

An Analysis on the Role Identification of Clones in *Never Let Me Go*

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With the guidance of Erikson's identity theory, the article analyzes the clones' identity exploration through role identification in *Never Let Me Go*. It interprets the clones' puzzlement about their identity, and the process of their identity quest as well as role identification. Through the specific analysis, it is concluded that the clones, represented by Kathy, Tommy and Ruth, have gained self-certainty and social identity by realizing the role identity as a "carer" and a "donor", in the meantime, they have constructed their identity as social persons with souls like ordinary people. Furthermore, the findings shows that *Never Let Me Go* is actually a microcosm of human's quest for identity. Ishiguro aims to express his meditation on human life in the novel: human life is a process of seeking self-identity and social roles, and then fulfilling the obligations of the roles, which confirms Ishiguro's internationalism that he attempts to convey his contemplation on human existence through his works.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, clones, identity confusion, role identity

Introduction

As Ishiguro's sixth work, *Never Let Me Go* has gained tremendous popularity since its publication. It tells a story of a host of clones who are bred and isolated in a boarding school, and then fulfill their task of organs donation when they grow up. Setting the story in a dystopian society of England in the 1990s, Ishiguro skillfully avoids the conflict of clones' ethical identity, but focuses on the identity of clones as a social individual, without mentioning the cloning technology related to cell culture. A science fiction on the surface, *Never Let Me Go* reflects profound and universal implications closely related to human issues worthy of continuous exploration.

Literature Review

Many previous studies are relevant to the novel *Never Let Me Go* and the identity issue in the novel. Generally speaking, they can be divided into two groups. One is the study focusing on clones' identity in *Never Let Me Go* from diverse perspectives; another group approaches identity issue by comparing the novel with Ishiguro's other works.

Studies illustrating the identity issue in *Never Let Me Go* mainly focus on identification, identity construction and identity anxiety in the novel. Rosemary Rizq (2014) analyzes memory, coping, and identification through the vision of Laplanche's notion of "afterwardness", claiming that the clones'

identification can be “updated, changed, transformed,” rather than be fixed by biological origins. However, I would like to emphasize the process and approaches of clones’ role identification by recognizing their roles in society, not just the developing feature of clones’ identification. Guo (2018) studies the process of clones’ identity construction and points out that the novel itself is a philosophical metaphor of human’s identity problem in a modern pluralistic society. Furthermore, the study by Chen and Qu (2018) shows that Ishiguro applies clones’ identity anxiety to elucidate the crisis of marginal group identity of immigrant writers.

The latter group is comparison analysis related to *Never Let Me Go* and Ishiguro’s other novels. Teng (2021) illustrates the growth issue in Ishiguro’s three works including *An Artist of the Floating World*, *When We Were Orphans*, and *Never Let Me Go*, probing into the growth meaning regarding “individual and self” in the three novels. Additionally, Li (2023) reveals that Ishiguro is exploring a kernel issue about “What on earth is the human nature?” from *Never Let Me Go* to *Klara and the Sun*. He also interprets Ishiguro’s nonhuman narrative features and the moral reflection hidden in the narrative of the two novels.

In general, these studies mentioned above investigate the identity issue with various viewpoints, however, this article elaborates clones’ role identification from a different and specific perspective. By employing Erikson’s identity theory, the article will illustrate the process of the clones’ identification in different roles, such as carers and donors, as well as the result of their identity quest.

Identity Theory

According to Erikson (1977, p. 222), the development of identity begins at the infant stage where individuals discover the self. And then it continues throughout childhood, and comes to the core stage in adolescence. During the childhood, self-sameness grows and changes with child’s cognition development of the social world. The physical, cognitive, and social activities in childhood are conducive to the achievement of identity. The goal of adolescence is gaining self-certainty and identity achievement. Identity includes many dimensions like physical, sexual, occupational, religious identity, etc., and therefore, adolescents need to explore and search diversified identities as they come into adult stage. Although identity development is mainly associated with the adolescent stage, individuals should reevaluate and adjust aspects of their identity, because identity formation is a lifelong development.

In the novel, the clones are born without parents, and isolated in a domesticated institution, Hailsham. Without choice, positioned in a situation with parentless origin, clones are puzzled about whom they are. Such confusion, as the booster, drives them to seek the truth of their identity throughout the childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Although adolescence is the key phrase to identity development, each stage offers opportunities for reevaluation and modification, because identity formation is a lifelong journey. Hence, the clones have been pursuing the achievement of identity since the emergence of identity confusion. At the end of their life, they eventually acquire the individual and social identity, namely, the self-sameness and the approval of others through the identifications of roles as a carer and a donor. As Erikson (1956, p. 74) says, the optimal sense of identity is “knowing where one is going.” Experiencing these role identifications, the clones figure out where they are going: the social world where they become social persons as “normal” human beings.

