

Never Let Me Go Study Guide

Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro

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Plot Summary

Never Let Me Go is a science fiction novel about three friends who grow up together in England in the late 20th Century. Kathy, Ruth and Tommy attend an exclusive boarding school called Hailsham that has an unusual emphasis on encouraging physical fitness and artistic expression. It is gradually revealed to the reader that the students of Hailsham are actually clones being raised to donate their organs. After completing their schooling, the three friends are sent to live in communal housing with other clones before entering the final stage of their lives when they will become "carers" for other clones who are beginning the process of donating their organs, and then finally begin to donate their own organs until they "complete."

Told from the viewpoint of Kathy, who becomes a carer for her two friends, the manipulative Ruth and the hapless Tommy, the novel is a narrative of how the three young people learn about one another and their place in the outside world. Ruth and Tommy become a couple, even though it is Kathy and Tommy who seem to have the more natural attraction. Years later, when Ruth is a donor and Kathy her carer, Ruth confesses that she had intentionally kept Kathy and Tommy apart out of her own jealousy and selfishness and she asks Kathy for her forgiveness. She encourages Tommy and Kathy to get together and encourages them to seek out Madame, one of the mysterious people connected to Hailsham, to ask her about the rumors that clones who can prove they are in love can postpone their donations.

After the death of Ruth, Tommy and Kathy seek out Madame and find her living with Miss Emily, the former leader of Hailsham. The women reveal to them that there is no postponing their destinies and no deferral program exists. Tommy and Kathy also learn that Hailsham, which had since been closed, was created in an effort to demonstrate that clones had souls, which is why the students had been encouraged to express themselves artistically. It had been an experiment designed to demonstrate that clones should be treated humanely, but it was found that society preferred to think of them as sub-human so as to avoid having to confront the ethical issues.

The novel ends after Tommy "completes" and Kathy is left alone to carry on her role as a carer for the final few months until she will become a donor herself.

Never Let Me Go raises questions about mortality and personal identity as the main characters move through life with the ever-present knowledge of their final destinies. Themes of love and personal sacrifice are also explored.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Chapter 1 opens with Kathy H., the narrator, introducing herself to the reader. She is 31 years old and has been a "carer" for nearly 12 years, caring for patients called "donors." Kathy travels by car from place to place, wherever her donors are staying. She indicates that she is good at what she does and has been allowed some privileges in choosing which donors she cares for. It is because of this privilege, she says, that she had been able to reconnect with two old friends named Ruth and Tommy when they became donors.

Ruth and Tommy are friends from her days at a place called Hailsham, a kind of boarding school. In a recollection, Kathy describes an episode from those days. A group of girls, including Ruth and Kathy, are watching some boys choose up sides for a football game. Tommy is among the boys, and they are watching in anticipation that he will be chosen last. Despite being a good player, Tommy is often chosen last because the other boys enjoy provoking his terrible temper.

As expected, when Tommy is not picked for a team, he throws a fit, screaming and cursing in anger. Ruth wonders why Tommy lets himself get so angry and walks away with the other girls. Kathy approaches Tommy, however and calms him down.

Chapter 2 continues with Kathy's recollections of Tommy and his temper. Hailsham places a good deal of importance on artistic expression, Kathy explains, and students exchange art and poetry with one another at regular exhibits called "exchanges." She relates a discussion with Ruth that takes place long afterwards about how they looked forward to those exchanges and built their own private collections of things created by the other students. The discussion takes place when Kathy is Ruth's carer, and Ruth is in a bright, clean recovery room in some kind of hospital setting. They both remember how they treasured the paintings and poems in their collections and wondered what they would think of them now.

Kathy returns to her recollections of Hailsham. Tommy has not kept up with the others in his artistic abilities and seems to stop trying. This causes even more teasing, but Kathy notices that it does not seem to bother Tommy as much as it once did. She asks him one day about his apparent change in attitude and he tells her he feels better after talking to one of the guardians of the school, a woman called Miss Lucy. He promises to tell Kathy about it if she will meet him where they can speak privately.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The three main characters, Kathy H., the narrator, and her friends Ruth and Tommy are all introduced in the first two chapters. Their relation to one another is not fully explained beyond their having all been together at a place called Hailsham, but there is an

implication in the narrator's tone that they all became important to each other in some way.

The basic characteristics of the primary characters are established as well. Kathy is a keen observer who seems to have empathy for others. Ruth is also a close observer but is somewhat manipulative. She is a social leader. Tommy is an earnest and essentially introverted person.

The truth behind Hailsham and the backgrounds of the main characters is not yet fully revealed, but is implied in the narration. The characters are actually clones who have been raised to provide organs for transplant to non-clones who need them. Hailsham is a kind of boarding school for these clones, who, once they leave the school, will first be trained as carers, then become donors themselves. The narration mentions that the donors "complete" after their fourth donation, meaning they die or go on life support after having made four organ donations.

The importance placed on artistic expression at Hailsham is mentioned here as well. This will be more fully developed in later chapters and resolved in the final pages of the book.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

Chapter 3 begins as Tommy and Kathy meet beside a pond on the Hailsham grounds to talk about Tommy's meeting with Miss Lucy. He makes Kathy promise not to tell anyone what he is about to say, then explains that Miss Lucy had told him if he did not feel like devoting himself to his artwork it was alright. She said that some people did not have the same desire or drive to be creative and he should not worry about it.

Kathy is surprised to hear this, since they have always been told how important their art is. Tommy goes on to tell her that Miss Lucy seemed to be about to tell him something more, something important about the students and their destinies. Kathy replies that they already know all about becoming donors one day, but Tommy says Miss Lucy seemed to suggest that they were not being told enough. She seemed to be suggesting some kind of connection between the artwork and the donations, and Tommy and Kathy puzzle about what it might be.

Kathy's narrative shifts to explain more about the artwork and something the students called "Madame's Gallery." A woman known only as "Madame" visits Hailsham on occasion and takes away some of the best creative works by the students. Although they are never told explicitly who Madame is or why she takes their art, the rumor arises that she has some kind of gallery where the best works are displayed. Ruth develops a theory that Madame, who never speaks to the children and seems to be agitated whenever she arrives, is afraid of the students. Ruth comes up with a scheme to confront Madame by simply walking up to her in a group and watching her reaction. Kathy and some other girls take part in the plan and when they approach Madame, they do indeed see a flash of fear in her eyes as she shrinks from them slightly.

Chapter 4 opens with an explanation by Kathy that she feels the need to sort out the recollections she is recounting before she ends her period as a carer and becomes a donor. She explains more about Madame and the artwork and the workings of Hailsham. The students are given a chance to earn tokens by selling their artwork to one another, which they can spend at the "Sales" that take place on the campus from time to time. Some of the students protest that they should receive tokens for the artwork that Madame takes. A student asks Miss Lucy about the gallery one day, and she again suggests that there is much the students are not being told but that she hopes it will be explained to them one day.



Kathy turns to a description of her early friendship with Ruth, which begins when Ruth invites Kathy to ride one of her imaginary horses around the Hailsham grounds.

