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Review Article

A Study of Unreliable Narration in *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

Based on James Phelan's theory of unreliable narration, this paper analyzes Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* from three dimensions: fact, ethics and knowledge. Centering on Kathy's misreporting, underreporting, misjudgment, under judgment, misinterpretation and under interpretation, the study explores technological violence, subject disintegration and cognitive confinement behind her retrospective narration. The clone protagonist beautifies memories and adopts institutional discourse to gloss over organ exploitation and surveillance, failing to recognize the systematic oppression embedded in Hailsham. She identifies with the donation system and misjudges self-value, while distorted cognition keeps her from comprehending interpersonal intimacy and the instrumentalized nature of cloned bodies. Her futile pursuit of prototypes further exposes the existential confusion of clones stripped of subjectivity. The novel reveals how power disciplines and deprives marginal lives, and reflects on bioethics and technological development. It also indicates that unilateral narratives constructed by technological systems may mislead public cognition, highlighting the importance of critical awareness and ethical norms for scientific progress.

Keywords: *Never Let Me Go,* Kazuo Ishiguro, Unreliable Narration.

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1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the most influential contemporary writers in British literature, renowned for his subtle narrative style and profound philosophical reflections. As the recipient of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature, his writing revolves around memory and forgetting. *Never Let Me Go* explores humanity, identity, and ethics through Kathy H.'s retrospective narration, employing a calm and restrained tone to uncover the cruel truth behind Hailsham.

Current scholarship mainly focuses on four aspects. First, researchers examine the clones' identity crisis, investigating how they construct subjectivity within a highly regulated environment. Second, technological ethics studies analyze the novel's critique of the commodification of life and organ transplantation from perspectives such as technological rationality, bioethics, and posthumanism. Third, biopolitical theories, particularly those of Foucault and Agamben, reveal how power disciplines and exploits clone lives through space, language, and institutions. Fourth, narrative perspective research concentrates on the novel's marginal narration and symbolic system to explore its thematic expression. However, existing studies of unreliable narration tend to emphasize emotional trauma and psychological causes, while failing to fully uncover its deep interaction with core issues such as technological ethics and identity.

2.The Concealment of Technological Violence on the Axis of Facts

In Phelan's theory, unreliability on the axis of facts/events is manifested through "underreporting" and "misreporting": the former refers to deliberate concealment of key facts, while the latter describes a discrepancy between the narrator's account and the implied author's truth (Phelan, 2005). Kathy evades cruel reality by beautifying memory, presenting Hailsham as an Eden-like paradise and obscuring the truth of the clone survival system.

2.1 Misreporting: The Idealization of Memory

According to Phelan, "misreporting involves the dimensions of characters, facts, and events" (Phelan, 2005). In *Never Let Me Go*, this unreliability first appears in the inconsistency between Kathy's narration and objective reality. As narrator, Kathy should remain objective in presenting facts, yet she consciously or unconsciously omits and alters information, creating a gap between narration and reality.

The first contradiction lies between Kathy's portrayal of Hailsham as an Edenic place and its actual nature. In her narration, Hailsham appears a pure, innocent haven where children grow up carefree and art is freely encouraged (Shen Aoyue, 2021). With guardians, sports pavilions, and art rooms, and students studying literature and geography, writing poetry and painting, the school seems no different from ordinary educational institutions. Yet the implied author reveals Hailsham's true nature: beneath Kathy's warm recollections lies a carefully designed institution for the cultivation and surveillance of life (Li Haiyang, 2024).

First, Kathy describes Hailsham's location: "Hailsham stood in a smooth hollow in the countryside with fields rising on all sides." (Ishiguro, 2005). She treats the landscape as a natural feature. "This meant from almost any of the classroom windows in the main house—you could see right along the winding lane and almost to the front gates." (Ishiguro, 2005). This changes the meaning of the "smooth hollow": it becomes a calculated design, a natural panopticon for surveillance (Li Haiyang, 2024). The bowl-shaped terrain and the main house's optimal vantage point enable complete surveillance of the only road outside. Kathy narrates this structure as natural scenery, while the implied author exposes it as a clone-training facility's monitoring mechanism.

