

1. How do you react to our narrator Kathy? How does she handle her situation, and do you think she has come to terms with it?
- ✓ 2. Why does Ishiguro reveal the plot and circumstances of his story gradually? How does this style of writing heighten the atmosphere of the novel?
3. How do the friendships that the Hailsham pupils formed at school affect them throughout their lives? What role does friendship play in *Never Let Me Go*?
4. What does Hailsham represent to Kathy? Why does she want to seek out her childhood friends years after she has left school?
5. How does the fact that Kathy and all the other donors have never had parents affect their lives and childhood? What importance do parents have in our lives? To what extent can friendships replace this family set-up?
- ✓ 6. How does Kathy's relationship with Tommy develop as the novel progresses? What role does this relationship play in the novel?
- ✓ 7. How would you describe Ruth and Kathy's relationship? Do you think their friendship is representative of human friendships in our world? Why/why not? What do you think this says about human friendships?
8. How do Kathy, Tommy and Ruth react differently as they gradually discover their fate in life? How do these reactions reveal their different personalities and different mechanisms for coping?
9. How would you describe the interaction between the donors and the outside world? How does the outside world view the donors? What is their view of the outside world? To what extent are they bitter and angry about what is to happen to them?
10. What do you think of the parallel world that Ishiguro has created, a world set in the late 1990s but distinctly different from our actual world? What point do you think the author is making by creating this sinister world?
11. How does reading about this parallel world make you feel? Why is that?
12. How does taking a look at this chilling parallel world make you react to our own human society? Do you think our world could ever become like this parallel universe? How likely do you think it is that cloning will become commonplace in our society? What do you believe are the ethical implications of this?
13. 'There are things I am more interested in than the clone thing. How are they trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? To what extent can they transcend their fate? As time starts to run out, what are the things that really matter? Most of the things that concern them concern us all, but with them it is concentrated into this relatively short period of time. These are things that really interest me and, having come to the realization that I probably have limited opportunities to explore these things, that's what I want to concentrate on. I can see the appeal of travel books and journalism and all the rest of it and I hope there will be time to do them all one day. But I just don't think that day is now.' (Kazuo Ishiguro in an interview with Nicholas Wroe in *The Guardian*, 19 February 2005).

How far do you agree with the author's perception of his novel? To what extent do you think that the world Ishiguro creates reflects the concerns of our human world? How would you answer the questions Ishiguro poses?

15. What do you think *Never Let Me Go* is saying about the value of human life? How do you react to the Bible's view that we are all created in the image of God and therefore we are worth more than we can imagine?
16. How is the theme of love carried through the novel? Why does the hope of a couple being given a reprieve if they can prove their genuine love for each other fascinate the donors so much? Why is this hope so important to them? Why do you think hope is important in our own lives? How do you react to the biblical teaching that the love we should hope in, because it alone is entirely trustworthy, is the love God has for every human?

Kathy is 31 and has spent the last eleven years driving around England in her capacity as a carer. In eight months' time she will need a carer herself when she begins the horrific undertaking for which she was created: she will donate her own vital organs until she is overtaken by death, or, in the novel's words, she 'completes'.

As she drives through rural England to and from hospital visits, Kathy keeps thinking she glimpses her old school, Hailsham. She never does. She counts herself lucky that she spent her childhood sheltered from the terrible realities of the parallel world in which clones like her are condemned to exist. At Hailsham she was able to appreciate the beautiful surrounding countryside and benefit from a well-rounded education. Looking back, she classes her school-days as a 'golden time.' However, despite the pretence of normality that the school fostered, and the efforts of the guardians to protect the children from the horrifying truths behind their existence, Kathy recalls instances when the peace they enjoyed was impinged upon and dark shadows were thrown across the school. For instance, there was the rumour that, in the surrounding woods, a pupil was murdered and his hands and feet chopped off. As a dare, the students would sometimes make one another stare out of their dormitory windows towards the woods in the middle of the night. There was also the time when, on one of her occasional visits, the elusive 'Madame' was reduced to tears when she caught Kathy dancing passionately by herself to the song 'Never Let Me Go'.

The revelation that the students have been set apart for organ donations comes as they huddle together in the sports pavilion in the midst of a storm. Their guardian, Miss Lucy finds it hard to listen to some students speak of becoming actors. She decides that the façade of normality can go on no longer if they are to have 'decent lives'. She tells them:

Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. . . You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided.

