciousness changing and their ideas morphing, has nowhere to go, so they suppress it. They are constantly avoiding the reality of their situation, as if they are putting off thinking about their fate. Garland comes up with a fantastic analogy for this, “They were like people sitting in a small room with a tiger, and they knew the tiger was going to eat them at some point, and they were just making sure they didn’t look too hard at the tiger. They’re not trying to get out of the room, but they’re going to keep having their conversation [...] and just not look there” (DP/30).

This act of avoidance is best shown in Kathy, the narrator of the novel. Kathy is someone who looks at the world around her practically. She thoroughly thinks through her words and actions before she speaks and acts. She is an empathetic person and always considers how certain events or words will affect her friends and acquaintances. This is not to say that she is the only Hailsham student like this. In fact, many others, including Kathy’s best friend Ruth, are much the same. Perhaps this can be said more of Kathy for the simple reason that it is through her eyes the reader is experiencing the novel.

The choices of an author, when writing a story, are conscious and deliberate. Every word is chosen and placed for the purpose of illustrating a certain image or eliciting a specific emotion from the reader. When a character is speaking about the past from the place of the present, there is always the question of the perspective they are looking back from and why. There are many stages of emotional development ranging from the mindset of a naïve child to that of a mature, aware adult. How a person moves through these 'stages' is important for writing a character. In what mindset is the character? How far are they in their emotional development? Ishiguro's decision to put Kathy's thoughts in the past tense has a purpose. The emotional place Kathy is at as she looks at the life behind her is important in that it shows how much she has developed, or not developed, and especially shows her perception of her experiences. She knows that her life will end soon and in looking back on her experiences she is trying to understand the choices she made or didn't make and how those choices have impacted the present state of her life.

Kathy's narration style seems perfunctory at first since she doesn't put too much emotion into her language. She winds her thoughts around and jumps from one memory to another like a person suddenly remembering an abstract detail which they believe is important to the story they are trying to tell. These are all casual remembrances for Kathy, or at least that is how she brings the story across. The key here is the subtext or the implicit or metaphorical meaning of a literary text (Merriam-Webster). In other words, it is the story within a story.

Subtext is everything that the characters aren't saying, everything the author wants to express which is not implicitly stated in the text. It is an immensely important element of literature and difficult to achieve. It mimics reality in that people rarely voice what they are truly thinking and feeling for any number of reasons, be it societal constraints or the desire to seem one way while feeling another. The entire novel is full of subtext as Kathy is filling up her narration with minute details about her life, all while continuously stating that the incidents she describes are "nothing, really" (Ishiguro). She is constantly understating her memories, insisting that they don't mean much. This is strange in that it doesn't add up, logically, to tell the reader so much about her life, with so much detail, but believe that everything said is "nothing, really," as if her memories are not very important in the bigger picture of history and time. Then why use the time and energy to tell this story? This is related to Garland's "tiger in the room" analogy. The subtext is that Kathy spends the entire book avoiding acknowledgement of her fate until she cannot avoid it any longer.

As stated above, she is looking back on her life and thinking about the choices she has made. She is also searching for answers to a question most of the characters probably have: what would they do if they had more time? Kathy never asks herself this question outright, but a reader can see her wondering about it in the subtext of her narration. In this section, the characters are in their late teens and early twenties and living on a farm referred to as "The Cottages" to wait until their bodies have matured enough for their first donations. Some donors become "carers", the people who look after the post-operation recovery of donors (Ishiguro 115). After several relationship-changing arguments with Ruth over a multitude of things, she

applies to be a carer. She says,

“I was suddenly looking at everything—the Cottages, everybody there—in a different light. I was now one of the ones leaving, and soon enough, everyone knew it. Maybe Ruth thought we’d be spending hours talking about my future [...] but I kept a certain distance from her, just as I did Tommy. [...] before I knew it, I was saying my goodbyes” (Ishiguro 203).

Her manner of telling is to the point and unsentimental. She doesn’t waste time talking about the unfortunate turn her relationships with Ruth and Tommy have taken. She doesn’t let herself do so. Between the lines, a reader can see she is talking about time, how she let time pass, and things fading from her grasp. She says she “was suddenly looking at everything [...] in a different light.” showing the next stage in her development. In becoming a carer, Kathy is setting herself apart from the other donors at The Cottages; moving to another level, even. In her carer training, she will come to know things that Ruth and Tommy don’t know. For some time, before her own donations begin, she will be known as a carer before being known as a donor. When she says, “Maybe Ruth thought we’d be spending hours talking about my future [...] but I kept a certain distance from her [...]”, she is deliberately keeping her distance, resisting any potential or implied attempt by Ruth to pass over their arguments and continue on as friends. Kathy has no interest in this. Here she is not making use of her time with Ruth and Tommy, something, which is implied in the subtext, she regrets. That regret is subtly shown in the line, “before I knew it, I was saying my goodbyes.” “Before I knew it” suggests she hadn’t paid attention to the passage of time, linking to the “suddenly looking at everything in a different light” at the beginning of the quote. Kathy is showing the reader everything she is feeling and thinking without saying it, as evidenced here. This is the epitome of well-written subtext.

