

Understanding sex
and infertility in never
let me go



Kazuo Ishiguro's science-fiction novel *Never Let Me Go* tells the heartbreaking story of Kathy H, a clone who is confined within the walls of Hailsham where she is guided into the life of becoming an organ donor. Kathy's life is spent at Hailsham awaiting her imminent death as an organ donor, and is placed under the strict authority of the guardians in order to protect herself and her body. For the entirety of their lives, everything that the clones at Hailsham have ever been able to achieve or obtain has been in the public eye, and often times their possessions are taken away from them by the guardians. As the clones grow older and begin to experience puberty, they come to realize that something they are in complete charge of and no one can take away from them or dictate is their own sex lives. In Ishiguro's coming-of-age novel, when Kathy and her fellow clones first begin to experience puberty and sexual urges, being infertile has a painfully distressing impact on the way they view and have sex. Kathy and the clones at Hailsham have an unsentimental attitude towards sex as a direct result of their non-reproductive nature. They attempt to perceive sex in the same manner that humans do, with care, respect, and caution; however, not being able to reproduce causes Kathy and the other clones to see sex as a game, and use it as a distraction from their lives as organ donors. By using Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, we are able to understand Kathy's unconscious desires of sex as a means of reproduction. Having a sex life was the first opportunity for Kathy and her peers at Hailsham to be able to experience a truly private and personal life that they are in control of.

Freud's theory of psychoanalysis has been a trademark for how we understand our conscious and unconscious desires. Freud distinguishes the

mind in three separate entities. First the conscious, which is our apparent desires which we focus our attention on. Second is the preconscious, which is derived from our memories and experiences. The third is the unconscious mind, which is where our primitive desires and impulses are held (Mcleod). Freud takes his theory of the unconscious mind further, and introduces the process of repression. By locking away certain events in our unconscious minds that are painful or disturbing, we are repressing them. The process of repression serves as a defence mechanism; however, those unconscious feelings and emotions can be redirected in other ways such as displacement, guilt, and aggression (ibid). In regard to sex, Freud's theory of psychoanalysis helps to understand Kathy's feelings of angst, confusion, and distress surrounding sex. Kathy's actions and behaviours serve as an explanation of her unconscious desire to be able to have sex with the ability to reproduce and have a future. Kathy's awareness that her life is going to end with her being cut open and her vital organs donated to strangers leads her to repress her fear of death and the unknown.

Even for clones, the excitement and arousal behind sex is still apparent. When the clones began to have sex, Ruth describes it as, " some parallel universe we all vanished off to where we had all this sex" (97). The clones embody feelings and emotions just as normal, living humans do, which interferes with the ways in which they engage in sex. The clones are taught to treat sex in the same manner that humans do in the real world, but are knowledgeable of the fact that their bodies are solely designed to become organ donors, and that they are unable to conceive or have a long, fulfilling life. Kathy discusses her first experience with sexual arousals and

excitement, claiming: “ I also spent a lot of time re-reading passages from books where people had sex, going over the lines again and again trying to tease out clues” (99). Living in Hailsham, life is ordinary, mundane, and stationary. The clones live under strict rules of the guardians and are unable to travel past the walls of Hailsham. The most excitement the clones get is when new t-shirts or pencil cases are shipped to the Sale. When the clones at Hailsham begin to enter puberty and understand more about sex, it becomes something both unfamiliar and exciting that can be explored. When Kathy and her peers first begin having sex, it gives them something completely outside of Hailsham and the lives of organ donors that can be kept personal and private. Once sex becomes something that is readily available, the clones use it as a distraction from the fact that their lives are often short and unfulfilling.

Although sex was something that the clones are in complete control over, they still are taught certain rules which govern the ways they are having and thinking about sex. Sex was taught to the students in Hailsham knowing that they already are, or are about to engage in sexual intercourse. Kathy recalls “ when the guardians first started giving us proper lectures about sex, they tended to run them together with talk about donations” (83). The guardians teach sexual education, while simultaneously reiterating the belief that when the clones are having sex, it was not for the purpose of reproduction, but for pleasure. The guardians did not particularly want the students at Hailsham to engage in sex; however, they are not able to refrain them from doing so. In order to strike fear and caution around exploring their sexual behaviours and urges, Kathy and the clones are told that the vagina can rip, and “ it could be

painful and a big failure if you didn't get wet enough" (98). The idea behind sex is that it is both something the students should be engaging in, but that they also should refrain from. The clones are taught that due to their non-reproductive nature, there are no consequences or risks of pregnancy, but there still are few circumstantial elements that one should be cautious of, such as infections, diseases, and heartbreak. The clones at Hailsham are taught about sex in a contradictory manner which ultimately leads to their confusion, but also exhilaration.