Miss Lucy's words come as a perverse inversion of the words of Jeremiah 29:11: 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' Despite investigating the possibility of deferring their donations, Kathy and Tommy both know that they cannot ultimately escape from the purposes for which they were created – purposes which *will* ultimately harm them *and* take away their future.

Knowing their destiny, however, does not prevent Kathy, Tommy and Ruth from hoping for better futures for themselves. In the vocabulary of the novel, 'possibles' are those people the clones are created from. As a teenager, Kathy develops an obsession with searching for her 'possibles' in the pages of magazines. She claims that

One big idea behind finding your model was that when you did, you'd glimpse your future . . . we all of us, to varying degrees, believed that when you saw the person you were copied from, you'd get some insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you'd see something of what your life held in store.

Another inversion of biblical motifs emerges from these thoughts. Genesis teaches that we are all, male and female, made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). For the clones, this teaching has been one step removed: they are made in the image of man. However, their constant searching for self-awareness reveals their fundamentally human need to find models on which to base their lives. A need, many believe, that has been inbuilt in each one of us by God.

We are given little insight into the lives of those who are responsible for the cloning, and it is not revealed why they think that they are eligible to play at being gods. However, we are told that many doubt that the clones, or 'students,' have souls. Considering that the novel is set in the 1990s, in a world which is increasingly materialistic, a division between 'normal' individuals and clones on the basis of souls is ironic. Why is it, in a world that is portrayed as ever more atheistic, that those individuals, who have not been cloned, think that they have souls? And what, if not a spiritual entity distinct from body and mind, is a soul? It is not until Kathy and Tommy's final meeting with Miss Emily that we learn why the Hailsham teachers placed so much emphasis on art and creativity. As children, Kathy and Tommy had been told that their art would reveal what they were like inside. Miss Emily claims that she took away the best pieces they produced in order to prove that they did, in fact, have souls.

'We're *all* afraid of you,' Miss Emily moves on to declare to Kathy and Tommy. Like Madame, she shudders at the very thought of the clones, and dreads thinking about how they were brought into the world and why. 'The first time you glimpse yourself through the eyes of person like that'. Kathy claims, 'it's a cold moment. It's like walking past a mirror you've walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange.' Indeed, the novel focuses more on the self-awareness of the central characters than the scientific rationale behind the cloning process. More is revealed about the loyalty they feel for one another than how they manage to stay alive after their first, second or even third donation. More is said about how they copy gestures and phrases from TV programmes than how and where they are created. What we are given is an insight into how they manage on a day-to-day level and learn by experience what it means to live an 'artificial' life.

To conclude, the novel raises numerous pertinent existential questions. As well as bringing to the fore the ethical debate about the morality of cloning, it also questions what it means to live as a human and, through its central protagonists, teaches valuable lessons about the nature of friendship and loyalty.

- ✓ 1. Kathy addresses us directly, with statements like "I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we used to have some form of medical every week" [p. 13], and she thinks that we too might envy her having been at Hailsham [p. 4]. What does Kathy assume about anyone she might be addressing, and why?
- ✓ 2. She learns from a donor who'd grown up at an awful place in Dorset that she and her friends at Hailsham had been really "lucky" [p. 6]. How does the irony of this designation grow as the novel goes on?
3. Discuss the obsession with the past of these children who have no future. If the future is non-existent, why does the past matter?
4. What does Hailsham represent for Kathy, and why does she say at the end that Hailsham is "something no one can take away" [p. 287]?
5. Kathy's narration is the key to the novel's disquieting effect. First person narration establishes a kind of intimacy between narrator and reader. What is it like having direct access to Kathy's mind and feelings? How would the novel be different if narrated from Tommy's point of view, or Ruth's, or Miss Emily's?
- ✓ 6. What are some of Ruth's most striking character traits? How might her social behavior, at Hailsham and later at the Cottages, be explained?
- ✓ 7. One of the most notable aspects of life at Hailsham is the power of the group. Students watch each other carefully and try on different poses, attitudes, and ways of speaking. Is this behavior typical of most adolescents, or is there something different about the way the students at Hailsham seek to conform?
- ✓ 8. Why does Tommy draw animals? Why does he continue to work on them even after he learns that there will be no deferral?
9. After their visit to Miss Emily and Madame, Kathy tells Tommy that his fits of rage might be explained by the fact that "at some level you always knew" [p. 275]. Does this imply that Kathy didn't? Does it imply that Tommy is more perceptive than Kathy?