Chapters 3-4 Analysis

The mysterious character of Madame is introduced in these chapters. She will return at the end of the book, when her actual role regarding Hailsham and the clone program is revealed. The mystery over the school is heightened with Kathy's description of the regular visits by Madame, who takes the best artwork away with her, and by the frustration of Miss Lucy, who seems to be barely able to withhold something from the students at times.

Ruth's role as a social leader is established when she arranges the scheme to confront Madame. She will continue to play a directing role in the social lives of her friends, including Kathy and Tommy, the extent of which is not fully revealed until the end of the novel.

The sudden shift in Tommy's behavior after speaking with Miss Lucy is a development that will return later in the story when Miss Lucy changes her advice, presenting Tommy with a crisis.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

In Chapter 5, Kathy continues to expound on her early friendship with Ruth. At Hailsham, Ruth had been the leader of a group of girls who were devoted to "protecting" their favorite guardian, a woman called Miss Geraldine. Exactly what they were protecting her from was never quite clear, Kathy explains, but they imagined a great conspiracy against her and went about listening to conversations among the guardians and discussing their possible meanings regarding the plot against Miss Geraldine. The "secret guard" as it was called was led by Ruth, who let girls in or expelled them at her own whim. The girls all knew it was a kind of fantasy invented by Ruth, Kathy explains, but they all played along and supported it.

One day Ruth suddenly has a fancy new pencil case and is mysterious about where she got it, implying that it was a gift from Miss Geraldine. Kathy knows that it is unlikely that it really was a gift since the guardians are very careful not to show any favoritism, and she suspects that Ruth actually bought the pencil case at one of the sales. While alone with Ruth one day she bluffs that she had seen the record book of what each student had bought at the sales and Ruth is crushed, thinking her ruse has been uncovered. Kathy feels terrible about what she has done to destroy Ruth's fantasy, and regrets it.

In Chapter 6, Kathy has an opportunity to make it up to Ruth. When a girl asks Ruth about the pencil case, Kathy jumps in and tells her that Ruth cannot tell anyone about where she got the case because it is a secret. With this gesture she signals to Ruth that she has no intention of exposing her small fantasy to the others.

Ruth is grateful, Kathy believes, and returns the favor when Kathy has a favorite cassette tape stolen. The tape is by a singer named Judy Bridgewater and has a song on it called "Never Let Me Go" that is a favorite of Kathy's. When the tape goes missing, Ruth does all she can to help find it, apparently knowing how much it means to Kathy.

Kathy relates an unusual episode involving the Judy Bridgewater tape and her favorite song. She finds herself alone one day in her dorm at Hailsham and takes the opportunity to listen to the song. In her mind, she imagines that song is about a woman who has been told she cannot have children but then has a baby by some kind of miracle and she sings to it "baby, baby, never let me go." Kathy admits she knew the song was really just a standard love song, but she likes to imagine this scenario as she holds a pillow like a baby and dances to the music.



She is dancing like this when she suddenly becomes aware she is being watched through the partly open door. She is startled to see Madame standing there, watching her dance. Madame is crying. Kathy stands still, unsure of what is about to happen, but Madame only turns and leaves the building. Kathy tells only Tommy about what has happened.

Chapters 5-6 Analysis

The complicated relationship between Kathy and Ruth is developed further in these two chapters. Ruth is a social leader whom many of the other girls at Hailsham, including Kathy, are willing to follow. Ruth is prone to fantasy, however, which Kathy usually sees through and sometimes confronts Ruth over. They will continue this kind of interaction into their adult lives.

Chapter 6 describes a central event in the narrative, one that gives the novel its name. Kathy is indulging in a small fantasy of her own regarding her favorite song, called "Never Let Me Go" when she is interrupted by the mysterious Madame. The scene obviously affects Madame, who is nearly sobbing. Her emotional response to such a simple episode deepens the mystery of her role at Hailsham and the larger purpose of the school. When Kathy and Madame meet again at the end of the novel, her reaction is explained.



Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary

With Chapter 7, Kathy indicates that she is moving on to describe the last three years at Hailsham, from the time she and her friends were 13 until they left at age 16. This part has remained very clear in her memory, she says, while the period prior to it is somewhat murky in her mind.

She relates another story about Miss Lucy, who becomes disturbed one day when she overhears some of the students talking about getting jobs one day or going to America. She tells them they will not be doing any of those things, but will one day begin their donations. Miss Lucy is obviously holding something back, Kathy notes at the time.

The students begin to learn about sex, which is taught in a matter of fact way and usually in connection with their learning about the importance of staying healthy and the subject of donations. Donations become a topic of conversation among the students, as well, often discussed in a humorous way.

In Chapter 8, Kathy describes a scene at Hailsham when she discovers Miss Lucy alone in one of the classrooms angrily and deliberately blacking out handwritten pages with a black pencil. She begins to suspect something sinister surrounding Miss Lucy.

Tommy begins to act impulsively again, as he had done before his earlier talk with Miss Lucy, and Kathy, looking back at the time, feels she should have noticed the reason why.

Despite being told about sex, Kathy recalls a good deal of confusion around it. The students are unable to have children, they have been told, and are not exactly discouraged from having sex with one another, but it also is not exactly allowed. Many of the students pair off, including Ruth and Tommy. Kathy decides she will choose one of the boys with whom to have sex, a nice boy named Harry. She prepares by reading every sex scene she can find in novels and then begins to drop hints to Harry when she feels she is ready. Her plans are put on hold when Ruth and Tommy split up, however.

Chapter 9 is the final chapter in Part One. Ruth is upset over her breakup with Tommy and asks Kathy to have a talk with him. Tommy has always trusted Kathy, Ruth says, and if she tells him it is a good idea to get back with Ruth he will. Kathy promises to talk with him.

When Kathy does get Tommy alone to talk, he tells her about something Miss Lucy had told him recently. She had taken him aside and reversed what she had told him earlier. His artwork was in fact very important, she told him, suggesting it was more important than she could actually explain. It was this talk that had put him back in his pattern of foul temper.



Kathy is fascinated by this revelation and she and Tommy speculate on what it could mean. She nearly forgets her promise to talk to him about Ruth, and when she mentions getting back together with her Tommy suggests he has bigger things to think about.

At the end of the chapter, the students are stunned by the sudden news that Miss Lucy has left Hailsham. No explanation is given by the guardians.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 move on to what the narrator says is the central part of her experience at Hailsham and in the establishment of the relationship between the three friends. As they enter their later teens, they begin to think about sex, which has been explained to them fully. Lacking any external context, the students treat sex in a matter-of-fact way, with Kathy making what she imagines are careful preparations. There does not seem to be any jealousy when Ruth and Tommy become a couple.

Tommy has another talk with Miss Lucy about his artwork, and she changes her advice. The artwork is indeed very important, she tells him. This upsets him, but it also puts in motion Tommy's speculation about what the artwork is really for. As it happens, he will come very close to guessing the reason behind Madame's gallery and the importance placed on artistic expression.

When Tommy and Ruth split up as a couple, Ruth asks Kathy to help reconcile them. Ruth tells her that Tommy will listen to Kathy's advice. Later in the novel, Ruth reveals to Kathy that she had intentionally kept Tommy and Kathy away from each other, and viewed within that context, this episode can be interpreted as an almost cruel manipulation by Ruth. She recognizes that Tommy and Kathy are very close to one another, and by calling on Kathy as a friend to help her reconcile with Tommy, she is presenting Kathy with a kind of ultimatum.



