

A Journey of Self-Discovery: Travel and Identity in *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the complex relationship between travel and identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*. Through the travel experiences of the clones Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, the novel depicts their exploration and cognition of self-identity across different spaces. Travel is not merely physical movement but a dynamic process of identity formation. Ishiguro subverts the traditional notion that "travel equals freedom" through travel narratives, framing travel as a journey toward destiny. He reveals the tragic fate of clones under social discipline, as well as the fluidity, fragility, and fatalism in their search for identity. Far from bringing liberation, physical movement becomes a medium through which clones gradually recognize their instrumentalized fate. Ishiguro thus deconstructs the romanticized imagination of travel narratives, transforming travel into a controlled mechanism of identity discipline and exposing the vulnerability and passivity of individuals within established social structures. Through its layered descriptions of travel scenarios, the novel not only questions the autonomy of identity—whether identity stems from self-construction or social attribution—but also, within a dystopian framework, engages in profound reflections on humanity, memory, and ethical dilemmas, demonstrating its unique critical value in contemporary literature.

Keywords

Travel; identity; *Never Let Me Go*.

1. Introduction

As one of the most internationally influential writers in contemporary English literature, Kazuo Ishiguro occupies a significant position in world literature with his unique narrative aesthetics and profound exploration of humanity. The awarding of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature not only recognized his literary achievements but also highlighted the universal value of his works across cultural boundaries. Ishiguro's writing integrates Eastern and Western narrative traditions, often unfolding philosophical reflections on identity, ethics, and existential dilemmas through the folds of memory. His signature unreliable narration not only creates deep textual tension but also serves as a crucial artistic tool for deconstructing the spiritual predicaments of modern individuals.

This sustained focus on humanity and identity reaches new intellectual heights in *Never Let Me Go* (2005). As Ishiguro's most representative dystopian narrative, the work constructs a disturbing yet eerily realistic ethical world through Kathy's memoir-like account of her life as a clone. Beginning at Hailsham boarding school, the novel traces the life trajectories of Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, revealing how individuals confront a predetermined fate in a society dominated by biotechnology. Notably, spatial movement in the novel is not mere scene-shifting but is invested with profound symbolic meaning—each geographical transition corresponds to a redefinition of self-perception.

Travel is not merely a geographical displacement, but also a flow and reconstruction of identity. Novels use this to conduct a profound inquiry into self-belonging. From the enclosed utopia of Hailsham, to the fleeting illusion of freedom in the farmhouse, to the journey to Norfolk in search of the "possible original", and finally to the inevitable donation center, the spatial displacement of Kathy and others is always accompanied by the questioning of the ultimate proposition "Who am I". What is particularly noteworthy is that the trip to Norfolk, as a crucial turning point in the novel, not only reveals the futile attempt of clones to find their human prototypes, but also implies that within the framework of biological determinism, any pursuit of identity is destined to be a Sisyphus-like tragedy. This exploration of identity through travel ultimately reaches its fatalistic climax in the scene of the donation center — when the trajectory of spatial movement coincides with the trajectory of life's passing, travel is no longer a symbol of freedom, but becomes the cruelest manifestation of disciplinary power.

In *Never Let Me Go*, travel serves not only as a means to advance the plot but also as a dynamic carrier of identity. Every migration of Kathy and others after leaving Hailsham is accompanied by a re-examination of their self-worth: the journey to Norfolk in search of the "possible original" symbolizes their yearning for the identity of "real humans"; while the final process of moving towards the donation center reveals the tragic fate of clones that cannot be escaped under social discipline. This kind of travel is not only a transformation of physical space but also a spiritual journey, highlighting the fluidity, fragility, and sense of fate of identity. By analyzing the travel narratives in the novel, this paper aims to explore how Kazuo Ishiguro uses spatial movement to show the identity predicament of clones, and how travel becomes an important perspective to understand the propositions of human nature in his works.

