Belonging in the Hyperreal

A Postmodern Reading of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*

Tillhörighet i hyperverkligheten
En postmodern läsning av Kazuo Ishiguros *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

The focus of this essay is Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*. My central claim is that a theme of belonging underpins the novel and is recurrent in a number of different ways. In my reading, I utilise Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern critical concepts to produce this interpretation. I argue that the theme of belonging can be interpreted using Baudrillard’s *loss of the real* and *hyperreal* concepts. The usefulness of these concepts is primarily based on the element of clones and cloning in the narrative. Baudrillard’s theories deal with signs and images that do not correspond with the realities that they are meant to represent, mirroring the predicament of the Hailsham students in *Never Let Me Go*. My essay presents three main areas of discussion in relation to the theme of belonging. Firstly, Hailsham and the students are examined using the *loss of the real/hyperreal* concepts. The second area deals with belongings as a recurrent motif. In my reading, the dual meaning of the word *belonging* is an important factor in identifying the theme. This particular discussion deals also with ownership. The final area of discussion revolves around the issue of genre, or rather genres. The novel’s mixture of character drama and science-fiction dystopia is discussed in relation to the *loss of the real/hyperreal*.

**Keywords**: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, Jean Baudrillard, postmodern, hyperreal, loss of the real, belonging, genre
Abstract


Nyckelord: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, Jean Baudrillard, postmodern, hyperverkligheten, förlust av verkligheten, genre
Cloning is an integral part of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005). The main characters are clones and their fates are decided by this very fact. The novel gives an in-depth look at the trio of central characters: Kathy, Tommy and Ruth. But in what is chiefly a drama of relationships the science-fiction element may appear to many as incongruous by comparison. Sci-fi as a genre is not typically renowned for moving relationship dramas. Furthermore, it could be said that Ishiguro’s simplistic narrative style stands in contrast with the novel’s challenging, philosophical ideas. It can also be argued that the dystopian elements of Ishiguro’s novel are short-changed when set side by side with the character drama; the reasons for cloning are explained only cursorily in the novel’s closing chapters. In my reading of *Never Let Me Go*, the possibility to see the novel’s genres as ill-matched relates to the predicament of the characters. Kathy, Tommy and Ruth are ill-matched with the human world they find themselves in on account of them being clones – they simply do not belong there. Consequently, an area of *Never Let Me Go* which I believe to be evident is the theme of belonging. In my reading of the novel, I show that this theme is illustrated, via the plot and characters, by meaningful relationships and a sense of home and love.

The title of the novel, which indicates the semantic field of love and belonging, bears reflection before my discussion begins. Taken from the song of the same name by Judy Bridgewater which Kathy is so fond of, *Never Let Me Go* is an unmistakable love ballad. A woman sings to her loved one, pleading for him to never let go of her. This is evidence of the theme of belonging. What is notable is the fact that both song and singer are inventions, although there is evidently a song called *Never Let Me Go* which inspired the author. The title is taken from an old jazz standard made famous by Nat King Cole. However, the real song does not bear any resemblance to that which features in the novel, the one lyric – “Oh baby, baby… Never let me go” – is Ishiguro’s. (Howell n.p). The use and reinvention of a real song connects with the postmodern idea that everything is a text. For postmodernism, the problem of inside/outside relations is not confined to the question of literature but extends rather across the whole field of culture and society (Lucy ix). In terms of my reading, the title of the novel and the song indicates a concern with belonging to one another by the means of familial, romantic and platonic relationships.

This essay will examine how the theme of belonging is central to *Never Let Me Go*. To perform this reading, I analyse the novel’s plot and characters by means of postmodern critical concepts, in particular, Jean Baudrillard’s *loss of the real* and *hyperreal* concepts. Baudrillard’s theories are significantly appropriate in this context due to the parallels that are established in my reading. The *hyperreal* concept focuses on signs and
images which do not correspond with the realities they are supposed to represent, which I believe can be used as a model for my reading of the clones in *Never Let Me Go*. Coincidentally, Baudrillard’s seminal work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) features an essay entitled “Clone Story”. Baudrillard’s exploration of the significance of clones will not be immediately relevant for my analysis in this essay, but his attention to clones as the ultimate example of a failed correspondence between reality and representation has served as a theoretical base (95-99).

