Hyperreality and the Mass Production of Destiny:
Baudrillardian Simulacra in *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on Never Let Me Go *has primarily engaged with its ethical, philosophical, and socio-political implications, particularly regarding cloning, human rights, and the commodification of life. While critics such as Rachel Carroll and Amit Marcus have examined the novel's deconstruction of normative discourses on humanity, and Shameem Black has explored its engagement with multiculturalism and globalization, insufficient attention has been given to its postmodern ontological dimensions. This article addresses this critical gap by applying Jean Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality, simulation, and simulacra to Ishiguro's dystopian narrative. It argues that* Never Let Me Go *functions as a meditation on the dissolution of reality, wherein clones exist as third- and fourth-order simulacra — entities that mask the absence of a profound reality. Through an analysis of Hailsham's institutional mechanisms, the novel's representations of nostalgia, and the commodification of identity, this study illuminates the ways in which Ishiguro's work critiques the hyperreal structures that define late capitalist societies. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how* Never Let Me Go *challenges conventional distinctions between the authentic and the artificial, exposing the mechanisms through which contemporary societies manufacture consent and obscure the erosion of human agency.*

Introduction

Often serving as a harbinger of a dystopian future, human cloning provides authors with a modern medium to interrogate the essence of human will, individuality, and autonomy. These speculations have yielded narratives that are both deeply emotional and intellectually stimulating. Among these, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* stands as a masterful exemplar, portraying a richly textured dystopian world where institutions and systems operate in concert to mass-produce human clones, destined solely for organ donation. Within this meticulously constructed reality, Ishiguro addresses the philosophical and moral complexities of a society that not only educates these clones about their so-called higher purpose, but also glorifies it as an honourable path, thereby tightly controlling their lives and extinguishing any potential for deviation from their predetermined fate.

The ethical dimensions of cloning emerge as a central and immediate concern when exploring the dystopian narrative of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. This theme has been explored through various scholarly lenses, each illuminating different facets of the novel's ethical quandaries. Richard F. Storrow, in the 2009 article "Therapeutic Reproduction and Human Dignity", examines contemporary controversies in therapeutic reproduction, offering a critical perspective on the implications of cloning.[1] Amit Marcus, in the 2012 article "The Ethics of Human Cloning in Narrative Fiction," investigates how narrative fiction presents ethical dilemmas that "can affect

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1 Richard F. Storrow, "Therapeutic Reproduction and Human Dignity," *Law and Literature* 21, no. 2 (2009): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1525/lal.2009.21.2.257>.

personal identity, human desire, will and cognition, and the conception of humanity, that is, what a human being is or should be"[2] by taking a closer look at multiple novels such as David Rorvik's *In His Image*, Naomi Mitchison's *Solution Three* and Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. Rachel Carroll, in the 2012 chapter "Imitations of Life: Cloning, Heterosexuality and the Human in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*" in *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction*, shifts the focus from the humanity of the clones to the normative discourses that challenge their status, arguing that "it is not the human status of the clone which is in question in this novel so much as the normative discourses which conspire to contest it"[3]. This perspective invites readers to reconsider notions of normality, both within the world of *Never Let Me Go* and in our own lived reality. Similarly, Tiffany Tsao, in the 2012 article "The Tyranny of Purpose: Religion and Biotechnology in Ishiguro's 'Never Let Me Go'", juxtaposes Ishiguro's novel with Milton's *Paradise Lost* to explore the intersections of religion and biotechnology, highlighting "religion's ability to provide its adherents with a sense of purpose, and the benevolent purposes for which biotechnical research is undertaken."[4] Tsao further argues the outlook of this novel on the nature of religion and humanity's purpose in life by stating "Never Let Me Go suggests that our obsession with finding purpose, and our tendency to view religion as a means of deriving purpose, may be misguided."[5] As Tsao argues, this obsession with finding purpose is what drives humanity towards scientific fields such as biotechnology. Ishiguro's novel is therefore the manifestation of such a world where "clones can be created to save the dying.". However, as Tsao concludes, "the solution's details remain somewhat hazy. What would such pointless, selfless biotechnological innovation even look like?" because the nature of this biotechnology can usher a new age of human innovation but it can also lead to the very same dystopian world that Ishiguro is trying to depict.[6] This outlook and Tsao's work provide a fascinating frame that affirms the writings of the current article from a different viewpoint. As it will be further discussed in the later parts of the current article, Baudrillard's writing focuses on the cyclical nature of the hyperreality that dominates the modern world as a Möbius strip. Because Baudrillard believes the modern world has turned into a device for "… proving the real through the imaginary, proving truth through scandal, proving the law through transgression, proving work through striking …," which is why "Everything is metamorphosed into its opposite to perpetuate itself in its expurgated form."[7]