✓ 10. What kind of moral and emotional responses does the novel provoke? If you extend the scope of the book's critique, what are its implications for our own society?

✓ 11. The teacher Lucy Wainright wanted to make the children more aware of the future that awaited them. Miss Emily believed that in hiding the truth. "We were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by sheltering you. . . . Sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. . . . But . . . we gave you your childhoods" [p. 268]. In the context of the story as a whole, is this a valid argument?

12. Reread the novel's final paragraph, in which Kathy describes a flat, windswept field with a barbed wire fence "where all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled." She imagines Tommy appearing here in "the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up" [p. 287]. What does the final sentence indicate about Kathy's state of mind as she faces her losses and her own death—stoicism, denial, courage, resolution?

13. Do you think the novel actually makes any claims about the morality of cloning?

14. Why do we not find out they are clones until mid-text?

15. What role does friendship play in the novel? \*replacing family?

✓ 16. How do Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth react differently as they learn their true fate? How does this display the different mechanisms for coping?

17. Why do you think the author set the novel in the future but in the 1990s which is in the past?

18. How are they trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? To what extent can they transcend their fate? As time starts to run out, what are the things that really matter?

How far do you agree with the author's perception of his novel? To what extent do you think that the world Ishiguro creates reflects the concerns of our human world?

- ✓ 19. What do you think *Never Let Me Go* is saying about the value of human life?

20. Discuss how the characters actually go through all the normal stages of human life – childhood, adolescence, and old age

## Narrative Style

First-person narrative reflects the question of the existence of their souls – the existence of the story itself is eloquent proof of the existence of Kathy's soul (imagination, creative, complex reasoning, passion, emotional attachment, capacity for love, mental initiative, curiosity, inner conflict, manipulative behaviour, goals and a sense of future, capacity for morality and self-discipline, desire for redemption, awareness of others' perception of oneself, etc).

Hailsham as the primary setting demonstrates the normality of their emotional lives and the potential within them to be just like any other children – more poignant and revealing than a glimpse at inhumane conditions would be. This sense of normality with which Kathy presents it all, instead of confronting us up front with what to us are shocking truths about her life, emphasizes the horror of what has become completely accepted in her society – How could something so cruel and inhumane be normal?

Kathy as a narrator constantly oscillates between downplaying and exalting the accuracy of her account, admitting that some of her recollections are very vague yet insisting that others are indisputably correct.

"This was all a long time ago so I might have some of it wrong" (13); "I can see the thing now like it's here in front of me" (56). This creates epistemological uncertainty and constructs a particular relationship with the reader, built on tension between sympathy and distrust.

1. Find other examples of Kathy's defensive tone (when explaining the validity of her story) and examples of the extreme detail that shows confidence in memories.
2. What is the effect of this type of narration? Is Kathy an unknowing, unreliable, insecure, or unquestioning narrator?

Kathy often speaks to the narratee as if he/she too had been through an experience like hers. She assumes he/she grew up just like she did. This has a paradoxical effect of involvement and detachment on the reader. This effect is enhanced by the general lack of information about the context, which is gradually revealed.

"I've heard it said enough, so I'm sure you've heard it plenty more" (4).

"I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham" (13/67/96)

"I'm sure somewhere in your childhood, you too had an experience like ours that day; similar if not in the actual details, then inside, in the feelings" (36).

"I don't know if you had 'collections' where you were" (38).

3. What is the effect of this intimacy with the narrator? Do you feel more connected to Kathy or more separate from her?

Miss Lucy's monologue seems to be there more for the benefit of the reader than that of the characters, who are not surprised by her speech. The reader is also "told and not told", given hints whose significance can only be understood retrospectively. We thus find ourselves in the same situation as the narrator, looking back at her life through the filter of incomplete and biased information, unable to fully trust anything, yet eager to discover the untold truths that are gradually offered to us.

4. Is this style of narration effective? How does it add to the disquieting effect of the novel?

"Is it human nature to rebel? Can you go passively to your death without even thinking of leaving, and still be considered human? Another commenter on the Amazon forum, who identifies himself as an American expatriate living in the UK, writes that "asking why the clones don't run away is a very American question. Our [American] cultural myths celebrate those who escape their beginnings or who act above and beyond what society determines for them. But there is no British equivalent to Horatio Alger that I can think of" (C. Years). I can't corroborate what he says about the British psyche, but it's certainly true that rebelliousness is, in large part, culturally learned.

