

A Landscape Lullaby?

The Function of (Post-) Pastoral Elements in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Published in 2005, Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* presents a vision of a society where clones are raised to donate their vital organs.¹ Because of the dystopian elements in the narration,² one might expect a setting in a futuristic environment. Instead, the story takes place mainly in pastoral visions of the English countryside. This distinct setting creates a stark contrast to the characters' harsh reality, which is gradually revealed throughout the narrative. In this article, I argue that the novel complicates the pastoral and offers new perspectives on the relationship of humans and nature by incorporating post-pastoral elements. In order to investigate the contrast between the dystopian reality and its peaceful setting, the pastoral initially provides a useful lens. The concept is an "ancient cultural tool" often found in literature, which is used to express humanity's relationship to the land and natural surroundings (Gifford, "Post-Pastoral" 15; "Reading Strategies" 45).³ It is extended by approaches like the anti-pastoral and the post-pastoral. By primarily following Terry Gifford's theoretical understandings, I will use these concepts for an analysis of the novel's descriptions of nature, choice of language and narrative structure. I will mainly focus on the depiction of Hailsham, a boarding school for clones, because this offers insights into the characters' ways of handling their fate and the importance of their childhood

¹ Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Vintage, 2005.: further references in the text abbreviated as "NLMG".

² A dystopia is literally a "bad place" and an imagined society that is unpleasant in every way (Abrams and Harpham 378). The political and social order is controlled by the state and (bio-) technology plays an important role for that, as represented by the cloning in *Never Let Me Go* (378; see Baccolini and Moylan 3).

³ In this context, the relationship between humans and nature will also be expanded to the relationship to clones.

surroundings throughout their lives.

The novel's portrayal of Hailsham, where the main characters, Kathy, Ruth and Tommy, are raised, incorporates visions that show aspects typical of the pastoral concept. The school is located in a peaceful setting, sheltered in "a smooth hollow with fields rising on all sides" (NLMG 34). It is reminiscent of an idyllic Renaissance country-house, "one of the privileged estates" (44; see Lilley 63). Nature is described as calm, at the "pond, you'd find a tranquil atmosphere waiting, with ducks and bulrushes and pondweed" (NLMG 25). The descriptions of Hailsham represent the pastoral focus on country-life with a landscape characterised by spontaneous, actual elements of nature (Andrews 4; Gifford, "Pastoral" 1). Furthermore, Malcolm Andrews includes an order established by humans in the characteristics of the pastoral landscape (4). This is represented in Hailsham with "rhubarb patches" and "shrubs and flowerbeds" as signs of human cultivation (NLMG 25, 34). Origin of the pastoral concept is the life of shepherds talking about an idealised landscape (Gifford, "Pastoral" 1). The presence of animal images in the novel, such as Tommy's drawings, further allude to the pastoral's traditional depiction of nature (NLMG 178).

The place's pastoral notion is underlined by Kathy's memories of it as an adult and carer for donors (NLMG 115, 286). Seeing images of nature often reminds her of Hailsham, for example she states that

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. (6)

These kinds of passages usually introduce flashbacks to her childhood, so that Kathy's mind wandering off is represented in the narrative structure set up of memory fragments until the bigger picture of the exploitation system is revealed. Kathy's memories of Hailsham are often described as nostalgic, which too is one of the main characteristics of the pastoral (Gifford, "Reading Strategies" 44; *NLMG* 116). Gifford expands this nostalgia to the "Golden Age", an idealised view on the past as a whole ("Reading Strategies" 55). In the novel, Kathy's memories are presented in a metaphorically similar way, "they tend to blur into each other as a kind of golden time, and when I think about them at all, even the not-so-great things, I can't help feeling a sort of glow" (*NLMG* 77). Pastoral notions are therefore present throughout Kathy's life as she remembers Hailsham.

The nostalgic view of the past is based on an idealised and simplified conception of Hailsham. When Tommy and Kathy see an actual photograph of Hailsham in their later life, it is "just a bit of countryside", unlike their memories (*NLMG* 250; see Lilley 65). This represents the simplifying quality of pastoral writing incorporating idealised descriptions of nature and foregrounding the positive aspects of the places it refers to (Gifford, "Reading Strategies" 46, 53–54). Similarly, Kathy's descriptions of Hailsham mostly ignore negative aspects, such as her likely envy of Ruth and Tommy's romantic relationship. The novel's narrative structure strengthens this effect in omitting certain time periods of the clones' lives. Kathy's memories represent a desire for stability, contrasting the past against the frightening circumstances of her adult life (Williams 60). Hailsham's depiction therefore fits Deborah Lilley's understanding of it being "less a place in itself than a particular way of looking at place" (65).