Two additional studies warrant particular attention, given their relevance to the focus of this paper. John David Schwetman, in the 2017 article "'Shadowy Objects in Test Tubes': The Ethics of Grievance in Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go", contends that:

2   Amit Marcus, "The Ethics of Human Cloning in Narrative Fiction," *Comparative Literature Studies* 49, no. 3 (2012): 405, <https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.49.3.0405>.

3   Rachel Carroll, "Imitations of Life: Cloning, Heterosexuality and the Human in Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go," In *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 131.

4   Tiffany Tsao, "The Tyranny of Purpose: Religion and Biotechnology in Ishiguro's 'Never Let Me Go,'" *Literature and Theology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 214.

5   Tsao, "The Tyranny of Purpose," 226.

6   Tsao, "The Tyranny of Purpose," 229.

7   Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 19.

> By presenting radically aggrieved clones as visibly indistinguishable from the non-cloned normals, Ishiguro dramatically challenges traditional understandings of the stage of grievance and compels readers to re-examine their reactions when confronting the spectacle of grievance.

Here, "the spectacle of grievance" refers to the emotional turmoil "experienced by its narrator-protagonist and other clones destined to die young when donating their organs to other non-clone, or 'normal,' members of their community."[8] While Schwetman's analysis leans toward a socio-political critique, it nonetheless lays the groundwork for understanding the ethical implications of such a dystopian world. Shameem Black, in the 2009 article "Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics", positions *Never Let Me Go* as a meditation on "the ethics of artistic production and consumption in an age of multiculturalism and globalization,"[9] and encourages readers to recognize "what in ourselves is mechanical, manufactured, and replicated."[10]

Furthermore, John Marks, in the 2010 article "Clone Stories: 'Shallow Are the Souls That Have Forgotten How to Shudder'", examines *Never Let Me Go* alongside Eva Hoffman's *The Secret*, situating both within bioethical, psychoanalytic, and posthuman theoretical discourses, and contends that while Hoffman's narrative "resolves the struggle for identity in a 'human' conclusion," Ishiguro "maintains the uncanny in-human difference of the clone even as it highlights the dangers of the biopolitical instrumentalization of life itself."[11] In this reading, Kathy's unruffled account of a predetermined fate is central to the novel's unsettling effect: "The lack of outrage more than anything else makes one wonder whether she is not somehow deficient… It is in this sense that Kathy H.'s voice can appear uncanny."[12] This "uncanny indeterminacy" operates as a deliberate narrative strategy, compelling the reader to confront the ethical ambivalence that surrounds the clones' existence.

The analysis further emphasizes Hailsham's "aesthetic economy," where art "was collected as evidence of the fact that, contrary to received wisdom, they have 'souls.'"[13] Yet rather than serving as a vehicle for liberation, this aesthetic valuation "reinforces the hold that the ultimately inhuman system… has over the students."[14] Drawing on Baudrillard's critique of simulation and the suppression of otherness, Marks characterizes Ishiguro's clones as "not, and cannot be, like us" — while simultaneously presenting them as figures that "remind us of something about ourselves which is not like us."[15] This interpretation aligns with a Baudrillardian framework in which the clones function as third- and fourth-order simulacra, masking the absence of an authentic origin while exposing the hyperreal mechanisms that structure both their world and contemporary society.

Finally, in the 2023 article "The Human Body as a Commodity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*," Evelina-Iulia Hreceniuc (Cîrdei) shows how Ishiguro's dystopia organizes clones as

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8   John David Schwetman, "'Shadowy Objects in Test Tubes': The Ethics of Grievance in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 19, no. 4 (2017): 421, <https://doi.org/10.5325/intelitestud.19.4.0421>.

9   Shameem Black, "Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics," *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 4 (2009): 785.

10 Black, "Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics," 786.

11 John Marks, "Clone Stories: 'Shallow Are the Souls That Have Forgotten How to Shudder,'" *Paragraph* 33, no. 3 (2010): 331.