## Willful Ignorance (Told and Not Told)

The fear of death and their willful ignorance in not wanting to confront the facts of their lives – these are the reasons for their failure to fight harder and are deeply rooted in human nature.

"Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, and then before you're old, before you'd even middle-aged, you'll donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. You're not like the actors you watch on your videos, you're not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided...If you're to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you" (81).

"Tommy thought it possible the guardians had, throughout all our years at Hailsham, timed very carefully and deliberately everything they told us, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course we'd take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us every having examined it properly" (82).

"So I'd say Miss Lucy had it right when she said, a couple of years later, that we'd been 'told and not told'. And what's more, now I think about it, I'd say what Miss Lucy said to us that afternoon led to a real shift in our attitudes. It was after that day, jokes about donations faded away, and we started to think properly about things. If anything, the donations went back to being a subject to be avoided" (88).

The reader is offered the last untold truth about Hailsham and its students through Miss Emily. The school was created as part of a broader effort to raise public awareness and establish more humane conditions for the farming of clones. The works they produced were used not to look into their souls, as they naively believed, but, as the school principal puts it, "to prove that you had souls at all" (260). The experiment failed as it raised ethical questions about cloning and organ harvesting that the general public was not willing to face.

"Suddenly there were all these new possibilities laid before us, all these ways to cure so many previously incurable conditions. This was what the world noticed the most, wanted the most. And for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most they grew in a kind of vacuum. Yes, there were arguments. But by the time people became concerned about...about students, by the time they came to consider just how you were reared, whether you should have been brought to existence at all, well by then it was too late. There was no way to reverse the process. How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable, how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days?" (263).

1. They are continually told they have a purpose, yet none of the students actually know what that purpose is. When Miss Lucy tells them the reality of their lives she paints a hopeless picture, making them face the fact that they have absolutely no say in what will happen to them. How much free will do any of us have if we are all going to die?
2. After their visit to Miss Emily and Madame, Kathy tells Tommy that his fits of rage might be explained by the fact that "at some level you always knew" [p. 275]. Does this imply that Kathy didn't? Does it imply that Tommy is more perceptive than Kathy?
3. What does this reflect about our society and our willingness or unwillingness to acknowledge harsh truths? Are we any different than the clones?

✓ **Historical/Social/Ethical Parallels:** *think of same current*

Slavery – also justified with the argument that those enslaved were less than human.

Exploitation of the underclass – those who benefit are reluctant or unwilling to let go of the benefits so they avoid the fact of the suffering of the working class and poor throughout the world

Animal Research/Animal Agriculture – also justified by some with the argument that animals do not have souls

Elitism and Segregation – the notion that different standards are acceptable for different groups of people

The Cost of Comfort – most things that extend our lives have some kind of ethical, environmental, or social cost



'There are things I am more interested in than the clone thing. How are they trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? To what extent can they transcend their fate? As time starts to run out, what are the things that really matter? Most of the things that concern them concern us all, but with them it is concentrated into this relatively short period of time. These are things that really interest me and, having come to the realization that I probably have limited opportunities to explore these things, that's what I want to concentrate on. I can see the appeal of travel books and journalism and all the rest of it and I hope there will be time to do them all one day. But I just don't think that day is now.' (Kazuo Ishiguro in an interview with Nicholas Wroe in *The Guardian*, 19 February 2005).

How far do you agree with the author's perception of his novel? To what extent do you think that the world Ishiguro creates reflects the concerns of our human world? How would you answer the questions Ishiguro poses?

### The Unlived Life

The text offers a parallel reality with some science-fiction features that further stresses the counterfactual nature of the story. This allows Ishiguro to question the nature of memory both from an epistemological perspective, through the sophisticated use of an unreliable narrator that ultimately questions the notions of personal and historical memory, and from an ontological one, challenging the very notion of individual identity.

The text maintains a sustained focus on retrospection and regret. Narrative focuses on what could have been, a "counterfactual course of events". Kathy obsesses and wonders if things could have been avoided. These, however, seem to revolve around minor incidents. By looking back at their life through the lens of alternative choices, the characters ultimately gain a greater degree of self-awareness. The unlived lives invite a broader reflection on the connection between memory and agency (or lack thereof).

The novel proposes memory as consolation; going over memories of a happy past becomes an important source of solace in the face of disempowerment.

"What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood. He knew he was close to completing and so that's what he was doing: getting me to describe things to him, so they'd really sink in, so that maybe during those sleepless nights, with the drugs and the pain and the exhaustion, the line would blur between what were my memories and what were his" (5-6).

