

NEVER LET ME FORGET:
CRUEL EMPATHY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *NEVER LET ME GO*

by

Jackson Mattocks

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
August 2024

© Copyright by Jackson Mattocks, 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: ATTENTION, EMPATHY, AND CRUEL EMPATHY	5
CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION	27
WORKS CITED	35

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The most widely written about theme in Kazuo Ishiguro's novels is that of memory, but a relatively overlooked, albeit crucial element of many of them, is their specific focus on empathy, and on how, when instrumentalized to serve a system, it can serve to afflict rather than help people. The novel which deals perhaps most intimately with empathy's problematic potential is *Never Let Me Go*, a story told by an adult narrator who is actively remembering her childhood in order to unpack and understand events which later prove to be transformative. *Never Let Me Go* is told from the perspective of Kathy H., a clone "carer," whose upbringing in an insular, secluded, and clone-populated boarding school in rural England called "Hailsham," leaves her with many unresolved and puzzling memories as an adult. This thesis explores why the narrator in *Never Let Me Go* tends to imagine the experiences of others, without deeply interrogating her own, and how this focus on the interpersonal blinds her to the pernicious system that is actively destroying her in both a physical and psychological sense.

The opening half of the book focuses on Kathy's youth at Hailsham. This setting serves as both a source of emotional conflict and nostalgia for Kathy, as she realizes the tight-lipped policies of the Hailsham teachers, known as "guardians," have served to produce much of the confusion and false optimism about her future that she must address later in her life. These clone students are raised with the sole purpose of slowly and incrementally having their vital organs harvested, a process that begins in their mid-twenties, and continues until they are dead. As Miss Lucy, one of the more transparent and forthcoming guardians at Hailsham, eventually tells Kathy and her classmates in a moment of exasperation, "You've been told and not told" (Ishiguro 81), meaning the students have been slowly drip fed information, so that by the time they understand

the macabre future they all share, they are not surprised by it and do not even view it as objectionable.

Contemporary readers might expect a contemporary novel about clones living in an oppressive and unjust society to culminate in an escape, some kind of revolution, or a grand confrontation with the powers that be. *Never Let Me Go* subverts these expectations by instead focusing on the interpersonal relationships of an “ordinary” clone. Kathy does not incite a rebellion, nor even contemplate it. Instead, while Kathy narrates her story to one of her donor patients, she is actively working as a “carer” for the government that will soon cannibalize her body, break her down for parts, and install those parts into regular humans. Her first-person narrative only looks peripherally at the systemic injustices she is born into, and instead focuses primarily on two relationships: her friendship and eventual romance with Tommy, the boy whom she has been secretly in love with since childhood; and her contentious relationship with Ruth, with whom she seems to be in perpetual conflict, ranging from a dispute over a childhood pencil case to Ruth’s sudden romantic interest in Tommy. Kathy’s interpersonal relationships are all deeply affected by the power structures that constrain and influence her, but the focus of her story is on the relationships themselves, not the power structures.

Ishiguro has often been asked why the clones in *Never* do not escape, or, in other words, why don’t they address the fact that their political status is one of horrible inequality, injustice, and despair. Why don’t they do something about it? In an interview, Ishiguro answers this question by saying, “I was never interested in looking at that story of ‘brave slaves who rebelled’ ... I’m fascinated by the extent to which people don’t run away. I think if you look around us, that is the remarkable fact: how much we accept what fate has given us” (“Ishiguro Discusses His Intention Behind *Never*” 2:20-2:53). The clones in *Never* do not attempt, nor even

contemplate, any kind of escape from or rebellion against their despotic overlords, and like many peoples, nations, and cultures around the world, they are inculcated into a society that instills in them a carefully calculated and manipulated sense of belonging and purpose. The clones in *Never* accept their cultural upbringing at face value, and while to the reader their sense of belonging may seem tenuous and facile, and their purpose actually purposeless, these seem hardly less facile than that of the American dream, which inspires false hope in its massively depressed and overanxious populace. Like in a neoliberal capitalist society, Hailsham encourages its students to find meaning in practices which will later become instrumentalized to serve the state: childhood artmaking becomes the sole currency of their economy, and their art is used politically rather than for the students' own self-satisfaction or meaning making; the love of another becomes something the clones seek "to prove" in order to instrumentalize it for the much-rumoured "deferrals;" and caring for people becomes a tool used to prolong the lives of clones so that they might make more suitable and productive donors.

My research in this thesis is conducted under a framework of theories of affect and empathy. I am working with Suzanne Keen's definition of empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [that] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (4). To complement this understanding of empathy, I am also utilizing Simone Weil's writing on suffering and attention, two themes which seem to share an intrinsic link to empathy's "vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect." Working with Weil, Keen, and other theorists, I then examine Kathy's relationship to her empathic inclinations, and how they may actually do her more harm than good. These theorists provide useful ideas and terminology for my discussion of empathy, attention, and optimism in *Never*.

Empathy is popularly understood as a more or less wholly good quality. Within the academic humanities empathy is often lauded as being conducive to some of the most positive and beneficent human traits like kindness, compassion, understanding, altruism, and generosity.¹ While this understanding may prove true in some cases, it is far from a holistic picture. Suzanne Keen's book *Empathy and the Novel* problematizes this understanding of empathy as a force of pure good, and instead argues that its influence can be far more cruel. Using Keen's thinking as well as Lauren Berlant's essay "Cruel Optimism" I argue that Kathy develops a cruel attachment to empathy, and that while Kathy's empathy for her patients likely makes them feel seen, on a macro level it is instrumentalized and manipulated to serve the regime which actively seeks to destroy her and everyone she loves. I argue that while empathy does in many cases directly lead to Kathy acting compassionately, her propensity to empathize and identify with the experiences of others serves to strengthen her myopic worldview and precludes her from addressing the pernicious system within which her life is instrumentalized.

In my conclusion I turn to the writings of Ann Cvetkovich and David Foster Wallace, whose consideration of compassion in the face of "ordinary" oppression bear very strongly on the life of Kathy. Cvetkovich's call for "more space for creative thought" for the sake of creativity itself, rather than an instrumentalized purpose, is one I also explore. Art is integral to Kathy's life, as can be seen in the imaginative narrative of which the novel consists. Her story begs the question: what might Kathy have done in a world in which her capacity to imagine and empathize with others was not made an instrument to the system that controls her?

¹ See Shameem Black's chapter "Sacrificing the Self" in *Fiction Across Borders*; Martha Nussbaum in many of her works including *Upheavals of Thought*, *Political Emotions*, and *Cultivating Humanity*; and Roman Krznaric in *Empathy: Why it Matters*.