This theme is multi-layered due to the dual meaning of the word *belonging*. Great attention is given to the students’ *belongings* throughout the novel, an element that accentuates the lack of real meaning in the students’ lives. In this reading, losses and absences will be focused on to highlight the theme of belonging. The *loss of the real* concept will also be applied to the novel’s genre for the purpose of highlighting the lack of information surrounding the dystopian premise. It is my view that the shortage of details in connection to the human world is noticeable. I define the human world as all that happens outside of the students’ “world”. This involves the happenings of the world beyond Hailsham, the world that has initiated the practice of cloning. Even though the students have direct contact with some humans (the guardians and monitors) they are not directly privy to information about the details of their lives. This absence of information denies the reader insight into a world which the characters are keen to belong to; we are as much in the dark about the human world as Kathy, Tommy and Ruth. Viewing *Never Let Me Go* from a postmodernist standpoint may be the most logical perspective. The function of the postmodern sign is to disguise the fact that reality is no longer with us (Lucy ix). With this in mind, the lack of a recognisable world contributes to a loss of reality (or realism, in this case). Ishiguro has created an alternate history which the reader is unfamiliar with. This is pertinent in my reading of *Never Let Me Go*. Not only is the reader alienated through a lack of information in relation to the human world, but the main trio of characters are as well. The alienation of Kathy, Tommy and Ruth heightens their lack of belonging.

The essay will explore the theme of belonging in three main areas. Firstly, the students and Hailsham will be discussed in relation to the *hyperreal/loss of the real*. Secondly, there will follow a discussion on the significance of belongings and ownership. Lastly, the genre of the novel will be examined in relation to the *loss of the real*, and how the blending of literary genres contributes to the theme of belonging in a broader sense.

The two most influential theories of postmodernism, according to Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, are the dominance of the sign or image and consequent loss of the
real, and a scepticism towards the “grand narratives” of human progress (200). To perform this reading of *Never Let Me Go* it is productively helpful to utilise the concepts of Baudrillard. The students and the school which plays such a formative part in their upbringing – Hailsham – can be understood in a reading informed by his theories.

The *loss of the real* is the view that mass media has neutralised reality for us and it has done so in stages: first reflecting, then masking reality, and then masking the absence of reality, and finally, bearing no relation to reality at all (Hutcheon 223). On Baudrillard’s hyperreality theory, Steven Connor writes that “the space of simulation confuses the real with the model. There is no longer any critical and speculative distance between the real and the rational. The real is hyperrealised. Neither realised, nor idealised: but hyperrealised” (60). Monika Kilian describes hyperreality as “a pure construct which has no connection to basic reality” (60). According to Baudrillard, reality no longer appears as such, but rather **becomes** its appearances (Lucy ix). The fact that the students in *Never Let Me Go* are clones provides us with a parallel. The students are clones, that is to say models, or copies of their human counterparts. Early in the novel, Kathy describes the “normal” people as models: “Since each of us was copied at some point by a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life” (Ishiguro 137). The students refer to the humans as models but it is, in fact, the students who are the models. In Baudrillard’s terminology, these “models” are what he categorises as **signs**, or **simulations**; “Simulation … is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1). This concept presents a foundation for my reading, but it is important to point out the slight difference in the meaning of “model” here. In Baudrillard’s meaning, the model is a sign without referent or origin. The students (also called “models” by Ishiguro) on the other hand may have a genetic origin but, importantly, they have no contact or knowledge of their own original. The students are never given the opportunity to learn of who they are modelled from.

In his seminal work *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981), Baudrillard explores a world dominated by what he calls the *simulacra* (a copy without an original) and the world of “hyperreality” (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 201). Baudrillard’s belief is that we live in an age in which signs are no longer required to have any verifiable contact with the world they allegedly represent (Connor 55). Manufactured objects and experiences attempt to be more real than reality itself and become, in Baudrillard’s words, *hyperreal*. Contemporary life is dismantled and reproduced in scrupulous facsimile (Connor 56-57).