Through all this subtext a reader can arrive at the meaning of the term “repressed energy.” What Ishiguro meant when he spoke of this is the unsaid things in the story; the words the characters never let out. Kathy represses her true thoughts while filling her narration with simple explanations of her experiences. Although every other character is seen through Kathy’s perception and therefore the reader has a biased view, all of the donor characters have this sense that they must repress any sort of emotion or thought which would encourage them to think critically about their lives and their purpose. This is not to say they don’t have lengthy talks with each other about things. Kathy and Tommy often talk about their theories on the ‘why’ of their lives during their time at Hailsham, their time at The Cottages, and during their time as donors. They talk with each other extensively throughout the novel but they never go any further than an answer to why. Again, it’s the ‘tiger in the room’ analogy. It’s the repressed energy and it also leads to an answer for the previous question of ‘why don’t they try to escape’. It is because of repressed energy.

The donors haven’t been given the proper tools for thoughts of life outside their predetermined paths. As stated above, they always come right to the thought of “what if” but they never let it go any further. They are afraid of what emotions and compulsions it may bring. They repress all those thoughts out of the

fear of what it could make them do. They don't know what the consequences of letting go of their thoughts and emotions could be and that frightens them.

Kathy speaks of the donors sometimes thinking of a fantasy life for themselves, like a "what if I wasn't a donor" thought process. Some fantasies become elaborate and detailed. She says,

"It was possible, [...] to forget for whole stretches of time who we really were; [...] It couldn't last, of course, [...] just for those few months, we somehow managed to live in this cosy state of suspension in which we could ponder our lives without the usual boundaries" (Ishiguro 142).

The "usual boundaries" are, of course, the fact that they were created to donate their vital organs to non-donors. The "few months" she speaks of are the months spent at The Cottages. It is something they do entirely in their heads, sharing it occasionally, but never completely believing it. She says it was a "state of suspension" in which they could let their minds wander, which reflects their time at The Cottages where they are in limbo between their lives at Hailsham and their future as donors.

Kathy takes it further, "Mind you, none of us pushed it too far. [...] The talk was more likely to be about becoming a postman or working on a farm" (Ishiguro 143). The most important part here is the "none of us pushed it too far", suggesting that thinking of what their lives would be if they weren't donors is dangerous; that it would force them to face reality; they are donors and there is no changing that. Kathy says the same things at the end of the novel when she speaks about her life after Ruth and Tommy have completed:

"I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing, [...] this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up [...] if 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 [...] The fantasy never got beyond that—I never let it—and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be" (Ishiguro 287-88).

The words are simple, her explanation of her emotions is uncomplicated, but in the subtext a reader can see the intense sorrow she is feeling. She is, again, giving herself the opportunity to fantasize about a future she wants, but, like before, doesn't let herself get carried away. The saddest part about this fantasy is that it can never be a possibility. In the past, for all the donors, there was some vague, though unbelievable, hope that they might one day be able to do the things they've dreamed about. For Kathy, in this moment, her dream can never come true because Tommy is gone and she will never see him again. He won't walk over the crest of that hill and for this reason she is crying. She has finally decided to look at the tiger in the room. The reality of her hopeless situation hits her for real this time and she can no longer indulge in any of these fantasies. In this way, she is accepting her life as it is. Although she is repressing her emotions in this scene,

like she has through the entire book, she is no longer repressing the reality that as a clone, her dreams will never come true and, perhaps in a couple years time, she will complete just like the others before her.

In 2010, a movie adaptation of the novel was released (IMBD). While the movie carries the same overall message of the novel, a different route is taken in bringing that message to light. The novel is mainly concerned with the use or misuse of time, the repression of energy, and the emotion or actions which are a result. The movie does take all that into account. However, it's different; the story is told in another way.

With the novel, everything is told from Kathy's point of view. Although Kathy is a fairly reliable first person narrator, every memory and emotion conveyed should be regarded with some reservation. Such an effect with unreliable perspectives can and have been achieved in film. The concept of perspectives becomes more fluid in that it is easier to portray the emotions of more than one character. Viewers see the story from more than one perspective. This is not exclusive to film but since film is a visual medium, viewers literally see every facial expression and hear every sound. Not as much thought or deeper thinking is required to watch a movie. This is not to say that movies are mindless endeavors for mindless people. Only that when reading a book, a person must first interpret the symbols on the page as a language, understand what those symbols mean, and then think of what the meaning translates to in terms of subtext and a larger message. Steps one and two on this list are excluded with film. Thus, a story is told with images and sound, rather than with words like in a book.