CHAPTER 2: ATTENTION, EMPATHY, AND CRUEL EMPATHY

In her influential essays, the French-Jewish philosopher Simone Weil describes attention to a person, place, or object as a form of love. More specifically, Weil sees attention as prayer, and prayer as an expression of love. A poignant metaphor for attention that she uses in her book *Waiting for God* emerges from what she anachronistically calls “an Eskimo story”:

An Eskimo story explains the origin of light as follows: ‘In the eternal darkness, the crow, unable to find any food, longed for light, and the earth was illumined.’ If there is a real desire, if the thing desired is really light, the desire for light produces it. There is a real desire when there is an effort of attention. It is really light that is desired if all other incentives are absent. (*Waiting for God* 33)

The idea that the light is only really desired “if all other incentives are absent” is an important one. It suggests that for attention to truly and completely be paid to another, it cannot arise from an ulterior motive, such as the desire to be seen as a good listener, or a nice person, or the wish to dissemble attentiveness in order to acquire something. Weil says that “attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object” (*Waiting for God* 35). In other words, attention, in the way Weil understands it, is an open state of reception, where the attending person’s only desire is to listen, receive, and “be penetrated by the object.” And for Weil, attending to someone or something in this way is how one expresses love. On an interpersonal level, she says that love can be shown through merely asking a person about themselves and truly listening to their response. She writes,

The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: ‘What are you going through?’ It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labelled ‘unfortunate,’ but as a man,

exactly like we are, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. (*Waiting for God* 36)

It seems that attention and empathy have an inextricable link given that, in order to bear witness to someone else's emotions, one must on some fundamental level be willing and able to understand what another is feeling. And in order to feel intimately linked to another person to the degree that one can feel what another is feeling, one must pay concerted attention to that person. This is exactly what Kathy does through the course of her narrative, which is almost entirely composed of interactions she's had with friends. More often than not, she attempts to review these memories by accounting for others' points of view.

In this way Kathy's highly attentive interactions with others seem in line with the Simulation Theory of empathy, which presupposes that empathy is brought about by a person first understanding what another is feeling, and then by simulating that feeling within themselves (Schmetkamp and Ferran 743-45). But in order for this to occur, a person has to "be able to understand on a very basic level that the other is in some specific mental states" (Schmetkamp and Ferran 745) before they can understand and potentially feel those mental states in themselves. Kathy seems particularly skilled at simulating the feelings of others, and this can be seen in the fact that she is able to relate to others' experiences and imagine their motivations. However, Kathy's aptitude for making empathic connections also seems to be a quality which in many ways stultifies her, because while she focuses on understanding the feelings of others, she is unable to grasp the larger implications of those feelings. It is her tendency to attend to and empathize with others, rather than act herself, which characterizes her life. Paradoxically, empathy can be seen as the root cause of many of the afflictions she suffers in her short life.

Weil says that suffering is universal, but affliction, on the other hand, is the “special mark” of suffering that an individual experiences (*Waiting for God* 36). Each person bears a special mark, and for Weil that is evident in their unique afflictions. She goes on to say that “Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention” (*Waiting for God* 36). Weil’s understanding of suffering and attention when applied to *Never* can help to illuminate why “normal” people are incapable of perceiving clones as anything other than the moniker of “clone.” All clones are treated as if they are the same: they all must give their lives and bodies to the state and none are eligible for exemptions or any kind of special treatment, with the possible exception of the Hailsham students. The reason for this appears to be that because “normal” people lead completely different lives than those of clones, they are incapable of imagining what clones might be afflicted by. Throughout the novel, there is little evidence that “normal” humans perceive clones as anything other than one homogenous group.² Only the clones themselves are willing and able to perceive the differences among themselves. Notably, Kathy, through her keen attentiveness, as shown in her detailed recollections, is able to illustrate the unique afflictions of all her clone friends: Tommy is conveyed as a temperamental child, prone to fits of rage, and reluctant to adhere to social norms and the status quo, traits which make him an outsider. Ruth, on the other hand, is obsessed with status, and her self-centered, fractious, and confrontational nature often drives her apart from those closest to her. As I will argue in more detail later in this thesis, Kathy is empathetic, attentive, and caring, but her fecklessness leads her to make very few decisions for herself and more often than not be led blindly by the choices of others. Her main affliction is that her

² Except perhaps Miss Lucy, who is far more forthcoming and compassionate towards the clones than any other guardian. She also shows discerning attention to students, such as Tommy, whom she tells it is ok to not be creatively talented.

imaginativeness often causes her to turn inward rather than outward, which effectively causes her to lead a very passive and compliant life.

Suzanne Keen's work interrogates the commonplace, almost axiomatic belief that empathy is inherently positive, and instead shows how it may actually produce outcomes that are inversely, rather than positively, related to prosocial forces. Drawing from psychological studies, literary sources, and also upon the reading responses of university students in her own classroom, Keen raises sundry critiques of the "benevolent empathy" axiom. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on three such critiques that are most relevant to Kathy: false empathy; failed empathy; and hyperempathy. The "false empathy" critique suggests simply that a person's perception of empathizing could be false or misplaced and that their perceived empathic experience could, in reality, not constitute an empathic one (152-57). Keen illustrates why this is a very dangerous possibility especially when it involves people of high social status believing they have understood someone of a marginalized status. She quotes the critical race theorist Richard Delgado in this passage and uses white people's false empathy for Black people as an example. Keen writes that "since false empathy is worse than none at all, worse even than indifference, Delgado eschews empathy altogether" (Keen 157). While this may seem like an extreme reaction, Delgado's view shows how empathy, or the idea of empathy, is seen by some as a dangerous enough force that it makes sense to avoid it altogether.

"Failed empathy" occurs when empathy does not "provoke[e] action that would lead to positive social or political change" (Keen 159). This idea is key to Kathy's life in *Never Let Me Go*, because it is evident that empathy does not drive Kathy towards any positive political change; whether it drives her towards positive social change is a more difficult question to answer, especially since the political and social are very much enmeshed in all aspects of

Kathy's life. In a personal context, Kathy's empathy drives her friend Ruth to make amends for past wrongs, which leads to Kathy and Tommy realizing and physically actualizing their love in his final months before Tommy dies. Kathy's empathic tendencies also evidently improve the final days of the donors she cares for. However, as I argue later in this thesis, it becomes evident in her final days caring for Tommy, before he "completes," that although Kathy is intimately attentive to the needs of the dying, she is unable to use this experience and understanding to assuage Tommy's suffering. she understands the immense suffering that all donors must go through before they die, she resigns herself to the supposed inevitability of this, instead of using this knowledge to interrogate the system that confines them.