The students in *Never Let Me Go* have very limited knowledge of the outside world and even less contact with it; the world that effectively made them. One such example
is the reference to the “Culture Briefing”: “These were classes where we had to play various people we’d find out there – waiters in cafés, policemen and so on” (Ishiguro 108). The nucleus of the students’ existence is Hailsham, itself an idealised version of England. Baudrillard believes that alongside this awareness of the fading out of the real, is a compensatory attempt to manufacture it (Connor 56). In this reading, Hailsham is the manufactured reality, and the uncovering of this fact from the students’ perspective is a key aspect in this discussion. During the final revelation, Miss Emily boasts of how the Hailsham students “grew up in wonderful surroundings” and how they “won’t find anything like Hailsham anywhere in the country now” (Ishiguro 254, 260). Hailsham is an attempt at an England – or reality – which no longer exists. In a discussion below on the genre of the novel and realism, I show how references to the human world are underrepresented in such a way that connects with the theme of belonging which I have interpreted.

There are several absences within *Never Let Me Go* which I believe can be interpreted by means of Baudrillard’s theories. The absence of a “real world” dimension in the text provides the basis for the theme of belonging. The students of Hailsham are technically orphans; copies without originals, in Baudrillard’s meaning, reproduced in facsimile. They have no connection, knowledge, or any sort of bond with their genetic origins in everyday life. They have no parents and are cared for primarily by the Hailsham faculty, otherwise known as the guardians and monitors. The students have no biological families or homes to go to. Hailsham is both home and family. The only meaningful relationships the students have are with each other. The students are each other’s surrogate brothers and sisters; the guardians and monitors the surrogate parents. In the second part of the novel the veterans at the Cottages fulfill the role of a surrogate family also, to a slightly lesser extent. The only place where the students truly belong is Hailsham. But Hailsham is, in essence, a facade. The absence of parents and relatives means that the students do not belong to anyone in the familial sense. Consequently, Hailsham is no place for a person to belong – the students cannot return there later in life, as if it were their home. What is important to point out is that this is not understood by Kathy, Tommy and Ruth until much later. During their time at Hailsham as children, the students are blissfully unaware of the pretence of it all. It has been manufactured solely for the benefit of the students’ upbringing, to shield them from the outside world and the grim fate that awaits them. Hailsham is a huge, fake security blanket. Late in the novel, Miss Emily defends the idea of Hailsham as she reveals the awful truth behind it:
You see, 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. Hailsham would not have been Hailsham if we hadn’t. Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. 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.

(Ishiguro 263)

The significance of Hailsham is twofold in that it also relates to another aspect of the hyperreal concept, aside from the school being seen as a superficial home for the students. The notion that this idyllic boarding school in the English countryside is an idealised version of England has a striking parallel with another part of Baudrillard’s hyperreal theory. In comparison to the other clones living in deplorable conditions in “government homes” (which are only very briefly alluded to) the Hailsham clones have had near-perfect childhoods. Miss Emily tells Kathy and Tommy that they would not “sleep for days if you saw what still goes on in some of those places” (255-260). This illustrates an England that is not what it once was, especially in comparison with the England that Miss Emily and the rest of the guardians are trying to manufacture in Hailsham. Hailsham, alongside Glenmorgan and the Saunders Trust, seems to be part of a small liberal “little movement” started in the “late seventies” (256-258). These places are very much the exception and not the norm in the England of the novel. According to Baudrillard, signs no longer correspond to, or mask, their “real-life” referent but replace it in a world of autonomous “floating signifiers”. Experience everywhere is now derivative and literally superficial, and has achieved its final utopian’ form in the instantaneous abundance and banality of the “cultureless” society of the United States, quintessentially in Disneyland (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 201). Niall Lucy summarises this concept thus:

Today the ‘reallest’ (or the hyperreal) experience of a perfect childhood is to be had as an adult visiting Disneyland, where the opportunity for that experience has been reproduced as a fantasy for grown-ups to act out in the perfect simulation of an event that never happened but which is nonetheless indistinguishable from its having done so. (Lucy 52)
This idea works for Hailsham also. Hailsham is the impossible dream, the ideal. Most telling of all is how, as an adult, Kathy cannot find Hailsham at all, as if it was never there in the first place, supporting the idea that the school is a false reality; a simulation, in Baudrillard’s words.