Chapters 10-11

Chapters 10-11 Summary

Chapter 10 is the opening chapter of Part Two of the novel. This section focuses on the years spent by Kathy, Tommy and Ruth at the Cottages, a communal living area they share with clones from other parts of the country.

The Cottages are a bit run down and drafty and cold, Kathy explains, especially compared to Hailsham, but the thrill of being on their own makes up for any discomfort. After feeling awkward upon first arriving, the three friends are soon taken in by the "veteran" older residents who make them feel welcome.

The veterans treat Ruth and Tommy as an "established" couple, Kathy observes, not knowing anything about their past. This pleases Ruth, Kathy notes, and she closely analyzes how Ruth's behavior shifts as she fits herself into the new social setting of the Cottages. There are television sets, and Kathy notices that several of the other residents seem to have taken cues from television shows about how to act.

In particular, Kathy notices that Ruth has started to touch Tommy's elbow in a certain way whenever they part. She has seen other residents use the exact same gesture and is sure it was originally copied from a television character. She mentions to Ruth one day that she has noticed Ruth seems to be copying the behavior of the veteran residents. This angers Ruth, who accuses Kathy of being jealous that Ruth is spending more time with Tommy and the other residents. Then Ruth throws in a slight jab at Kathy, insinuating that Kathy has not exactly been unable to make friends with some of the residents.

The reason this is a jab is made clear in Chapter 11. Kathy explains that in the early days at the Cottages, she had continued to explore sex and had been with a couple of the other residents. She had confided in Ruth that she sometimes felt a very strong sexual desire that she could not explain. At the time, Ruth had simply said while her strong desires seemed odd it was probably nothing to worry about and would go away. Ruth denied ever having similar feelings. Ruth's remark about Kathy "making friends" was a betrayal of the trust Kathy had given her in confiding about her sexual drives.

Kathy goes on to describe an episode with Tommy that takes place at the Cottages. There is a caretaker named Keffer who brings supplies and makes repairs. Keffer is also something of a father figure, although he has no authority like the guardians did. One of Keffer's habits is to root out the pornographic magazines that the residents sometimes have around. He bundles them up, grumbling, and takes them away to be destroyed.

Kathy finds one of these bundles one day and takes them into a shed where she begins to look through them methodically, looking mainly just at the faces of the models. As she



is paging through the magazines, Tommy comes into the shed. Kathy treats the magazines lightly, but Tommy inquires about what she is really doing. He has noticed that Kathy doesn't seem to be looking at them just for "kicks" but has a more serious look on her face like she is a little sad. Kathy makes a flip remark and walks out, but recalls later that she was not angry that Tommy had interrupted her. She had been comforted in fact.

Chapters 10-11 Analysis

The middle part of the novel commences with Chapter 10 as the students leave Hailsham and move to the Cottages, a communal living establishment where other clones are already living. While they are not exactly fully on their own, the students have much less oversight and are free to come and go.

Without the fixed structure of Hailsham, the three friends find different ways to cope. Ruth soon adapts to the new social situation, taking her lead from the "veteran" clones. Tommy seems content to let himself be carried along by Ruth. Kathy continues her close observation of the interpersonal relationships among those around her and remains somewhat detached. She notices that Ruth is enjoying the social influence she seems to have as a privileged Hailsham student.

Kathy and Ruth have a small falling out when Kathy confronts Ruth about her artificial behavior. Ruth reacts angrily, accusing Kathy of being jealous because Ruth is fitting in with the veterans better than Kathy is. The jab she makes about Kathy's supposed promiscuity will figure in Ruth's confession near the end of the novel. At the time, she had intended Kathy to feel ashamed for having strong sexual desires, so she did not admit that she had them herself.

Her remarks seem to hit home with Kathy, however, who continues to assume her sexual drives are not normal. This is the reason behind her fascination with the pornographic magazines, as Tommy surmises. She looks through them searching for a face like hers that might indicate the person from whom she had been cloned, thinking her desire for sex might be genetic somehow.



Chapters 12-13

Chapters 12-13 Summary

Chapters 12 through 15 are a recollection of a trip that Kathy, Tommy and Ruth take to the town of Norfolk along with two veteran residents of the Cottages, a couple named Rodney and Chrissie. The trip is an important memory to Kathy and she indicates that she wants to tell the complete story.

Rodney and Chrissie had returned from an earlier trip to Norfolk with a story about seeing someone who might have been Ruth's "possible." Kathy does not explain exactly what is meant by the term, but it is implied that it means the person from whom each clone was copied.

Rodney and Chrissie had seen the woman working in an office that had a large front window and thought she looked like an older version of Ruth. Ruth does not get overly excited outwardly, but Kathy's acute observation tells her that she is actually very eager to see the woman herself. Ruth also begins to talk about the possibility of working in an office one day, much like the one that Rodney and Chrissie describe where her potential "possible" works. This becomes a regular topic of conversation among the other residents, but Kathy remembers the outburst of Miss Lucy at Hailsham when she told the students none of them would ever be taking jobs of any kind. Ruth heard Miss Lucy, too, but Kathy sees she enjoys the attention being paid to her when she discusses working in an office and does not betray her fantasy.

It is decided that Rodney and Chrissie will take Ruth along on a trip to Norfolk to look at the woman they have seen and while Ruth seems reluctant to have them along, Tommy and Kathy are invited as well.

In Chapter 13, the five of them drive to Norfolk with Rodney driving a borrowed car. Once there, they find a place to have a meal and chat. While talking, Rodney and Chrissie broach a sensitive subject with the three Hailsham students. They have heard rumors that it is possible for Hailsham students to be granted a "deferral" from becoming a donor for three years if a couple can prove they are in love. They press Ruth for any information she might know about it. Ruth shrugs and does not exactly deny the rumors, but says they were never told much about the possibility. Kathy knows they were never told of any such deferral program, but allows Ruth to imply otherwise.

Tommy is more forthright. He admits that there was never any such talk about deferrals at Hailsham and despite Ruth trying to clue him in, he remains oblivious. Ruth quickly makes an excuse for him with Rodney and Chrissie that Tommy had not "really" been a Hailsham student in that he was often left out of many things. She quickly changes the subject to finding her possible.



Chapters 12-13 Analysis

The trip to Norfolk is a central event in the story, bringing the relationship of the three characters into greater focus and setting up the situation for the resolution of the novel in the third part.

Ruth is excited at the rumor that two of the older students have seen someone working in an office in Norfolk who might be her "possible," the term used for a possible genetic model for a clone. Kathy closely observes her reaction to the rumor and describes how after hearing about her possible Ruth develops a fantasy about one day working in an office. Chrissie and Rodney, the two older students who had seen the woman in Norfolk, encourage her in describing what she might do in an office and how the job might work. Behind the discussion, Kathy observes, is an assumption that for Ruth it might one day be possible to get a job in an office because she is from Hailsham. Ruth encourages this interpretation, which has repercussions when Chrissie and Rodney ask her about the rumors that Hailsham students might be granted a three-year deferral from starting their donations if they can prove they have fallen in love.