Keen also raises the question of what hyperempathy can do to a person. She explores this hypothetical through Olivia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower*, which follows a hyperempathic protagonist who has "a condition that renders her helpless in shared sensation when she witnesses another's pain" (Keen 148). Keen argues that this character's hyperempathy does not make her a kinder and more compassionate person, but instead contends that

Butler consistently represents it [hyperempathy] as an obstacle to relationships, an alienating personal quality that is as likely to result in anger, hatred, distrust, resentment, and despair, as more positive emotions. The personal distress-suffering hyperempath takes to heart the violence done to others, and she learns suspicion as a first strategy for survival. (149)

Similar to Butler's protagonist, Kathy is often brought to a standstill by her propensity to imagine what others are feeling, and this proclivity often leaves her in states of extreme insecurity and vulnerability. This is apparent in arguably Kathy's most important memory—the one that supplies Ishiguro's novel with its title, *Never Let Me Go*—which involves Madame,

Hailsham's benefactor, walking in on Kathy while she was hugging a pillow and gently dancing to her favourite song "Never Let Me Go." When Kathy realizes that Madame is watching, she sees that she is also crying (71-73). Kathy prefaces this memory by saying "it really unsettled me" (71) and then later says that "I wasn't ashamed exactly ... what I wished more than anything was that the thing hadn't happened at all, and I thought that by not mentioning it I'd be doing myself and everyone else a favour" (73). This memory sticks with Kathy, and while she does not believe it caused her to feel ashamed "exactly," this is at the very least a peripheral feeling on her mind. Most of all this moment seems to make her feel vulnerable in a way that is also directly related to her position as a child who does not understand the complicated sociopolitical rules that govern her life and body. The fact that she does not want to mention it speaks to the shame and vulnerability she feels about it. Despite feeling unsettled by this moment, which may have proved to be significant in Kathy's future should she have investigated it further, Kathy tells no one about the encounter until years afterwards because she "thought that by not mentioning it I'd be doing myself and everyone else a favour" (Ishiguro 72). Kathy's desire to do other people "a favour" by remaining silent about a disturbing experience is just one of the ways in which her attention to the feelings of others blinds her to the truth of her fate as a clone, and shows her unwillingness to act in the service of herself if she thinks it might negatively affect others. Despite these critiques, empathy does hold tremendous value and import for Kathy and the people she affects through her empathic disposition. These critiques are simply meant to illuminate the fact that for her empathy is by no means an unequivocally positive quality, and its effects can often be unpredictable and even harmful. With the help of Keen and Butler, it can be seen that in the context of *Never* empathy should be actively interrogated, rather than understood as an categorical force for good.

These problems with empathy are important to *Never Let Me Go* because the political and social structures which govern the clones use empathy to bolster and also normalize the system they are in. It is because empathy works against Kathy that it becomes cruel in the sense that Lauren Berlant, in their essay, “Cruel Optimism,” defines. They use the term *cruel optimism* to describe “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss” (94). And while Berlant realizes and acknowledges that all optimism may be cruel, they aver that:

some scenes of optimism are crueler than others: where cruel optimism operates, the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place. This might point to something as banal as a scouring love, but it also opens out to obsessive appetites, patriotism, a career, all kinds of things. One makes affective bargains about the costliness of one’s attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition. (21)

Berlant’s essay analyzes various works of American literature and extends those analyses to comment upon the conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary neoliberal American world. The attachments Berlant looks at most closely are those of the “American dream” and its implicit, albeit misplaced, connection to the “good life” (24). Berlant’s terminology and insights, especially their focus on the cruelty inherent to the “ordinary,” are useful in illuminating the conditions of “ordinary” life in *Never*. In Kathy’s case, her attachments all become problematic in that they are all immediately and very consequentially affected by the system that governs her; yet her ignorance of and inability to address this system causes her life to be one of continuous

suffering, even when pursuing things she thinks she desires, such as her position as a carer. From the opening page of the novel, where she claims, “I am not trying to boast” (3), Kathy is evidently proud of her longstanding career as a carer, even though it is a career which directly benefits the system which is killing her friends, all the while exposing her to the constant trauma of needless suffering and death.

For Kathy, as for many people, empathy is one constituent part of the ideal “good life.” Much like the problematic attachment of the good life to the American dream for Berlant, for the clones in *Never Let Me Go*, “donating” and “caring” and even art creation are ideas and practices inculcated in them as children so that they become normalized forms of purpose in their lives. The latter two practices, caring and art creation, rely on empathy. But in both cases their empathy is commodified and manipulated to meet the ends of the despotic state. So while Kathy’s intentions as a carer are good, on a larger systemic scale she is using her empathic connection to clones to perpetuate a cruel, tyrannical, and inhumane system. One of the ways Hailsham does this is by influencing their students to place their faith in practices which instrumentalize empathy and individualism, including artistic practice. This can be seen in Hailsham’s “Exchanges” which, held four times a year, are art exhibits in which students can submit artworks for tokens and use those tokens to buy other students’ works (Ishiguro 16). However, the artworks deemed best by the guardians are taken from the exchanges and instead displayed in the ever-mysterious “Gallery.” Shameem Black, in her article, “Ishiguro’s Inhuman Aesthetics,” argues that this practice especially suggests that “*Never Let Me Go* shares in a pervasive late-twentieth-century cultural skepticism about the viability of empathetic art” (785). While at the outset, Hailsham’s Exchanges seem harmless enough, their purpose is soon revealed

to be far more malign than is at first apparent. Black explores the instrumentalized purpose of art in *Never Let Me Go*:

Never Let Me Go illuminates the problems that arise when art becomes a governing ideological force. To professionalize its students, Hailsham builds a virtual electric fence through an emphasis on artistic production. From an early age, the guardians encourage their students to develop their “creativity” through poetry, painting, and sculpture. (792)

And while this practice at first appears nothing more than an innocent way to urge students to express themselves, at the end of the novel, when, in adulthood, Kathy and Tommy, confront Miss Emily, the old headmistress of Hailsham, she says about the exchanges, “we took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to prove you had souls at all” (Ishiguro 260). Black says about this scene:

As advocates for compassionate treatment of clones (whom they always call “students”), Madame and Miss Emily use art shows to convince others of their students’ right to humane consideration. Art, they believe, will inspire regular people to identify with the students and thus recognize their ethical obligations toward them ... [However,] concealed within their Romantic logic lies a far more dystopian goal that colludes with the exploitation of the students they claim to protect. When Miss Emily says that “your art will reveal your inner selves” (*Never* 254), her choice of phrase suggests that making such art actually prefigures the process of organ donation. From a young age, children grow accustomed to the idea of handing over their “inner selves” to figures of authority. For such donations they are literally paid in “Tokens”—one of Ishiguro’s most frightening wordplays. (Black 793)

At Hailsham, artworks, along with all other facets of clones' lives, are never produced for the purpose of the clones themselves, but rather instrumentalized in some perverse way in order to benefit the state.