Driving around the country now, I still see things that will remind me of Hailsham. I might pass the corner of a misty field, or see part of a large house in the distance as I come down the side of a valley, even a particular arrangement of poplar trees up on a hillside, and I’ll think: ‘Maybe that’s it! I’ve found it! This actually is Hailsham!’ Then I see it’s impossible and I go on driving, my thoughts drifting on elsewhere. (Ishiguro 6)

This extract is notable in illustrating just how little Kathy knows of the outside world, due to the sheltered upbringing she received at the school. Why is Hailsham so difficult to find, we ask ourselves. The loss of home and belonging that Kathy feels is exacerbated by her failure to find her childhood home. A place, so formative in her childhood, is just not there – unreachable. Although the reader is aware that Hailsham has not just vanished into thin air, this passage is symbolic in the sense that Kathy does not try very hard to find it. Hailsham is no more than just a physical location. As an adult she realises that there is nothing there for her or her fellow students anymore. The idea that Hailsham is the key location in relation to the students’ belonging is recognised in Keith McDonald’s reading. He regards *Never Let Me Go* as a “speculative memoir” which utilises many of the techniques of the autobiographical memoir (75). He writes:

> Whereas the realist autobiography may present school as a place where infancy has led the subject, and an experience that informs and sets a template for adult life, here the focus is on Hailsham because this is the only experience of any relative normality, family, and co-existence. (78)

With this in mind, normality and family are two basic parts of life that the students lack. Hailsham is the vital source of these things in their lives, but in a form which can be described as fake. The most revealing passage concerning the importance of Hailsham comes in the middle of the novel. As Kathy sees a clown holding a bunch of balloons she reflects on the loss of her childhood home:
I thought about Hailsham closing, and how it was like someone coming along with a pair of shears and snipping the balloon strings just where they entwined above the man’s fist. Once that happened, there’d be no real sense in which those balloons belonged with each other any more. (Ishiguro 209)

The prospect of Hailsham closing explicitly addresses Kathy’s lack of belonging. Up to this point Kathy feels that she belongs at Hailsham. The function of this passage is to confirm that she is now truly homeless and that her previous feeling of belonging is undermined. The theme of belonging is never more prominent than in this episode.

In my reading it is possible to draw another fascinating parallel in relation to the *loss of the real/hyperreal* concerning the students from an early Hailsham episode. Just before Miss Lucy reveals to the students that they will begin donating their vital organs before they grow old, the students chat about their respective plans for life after Hailsham: “We were just talking about what it would feel like if we became actors. What sort of life it would be” (Ishiguro 79). This seems to be the decisive factor for Miss Lucy’s revelation. Miss Emily says: “You’re not like the actors you watch on your videos, you’re not even like me” (80). My interpretation of this passage is that Miss Lucy cannot bear the thought of the students who are, in essence, clones “pretending” to be real people, wanting to grow up to be actors; those who pretend for a living. Miss Emily’s outburst is instigated by the absurdity of the situation: a clone pretending to be a human, pretending to be another person. The students are already unwitting actors in a world which they know little about.

Further evidence of the theme of belonging is exemplified in the students’ urge to forge sexual and romantic relationships. “I’m keeping you”, says Ruth to Tommy (Ishiguro 149). The students make great efforts to “pair up” with one another. This demonstrates the students’ attempts to belong to one another via the means of a romantic or purely carnal relationship. Karl Shaddox recognises this in his essay on the theme of sentiment within the novel: “As “orphans”, separated from their models and shunned by society, the clones are forced to forge whatever connections they can between each other socially, sexually, and confidentially” (Shaddox 458). For the students, it is “completely impossible” for them to have children, due to them being sterile (Ishiguro 82). Sex is a hobby, but not completely without emotional attachments. Miss Emily warns the students that sex “affects emotions in ways you’d never expect” (82) and is a “really big deal between people” (96). Students seek out sexual relationships when they are as young as sixteen (Ishiguro 88), an activity which is predominantly linked with romantic partnerships. A crucial plot point involves Tommy and
Ruth’s desperate plea for a “deferral”. This is based on their incorrect assumptions that those in love are granted longer lives. Their lives may be saved, or at the very least prolonged, if they are seen to belong to each other.