2. Hailsham: Innocence and Ignorance

In Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Hailsham, the initial living space of Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, presents a paradoxical enclosed world. This seemingly ideal boarding school, through meticulously designed mechanisms of isolation and discipline, provides temporary refuge for clones while systematically concealing their true fate as organ donors. The walls of Hailsham not only demarcate physical boundaries but also construct a cognitive barrier. Hailsham's education, under the guise of humanistic instruction, is a form of hypocritical conditioning, its purpose being to prepare students to "donate" more effectively^[1]. Confined strictly to the campus, the children of Hailsham know little of the outside world; their cognitive horizons are rigidly defined by the closed authoritative structure of Hailsham's educators. "and it's amazing, even now, after all these miles I've covered as a carer, the extent to which my idea of the various counties is still set by these pictures Miss Emily put up on her easel." (Ishiguro, P53). Even with a degree of autonomy later in life, Kathy's cognition remains constrained by Hailsham's educational system. This dual function of spatial isolation and information control predetermines profound contradictions in the clones' identity from the outset, sowing seeds for subsequent identity struggles.

As the clones' initial living space, Hailsham carefully constructs a closed world where innocence and ignorance mutually reinforce. This seemingly idyllic boarding school, through systematic information control, places clones in a peculiar cognitive state—they retain childlike naivety while being deprived of knowledge of their true destiny as organ donors. The most obvious manifestation of this innocence lies in their attitude toward artistic creation. Headmistress Emily emphasizes that "We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls" (Ishiguro, P201), instrumentalizing art as a tool to evaluate humanity, yet the students sincerely believe that creation can demonstrate their uniqueness. Their longing for the "Gallery" and eager participation in art evaluations are rooted in ignorance of the system's true nature.

The clones' ignorance of their fate is most vividly reflected in their understanding of "donation." Hailsham's educators deliberately mystify the topic, leaving the students with only a vague grasp of the concept. Daily life at Hailsham normalizes future organ donation as a natural part of growth through ritualized health management. For instance, Miss Lucy tells them: "If, say, they were telling us how we'd have to be very careful to avoid diseases when we had sex, it would have been odd not to mention how much more important this was for us than for normal people outside. " (Ishiguro, P66). Through such subtle mechanisms, clones accept their instrumental fate while remaining innocent. Only when Kathy later works as a carer does she truly comprehend that Hailsham's so-called "care" is designed to ensure clones' bodies meet medical standards. This belated realization underscores the deceit of their early education—it protects not childhood but prepares them for future exploitation.

As the first stage of the clones' growth, Hailsham is significant not only for shaping their initial cognitive patterns but also for revealing how power constructs identity through spatial isolation and educational discipline. This seemingly protective environment is, in reality, a carefully designed cognitive prison, ensuring clones unknowingly accept their social positioning. Hailsham thus becomes a deeply ironic space—a cradle of innocence and the first site of systematic violence. All subsequent journeys and identity explorations by the clones inevitably return to this original cognitive starting point, either to break through it or ultimately submit to it.

3. The Cottages: Transition and Confusion

The move to the cottages marks the transition of Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy from the childhood world of Hailsham to adulthood. This space ostensibly grants them greater freedom, yet in reality, it perpetuates discipline in subtle, invisible ways. The cottages are described as "semi-independent" dwellings where clones can come and go freely, even visiting nearby towns, but this freedom of movement is merely a facade. The disappearance of walls did not bring true liberation, nor did leaving Hailsham grant them genuine independence.

Kathy recalls, "If you'd told me then that within a year, I'd not only develop a habit of taking long solitary walks, but that I'd start learning to drive a car, I'd have thought you were mad." (Ishiguro, P91) Kathy and the other clones had never left Hailsham; they were fearful of the outside environment. As the text mentions, "Even Ruth looked daunted that sunny day the minibus dropped us in front of the farmhouse, circled round the little pond and disappeared up the slope." (Ishiguro, P91) The contradictions of this transitional phase are particularly evident in Ruth. She is eager to mimic the ways ordinary couples interact, yet there is always a deliberate theatricality to her behavior. She would deliberately link arms with Tommy in public or imitate the intimate gestures of couples in magazines, as if this could prove she is no different from ordinary people. However, the more strenuous her mimicry, the more it reveals her unfamiliarity with genuine intimacy. She does not know how ordinary couples interact naturally because she has never truly possessed the emotional experiences of ordinary people. Her actions stem not from genuine desire but from an anxiety about her identity—she longs to be recognized as "normal" yet cannot escape her essence as a clone. This contradiction ultimately strains her relationships with both Tommy and Kathy. Once clones are plunged into an identity crisis, they do not know how to situate themselves. They seek to shed their past identities and be accepted by new communities, yet fear the unknown life, thus struggling painfully between the past and the future.^[2]