And while empathy is instrumentalized through art in Kathy's childhood, it is again instrumentalized in her early adulthood when Kathy becomes a "carer." This position is one that all clones must occupy for a certain period of time in early adulthood. The carer is essentially tasked with making sure "donors," the clones whose internal organs have begun to be harvested, are in good spirits and morale while the state procedurally removes their organs until they die. In essence, the purpose of the carer is to placate and mollify donors so that they are in a healthy enough state to undergo as many "donations" as possible before their bodies cease to function. So Kathy's role, the one that she actively plays out in narrating the novel, is to make the donors feel comfortable and cared for so that they may have their organs harvested under a pretense of calm and security, rather than face the reality that they are literally having their life and body stripped from them by the state. As Black argues, Kathy's life is not imbued with any special sense of importance (except the vaguely special status all clones are told about by their guardians), and it is precisely the ordinariness of their lives that convinces them of the normalcy of their fates:

Hailsham offers no heroic or theological ideology to comfort the students; no elevating talk of sacrifice infiltrates Ishiguro's prose. "I was pretty much ready when I became a donor," a student named Ruth says. "It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?" (227). Such ordinary and even banal language suffices to convince students to acquiesce to their own extraordinary demise. (Black 794)

Black's pointing out the use of "ordinary language" in what readers can only perceive as extraordinary circumstances speaks to Kathy's perverse notion of what is "ordinary." Kathy tacitly seems to believe that, through performing what the system she lives in has convinced her is an ordinary life (i.e. going to school, participating in exchanges, caring, donating), she can be "ordinary." And, as an "ordinary" clone, like Ruth or Tommy, she can empathize very intimately with their ordinary lives as well. However, because of her desire to empathize through a shared feeling of ordinariness, she finds herself paralyzed in a cruel system, rather than galvanized and outraged by her shared suffering with others.

Never serves to illustrate the limits, dangers, and consequences of unexamined empathy, and while it is a novel and remains a fiction, it shares many similarities with the work of theorists who speak to conditions in the real world. For Berlant, as for Black, and, as I will soon discuss, for Weil, cruelty is often inherent to what society has deceptively presented as ordinary. Here is a passage in which Berlant speaks about the cruelty inherent to ordinary life in the United States, but this passage could just as well, without any editing, be used to define the system governing the clones at Hailsham: "that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it—has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the 'technologies of patience' or lag that keep these processes in place" (23). Because the clones' lives are so deeply imbricated with—largely because they are directly a product of—the system that they inhabit, even behaviours as seemingly emancipatory as imagination and empathic connections are manipulated in order to distract the clones and to directly serve the government which oppresses them. This is especially evident in the case of Tommy, who, while growing up at Hailsham, was never artistically gifted in any way that Hailsham's Exchanges valued. Because Tommy was aware of his inability, he

began to make intentionally bad and childish artworks “as a kind of joke” (19). However, this joke backfires, and when Tommy’s artistic ineptitude becomes apparent to the other students, they begin to shun him: “he got left out of games, boys refused to sit next to him at dinner, or pretended not to hear if he said anything in his dorm after lights-out” (20). At Hailsham, creativity is so imposed upon the students that when Tommy tells Kathy, seemingly the only person he thinks he can confide in, that Miss Lucy, the only openly insubordinate guardian at Hailsham, told him “that if I didn’t want to be creative ... that was perfectly all right” (23), even Kathy responds with anger and annoyance, saying, “That’s just rubbish,” and storming away (24). Despite Kathy’s response, Tommy finds comfort in Miss Lucy’s words and for the rest of his time at Hailsham does not pursue art with any sense of urgency. It does not become apparent until far later in the novel that Tommy’s unwillingness to participate in Hailsham’s Exchanges may have been one of his first instances of rebellion against the system that controls him. The fact that he will not instrumentalize his metaphorical “inner self” for the system which oppresses him is a more tangible representation of resistance than any other in the novel. The key takeaway from Tommy’s rebellion is that it is singular; it does not appear to rely on empathy with others’ experiences for it to arise, but is instead a unique refusal to acquiesce to the perverse sense of the “ordinary” which is imposed upon him. Rather than empathizing with the “ordinary” experiences of other clones, he singles himself out by refusing to be like others, and refusing to allow his identity to be confined to the same narrow value system as other students.

The ordinariness of suffering which Berlant speaks about also relates very closely to Weil’s understanding of suffering, which she sees as a universal fact of life. While Berlant speaks about how suffering is brought about by “desires and affects” (21) created by the state,³

³ Such as, but not limited to, political and economic systems.

Weil speaks about force, but she uses this terminology in many of the same contexts as Berlant. Like cruel optimism, force, when used to exert complete control over a person's life, can make a person operate like a "thing." In Weil's book-length essay *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*, she writes:

The idea of a person's being a thing is a logical contradiction. Yet what is impossible in logic becomes true in life, and the contradiction lodged within the soul tears it to shreds. This thing is constantly aspiring to be a man or a woman, and never achieving it—here, surely, is death but death strung out over a whole lifetime; here, surely is life, but life that death congeals before abolishing. (8)

Kathy, like all clones, exists as this very contradiction of being at once a person and a thing, living a half-life: "death strung out over a whole lifetime." In theory she is a thinking, feeling, desirous being, but in practice she is a means to an end, instrumentalized in a very real sense, like a musical instrument. She is played by and for the state to serve their purposes: creating art; caring for donors; and finally donating herself, being unstrung and disassembled by her masters. To extend this instrument metaphor a little further, the clones never play for themselves: they create art for the school and also in order to gain currency to exchange for other artworks; they do not work for themselves, their occupations are chosen for them; and they do not donate for themselves, as all clone donations are compulsory and go to non-clone humans. Kathy, in a very literal sense, is a slave. She is under the constant control and rule of a state that dictates exactly what course her life must follow. Her life, under threat of literal force, and the forces of coercion, is completely controlled by the state.

As Weil points out, "force, in the hands of another, exercises over the soul the same tyranny that extreme hunger does; for it possesses, and in perpetuo, the power of life and death.