The manner in which the guardians teach sexual education is highly unusual. Kathy recalls being slightly disturbed by Miss Emily bringing in two life-size skeletons where she demonstrates certain sex positions and the mechanics behind sexual intercourse. Miss Emily reveals all of the sexual areas of the body, but also warns the clones about the possibility of emotional attachment after engaging in sex. Miss Emily advises the clones to be sure about who they decide to sleep with — not only because of sexually transmitted infections — but because “sex affects emotions in ways you'd never expect” (83). Kathy recognizes that the ways in which people have sex in the real world is different because there is a real possibility of a woman becoming pregnant. Deciding who to have sex with in the real world is a serious decision because of the risk of pregnancy, while at Hailsham pregnancy was not possible, and thus, having sex is deemed as inconsequential, aside from the potential heartbreak or sexually transmitted diseases or infections. Despite knowing that one could engage in sex without ever having the risk of pregnancy, Kathy explains: “we had to respect the rules and treat sex as something pretty special” (84).

Once the clones at Hailsham began engaging in sexual behaviours, they started to create their own customs and regulations around it. For instance, Kathy explains “[w]hen someone wanted sex with you, that too was much more straightforward. A boy would come up and ask if you wanted to spend the night in his room ‘for a change’” (127). Sex became a phenomenon where it was often spoken of and regarded as a game. The clones had even created a game at Hailsham called “rounders” which gives the boys a chance to flirt with the girls. Sex at Hailsham is challenging to understand, because the clones have to be cautious of infections or diseases in order to protect their bodies as organ donors, but they also are able to have unprotected sex without the risk of pregnancy. Kathy compares sex at Hailsham to sex in the real world, and explains sex for clones as a fun, and riveting experience. Kathy is able to have a lot of sexual partners because she is infertile and does not have to concern herself with who the potential father would be. Kathy claims that, “the reason it meant so much — so much more than say, dancing or table-tennis — was because the people out there were different from us students: they could have babies from sex” (84). Kathy comparing having sex at Hailsham to dancing and table-tennis reiterates the notion that Kathy views sex as a game, or distraction. Kathy also describes the rule about not discussing being organ donors and not discussing sex something they often joke about. Kathy claims, “it became something we made jokes about, in much the way we joked about sex” (84). Kathy and the clones desire to give sex a proper function, and despite the inability to do so as a result of infertility, treating sex as if it were a game, or a joke gives them a distraction from the harsh realities of Hailsham and their lives as organ donors.

As organ donors, protecting one's body was necessary practice among the clones at Hailsham. When Kathy and her peers begin entering the stages of puberty and engaging in sexual intercourse, they attempt to normalize the changes occurring to their bodies and the new sexual urges they experience. The guardians never portray sex as deviant or forbidden, but as something to be cautious of. Ruth argues that guardians "want us to do it properly, with someone we like, and without getting diseases" (97). Kathy and the other young girls at Hailsham are reminded by the guardians of "how important it was not to be ashamed of our bodies, to 'respect our physical needs,' [and] how sex was 'a very beautiful gift' as long as both people really wanted it" (95). Despite the guardians' abnormal methods of teaching sexual education, they ensure that Kathy and all of the other female clones are taught most importantly to respect themselves and protect their bodies. In doing so, sex becomes something that does not need to be repressed, and gives Kathy and the clones something that makes them feel human. What is repressed is the fact that as organ donors, their lives are coming to an unavoidable end and their organs will be donated to humans in order to save their lives and give them a future. Kathy and the clones' futures are taken away from them so that they can donate their organs to other humans, and give others a life, rather than having a life of their own.

Kathy and the other females at Hailsham are told during early teenage years that as organ donors, they are unable to conceive. The clones are living for the sole purpose of being able to donate their vital organs to other humans, and will be completed by the time they reach middle-age. The clones at Hailsham are not ignorant to the outside world. They are able to see films,

