

Article

## Fabricating Stability: A Study of Ontological Security in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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**Abstract:** The research study analyses Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* through the lens of social psychology. The paper employs qualitative methods to explore the concept of ontological security, as introduced by R.D. Laing, and its broader implications in sociology, as discussed by Anthony Giddens. This theoretical framework examines how contemporary individuals develop and maintain ontological security within the constructed social setting. In addition, the study highlights the significance of Hailsham as a symbolic representation of a fabricated safe zone for its inhabitants. The institution's invisible structures encourage students to comply and perceive themselves as emotionally stable. Art and sports activities in the institution emphasize the intimate emotional security and desire for identity and belonging in the artificially constructed space of a dystopian society. Therefore, this stabilized practice, routine, and ritual within the institution make students believe it is a safe place, thus avoiding rebellion. Therefore, this research sheds light on the importance of ontological security in understanding modern subjectivity, governance, and security. It provides future interdisciplinary applications, especially within literature, film studies, and social psychology.

**Keywords:** Ontological Security; Hailsham; Social Setting; Identity

## Introduction

This article examines Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), a dystopian narrative set in a parallel world of late-twentieth-century England, presented in an ordinary yet serene manner. The novel centres around the characters of Kathy, Tommy, Ruth, and clones who live for the ultimate goal of donating organs. The central characters in the novel, rather than creating a rebellion or confronting their fate immediately, attempt to find mental stability through their friendships, romantic relationships, and ephemeral cultural norms. The portrayal of group conformity, community compliance, and internalized fatalism as a means to seek emotional stability and order in their lives within an oppressive system reveals the author's perspective on the world. The central figures were conditioned to be quiet and emotionally suppressed to accept their mortality without confronting the cruelties prevailing in the place.

This research employs the concept of Perceived Ontological Security, initially framed by R.D. Laing (1960) and further developed by Anthony Giddens (1991), which focuses on the foundational confidence people have in the continuity of their identity and social environments. This study suggests that the novel portrays this phenomenon, specifically at Hailsham, an elite boarding school. The students are raised in a specific institution that functions as a carefully curated environment designed to foster a false sense of care, compassion, purpose, and belonging while subtly shaping its inhabitants to conform to their predetermined roles as organ donors. The following discussion is structured into four key subsections to provide a meticulous exploration of the concept of ontological security in the selected novel. The first section examines how the institution develops a comfort zone with regulated routines, curated spaces, and moral codes. Secondly, it focuses on the role of its creative expression that fosters identity and social belonging. Thirdly, it examines social interaction and peer validation, which aligns with the main idea. Finally, it analyses its compliance with predetermined destinies. This research integrates a socio-psychological reading of Ishiguro's narrative.

## Methodology & Discussion

The present research employs qualitative methods and textual analysis grounded in the literary framework. The study adopts the conceptualisation of Perceived Ontological Security by R.D. Laing (1960) and Anthony Giddens (1991) to examine the main characters' significant socio-psychological conditions and survival crises. The study focuses on routine, social, emotional stability, institutional trust, and a sense of belonging. The close reading of the text allows for analysing the main characters' maintenance of ontological security in a predefined dystopian society.

## Hailsham as a Fabricated Ontological Safe Zone

Hailsham is a modern institutional environment meticulously curated to foster a sense of ontological security for its students. This ontological security refers to the confidence a person feels when they internalise the idea that their world is stable, predictable, and reliable. The invisible control on Hailsham performs this action by regulating students' perception, knowledge, experience, and social expectations. The institution has its predefined daily routines, academic activities, and moral ethics that

make it a sanctuary to protect its inhabitants from the existential horror of their predetermined end.

Kathy narrates the story, where the fellow students were conditioned to internalise their existence as usual within the microcosm of Hailsham.

This might all sound daft, but you must remember that at that stage in our lives, any place beyond Hailsham was like a fantasy land; we had only the haziest notions of the world outside and about what was and was not possible there. (Ishiguro 105)

There is a cautious omission of the reality about their future until adolescence, which ensures that the students perceive a sense of security based on the knowledge they have acquired in their institution. She describes the significance of exchange and sales rituals, in addition to art shows and sports events, and offers instant assurance of their continuity and belonging. By providing inhabitants with labelled boxes and allowing them to collect their personal belongings, the guardians develop a surface-level sense of individuality and stability by motivating students to emotionally invest their time in these small possessions. This emphasizes the compliance through perceived stability, where they accepted their confined, controlled living at Hailsham partly because of such systems of personal ritual, such as the sales, exchanges, and collections. It performs as an anchor of identity and belonging in a structured system created to mask their dehumanistic behaviour. These chests highlight a private, safe space in defined life and how people are willing to participate in a predetermined system of control when it provides comforting daily routines, social roles, and personalized tokens of continuity in a fundamentally unstable world.

