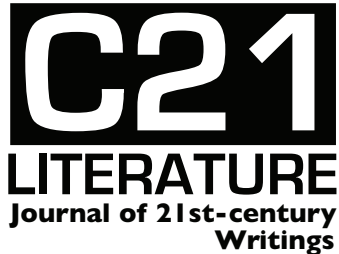




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## Article

**How to Cite:** Mullen, A., 2019. "Kazuo Ishiguro and the Legacy of Aspirational Individualism'." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 7(1): 2, pp. 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.556>

**Published:** 28 January 2019

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ARTICLE

## 'Kazuo Ishiguro and the Legacy of Aspirational Individualism'

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Within contemporary literary scholarship, Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go* has primarily been framed as a science fiction novel concerned with cloning and genetic questions of 'the self'. This article offers a new perspective by analysing the ways in which the novel is also about the legacy of a particularly Thatcherite notion of aspirational individualism. To this end, it considers the extent to which the stories of the main characters of Ishiguro's novel – Kathy, Ruth and Tommy – are also stories of unfulfilled ambition. Placing the novel within contemporary debates about aspirational individualism, the article considers how Ishiguro – while critical of Thatcherite ideas of aspiration – nonetheless concedes that a belief in such ideas can give structure, fulfilment and meaning to individual lives.

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**Keywords:** Narrative; individualism; aspiration; the self; Thatcherism

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1979 marked the beginning of almost two decades of Conservative Party governance, first under Margaret Thatcher and subsequently under John Major. It was not until 1997 that Labour returned to government, having had a series of leaders during its time in Opposition: James Callaghan (1976–1980), Michael Foot (1980–1983), Neil Kinnock (1983–1992), John Smith (1992–1994), Margaret Beckett (1994) and Tony Blair (1994–1997).<sup>1</sup> When the party won the 1997 UK general election under the guise of New Labour, it was significantly transformed. This article is not concerned with the reasons why, or the moment at which, the fortunes of the UK Labour Party

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<sup>1</sup> James Callaghan and Michael Foot both resigned the leadership following General Election losses. Neil Kinnock did not resign after Labour's 1987 General Election defeat as the party won 20 seats and increased its share of the vote; Kinnock resigned following Labour's loss at the 1992 General Election. John Smith died in office and Margaret Beckett subsequently held the role on a temporary, acting basis. Tony Blair remained leader until his resignation in 2007, having won three General Elections.

changed. Rather, it is concerned with how Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) can be read as a reflection of the continuities of Thatcherism into the twenty-first century.

In 2011, in one of his last contributions to the study of Thatcherism, Stuart Hall opined that Tony Blair was part of a 'neoliberal revolution' that began under Thatcher. Hall took the view that 'New Labour repositioned itself from centre-left to centre-right' (2011: 19) and, like Thatcherism, he saw in it a tension between two fundamentally contradictory forces.<sup>2</sup> Hall stated that, in New Labour, there 'was a continuous tension between a strident, Fabian, Benthamite tendency to regulate and manage and the ideology of the market, with its pressure for market access to areas of public life from which it had hitherto been excluded' (2001: 20). The metanarrative about several decades of unhindered neoliberalism, however, is a tired one which finds little appreciation among political scientists and historians today. There is some accuracy in what Hall suggests, but simply to say that Thatcher and Blair were part of the same neoliberal lineage is as crude as it is incorrect. There is clear evidence, at the level of policymaking, that Thatcherism influenced New Labour, but there is also evidence (at this same level) that Blair fits much more comfortably in the Labour tradition than Hall's thesis acknowledged. As Ben Jackson (2017) has noted, for example, this is true of New Labour's childcare policy. The neoliberals on the right in the 1980s had supported a childcare voucher model, but New Labour's policy in the 1990s and beyond represented a shift towards state provision. This, however, was not universal: it did not return the state to the role that Labour manifestoes of previous decades had proposed. The policy, in the end, represented a patchwork of public and private providers. Despite the presence of the state in New Labour's policy, Jackson argues that the fact Blair did not introduce a universal childcare policy represents a success of neoliberal thinking – but not a direct continuity. Much in the same way, Richard Heffernan also sees New Labour not as a direct continuity, but as an

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<sup>2</sup> There is a degree of truth in this. Analysis by the Comparative Manifesto Data project team demonstrates that in 1997, for the first time, Labour's manifesto was classifiably 'centre-right'. New Labour's 2001 manifesto returned it (although only marginally) to the centre-left, following which it began to move more to the centre (Afonso 2015).

