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GCSE (9–1)

Delivery Guide

J352

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Never Let Me Go – Kazuo Ishiguro

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's story

“A good book ... leaves you wanting to reread the book. A great book compels you to reread your own soul.” Richard Flanagan: *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013)

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954.

Nine years earlier, at 11:02 am on August 9, 1945 the city of Nagasaki was the target for the dropping of the second atomic bomb by the United States Air Force. If you switch those last two numbers round of Ishiguro's birth date his own story could have been a very different one. His parents, however, made the war seem distant to him when he was growing up.

Speaking in 2005, the year of publication of *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro said, 'I often play little games in my head... Our family arrived in England in 1960. At that time I thought the war was ancient history. But if I think of 15 years ago from now, that's 1990 and that seems like yesterday to me.'

Ishiguro was educated at a grammar school in Surrey and studied English and Philosophy at The University of Kent. After working in various jobs, including as a community worker in Glasgow and a residential social worker in London, he became a full-time writer in 1982.

Ishiguro has written seven novels including the Booker Prize winner *The Remains of the Day* in 1989 and *Never Let Me Go* in 2005. *Never Let Me Go* was Ishiguro's sixth published novel. He has also written original screenplays, collections of shorter fiction and has adapted his own novels *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go* for the cinema.



Structure

Never Let Me Go is set in 'England, late 1990s' and is narrated by thirty-one year old Kathy who looks back on her life and explores her relationships with key individuals she met in childhood at the seemingly idyllic Hailsham school. At the time of her narration Kathy is working as a 'carer', a role that simultaneously seems familiar, in the sense that she looks after people who are ill, and ominous in the casual way she refers to her patients as 'doners' who will, we discover, repeatedly donate until they 'complete'. 'Completion', it soon becomes clear, is a euphemism in Kathy's world for dying. Kathy appears preoccupied by her childhood and the purpose of her story seems as much a quest to rediscover that childhood for herself as it is to inform us about it.

Summary

Kathy tells us, in at times painstaking detail, about her childhood relationships at Hailsham, particularly with her challenging friend Ruth and with Tommy, a loveable misfit amongst his peers. The lives of these three children and their relationships with other children and their 'guardians' at the school becomes the focus of Part One of the novel.

Who hasn't, in later life, recalled the events and friendships of childhood and schooling? But the world described soon takes on a disturbing quality for the reader as we discover that Kathy, as well as living in a recognisable place, 'England', and time, 'the late 1990s', is also living in a grotesquely skewed version of that familiar world. For Kathy, Ruth and Tommy

and the rest of the children at Hailsham live in a dystopian alternative world in which they have been reproduced as clones that have the sole purpose of donating their vital organs so that the non-clone population can be cured of the various illnesses that afflict them. We discover that when the children are old enough, they will begin their careers as donors and will have their organs harvested until, generally after the fourth donation, they will 'complete' or die.

It soon becomes apparent that the roles of 'carer', a role Kathy performs with real pride, and 'doner' are not mutually exclusive, for the carers are also clones who will eventually start the process of donation themselves. Kathy's account of her life in this grotesque parallel world is made particularly haunting for the reader by the matter-of-fact way these lives are described and her inclusion of seemingly trivial detail whilst steering clear of the full horrifying reality of their existences. The children, and later young people, are for the most part in a state of denial about their realities.

But the extraordinarily brave face that Kathy puts on in describing these events sometimes slips, and the aching tragedy of her and the other characters' lives is revealed. The title of the novel *Never Let Me Go* is also the title of Kathy's favourite song by the fictional singer Judy Bridgewater. Kathy's projection onto the lyrics of the song is not, as would be imagined, that this is a song about romantic love but that this is about "a woman who had been told she couldn't have babies, who'd really, really wanted them all her life. Then there



Structure

is a sort of miracle and she has a baby, and she holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing: 'Baby, never let me go...' partly because she is so happy, but also because she's so afraid something will happen, that this baby will get ill or be taken away from her". The poignancy of this fantasy is profound in the context of the lives of the clones. They are infertile. They will never have babies.

After leaving Hailsham, Kathy and some of her peers are moved to an establishment called the Cottages. Here they have more freedom and can travel but their lives take on an increasingly aimless quality. They have no meaningful work to perform and the reality of their existences can no longer be childishly evaded. Increasingly they become preoccupied with the idea of the 'possible', that there is somewhere out there, the human being from whom they have been cloned. In their young adult lives the desire to know something of their origins and make contact with their 'possible' makes the pathos of their situation even more acute. At the Cottages they are essentially waiting until the process of donation begins, this reality only being delayed if they become, like Kathy, a carer.