Its rule, moreover, is as cold and hard as the rule of inert matter. The man who knows himself weaker than another is more alone in the heart of a city than a man lost in the desert” (10). Like the visceral suffering of hunger, Kathy’s life is one of suffering, even though she experiences little physical harm in the course of her narrative. But the final line I quoted by Weil in the above passage is the most interesting one: if Kathy’s weakness—politically, bodily, and socially—makes her “more alone in the heart of a city than a man lost in the desert,” does Ishiguro suggest empathy can provide any salvation from that loneliness, or promote any positive change, or are the forces exerted over her too powerful to be overcome by the act of imagining others? Kathy is very much a victim of circumstance, specifically those circumstances prescribed by the powers that be, and her life is almost entirely controlled by the force of others. This is true not only of authority figures like the government and the guardians, but also of her friends, whose decisions shape Kathy’s life far more than her own will.

Weil acknowledges that no one in the universe can escape force, and that all people must submit to it some capacity:

The truth is, nobody really possesses it. The human race is not divided up, in the *Iliad*, into conquered persons, slaves, suppliants, on the one hand, and conquerors and chiefs on the other. In this poem there is not a single man who does not at one time or another have to bow his neck to force. The common soldier in the *Iliad* is free and has the right to bear arms; nevertheless he is subject to the indignity of orders and abuse. (Weil, *The Poem of Force* 11)

So the questions I pose with the help of Keen, Berlant, and Weil are: are the forces that oppress Kathy at all opposed by the force of empathy? And does empathy present a positive

counter-force? in her world, or does it merely effect minor glimmers of hope, while on a larger scale serving the system which oppresses her?

Kathy is the most empathetic character depicted in *Never Let Me Go*, and yet she remains a passive and even feckless one. As I have pointed out, she is so inclined to imagine and understand the mental states of others that much of her first-person narrative is comprised of her interpretations of how others may have felt at certain points in time. Her ability to understand others also earns her a prolonged position as a “carer” because of her unique ability to understand, attend to, and care for others. It is this skill that allows Kathy to get along with essentially all characters in the novel. She is not desirous of many things—except for perhaps Tommy—and is deeply self-conscious about how her actions affect herself, but also, importantly, how they affect others. Kathy’s entire narrative is comprised of moments in which she attends to others, but I will list a few key examples to illustrate this point. When they are children, although Kathy does not know Tommy very well at this point, she approaches him when he is throwing a fit, and despite their relative ignorance of each other at this time, Kathy understands that he loves his polo shirt, and urges him to stop throwing a tantrum before it gets muddy. Kathy is evidently correct in this understanding, because as soon as she notifies him of the mud on his shirt, he “only just [stops] himself crying out in alarm” (11). Another such moment of understanding can be seen following her recollection of a row with Ruth when she says, “But when I think about it now, I can see things more from Ruth’s point of view” (129). I chose these examples for their more explicit connection to empathy, but empathy can be seen as

the driving force behind Kathy's entire narrative, which is dedicated to trying to understand her relationships with her friends, and by extension, trying to understand her friends themselves.

But Kathy's attachment to empathy, her desire to understand others, can very easily be understood as a cruel one because of the fact that it directly inhibits her own life, and does not lead her to prosocial or positive political action. It seems Kathy's interrogation of her memories is meant to help her understand her friends more deeply, but her understanding of herself appears to be less fully interrogated. Perhaps this is natural due to her proclivity to imagine others, both her friends and characters in novels, rather than to look more directly at the forces affecting her own life. But this is a practice that directly inhibits her thriving, as it encourages her to think and feel with others, within the confines of a system which horribly oppresses her and others.

Kathy and her peers are vigorous readers, as can be seen in the fact that, as she states, "we'd somehow developed this idea that how well you were settling in at the cottages—how well you were coping—was somehow reflected by how many books you'd read" (122-23). In a context where books represent social capital, Kathy is also writing an essay on Victorian novels, a task she has for some vague reason been assigned by her old guardians. Whether her avid reading habits make her more inclined to empathizing, or if her empathic tendencies makes her more inclined to reading, she is no more inclined to political or social action because of this hobby. As Suzanne Keen argues, novels might only produce empathy in readers if those readers fit a very specific set of criteria, such as professional training in literature (78), or whether readers find a specific character or setting compelling (75; 79).⁴ In this sense, Kathy seems to fit

⁴ Keen even suggests that the perceptions that novels are particularly conducive to empathic responses is merely a marketing tactic (104-05).

Keen looks at readers' responses and the work of literary theorists, such as David Bleich and Mary Lenard, and psychologists such as Nancy Eisenberg to make these specific claims.

the “false empathy” critique, because if Kathy does empathize with the characters in the novels she reads, her empathy does not inspire her to action but instead to apathy (Keen 159). But her tenacity for reading does indicate her tremendous capacity for imagination. Just as reading gives her the skills to imagine others in novels, it also gives her the storytelling abilities to tell the narrative of which *Never* consists. However, this capacity for imagination seems at times to slip into an almost analgesic tendency to fantasize rather than use her imaginative abilities to imagine substantive change in her world.

Hailsham remains one such fantasy, built largely from her complicated nostalgic attachment to it, to which Kathy clings long after leaving the school in early adulthood; she, along with everyone else at her school, appears willing enough to die for the comfort and fraternity that is provided by their imagined version of Hailsham. Hailsham’s power over Kathy’s identity becomes clear to her only much later in life, when she finds out that Hailsham has recently been shut down. After realizing this, she compares herself and the other Hailsham students to helium balloons held together by strings in a bunch, and the closing of Hailsham as “like someone coming along with a pair of shears and snipping the balloon strings” (213), so that the balloons are irrevocably disconnected from one another. Kathy’s sense of connection to a fantasized community crumbles, because even though her community was an imagined one, it was grounded in the tangible idea and physical place that was Hailsham. Hailsham raised her and inspired her cultural beliefs, and the idea that there will always be people in Hailsham raised with beliefs and surroundings akin to those of her own childhood is lost.

Kathy’s relationship to Hailsham prompts several of the questions Keen raises about the limits of empathy. Keen asks: “Do people in worldwide cultures empathize with, or express an

emotional obligation toward, individuals that they would construe as outsiders? Do people generally welcome or disdain the notion of empathy as a source of helping and altruism?" (163)

In the context of *Never*, does Kathy's empathy extend beyond her friends at Hailsham? Can Kathy even empathize with other clones outside of Hailsham, let alone regular humans? Kathy's narrative begins with her telling a story about one of the donors she cared for and how fond he was of her stories about Hailsham. She says, "I asked where *he'd* grown up, he mentioned some place in Dorset and his face beneath the blotches went into a completely new kind of grimace. And I realised then how desperately he didn't want reminding. Instead, he wanted to hear about Hailsham" (5). It is evident from this donor's reactions that Hailsham was an exceptional place, and that he, like most other clones, had much less nostalgic memories of his upbringing. So while Kathy, as a clone, occupies the lowest social status in England, it becomes clear that she has led a far more privileged life than that of other clones. And when her donor continues to ask questions about Hailsham, she realizes "what he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood" (5). This fact makes it evident that the donor is the one empathizing with Kathy, living vicariously through her detailed account of her life, and not the other way around.