Sexual and romantic relationships are not the only instances where the students can be viewed as belonging to each other. The friendships in the novel are significant in forming a sense of family. When Kathy, Tommy and Ruth are living at the Cottages, Kathy wonders “if one day we might all of us move into a place like that and carry on our lives together” (Ishiguro 142). Kathy and Ruth bicker like sisters in an exchange about what real families are like:

‘So that’s it, that’s what’s upsetting poor little Kathy. Ruth isn’t paying enough attention to her. Ruth’s got big new friends and baby sister isn’t getting played with so often…’ ‘Stop all that. Anyway, that’s not how it works in real families. You don’t know anything about it.’ ‘Oh Kathy, the great expert on families.’ (Ishiguro 122)

Kathy and Ruth demonstrate a lack of understanding of what it means to belong to a real family. Before they become lovers, Kathy is almost a maternal figure to Tommy. As children, Kathy reprimands him as if she is his mother: “‘Tommy,” I said, quite sternly. ‘There’s mud all over your shirt’” (Ishiguro 11). This sense of family is drummed into the students by the guardians. They are told that after Hailsham, there will be no more guardians and they are to “look after each other” (Ishiguro 115), yet the guardians are replaced as surrogate parents by the veterans at the Cottages, during a period which constitutes the students’ university years (Ishiguro 117).

Lucy writes of postmodernism that the emphasis lies on the surface, not on the depth of the signs (ix). In this reading of Never Let Me Go, the students’ lack of depth is exemplified by their attachment to their belongings. The dual meaning of the word belonging is one aspect that supports my reading and one which I believe to be the most intriguing. Throughout the novel, there are many instances where the students’ belongings are given great attention. My interpretation is that the characters’ belongings are motifs that reinforce the theme of belonging. Lengthy passages are devoted to the origins of things belonging to Tommy, Ruth and Kathy which may leave a reader feeling nonplussed at first glance. Kathy’s favourite cassette tape, Ruth’s pencil case, and Tommy’s favourite jumper are given special attention in the text. Kathy narrates of the importance of the cassette: “I still have it now. I
don’t play it much because the music has nothing to do with anything. It’s an object, like a brooch or a ring, and especially now Ruth has gone, it’s become one of my most precious possessions” (Ishiguro 75). The cassette tape is significant in that it holds memories of Hailsham and Tommy, an important place and person in her life – a place and a person which she has previously felt a sense of belonging with, but are now no longer with her.

There is also great significance given to the Sales and the Exchanges. These are events of cultural importance to the Hailsham students which give them opportunities to acquire, swap or sell the only things they truly own – their meagre possessions. The tokens controversy is seen as scandalous among the students as it involves other students feeling cheated out of Hailsham’s currency, the only thing that enables the students to buy more things (Ishiguro 38). In Baudrillard’s essay “The System of Objects” (1968), he writes that a consumer society offers the individual the opportunity for total fulfillment and liberation (Rivkin and Ryan 410). This concept is relatable to the students’ attachment to their belongings. The students have a sense of fulfillment and a modicum of freedom through the ownership of their things. Great drama in the students’ lives is caused by these objects, such as when Kathy catches Ruth in a lie about the true origin of her pencil case. Ruth insinuates to the others that one of the guardians has given her preferential treatment by giving her the pencil case as a gift, when, in fact, she has bought it herself (Ishiguro 56-8). The reason that these objects receive so much attention in the novel is to disguise what little else the students have.