During this time Tommy and Ruth begin a relationship. This is painful for Kathy, who also loves Tommy. Ruth begins her process of donation cared for by Kathy. After Ruth 'completes',

Tommy is next in line. Kathy and Tommy begin a relationship and, in quiet desperation of a future together, visit their former teachers at Hailsham, Miss Emily and Madame, in the forlorn hope that if they can evidence that despite being clones they do have 'souls' – the evidence being in the form of Tommy's collected artwork – they will be granted a 'deferral' from donation. No such deferrals exist. Hailsham was, after all, merely a more humane clone-rearing centre, and has now closed in favour of more utilitarian operations. Tommy starts to donate and Kathy continues as his lover and later, agonisingly, his carer until Tommy dies.

Kathy then does 'an indulgent thing', drives to Norfolk, a place where it is believed all that has been lost will be found, and gazes at a desolate landscape imagining that "if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually it would get larger until I'd see that it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call". This is, though, as Kathy realises, a "fantasy" and as the tears roll down her face she turns back to the car to "drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be".



Characters

Major characters

Kathy

The narrator of the novel. She is thirty-one at the point she is telling us the story and working as a 'carer' of those clones who are donating their organs. Like them she will eventually have her vital organs harvested through a series of donations. During her childhood, Kathy is shown to be a very kindly and loving person who has a strong sense of right and wrong. Her support for Tommy who suffers bullying at Hailsham school, and for Ruth who is sometimes unkind to Kathy show her to be a very 'good' person. Throughout the novel Kathy struggles to show much emotion about her life and she continues, in terrible circumstances, to remain mainly strong and accepting.

Tommy

A male friend of Kathy's at Hailsham. As a child Tommy finds it difficult to control his emotions and is picked on by other children. He struggles particularly with the creative work that the Hailsham children are encouraged to undertake. This lack of creativity upsets Tommy until one of the guardians, Miss Lucy tells him something that, for the short term, positively changes his life: it is okay if he's not creative. He feels great relief. Later Miss Lucy tells him that she shouldn't have said what she did, and Tommy goes through another

transformation. Once again upset by his lack of artistic skills, he becomes a quiet and sad teenager. Later in the novel Tommy has a relationship with Ruth and, eventually, with Kathy who also ultimately becomes his carer.

Ruth

Kathy's main friend during the Hailsham years. This is something of a love/hate relationship as Kathy finds Ruth at times overbearing and manipulative. In Part One of the novel Ruth is a dominant character who is controlling of her friendship group at school. Later it becomes apparent that she is not as confident as she first appears and as the reality of how her life will inevitably pan out in the future, Ruth becomes increasingly withdrawn and, ultimately, despairing. At The Cottages, Ruth seeks desperately to fit in – especially with the non-Hailsham characters Chrissie and Rodney. She becomes very impatient with Kathy's continued preoccupation with Hailsham. This leads to a painful period in their relationship. Ruth rejects things from her past that she perceives will negatively affect her image. She throws away her entire collection of art by fellow students, once her prized possession, out of a sense of embarrassment about where she has come from. As an adult she is deeply unhappy and regretful. Ruth eventually gives up on all of her hopes and dreams, and tries to help Kathy and Tommy have a better life.



Characters

Other characters

Madame

A woman who visits Hailsham to pick up the children's artwork and who is described as a 'mystery' by the students at Hailsham. She acts professional and stern, but a young Kathy describes her as distant and forbidding. When the children decide to play a prank on her and swarm around her to see what she will do, they are shocked to discover that she seems disgusted by them. Later in the novel Kathy and Tommy visit Madame in the forlorn hope that she can offer Tommy a 'deferral' from donations.

Miss Emily

Headmistress of Hailsham, who can be very sharp, according to Kathy. The children thought she had an extra sense which allowed her to know where a child was if he or she was hiding. The regime that Miss Emily runs at Hailsham is designed to treat the clones humanely and demonstrate, through their creative work that the children do have 'souls'. Working within the system Miss Emily seeks to challenge the ethics of the cloning programme.

Miss Lucy

A teacher at Hailsham with whom the children feel comfortable. She is one of the younger teachers at Hailsham. Miss Lucy does not believe the realities of the children's

futures should be hidden from them and breaks the school protocol by telling the children that their dreams of a happy and fulfilling future will never be realised and that they exist only for organ donation. Miss Lucy suddenly disappears from Hailsham. One of the central debates of the novel is around whether Miss Lucy is right in telling the children the truth, or Miss Emily in protecting them from it.