The fact that Kathy can most readily empathize with those of her own flock does seem to draw some boundaries as to the limits of her empathic capacities, and perhaps, the prosocial limits of empathy. In this context empathy is a kind of analgesic that placates the donor in their time of intense pain and likely despair as they near death. This seems to provide the same comfort as a parent reading a child a fairytale before bedtime, and the comfort it provides certainly appears real, but this comfort also directly serves to make the donor a more healthy and productive donor, and more capable of having all their organs successfully extracted. As Keen

argues, “good actions confined to taking care of members of the in-group may be regarded as a weaker or even deleterious form of prosocial action” (164). While Kathy is caring for many non-Hailsham donors, it is evident that her deepest empathic connections lie with her friends from Hailsham, and while this relatively narrow range of connection seems entirely understandable, it does perhaps spell out the prosocial limits of empathy. Kathy’s deepest emotional responses are provoked by her empathic connections with Hailsham students: a narrow subset of people within the already narrow demographic of “clones.” So while Kathy shows evidence of empathizing with people from Hailsham, there is not as much evidence to suggest she can empathize with her donors, or at least not as well. The degree to which Kathy is actually able to empathize with other donors as a carer remains unclear, and her ability to imagine the lives of non-clones appears to be almost nonexistent.

Even with Miss Lucy, the most personable and forthright guardian, Kathy says about herself and Tommy, “We never considered anything from her viewpoint, and it never occurred to us to say or do anything to support her” (89). The fact that Kathy’s narrative is one told to a donor, and the fact that very little space is dedicated to individual donors, other than those who are also her lifetime friends, indicates that she does not spend very much time imagining them. But this makes sense given that, by definition, as a carer, she is not a donor and therefore has not begun the traumatic and prolonged process of donations. Of course, she will soon become a donor, but the fact that she is not one over the span of the novel makes the idea that she is empathizing with her patients a precarious one. In fact, at the end of the novel Tommy actually asks Kathy to stop being his carer, and to not see him in the final days before he dies. When she asks him why, he says, “Kath, sometimes you just don’t see it. You don’t see it because you’re not a donor” (281). While it seems plausible that, as a longtime carer—and evidently a good

one—Kathy can, to some extent, empathize with the fear, pain, and insecurity that accompanies “donations,” it is also apparent that she’s actually unable to empathize with Tommy’s specific fear of his imminent death. While Kathy knows that she will meet the same end as Tommy, it is evident that she is not afflicted by this fact in the same way that Tommy is. Unlike Kathy, Tommy appears to reject the whole system of “caring” which others seem to have so readily accepted, much as he refused to participate in the Exchanges and threw tantrums as a child.

The fact that Tommy has internalized his death and realized the gross exploitation which had led to it becomes comes to a head after he finds out that there is no such thing as the much rumoured “deferral,” and that he, like all other clones, cannot escape his fate. Deferrals are something that Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy first hear rumours about during their time at the cottages. The idea of deferrals, as they understand it, is that if two clones are able to show that they are truly in love then they may be eligible for a deferral from their obligations as donors, meaning they will be able to live longer with the person they love.⁵ Tommy believes that the artworks they made as children are what the guardians use as proof to show that two clones are in love. So, when he hears about this rumour, he suddenly takes up drawing, and continues this practice for years with the hopes of one day getting this deferral. But when he presents his drawings to Miss Emily at the end of the novel, she very quickly dismisses the existence of deferrals, although she admits that she was aware of the rumour, saying, “It’s something for them to dream about, a little fantasy. What harm is there?” (258). For Kathy and Tommy the harm is very real. They had misplaced their hope in a fantasy, and now it is too late for them. They were

⁵ Given that the clones are trained to instrumentalize empathy, it seems only a natural evolution that they might try to instrumentalize their love as well.

cruelly given optimism where they should not have been, and trusted in a system which has only ever served to exploit them.

On their drive home from this devastating encounter with Madame and Miss Emily, Kathy suddenly pulls over, and Tommy leaves the car and begins—like he did as a child—to throw a fit. While Tommy is evidently beside himself, expressing his despair in a most visceral display of agony and outrage, Kathy goes to him and attempts to console him, but there is no evidence she feels a similar sense of desolation. After he settles down and gets back into her car, Kathy says to him, “I was thinking ... about back then, at Hailsham, when you used to go bonkers like that, and we couldn’t understand it. We couldn’t understand how you could ever get like that. And I was just having this idea, just a thought really. I was thinking maybe the reason you used to get like that was because at some level you always *knew*” (275). The fact that it took Kathy, the most conspicuously empathetic person in the novel, this long to understand this is a testament to the fact that Tommy is on some fundamental level unlike the other clones. But even after realizing why Tommy is behaving the way he is, she is unable to empathize with Tommy’s disposition, and this is blatantly obvious to Tommy. Again this seems to play into the notion that Tommy has on some level always been aware of what Berlant refers to as “the ordinariness of suffering [and] the violence of normativity” (23).

In their final days, it appears that, in spite of the bombshell they have just uncovered—the fact that deferrals are a myth—Kathy remains anxious to continue living as blissfully with Tommy as she can, happy not to address the elephant in the room. Kathy says, “Nothing seemed to change much in the week or so after that trip” (276). And what she means by this is her attitude does not much change following this revelation, likely because she is never able to really

internalize her fate. But Tommy feels differently, and his demeanour soon begins to change.

Kathy says about this time,

I couldn't help noticing how, more and more, Tommy tended to identify himself with the other donors at the centre. If for instance, the two of us were reminiscing about old Hailsham people, he'd sooner or later move the conversation round to one of his current donor friends who'd maybe said or done something similar to what we were recalling.
(276-77)

From this passage, it is evident that while Kathy is still content to reminisce about the past—specifically Hailsham, a place that is now long gone and whose absence has very real bearings on the future that she and Tommy share—Tommy is more comfortable grounding himself in the present, and in the realization that he and the other donors are soon going to die the same ignominious death. But, because Tommy is either unable to bear making Kathy face this truth, or is too discomfited by her inability to confront reality, he asks her to not see him anymore during his final days before he “completes,” or dies. Here Kathy’s empathic capacities reach their limits, as even when losing the last person she loves, she cannot bring herself to understand his experience. This raises some dismal questions as to how extensive Kathy’s empathic capacities are, because even though Kathy is closer to Tommy than perhaps anyone in her life, she is unable to empathize with him here. Even though Kathy is the most empathetic character in *Never*, the end of the novel seems to suggest that Kathy can only empathize with Tommy when his experiences are similar to hers, and that she is unable to grasp more profound realizations through empathic connections.