Never Let Me Go the film, like the books has the theme of time and how people use or waste time but uses the relationship between Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth played as a love triangle to support it. The movie elicits empathy from the viewer for Kathy when it shows Ruth deliberately scheming to keep Kathy and Tommy separated. Moments of close friendship between the girls become fewer and farther between as the movie continues, almost disappearing by the time the group reaches The Cottages. In the novel, however, Kathy stays a supportive friend to them both, oftentimes backing up Ruth in her schemes and even convincing Tommy to get back together with Ruth (Ishiguro 110). Throughout the book, Kathy is constantly stating how close she is to Ruth. This could be seen as an attempt to hide a lesser relationship, but it is actually shown in the many things Kathy does for Ruth, and vice versa (Ishiguro 60, 75-6). The girls only rekindle their friendship towards the end of the movie when Kathy becomes Ruth's carer, though the moments of friendship seen in the first third of the movie are gone.

In the movie Kathy and Ruth are often played off one another in their rivalry to create tension. They nearly have a rivalry concerning Tommy. Kathy keeps out of the way most of the time while always enduring unkind remarks from Ruth (*Never Let Me Go*). A high point of the movie is when Ruth admits to having kept Kathy and Tommy apart and the two of them finally consummate their love. There is even a sense of hope when they seriously consider going to Madam to request a deferral. The movie is still about the use of time, but focuses on how time is used in terms of romantic love between Kathy and Tommy, while

the book focuses on the love of friendship between all three of them.

While the novel has more time and space to create a slow build-up of story and emotion, the movie has only about an hour and a half to get the message across. As a result, the characters must put forth the concepts described as Kathy's thoughts in the book as dialogue in the movie. Viewers get a clearer explanation of the story, thus they don't have as much information to interpret. It should be noted that the emotion and subtext from the novel is not lost. Portraying subtext is difficult in writing since the emotion conveyed cannot be written about. It is easier to pull off in film because of the visual aspect. Certain looks between actors or visual cues in the landscape can portray any kind of subtext a director may wish for.

In the end, the novel and the movie are able to communicate the same message to the audience: how people use or misuse the time they have in life and the concept of repressing energy. People in real life, like Ishiguro's characters, hide the things they are truly thinking and feeling by looking away from something they don't want to see. They don't want to see the tiger in the room with them. This is shown with skill through the use of subtext both in print and film. Ishiguro says:

"I started off with a bunch of young people whose lives were going to be shorter. By doing that I thought we would get a new perspective on something we barely look at but know all about, which is the fact that we do get older and at some point we're going to go." ("Exploring the Story")

Never Let Me Go, novel and film, explores what mortality means to the characters, the people in their world, and to the reader or viewer. The inescapable fact is that everyone will die. Do you have regrets? What would you do if you had more time? Using the donors as a focal point makes mortality seem present and close. It turns the attention to the readers' or viewers' lives. It is not about desperate escapes and chase scenes and dramatic fights. It is about subtext and quiet reflection; coming to terms with how a life has been lived and if the time given for that life has been used well. Kathy says it best in her monologue at the end of the film:

"I remind myself that I was lucky to have any time with [them] at all. 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 understand what we've lived through, or feel we've had enough time." (*Never Let Me Go*)

This is what every human in the world thinks when they decide to recognize the tiger in the room. Maybe humans don't understand they've lived through, their purpose on this Earth, or that they've had enough time.

References

"Carey Mulligan — *Never Let Me Go*." September 11, 2010. YouTube.com. Accessed August 21, 2013. Online video clip. https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Q3_GkjCMrZw

- DP/30. "DP/30: *Never Let Me Go*, screenwriter Alex Garland, novelist Kazuo Ishiguro. December 18, 2010. YouTube.com. Accessed on August 21, 2013. Online video clip. https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=mb_BmKVFqrQ
- Fox Searchlight. "*Never Let Me Go* Featurette – Exploring the Story." September 22, 2010. YouTube.com. Accessed August 21, 2013. Online video clip. https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=o7Es5-nhZWo#t=48
- . "*Never Let Me Go* Featurette – Meet the Author". September 10, 2010. YouTube.com. Accessed August 21, 2013. Online video clip. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_gRhJ_Rwhg
- Gregg, Allen. "Kazuo Ishiguro on his novel '*Never Let Me Go*.'" September 17, 2010. YouTube.com. Accessed on August 21, 2013. Online video clip. https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=batJulypW-Y
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. New York. Vintage Press, 2005. Print.
- Merriam-Webster. "Subtext". *Merriam Webster Online*, Merriam Webster, n.d. Web. September 26, 2013.
- "*Never Let Me Go*." Internet Movie Database (IMDB). IMDB.com, n.d. September 26, 2013. Web.
- Never Let Me Go*. Dir. Mark Romanek. Writ. Kazuo Ishiguro, Alex Garland. Fox Searchlight Pictures. February 1, 2011. film.