Chrissy

Another female "donor" who Kathy, Ruth and Tommy meet at the Cottages. She is older than them and more 'worldly'. She believes the former Hailsham students are a privileged group who might be able to get a donation 'deferral'. She and her boyfriend, Rodney, 'find' Ruth's "possible" and take Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth to Norfolk to see her. She "completes" before the book ends.

Rodney

Chrissy's boyfriend who also is at the Cottages. It is Rodney who first sees the woman they think is Ruth's "possible". He and Chrissy's relationship ends before they "complete".



Themes and contextual factors

Human cloning

Never Let Me Go was written in the decade after the possibilities of human cloning became something much more real and technologically possible with the successful cloning of a sheep known as Dolly, a development that sent shockwaves around the world and continues to shape frontiers of science today. Scottish scientists had taken a cell from an adult sheep, fused it with another sheep's unfertilized egg and created an identical twin. The huge media attention that this development created focused on speculation and anxiety about man's ability to manipulate biology, or in the language of tabloid newspapers of the day, 'play God'. The story of Dolly reveals something of the tension between politics, ethics and science and relates closely to the growing and ongoing controversy about embryonic stem cell research. Something about this debate plays to our highest hopes and greatest fears.

Most nations had already outlawed human cloning but some scientists still worked on cloning technology and the first hybrid human clone was created in 1998. The embryo that was created was then destroyed. Ten years later in 2008 the biotech company Stemagen announced that they had produced five mature human embryos by a process known as somatic cell nuclear transfer.

The novel does not tell us anything about the science of human cloning or how, in a society that seems in many ways to be quite similar to our own, it was ever thought ethically acceptable to rear children as clones and then harvest their organs.

Related activities

Students could research something of the history of cloning and how the debate about it has been represented in the media, films and stories. Michael Bay's 2005 film *The Island* starring Ewan McGregor and Scarlett Johansson is an interesting parallel text to *Never Let Me Go* as is the novel *Spares* by Michael Marshall Smith. Students could look at some of the media reporting of both Dolly and the embryonic stem cell debate. It can provide a fascinating insight into how this technology both intrigues and terrifies us.

Here are some questions to consider on the novel. Doing some research, thinking and talking about and writing responses to these questions will help you prepare for the part (b) question in the exam.

Q. Why do you think Ishiguro chose not to include any of the detail or science of cloning in the novel?

Q. What might have been gained and lost in the novel if such detail had been included?

Kazuo Ishiguro talked about **other important themes and contexts** in his novel in an interview on the website BookBrowse. Here are some of the things he said - but a link to the whole interview can be found in the Useful links/resources section.



Themes and contextual factors

Being human

KI: I could see a way of writing a story that was simple, but very fundamental, about the sadness of the human condition.

Q. Do you agree that the story is 'simple'?

Q. As the characters in NLMG are not 'human' why do you think he might see the novel as about the sadness of the human condition?

Time and place

KI: I was never tempted to set this story in the future. That's partly a personal thing. I'm not very turned on by futuristic landscapes. Besides, I don't have the energy to think about what cars or shops or cup-holders would look like in a future civilization.

Q. Do you think this decision made by the author makes for a better, or worse, novel?

KI: And I didn't want to write anything that could be mistaken for a "prophecy." I wanted rather to write a story in which every reader might find an echo of his or her own life.

Q. Has the author succeeded in creating 'echoes' of your lives and school experience in Kathy's description of life at Hailsham? What things about the characters' lives seemed familiar or believable to you?

Multi-genre?

KI: Yes, you could say there's a "dystopian" or "sci-fi" dimension. But I think of it more as an "alternative history" conceit. It's more in the

line of "What if Hitler had won?" or "What if Kennedy hadn't been assassinated?" The novel offers a version of Britain that might have existed by the late twentieth century if just one or two things had gone differently on the scientific front.

Q. Find out about 'dystopian' and 'science fiction' writing. What are the main features of this kind of genre of writing? What elements of NLMG seem 'dystopian' or 'sci-fi'?

Q. Do other kinds of genre description fit the novel better? A love story? (which, like all the best love stories, is also a story about loss). A growing up (or *bildungsroman*) story? A school story (a genre popular in the first half of the 20th century, often set in an English boarding school, and revived in the 21st century in the Harry Potter series)? Try finding an example of each of these genres, either in a library or online. What are the similarities/differences with *Never Let Me Go*?