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

In the final paragraph of *Never Let Me Go*, after finding out Tommy has died, “even though [she] had no real need to” (287), Kathy returns to Norfolk, the place she and her classmates had fantasized to be a place where lost things are found. In this passage Kathy pulls over and walks out to a barbed wire fence, which bars her from a field beyond it. She says, “all along the fence, especially along the lower line of wire, all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled ... torn plastic sheets and bits of old carrier bags” (287). And as she stands there, looking at the garbage, she “imagined this was the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up” (287). And as she does so, she imagines “I’d see it was Tommy, and he’d wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that—I didn’t let it—and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn’t sobbing or out of control” (288). At this point, Kathy has had everything she has ever loved taken from her: first Hailsham, then Ruth, and now, finally, Tommy. They were all taken from her by the country she now looks out on, the region of the country she had fantasized about and placed her hope in. Weil asks, “And what does it take to make the slave weep? The misfortune of his master, his oppressor, despoiler, pillager, of the man who laid waste his town and killed his dear ones under his very eye” (9). This bleak image of rural England, the country that has revoked all that she has loved, also makes Kathy cry, for the life it gave her and also all that it has taken from her. Importantly, the final line of the novel is: “I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be” (288). Even at this moment of utter desolation, Kathy still feels there is some place she is “supposed to be.” Where could she possibly be after she has lost everything and wants nothing? There is nowhere she could possibly drive that would make any sense. The only reason Kathy

decides to drive off to “wherever it was [she] was supposed to be,” is because she knows nothing else than what is expected of her.

The plastic shopping bags that cause Kathy to briefly contemplate her losses bring to mind the grocery store that causes Anne Cvetkovich so much distress in her memoir, *Depression: A Public Feeling*. As she browses the chain supermarket that she needs to visit in order to feed herself, she feels overcome with the fear that the circumscribed choices within this fluorescently lit store are not what she desires:

Consumerism is the arena of agency and desire held out by a culture that forecloses other options—you’re in the store, and you can ask yourself *What do I want? What’s my pleasure?* If the answer that comes back resoundingly, is *I don’t know*, or worse yet, *Nothing*, and you thus seem to have stepped beyond even capitalism’s seductions, what is to become of you? (460)

Cvetkovich stands in the grocery store, among nearly any type of food she could conceive of buying—no matter the season—and yet the sight of it both overwhelms and deeply upsets her. The supermarket, despite its depression-inducing combination of clinical lighting, an overabundance of artificial colours and packaging, and underpaid, un-unionized workers, remains a place that she has to visit literally in order to survive. In the epilogue of her book, Cvetkovich quotes a passage of David Foster Wallace’s university commencement speech “This is Water,” which also laments the accepted evil that is the supermarket:

It's pretty much the last place you want to be ... you have to manuever your junky cart through all these other tired, hurried people with carts ... the checkout line is incredibly long ... But you can't take your frustration out on the frantic lady working the register,

who is overworked at a job whose daily tedium and meaninglessness surpasses the imagination of any of us here at a prestigious college ... Probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education—at least in my own case—is that it enables my tendency to over-intellectualise stuff, to get lost in abstract argument inside my head, instead of simply paying attention to what is going on right in front of me, paying attention to what is going on inside me. (Wallace)

Cvetkovich says about this passage: “Wallace mentions the sacred and worship, and his recommendation for ‘paying attention’ resembles a Buddhist training in mindfulness and the sacred everyday. Attention is a difficult and ongoing practice, he seems to be saying” (Cvetkovich 208). Like Foster Wallace, she is suggesting that through paying attention to and imagining the lives of the other people who are either shopping or working in the grocery store, the flawed capitalist structure that endorses the depressing practice of poorly paid supermarket labour, along with sundry other similar practices conducive to depression, can be evinced. It is in this sense that Cvetkovich sees empathy as a means of rebellion, because if one can exercise the presence of mind to imagine how others might feel, one is at least doing something positive, rather than negative. But she concludes this section with a disclaimer:

The default setting of numbness that Wallace warns against includes critique (such as cursing the owners of SUVs and their consumerism), but even as his essay critiques critique and the smugness of being smart or right, it also manifests compassion (and despair) for how easy it is to succumb to it. (Cvetkovich 208-09)

Wallace advocates for an empathetic outlook on the depressing reality that all people face in their narrowly delimited worlds, but he stresses that compassion is a difficult thing to muster

especially when you are suffering or tired.⁶ Similarly, while Kathy is able to practice empathy, it does not motivate her to do anything about the powers that oppress her. While Kathy's life appears far more extreme than the middle class white existence that characterizes Cvetkovich's and Wallace's experiences, it is extreme in order to metaphorically illustrate the extreme, perverse, and cruel factors which work against many people in contemporary life. Both Kathy and Foster Wallace appear to share a common malaise and purposelessness at feeling obliged to be "wherever it was [they] were supposed to be." Empathy as an affective force seems to drive neither Kathy nor Foster Wallace to address the pernicious forces acting against them, but merely to briefly attend to what others are suffering from, which is not an insignificant thing. Of course empathy does not have to drive Kathy towards revolution, nor Foster Wallace, nor anyone for that matter, but it is illuminating that it does not. While a fictitious character and a real person are very different, Kathy and Foster Wallace are both waylaid by the oppressive forces that have been tacitly accepted as "ordinary." While neither offer a clear way towards *progression*, be it social, political, personal, or private, away from the depression and oppression of the contemporary "ordinary," Cvetkovich suggests that one direction may be towards "[creating] more space for creative thought, for whatever it is that provides more pleasure or happiness, even if its immediate professional or social gains are not obvious" (22). She suggests that, rather than instrumentalizing creativity, as Hailsham does, people be simply allowed "more space" for creativity to take place, without the feeling that they are "supposed to be" doing something. Cvetkovich offers an optimistic and hopeful suggestion: that humans, if allowed creative freedom, will simply do and be better.

⁶ Weil notes that "When we become tired, attention is scarcely possible any more, unless we have already had a good deal of practice" (*Waiting* 34).