12 Marks, "Clone Stories," 349.

13 Marks, "Clone Stories," 349.

14 Marks, "Clone Stories," 349–350.

15 Marks, "Clone Stories," 353.

expendable resources, noting that "the organ donation system entails that each of these students donates two or three organs, afterward, their mission is considered complete."[16] This regime fractures personhood: "The image of the self as an individual is thus fragmented since the clones can no longer exercise control of their own bodies," and "the individual is perceived as a conglomeration of organs, not as a person with feelings, opinions, and principles."[17] Drawing on Nietzsche and Ishiguro's own Madame scene, the study warns that a world made "more scientific, more efficient" can also be "a harsh, cruel world."[18] Through Baudrillard, the contemporary condition is cast as "after the orgy," where "today's technological beings—machines, clones, replacement body parts— all tend towards this kind of reproduction," and where procreation by code means "the coming into existence of the clone amounts to the creation of a matrix—a matrix that is devoid of human significance."[19] The conclusion presses the ethical stakes: the analysis "focused on the status of the clone as a commodity," showing "the way in which our comprehension of humanity may be constructed on the principle of normativity."[20]

Many studies have explored the ethical and philosophical dimensions of Ishiguro's novel. There have even been some works that use Baudrillard to uncover and analyze the nature of organ donation or art in Hailsham. These are the pieces, however, of a much larger puzzle. This article therefore turns to Jean Baudrillard's theories of postmodernity — particularly his concepts of simulation, simulacra, hyperreality, and the multiple orders of simulation. By engaging with Baudrillard's ideas, including the erosion of cultural authenticity through excessive simulation and the evocative power of nostalgia, this paper aims to uncover the hyperreal structures embedded within *Never Let Me Go* and their lasting impact on the lives of the clones. The clones, as depicted in the novel, can be understood as third or fourth-order simulacra within Baudrillard's framework – entities that "mask the absence of a profound reality" or bear "no relation to any reality whatsoever."[21] They exist as hypercommodities, their lives governed by a system of exchange value that blurs the boundaries between human and clone, reality, and simulation.

This mass production of destiny begins at Hailsham, the school where the clones are raised until adulthood. Initially portrayed as an idyllic and exceptional institution, Hailsham's true nature is gradually revealed through the reflections of Kathy, the novel's protagonist. Adult Kathy revisits her memories of Hailsham, only to find that the physical building eludes her, which symbolizes its commodified, and hyperreal essence. This elusive quality mirrors the broader systems of simulation that define the clones' existence. As Paul Hegarty observes, the postmodern era is characterized by a third order of simulation, where "there is no real to imitate [...] as the simulation is not an imitation, but a replacement."[22]. Baudrillard further elaborates on this condition as the "hysteria of

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16 Evelina-Iulia Hreceniuc (Cîrdei), "The Human Body as a Commodity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*," *Messages, Sages and Ages* 10, no. 1 (2023): 39.

17 Hreceniuc (Cîrdei), "The Human Body as a Commodity," 39.

18 Hreceniuc (Cîrdei), "The Human Body as a Commodity," 40.

19 Hreceniuc (Cîrdei), "The Human Body as a Commodity," 41.

20 Hreceniuc (Cîrdei), "The Human Body as a Commodity," 42.

21 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

22 Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004), 50.

our times," marked by the relentless "production and reproduction of the real."[23] In this context, the clones and the institutions that produce them become part of a self-replicating hyperreal system, where the distinction between original and copy dissolves.

Ishiguro subtly alludes to this hyperreal condition through his depiction of the school buildings and pavilions, which are constructed as indistinguishable replicas, devoid of individuality or history by having Adult Kathy state

> In particular, there are those pavilions. I spot them all over the country, standing on the far side of playing fields, little white prefab buildings with a row of windows unnaturally high up, tucked almost under the eaves. I think they built a whole lot like that in the fifties and sixties, which is probably when ours was put up[24]

These structures become metaphors for the clones themselves, who are similarly molded into uniformity by the systems that govern their lives. The adult Kathy's observations of these buildings reflect her newfound awareness of the hyperreality that once enveloped her, which is why she longer can either recognize or find Hailsham. Her ability to perceive the artificiality of these structures signifies her detachment from the simulated reality of Hailsham and the broader systems that shaped her existence. This interplay between the clones and their environment exemplifies the novel's central tension: the collision between human individuality and the dehumanizing forces of hyperreality. Through this lens, *Never Let Me Go* emerges as a meditation on the consequences of living within a world where reality itself has been supplanted by simulation, and where the boundaries between the authentic and the artificial have been irrevocably blurred.