This has only ever been a rumor and the three Hailsham students were never informed of any such possibility, but Ruth suggests that they were. Her behavior is very similar to when she presented the fancy pencil case as a gift from Miss Geraldine. She never flatly lies about it, but through innuendo and with the support of the fantasy by her friends she gives an impression that she is in a privileged position.

This time is different, however, in that Kathy and Tommy seem to buy into the underlying fantasy themselves. Even though they know Ruth is giving the wrong impression about Hailsham students having been told they are privileged, they begin to wonder if they truly are.



Chapters 14-15

Chapters 14-15 Summary

The five friends are leaving the restaurant as Chapter 14 opens. As they walk through the streets of Norfolk, Kathy senses that much of the excitement they had felt on arriving has diminished. As they pass a Woolworth's store, Rodney and Chrissie detour the group to go inside, where they want to buy some greeting cards. Ruth is furious at being detained from looking for her possible, Kathy can tell, but she herself is cheered by the shop with aisles of colorful merchandise. They split up and wander through the store. Kathy sees Tommy looking through some cassette tapes and accidentally interrupts Chrissie and Ruth having a quiet discussion on the subject of deferrals again. Ruth shoots Kathy an angry look for disturbing them.

They leave the store and Rodney takes them to the office where he saw Ruth's "possible." They stand across the street and gaze through the large window. Rodney points out an older woman standing inside, talking, and the feeling sweeps over all of them that she really does look very much like Ruth. When they are noticed by some other people inside the office, the five of them run away, giggling.

As they are discussing the episode down the street, they see the woman from the office walking nearby. Impulsively they start to follow her at a distance. They follow her into an art gallery, where she approaches the owner and begins to have a conversation. Meanwhile, the students wander through the gallery looking at the paintings and eavesdropping on the conversation. As they hear the woman speak, the realization spreads among them that she could not possibly be Ruth's "possible."

After leaving the gallery, Ruth is somewhat dejected. Rodney and Chrissie try to cheer her up by treating it lightly. They suggest they all go visit a friend of theirs who lives in the town, a man named Martin who has become a carer. Kathy reminds them that they are not supposed to visit carers, but Ruth decides to go along. Kathy says she will wait for them and meet them later. Both Ruth and Kathy are surprised when Tommy opts to stay with Kathy.

In Chapter 15, Kathy and Tommy go wandering around the town. At first they talk about the deferral rumors, both agreeing they were probably nonsense. Then Tommy mentions that at Woolworth's he had been looking through the cassettes for the Judy Bridgewater tape that Kathy had lost at Hailsham. She is touched by the thought and soon the two of them decide to go looking for a copy of it. They visit thrift shops and record shops and finally Kathy does find a copy of the tape. Tommy is a little disappointed that he isn't the first to find it.

They begin to talk about the deferral rumors again, and Tommy tells Kathy that he thinks Ruth believes them. He himself suggests that they might explain some of the things he had been wondering about Hailsham. He tells Kathy about something that Miss Emily,



the head guardian, had told a class once. She said that a person's artwork revealed what they were like inside. It revealed their soul. He suggests to Kathy that perhaps this was why their artwork was taken away by Madame, so that if students came later to ask for a deferral claiming to be in love, the guardians could refer to their artwork to judge the true nature of their soul.

Kathy is intrigued by this theory and points out to Tommy that if Ruth believes in the possibility of getting a deferral she will be furious at Tommy for having neglected his artwork. He agrees, and says he has not said anything to Ruth about his theory and that just in case, he has started working on his drawings in private.

The two reach the car where they are to wait for the others and continue their conversation. Tommy brings up the episode when he found Kathy looking through the pornographic magazines. He tells her he realizes what she really was doing was looking at the faces for someone who might be her own "possible." Kathy admits he is right, and when he inquires further she admits to her occasional strong sexual desires. She thinks perhaps she has them because her model is a woman like those who pose for the magazines.

She is upset, and Tommy comforts her with an arm around her shoulders. She brushes it off and they make other conversation until the others return. Ruth is in good spirits, she notices, and makes a genuine effort to include Tommy and Kathy in the conversation on the drive home. Kathy does not tell her about the cassette tape.

Chapters 14-15 Analysis

As it turns out, Tommy has already bought into the rumor that Hailsham students were somehow special and might be granted a deferral. His interactions with Miss Lucy were the seed of his theory, as well as remarks made by some of the other guardians about how the students' artwork was important and that it revealed their inner selves. As he explains his theory to Kathy, she begins to wonder herself if he might be right.

The closeness between Kathy and Tommy is apparent in Kathy's description of the trip, but they both seem to be suppressing their feelings. The incident with the discovery of the Judy Bridgewater tape feels to Kathy like a betrayal of Ruth, and she does not mention the tape. Ruth later discovers the tape, however, and uses it in another manipulation of Kathy.



Chapters 16-17

Chapters 16-17 Summary

The trip to Norfolk seems to have had an effect on their friendships, Kathy recalls in Chapter 16. They never really talk about what happened, and Kathy and Tommy do not explore his theory about Madame's gallery as she expected they might.

Then one day Kathy comes across Tommy sitting alone in one of the outbuildings of the Cottages. He is drawing in a small notebook and he shows his drawings to Kathy. They are of tiny imaginary animals, with great detail. Kathy is impressed with the drawings and tells Tommy so.

The drawings become an issue between the three of them. One evening Ruth and Kathy are having one of their regular confidential chats alone. Kathy opens up about a boy she has been seeing and is feeling close to Ruth. As they sit in Kathy's room, Ruth notices the Judy Bridgewater tape that Tommy and Kathy had found. Kathy has been expecting her to notice it eventually, and tells her the story. Ruth does not show any outward signs of being upset, but she turns the conversation around to Tommy's drawings.

Ruth dismisses the drawings as silly, and Kathy, even though she thinks Tommy's drawings are good, goes along with her. She is unaware at that time that Ruth is tricking her. Later, Kathy encounters Ruth and Tommy together and Ruth brings up the drawings. She tells Tommy they are laughable and continues on to tell him that Kathy agrees with her. Kathy is furious, but says nothing. She simply turns and leaves.

As Chapter 17 opens, Kathy is recalling that this episode had been a marking point in the friendship of the three characters. The atmosphere at the Cottages is changing, as well, as more people leave to start their training as carers.

After the episode about the drawings, Kathy approaches Ruth in an attempt to reconcile. Ruth agrees they should not argue over such things. Ruth goes on to talk to Kathy about Tommy. She tells Kathy that it is probable that she and Tommy will split up some day and that she would understand if Kathy thought it natural to begin a relationship with Tommy herself. She tells Kathy, however, that Tommy has issues with girls who have been promiscuous. She is telling Kathy this to spare her feelings, she says.

It is not long afterward that Kathy decides to start her training as a carer.



Chapters 16-17 Analysis

The trip to Norfolk is a turning point in Kathy's recollection of her friendships with Tommy and Ruth, and it is a turning point in the novel, as well, marking the end of the middle section of the book.

