From Brontë to Ishiguro: The Dystopian Evolution of the Boarding School Motif

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Abstract:

The present study proposes to examine the setting in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as an important motif that invites comparisons to classic works while foregrounding the novel's dystopian elements. By engaging with Foucault's discursive ideas, this study will argue that *Never Let Me Go* transforms the traditional motif of boarding school as seen in such Victorian bildungsromans as *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield* into a biopolitical institution of care and control. It will examine the subject positions made available by this institution as well as the roles and activities that characters can adopt for themselves or assign to others. As this essay will demonstrate, these discursive positions are sustained through a medical gaze that reduces each character from an entity to a set of organs to be observed, examined, and labeled. The findings of this study suggest that *Never Let Me Go* could be interpreted as an allegorical tale of how modern institutions use discourses to normalize violence and erase individual agency under the pretext of progress and survival imperatives.

Keywords: bildungsroman, institution, discourse, subject position, gaze

Introduction

The boarding school has long served as a significant motif[1] in English literature, captivating readers by offering a microcosm of self-discovery and a tumultuous journey from childhood to adulthood. It is no

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[1] Motifs, topos, and, more recently tropes have frequently been used interchangeably in literary and film studies. The present analysis, however, adopts the definitions provided by M. H. Abrams (1999), who distinguishes between these concepts. Abrams defines a motif as "a conspicuous element, such as a type of incident, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature" (189). In contrast, he describes topos (Greek for a commonplace) as an "older term for recurrent poetic concepts or formulas" (189). Additionally, Abrams explains that tropes (meaning turns, conversions) constitute a category of figurative language "in which words or phrases are used in a way that effects a conspicuous change in what we take to be their standard meaning" (116). Given that the 'boarding school' is a modern phenomenon, particularly in the context of girls' education, and its literary prominence emerged largely in 19th-century novels rather than in ancient Greek/Roman literature, the term 'motif' is deemed more appropriate for this study. See Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. US: Heinle & Heinle.

surprise that it has become a popular setting in numerous renowned coming-of-age tales, often embodying themes of growth, rebellion, and social criticism. In nineteenth-century literature, boarding schools commonly figure as oppressive and harsh environments, typically overseen by a cruel and abusive headmaster or headmistress. The first notable example is Charlotte Brontë's renowned novel *Jane Eyre*, in which the protagonist, Jane, is sent to a private school called Lowood Institution to escape her unloving aunt, Mrs. Reed. Lowood is overseen by a clergyman named Mr. Brocklehurst who claims his mission is "to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh, to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety" (Brontë, 2006: 107). Brontë does not delve deeply into the specifics of nineteenth-century English schooling and offers little direct social commentary. She focuses on exposing the hypocrisy of Christian clergymen like Brocklehurst who subject the impoverished Lowood girls to deprivation, illness, and even death while indulging their own families in worldly comforts. In contrast to Brocklehurst, Brontë portrays Helen Burns as a true embodiment of Christian virtues. As Jane's first friend at Lowood, Helen's teachings and example leave a lasting impression, ultimately guiding the heroine to forgive her aunt and cousins later in the novel and attain a sense of inner peace.

Boarding schools also feature prominently in the works of Charles Dickens, particularly in his semi-autobiographical bildungsroman, *David Copperfield*. In this novel, the protagonist, David, is sent by his tyrannical stepfather, Edward Murdstone, to Salem House, a private school ruled by the oppressive Mr. Creakle. At Salem House, David endures immense hardship and bullying. Yet, he also forms genuine friendships and experiences loyalty, all of which shape his compassionate nature and contribute to his resilience and moral development. Unlike Brontë, Dickens provides a more detailed critique of the educational system, and Salem House serves as a powerful example of his ability to use the setting to criticize the flaws of Victorian-era educational institutions.