The Theoretical Framework of *Simulacra and Simulation*

Before delving deeper into Ishiguro's work, there should be a closer look at Baudrillard. Jean Baudrillard covers much ground in *Simulacra and Simulation*. This collection of essays, which was published in 1981, mainly focuses on the concept of simulacra and its manifestation as the hyperreal in modern everyday life. After defining this modern conception of simulacra, Baudrillard continues by presenting a series of examples that analyze the role of simulation, simulacra, and the hyperreal in more general categories such as cinema, television, science, war, politics, and history alongside some more specific examples such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* or J. G. Ballard's *Crash* (It should be noted that there are several articles that question Baudrillard's analysis of *Crash*, however, this topic falls outside the scope and direction of the current paper).

Baudrillard takes advantage of Borges' "On Exactitude in Science" to better explain his ideology. This story involves some cartographers hired by the Empire to draw up a map so extremely detailed that it covers the territory of that Empire exactly. The decay of time and loss of interest from future generations slowly, however, destroy this map over time. This could be seen as a classic example of simulation. This sort of simulation used to be divided and distinguishable from reality. However, this notion of simulation has changed greatly in the modern world. Simulation is now

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23 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 23.

24 Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 6.

only the "generation by models of a real without origin or reality" that only leads to the creation of "a hyperreal."[25] This is why "the territory no longer precedes the map" because not only modern simulation and simulacra allow for the map to exist without any territory, but they also threaten the sovereignty of existing territory. This phenomenon prevents the decay of the map (simulation) over time and leads to the decay of the territory, which creates "the desert of the real itself."[26]

This exact simulation of reality has a fascinating yet terrifying result as it destroys the "sovereign difference"[27] between what is real and what is simulation. This modern form of simulation can reproduce the real infinite times, which completely strips it of any form of idealism, either positive or negative, to create something purely "operational." As Baudrillard puts it:

> It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.[28]

The creation and perfection of this hyperreal has an effect on everything. There is a cycle of life – real replacing imitation and vice versa – things come to life and die. This new hyperreal is systematic; therefore, it destroys the organic cycle of life and death because it is created and destroyed by the whims of its creators as an artificial entity. This simulation "threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'"[29] as it continues to create simulated signs to replace the pre-existing real.

Baudrillard defines four "successive phases of the image": 1) Everything starts with a "reflection of a profound reality." 2) Then, there is an image that "masks and denatures a profound reality." 3) There is an image that "masks the *absence* of profound reality." 4) Finally, this cycle continues until an image is created that "has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum."[30] This new sign order marks the "transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing."[31] This substitution of meaning for imitation of meaning creates the artificial cycle of life and death in everything. In other words, the modern simulation and hyperreality kill the traditional real, leaving room for nostalgia to become a prominent societal force. As people yearn for this lost meaning, they search for it in different ways, which are explained and examined in the following chapters of this book. The first chapter of *Simulacra and Simulation* presents some important examples such as the Tasaday Tribe, Disneyland, Watergate, the Möbius strip, The American Family (a reality show from the early 1970s), the Atomic War, the Space Race, and the Vietnam War.

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25 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

26 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

27 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.

28 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.

29 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.

30 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

31 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

The Power of Art: The Hailsham Days

The Hailsham era can be delineated into two distinct phases, each defined by the dominant systems that regulate the children's daily lives and routines. The initial phase, often nostalgically referred to as "a kind of golden time,"[32] is governed by the token system. This system pushes students to produce any art in the form of poetry, drawings, and paintings. Then, students who can produce 'good' art are rewarded with tokens. However, these students have zero understanding or knowledge regarding what makes good or bad art. They do not understand the process of creating art; they merely produce art and gain arbitrary rewards for it. As one student reflects, "A lot of the time, how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at 'creating.'"[33]