Identity Confusion

Since the birth of the cloned sheep Dori in 1996, cloning technology has attracted worldwide attention, because it indicates that the realization of human cloning is approaching after this major breakthrough in human genetic engineering. However, influenced by traditional ethics and moral concepts, human beings reject and feel fearful of clones, and in the international community human cloning experiments are prohibited.

In the novel *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are set in a secluded institution Hailsham, and have been isolated from society ever since they were born. They grow up in Hailsham and are completely segregated from society. The purpose of their existence is only to provide organs for humans in the outer world, so they have never been treated as normal people. Despite the fact that as “normals”¹, they take classes, participate in sports activities and develop their creative potential in school, they are held back from the truth about their identity and fate. It can be seen from the end of the novel that in order to ensure that the clones can obey and firmly exercise their task of donating their organs, the guardians in Hailsham leave them in a vacuum about the truth. Therefore, it is impossible for them to clearly understand themselves and their identity.

In Erikson's opinion (1956, p. 74), it is very important for teenagers to get assured about their self-identity, and self-certainty is the basis for identity formation. However, due to various factors, these clones get confused about their identity, and then begin to ask “who are we?”. It is, precisely, the puzzlement that drives them to pursue their identity. Furthermore, the lack of self-certainty makes them all more conscious and anxious of their identity (Erikson, 1956, p. 69).

In the process of human development, family, the most basic system and group form, plays a significant role, especially in children's physical, psychological and social development. According to Nie Zhenzhao (2014), a person's identity includes personal identity and social identity in terms of identity origin. The former one, determined by blood, has existed since we were born, and the latter can be acquired in the future. That is to say, in the process of self-identification of individuals, parents, undoubtedly hold an irreplaceable position in their children's acquisition of identity. However, the protagonists in the novel are born without parents. As a result, the ambiguity of kinship makes it impossible for the clones to recognize their identities at the starting point.

The novel starts with the suspense of the protagonists' identity at the beginning, and then in a detective style, it guides readers to uncover step by step the mystery of their identity. In the novel, many characters except the guardians do not even have their complete names. Their family names are no more than a single letter, such as Kathy H., Tommy D., Jenny B., Graham K., Polly T., Susie K., Peter N., Roy J., Arthur H., Harry C., and some only have their first names, such as Ruth and Chrissie. Actually, the shortening of the clones' names reveals the ambiguity of their identity. In the article “Surnames: Bearer of one's identity”, Mangion (2011) notes “surnames are part and parcel of our identity. They make connections and help us feel we belong somewhere and to a group of people we call our family” (p. 1). And they denote people's origins. However, the clones in the novel are deprived of surnames, because they are just copies of “normals”, and their existence is just for organs harvest. In this abnormal school, they are not only born without parents, but denied the right to be parents—they are infertile. In this planet, every creature has reproductive ability except them. In this sense, they are even inferior to the

¹ A term used by clone students in Hailsham to refer to ordinary human beings.

lowest creatures. Their surnames and identities are not important, because their predetermined destiny has rendered them in darkness.

Erikson (1956, p. 68) believes that parents' support and guidance are significant for adolescents' identity achievement, and the involvement of parents in children's life has a positive influence on their recognition of self-identity. In other words, the absence of parental roles in child's life leads to his or her confusion of identity. The clones in the novel are in the parentless position, and are kept in a bubble of deceptions, which results in the increase of their puzzlement about identity.

Identity Quest

Klapp (1969, p. ix) claims that the need for identity is a need for a socially confirmed concept of self. And Erikson (1956, p. 74) emphasizes that the key to achieving self-certainty is to find out one's place in society, i.e. what he or she belongs to. In other words, the confusion of identity is a driving force for one to seek identity and acquire self-certainty. Because of the puzzlement of self, after leaving Hailsham for Cottage, the clones begin to explore self-identity step by step, mainly by seeking the sense of belonging.

In the story, at the age of sixteen, the clones will be dispatched to different places to spend their transitional period. Coincidentally, Kathy and her friends are sent to the same place, Cottage. Leaving Hailsham and then arriving in an unfamiliar environment, they find it difficult to recognize their role and position due to their completely chaotic states. They "always move about together and seem to spend large parts of day awkwardly standing outside the farmhouse, not knowing what else to do" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 119). It reveals that they are in a chaos, hurrying to find their group in the new environment and get a sense of belonging. Tajfel (1981, p. 255) deems that "social identity is defined as 'that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership.'" Groups give individuals social identity which is a sense of belonging to the society. Therefore, it is essential for the clones to acquire the membership of community in order to get rid of the confusion and pursue their social identity. Hence, Ruth and Kathy, they both try to explore the sense of belonging by different approaches.