Similarly, in the early twentieth-century children's literature, the boarding school functions as an important institution of life where the upper class sends their children to acquire the usual accomplishments. One of the most famous examples is Miss Minchin's Select Seminary for Young Girls, the setting of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*. In this story, Burnett takes the reader from "a beautiful Indian bungalow" to the seemingly respectable environment of a London private school populated by "a set of dull, matter-of-fact young people" who are "accustomed to being rich and comfortable" (Burnett, 2009: 101). As the plot unfolds and the protagonist's fortunes decline, the school's true nature is revealed – harsher than the Indian climate, it exploits impoverished orphan girls as mere laborers. To Miss Minchin, the pupils are no longer 'children of grace' but 'children of greed' as her sole concern is material gain. The story resolves with a deus ex

machina, as a wealthy acquaintance intervenes to rescue the protagonist from the clutches of the greedy headmistress.

Boarding schools also take center stage in twentieth-century fantasy literature, often operating on a symbolic level. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series follows a narrative trajectory similar to that of the earlier works mentioned. The protagonist, Harry, escapes his oppressive relatives, the Dursleys, to attend a private school known as Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardly. At Hogwarts, Harry must fight for his survival, confronting new challenges in each book posed by the dark wizard Lord Voldemort, a spirit who murdered his parents and seeks Harry's blood to restore his body. In the final instalment, Harry triumphs over his nemesis and, like the protagonists before him, achieves a happy ending.

Though significant differences in terms of both time and genre separate these works from the science fiction of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, they are linked by a common interest in the motif of boarding school.[2] In this work, Ishiguro depicts a society highly advanced in the medical field of cloning human embryos that promises longevity to its citizens. In the early days, these clones exist "as shadowy objects in test tubes" (Ishiguro, 2012: 401). Then a movement starts that objects to the entire way the donation programme is run. It proposes that if the clones are reared in a humane, cultivated environment, they will grow as "sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being" (Ishiguro: 401). This revolutionary movement materializes in Hailsham, a boarding school established to keep a selective number of clones away from "the worst of those horrors" (400–401). The story revolves around a love triangle between Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy from their early days at Hailsham till Ruth and Tommy complete (a euphemism used throughout the text for post-donation death).

Vorhaus (2007) argues that although *Never Let Me Go* is a story about clones, it subverts the conventional image of clone qua zombie to offer a captivating alternative. As we follow Kathy and other clones from their early years till the completion of their operations, it becomes brutally clear that "these clones carry unique names, faces, and personalities" (99). By the time Ishiguro unveils the truth, it is too late as his clones have already established themselves as ordinary humans. They

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[2] Japanese-born British author and Noble Prize winner, Kazuo Ishiguro (1954–) sets his early works *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) in post–World War II Japan. He then delves into post-war England in *The Remains of the Day* (1989), for which he is awarded a Booker Prize. At the turn of the century, Ishiguro shifted his writing to the speculative genre, publishing *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *The Buried Giant* (2015), and *Klara and the Sun* (2021). Ishiguro has also written a collection of 16 lyrics for the Jazz singer Stacy Kent, published in the book, *The Summer We Crossed Europe in the Rain: Lyrics for Stacy Kent* (2024) by Faber& Faber.

laugh, cry, gossip, reconcile, age and, even fall in and out of love. For all its unmistakable air of science fiction, Ishiguro's tale presents a difficulty for the reader to view its clone protagonists as something other than 'normal' (99–100).

In his discussion of Ishiguro's novels, Chris Holmes (2019) contends that Ishiguro's recent transition to genres of speculative fiction in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Buried Giant* should be interpreted "as a sustained interest in the dynamic between constraint and freedom that generic conceits force upon us in any conceptualization [of] the world" (4). He describes Ishiguro as "a writer hemming his style and characters into worlds in which structures necessary for understanding have been stripped bare, reduced to the barest elements by which meaning might be still produced" (4–5). Holmes suggests that in Ishiguro's works when characters are disconnected from the frameworks of meaning that give context to their experiences, they find themselves lacking the linguistic tools necessary to articulate or fully comprehend the structures of power that dominate their lives. In this view, it is possible to exist within the world, shaped by its systems and influenced by its ideologies, without fully belonging to it – meaning one might remain unable to recognize or reveal the underlying forces that shape and drive their actions and experiences (Holmes, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Despite several studies on Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, no research has yet treated the boarding school as an important motif within the narrative, one that invites comparisons to classic literary works while highlighting its dystopian elements. Drawing on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1977), the present study contends that *Never Let Me Go* reimagines the traditional motif of boarding school as seen in such bildungsromans as *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield*, transforming it into a biopolitical institution focused on surveillance. Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power–particularly the mechanism of control and normalization–provides a framework for understanding how Hailsham operates as a mechanism of power. In contrast to its predecessors, where boarding schools serve as harsh testing grounds for fortitude and perseverance, molding protagonists into morally upright citizens, Hailsham functions as a disciplinary apparatus designed to create a human-like environment for clones, conditioning them to accept their inevitable fate as organ donors. Comparing Hailsham to a Victorian-era boarding school thus reveals a dystopian reversal: rather than fostering individual agency, Hailsham stifles individuality and normalizes ethical transgression, masking the brutality of its purpose with a façade of care and normalcy.