This token-based economy fosters a social hierarchy predicated on productivity, where students who excel in artistic output are elevated to elite status, while others are marginalized. For instance, "Christy had this great reputation for poetry, and we all looked up to her for it."[34] Yet, this admiration is not rooted in an appreciation of poetry as an art form but rather in the tokens it yields. This dynamic exemplifies Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, wherein "the very ideology of 'cultural production' is antithetical to all culture."[35] Much like Baudrillard's analysis of Beaubourg – a cultural institution that simulates the production and consumption of art while eroding its authentic value – Hailsham's token system constructs a hyperreal simulation of anticulture. This simulation, as Baudrillard observes, "only establishes itself on the alibi of the previous order,"[36] dismantling genuine cultural practices and replacing them with hollow reproductions. The students themselves acknowledge their detachment from art, confessing, "we didn't know a thing about poetry. We didn't care about it. It's strange."[37]

This anticulture, characterized by its reliance on simulation and spectacle, permeates every facet of life at Hailsham, shaping social dynamics and interpersonal relationships. Prolific students are valorized as elites, while those who fail to conform are ostracized, reflecting Baudrillard's assertion that anticulture is "a culture of simulation and of fascination."[38] The students, akin to the visitors of Beaubourg, become unwitting participants in the "great mourning of a culture,"[39] not out of a genuine desire for cultural engagement but as actors in a performative ritual that signifies its demise. Within this hyperreal framework, the students are ensnared in a paradoxical loop: their pursuit of culture yields only its absence, while their attempts to negate it such as Tommy's attempts to cultivate his own unique art style or the teachers attempt to shelter the students from the reality of the world inadvertently redefines their understanding of culture under the rules of hyperreality. This cycle culminates in the emergence of hyperculture, a commodified and mass-

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32 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 76.

33 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 16.

34 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 18.

35 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 64.

36 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 64.

37 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 18.

38 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 65.

39 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 65.

produced simulacrum of culture, epitomized by institutions like Beaubourg, which Baudrillard describes as "a cultural hypermarket for the distribution of hyperculture as a hypercommodity."[40] In this context, Hailsham functions as a microcosm of this phenomenon, its simulated social structures transforming students into products—donors and carers—devoid of authentic agency or purpose.

As the students mature, they transition into the second phase of their Hailsham experience, termed the "Darker"[41] era. This period is marked by a shift in focus from artistic production to the regulation of the body, as the students are indoctrinated into the realities of their future roles as donors. Guardians emphasize the necessity of preserving their physical health, framing behaviours such as smoking and sexual activity as threats to their utilitarian value. This instruction reinforces their status as the "other," distinct from "normal" individuals, and entrenches them further within the simulated reality of Hailsham.

The central preoccupation of this era is how the guardians handle the concept of intercourse. Intercourse and the students' obsession with it replace the token system's importance in their daily lives. The guardians underscore the disparity between the students' experiences of sexuality and those of the outside world, framing their interactions as devoid of the emotional and reproductive significance attributed to "normal" individuals. As Kathie recalls the words of their guardians, "'sex affects emotions in ways you'd never expect.' We had to be extremely careful about having sex in the outside world, especially with people who weren't students, because out there sex meant all sorts of things."[42] This discourse instills a sense of otherness in the students, as they come to perceive their guardians as fundamentally alien. As one student observes, "for them, sex was for when you wanted babies, and even though they knew, intellectually, that we couldn't have babies, they still felt uneasy about us doing it because deep down they couldn't quite believe we wouldn't end up with babies."[43] This fixation on intercourse reshapes the social hierarchy, rendering the token system obsolete and replacing it with a new, equally hollow, structure predicated on sexual activity.

This different hierarchical structure is further drilled into the students' minds by taking advantage of a new focus on their physical health. The nature of the students' existence and their role as future donors forces the guardians into banning anything that could potentially hurt the physical health of the students, and the example of smoking highlights this fact. As Kathy states: "the guardians were really strict about smoking." Therefore, they completely ban it. They keep insisting upon this notion, however, as they "made sure to give us some sort of lecture each time any reference to cigarettes came along" to the level that "Even if we were being shown a picture of a famous writer or world leader, and they happened to have a cigarette in their hand, then the whole lesson would grind to a halt."[44] This constant insistence mainly operates to integrate the students in Hailsham's system of simulation as it turns the illusion of their lives into an influential simulacrum of reality because the students are "special,"[45] which is why they cannot smoke.

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40 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 67.

41 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 76.

42 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 82.

43 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 95.

44 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 67.

45 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 68.