In addition to this emphasis on objects, the references to Norfolk within the novel provide us with a “promised land” ideal. Norfolk is referred to as a place for “lost things” and as a “lost corner of England” (Ishiguro 189) suggesting a kind of home, safe haven or final destination for the students. One passage involves Kathy and Tommy searching for her lost tape in several second hand shops. This activity is a moment of pure happiness for Kathy, in particular, as she is moved by Tommy’s suggestion that they look for it. The search for the tape is a joyous activity for them both: “When I think about that moment now, standing with Tommy in the little side-street about to begin our search, I feel a warmth welling up through me. Everything suddenly felt perfect” (Ishiguro 168-169). Baudrillard writes of this phenomenon in “The System of Objects”: “The desire of the subject is no longer at the centre of the world. It is the destiny of the object which is at the centre” (qtd. in Genosko, ed. Kellner 293). This passage reinforces the belongings motif theory; a moment of joy in an otherwise very sombre novel is centred around an object that belongs to the narrator: a tape. The emphasis placed on the hunt for an object as trivial as a single cassette tape draws
one’s attention to the lack of anything truly meaningful in Kathy’s life. Norfolk being a home for “lost things” presents the idea that it is a place for things that do not belong to anyone, much like the students themselves. The fact that Kathy finds her lost tape in Norfolk contributes to it being regarded as a special place. Norfolk is a place where the lost things reside before they are reclaimed. In the students’ case, they will be reclaimed once it is time for them to begin donating their vital organs.

Late in the novel, a different object has a strange influence over the proceedings. Kathy and Tommy are eager to know the truth about the deferrals, while Miss Emily is preoccupied with the removal of her bedside cabinet. The vital revelation is comically interrupted by Miss Emily’s concern for one of her own belongings: “Unfortunately my dears, I won’t be able to entertain you for as long as I’d like just now, because in a short while some men are coming to take away my bedside cabinet. It’s quite a wonderful object” (Ishiguro 251-52). The object in this scene is important in that it curtails the meeting between Tommy, Kathy and Miss Emily. The object belonging to Miss Emily is more important to her than the fate of these “poor creatures” (267). What is notable here is that this passage concerns an object belonging to a character from the human world, not one of the clones. This is an example of the power which belongings have over characters on both sides within the narrative.

Another argument in support of my claim is the notion which concerns the students being the property of other people, namely their human counterparts. As well as not belonging anywhere other than Hailsham, the students do not even belong to themselves. It is revealed that each of the students were “copied at some point from a normal person” (Ishiguro 137). There is an important detail which indicates ownership: many characters are given an initial to denote a surname – Kathy H, Tommy D, Patricia C, Marge K, James B, Cynthia E, Christopher C, Christopher H, to name but a handful. If the students are manufactured to order, it brings forth the concept of people as commodities. This last frontier of consumerism is a concept which is connected with the postmodernist condition: “For some postmodernism signals a deplorable commodification of all culture, and the loss of tradition and value crucially embodied in the twentieth century and in modernist works” (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 198). The students, or rather their vital organs, are the commodities in question.

The loss of the human counterparts is a key absence in the text. One particularly telling passage involves the central trio of Kathy, Ruth and Tommy along with Chrissie and Rodney travelling to Norfolk in an attempt to find Ruth’s “possible”, the human from whom Ruth has been copied from. Their excitement at getting a genuinely good look at the possible
is notable because this provides Ruth with an opportunity to see a human – or real – version of herself. The fact that the suspected possible does not turn out to be Ruth’s human counterpart supports the argument that the students are never given a genuine look at how their lives could have been should they have lived “normal” lives: “Well I think we’re agreed, aren’t we? That isn’t Ruth” (Ishiguro 162). This is an example of the loss of the real in that Ruth has now lost hope in finding her original, the “real” version of herself.

I have discussed the way in which the students and Hailsham relate to the hyperreal/loss of the real, and the significance of belongings and ownership in my reading. A third area of discussion which relates to my claim about belonging is how the loss of the real can also be applied to the novel’s genre, or rather genres. The lack of information about the novel’s premise adds to the theme of belonging in a much broader sense. The students have little knowledge of the outside world, but neither does the reader. It is my belief that, in this reading, the students cannot truly belong to a world that they know and understand little of. As Monika Kilian writes, the postmodern concept of reality is a flexible one. From a postmodern perspective, we can never be really sure which is the one true reality (Kilian 50). This applies directly to this discussion. The ambiguity of the world of the novel plays a part in the reader’s understanding of what kind of a world it is. The lack of information in regard to the human world is instrumental in my interpretation of the theme of belonging, due to the uncertainties which develop.