The Judy Bridgewater tape becomes a central point in the plot when Ruth discovers it, or pretends to discover it, in Kathy's things as they are sitting having one of their friendly chats. Kathy feels guilty for having kept the story of the tape from Ruth, and Ruth appears to pick up on that fact. She uses the situation to manipulate Kathy into agreeing with her that Tommy's drawings are silly. It is a similar ultimatum as the one Ruth presented at Hailsham when she asked Kathy to talk to Tommy on her behalf.

Things come to a head when the three of them are alone and Ruth ridicules Tommy over his drawings in front of Kathy, then claims that Kathy supports her. She is intentionally driving a wedge between Kathy and Tommy, as she later admits. She goes even further when in the guise of a friend offering advice, she tells Kathy that Tommy does not like women who have been promiscuous.



Chapters 18-19

Chapters 18-19 Summary

Chapter 18 begins the third part of the book. Kathy has been a carer for some time and has grown to like the job, although she is constantly alone and on the move. She has not seen Tommy or Ruth since leaving the Cottages and only hears about them through rumors and the occasional rushed chat with mutual friends as she moves around the country caring for donors.

One day Kathy runs into Laura, a girl with whom she had been at Hailsham and the Cottages. Laura is a carer, too, and the two catch up with each other. Laura tells Kathy that after she left the Cottages Ruth became overbearing until Laura finally stopped having much to do with her. They have both heard that Ruth has started her donations and has had a rough time with the first one. They also talk about the closing of Hailsham, news of which has been circulating.

Kathy decides to request to become Ruth's carer. She finds her in a sparkling clean center in Dover, and when she walks into her recovery room Ruth looks frightened for a fleeting moment, Kathy notices, as if she has been expecting Kathy to find her and exact some kind of revenge. But Ruth is pleased to see her and the two of them enjoy long talks, although Ruth sometimes seems preoccupied and very tired.

On one visit, they start talking about rumors they have heard from other patients and carers about an abandoned boat that has been left sitting in the middle of a marshy field after a flood. Some of the patients have been to see the boat, and the more Ruth and Kathy talk about it, the firmer the idea of visiting it becomes. Kathy learns that the boat is near the Kingsfield center, where she knows Tommy is a donor. Ruth admits she knows this too, and they begin to form a plan to go with Tommy to see the boat.

In Chapter 19 the three friends are reunited again. Kathy drives Ruth to the Kingsbridge center and they pick up Tommy. It is the first time either has seen him since the Cottages. He has just gone through his second donation.

They talk in the car as they follow the directions to find the boat. Ruth chatters somewhat nervously until Kathy chides her for talking too much. Tommy immediately adds that he had been about to say something about Ruth's chattering as well. Ruth quiets down.

They reach the spot where they will find the boat and make their way down a rough path through some woods to a marshy clearing. The boat is there, sitting on the swampy ground. They sit and look at it and talk about Hailsham.

The talk turns to the subject of Chrissie and Rodney. They have all heard that Chrissie "completed" during her second donation. Kathy mentions that she had run into Rodney some time before and spoken with him about it, and that he did not seem to be too



upset about it. Ruth turns on Kathy and asks how she could possibly know what it was like to be a donor. Ruth looks to Tommy for support, but he does not take sides.

On the drive back, Kathy finds herself needling Ruth about her habit of pretending to forget things from their earlier days. She sees a billboard with a picture of an office and reminds Ruth of the time when she had been so excited about the possibility of working in an office. She presses Ruth about why she did not pursue the idea. She should have tried to contact Madame and asked if it was possible.

At the mention of Madame, Kathy knows she has made some kind of mistake. Ruth turns to her and speaks intently. She tells Kathy that although she does not expect Kathy to forgive her, she wants to ask for her forgiveness anyway.

Kathy is stunned. She does not know what Ruth means exactly. Ruth explains that she had intentionally kept Kathy and Tommy apart even though it was plain it was Kathy and Tommy who were in love. When Kathy had confided about her sexual desires, Ruth tells her, she had lied and said she never had them herself even though she really did. Ruth gives Tommy a piece of paper for safe keeping. On it is Madame's address, she says. She tells them that the two of them should go to Madame and ask about the deferral.

After this episode, the relationship between Ruth and Kathy improves, Kathy recalls. She stays with Ruth until she "completes" some time later. All during their last days together, Ruth encourages Kathy to become Tommy's carer.

Chapters 18-19 Analysis

Kathy quickly glosses over her many years as a carer and skips to the reunion of the three friends as adults, after Ruth and Tommy have already started their donations. Her reunion with Ruth is strained at first, and she notes Ruth's reaction that Kathy has somehow come to seek revenge on her. This reaction is perhaps understandable after Ruth's confession to Kathy, and in front of Tommy, that she had intentionally tried to keep Kathy and Tommy apart. Her confession is surprising to Kathy, and it comes along in the narrative unexpectedly so the reader is surprised as well. When Ruth provides the two others with Madame's address, she furthers the events that take place at the end of the novel when Tommy and Kathy learn the truth about Hailsham.

Once again a short journey is part of a major turning point in the narrative. The trip to see the rumored grounded boat is similar in its purpose as the trip to Norfolk to see Ruth's rumored possible.



Chapters 20-21

Chapters 20-21 Summary

It is one year since the trip to see the boat that Kathy becomes Tommy's carer. She is recalling this as Chapter 20 opens. He has just finished his third donation and has been moved to a private room at the Kingsfield center. Kathy visits every few days and soon they have started having a sexual relationship.

Tommy has continued with his drawings, Kathy learns, and they decide that they will explore the rumors of getting a deferral. Kathy goes as far as visiting the address that Ruth has given them, where she sees Madame walk along the street and enter the house. She reports this back to Tommy and they make their plan to take some of his drawings to her and ask for a deferral.

Chapter 21 describes the strange visit to Madame. Kathy and Tommy approach her house and meet her entering at the front. She is taken aback, but invites them to come inside the house. It is a dark house, decorated in an old-fashioned Victorian style. Madame is brusque with them and tells them to wait in a front room. They can hear voices elsewhere in the house.

Madame returns to the room where they are waiting and has them sit facing her in two large chairs. Behind them, the long room is darkened. Tommy explains they have come because they believe they have figured out the purpose of her gallery. Madame is skeptical, but invites him to go on. He explains his theory about a person's art revealing their inner selves and that she was collecting it to tell if someone was telling the truth should they ask for a deferral for being in love.

During the entire conversation, Kathy has a sense that Madame is not speaking directly to them. Her suspicion is correct, for after Tommy lays out his theory Madame, tears in her eyes, tells someone at the back of the room to come and speak to the "poor creatures." Kathy and Tommy turn to see Miss Emily, the head guardian from Hailsham, wheeling toward them in a wheelchair.

Chapters 20-21 Analysis

After Ruth dies, Kathy and Tommy finally come together as Ruth had hoped they would. Tommy has kept Madame's address and they prepare to ask her about the possibility of getting a deferral.

Upon meeting with Madame, Tommy lays out his theory about her "gallery." Madame's reaction is mixed. She seems to have sympathy for Tommy and Kathy, yet is also apparently angered by their finding her. She ultimately cannot go on explaining anything and turns things over to Miss Emily, who emerges from the darkness. The scene is very dark and somber.



Chapters 22-23

Chapters 22-23 Summary

Miss Emily comes forward and explains everything to Kathy and Tommy. Tommy is partially correct. Their artwork had been collected by Madame in order to prove to others that the students had souls. There is no deferral program, she tells them, although she is aware of the rumors and has even let them pass because they had given some people a small fantasy of hope. She can tell that Kathy and Tommy have thought carefully about it, however, and she is sorry.

Tommy is puzzled as to why it should have to be proven that they had souls. Miss Emily explains that Hailsham was a kind of experiment created by people like herself and Madame who advocated for a more humane and civilized treatment of clones. The artwork was a way to demonstrate that clones were human. In the end, society did not want to face the matter, she explains, preferring that clones be kept out of sight and treated not much better than animals so that a world that had become accustomed to living without disease did not have to face the ethical and moral ramifications directly.

The Hailsham students had been shielded from this larger picture, she confessed. Guardians like Miss Lucy had argued that the students should have been told more about what was going on, and this is partially the reason she left Hailsham.

Miss Emily is expecting some movers to help her take a large trunk from the house, and when they arrive, she leaves Kathy and Tommy alone with Madame. Kathy remarks to her before she leaves her opinion that Madame has always been afraid of them. Miss Emily turns quickly to her and snaps that Madame has always been on their side and has given everything for them. She adds that all the guardians, herself included, were afraid of them.

As Tommy and Kathy are leaving Madame, Madame slowly realizes that she recalls the episode when she watched Kathy dancing alone to the Judy Bridgewater song. Kathy explains to Madame about her own version of the song about a woman who is clinging to her baby. Madame explains her own interpretation, which was that she was watching a little girl clinging to her happy world unaware of the harsh reality of the new scientific advances that had created her, or her own future role. The little girl was pleading to the old world to never let her go.

Tommy is upset as they drive back to the center. He asks Kathy to stop the car and he runs into a field where he screams and yells like he once did at Hailsham. Kathy runs to him and gets him back in the car. He apologizes for the whole idea of trying to get a deferral, saying it was stupid. Kathy replies that she wonders if somehow Tommy always "knew" about their destiny and perhaps that was why he had such outrage bottled up. Tommy dismisses it at first, but then adds that perhaps he did always know something the others did not.



Chapter 23 is the final chapter. Kathy continues on as Tommy's carer, but she notices that he identifies more and more with the other donors at the center as his fourth and final donation approaches. Tommy speaks with Kathy and tells her he does not want her to be his carer any more. He does not want her to see him in his final days. Kathy is upset at first, but she comes to understand his wishes and arranges for him to have another carer. They say goodbye.

Kathy goes on with caring for donors. Shortly after she hears that Tommy has "completed" she decides to drive to Norfolk. She gets slightly lost on the way and pulls over on the side of a country road. She sees a fence where bits of debris have been blown by the wind and caught, and she imagines it is the place where everything from her childhood has been blown and caught up in the fences and trees. She imagines a figure coming toward her and sees it is Tommy. She is crying. She gets back in her car and goes on her way.

Chapters 22-23 Analysis

Chapter 21 provides the resolution to the larger mystery of Hailsham as Miss Emily spells out the experiment that was undertaken there and why it ultimately ended. The episode at Hailsham when Madame watched Kathy dancing alone is also resolved, as the two women share their different interpretations of the lyrics to the song.

The novel ends quietly. Kathy and Tommy part before he has made his last donation with little emotional display. Kathy has survived her friends and has acted as a kind of guide for them. While she has displayed no religious or spiritual views over the course of the narrative, the novel ends as she has a kind of vision of a possible afterlife shared with Tommy.



Characters

Kathy H.

Kathy H. is the narrator of the novel and provides the point of view for the events within. She is in her early 30s and has been a carer for almost twelve years. Her job as a carer involves visiting clone organ donors in the various facilities where they live and providing them with comfort and assistance as they recover from their operations.

Kathy is a close observer and as she presents memories of her earlier life she focuses on many small but telling details of people's behaviors that indicate their internal motivations and opinions. Her objectivity approaches coldness at times. She rarely describes herself as feeling or displaying any overt emotion. Her description of her relationship with Tommy is direct and free of any romantic or sentimental tone.

Kathy has had a complicated relationship with her friend, Ruth, since their early days. Publicly, she supports Ruth's small fantasies but in private she sometimes needles Ruth about the inconsistent ways in which she behaves. Their friendship appears to survive these disagreements, although it becomes clear by the end of the novel that Kathy's behavior has perhaps angered Ruth more than she had realized at the time.

Tommy

Tommy is one of the main characters in the novel, one of the three students who grew up together at Hailsham. He is an athletic young man, but has a fiery temper that is often provoked for fun by the other students. Despite being encouraged constantly to develop his artistic expression at Hailsham, Tommy at first finds it too difficult to work at. He later regrets this neglect and returns to drawing.

Tommy becomes involved with Ruth, the third of the three main characters. As described by Kathy, the relationship is dominated by Ruth. Tommy seems to be much closer to Kathy. He is often placed in between the two young women, particularly by Ruth, who later reveals that her manipulation was intentional.

Tommy develops a theory about the artwork at Hailsham that becomes a driving theme toward the end of the novel. He comes to believe that he and Kathy might be allowed to postpone their donations if they can demonstrate through their artwork that they are sincerely in love. His theory about the purpose of the art at Hailsham is mostly correct, but his interpretation of why it was encouraged is not. There is no possibility of deferring donations, he learns, and he continues on as before. Kathy becomes his carer and his lover, but he sends her away before his final donation, not wanting her to see him die.



Ruth

Ruth is the third of the three main characters, and the first of them to die after making organ donations. She is a popular girl at Hailsham, organizing clubs and groups of girls that center around herself. She is also quite jealous, she reveals as an adult, manipulating Kathy and Tommy in order to keep them apart. Her behavior eventually contributes to Kathy's decision to leave her friends and become a carer.

After becoming a donor and after Kathy becomes her carer, Ruth regrets her earlier behavior and seeks Kathy's forgiveness. She encourages Kathy and Tommy to become involved and to explore the possibility of postponing their donations together.

Madame

Madame is a French or Belgian woman who visits Hailsham a few times every year and carries away with her the best of the artwork and poetry created by the students. Rumors abound that she has a kind of gallery where she exhibits these works. Her behavior while at Hailsham is strained and the students, led by Ruth, develop a theory that she is afraid of them. This turns out to be a correct impression, as Madame later confirms to Kathy and Tommy at the end of the novel.

Madame's true mission is to gather evidence that the young clone children have souls and are entitled to humane treatment. The nature of their souls is revealed in their artwork.

Miss Emily

Miss Emily is the head of Hailsham, the boarding school where the three main characters grow up. She is a stern woman, but is well-respected. In later years, Miss Emily lives with Madame, as Kathy and Tommy discover when they track down Madame's address. Miss Emily explains to them the true nature of Hailsham and what its founders had been attempting to do.

Miss Lucy

Miss Lucy is one of the guardians at Hailsham. She is prone to speaking out and often appears frustrated that the students are not being fully informed of what their future holds. She leaves Hailsham suddenly and the reason is never fully explained.

Chrissie

Chrissie is a clone who the three main characters meet when they go to live at the Cottages. She is not from Hailsham, but has heard of it and treats the Hailsham



students with some deference because of its reputation. Chrissie is the girlfriend of Rodney.

Rodney

Rodney is one of the clones who lives at the Cottages and the boyfriend of Chrissie. He arranges for the trip to Norfolk which is a central point of the book.

Miss Geraldine

Miss Geraldine is one of the guardians at Hailsham and the favorite of the young Ruth, who invents a conspiracy theory that she is in danger of being kidnapped.

Keffers

Keffers is the gruff caretaker of the Cottages where the three main characters live after leaving Hailsham.

Ruth's Possible

Ruth's possible is an unnamed woman who is first seen by Rodney and Chrissie, who think she looks enough like Ruth to have been the original donor of her genetic material. The trip to Norfolk is undertaken to show the woman to Ruth. As the five clones get closer to the woman, they all become aware that she is not likely to be Ruth's possible at all.



Objects/Places

Hailsham

A large boarding school with a central house, several outbuildings and a large grounds. Hailsham is where the three main characters grow up and receive their education. It is run by several guardians who act as teachers and counselors. The students never leave Hailsham. Everything they need is brought in from the outside. While they are given a fairly thorough understanding of geography, the students are never told exactly where Hailsham is located. The school closes not long after the three main characters leave.

The Cottages

The Cottages are a communal living establishment on an old English farmstead. At the age of sixteen, the three main characters leave Hailsham and go to live at the Cottages until they begin their training to become carers. The Cottages are cared for by a gruff man named Keffer.

Norfolk

A city on the English coast, Norfolk is the site of a visit by the three main characters and two other clones. At Hailsham, Norfolk was referred to by one of the students' teachers as a "lost corner" of England, and in their minds they thought of it as a place where everything that was ever lost was sent, like a countrywide lost and found box. It is in Norfolk that Kathy finds a copy of her favorite music tape that was lost at Hailsham.

Dover Center

Dover Center is a bright and clean hospital-like facility where Ruth stays after beginning her donations, and where Kathy visits her as her carer.

Kingsfield Center

A former summer resort facility, Kingsfield Center has been converted into a care center for donation patients. Tommy is a resident at this center, where he is visited by Kathy when she becomes his carer.



The Woods

A fringe of forest surrounds part of Hailsham. The woods are a frightening place to the students, who never enter them and who repeat horrific fables of students who had gone into the woods and were later found dead.

The Pond

A pond on the ground of Hailsham is a meeting place for Kathy and Tommy.

The Boat

A boat that has become grounded in a flood and sits in the middle of a marshy field. Kathy, Tommy and Ruth visit the boat, and it is on this trip that Ruth asks Kathy to forgive her.

Madame's Gallery

A gallery is rumored to be kept by the mysterious Madame where she displays all the best artwork of the Hailsham students. The gallery is never openly discussed in front of the guardians and turns out to be mostly just rumor. The true reason Madame takes their artwork is revealed to Kathy and Tommy at the end of the novel.

Miss Emily's House

Miss Emily lives in her later years with Madame in a dark and old-fashioned house. Its location is somehow learned by Ruth, who passes the address to Tommy in order for him to find Madame and ask about postponing his donations. It is at Miss Emily's house where Tommy and Kathy are told the truth about Hailsham.



Themes

Ethics of Human Cloning

The three main characters in *Never Let Me Go* are clones, created from the genetic material of unknown humans and raised for the express purpose of providing organs for transplant to non-clone humans. In the fictitious world of the novel, severe diseases have been all but eliminated because of this cloning.

Ishiguro does not attempt to explain how such a program might have come to be established or who exactly is in charge of it. In practice, the clones are raised fully aware they will one day be expected to sacrifice their lives by donating their organs. They all seem to accept this, even the main characters, who only hope to delay the donations and do not expect to be released entirely from their destinies.

Only in the final chapters are the ethical questions of such a program raised, and then only in the context of how clones should be treated and not whether such a program is ethical at all. Society seems to prefer that clones be treated as sub-human, as it keeps these ethical questions at bay. Hailsham is an experiment into how clones can be raised in a rich environment that acknowledges their humanity, but still raises them to obediently become organ donors. The suggestion, made by the character Miss Emily, is that the experiment failed because by showing that clones could be raised as thoughtful, expressive people the idea had been created among some that clones could actually be raised to be superior to average humans. This had been too frightening to the larger society, who regressed to treating clones like sub-humans once more.

Ishiguro does not seek to resolve these ethical questions, but uses them as a framework to create tensions and suspense in the plot as the characters slowly come to understand the purpose of Hailsham. It never occurs to the characters that they are less than human or do not have a soul, only that they have been selected for a specific purpose. While their lives are shorter than their non-clone counterparts, the three main characters still live what they consider to be rich and mostly happy lives.

Identity

By making cloning a central foundation of the novel, Ishiguro invites the reader to speculate on how we each establish our personal identities. Each of the three main characters in the novel have a different way of approaching their own identities.

Ruth is a social leader who, despite her apparent confidence, appears to be insecure in her own identity. Through the eyes of Kathy, the reader sees Ruth invent fantasies around herself that suggest she is perhaps more important or privileged than others. She claims to have knowledge of things she does not. Kathy also observes her assuming the behaviors of older clones and using them deliberately. Ruth appears to rely largely on the opinions of others in defining her own identity. She is very excited at



the prospect of finding her "possible" and equally disappointed when it seems she was mistaken.

Tommy appears to be comfortable with his own identity but becomes concerned that others do not recognize him as an individual. His theory about the purpose of the students' artwork at Hailsham creates a crisis for him, as he realizes he has to prove his individuality somehow by developing his artistic expression.

Kathy's search for her own identity seems to be motivated by feelings that she is alone in her own outlook. Her normal sexual desires as a young woman disturb her when she can not get confirmation from Ruth that they are in fact common. She takes a somewhat scientific view of her identity, assuming that the thoughts and desires she has must have come from her genetic "model." She goes searching where she thinks it would be most likely to find such a person, in the pictures of a pornographic magazine.

Mortality

Hanging over the entire novel is the impending mortality of the main characters. Kathy, the narrator, opens with a brief description of her job as a carer which, while it is not fully explained, indicates that she is familiar with death.

Death is apparently never mentioned explicitly to the clones who are raised for organ donations. They refer to death as "completion," a term that seems to reinforce that they have been raised to complete a specific task, the donation of their organs to the point where they can no longer live.

The characters fully accept their destinies and understand they are not likely to live into their 30s. They do not seek to escape this destiny, although Tommy and Kathy do seek to postpone it when they hear rumors that this might be possible. They actually seem to embrace the beginning of their donations and speak about other donors with admiration. There is a small hint in Kathy's remarks that some donors become "agitated" as they approach their fourth and final donation, but this is not explored.

The impending mortality of the clones is put in stark contrast to the expectations of the larger public by the end of the novel, when it is explained that the short lives of the clones are to make longer lives possible for the recipients of their organs. The question is raised about the validity of the trade, but no simple answer is suggested.