photos, and read all about families and children. Being so knowledgeable about the outside world, and knowing that the world they are living is filled with barriers is a depressing and hardening obstacle to overcome. The clones desire for a family and wish to be able to have children, but are told from an early on in life that a family and children is not something within their reach. Although the inability for Kathy and the clones to conceive is not something that they publicly anguish or mourn over, it has a distressing impact on their unconscious desires. Kathy was caught at a young age by Madame swaying with a pillow held tightly in her arms, as if it was a child. At the time, Kathy was so young that she had not been told yet that she was unable to conceive, yet somehow knew that she was infertile. Kathy explains her unconscious feelings, stating that, “[i]t’s just possible that I picked up on the idea when I was younger without fully registering it” (73). When Madame saw her, she stood outside in the hall bawling, without saying a word. Kathy came to the realization later in life that Madame was crying for her because of the sympathy she felt that Kathy will never be able to procreate. Looking back to Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, Kathy is demonstrating her unconscious desire as she holds a pillow that she imagines is a child. Kathy from a young age shows a desire to have a baby, and when she realizes that she is infertile, it becomes an unconscious desire that follows her through adulthood.

Kathy also demonstrates her desire to have a child through music. One of Kathy’s most precious belongings that she kept safe during her time at Hailsham was a Judy Bridgewater tape called “ Songs After Dark.” Kathy repeatedly listens to her tape any chance she can, and was careful to only

listen when no body was around incase they stole it from her. Kathy's fondness with the tape became almost an obsession. The song that Kathy is most partial to is called, " Never Let Me Go," and [she] was specifically fond of the line Judy sings: "[n]ever let me go ... oh baby, baby ... never let me go..." (70). What Kathy finds so special about this song in particular, is that she believes the lyrics are about an actual child. Kathy claims " I just waited for that bit that went: ' baby, baby, never let me go ...' And what I'd imagine was a woman who'd been told she could never have babies, who'd really, really wanted them all her life. Then theres a sort of miracle and she has a baby" (70). Kathy subconsciously associates a romantic love song to an infertile mother. Kathy places herself into the song, living vicariously through the lyrics hoping and imaging that one day she will miraculously have a baby. Although Kathy is not openly struggling with being infertile, her unconscious desire has an effect on how she perceives music and lyrics.

The clone's at Hailsham and the Cottages have a very unsentimental attitude towards sex as they experience puberty, despite being taught otherwise. Kathy and her peers create theories as to whether or not sex is functional in order to have healthy organs. Kathy explains one of the many theories that: " it was their duty to make us have sex because otherwise we wouldn't be good donors later on. According to her, things like your kidneys and pancreas didn't work unless you kept having sex" (98). The clones have all of the exact same bodily functions and are able to engage in sex as normal humans would, yet are infertile and hold no chance of creating a future for themselves. The ways in which the guardians at Hailsham approach the idea of sex makes it seem as if sex is unnatural. If they are not

able to conceive, then having sex was purely for the sake of pleasure. The primary function of sexual intercourse is to conceive a child; however, for the clones, there is no necessary function that sex serves. Although sex was becoming common practice in Hailsham, once Kathy and her peers entered the stages of puberty, they sought to give sex a function in order to make them feel better about it, even though there was no possibility of procreation.

Kathy does not see her sexual urges as natural, and believes that her possible (the original person she was cloned from) must have been a porn star or sex worker. Kathy believes that her sexual urges are deviant and attempts suppresses her desires because she is infertile. Given that there is no proven purpose or function for her to have sex other than pleasure, Kathy becomes disgusted with herself. Kathy only realizes that she is not the only clone experiencing sexual desires when Tommy confronts her about reading porn magazines and her desires, and explains that she is not alone. Despite Tommy's efforts in consoling Kathy, her unconscious desires lead her to feeling isolated and lonely in her sex life. Kathy is battling her sexual emotions, and as a result, finds her self feeling hostile towards Ruth — who is undeniably having regular sex with Tommy — and is sleeping with boys at Hailsham who she does not care for. Kathy confides in Ruth, explaining that, “[t]here might be something not quite right with me, down there. Because sometimes I just really, really need to do it” (128). Ruth immediately disagrees with Kathy telling her that her sexual urges are unnatural. Kathy having a great deal of one-nighters can be seen as her repressed fear of death coming out through her intense sexual urges. Kathy is knowledgeable

that she is going to die and that her organs will be dispersed. Thereby, having sex gives her something to distract and occupy herself. Kathy struggles to feel normal with her sex life; however, it is inevitable that without being able to procreate, the sex the clones are having is solely for fun, pleasure, and distraction.