To further analyze this transformation, this study employs Foucault's concept of discourse and the medical gaze, as articulated in

The Birth of Clinic (1994). Foucault describes discourse as a collection of statements that establish a framework for discussing a specific topic within a particular historical moment context. It revolves around "the production of knowledge through language" (Hall, 1992: 291). Foucault further characterizes discourse as "the capillary structure of social cohesion and conformity" which "situates us as individuals, and silently legislates the boundaries of what is possible for us to think and say" (Davis, 1997: 71). Building on Foucault's ideas, this essay argues that the dominant discourse in *Never Let Me Go* reinforces the institution of Hailsham and perpetuates existing power dynamics. Specifically, the study will examine the subject positions made available by this discourse as well as the roles and activities that characters can adopt for themselves or assign to others. As Gibbs (2015) notes, subjects do not merely accept discourses and their associated ideas; they also actively locate and position themselves within these conceptual frameworks, internalizing the roles defined by such discourses and understanding themselves accordingly. This essay will contend that these discursive positions are maintained through a medical gaze that reduces each character from a whole entity to a set of organs to be observed, analyzed, and categorized. Furthermore, it will propose that this gaze extends beyond institutional practices, encompassing the creation of discourses that regulate behaviors, enforce order, and exert control over individuals.

Hailsham and the Subject Positions

Similar to *Jane Eyre*, *Never Let Me Go* features a first-person female narrator who is also the protagonist. Kathy H. begins her narrative by stating, "My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years" (Ishiguro: 3). Unlike Jane Eyre, however, Kathy offers no additional information about her family background. After briefly describing her job, she uses a conjunction to introduce a pivotal statement: "And I'm a Hailsham student," which shifts the narrative focus from her identity to the institution (4). This declaration is particularly significant, as she adds that mentioning Hailsham "is enough by itself sometimes to get people's backs up" (4). Upon invoking Hailsham, Kathy transitions into a flashback to an indistinct period referred to as "in the Juniors" when she first recalls being at the boarding school. Situated in an unspecified English countryside, Hailsham is managed by a group of individuals known as *guardians*, who resemble "the normal people outside" and reside in their separate quarters, Orangery, within the institution (109). With the exception of Madame, a guardian who maintains a cold demeanor and avoids direct interaction with the students, the Hailsham guardians are not portrayed as stereotypically cruel figures like Miss Minchin or Mr. Brocklehurst. In fact, some, such as Miss Geraldine, are described as "gentle,

soft-spoken, and always comforted you when you needed it, even when you'd done something bad" (29). Nevertheless, the guardians are officially prohibited from exhibiting partiality by "bending the rules and doing something special" for the clones like "a spontaneous hug, a secret letter, a gift" (95). Reflecting on her time at Hailsham, Kathy observes that the guardians often appeared uneasy when the topic of organ donations arose. To avoid such discomfort, she notes that the guardian meticulously timed and structured their lessons to ensure the clones were always just too young to fully grasp the implications of the information being conveyed.

The guardians refer to their clones as "students", similar to those in ordinary boarding schools, to differentiate them from non-Hailsham clones who "existed only to supply medical science" (Ishiguro: 401). Although not in any profound sense, all Hailsham students are aware that they differ from their guardians in that organ donations await them in the future. Despite this knowledge, they do not attempt to rebel or escape Hailsham; instead, they willingly participate in their subjugation. This complicity of the students (subjects) with the discursive process challenges the traditional repressive hypothesis, which equates power with repression (Habib, 2005: 770). As Foucault observes, "discourse is normative: not because disobedience and dissent are impossible but because they too are 'grammatical,' already anticipated and positioned in the hegemonic syntax of discursive power" (Davis, 1997: 71). Even the older students admit to "missing the guardians" after relocating from Hailsham to the Farm Cottages, where only an elderly man named Keffers – who "was having none of it" – oversees them (183). Despite knowing that no one would stop them, they rarely venture beyond the confines of the cottages in their initial months there, not even walking "about the surrounding countryside or wander into the nearby village" (184).

After the students arrive at the cottages, Keffers provides them with a list of chores to "keep the place up" (182). At this point, the text introduces the role of the *veteran,* an established group of older students already living in the cottages. These veterans have created a "rota" that the newcomers diligently follow (182). Unlike the newcomers, the veterans are permitted to occasionally pack their bags and go on two- or three-day excursions, an unfamiliar concept for the newcomers. Another new experience for the newcomers is observing that the majority of veterans are in relationships, "going about in a sensible sort of way, like a mother and father might do in a normal family" (188). However, the narrator notes that their mannerism – "the way they gestured to each other, sat together on sofas, even the way they argued and stormed out of rooms", seem unnatural, largely imitated from television (189).

Kathy also notes the quiet demeanor that surrounds some of the veterans when they begin training to become *carers*. This role involves "driving across the country, centre to centre, hospital to hospital, sleeping in

overnights" (Ishiguro: 317). Carers are often required to rush "between three or four ailing donors in different parts of the country" (362). While some carers are asked to stop after two or three years, others continue for as long as fourteen years. Kathy explains that the carers differ from typical nurses in that they provide non-medical services for their fellow clones. For instance, carers know "when to hang around and comfort them, when to leave them to themselves; when to listen to everything they have to say, and when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it" (5). Although this role is not mandatory, there is a shared belief among the Hailsham students that becoming a carer is the natural path to follow. Consequently, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth all leave the cottages within two years to serve as carers, with only Kathy continuing in the role for twelve years.

No miraculous intervention, a stroke of luck, or magic can save these clones from their ultimate fate as donors. Not even true love can grant couples a chance at deferral, as Ruth had hoped to offer Kathy and Tommy in atonement for pulling them apart. For these clones, becoming a donor is not just an inevitability but a meticulously structured process that defines their existence. Among the trio, Ruth is the first to begin donating, followed by Tommy, and both eventually become Kathy's donors. Although the text does not explicitly state it, it is understood that the type and sequence of organs to be donated depend on each donor's strength and condition after each operation. Ruth, one of the weakest donors, completes after her second donation, while Tommy endures four surgeries, underscoring the harsh nature of their predetermined roles.

Hailsham and the Medical Gaze
Hailsham serves a dual purpose as both a school and a clinic, requiring the students "to have some form of medical almost every week–usually up in Room 18 at the very top of the house–with stern Nurse Trisha," (Ishiguro: 13). Additionally, the institution enforces strict rules to protect the students' health, such as prohibiting smoking entirely. In fact, the guardians would prefer that the students never learn about smoking at all. Since this is impossible, they ensure that any mention of cigarettes is accompanied by "some sort of lecture" (107). For example, if a photograph of a famous figure holding a cigarette is shown during a lecture, "the whole lesson would grind to a halt" (197). A rumor even circulates at Hailsham that certain books, like Sherlock Holmes, are excluded from the library because the character smokes excessively. Whenever students find pages torn out of illustrated books, it is often because those pages depict someone smoking. The guardians go to great lengths to educate the students about the dangers of smoking, using graphic images to show the potential damage it could cause to their bodies.

