More Human Than Human: Clones As Authentic Humanity In Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go

Chung Chin-Yi

In Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go, the question of the humanity of artificially produced life is raised: Do Clones have souls? Ishiguro’s answer is a resounding yes. In his imagined dystopia, clones are raised with an eye on harvesting their organs in the form of donations to complete their life span. The highlight of the novel is the relationship that develops between Tommy and Kathy, and a love triangle that involves Ruth, a fellow clone. Throughout the novel, the emotional passage of the clones as they grow up and struggle to come to terms with their fate in Hailsham is documented, and it is made lucidly clear that clones do indeed have a thriving inner life and are thus virtually indistinguishable from normal human beings.

Hailsham, the boarding school in which the clones are raised, is a cruel experiment. While most of the school’s activities are difficult to distinguish from those of a normal boarding school, there is an emphasis on assessing the creativity of the clones, in terms of assessing the art and poetry they produce. The rationale behind these activities is to demonstrate that clones being artificially produced will not be able to reach the artistic competence of a normal human being because they lack an inner life. Indeed, Tommy produces repeatedly what one of the teachers calls rubbish, and is at one point told that it did not matter if he could not be creative because the teacher probably understands that clones being what they are would be incapable of emotional depths and creativity. But through the novel the series of meetings and affections that develop between Tommy and Kathy are authentic emotions and indeed, they attempt to obtain a deferral from their fate as organ donors by seeking exemption from donating because they are genuinely in love, which is ruthlessly thwarted of course, because the humans that run the cloning experiment deny them the right to love or the right to be recognized as fellow human beings. Indeed, the cold inhumanity with which they are denied the right to escape their fate as donors highlights that ironically, it is the clones who are capable of emotional depths and compassion as well as love while it is the humans who commit atrocities and are inhumane.

The height of the capacity for emotional depths is highlighted in several scenes. One involves Tommy reproaching Kathy for taking sex casually by just stimulating herself through porn magazines, he explains that sex can be meaningful if love is involved; it need not be just a mechanical act. Then there is the scene in which they are denied their deferral...
and they cling to each other with what seems to be an infinite embrace, capturing in this moment the intensity of their passion for each other, which far surpasses the hollowness and superficiality of the emotions evinced by their human counterparts at Hailsham. Indeed, in *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are more human than human, and Ishiguro’s insight is that authentic emotion can exist independently of its origin, whether a being is naturally or artificially produced.

The love affair between Tommy and Kathy can be seen as a gradual one, though it is clear from the start that Kathy cares for Tommy despite his outcast nature and that Tommy in turn cares for Kathy despite repeatedly getting back with Ruth who apologises at the end that she is the one who has kept Tommy and Kathy apart, and it is they who are truly in love and thus deserving of obtaining a deferral from Hailsham on the grounds that they experience authentic emotion and depths of passion.

The grounds on which the clones are subjugated to the humans and exploited by them for organ donations is thus seen to be fundamentally flawed. It is clear that the clones are capable of depths of emotion, as the moving love affair that unfolds between Kathy and Tommy demonstrates. Kathy begins caring for Tommy even though the rest of the clones mock and ostracize him, and this is seen from the time she cares about him getting his best shirt dirty and talks to him about wearing his best shirt to football not being a wise decision. He grumpily tells her that it is none of her business, but eventually regrets saying that and apologises profusely after for hurting her while she was trying to help him.

The plight of the clones is profoundly pitiful. It is clear from the passages that the clones are hardly different from the humans, the only difference is their artificial rather than natural origin, because the clones, think, feel, suffer, long and have a whole range of emotions similar to the humans which include lust and love. Madame, the leader of the experiment is described as being frightened of the clones, and the cruel inhumanity with which she denies Kathy and Tommy their deferral at the end seals the conclusion that ironically it is the humans such as her that are inhumane and the clones, who, experiencing depths of love and compassion for each other, are more human than human.

Indeed that the clones are constantly being assessed for their creativity to demonstrate that they are less than human and to show that they are deserving of being treated as less than human simply confirms the cruel nature of the experiment. While it is clear that Tommy produces rubbish as art it is also clear that he experiences the whole range of human emotions
and might be less creative not because he does not possess an inner life but because he simply does not have the interest or talent for art, but this seems to be taken simply as evidence that he, as a clone, cannot live up to the artistic depths and talents of a natural human being.

The novel also examines other aspects of the plight of being a clone. As clones, they can only mimic the gestures of real human beings in order to feel authentic, as Ruth who keeps imitating Chrissy and Rodney does. Indeed it may be true that the clones because of what they are cannot be as creative and original as naturally born human beings and are reduced to simulacrum, copying the gestures of original human beings as well as producing art that is in the words of the teachers, rubbish.

The height of the pathos of being a clone is seen when Kathy is listening to a record “Never let me go” which goes “Baby, Never let me go” and she imagines it is about a mother whose child is taken away from her and cannot bear to let her child go. This confirms her status as a clone, because an original human would be able to discern that Baby is just a term of endearment and it is clear the songs is actually about a lost love and someone who is longing to be reunited with her love but Kathy as a clone, misinterprets it because she does not have an authentic human upbringing but a highly rigid and disciplined as well as artificial setting in which they are prepared solely for the purpose of their organ donations.

It is also clear that all the clones experience a full spectrum of emotions including jealousy and competition which is why Ruth repeatedly keeps Tommy and Kathy apart when it is clear that they are the ones who truly feel for each other. In the description of their time at Hailsham, from the mention of the secret guard business to the mysterious pencil case and Kathy and Ruth’s tense exchanges about whether their friendship remains and is genuine, it is clear that even if the clones are not as capable of being creative as their human counterparts they experience every shade and depth of emotion that an original human being does.

It is thus quite clear that the clones are being exploited and treated cruelly, as organ banks and lesser than human when in fact they are more human than human, as the love triangle between Tommy, Kathy and Ruth shows. The ultimate sacrifice that Ruth makes at the end, to allow Tommy and Kathy to seek a deferral and be united as true loves shows that clones are capable of even self-sacrifice even though Ruth had clung selfishly to Tommy earlier on. That ultimate denial of self and the sacrifice that Ruth makes stands in stark contrast to the cold and calculating malice with which the humans treat the clones and exploit them for organ donations.
Never Let me Go is ultimately a love story, and a story about the depths of passion set in a cruel and hostile environment which denies clones the right to love on the basis that they are less than human when it is clear from our reading that the clones are more human than human, experiencing every shade and depth of emotion indeed on a deeper and more spiritual level than the cold, calculating and inhumane humans who run the clone experiment. The novel is thus about the cruelty of human exploitation of artificial humans for organs when on every level of experience and description, it is the clones who are capable of emotional depths, romance, friendship and sorrow, indeed they experience all this on a level that is magnified and intensified because of their short life span and the artificial and contrived environment in which they are brought up.

The novel is thus about the triumph of emotion against the cold scientific and clinical backdrop in which the clones are raised, indeed they are brought up and taught not to feel and love but against these odds it is precisely these feelings that Tommy and Kathy experience. Never Let me Go is thus a story about the utopian quest for love in a deeply dystopian environment which contrives to their annihilation in speculative England.

References: