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DIALECTICS OF UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA IN *NEVER LET ME GO* BY KAZUO ISHIGURO

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Introduction

This article examines the features of dystopian and utopian fiction in the novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro. Some literary scholars, for example, Ivan Stacy (225) and Kasturi Sinha Ray (284), tend to classify the novel as unmistakably dystopian. This analysis aims to underscore the dual character of *Never Let Me Go* and demonstrate how utopian and dystopian elements intertwine. First, the genesis and characteristics of utopian and dystopian fiction are discussed. These aspects are compared to a selection of early and relatively uncomplicated definitions of these genres, then their traces in Ishiguro's novel are identified. The findings imply that the conclusive evaluation of the novel's utopian or dystopian character is impossible and the final interpretation is based on interaction between the two. However, Ishiguro does not leave a reader without any hint, as he forms the narrative suggesting a dystopian reading by emphasizing omnipresent atrocity and oppression.

From Utopia to Dystopia: Literature Review and Context

The first piece of writing that started the genre known today as utopian fiction is Plato's *Republic* written around 380 BC (Gerhard 2-3). Since then, numerous

definitions of that kind of fiction started to appear. The term utopia was first used by Thomas More in his novel *Utopia* from 1516 to name an island with a perfect sociopolitical system (Gerhard 4-5). According to Chad Walsh, these early utopian worlds are based on the assumptions that human nature is inherently good and that there is no distinction between personal and communal fulfillment (71). Therefore, the happiness of an individual depends only on the efficiency of the social system since phenomena such as abuse of power, injustice, and corruption are unlikely to arise due to people's moral purity. Other critics over time form more detailed analyses of utopian fiction and focus on its different aspects. For example, Martin G. Plattel states that fiction about utopia usually searches for freedom and happiness (47), whereas Martin Parker emphasizes the role of the social structure (Parker 217). George Kateb, in turn, provides a definition with minuscule details (17). According to Kateb, such structure includes the resourcefulness of modern technology, lack of obstacles to a decent life, and any conflicts of interest (17). Nevertheless, all of them state that utopian fiction depicts "an ideal, imaginary society with a perfect socio-economic and political system superior to the present-day version of it where people live carefree, in abundance and happiness" (Gerhard 3).

However, the twentieth century brought about changes in the perception of human nature. The first set of reasons for these changes is associated with major historical events. As Patrick Reedy and Tom Moylan suggest, it was World Wars that laid the ground for utopian thinking (Reedy 175; Moylan xi). Also, the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union had an impact on the dystopian shift (Gerhard 7). The argument for this is that in utopian fiction, especially in early examples, society is "based on the idea of communism where everything is shared" (Walsh 40). Therefore, "the failure of socialism in the Soviet Union, once thought to be a model utopian experiment" (Ruppert 100) challenged optimistic assumptions regarding utopian societies. Another reason to doubt people's inherently good nature stemmed from the observation of progress in science. According to M. Keith Booker, many of the

technological achievements suggested that “science in general goes against human nature and thus becomes a source of its suppression and control” (6). Facts that also contributed to the emergence of dystopian thought are discoveries in psychology and philosophy (Gerhard 8). For example, the discoveries of Freud “proved that humans are not entirely rational beings: they have instincts and are driven by passions and desires” (Walsh 125). These discoveries about spontaneity and unpredictability of human nature stood in opposition to the basic utopian assumption. People could start being questioned scientifically so as to whether they can be trusted to “exercise justice and reason, when they govern the state and the general populace” (Gerhard 8). The utopian society needs a carefully planned system but now the human capacity to implement such a system is put into question (Walsh 55). As a result of this undermined utopian belief that human nature is perfect and morally good (Gerhard 8), the dystopian genre emerged. The genre reflects “the fear of what might happen to a utopia if the perfect ‘planning’ of the elements of that society goes awry and even turns against its people” (Gerhard 8). An early example of dystopian fiction, *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin, from 1921, which “inspired most of the dystopias of the twentieth century” (Gerhard 9) directly fits this definition. *We* represents a society that is heavily regulated by the state. People are forbidden to manifest any form of individuality or creativity, turned into robots incapable of making their own decisions. They are “indoctrinated to embrace reason and logic, ignore their personal feelings and ambitions, and idolize the collective” (Gerhard 9). At this point, it becomes clear that dystopia is not anti-utopia in terms of being the opposite of the ideal place to live, but rather “shares a lot of characteristics with utopia” (Gerhard 1). What is different is the result of the functioning of such a system since dystopian fiction “portrays utopia gone awry” (Gerhard 1).

Never Let Me Go: Between Utopia and Dystopia

Bearing in mind the above, *Never Let Me Go*, to be read as either utopian or dystopian fiction, should depict a utopian society with a meticulously planned system. Kazuo Ishiguro achieves that by speculating about the potential of medical technologies (Ishiguro 268) in an alternative version of late-twentieth-century England. At first glance, a reader may be deceived to think that the world of the novel mirrors reality, but as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the development of genetics is far superior to the contemporary world and that the novel's setting is fictitious. The main concept of the system designed in the novel revolves around the idea of prolonging lives through human cloning. The author created "a world that has come to regard cancer as curable" (Ishiguro 268). People are able to overcome terminal conditions by exchanging organs like spare parts. The process is crude, cruel, and of questionable ethics, because organs are cultured in the form of human clones. There is an intricate system developed to administer the process of upbringing to keep these cloned sets of organs in an immaculate condition. To achieve that, clones are reared as students in institutions away from the outside world. The students begin to donate their vital organs as young adults. As donors, due to becoming gradually crippled, they are nurtured by designated carers, i.e. clones that have yet to begin the donation program. Donors usually die after a third or fourth donation, and their death is called "completion" as a reference to the fulfillment of their designated role. The language of this system is purposefully softened by the author to contrast it with ethically doubtful and brutal actions. Clones are referred to, "in a chilling yet appallingly convincing-sounding euphemism," (Fisher 32) as "students" and they "complete" instead of dying. Such a choice of vocabulary resembles, for example, military jargon, in which soldiers communicate using collocations such as "eliminating targets," or "eliminating threats," to distance themselves from ethically dubious actions.

In this fictional world, clones are bred exclusively to provide vital organs for the general population, which poses the question of whether being a clone

excludes being human. Answering this question seems necessary to decide if the vision presented by the author is dystopian or utopian. When a reader assumes that clones are not truly human, but merely artificial instruments created to serve humanity, then there will be no major counter-argument to read the novel as utopian fiction. However, if a reader decides that clones are full-fledged people, then it will be a reading that recognizes clones as an oppressed class which is alienated and physically exploited by others to the point of being classified as victims of genocide. As a result, it seems that the author burdens the reader with the prioritization of ethical values before forming a final interpretation. Nonetheless, as suggested by Matti Hyvärinen, Ishiguro never introduces such issues neutrally (Hyvärinen 202). By the use of a first-person narrator, the author offers an emotional and intimate journey through the story, in close proximity to a group of clone-friends. He “seduces his readers into seeing the world from the perspective of clones” and as a result makes them “recognise the harsh, prejudicial and hypocritical human world, full of segregationist impulses” (Hyvärinen 220). The novel is “clearly a story about friendship and love” (Hyvärinen 206), which eventually ends abruptly because clones are prevented from “growing into humans” (Hyvärinen 216) in terms of starting mature life, as Hyvärinen suggests.

Moreover, clones are reared in humanitarian institutes treated as students, but regular people are still afraid of them (Hyvärinen 215) “[i]n the way people are afraid of spiders and things” (Ishiguro 263). To comfort themselves, citizens would rather not call them humans. Even supervisors at institutes such as Hailsham were only experimentally checking if clones “had souls at all” (Ishiguro 265) and it is “still not a notion universally held” (Ishiguro 265). When people were demonstrated that clones reared in the humane environment are “as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being” (Ishiguro 266) the novel only compares their qualities and cautiously never calls the clones humans. Nevertheless, the narrative clearly suggests that clones are a blessing for people, “[h]owever uncomfortable (...), their overwhelming

concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease” (Ishiguro 268). At the same time, it suggests that the world with such a system will always project a barrier against seeing donors as properly human (Ishiguro 268): they are treated impersonally, as people are afraid to confront their guilt. The novel eventually suggests that there is “no way to reverse the process” (Ishiguro 268) of clone donations as it has gone so far. Therefore, although the construction of the novel balances the question of clones’ humanity, Ishiguro through the first-person narrative arouses the reader’s sympathy towards these groups of friends. It is much later as the story unfolds when the fact that they are clones whose only goal is the inevitable participation in the donation program becomes revealed. Such a sequence develops sympathy for the characters since they appear as martyrs doomed to die for others.

Conclusions

Taking into consideration different definitions of utopia and dystopia as well as the effects of the point of view technique, one’s conclusions regarding the dystopian or utopian character of *Never Let Me Go* are bound to remain ambiguous. In spite of the implied suggestions resulting from the construction of the narrative, interpreting the world in *Never Let Me Go* as a perfect place for its inhabitants remains debatable as long as clones are not unequivocally labeled as full-fledged members of society. Thus, in order to determine if the world is a utopia or not, it should be first established whether the clones are merely non-human tools used to alleviate suffering. When they are considered regular members of society, the practice of killing them so that others can live longer is mass murder. However, even the fact that human copies are being farmed for corporeal use is not a morally acceptable practice. It is impossible for such a place to be perfect, even if it provides longevity to its members. Relying on Julia Gerhard’s statement that dystopia expresses what might happen to a utopia if it crumbles unexpectedly or even turns against its people

(8), it can be safely asserted that *Never Let Me Go* provides few examples that apply to this definition. Unless clones are seen as humans, the system can go awry only in the case of developing eugenics experiments. However, the novel's statement that clones have souls strongly implies that people and clones are equal not only on the corporeal but also on the spiritual level. According to Sharon Stevenson, the wrongness of dystopia may be based on a "belief system that annihilates or restricts some set of values the readers believe are indispensable to both their own and the characters' ability to function as fully dignified human beings" (131). Gerhard adds that the state "directly attack[s] dystopian citizens in both body and mind and turn[s] them into robots that are supposed to live and work for the state only" (15). Both statements in the context of clones having souls, and by extension being humans, confirm that *Never Let Me Go* depicts, after all, a dystopian society. Yet this mostly applies to a spiritual dimension. The clones outside institutes are stripped of their dignity, freedom and become a repressed, exploited group. Such a system collides with readers' belief in the importance of certain values, which contributes to the dystopian reading of the novel.

Although the novel refers to the times with no cure for many terminal diseases literally as "the dark days" (Ishiguro 268), the present is by no means presented in a positive light, but is soaked with omnipresent guilt for copying and farming clones instead. Even though people can prolong their lives significantly, they feel awkward and do "not want to think about (...) students, or about the conditions [they] were brought up in" (Ishiguro 270). This may be one of the more direct hints offered by the novel that the cost of this supposed-to-be utopian society is achieved at a great moral cost. The most significant flaw of the system, though, emerges out of fear. Regular people are afraid of the possibility that manufactured children "would take their place in society" (Ishiguro 269). The incident with a rogue scientist, who experimented with enhancing characteristics of the clones, "reminded them of a fear they'd always

had” (Ishiguro 269). As a result, humanitarian facilities for clones lost funding and in consequence cease to exist.

Regardless of these conclusions, the novel asks what makes humans human, given the literary context in which clones play the key role. The answer for this question lies beyond the scope of this article, but further considerations may be undertaken based on research such as Michael Tomasello’s. He contends that thinkers have asked this question “[f]rom the beginning of the Western intellectual tradition” (Tomasello 297) and in terms of the real world, without any speculative elements, “[t]oday this puzzle is essentially solved” (Tomasello 4). His research may provoke people to ask and reflect on old questions in new, literary contexts, the way Kazuo Ishiguro does it in *Never Let Me Go*.

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Abstract

Based on the historical shift from utopian to dystopian fiction, the article argues that *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro does not invite a clear dystopian reading. The novel shows an innovative method of lengthening the human lifespan by implementing an ethically controversial system. Its analysis shows the dynamics between the communities and their positions in the world of the novel. Ishiguro constantly balances the elements of utopia and dystopia, but at the same time, the narrative provides a set of subtle suggestions which lead to highlighting the flaws of the system. As a result, assuming a certain set of values of most readers, the novel may be roughly qualified as dystopian fiction, but its boundaries between utopia are not clear-cut.