Of course, empathy does not work wholly against Kathy. While it does seem to make her somewhat inert, it also encourages moments of extreme compassion, such as when Kathy decides to become Ruth's carer before she dies. As a longtime carer at this point, it seems this experience, of helping many people through their last, and likely most vulnerable, stages of life, allows her to understand what her friend Ruth is going through. Despite their differences, and the cruel things Ruth had said to her in the past, Kathy is able to take care of her and repair their friendship before it is too late. As well, Kathy's final romance with Tommy is directly caused by Kathy rekindling her relationship with Ruth. It is Ruth who asks to visit Tommy in his care facility (something Kathy never seemed to have contemplated doing) and Ruth who says outright to both of them, "I kept you and Tommy apart" (232), and then in the same confession, "You and Tommy, you've got to try and get a deferral" (233). It is Ruth who ultimately urges Kathy to be with Tommy, and Ruth who urges them to take some kind of action for their futures, albeit an action which would be delimited within the cruel system set up around them. While Ruth's confrontational personality is ultimately what drives Kathy and Tommy to be together, and encourages them to pursue change, this is all brought about by Kathy's empathetic and compassionate nature. Were Kathy not driven by her empathy to care for Ruth, Ruth would have never urged her and Tommy to be together, nor to pursue a deferral. At the very least Kathy's unreciprocated empathy for Ruth made her feel cared for, and Ruth felt she should return this empathy in kind.

Moreover, in spite of the larger implications of doing nothing for her own cause or that of her friends, and other clones, Kathy's exceptional aptitude as a carer is certainly a very welcome and comforting thing to her donors. She is essentially a palliative carer—and evidently good at her job given that she begins as a carer before any of her friends and continues years after they

die as donors. This is undoubtedly an important job; attending to people who are suffering is one of the key tenets of love that Weil implores: “The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: ‘What are you going through?’ It is a recognition that the sufferer exists” (36). At the very least, Kathy’s position as a carer allows people who might otherwise have died anonymously to live their final days feeling seen, and more importantly, feeling loved.

My argument is not meant to be a broadside against the idea that empathy is a force of good in Kathy’s life; it is merely meant to explore the possible negative consequences of empathy in her life, and how for her, empathy, without other qualities like leadership, drive, and self-awareness, is instrumentalized to perverse ends. In Kathy’s case empathy does not lead to any prosocial or positive political change, but Kathy is also not a leader. Were Kathy to possess the same empathic tendencies as well as qualities like independence and leadership perhaps she would have effected change in some way. But that is purely speculation, given that, in the context of this novel, very little tangible good arose from Kathy’s ability to imagine and empathize with others. Kathy’s ability and willingness to empathize with others may have been altogether positive were they utilized in a more generous world. But in the case of Kathy, it is very difficult to gain perspective on the forces you are affected by, and how they shape the ways in which you affect other people. So while Kathy’s life may have been a well-meaning one, she does little to effect meaningful positive change in the world. Whether or not she wanted to, or even felt she should, is beside the point. What matters for the sake of this thesis is that in this novel, attention to others, and the empathy that arises from that, is not enough. Were Kathy able to pay attention to what was happening to her friends, to the nurses and doctors, who were killing her friends, who are themselves controlled by hospitals and politicians, perhaps she would have

been able to at the very least address the root of her problems. The cruelty of Kathy's life lies in the perpetual assurances she receives from the system that literally raised her to believe that she is doing what she is "supposed to" (288). At the end of the novel, as Kathy looks out at the rubbish caught in the field's fencing, the reader can see how, like the plastic bag once filled with groceries, she will soon be emptied and discarded.

Keen's criticisms against empathy are exemplified by Kathy's experience. While Kathy is a tremendously empathetic person, and apparently a very caring one, her attention towards others, while certainly compassionate in many respects, obscures her view of the larger oppressive structures acting against her. And while empathy in Ishiguro's novel is not inherently a bad thing, it does not lead to progress in a political sense, and is only minorly successful in a social sense. And while these successes are certainly significant, and welcome by the people who are on the receiving end of Kathy's attention, her attention to others does not lead her to the realizations Tommy does, or give her the perspective to see the oppressive system which confines her. As Weil points out, suffering is universal, but as Berlant suggests, the unique afflictions suffered in contemporary life are intrinsically tied to what is accepted, rather than interrogated, as "ordinary."

To return one last time to the final scene in the novel: as Kathy surveys the rubbish, she "[starts] to imagine just a little fantasy thing ... and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since childhood had washed up ... and if I waited long, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field ... until I'd finally see it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call" (287-88). When everything else is lost, all that is left for Kathy is her ability to fantasize about the people she loves. This ability to fantasize is integral to creativity, and it begs the

question: in a system which did not instrumentalize her humanity would an imaginative and empathetic mind like Kathy's have allowed her to initiate positive change?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Black, Shameem. *Fiction across Borders: Imagining the Lives of Others in Late-Twentieth-Century Novels*. Columbia University Press, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.7312/blac14978>.
- . "Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2009, pp. 785–807, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1637>.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Cruel Optimism." *Differences (Bloomington, Ind.)*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2006, pp. 20–36, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2006-009>.
- Carroll, Rachel. "Imitations of Life: Cloning, Heterosexuality and the Human in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2010, pp. 59–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230903525445>.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Duke University Press, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822391852>.
- Christmas, Amy. "Love as Subjectification in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2023, pp. 392–411, <https://doi.org/10.7560/TSL65405>.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. "Kazuo Ishiguro Discusses His Intention behind Writing the Novel, *Never Let Me Go*." 10 Sept. 2010. *Film Independent*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jCB59pPG7k.
- . *Never Let Me Go*. First edition., The Folio Society, 2012.
- Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. 1st ed., Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Krznaric, Roman. *Empathy: Why it Matters*. TarcherPerigee, 2015.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. (Martha Craven). *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Harvard University Press, 1997.

---. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. Harvard University Press, 2013.

---. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Robbins, Bruce. "Cruelty Is Bad: Banality and Proximity in *Never Let Me Go*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2007, pp. 289–302, <https://doi.org/10.1215/ddnov.040030289>.

Rollins, Mark. "Caring Is a Gift: Gift Exchange and Commodification in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *CEA Critic*, vol. 77, no. 3, 2015, pp. 350–56, <https://doi.org/info:doi/>.

Schmetkamp, S., and Vendrell Ferran, Í. (2020). Introduction: Empathy, Fiction, and Imagination. *Topoi*, 39(4), 743–749. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-019-09664-3>.

Wallace, David Foster. "This Is Water by David Foster Wallace (Full Transcript and Audio)." *Farnam Street*, 28 Apr. 2012, <https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>.

Weil, Simone. *The Iliad: Or, The Poem of Force*. Pendle Hill, 1967.

---. *Waiting for God*. 1st Harper Colophon ed., Harper Colophon Books, 1973.