"Yes, in many ways we fooled you. I suppose you could even call it that. But we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods. Lucy was well-meaning enough. But if she'd had her way, your happiness at Hailsham would have been shattered. Look at you both now! I'm so proud to see you both. You build your lives on what we gave you. You wouldn't be who you are today if we'd not protected you" (268).

"Once I'm able to have a quieter life, in whichever centre they send me to, I'll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that'll be something no one can take away" (287).

1. Discuss the obsession with the past of these children who have no future. If the future is non-existent, why does the past matter?
2. How might Kathy's description of the value of memories reflect someone in their old age looking back on life? Discuss the significance of this as Kathy nears donations.
3. Is it meaningful that the clones were given a childhood? How does this help them?
4. Reread the novel's final paragraph, in which Kathy describes a flat, windswept field with a barbed wire fence "where all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled." She imagines Tommy appearing here in "the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up" [p. 287]. What does the final sentence indicate about Kathy's state of mind as she faces her losses and her own death—stoicism, denial, courage, resolution?
5. How do the final two sentences of the text summarize the clones' entire 'way of being' in the text?

## "Possibles" and Dream Futures

The clones take refuge in daydreams and preoccupation with other things and thus avoid having to confront the reality of their situation. This reflects a universal human response to death – all of us face death and might die at any time, and we react to that central fact of our existence in much the same way they do.

"Foil characters" are secondary figures that find themselves in a situation similar to that of the protagonist but make different, either braver or more foolish, choices. These characters are an object of projection. In NLMG these are the "possibles". The students project onto their possibles all sorts of fantasies about their future careers as postmen, farmers, office workers and try to look for them to catch a glimpse of their own "unlived lives".

"One big idea behind finding your possible model was that when you did, you'd glimpse your future. Now I don't mean anyone really thought that if your model turned out to be, say, a guy working at a railway station, that's what you'd end up doing too. We all realised it wasn't that simple. Nevertheless, we all of us, to varying degrees, believed that when you saw the person you were copied from, you'd get *some* insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you'd see something of what your life held in store" (140).

Kathy never had a choice. The awareness she gains through self-reflection is a chilling one: her destiny was from the beginning determined by forces beyond her control, and her story was silenced by those same forces. When it becomes evident that none of those alternative paths was ever available to her, that she never had any agency in determining her personal trajectory, the narrator finds solace in memories of her actual life, rather than in speculations on the unlived one.

1. How could Kathy's description of "looking but not looking" for Hailsham (287) reflect her subconscious desires? Is Kathy really searching for a 'home'?
2. How are they trying to find their place in the world and make sense of their lives? To what extent can they transcend their fate? As time starts to run out, what are the things that really matter?

## Conformity and Identity

Passivity in the face of authority and the group – they are reluctant to go against the course that has been set out for them; they have been indoctrinated to believe that it is "right" for them. Conformity – the system works because the clones accept their fate. They conform to society by fulfilling their "purpose" – don't we as well?

"I was like you, Tommy. I was pretty much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?" (227).

1. One of the most notable aspects of life at Hailsham is the power of the group. Students watch each other carefully and try on different poses, attitudes, and ways of speaking. Is this behavior typical of most adolescents, or is there something different about the way the students at Hailsham seek to conform?

"So you're waiting, even if you don't quite know it, waiting for a moment when you realize that you really are different to them; that there are people out there, like Madame, who don't hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you – of how you were brought into this world and why – who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. This first time you glimpse yourself through the eyes of a person like that, it's a cold moment. It's like walking past a mirror you've walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange" (36).

Identity is a central topic as the clones struggle with understanding their place in society. Kathy regularly questions and fears her own identity.

2. Find examples of the clones searching for identity. Is this futile or is it what brings meaning to their lives?

So by asking this question—"Why doesn't anyone consider leaving?"—we're implying that one of our particular cultural values can define what it is to be human. This is a dangerous assumption to make. It's this logic that allows us to dehumanize people who aren't part of our culture. Ishiguro is challenging us here: when confronted with the disturbing prospect of people going unquestioningly to their deaths, will we retreat to our lazy assumptions about humanness in order to separate them and us? Will we take the bait of dehumanization?"

5. We read a review that stated this text is inherently British. Is this part of our difficulty in understanding the clones? A cultural divide?
6. Find examples of Kathy's rebellious thoughts that do not turn into actions. Is this narrative style effective if Ishiguro is challenging us with these concepts?