Once in Hailsham, as the leader of a small group of girls, Ruth was always supported by others. However, when students are transferred to different places, Ruth is sent to Cottage, losing her leadership and becoming an out-comer here. In this strange environment, her sense of belonging is under threats. In order to retrieve the sense of belonging, Ruth begins to assimilate herself to "veterans"². Upon the arrival to Cottage, Ruth finds herself separated from those veterans, so she endeavors to imitate them and to communicate with Tommy by some special actions. Her imitation is driven by the intention to gain confirmation from others and then to acquire the membership. However, Ruth fails to realize her goal through such blind imitation, which explains why she gets angry when Kathy discloses her secret attempts. Ruth pretends not to care and replies, "So what? It's no big deal. A lot of us do it.", but her words to fight against Kathy reveals her anxiety: "you can't expect me to hold your hand in the whole time. We've been here nearly two months now" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 124). It seems commonplace for the clones in Cottage to seek identification with others by imitation. Veterans here copy the

² A term used by clones to call the older ones living in Cottage.

manners from characters of “normal” family in television, and then Ruth imitates the same behaviors after close study of veterans. They all want to behave and speak like “normal” persons, through which they can regard themselves as human beings that is the identity they are pursuing for a long time.

For Ruth, the way to restore a sense of belonging is to integrate into another new group by assimilation, by which she renders herself to be a member of veterans. Meanwhile, she is trying to remove her former relationship with Hailsham, so she throws away the memory of Hailsham deliberately, which arouses Kathy’s dissatisfaction. Specifically, Kathy chooses an opposite way from Ruth when entering in an unfamiliar circumstance—she intends to seize all the memories of Hailsham and searches for the sense of belonging in her memories.

According to her memory, Kathy, the narrator of the novel, tells a story of herself as well as her companions, which manifests the importance of reminiscence for Kathy. Throughout the novel, numerous clues unfold that Kathy cherishes memories in Hailsham where she finds her past and obtains her own identity along with destination. As Ishiguro puts it, “when they look back to the school, even after they know what the school was for, in their heart, they think of it, a very precious place of belonging to those defines who were” (Shaffer & Wong, 2008, p. 216). Though Hailsham is actually an institution for implantation to clones, it indeed gives them a sense of belonging.

In Kathy’s view, the reminiscence about Hailsham plays a vital role in her life. Leaving Hailsham, Kathy is unwilling to discard anything there. Between the lines of her narrative, it can be noticed that she has a particular feeling for the school because she considers it as her home, her root. In the new environment of Cottage, Kathy is more worried that her memories about Hailsham will fade away so as to erode her sense of belonging in this group. So, when another group of freshmen come to Cottage, Kathy laments “this non-appearance of Hailsham students just added to a feeling that Hailsham is far away from the past, and that ties binding our old crowd always were fraying” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 189). The melancholy remarks display her anxiety about her belonging.

Kathy cautiously keeps all the collections she got from the Exchange in Hailsham when she left Hailsham. So, Kathy is shocked when she learns that Ruth left all the collections behind. Meanwhile, she gets annoyed about those behaviors that Ruth is trying to throw Hailsham away and pretends to forget the memories there. From Kathy’s perspective, Hailsham exists as a family. If there is no Hailsham, she will become homeless. When she learns that Hailsham will be closed, Kathy is even more afraid that once the “home” that ties them together vanishes, her companions and herself would drift away in different directions. She keeps brooding over that “all the students who’d grown up with me and were now spreading across the country, carers and donors, all separated now but still somehow linked by the place we’d come from” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 212). It can be concluded that Kathy keeps the reminiscence of Hailsham carefully so as to escape from the rootlessness resulted by confusion of self-identity.

Both Ruth and Kathy have spared no efforts to search for their sense of belonging, no matter what methods they apply. Assimilation to veterans gives Ruth a sense of belonging to a new group in an unfamiliar environment, while the grip on memory appeases Kathy’s restlessness for loss of belonging. Generally speaking, their quest for sense of belonging indicates that they are eager to ease the confusion of self.

Role Identification

With destiny predesigned by human beings, all these clones will experience the life in society as carers before they start the organ donation. Undergoing the phase of identity puzzlement, after all the endeavors in quest for identity, clones realize that the search for self-identity from “possibles” is futile. Henceforth, their latter experience in society turns out to be an opportunity to recognize their identity.

According to Erikson (1994, p. 86), an optimal sense of identity, on the other hand, is experienced merely as a sense of psychosocial well-being, and the most important step to gain self-identity is to find the position of the self in society, integrate oneself into society and become a “social person”. By participating in the activities of his roles, fulfilling the corresponding responsibilities, one’s role identity will ultimately be achieved. Therefore, entering society as adults, Tommy, Ruth and Kathy, the representatives of the clones, complete their role identifications as a carer and a donor.