Discussing his most recent novel The Buried Giant (2015) in an interview with The Guardian, Ishiguro compared his latest work to the reception Never Let Me Go received on its publication and the uproar concerning genre classification it caused with critics and readers alike. Ishiguro says: “I think genre should be porous, if not nonexistent. All the debate around Never Let Me Go was is it sci-fi or is it not?” (Cain n.p). Barry writes that the mixing of literary genres is one of the key concerns for postmodernist criticism, an exercise which commonly exemplifies the “disappearance of the real” (Barry 91). The central premise of Never Let Me Go revolves around human clones who are manufactured for organ harvesting. This is not a practice that is socially, ethically or medically accepted in our world, and therefore it is simple to give the novel a science-fiction label. The novel has even been categorised as detective fiction since the fullness of the students’ situation is revealed slowly, piece by piece; the students are slowly uncovering their own mystery (Query 156). But as M John Harrison points out in his review, the premise itself is rather implausible. He poses a very practical question in relation to the central premise: “How are the clones kept alive once they’ve begun ‘donating?’” He also questions how this type of medicine is made affordable
in a society that does not appear to as affluent as our own (Harrison n.p). The conundrum in this respect is that for a novel labelled as science-fiction, the reader is denied knowledge of the science. Harrison points out that “there is no science here” (n.p). Why, for example, is it “completely impossible” for the students to have children? The absence of science is an angle that interests Gabriele Griffin a great deal. She writes that Ishiguro’s novel “does not, as is common in science-fiction, make use of an invented, specialist vocabulary that references its own scienticity through words that connate expert knowledge and technicality” (649).

Admittedly, the novel is narrated by a clone who is not privy to knowledge of the system, but even when she becomes a carer there is still a loss of scientific terminology. Anjali Pandey points out that the word clone appears only twice in the novel (391).

What has caused Ishiguro trouble among critics since the publication of Never Let Me Go are his views that the cloning element is not completely central to the novel. He says that “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?” (Wroe n.p). In other interviews on the subject, the author has said that the dystopian premise “plays only a minor part” in the novel and that he was more interested in “the notions of how long we have on earth and human mortality” (qtd. in Query 155). Regardless of whether Ishiguro is interested or not in “the clone thing”, there remains an important question in relation to the central claim of this essay: where is the rest of the world? The dystopian premise is underplayed to the extent that it is conspicuous by its absence. The government that is responsible for the students’ predicament is never seen directly. Its power is only alluded to by the closing of Hailsham, which Kathy finds out through a friend (Ishiguro 207) and the fact that Ruth and Tommy begin their donations. The face of this practice is Hailsham, the guardians and the monitors, specifically Miss Emily. To provide a concept of fullness is very difficult in this instance as we are only privy to the students’ world. What happens in the outside world is a mystery. Aside from the trip to Norfolk in Chapter 12, we do not see the characters very much outside of their home environment. The human world is a mystery, as are the politics of the world that caused the main characters’ predicament. We learn of the motivations for cloning in Miss Emily’s final revelation. Cloning has brought about a cure for cancer, motor neurone disease and heart disease (Ishiguro 258). The donations programme began “after the war, in the early fifties, when the great breakthroughs in science followed one after the other so rapidly” (257). The dystopia is flippantly explained by Miss Emily. At no point in the novel are donations visibly enforced and the absence of these elements plays a
great role in picturing the kind of world that would approve such a practice. All references to actions of the government are discovered in rumours or scant, second hand information, passed on from person to person. Baudrillard himself has a salient point which is relevant to this discussion, and which can be used to defend Ishiguro’s stance on his indifference to genre. On science-fiction he writes that:

it is not about a parallel universe, a double universe, or even a possible universe – neither possible, impossible, neither real nor unreal: hyperreal – it is a universe of simulation which is something else altogether … science fiction has always … played on the double, on doubling, or redoubling, either artificial or imaginary, whereas here the double has disappeared, there is no longer a double, one is always already in the other world … without a mirror, a projection, or a utopia to reflect it. (Baudrillard 125)