'accommodation to and adaption of Thatcherism' (2000: 178). So, while New Labour did not simply represent the continuation of the same 'revolution' as Thatcherism, as Hall suggested, Thatcherism's influence upon it was evident and discernible.<sup>3</sup> This article analyses how Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* deals with ideas of aspirational individualism to examine the extent to which the new 'Blairite' Labour Party had followed in the footsteps of Thatcherism.

*Never Let Me Go* was published in 2005, the year in which Tony Blair celebrated his third General Election victory. The narrative takes place prior to the election of New Labour. Ishiguro's novel spans the preceding decades and charts the life of three clones who grow up in Hailsham boarding school. It is not immediately obvious that the novel may be taken as a commentary on Blair's Britain, but this article argues that it actually explores the continuities of Thatcherism in more subtle ways than some other novels published in the same year, including Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005). While the two texts are very different in many ways – Ishiguro's clone narrative is more of a dystopian fantasy than McEwan's portrait of a day in the life of a neuroscientist – they also have much in common. Both novels comment upon the place of the arts and the sciences in their respective portrayals of contemporary society; they focus on professionalised medicine and the ethics of care; and, perhaps to a lesser extent, they comment upon ideas of lifestyle and consumerism. But, fundamentally, at the heart of *Never Let Me Go* is an exploration of the interaction between narrative and the construction of the individual self and the limits of individualism. In this novel, the clones' engagement with the arts underpins their ongoing quest to prove that they have a soul. Their efforts, however, are futile: their individualism, no matter how pronounced, is unable to change the fact that they were born to be harvested for organs. Only towards the end of the novel do they learn that their existence and fate were never things over which they had control. The novel challenges the notion

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<sup>3</sup> It is necessary to establish this to accurately understand how *Never Let Me Go* fits into this political context because too many critics, such as Alexander Beaumont (2015), simply label the period 'neoliberal'. In many cases (such as Beaumont's) this is because of the influence of Hall's work.

that the individual exists as a social construct, instead focusing upon the biological limitations of human (or post-human) existence.

As well as speaking to this specific political moment, Ishiguro's novel engages with contemporary philosophical debates about the notion of the narrative self which began in the 1980s and continued into the twenty-first century. The concept of the narrative self – the constitution, representation and articulation of an individual identity through narrative(s) – was central to works by Charles Taylor, Jerome Bruner, Marya Schechtman, Daniel Dennett and Anthony Giddens.<sup>4</sup> In 2003, Samantha Vice wrote that although individual lives are constituted through narrative, each person does not constitute their identity through narrative in the same way: some may actively think about their lives as a narrative while others may do it only in moments of reflection. Significantly, Vice also justifies why individual lives are understood in narrative terms. She states that 'we experience ourselves and the world in way [*sic*] that is meaningful and coherent, with a trajectory of development, in a way that promises, or actively seeks closure and significance' (2003: 97). Although it is not explicitly identified, Vice's explanation of how the self operates through narrative has, at its heart, aspiration and hope. The aspirational individual is imagined to be the archetypal Thatcherite voter: hardworking entrepreneurs growing their business and working-class families buying their council houses. The role of aspiration in *Never Let Me Go* should not be overlooked, as it is through aspiration (and the myths surrounding what Vice calls the 'trajectory of development') Ishiguro critiques Thatcherite ideas of individualism.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the narrative self is also employed (futilely) as a means of resisting a difficult biological reality. However, Here, though, it is not a genetically-inherited

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony Giddens was a significant influence on Tony Blair's politics. As Bill Jordan points out, Giddens' 'Third Way' 'redefined the central terms of the debate between liberalism and socialism' by 'fusing individual choice with equality and social justice' (2010: 47). The continued focus on individualism and individual choice (albeit framed in a different way) is one indicator of Thatcherism's influence on New Labour and social democracy more broadly. Giddens, though, did not accept that New Labour was a continuation of Thatcherism. In his reflection of its time in office, he said that he understood why some felt New Labour did not deliver the 'New Dawn' it promised, but he nonetheless distinguished it from the 'disastrous legacy' of Thatcherism (Giddens 2010: n.p.).