Take a short extract from a different novel and compare it with a similar length extract from *Never Let Me Go* that explores similar themes or ideas. This task would help in your preparation for the part a) question in the exam.

Finding a voice

KI: You see, in the past, my narrators were unreliable, not because they were lunatics, but because they were ordinarily self-deceiving. When they looked back over their failed lives, they found it hard to see things in an entirely straight way. Self-deception of that sort is common to most of us...



Themes and contextual factors

Q. What might an 'unreliable narrator' be? Find out about the literary tradition of unreliable narration. Do you think Kathy provides us with a 'reliable' account of events?

KI: She's [Kathy] someone narrating in contemporary England, so I had to have her talk appropriately... The challenge is...getting a voice that properly presents that narrator's character. It's finding a voice that allows a reader to respond to a character not just through what he or she does in the story, but also through how he/she speaks and thinks.

The point the author makes here is relevant to AO2 in your exam: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.

Q. In pairs make a list of ten quotations from Kathy that seem to you to be important. For each one, see if you can examine the ways Kathy describes things and what this reveals about what she truly thinks. For much of the novel Kathy puts a brave face on things but are there moments when her language, almost in spite of herself, reveals her real feelings?

Q. Do you think Kazuo Ishiguro has succeeded in making Kathy's voice 'appropriate' for someone living in contemporary England?

KI: I like it that a scene pulled from the narrator's memory is blurred at the edges, layered with all sorts of emotions, and open

to manipulation. You're not just telling the reader: "this-and-this happened." You're also raising questions like: why has she remembered this event just at this point? How does she feel about it? And when she says she can't remember very precisely what happened, but she'll tell us anyway, well, how much do we trust her? And so on. I love all these subtle things you can do when you tell a story through someone's memories.

Q. What do you think is significant in what Kathy remembers from Hailsham and what she has forgotten (or chooses not to tell us)? Were you surprised at some of the things she does tell us, and some of the things she doesn't?

KI: Kathy's memories are...principally a source of consolation. As her time runs out, as her world empties one by one of the things she holds dear, what she clings to are her memories of them.

Kathy is very nostalgic about her childhood. Nostalgia is when we look back fondly at our past lives, particularly to a time when life seemed happy and easy. The word derives from the ancient Greek words *nostos* (meaning homecoming) and *algos* (meaning an ache or pain). Many people are nostalgic about the past. Do you know people yourself who often talk fondly of the 'good old days'? Perhaps you do it yourself! Why do you think we tend to be nostalgic? And why do you think this is such a strong characteristic of Kathy?



Themes and contextual factors

KI: When I write about young people, I do much the same as when I write about elderly people, or any other character who's very different from me in culture and experience. I try my best to think and feel as they would, then see where that takes me. I don't find that children present any special demands for me as a novelist. They're just characters, like everyone else.

Q. How well do you think the author captures what it is like to be a child in Part One of the novel? Find some examples from the text featuring Kathy, Ruth and/or Tommy where you think Kazuo Ishiguro has managed to 'think and feel as they would'.

Towards a World Unknown

KI: The school setting, I must add, is appealing because in a way it's a clear physical manifestation of the way all children are separated off from the adult world, and are drip-fed little pieces of information about the world that awaits them, often with generous doses of deception, kindly meant or otherwise. In other words, it serves as a very good metaphor for childhood in general.

In Never Let Me Go the children are, according to Miss Lucy 'told, and not told' about what awaits them in adult life. In this regard the guardians are much like any other adults who think it is right to withhold certain information from children.

Q. Do you think adults should be more honest with children about the realities of life? Does not telling them certain things protect children – or make it more difficult for them to cope with these realities in adult life?



Assessment preparation

Assessment Objectives:	
AO1	Read, understand and respond to texts. Students should be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response• use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.
AO2	Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.
AO3	Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.
AO4	Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

Required skills

Learners will develop **comprehension skills** and learn to express their ideas about aspects of plot, characterisation, events and settings and to distinguish between literal and implied meanings. They will also develop **critical reading skills** and engage personally with texts and be confident in sustaining and supporting an individual response to their studied text in comparison with a thematically linked, same genre unseen text.

Learners will be exploring, responding to and interpreting the following areas in their chosen text:

- the significance of key themes, ideas and issues
- characters and their relationships
- choices of language, form and structure made by the author
- how social, cultural and contextual factors are significant in terms of understanding the text.

Approaching the text

Two key passages from the novel: the opening and the ending.