This aligns with the notion that Ishiguro’s world is meant to be recognisable, or at least represent a possible world that the reader identifies with, but it does not completely match our own. The world and characters of Never Let Me Go are indeed hyperreal. What is perhaps important to recognise is that this is not our world. Ishiguro has created an alternative history – Kathy’s narration takes place in the 1990s, a time period which has already elapsed. In this world, lack of knowledge about the human world is a significant absence, one which highlights the alienation of the students and their subsequent lack of belonging. As Monika Kilian writes, in a postmodern context it is impossible to assess the “truth” of reality. Reality is not what we find, but what we make (35). The absence of information of the human world makes us question what sort of reality is present in the novel. With this is mind, it may now be appropriate to ask the question that Harrison asks of the novel: “how naturalistic is it supposed to be?” (n.p). To answer this, a sobering perspective on the concept of realism in literature is provided in Selden, Widdowson and Brooker:

No matter how formally constructed a work may be, we still often expect it to give us the illusion of the ‘real’. We expect literature to be ‘life-like’ and may be irritated by characters or descriptions which fail to match our common-sense expectations of what the real world is like. On the other hand … we become accustomed to all kinds of absurdities and improbabilities once we learn to accept a new set of conventions. (35)
In my reading, the hyperreal plays a part in the reader’s perception of realism. Hailsham, Tommy, Ruth and Kathy are all very “life-like”. We have a real sense of place in Hailsham due to the vital part it plays in the narrative. The main trio of characters are real in the sense that they act, talk and argue as real people do. In my interpretation, putting Hailsham and these characters in an absurd and improbable world – a hyperreal world where clones are manufactured for their vital organs – produces the theme of belonging. Kathy, Tommy and Ruth are simply not meant to belong anywhere.

In conclusion, the theme of belonging recurs throughout Never Let Me Go within three main areas. Firstly, the students do not belong to a specific place, other than the temporary, artificial home they have in Hailsham. The fact that the students are clones, or models of absent humans, heightens their lack of belonging in that they have no families. Hailsham, the institution directly linked with the fate of the students, is the only place where the students feel a genuine sense of belonging due to the relationships that are forged there. Kathy’s realisation of what life would be like without Hailsham is a key moment in identifying this theme. The students’ efforts to forge platonic, romantic and purely sexual relationships is an indicator of their need to belong to each other.

Secondly, the theme is illustrated via the motif of the characters’ belongings. These possessions are of paramount importance during their upbringing, providing comfort for the students. This masks the lack of depth and meaning in their lives. The few moments of true happiness that Kathy experiences centre around her belongings and events related to them. In connection with this area, the subject of ownership is important. The catalyst for the novel’s events is the students’ vital organs, which do not even belong to them. The students are owned by absent humans. This is an additional factor in alienating the students from the human world and adds to their lack of belonging.

The third area is the question of how the novel’s mixture of genres plays a role in the theme. This is primarily caused by a lack of detail revealed in connection with the novel’s dystopian premise. The absence of information of the human world includes how the cloning came about, how it is enforced, and who the “owners” of the students are. This results in a narrative which emphasises the drama but sidesteps the science-fiction. This scant knowledge of the novel’s human world alienates not only the students even further, but the reader as well. It is difficult to know how characters can belong in a fictional human world we know little about.
Baudrillard’s concepts prove to be productively helpful in this reading. His *loss of the real* and *hyperreal* concepts speak of signs and images which do not correspond with the realities they are supposed to represent. Hailsham, the epicentre of the students’ childhood, has been manufactured specifically for the purpose of a perfect childhood. The school is just one sign that masks the loss of a “real” life for the students. The main trio of characters in *Never Let Me Go* do not belong in the human world because they are not real people. Or, to use Baudrillard’s terminology, Kathy, Tommy and Ruth are *hyperreal*; neither real nor artificial, but something else entirely.
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