Style

Point of View

Never Let Me Go is told exclusively from the point of view of Kathy H., one of the main characters. She narrates the story directly to the reader in the first person, describing events and places as she experienced them herself. As a result, there is no omniscient voice to describe the feelings and motivations of any of the characters. Everything is presented as interpreted by Kathy.

The character of Kathy is very observant, however. She notes subtle changes in people's behavior that indicate their feelings, and is an acute interpreter of how people interact with one another. Her point of view is very objective, with very little emotional color. She understands when her friend Ruth is being manipulative, for example, and carefully chooses her own reaction accordingly. She rarely gets angry, and on the occasions where she is hurt, she analyzes why and moves on.

There is an overlying sadness to Kathy's point of view, however, as it is clear from the beginning that she lives a largely solitary life, moving from place to place making no permanent attachments. This seems to be a natural destiny for her character, which is that of an outside observer, even of events in which she is directly involved.

Setting

Never Let Me Go is set in the late 20th Century in England, as is noted at the beginning of the book. While it is in many ways a science fiction novel in that it presents an alternative version of real society, it takes place in a contemporary time and familiar setting that is not very different from reality.

The first part of the story takes place primarily at a country boarding school called Hailsham. This is a large idyllic estate with central school buildings, dormitories and other outbuildings. There are playing fields and a pond. While it is an expansive setting, it is also secluded, surrounded by woods of which the students are frightened. The students never leave the grounds, and everything is brought in by truck. The exact location of Hailsham is never mentioned, and the children are not told.

The second part of the story takes place in a communal living area called The Cottages, where some of the Hailsham students and clones from other parts of England live on an old farmstead. It is similar to Hailsham in that they are provided for, but they have freedom to come and go, visiting the nearby village and occasionally taking car trips.

In the final part of the novel, the setting is mainly the hospital-like centers where the clones go to begin donating their organs and where Kathy works as a carer. These centers vary in description. The center where Ruth is a donor is bright and very clean, while the center where Tommy is a patient is a converted resort that is somewhat dingy.



As Kathy drives from center to center following her duties as a carer, she spends extensive time in her car wondering about the buildings she passes.

Language and Meaning

Never Let Me Go is written in the first person singular voice and in the past tense. It is a frame narrative, meaning that the narrator has already lived through the events described in the story and is relating them to the reader afterwards.

The prose is very natural, like a person speaking in conversation. Kathy H. is a very observant character and provides rich descriptions of the actions and surroundings of the story, but only so far as they relate specifically to the story. There is no omniscient voice that provides any external descriptions or explanation. The vocabulary is consistent with how an educated young person would speak or write. The sentences are constructed as statements, without extra flourish or elaborate phrasing.

The narrative frequently drops into passages of dialogue, sometimes written without attribution of who is talking. The context is clear in these passages, because the narrator is always present during the conversations.

Ishiguro is a British author, and uses standard British spelling and vocabulary and idioms that are particular to British English.

Structure

Never Let Me Go is divided into 23 chapters in three main parts. The main focus of Part One is the time spent by Kathy, Ruth and Tommy at Hailsham, the exclusive boarding school. Part Two covers the years after they leave Hailsham and go to live in a communal setting with other clones at a place called The Cottages. Part Three focuses on the years after the three have left The Cottages and become carers and donors.

The novel is a narrative told in a series of recollections by Kathy H., one of the characters. While the narrative sometimes jumps forward and back in time, it is generally chronological, with Part One beginning when the main characters are in their teens and ending when they leave Hailsham at about the age of 18. Part Two covers their late teens and early twenties, beginning when they leave Hailsham and ending when Kathy enters her training to become a "carer," at which point the three characters drift apart for a period of a few years before they are reunited in their mid-twenties in Part Three.

The narrative is divided into chapters that correspond generally with isolated episodes in the lives of the three main characters as related by Kathy H., the narrator. Some chapters are further divided into smaller sections. At the beginning of most of the chapters, the narrator resets the time and place by addressing the reader directly and placing the previous events in context with relation to the events about to be described. The result is an overall structure that is like a personal memoir or oral history.



Quotes

"My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year." Chapter 1, p. 3

"If for us the Gallery remained in a hazy realm, what was solid enough fact was Madame's turning up usually twice - sometimes three or four times - each year to select from our best work. We called her 'Madame' because she was French or Belgian - there was a dispute as to which - and that was what the guardians always called her." Chapter 3, p. 32

"The woods were at the top of the hill that rose behind Hailsham House. All we could see really was a dark fringe of trees, but I certainly wasn't the only one of my age to feel their presence day and night." Chapter 5, p. 50

"I want to move on now to our last years at Hailsham. I'm talking about the period from when we were thirteen to when we left at sixteen. In my memory my life at Hailsham falls into two distinct chunks: this last era, and everything that came before." Chapter 7, p. 77

"Looking back now, I can see we were pretty confused about this whole area around sex. That's hardly surprising, I suppose, given we were barely sixteen. But what added to the confusion - I can see it more clearly now - was the fact that the guardians were themselves confused." Chapter 8, p. 95

"We arrived at the Cottages expecting a version of Hailsham for older students, and I suppose that was the way we continued to see them for some time. We certainly didn't think much about our lives beyond the Cottages, or about who ran them, or how they fitted into the larger world. None of us thought like that in those days." Chapter 10, p. 116

"I want to talk about the Norfolk trip, and all the things that happened that day, but I'll first have to go back a bit, to give you the background and explain why it was we went." Chapter 12, p. 138

"But now, in that gallery, the woman was too close, much closer than we'd ever really wanted. And the more we heard her and looked at her, the less she seemed like Ruth. It was a feeling that grew among us almost tangibly, and I could tell that Ruth, absorbed in a picture on the other side of the room, was feeling it as much as anyone." Chapter 14, p. 163

"The odd thing about our Norfolk trip was that once we got back, we hardly talked about it. So much so that for a while all kinds of rumours went around about what we'd been up to." Chapter 16, p. 184



"For the most part being a carer suited me fine. You could even say it's brought the best out of me. But some people just aren't cut out for it, and for them the whole thing becomes a real struggle. They might start out positively enough, but then comes all that time spent so close to the pain and the worry." Chapter 18, p. 207

"I became Tommy's carer almost a year to the day after that trip to see the boat. It wasn't long after Tommy's third donation, and though he was recovering well, he was still needing a lot of time to rest, and as it turned out, that wasn't a bad way at all for us to start this new phase together." Chapter 20, p. 237

"I was talking to one of my donors a few days ago who was complaining about how memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But I don't go along with that. The memories I value most, I don't see them ever fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them." Chapter 23, p. 286

Topics for Discussion

What ethical questions are raised in the novel?

Never Let Me Go was written in 2005 and set in the late 1990s. How does the author's choice of time setting affect the story?

Is the question of whether clones have souls ever resolved? Is an answer implied?

What do the woods symbolize to Hailsham students? Do they have a larger symbolic meaning in the novel?

Is Kathy H. a reliable narrator?

How do the main characters approach their impending destiny as organ donors?

How is the subject of personal identity presented in the novel?