

Never let me go:  
analyzing and  
evaluating the film  
adaptation



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Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* highlights the human tendency to create hope when forced to confront a harsh reality. In the novel, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy gradually learn of their predetermined fates as clones to donate their organs, yet they continue to hope for a better future. Romanek's film adaptation of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* somewhat deviates from the novel's portrayal of the necessity of hope in accepting reality, thus developing the relationship between hope and reality to a limited extent.

The film places less emphasis on symbols in the students' childhoods at Hailsham, weakening the development of the role of hope as the clones begin to understand their reality. Romanek cuts out the pencil case incident, during which Ishiguro demonstrates Ruth's ability to hope. The pencil case symbolizes Ruth's desire for an emotional bond through special treatment, not simply superiority among the students. In the novel, Kathy's confrontation with Ruth subverts her act of deception, essentially stripping her of her hope of forming emotional connections. However, Kathy's immediate regret for exposing the truth, as she expresses her guilt on page 60 for "[upsetting her] dearest friend" who had only "fibbed a little," places greater fault on herself. In mitigating the severity of the lie, Kathy illustrates Ishiguro's commentary on the importance of holding on to hope, despite both the characters' knowledge that Ruth's hope is an impossibility, a forbidden gesture of favoritism. In cutting this scene, Romanek's adaptation does not effectively illustrate the role of hope in Ruth's character, who, in the novel, still retains hope, though less visible. Therefore, the film loses this facet of conveying Ishiguro's comments on maintaining hope, even in a character that attempts to mask it.

At Hailsham, the film partially translates the significance of hope in reality through emphasis on the students' collections. As the students in the novel find difficulty comprehending the larger world, they attempt to find meaning in their collections. The collections give them a purpose, allowing the students to preoccupy themselves as a way of coping with confronting reality. Romanek highlights the collections through a series of close up shots, demonstrating their significance to the clones in that they fuel hope for a fulfilled life before completion. However, this symbol in the film more effectively communicates ideas relating to the dehumanization of the clones and their low positions in society, rather than the importance of hope, because the film lacks the scene of the clones discussing their collections on page 131, in which Ruth insists to Keffer that hers consists of "' really good stuff,'" and later wishes she had kept it. Even as she attempts to discard her collection, Ruth recognizes the value of the items, a view that contrasts with that of Keffer, who in this situation embodies reality. Though in conflict, reality yields to hope, as Keffer agrees to take Ruth's collection. Ishiguro establishes the collections, with their strong connections to Hailsham, as a symbol of the clones' hopeful youths. With Ruth's reflection upon throwing away her collection, the prominence of their hope as adults further highlights Ishiguro's comments on maintaining hope to thrive in reality. In cutting the conversation between Kathy and Ruth, the film does not effectively develop the symbol of the collections as the novel does, instead focusing more on societal issues than on the necessity of hope.

Additionally, the essays from Hailsham are not present in the film. In the novel, Kathy imagines how she would write her essay when she first arrives

at the Cottages. She states on page 115 that they “ helped keep us afloat,” among the “ powerful tides tugging us apart,” as the essay acts as a thread that ties the Hailsham students to their childhoods. Kathy’s daydreaming about her essay displays the hopefulness she had experienced during her youth and her tendency to return to that period to escape reality. The references to water further convey this attachment to childhood and its conflict with reality, because the clones cling to the essays as a representation of Hailsham that aid in their survival outside of the sheltered school. The statement also demonstrates the strength of their hope with the clones’ ability to resist the “ powerful tides” attempting to strip them of hope. Without this symbol connecting the clones to their childhoods, the film lacks Kathy’s fondness of her hopeful youth as well as all the clones’ eventual dismissal of the task that signifies their ultimate loss of this thread of hope.

In altering the narratology of the novel, the film ineffectively communicates the cassette tape’s significance to Kathy as symbol of her hope that extends throughout her life. Romanek adds to his adaptation Tommy’s buying Kathy the cassette tape at a Sale. This change establishes the tape as a symbol of affection between the two characters and makes the significance of the tape and the film as a whole more concentrated on the characters’ relationships, and less on the dreams that manifest from the tape and the hope it provides. Romanek’s choice to center Kathy’s tape around romantic relationships detracts from Ishiguro’s comments on the need for hope to thrive in reality, ultimately creating a more shallow relationship between hope and reality.