Kathy's confusion takes a different form. Unlike Ruth, she is not eager to perform "normality"; instead, she tends more toward introspection, even displaying a near-cold sense of detachment at times. This does not mean, however, that she is without confusion. When she flips through pornographic magazines in an attempt to find her own "original," her behavior may seem

absurd, but it reveals a deeper psychological predicament—she seeks to affirm her identity through external references, even if such references are themselves strongly tinged with objectification. The female figures in pornographic magazines are portrayed as objects of desire, and as Kathy gazes at them, she is in fact gazing at her own potential fate—she is not merely a created being, but a tool with a predetermined purpose. In reality, Kathy simply fails to confront her own desires; she does not understand that her sexual urges are normal, thus mistakenly assuming her original must be a "pornographic actress."

The identity dilemmas of Kathy and Ruth are essentially structural products of Hailsham's enclosed upbringing system. This system accomplishes the marginalized construction of the clone subjects at the cognitive level by systematically blocking their interaction and contact with mainstream society. Such institutionalized isolation is manifested not only in the separation of physical space but more profoundly internalized as limitations in cognitive frameworks, depriving the trainees of the reference system necessary for the development of a complete sense of self-identity. Raised from childhood in that seemingly idyllic campus, they are exposed only to filtered information and have never truly understood the outside world. This deliberate isolation leaves them longing to integrate into ordinary people's lives while forever remaining alienated, like outsiders. This isolation is no accidental oversight, but a deliberate act. Hailsham aims to keep them neither completely ignorant nor truly awakened. They are cultivated to be peculiar beings who know just enough, but not deeply enough—smart enough to fulfill their mission, yet not aware enough to question their fate.

4. Norfolk: Truth and Disillusionment

In Kathy's childhood memories, Norfolk was mysteriously described by Hailsham's guardians as the "lost corner" of England (Ishiguro, P53). This geographical symbol, from the very beginning, carried the clones' fantasy of tracing their identity origins. Ruth once mentioned, "when we lost something precious, and we'd looked and looked and still couldn't find it, then we didn't have to be completely heartbroken. We still had that last bit of comfort, thinking one day, when we were grown up, and we were free to travel around the country, we could always go and find it again in Norfolk." (Ishiguro, P54) When Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy drove to Norfolk, this journey, on the surface, was to verify Ruth's "possible original", but in essence, it reflected the clones' deeper desire – to confirm the basis of their own existence, and even to fantasize about delaying their unalterable fate. However, this pursuit ultimately proved that some losses are destined to be irrecoverable, and some answers will never be found.

Ruth's process of searching for her original in Norfolk was filled with expectation and disappointment. At Hailsham, she firmly believed that she had an original, and that this original was a decent and respected person. In Norfolk, they discovered a woman who seemed to be Ruth's original, and this woman looked very similar to the original Ruth had imagined. They followed this woman into an art gallery and even talked to the silver-haired lady there. However, as they got closer, Ruth and the others gradually realized that this woman was not her original. Tommy tried to comfort her, saying it was just "for fun", but Ruth's emotions erupted. She angrily pointed out, "We all know it. We're modelled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren't psychos. That's what we come from." (Ishiguro, P128) These words revealed Ruth's complete disappointment in her own identity, as well as the heavy blow they suffered in the process of seeking identity. Ruth's words also embodied the clones' helpless acceptance of their own fate. They originally hoped to prove their value by finding their originals, but in the end, they had to face the restrictions and constraints brought by their identity as clones. The fact that Ruth and others spared no effort to find their originals showed the clones' strong sense of identity anxiety. It can be said that this is an extension of the first question in Gauguin's query: "Who are we?" [3]. This dilemma of identity

not only affects their self-perception but also influences their relationships with other clones. Ruth's anger and despair reflect the clones' struggle and pain when facing the issue of identity. The spatial narrative of the journey also reinforces the irreversibility of fate. Norfolk is depicted as a place where "a road carved into a cliff edge" (Ishiguro, P113). This geographical feature implies the futility of their pursuit. The place where they thought they could find answers ultimately gave them nothing. Norfolk thus becomes the most direct metaphor for the clones' fate – its legend as a "lost and found office" precisely proves that what is lost can never be recovered; its desolation as a geographical endpoint mirrors the futility of the search for identity. When the clones left, they took away only a deeper sense of emptiness and another confirmation of their instrumental identity.