Once the clones at Hailsham began having sex and discussing it more openly among one another, the novelty surrounding ones virginity becomes distressing. Being a virgin was seen as juvenile, and embarrassing. Those who are not having sex wanted to be. However, Kathy and the other girls are unsure exactly who was having sex, and also, if the sex they are having is proper. Kathy explains that even though the girls speak openly about sex, they do not press one another on the details or ask intimate questions incase one may be lying about their virginity and is unable to answer. Kathy gives an example by stating: “ if say Hannah rolled her eyes when you were discussing another girl and murmured: ‘ Virgin’ — meaning of ‘ of course we’re not, but she is, so what can you expect?’” (98). As sex becomes a phenomenon at Hailsham, being a virgin is something that the clones look down upon. Sex is a challenging and distressing for the women at Hailsham to experience. There are limits placed on sex, yet it is even worse to be identified as a virgin. It was encouraged to be engaging in sex regularly, yet it was frowned upon to be having a great deal of sex and experiencing constant, intense sexual urges because to them, sex has no function other than a distraction.

When Kathy struggles with her developed sexuality as she fights her strong sexual urges as she goes through puberty, she has sex with a number of

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different boys at Hailsham. Despite the belief that sex was inconsequential, and everyone was having it, there are still rules which govern the appropriate amount of sex or sexual partners one is permitted to have. Those — especially females — who have a more than average amount of sexual partners are seen as having a lack of respect for themselves. This stems from the guardians teaching the girls to respect sex, and, “ if you can’t find someone with whom you truly wish to share this experience with, then don’t!” (98). Towards the end of the novel when Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy are at the cottages, there is a vast amount of tension that arises between Kathy and Ruth. Tensions which stem perhaps from Kathy’s undeniable crush on Ruth’s boyfriend, Tommy. Ruth faults Kathy for her number of sexual partners and tells her that Tommy would never date her. Ruth claims “ I know he doesn’t see you like, you know, a proper girlfriend ... Tommy doesn’t like girls who’ve been with ... well, you know, with this person and that” (201). Ruth reinforces what the clones had been taught by the guardians — that sex was something to be respected and to only engaged in when certain.

Not only was the idea surrounding sex discomfoting and uncanny at Hailsham, but love and dating also became new phenomenon. Those who are in a relationship are perceived as happy and satisfied, while those who are not in a relationship desire to be in one. Sex with a boyfriend was private, and limitless, while having sex when you are single comes with certain rules and restrictions. Kathy’s desire for a partner stems from her intense sexual urges. Later in the novel once Kathy becomes a carer, she inevitably begins to date Tommy. Rumours spread among Hailsham that if

two people are in love, they can request a deferral from donation in order to spend more time with one another prior to death. Many couples from Hailsham and the Cottages attempt to be granted a deferral claiming to be in love; however, after Kathy and Tommy met with Madame to make their request, they realize that they were sadly misled. The clones believe that being in love could defer their inevitable death suggests that they embody true humanistic qualities. They acknowledge that having proper relationships, sex, and heterosexual qualities is what makes them human (Garlick 151). Kathy and the clones believe that if they are able to embody all of the qualities that make them human (aside from fertility), they are thus, one step closer to becoming humans and escaping their ordained lives as donors.

Throughout the novel, Kathy struggles with her unconscious desires of sex and fertility. Kathy understands sex as a form of diversion due to of being infertile, but experiences a challenging and distressing time during puberty as she is forced to try and suppress her sexual urges. The way sex is represented at Hailsham is not black-and-white, and comes with many rules and regulations which shape the way that the students at Hailsham perceive, and engage in sex. These rules and regulations are both a product of the guardians lectures and the clones perceptions. Using Freud's theory of the conscious, the preconscious the unconscious, we are able to understand Kathy's emotions and actions through her years of puberty. Kathy's conscious is apparent as she understands her infertility and life devoted to becoming an organ donor. Kathy demonstrates her preconscious throughout the entire novel, as she recalls her experiences at Hailsham, and is able to

look back on certain events and recognize the realities of what she had endured. For instance, when Kathy recalls Madame crying outside her bedroom door when she is dancing with a pillow, it is because Kathy will never be able to have a child. Kathy's unconscious desire is shown through her obsession with the song "Never Let Me Go" and the connotations of fertility she wrongly attaches to it. Kathy openly accepts her life as a donor, yet her unconscious desires are truly to have a family. Her non-reproductive nature changes the way she has sex because although it may seem inconsequential and liberating because she is unable to have a child, she places a deeper emphasis on sex because it has no apparent function aside from a distraction. Not having a function or a proper lover to engage in sexual intercourse with has led Kathy to see sex as inconsequential. Kathy represses her fear of death and the unknown as an organ donor, and as a result, her repressions are redirected as she indulges in sex as a means of distraction and amusement.

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