Furthermore, when explaining why visitors rarely came to Hailsham, Kathy adopts seemingly reasonable everyday logic: "Sometimes we'd not see a single car for days, and the ones that did come were usually trucks delivering things, or gardeners and workmen. Cars were very rare." (Ishiguro, 2005). She attributes this to geographical remoteness. Yet the implied author suggests another explanation, as shown by Madame's reaction when students surround her: "She was trembling all over, and I could see she was trying to keep herself from crying. She was frightened of us in the same way someone might be frightened of spiders." (Ishiguro, 2005). This fear targets clones as a category rather than individuals, revealing that visitors stay away because of society's collective alienation and rejection, not geography. "The implied author creates unreliable narrators to produce discrepancies between authorial norms and narrative norms, thereby generating effects such as irony" (Shen Dan, 2010). Hailsham is a segregated zone at the margins of society, and Kathy's "misreporting" uses remoteness to conceal social exclusion.

2.2 Underreporting

As a veteran carer, Kathy uses official terminology to narrate her work, producing an impression of professionalism while actually constructing a rhetoric of disembodiment. These terms strip away the physical specificity of organ extraction and reinterpret the entire process from Hailsham's cultivation through the Cottages to the recovery centers and eventual death as a manageable, seemingly ethical medical-social service system.

First, the euphemistic term "donation" performs a covert conceptual substitution. Kathy states: "My donors have always tended to do much better than expected." (Ishiguro, 2005). This transforms forced organ extraction into voluntary sacrifice; when clones call themselves "donors," they unconsciously internalize the ethical disguise over oppressive violence. The term "recovery" is even more deceptive: rather than regained health, it means the interval between successive organ removals, a temporary recuperation only to prepare the body for the next extraction. When Kathy says "their recovery times have been impressive," she praises the durability of a body as biological resource, not the rehabilitation of a person. Likewise, the administrative term "completion" severs death from fear and pain, and Kathy plans her own "completion" like the endpoint of a career. Beneath her composure, her cognition has been fully disciplined by institutional language.

Kathy's "misreporting" and "underreporting" on the factual level shape her perception of the past and influence her ethical judgments and understanding of the present and future. Her idealization of Hailsham becomes the cognitive foundation for her later sanctification of donation and the psychological root of her inability to question the nature of her own existence.

3. The Dissolution of Subjectivity on the Ethical Axis

Phelan points out that "misjudgments are usually accompanied by another form of unreliability" (Phelan, 2005). Kathy's misrepresentation of events is bound to her value system, and on the ethical/evaluative axis her moral judgments deviate considerably, with significant gaps between the facts and her evaluations.

3.1 Misjudgment: Self-Misrecognition Under Oppression

Kathy speaks with a calm, even proud tone of her identity as a veteran carer of nearly twelve years, which reflects her fundamental self-understanding and forms the starting point of her misjudgment. Her entire sense of self-worth is built on the evaluative standards of the donation system.

"My donors have always tended to do much better than expected, recovery times being impressive and hardly any of them becoming agitated." (Ishiguro, 2005). Kathy regards donors as objects requiring care rather than subjects possessing rights, concerned more with reducing complications than protecting lives. With classmate Laura, she proudly notes that her performance lets her choose her own donors: "I've developed a kind of instinct around donors. I know when to hang back and when to offer support." (Ishiguro, 2005). She treats this

institutional privilege as personal recognition, wholly accepting the system's logic of exchange.

Kathy's pride lies in how perfectly she cooperates with the donation system's efficiency. "Some carers, they spread despair around them. They don't know how to talk to the doctors or how to stand up for their donors." (Ishiguro, 2005). Her values mirror the system: a good carer communicates efficiently with doctors to calm donors and minimize disruptions. She takes pride in smoothing the process, never questioning whether it is justifiable.