disease that limits Kathy, Tommy and Ruth's freedom, but the fact that they are clones that have been raised unwillingly (and, for the most part, unknowingly) as organ donors. It is only when Miss Lucy, a guardian at Hailsham boarding school where they are raised, tells the students that they are clones that they are first aware that they are not strictly human. Although it is set prior to Blair taking office, Anne Whitehead has acknowledged that *Never Let Me Go* is nonetheless 'suggestive of the continuities into the present of the social issues to which it alludes' (2011: 62). However, where Whitehead's analysis is limited is in that she simply sees these continuities in terms of government health care policy – and, specifically, the increasing presence of the private sector in the NHS since Thatcher. The novel, though, is much more concerned with the underlying philosophical continuity of the Thatcherite notion of individualism. Kathy, the last surviving of the three central clones, also works in a healthcare-related role and views the idea of the narrative self with scepticism.<sup>5</sup> Kathy's scepticism is not grounded in a scientific reductionism; it stems from first-hand experience and revelation. The function of Hailsham boarding school, and particularly its arts-based curriculum, is to provide a more humane way of raising the clones before their organ donations begin, while challenging existing notions of what a 'human' is. Fundamentally, the novel explores the various narrativised means of expressing an inner quality that demonstrates the clones' humanity – including love, enterprise, creativity and ambition – but these efforts are not enough to overcome the biological difference between the clones and humans.

Jane Elliot also argues that *Never Let Me Go* as a novel about individualism. Elliot suggests that the novel tells the story of 'the failure of individuation, but this story is simultaneously cast as counter to reality, as an alternative version out of keeping with actual historical events' (2013: 95). The first sentiment expressed by Elliott

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<sup>5</sup> Despite this, Kathy's narration and her existing sense of self-identity are reliant upon an episodic memory which is, in turn, intrinsically reliant upon a narrative structure. Although she appears sceptical about ideas of a 'self' being constructed through narrative, her account reinforces that such a thing exists. What her scepticism does reveal, however, is the loss of hope that was previously associated with the clones' narrative selves, demonstrated through their aspirations and beliefs (e.g. in deferral) which she now sees as irrevocably lost. The narrative self, then, continues to exist at the end of the novel but is divorced from hope.

appears true of the novel, but her suggestion that it is grounded in an alternative history which has no relation to actual events is questionable. The novel maps onto the preceding decades in a subtle, but meaningful, way, opening with confirmation that the present moment from which Kathy, now aged 31, is narrating is the late 1990s: more specifically, it is also late April. Using this as a starting point, the references to the passing of time in the novel, when considered together, would indicate that this is April 1997. The opening and closing passages of the novel depict Kathy standing, looking out over an empty field; she reflects on the past and wonders about the future. The significance of doing so at the end of April 1997, given those political and ideological continuities to which Whitehead and Elliot refer, is its proximity to the election of New Labour on 1 May 1997. It is also significant because, assuming that Kathy was born in 1966 (which she would have been, if she is 31 in 1997), it also implies that it is 1979 when the clones first begin to think about their art as a commodity with a market value – the same year that Thatcher first took office; it suggests that it is 1982 when the clones first begin to explore sexuality and desire, the same year in which Thatcher called for a return to Victorian values. Ishiguro does not offer specific dates, other than that the present is the late 1990s, but he does make various references to the passing of time, for example 'almost a year to the day' (2005: 233) or the passing of a 'couple of years' (2005: 76), with some occasional references to the specific month. By piecing these references to the passing of time together, it is logical to assume that Kathy is reflecting upon a period which directly maps onto the rise and development of Thatcherism, from the end of the so-called 'postwar consensus' to the late 1990s. The novel deals with the political landscape of the decades preceding its publication though abstract and allegoric modes of storytelling. Nonetheless, at the heart of this story is the question of individualism and individual freedom.

In Parts I and II of the novel, Kathy reflects upon her childhood and teenage years at Hailsham, and subsequently the cottages where Hailsham alumnus live. Although the clones are oblivious to it at the time, headmistress Miss Emily reveals in the final part of the novel that Hailsham was set up by a group of left-wing human rights activists who begin to lose power at the end of the 1970s and become powerless by the end of the 1980s. The activities which the clones engage in at Hailsham