Klapp (1969, p. 56) observes that individual’s need for identity is “a need for a socially confirmed concept of self; fullness of sentiments, including mystiques; and centering or devotion, so that a person’s life is focused on a point where he recognizes some highest value.” Therefore, the key to fulfilling one’s self-identity is to confirm his value in society and make every effort to realize it. After the failure in seeking “possible” in Cottage, Kathy turns to other approaches as she enters society. She begins to position herself in society and try to acquire social identity through the identification of the role as a carer.

Being a carer is not an easy job, for it requires them to take good care of the clone fellows after every organ transplantation operation. It is manifest that the process is torturing, because carers need to watch donors undergo pains which they will experience themselves ultimately. Many clones are not able to endure the brutality and just muddle through this period and then terminate the struggle as soon as possible, simply waiting for the notice of organ donation. Furthermore, carers have to endure loneliness and tedious routine work. Such solitude is that they cannot find anyone to talk, and nobody will listen to their complaints.

However, in spite of the hardship of the job, Kathy keeps her life going on as a carer for about twelve years. She overcomes all the hardship and tries to deliver spiritual comfort to donors stranded in the pain and bewilderment. She shoulders the responsibilities of the onerous job and behaves excellently. After the long devotion to her job, Kathy acquires a good achievement in her workplace, like she narrates “I do know for a fact they’ve been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have too. My donors have always tended to do much better than expected. ... it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well ...” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 1). This monologue manifests that Kathy is satisfied with her performance in the job, and that she gains self-confirmation from the job. On the one hand, donors appreciate her endeavors in the caring job; on the other hand, she acquires the approval from the social world, so she gets the right to choose whom to look after. Her work goal of “being able to do my work well” offers her a sense of achievement in the job. With the harvest of self-certainty in her career, Kathy has a clearer perception about her social identity, a carer.

Different from Kathy, Ruth and Tommy commit themselves to their donor roles. The ultimate destination of the clones is to fulfill completion after several organ donations. Though exposed to the cruel reality that everything about Hailsham is human’s intrigues for their own benefits, the clones still choose to accept their predominated fate. Readers may be confused about this plot, as Philip Hensher (2005) puts forward his question

“why don’t any of them ever run away?” Actually, it can be considered as Ishiguro’s exquisite writing skill aiming to arouse readers’ curiosity by the unexpected but peaceful ending, leading readers to ponder over the profound meaning behind their choices.

Erikson (1994, p. 47) holds that “the young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity ... between that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him.” In other words, in order to achieve the wholeness, namely, the self-identity, individuals will conform to others’ anticipations to become the expected roles. Therefore, the clones make such decision because they attempt to achieve their social identity through the identification of the role as a donor, with full awareness of their position and task in society.

Ruth presents a peaceful attitude before the arrival of her death, fully understanding that organ donation is her duty. Being a donor offers her the sense of responsibility, so she confesses that “I was very much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it’s what we’re supposed to be doing, isn’t it?” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 227). In fact, her orientation of her role proves that she has figured out her position and identity in society.

Tommy, after the attempt for deferral turns out to be in vain, still firmly chooses to undertake his responsibility as a donor. For Tommy, even most clones, organ donation is not only an obligation, but a chance to obtain honor. Among these clones, there prevails a view that it is shameful for donors to “complete” too early; in contrast, one is, undoubtedly, respected if he can make it through more operations. “A donor ‘on a fourth’, even one who’s been pretty unpopular up till then, is treated with special respect” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 278). Tommy also adheres to this professional belief and finishes his fourth donation. When hearing Chrissie completed in her second donation, he responds that “I heard exactly the same. A shame. Only her second as well. Glad that didn’t happen to me” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 225). Tommy’s response indicates that he has identified himself as a member of the society and he considers being a donor as his occupation. His role as a donor helps him achieve the role identity as a professional man in society, through which he gains the sense of achievement and the recognition of other donors. Therefore, Tommy structures himself in a position of a donor in society, and his social identity is realized.

Conclusion

The above analysis manifests clones accomplish their quest of role identity through three phases: they start getting perplexed about their identity for the status of parentlessness; then they spare no efforts to seek their identity through the search of sense of belonging; ultimately, they all achieve the role identity after fulfilling the obligations of different roles in society. Represented by Kathy, Tommy and Ruth, the clones realize their role identification in playing roles as a carer and a donor in society. Specifically, due to their engagement in social world, the three protagonists situate themselves in a position as a member in society. And the membership from roles provides them opportunities to acquire the approval from the inner self and others.

The theme of the novel reveals Ishiguro’s meditation on human beings—the ultimate destination of human life is to fulfill the responsibilities in society. What the clones have experienced is the representation of human beings’ life journey, indicating that Ishiguro infuses his universal concerns about human issues into the whole story. In fact, this novel serves as a metaphor for human beings to identify themselves and ponder over what they are supposed to do in order to achieve the wholeness of their identity.

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