"When things are bad, of course I feel sad. But at least I can feel I've done my best, thinking about things in the long term." (Ishiguro, 2005). Behind this, "the long term" merely means enabling donors to survive the current operation and proceed to the next until death. Kathy's sense of responsibility actually ensures the uninterrupted cycle of exploitation: she prizes short recovery times as professional competence, yet such success only proves donors' strong endurance and high value as organ resources, letting them reach the next donation and death faster. Her professional achievements accelerate extinction (Ma Huanle, 2024). This seemingly professional yet distorted self-evaluation obscures the role she herself plays within the system; her identification with the carer identity shows how systemic violence grants victims seemingly respectable identities and induces them to internalize oppression.

3.2 Underjudgment: The Avoidance of Truth

In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's understanding of sexuality is not entirely misguided: she knows sex is related to emotion and is important. Yet her insufficient evaluation of love undergoes three stages: the instrumentalization of intimacy at Hailsham, the emotional emptiness of sexual experience at the Cottages, and the partial awakening of love in her relationship with Tommy.

When Kathy plans to practice sex with Harry C., her thinking is pure utilitarian calculation: "I chose Harry because he'd already had sex before… I needed to get experience with someone I didn't care about too much. Then, if I ever got together with someone I really cared about, I'd know what to do." (Ishiguro, 2005). She reduces one of humanity's most complex and intimate experiences into a technique that requires rehearsal, and the implied author reveals the profound alienation of intimacy produced by Hailsham and the Cottages: sex is stripped of emotion and reconstructed as a programmable, optimizable procedure, reflecting the institutional tendency to manage clones as objects. Kathy recognizes only the process and outcome of sex, not that its essence lies in mutual attraction between unique individuals; under the supreme principle of efficiency, its emotional dimension is erased.

At the Cottages, Kathy's experience of sex grows hollow: "Whenever I think about sex at the Cottages, I think about darkness and cold and blankets piled on top of us." (Ishiguro, 2005). Sex becomes more direct, tied to physical needs such as warmth, and she feels emptiness and alienation from her partners. Yet she attributes this merely to environment or a stage of growth, rather than tracing it to its systemic origins.

When Kathy later becomes Tommy's carer, she initiates intimacy out of mixed affection and compensation: "If we were going to ask for a deferral, the fact that we'd never slept together might count against us." (Ishiguro, 2005). Sex no longer seems a frightening impulse; it becomes the only way for Kathy and Tommy to affirm their feelings and establish intimacy within their limited lifespan.

4. Cognitive Limitations on the Axis of Knowledge

As narrator, Kathy is also the character whose cognition is most restricted: she understands her predetermined fate, yet never goes beyond surface phenomena to perceive the underlying systemic violence.

4.1 Misreading: The Search for the "Possible"

The clones' search for their "possibles" is a fantasy about self-origin: they believe an original human exists somewhere outside, living the normal life denied to them. Phelan argues that misreading occurs when a narrator's interpretation contradicts the implied author's truth.

Since recollection can never be entirely accurate, memory always carries a certain "ambiguity" (Shen Annie, 2020). The "possible" exists vaguely even at Hailsham, and Kathy describes this mentality: "Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be models wandering around out there somewhere." Yet this possibility cannot be openly discussed: they long to know their origins while fearing the answer. Hailsham never teaches them how to confront their origins, and Kathy treats this taboo as natural, while readers recognize it as a product of power structures.

The key episode occurs when Chrissie and Rodney claim to have seen Ruth's possible in a Norfolk seaside town. Rodney says: "Over there. The one in the blue dress." (Ishiguro, 2005). Kathy observes: "The longer we looked, the more convinced we became." (Ishiguro, 2005). This effect of "seeing resemblance the longer one looks" is essentially a result of psychological projection: desperate to find someone resembling Ruth, they perceive similarities in a stranger. Kathy records this faithfully but fails to recognize the mechanism, believing they are objectively identifying a possible while the implied author reveals a collective fantasy—

clones need to believe in another self existing in the outside world.