are largely a means of demonstrating and articulating a narrative of individualism. The activities include everything from creating what Tommy describes as 'painting, poetry and all that stuff', which he believes '*revealed what you were like inside*' (2005: 173), to buying items from the Spring Exchange, and 'personalising our desks' (2005: 38). Whitehead has suggested that the promotion of the humanities in the clones' adolescent years is 'at best a deception or lie, and at worst, complicit with the system of political oppression to which the clones are subject' (2005: 57). The humanities feature as the binary opposite to the sciences, inasmuch as they serve to provide an alternative to a harsher, uncontrollable scientific reality. Within Ishiguro's novel, this is the guardians' view of art as they believe that art can express the clones' humanity. In this sense, then, the humanities act as a deception necessary to give the clones' lives meaning. The clones are encouraged to create works of art which are collected by Madame, a woman who visits Hailsham but appears reluctant to engage with its students. A rumour circulates the school that Madame presents the art works in a gallery. The reality, as they later discover, is that Madame collected the art to utilise it as evidence that the clones have a soul. This is one of multiple ways that they are encouraged to express a sense of individualism. The clones also partake in a school sale at which they buy various items used to express their sense of self. It is at one of these sales that Kathy buys a recording of the fictional song 'Never Let Me Go', from which the novel takes its name. The possessions which the clones collect shape their identities long after their time at Hailsham. This is revealed most clearly when the adult Tommy demonstrates his affection for Kathy by seeking a replacement for the recording which, by this point, she has lost. The clones' outward expression of their innermost selves are equally bound up, in such instances, with their possessions as with their art.

Looking back, Kathy, now aware that the Hailsham experiment offered a false sense of hope about the future, begins to understand that while the clones had constructed narratives about themselves, they were never truly in control of their existence. She recalls Miss Lucy's revelation that 'Your lives are set out for you' (2005: 80) as evidence of this: something which appeared meaningless to the students at the time. What Kathy does, as a result, is offer an account of Hailsham as an environment



in which a narrative self was able to exist, but only within certain constraints (invisible to them at the time). For example, a heteronormative discourse dominates around Hailsham, and works to encourage the clones to self-regulate their individualism: for example, Kathy refers to the Thatcherite ideal of the nuclear family on numerous occasions as a 'normal' or 'ordinary' family; there is, similarly, an intolerance of 'any kind of gay stuff' (94). When Kathy, Tommy and Ruth reach the cottages, they learn of a myth regarding how organ donations may be deferred if a couple can demonstrate that they are in love. But the only conception of love which is expressed is strictly heterosexual. However, the main way that Kathy explores the relationship between individual freedom and the power system which controlled them is through memories of Ruth. Ruth is originally referred to, on multiple occasions, as being the naturally more dominant member of the group, often compared to a mother figure among the clones. However, in Part III of the novel, when Ruth and Tommy have become donors and Kathy works as a carer to Ruth, the power relations between them change: Kathy now embodies the dominant discourse of the medical profession and has evidently gained a sense of authority over Ruth and Tommy. Within the professional-patient relationship, the former can remove and re-work the identity of the latter. This occurs when Kathy reflects that their long-held idea that they somehow resembled a 'normal' family was merely always part of a lie. Rather, she observes, the clones are divided into donors, who will soon die, and the carers who facilitate the donation process. Kathy notes how a black-and-white photograph of the care centre where Tommy resides shows that it has been converted from 'a holiday camp for ordinary families' (2005: 214) into the medical facility that it has become. This process of conversion re-emphasises the divide that Kathy now sees between the clones' lives and ordinary lives: no longer a place for the ordinary families they had once likened themselves to, but a sphere in which the carer-patient relationship is formalised. Kathy's altered discourse, in her role as a carer, reveals her changing perception of Ruth. Rather than the strong, mother-like figure she was in their childhood, she sees Ruth as weak. Despite Tommy and Ruth having previously been lovers, when Tommy embraces Ruth Kathy suggests that 'it was clear, though, this was just to steady her' (2005: 220). What Kathy does in her role as carer is to consciously, and explicitly,

embody the power system which has implicitly controlled them their whole lives, and to actively rework Ruth's identity through the lens of care.