5. The Final Journey: Acceptance and Resignation

Kathy and Tommy's journey to Littlehampton by car marks their last attempt to challenge their predetermined fate. On the surface, this trip is to verify the rumor that "true love can delay donations", but in essence, it carries their final hope of resisting fate. Love is the spiritual pillar that supports them in fighting against reality: even though Tommy's health is declining, he still insists on finding Madame; as a carer who has witnessed countless deaths, Kathy is unwilling to give up the possibility of an "exception" because of her love for Tommy. In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy and Tommy embark on a journey to find Madame, harboring the slim hope that their sincere feelings can achieve "delayed donation". They believe that showing their love for each other and Tommy's paintings to Madame might break the fate of clones, who are destined to die for organ donation. On the way, they first find Madame, who is full of fear at their existence, and then learn the truth about "delay" from Miss Emily—that the so-called "delay" does not exist at all, and this rumor is groundless and never true. The school was founded not to protect clones, but to prove that clones have souls and emotions, so that the "organ donation" system can be socially accepted at the moral level. The so-called "delayed donation" has always been a rumor.

Tommy's breakdown on the way back is one of the most impactful scenes in *Never Let Me Go*. After learning the truth, "Tommy's figure, raging, shouting, flinging his fists and kicking out" (Ishiguro, P211) Tommy's breakdown represents the common dilemma of all clones in the face of the truth. They were educated to have the illusion of having a "soul", but when they grow up, they are told that everything is a lie. The spiritual destruction caused by this cognitive subversion is more cruel than the physical "donation". Through his breakdown, the plot elevates the individual tragedy to a metaphor for the living state of the clone group—they are "sober prisoners" under the system, knowing the ending but unable to resist. This plot not only explains his subsequent decline, but also implies that "broken hope" directly destroys the lives of clones—when the meaning of survival is stripped away, the collapse of the body becomes inevitable.

At the end of *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy finally accepts her role as a "carer", accompanies other clones to complete organ donation, and waits for her fate of being rotated as a "donor". Her ending is calm and restrained, but reveals a profound tragedy—she soberly walks towards the predetermined end of her life, neither resisting nor collapsing, but finding comfort in the memories of Hailsham with a certain sense of relief and nostalgia. At the end of the novel, Kathy recalls: "The fantasy never got beyond that—I didn't 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, P222) Kathy's journey may have no end, and her journey is more like a "persistence with scars": she cannot escape the set track, but guards the dignity belonging to clones in the track. Her "obedience" is actually a forced survival

strategy: on the premise of being unable to subvert the system, she uses "remembering" to resist forgetting. This is both a sad calmness and a "helpless whimper" [4].

6. Conclusion

In *Never Let Me Go*, the travel narrative serves as a crucial vehicle through which Kazuo Ishiguro explores the issue of identity. From Hailsham to the Cottages, then to Norfolk, and finally to the donation centers, each journey is not merely a shift in geographical space but a reshape of the clones' self-identity. The innocence and ignorance at Hailsham plant the seeds of contradiction in the clones' exploration of identity; the transition and confusion at the Cottages highlight their identity anxiety amid the illusion of freedom; the truth and disillusionment in Norfolk completely shatter their fantasies about identity. In the end, Kathy and Tommy, in their helplessness against fate, move from resistance to acceptance, embodying the tragic destiny of clones under social discipline. Through the travel narrative, Ishiguro thoroughly subverts the romanticized literary notion that "travel equals freedom," framing travel as a journey toward destiny. This narrative not only profoundly reveals the identity predicament of clones but also triggers profound reflections on humanity, ethics, and social discipline. The process of identity exploration by the clones in the novel underscores the fluidity, fragility, and fatalism of identity, showing that individual struggles often seem powerless in the face of powerful social discipline. Even so, the clones still attempt to preserve their dignity through memory and perseverance. Ishiguro uses this to explore the profound question of whether identity is determined by the individual or bestowed by society, presenting readers with a disturbing yet highly realistic ethical world, and his work demonstrates unique ideological value and artistic charm within the dystopian narrative framework.

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