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The pastoral is sometimes subject to criticism because its simplifying character does not represent ecological or economic problems (Gifford, "Pastoral" 2, "Post-Pastoral" 14). In Ishiguro's novel, the simplification complicates the dystopian reality of the cloning system. At Hailsham, the clones are "kept away from the worst of those horrors" and do not really grasp their future until much later (*NLMG* 261). A teacher later recollects that if they had provided them with more knowledge about their future as organ donors, their "happiness at Hailsham would have been shattered" (268). Hailsham therefore represents the limited view of the pastoral in its concealing function regarding the cloning system (Lilley 64). This highlights the contrast to the dystopian truth even more. Lilley argues that "the pastoral is used to manage and to explore the tensions between appearances and reality" (61, 64). A receptiveness to problematising contexts, such as the dystopian, underlines the ongoing relevance of the pastoral concept for literary writing (62).

Despite the critique of simplification, Hailsham's pastoral conception has an important function throughout the clones' lives. For example, Kathy's childhood memories serve as a calming solace for the hardships of her adult life: "Once I'm able to have a quieter life, in whichever centre they send me to, I'll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that'll be something that no one can take away" (*NLMG* 286–87). This calmness, which originates in spending her childhood in a peaceful place, can be seen as an allusion to another characteristic of the pastoral, namely the mind-expanding effect of intense contact with nature and the ensuing return to urban civilisation with new insights (Gifford, "Pastoral" 2; "Reading Strategies" 45, 53). The peaceful effect of Hailsham accompanies the clones beyond their time there. Kathy even seems to be able to transfer the calmness to the donors when telling them about Hailsham (*NLMG* 3, 5). Similarly, Lilley argues that places influence plots, which

the novel represents in the form of increasingly occurring elements that are not pastoral, such as motorways, as the clones get older (64). These elements represent the growing confusions in the clones' lives and strengthen their need for comfort represented by Hailsham. This calming function also prevents the clones from questioning the system.

The novel's incorporation of dystopian elements mainly refers to the cloning system. Lilley argues that the clones show a failure of the pastoral, which suggests that they be seen as anti-pastoral elements in the novel (64). The anti-pastoral concept generally offers a more realistic alternative to pastoral idealisation (Gifford, "Reading Strategies" 56). Nature is conceptualised as cold, its descriptions representing harsh reality and problems ("Pastoral" 119–20; "Reading Strategies" 57). In contrast to the pastoral, negative human impact on nature is not concealed but incorporated as warnings ("Pastoral" 124). The narrative, however, shows the contrast between the pastoral visions and the dystopian reality in a subtler way than the anti-pastoral. Unpleasant realities such as the donation surgeries are not explicitly articulated. Especially the language choices conceal the horror of the system. Beyond the clones' childhood, euphemisms such as "to complete" instead of anti-pastoral phrasings like "to die" are used (*NLMG* 279). Descriptions of nature are not harsh, the only sign alluding to an unpleasant reality are the dark woods surrounding Hailsham, in which people allegedly disappear (Lilley 65; Fischer 31; *NLMG* 50). The novel therefore appears very calm regarding its dystopian elements and shows subtle contrasts rather than harsh realities.

As analysed above, the novel represents the still frequent use of the pastoral in British literary writing, but also shows contradictions that are relevant for a post-pastoral approach (Lilley 61). Developed by Gifford, this concept is located between the pastoral and the anti-pastoral and investigates multifaceted themes connected to the relationship between nature and humans ("Pastoral" 150; "Post-Pastoral" 15, 17, 21; "Reading Strategies"

59). Therefore, the post-pastoral is an eligible lens which can be used to further investigate the complex effects of the novel's setting. It is defined by six criteria aiming to establish a respectful relationship to nature, of which selected aspects will be applied to the novel ("Post-Pastoral" 17–18, 21, "Reading Strategies" 59). What is crucial is the post-pastoral aim to develop a certain consciousness to result in conscience ("Reading Strategies" 61). Whereas in the past, e.g. during the Enlightenment, consciousness was seen as a factor distinguishing humanity from nature, the post-pastoral aims at the development of conscience to avoid nature exploitation. Humanity should not only be conscious of its position relating to nature but have a respectful relationship with it ("Pastoral" 163).

The post-pastoral is therefore concerned with the development of awe and humility regarding nature to overcome human hubris (Gifford, "Reading Strategies" 59). The novel incorporates elements that show how the characters acknowledge nature's power, which contributes to their calmness established in the pastoral environment ("Pastoral" 152–53; "Reading Strategies" 58). Tommy uses a nature image as a metaphor for his and Kathy's relationship:

I keep thinking about this river somewhere, with the water moving really fast. And these two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, holding on as hard as they can, but in the end it's just too much. The current's too strong. They've got to let go, drift apart. (*NLMG* 282)

The characters seem to have internalised a certain 'natural way' of things, which might be why they are able to cope with their fate in a comparatively calm way. This calmness, which is rooted in awe developed towards nature in a post-pastoral way, can here be seen as an extension of the pastoral calmness. Their upbringing in the peaceful surroundings of Hailsham has not only led to the clones being lulled by nature, but they have internalised a respectful relationship to the natural way of things.