However, Ruth challenges the medical authority that Kathy embodies. She resists Kathy's new-found authority by questioning the epistemological basis of her claim that the care profession she works in is largely a force for good for donors. Ruth asks 'How would you know? [...] How could you possibly know? You're still a carer' (2005: 222). Yet while Ruth challenges the new power relations that exist between her and Kathy, she cannot return to the narrative self she developed at Hailsham. Upon finishing boarding school, Ruth had developed an ambition to work in an office. Her commitment to the narrative trajectory that would lead her to office work was such that she, and others, travelled to Norfolk to find Ruth's 'possible'.<sup>6</sup> When she is reminded of her past aspiration, she appears haunted by the reality of what she once believed possible. Returning from a day out, Kathy tells Ruth and Tommy that she has something to show them. She stops the car on the side of the motorway and draws their attention to a billboard. The advertisement depicts an office like the one they visited in Norfolk. Ruth becomes overwhelmed with sadness when confronted with the image of what she had aspired to in the past and how naïve she had been to believe she could be anything else but an organ donor. Adopting a discourse which echoes certain Thatcherite attitudes, Kathy challenges Ruth's sadness, asking, 'Don't you sometimes wonder what might have happened if you'd tried?' (2005: 226). Combined with the memories that the billboard evokes, this reduces Ruth's voice to a 'whisper' (2005: 225). Kathy's language reflects the Thatcherite rhetoric surrounding the self-reliant individual, responsible for their own fate. In many ways, Kathy's sentiment could be viewed as facetious – the clones' collective fate will be the same, despite their individual efforts – but this is something that Ruth struggles to accept, even after accepting her own life is coming to an end. She continues to believe that there is a chance that Kathy and Tommy might escape the system and encourages them to seek deferral for their own organ donations. Ruth fails to understand that

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<sup>6</sup> The 'possibles' are the human beings who have been cloned. Ruth discovers that one of the older clones at the cottages may have seen her possible in Norfolk, working in an office.

her disappointment will be that of all clones, and not exclusively her own: even in accepting her reality, she still maintains on some level that she is an individual and this suffering is hers alone. What she does, therefore, is to continue to uphold the (from her perspective) failed deferral narrative, but removes herself from it. The persistence of the myth does not end with Ruth. When Kathy visits Ruth for the last time, Ruth's docile body lies in front of her, expressionless and voiceless, void of any identity beyond that of a body in the final stage of the role it was created to fulfil. Nonetheless, Kathy interprets the way Ruth stares at her as a reaffirmation of her previous request that she and Tommy seek deferral, and ultimately suggests that she dies believing some clones might live a life of their choosing.

Kathy and Tommy, at Ruth's suggestion, track down former Hailsham headmistress, Miss Emily, and request a deferral, only to find out that this is a myth that had been circulating at Hailsham since its opening. Miss Emily then reveals that while she and others were aware of how students were responding to their engagement with the humanities –that it encouraged aspirational individualism – it was the most humane way to raise the clones, as opposed to the battery farming that had previously occurred. To allow the clones to develop a narrative self and express themselves through possessions and creativity was not just a noble lie, but an experiment intended to challenge societal perceptions of what 'human' means. In Whitehead's terms, the humanities are not presented as complicit with the political system at work in the novel – but a means by which it could be resisted and a way of caring.

The sentiment of this definition of care, to support a myth to offer quality of life, contrasts with the definition of Kathy's role as a carer, in which she facilitates the systematic killing of the clones. Kathy's final memories are then focused on the idea of what it means to care, and how Miss Emily's notion that ignorance is bliss may be true. Kathy initially remembers that, after Miss Emily's revelation, 'more and more, Tommy tended to identify himself with the other donors' (2005: 271). Tommy had previously resisted adopting the identity of a donor – refusing the clothes provided by the care centre, and refusing to integrate – but now he embraces this identity.

Like Ruth in her final moments, Tommy also abandons his previously constructed sense of identity and accepts the homogenous, uniform existence: here the reality of the hospital (the institution with the greatest connotations of biology) undoes the work of Hailsham (the humanities' equivalent institution). In her 2014 lecture, 'Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling', Judith Butler discusses a similar instance in which a man with overpowering delusions, at the request of his doctor, professes to be mad. For Butler, this indicates the performative element of truth: not only is the act of avowal, of claiming to tell the truth, a performance in itself, but through avowal the subject enters into a social contract and submits, through self-constitution, to the terms set out by a system of power. Power 'brings into being what it says' (n.p.) in what can be understood to be a speech act. This is what Kathy observes of Tommy: he has reassessed his own identity having discovered that his past identity was grounded in a myth, and reconstituted his sense of self through the terms set out by the institutional power under which he now knows he will spend the rest of his life. This leads Kathy to draw comparison between Ruth and Tommy's final moments. She says to Tommy: 'The way it is, it's like there's a line with us on one side and Ruth the other' (2005: 279). Kathy visualises knowledge – the discovery of truth contrasted with the belief in the noble lie – in this instance as a dividing line, sorting those who die believing the myth of Hailsham from those who do not. This theorisation of knowledge as a dividing line returns at the close of the novel and, understood in this way, has meaningful implications for Jane Elliot's reading of the novel's ending.