In the film, Ruth is the one who sees Kathy hugging a pillow while listening to the tape instead of Madame. With its significance to Tommy and Kathy's relationship, in Ruth's eyes, the tape symbolizes a secret connection between the two that excludes her. In replacing Madame with Ruth, the film emphasizes Kathy and Ruth's competition for Tommy's love and hinders the development of Madame's character, who sees the pillow as a portrayal of the kinder old world. Madame's lessened significance in the film minimizes her continual presence in the novel that serves as a constant reminder of the clones' reality. This change significantly detracts from Ishiguro's comments on hope and reality, because the peacefulness of the scene in the novel in which Kathy fantasizes of her hopes contrasts sharply with Madame's sobbing, a shocking reminder of reality. Ishiguro describes on page 71 the crying that "[jerks Kathy] out of [her] dream" and causes her to "[freeze] in shock." The diction in this statement highlights the abrupt intrusion of reality into Kathy's fantasy. In creating this contrast, Ishiguro reflects the state of the hope each character retains: Kathy is hopeful, having not fully comprehended her role in society, while Madame has already confronted the harsh realities of the clones' lives and is consequently moved by Kathy's actions. For Kathy, the tape embodies her innocence at Hailsham, but for Madame, the tape evokes the cruelty of the world. Even as an adult, Kathy can still find happiness in her tape, despite having acknowledged reality, because it symbolizes her hopeful childhood. Ishiguro proves that she is still hopeful, and thus she can cherish the small instances of hope, such as the tape. With this, Ishiguro suggests that the ability to hope is a more rewarding approach to facing reality, as the absence of hope in Madame, who

recognizes the darkness of reality on page 266 when she tells Tommy his life  
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must ““ run the course that’s been set,”” establishing that she has lost hope and given in to society’s principles, leads her to experience a level of grief. Romanek’s film loses this conflict of reactions and subsequently the commentary on the clones’ humanity and ability to hope within strict confines as a necessary quality that aids in the characters’ survival in reality.

The film also omits Kathy’s losing the tape. In the novel, losing the tape introduces another aspect of hope: the belief that lost things can be found again. Kathy and Tommy cling to the memory of the tape, refusing to give up their hope to restore their childhood innocence and the freedom to dream. After finding the tape in Norfolk, Kathy states on page 180, ““ Judy Bridgewater. My old friend,”” demonstrating her strong, lasting connection to her childhood. Recovering the tape is a reminder that there is a chance that not all missing things are permanently lost. Kathy maintains this source of hope throughout her life, identifying the tape on page 64 as one of her ““ most precious possessions”” that she does not ““ dare to play”” in her car’s failing tape machine. Ishiguro portrays Kathy with a sense of fear of losing the tape, which suggests the importance of the hope it represents. Even after understanding the impossibility of the fantasy of Kathy’s interpretation of the song, the tape remains a constant in her life that she holds on to, proving its significance to her, not only in her naive childhood, but also in adulthood when she understands reality. In cutting this storyline, the film loses commentary on the necessity of maintaining hope as a source of motivation to continue through and find greater ease in accepting a harsh reality.

Additionally, Romanek's film only somewhat develops Norfolk as a symbol, representing the possibility of a continued existence, thus not fully articulating the significance of hope in reality expressed in Ishiguro's novel. During the trip to Norfolk, the film does not emphasize Ruth's dream to work an office job and her secret hope for that fantasy to translate into reality. Romanek's adaptation weakens the development of the complexity of Ruth's character. It displays Ruth's excitement more plainly, unlike in the novel when Kathy notes on page 146 that Ruth had "gone out of her way" to convince the veterans, whom she views as superior, that she "wasn't very serious" about "finding her possible." While Ishiguro's character hides her desire for the possible to be a correct match, she also acts in an eager manner from which Kathy can discern her true excitement. Rather than convey Ruth's suppressed hope, Romanek illustrates a sense of unguarded enthusiasm, which Ruth's openly displays to Kathy. Due to this change, the film does not prove the significance of hope to Ruth, because in the novel, Ruth, despite her wish to appear mature to the veterans, nevertheless retains an internal sense of hope. Although she does not truly believe that the possible is a correct match, she suspends her disbelief in favor of hope. As Kathy accepts this behavior and the other clones all encourage Ruth to pursue her possible, Ishiguro praises the ability to retain hope to thrive within a restrictive reality. Therefore, Romanek's changes cause the film adaptation to lose this approval of hoping despite knowing there is no option outside of facing one's inevitable fate.

In another departure from the novel, Romanek's characters do not follow Ruth's possible through Norfolk and into an art gallery, only viewing her from

outside an office window. Therefore, Romanek depicts Ruth's hope to only a limited extent, because although certain shots, in which Ruth leaves the window last, capture a slight sense of Ruth's hope that the possible is her original, the choice to shorten and condense the trip inhibits the film from fully conveying the relationship between hope and reality. As Ruth's primary source of hope, the chase after her possible in the novel that is eliminated from the film minimizes the development of Ruth's hope.

Romanek's adaptation of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* develops to a limited extent the relationship between hope and reality, as it somewhat deviates from Ishiguro's portrayal of hope as a necessary trait in the acceptance of reality. While the clones' passivity toward completion that Ishiguro depicts is a reflection of the universal human response to death, the novel advocates for retaining hope despite an inevitable mortality. However, this commentary is not fully conveyed in Romanek's film, which alters the narratology in such a way that minimizes the significance of symbols of the clones' hope, thus detracting from the novel's comments on the relationship between hope and reality.