The opening of the novel

Re-read the opening section of the novel in which Kathy introduces herself.

NLMG is told as a **first person narrative** told from Kathy's point of view. Looking back on her thirty-one years, Kathy tells us about the key moments in her life. All the information we discover about the world in which Kathy lives is represented in Kathy's language and consists of what Kathy has seen, has remembered and thinks worthy of telling us. As well as being a key participant in the events being described Kathy is also the controller of what story is told. Kathy, as first-person narrator, not only determines how the story is told but also what the story is.

A first-person narrative is where a story is narrated by one character at a time, speaking for and about themselves. First-person narrators can be **authoritative and reliable** or **deceptive and unreliable**. Such a narrator will refer to themselves using the first-person singular form "I", and/or the first-person plural form "we". The reader will encounter the thoughts, opinions and feelings only of the narrator, and no other



Assessment preparation

characters. In some stories, first-person narrators may refer to information they have heard from the other characters, in order to try to deliver a larger point of view.

A third person narrative is where a story is narrated using third-person pronouns such as 'he' or 'she'. Third-person narrators can be **limited** in perspective (they only know so much about the events being described and the motivations of the characters) or **omniscient** (or god-like) in their understanding of all the thoughts and feelings of all the characters in the story. When writing in third person omniscient form, the author will move from character to character, allowing the events to be interpreted by several different voices.

Related activities

Work in pairs or small groups to jot down some ideas for the following:

Why do you think a writer might choose to tell a story from a first-person point of view?

We have all had the experience of someone telling us a long story about themselves in which they talk in detail about people and situations. These people just assume we know what and who they are talking about. Jot down words and phrases from the opening of the novel where Kathy assumes, wrongly, that we are familiar with her world.

In the opening what kind of person does Kathy come across as being? Does her story interest you? Does it seem typical of the way that people you know tell stories? What impression do you have of what Kathy does tell us here – and what she doesn't?

What presumptions does Kathy make about us – as listeners to her story?

When you have thought about these questions, read what the author Rachel Cusk had to say about the opening of the novel in an article in The Guardian in 2011. The article coincided with the release of the film version of *Never Let Me Go* directed by Mark Romanek and starring Kiera Knightley, Carey Mulligan and Andrew Garfield.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/29/never-let-me-go-kazuo-ishiguro>

The end of the novel

Re-read the final passage of the novel, where Kathy looks out on the empty fields. The section begins 'I found I was standing before acres of ploughed earth...'

Related activity

In what ways do you think Kathy has changed by the end of the novel?



Assessment preparation

By this point in the novel, Kathy has lost all she previously held dear. She weeps but, still, is not 'sobbing or out of control'. Kathy has a daydream here that on two pieces of barbed wire, instead of the rubbish and old plastic bags she sees, are washed up all the things she has lost since childhood.

Draw or find an image on the internet of two lines of barbed wire. Draw onto the wire some of the things you think Kathy has 'lost' since her childhood. These could be things literally lost or they could be images of things that represent more abstract losses she has suffered.

Responding to examination questions

In the new OCR GCSE English Literature (9-1)J352 specification there will be a two-part question on the modern text (prose or drama):

- a) a comparison of an extract from the set text with an unseen modern, same-genre extract
- b) a related question on the set text as a whole.

The new comparison requirement in part a) allows candidates to explore a key theme or idea in their studied text by comparing it with a thematically linked unseen text. The unseen text chosen for this section of the exam will always have a direct link with the extract from the relevant studied text and is intended to be accessible and engaging

for candidates. This part of the task aims for candidates to be creative and exploratory in relation to the two extracts (one from the set text, one unseen). For this part of the task candidates will not need to bring to bear their whole-text knowledge of their studied text, this will be assessed in part b), but focus more on the treatment of the particular theme or idea in the two printed extracts.



Useful links/resources

	Resources
BookBrowse interview with Kazuo Ishiguro https://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/477/kazuo-ishiguro	
2005 Review in The Guardian http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/feb/26/bookerprize2005.bookerprize	
2011 The Guardian http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jan/29/never-let-me-go-kazuo-ishiguro	
YouTube video of Ishiguro talking about the novel https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SmuYqKeTTs	
Interview with the author from The Paris Review http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5829/the-art-of-fiction-no-196-kazuo-ishiguro	
Carey Mulligan talks about her role as Kathy in the film version of Never let Me Go https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQu-l_VXh5I	
Film clip where Kathy, Ruth and Tommy experience the 'outside world' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IARtutiRTKY	





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