Elliot has argued that, at this point, 'the reader increasingly desires to redirect Kathy's gaze to the approaching threat she refuses to examine' (2005: 95), suggesting that she is unaware of her real place in the world. However, following Tommy's death, the novel returns to the present moment, the location from which Kathy has been narrating, and we learn that she has been, this entire time, standing at the edge of a road looking at a wire fence and the field behind it where she imagined everything from her childhood 'had washed up' (2005: 282). Kathy has previously suggested that she would always have her memories, and that her memories constitute

her being as an individual, but this final image challenges that.<sup>7</sup> Much in the same way the imagined line divided Ruth and Kathy, Kathy's memories are now also divided from her (with the fence acting as a physical dividing line) and she is unable to return to what she describes as the Hailsham in her mind. Kathy, the 31-year-old adult, has been exposed to the reality from which she was protected by the myth of Hailsham. Now, with this new-found knowledge, she is separated from her own past, and from the memories (made comprehensible through narrative) that once constituted her identity. Contrary to Elliot's remark, Kathy's separation from her own identity – as she visualises it – exposes that she fully understands the threat she faces. But perhaps more significantly, the fact that Kathy even reflects upon her future with a sense of trepidation is indicative of this political climate – under which she will carry on in her role as a carer, complicitously going to wherever she is 'supposed to be' (2005: 282) – continuing despite the impending change of government.

Fundamentally, the novel seeks to challenge the emphasis placed upon the aspirational individual within Thatcherite discourse. In particular, it draws attention to the extent to which freedom and individual choice is limited. The main way in which it achieves this is by emphasising the differences between socially-constructed and genetically-determined notions of 'the individual'. Within the novel's exploration of these two expressions of individualism, there are two main common themes. The first is the contrasting of the humanities (associated with socially-constructed identities) with the biological sciences (linked to genetically-determined identities). In the novel, aspiration and self-determination are undermined by the biological factors that influence individuals. The clones of *Never Let Me Go* are seen to perform an identity of their choosing – but the circumstances of their birth undermine any element of choice in deciding their future. Samantha Vice's identification of a narrative trajectory at the heart of the narrative self is especially important in reading Ishiguro's novel. It is these characters' lack of future in particular – and the futility of a rhetoric

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<sup>7</sup> The significance of memory as a means by which narratives are established and reinforced is common *Never Let Me Go*. There is a failure of memory: the crisis is not medical but personal. Kathy's memories are accessible to her but the meaning of them is transformed by her discovery; they no longer represent any form of 'truth' about her present-moment sense of self.

which promotes ambition and self-reliance – which most forcefully challenges the Thatcherite conceptualisation of individualism. The second theme is the introduction of medical tropes – and, particularly, the exploration of power and authority through the professional-patient relationship. Kathy H takes on the role of a carer. The new relationship between her and her friends which this new role demands serves as a vehicle through which a patient's identity is changed against their will. The authority attached to the medical professional affords them the ability to deny the patient's self-expression by drawing upon the genetically-determined aspects of their identity, over which they have a greater understanding. To this end, the novel proposes that individual identities, fates and opportunities are not solely determined by individuals themselves – and highlights the extent to which those in positions of authority can re-work and revise the narrativised identities that individuals have articulated.

Yet, despite the challenge the novel poses to Thatcherite individualism, it ultimately demonstrates an ambivalence towards it, rather than an explicit rejection of it. Ishiguro does not suggest that the clones' aspirations simply indicate that they are being deceived, but that they (although flawed) can bring solace or give a sense of value on a personal level. In *Never Let Me Go*, there is an indication that consumerism – as demonstrated at Hailsham's exchanges where the clones sell their art and buy other items – offers a means of self-expression which is as valuable as artistic expression. In addition, Kathy's criticism of Ruth's lack of achievement, ostensibly because she had not tried hard enough, draws upon the Thatcherite virtue of self-reliance. The novel's exploration of the narrative self also concludes that narratives – even if untrue – can provide necessary frameworks through which individuals can feel more fulfilled. This is articulated clearly through Ruth's continued belief in the deferral scheme. Even despite knowing her own ambitions were not realised, Ruth dies with the solace of believing that Kathy and Tommy may yet have their own donations deferred. As a result, Ishiguro challenges elements of the Thatcherite discourse surrounding individualism, but also provides justification for why the idea – even if flawed – of the self-determined, aspirational individual in control of their fate can be fulfilling.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Mullen, A., 2019. "Kazuo Ishiguro and the Legacy of Aspirational Individualism." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 7(1): 2, pp. 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.556>

**Published:** 28 January 2019

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