The development of awe also encompasses the acknowledgement that humans “are part of nature’s creative-destructive processes” (Gifford, “Reading Strategies” 44, 60). In contrast to the pastoral suppressing negative aspects, the post-pastoral follows the bio-centric assumption that “neither growth nor decay are dominant” and acknowledges death as equal to birth (“Pastoral” 153; “Reading Strategies” 44, 60). In *Never Let Me Go*, the creative-destructive power of nature is subverted. The clones cannot experience a natural life cycle in a post-pastoral sense because humans decide their death. This reality represents the presumed superiority of humans over nature in that the cloning system is designed to compensate nature’s actual shortcomings, such as illnesses (Lilley 64, 67). The novel therefore hints at critiquing this superiority of humans that the post-pastoral wants to overcome as well. Despite facing an unnatural fate, the clones are able to develop a certain awe towards nature and appear relatively calm, which underlines the pastoral and post-pastoral notions in the novel.

Another way to establish a respectful relationship between nature and human is to eliminate the opposition between those categories. By being a newly emerged category situated between nature and human, the clones have the power to subvert and therefore even extend the post-pastoral. Despite them being artificially created by humans, they are situated close to nature. While in a post-pastoral sense, it would actually not be possible for them to find peace in their non-natural death, they nevertheless appear calm. The pastoral environment of their upbringing, therefore, exactly fulfils their increased need for comfort and their acknowledgment of nature further contributes to their calmness. It is likely that by the cautious reveal of their fate in a pastoral environment, the clones see the cloning system as natural, even though it is the direct opposite. Furthermore,

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the cultural enhancement of the clones hint at a placing in-between categories. This relationship of nature and culture is also focused on by the post-pastoral and aims at the elimination of binaries (Gifford, “Pastoral” 163; “Reading Strategies” 61). The clones are educated in Hailsham and engage with practises regarded as cultural classics such as art, drama and poetry (*NLMG* 17). The novel raises the question if this makes the clones more human, which is neglected by Miss Emily, a former teacher. Instead, it was Hailsham’s purpose to “*prove you* [the clones] *had souls at all*” (260, emphasis in original). This places the clones in an in-between position again, whereas Kathy’s detailed and thoughtful report that constitutes the narrative might be seen as an appeal to the reader that clones actually are fully human. In total, this presentation of clones embedded and influenced by visions of nature on the one hand, and culturally enhanced to relate them to humans on the other hand, places them in between the categories of human and nature.

The novel not only subverts clear-cut categories like human, nature and culture by placing clones in an in-between position, but it also incorporates tendencies of the destruction of categories like human and nature. This is represented by the pastoral “discontinuities” the novel incorporates (Lilley 66; Toliver 124). The clones’ subversive effect on binaries represents the post-pastoral aim of developing conscience in humans (Gifford, “Reading Strategies” 61). In particular, it relates to the post-pastoral’s focus on subverting the mistreatment of human minorities that are associated with nature (61). The post-pastoral recognises that the exploitation of nature shows similarities to the treatment of groups traditionally associated with it (44, 61). An example for this is the position of women, who are traditionally associated with nature, as theorised by ecofeminism (44, 61). The post-pastoral conscience wants to overcome these

oppressions and empower nature as well as people (“Pastoral” 165–67; “Reading Strategies” 61). *Never Let Me Go* rather subverts this by presenting the exploitation of the clones seeking solace in nature. They do benefit from their peaceful surroundings, which they meet with respect. As they cannot be placed in either the human or nature category, they complicate traditional mechanisms of oppression. Thus, the novel extends the post-pastoral by focusing on the treatment of a newly emerged, artificially created minority.

The post-pastoral proves to be an eligible lens to further investigate the clones’ relationship to nature presented in the novel. Due to its dystopian character, the novel complicates traditional pastoral notions. The narrative incorporates subversions regarding categories such as human and nature and encourages the reader to reflect on them. This appeal to the reader’s conscience is one of the main effects of the stylistic form of the novel, next to a questioning of appearances. It is important to consider that this analysis relies on the narrative presented from Kathy’s point of view, which is influenced by the societal system’s way of thinking and is therefore not entirely reliable. The focus of this article could be extended by having a closer look at the novel’s descriptions of nature outside Hailsham. Moreover, an application of all of Gifford’s criteria for a post-pastoral approach, a further differentiation of the term pastoral and the use of concepts such as ecocriticism could be rewarding to gain deeper insights into the relationship of clones, nature and humans.

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