In Baudrillard's hyperreal paradigm, such simulations serve to "mask the absence of profound reality."[46] Institutions like Hailsham exemplify this phenomenon, constructing elaborate facades to conceal the void at the heart of modern existence. As Baudrillard notes:

> People no longer look at each other, but there are institutes for that. They no longer touch each other, but there is contactotherapy. They no longer walk, but they go jogging, etc. Everywhere one recycles lost faculties, or lost bodies, or lost sociality, or the lost taste for food.[47]

Within Hailsham, even fundamental human experiences such as art and intimacy are stripped of their meaning, reduced to mechanisms of social control and commodification. This process reflects Baudrillard's assertion that "the original no longer even exists, since things are conceived from the beginning as a function of their unlimited reproduction."[48] Hailsham, as a microcosm of this modern murderous culture, annihilates authentic human experiences outside its boundaries while replicating them as empty simulations within its walls. These simulations, devoid of purpose or significance, serve only to obscure the absence of reality in the lives of the children, perpetuating a cycle of hyperreal existence.

The Power of Nostalgia: The Cottage Days

The second phase in the lives of the Hailsham students commences with a profound transition as they depart from the confines of Hailsham and relocate to a new environment known as the Cottages. This shift ushers in a distinct emotional undercurrent, one that Jean Baudrillard articulates with striking precision: "When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning."[49] This succinct observation encapsulates the psychological state of the students as they navigate this transitional period. Transitions, by their very nature, often evoke a sense of longing for what has been left behind, and in this case, the students' movement between two simulated systems generates a peculiar manifestation of nostalgia. This sentiment is immediately foregrounded as Kathy reflects, "We arrived at the Cottages expecting a version of Hailsham for older students."[50] The Cottages, a repurposed barn serving as a residential space for students, function as an intermediary zone between the insular world of institutions like Hailsham and the broader external reality. Their primary purpose is to prepare the students for the final stage of their lives as donors and carers.[51]

As the students approach their departure from Hailsham, they are assigned the task of composing an essay on a topic of their choice during their tenure at the Cottages. Initially, the students disregard this assignment, but over time, it assumes a symbolic significance. As Kathy observes, "In our first days there, and for some of us a lot longer, it was like we were each clinging

46 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

47 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 13.

48 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 99.

49 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

50 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 144.

51 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 130.

to our essay, this last task from Hailsham, like it was a farewell gift from the guardians."[52] The essay, as a final vestige of their time at Hailsham, underscores the enduring influence of the institution's structures on their lives.

This influence becomes evident as the students, in their new environment, begin to construct yet another social hierarchy, this time centered around the act of reading. Much like the earlier systems at Hailsham, which revolved around artistic production and sexual activity, the students now develop a hierarchy based on literary consumption as a means of coping with their nostalgia for Hailsham and its guardians. As Kathy notes:

> How well you were coping – was somehow reflected by how many books you'd read. It sounds odd, but there you are, it was just something that developed between us, the ones who'd arrived from Hailsham … it was pretty reminiscent of the way we'd dealt with sex at Hailsham.[53]

This propensity to create social hierarchies, ingrained in the students by Hailsham's production-centric ethos, persists regardless of their location. These hierarchical systems, however, are devoid of any substantive consequences; they are mere simulations of reality, designed to occupy the students and provide a semblance of structure. This phenomenon reinforces a recurring theme: the students of Hailsham are products of a simulated system that masks the absence of any reality,[54] existing solely to prepare them for their predetermined roles as organ donors. Moreover, their tendency to fabricate arbitrary social structures wherever they go highlights the indelible imprint of Hailsham on their identities. Even as they mature, leave Hailsham behind, and adapt to a more open existence, they remain tethered to the commercialized worldview instilled in them by their upbringing. They continue to perceive every aspect of their lives through the lens of hyperreal social stratification, a perspective that grows increasingly detached from reality and meaning as they age. This is the inevitable outcome of their mass-production within a system of void simulation, a process that ultimately reduces their existence to a series of hollow, performative rituals.

The Power of Sacrifice: The Carer Days

Finally, The Carer Days represent the culminating phase in the lives of the Hailsham students, a period divided into two interrelated stages under the same institutional framework. Initially, the students serve as carers, tending for older donors, before transitioning into the role of donors themselves. In this final stage, they undergo multiple organ donations until their bodies succumb to exhaustion, at which point they are granted what is euphemistically termed "completion." While individual reactions to the role of carer vary, there is a pervasive drive among the students to fulfill their ultimate purpose as donors. This is exemplified in Tommy's behaviour, which lays the groundwork for the third and final simulation that structures their existence.