When they observe the woman more closely, however, they realize: "Now she was much nearer than before, and the more we saw of her and heard of her, the less she looked like Ruth." (Ishiguro, 2005). Kathy still reads this as a simple mistaken identification, not recognizing that the entire pursuit of possibles is itself misguided. Ruth's outburst outside the gallery follows: "We all know it. We're modeled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts maybe. Just so long as they aren't psychos. That's what we come from." (Ishiguro, 2005). This is another misreading: Ruth swings from one extreme to another, transforming the possible from an office worker into social refuse, but both are mistaken because the possible's identity is irrelevant, with no meaningful connection between clones and originals. She needs to explain "what I am" through "what kind of person I came from," yet this causal framework is fundamentally flawed. Kathy can only say "Ruth, don't," unable to refute her because she shares the same cognitive limitations.

Clones search for possibles because their selves were deprived from the beginning: not welcomed as independent individuals but manufactured as biological samples, they fill their inner emptiness by imagining another self elsewhere. Kathy records these projections merely as events, failing to uncover their psychological roots—precisely her misreading.

4.2 Underreading: Jokes About the Body

Phelan defines underreading as occurring "when the narrator lacks sufficient knowledge, insight, or cognitive maturity to provide an adequate interpretation of events, characters, or situations" (Phelan, 2005). Kathy knows her body will eventually be donated, yet never fully recognizes how systematically it has been instrumentalized or what her body and life mean.

Through the "unzipping" joke, the implied author shows how clones' bodily perception is distorted from the start: they are taught to view their bodies as objects to inspect and resources to donate, never as their own. The joke originates from Tommy's injury, when Christopher H. says gravely: "Don't you know? If you bend your elbow too fast, the whole thing can unzip." (Ishiguro, 2005). It spreads quickly, and Kathy narrates: "The idea was that when the time came, a kidney would slide out, and you'd hand it over." (Ishiguro, 2005). Kathy interprets: "By this stage in our lives, we no longer avoided talking about donations the way we had a year or two earlier, but we still hadn't really confronted the issue seriously." (Ishiguro, 2005). She correctly senses the jokes reflect anxiety about donation in thirteen-year-olds, yet her understanding remains superficial.

Kathy misses the dual function of the "unzipping" jokes. They acknowledge the reality of donation while breaking the taboo, but they also serve as psychological defense: by imagining donation as light and even ridiculous, students turn an unbearable truth into a controllable joke. In this fantasy, organs slide out by themselves and bodies are unwrapped like parcels, stripping donation of violence, pain, and irreversibility and converting it into something almost harmless. When students joke about a liver slipping out, they perform cognitive anesthesia, temporarily forgetting that these organs mean the end of life.

At Hailsham, students constantly undergo medical examinations: "At Hailsham we had to have medicals almost every week." (Ishiguro, 2005). Kathy describes them matter-of-factly, never questioning what they signify, and presents the nickname "the grim nurse" without recognizing this teasing is a defense against continuous bodily surveillance. Humor dispels anxiety about examinations, just as the "unzipping" jokes later dispel fear of donation.

Through the juxtaposition of "unzipping" jokes and medical examinations, the implied author reveals the clones' distorted bodily consciousness: their bodies never truly belong to them. From childhood an object of inspection, in adulthood the body becomes something to be donated, dismantled, and consumed, and they never experience it as their own. The body is not part of the self but merely an instrument for donation.

CONCLUSION

By depicting a society where the exploitation of clone lives is normalized, Ishiguro raises the ethical risks accompanying technological progress. Today, as people increasingly rely on AI systems to obtain information and construct narratives, narrative reliability becomes even more relevant: like Kathy's externally shaped narration, technological systems may produce logically coherent yet partial and distorted narratives. This study therefore emphasizes the importance of critical awareness in an age of rapid technological development and calls for reflection on the ethical boundaries governing scientific advancement.

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