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These precautionary measures also extend to the realm of sexuality, not by denying its existence but by deploying "entire machinery for producing true discourses" about sex, carefully crafted to align with the demands of power (Habib, 2005: 770). When the guardians begin educating the students about sex, they tend "to run them together with talk about donations" (Ishiguro: 130–131). Kathy recalls one instance where a guardian used a life-size skeleton to demonstrate the mechanics of sex, explaining it as a matter of fact "like this was still Geography" (131). The guardian then emphasized the importance of being cautious about sexual partners, particularly with individuals outside Hailsham. Reflecting on this, Kathy notes that the students were confused about "this whole area around sex" (149). On the one hand, the guardians encouraged them not to feel ashamed of their bodies, to respect their "physical needs," and to view sex as "a very beautiful gift as long as both people really wanted it" (150). Yet, in practice, the guardians imposed so many restrictions that it became nearly impossible for the students to engage in any sexual activity "without breaking rules" (150). Despite the rhetoric of "sex being beautiful," the students felt they would face consequences if caught (150). They were prohibited from visiting the boys' dorms after nine o'clock, and the same rule applied to the girls' dorms. Additionally, classrooms were officially "out of bounds" in the evenings, as were "the areas behind the sheds" (75).

Caroll (2010) observes that there is something distinctly "queer" about the protagonists of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. As their queerness is not merely "commonplace" but also relates to their nonnormative heterosexuality, it may be conceivable to classify them under the extended definition of queer in theorized sense (59). Though nominally heterosexual, as Caroll (2010) goes on to argue, the protagonists of *Never let me go* seem to defy heterosexual norms, representing a heterosexual identity that heteronormativity has disempowered and marginalized. As such, they reveal the tensions and conflicts that exist both within and between heterosexuality as an identity and as an institution. Caroll (2010) concludes that the peculiar nature of Hailsham – as an imitative educational regime that teaches the clones to pass as normal – exposes the contradictions and perversity of heteronormativity as well as its performative nature.

Conclusion

Never Let Me Go (2005) comes full circle as Kathy, now thirty-one, drives around the countryside reminiscing about Hailsham. By this point, Hailsham itself has become a relic of the past, having fulfilled its mission and shut its doors, much like the fates of Ruth and Tommy. While Kathy's role as the narrator spares her from the same appalling

end within the story, the novel's conclusion remains profoundly tragic. The final image of Kathy in tears, imagining Tommy waving to her across a field, poignantly foreshadows her impending donation procedure, underscoring the inescapable tragedy that characterizes the clones' lives. This grim destiny, however, is not specific to Hailsham's students; it is a systemic reality for all clones, regardless of their background. Yet, Hailsham's distinctive approach to education provides a lens through which this essay could examine the motif of boarding school, juxtaposing it with classic coming-of-age tales such as *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield, and A Little Princess*. It argues that Ishiguro reconfigures the traditional motif of the institution, drawing on Foucault's theories of discourse and power, to present Hailsham not merely as a setting of Bildung (formation) but as a site of care that simultaneously normalizes and controls its students. By examining the subject positions and activities constructed within Hailsham, the essay highlights how the institution sustains the "medical gaze" – a discursive mechanism that legitimizes the clones' established social roles. This gaze, pervasive throughout the novel, reinforces the systemic dehumanization of the clones, despite Hailsham's efforts to provide them with a semblance of humanity.

In conclusion, the essay shall briefly explore the significance of the novel's title. *Never Let Me Go* refers to a love song by a fictional singer, Judy Bridgewater, in which a female voice pleads with her lover not to abandon her. The title gains deeper meaning in a scene where eleven-year-old Kathy is caught by Madame while swaying softly, holding a pillow, and singing along to the song. Madame, moved to tears, interprets Kathy's actions as symbolic: the little girl, clutching the pillow and dancing to the melancholic lyrics of 'Never Let Me Go,' represents a fading world of compassion and humanity, desperately clinging to it as a new, more scientific and efficient yet harsher and crueler world emerges. This occurrence might prompt readers to reflect on what it means to be 'human' in the face of swift technological advancement, particularly as artificial intelligence pushes the limits of the conventional notion of human agency.

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