During this terminal phase, the students are severed from their past connections, operating largely in isolation from former friends and classmates. This separation amplifies the nostalgia that

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52 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 113.

53 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 120.

54 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

emerged during their time at the Cottages, reaching its zenith when news of Hailsham's closure circulates. As Kathy recalls, "we hugged, quite spontaneously, not so much to comfort one another, but as a way of affirming Hailsham, the fact that it was still there in both our memories."[55] This poignant moment underscores the enduring psychological grip of their formative years, even as they move inexorably toward their predestined ends.

The hyperreal systems that permeate *Never Let Me Go* attain their apotheosis in this final phase. Here, the ultimate form of social currency emerges, manifesting as the number of donations a student has undergone, which in turn establishes a new hierarchical structure. This system reinforces the notion of otherness instilled by the guardians and society at large, creating divisions even among friends. Tommy, for instance, begins to perceive Kathy as fundamentally different because she has not yet become a donor, remarking, "Look, Kath, I'll sort out my own things. If you were a donor, you'd see."[56] Throughout the novel, each stage of the students' lives is marked by a distinct form of social currency – tokens, intercourse, books, and finally, donations – that perpetuates hierarchical distinctions. As one student observes "A donor 'on a fourth,' even one who's been pretty unpopular up till then, is treated with special respect. Even the doctors and nurses play up to this: a donor on a fourth will go in for a check and be greeted by whitecoats smiling and shaking their hand."[57] This final system fulfills its purpose by cementing the students' identities as the "other" and compelling them to fulfill their mass-produced destinies without question.

The concept of otherness is a constant thread woven through the students' lives. In Hailsham, Tommy is marginalized due to his perceived lack of artistic talent. The entire cohort of Hailsham students is later othered through the guardians' lectures, which emphasize the importance of maintaining their physical health for future donations. By the novel's conclusion, Kathy herself becomes the other, as Tommy bluntly reminds her, "because you're not a donor."[58] This relentless othering serves to dehumanize the students, reducing them to their utilitarian function within a hyperreal system.

The systems at the heart of *Never Let Me Go* are meticulously designed to shape their subjects, overriding any potential resistance. Through a series of materialistic activities and simulated social structures, these systems reprogram the students' thought processes, ensuring their compliance with their predetermined roles. Hailsham, the Cottages, the Carer Homes, and the broader society depicted in the novel collectively function as a mechanism for transforming bright, hopeful children into adults with a singular purpose: to donate their organs. This systematic mass-production of destiny lies at the core of *Never Let Me Go*, exposing the dehumanizing consequences of reducing individuals to mere commodities in a hyperreal simulation of life.

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55 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 207.

56 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 273.

57 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 276.

58 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 276.

Conclusion

From the token-based economy of Hailsham to the commodification of art, sexuality, and ultimately life itself, the clones are ensnared in a hyperreal framework that masks the absence of reality. The institutions that govern their existence – Hailsham, the Cottages, and the Carer Homes – function as mechanisms of social stratification and otherization, perpetuating a cycle of dehumanization that reduces the clones to mere products within a utilitarian system. The novel's exploration of hyperreality is particularly evident in the clones' inability to escape their simulated existence. Whether through the arbitrary hierarchies of artistic production, the regulation of their bodies, or the final commodification of their organs, the clones are trapped in a world where meaning has been replaced by simulation. This is exemplified by the students' nostalgic longing for Hailsham, a place that, like their lives, is revealed to be a constructed illusion. As Baudrillard observes, such simulations serve to "mask the absence of a profound reality," and in *Never Let Me Go*, this absence is the clones' humanity itself. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel is a dystopian critique of bioethics and an exploration of postmodern ontology. *Never Let Me Go* constructs a hyperreal system in which reality itself is subsumed by simulation. The institutional frameworks of Hailsham, the Cottages, and the Carer system replicate and reinforce the clones' predetermined destinies, masking the absence of genuine agency or resistance. Through nostalgia and commodified social hierarchies, Ishiguro illustrates how hyperreality perpetuates systems of control, shaping individual subjectivities within an illusion of autonomy. *Never Let Me Go* critiques not only the dystopian fate of its clones, but also the broader mechanisms through which contemporary societies manufacture meaning, identity, and consent within an increasingly simulated reality.

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