When you come across old students from Hailsham, you always find them getting nostalgic about their collections, sooner or later. At the time, of course, we took it all for granted. You each had a wooden chest with your name, which you kept under your bed and filled with your possessions—the stuff you acquired from the Sales or the Exchanges. (Ishiguro 61)

By isolating the students from the disturbing reality of their existence, Hailsham aims to create an illusion of normalcy and order. From a young age, they were led to believe that they were safe inside Hailsham and that everything outside was scary. Meanwhile, the symbolic representation of the woods evokes an ever-present awareness of their grim fate as organ donors, underscoring the ontological security fabricated by the space and revealing the limits of such an artificial psychological safe zone. Even though the inhabitants try to restrain from this anxiety by staying in parts of it, where the woods are not visible, the underlying threat remains constant. The psychological nature cast by the woods implies the fragile nature of students' perceived security. Their routines, spaces, and daily lives at Hailsham serve as coping mechanisms to maintain a sense of order, but nothing can stop them from being aware of their predestined future.

The woods were at the top of the hill behind Hailsham House. All we could see \_\_\_\_\_ was a dark fringe of trees, but I certainly was not the only one my age to feel their

presence day and night. When it got bad, it was like they cast a shadow over the whole of Hailsham; all you had to do was turn your head or move towards a window and there they would be, looming in the distance. The front of the main house was the safest because you could not see them from any of the windows. Even so, you never really got away from them. (Ishiguro 78)

Therefore, Hailsham's predefined structure maintains a semblance of normalcy, creating compliance and emotional stability in the dystopian social setting.

### Art as a Sense of Belonging

Art and creativity serve as a tool to maintain Hailsham's perceived ontological security. Madame would collect the best student work and keep it in a personal gallery. It is represented here:

However, what is her gallery? She keeps coming here and taking away our best work. She must have stacks of it by now. I asked Miss Geraldine once how long Madame had been coming here, and she said it had been for as long as Hailsham had been here. (Ishiguro 48)

This adds to the demonstration of the students' humanity. This functions as a myth, where people in Hailsham believe that it serves dual purposes, igniting a ray of hope and a sense of social validation while also serving as an ideological tool to justify their fate. Artwork in the institution becomes a form of social expectation and customary activity that empowers community relationships and personal identity. The exchanges, where students trade their artworks, resemble social rituals explained by Giddens, Kinnvall, and Mitzen, which are created to promote a sense of community.

Art serves as a sense of normalcy and a means of belonging. The children are restricted from having their own families or futures, but they are believed to be able to express their inner selves through art. "We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to prove you had souls at all." (Ishiguro 399) This concept aligns with the notion that having a soul signifies selfhood and, therefore, a claim to belonging within a social context. Madame insists on this in students' minds when she selects their artwork.

Kathy's view on Judy Bridgewater's Song After Dark represents a personalised emotional sanctuary. This art form showcases an intimate, self-selected object that anchors her identity through private meaning. This song expresses the imagination of maternal care and unconditional love, which are denied to clones. She cradles an imaginary baby while dancing, expressing her subconscious desire for emotional continuity, warmth, and human bonds that give her instant ontological reassurance in a detached environment. Madame's emotional reaction to her dance portrays the thematic resonance of her desire for a gentler and more secure real world than the one in which she was fabricated at Hailsham.

I was doing this slow dance, my eyes closed, singing along softly each time those lines came around again: Oh baby, baby, never let me go . . . The song was almost

over when something made me realise I was not alone, and I opened my eyes to find myself staring at Madame framed in the doorway. (Ishiguro 113)

The tape's retrieval in Norfolk mirrors her desire to recover a sense of emotional rootedness and continuity of identity in the disintegration of her world. Ruth and Tommy also identify tape as a symbolic artefact for the loss of an emotional bond worth reclaiming and a marker of exclusion.

### **Emotional Stability and Social Expectation**

Hailsham restrains people from overt displays of rebellion, thus promoting a social setting where its inhabitants moderate their emotions to align with community norms. The clones do not rebel against their institution because their identities and global perspectives are meticulously developed within a closed, normalised system that ensures compliance. Through education and social conditioning, they have internalised their destructive fate.

The key figures internalise social expectations by subtle mechanisms of emotional regulation. Ruth's assertive nature and Tommy's emotional outbursts are depicted as deviations met with social rejection. The sufferings of these personalities reveal the implication of social psychological processes of conformity and social expectation, where the protagonists adapt their social roles and behaviours to align with perceived norms. In the narrative, conformity develops emotional equilibrium within the social group, while dissent threatens the fragile security maintained by institutional structures.

The social dynamics that prevail in the structure extend into adulthood, where former students of Hailsham become carers and donors. Kathy's detachment and rationalisation in her journey reflect a coping mechanism consistent with Giddens's argument that individuals in modern societies construct personal narratives to maintain a continuous sense of self amidst institutionalised morality. The limitation of resistance shows the potency of perceived ontological security in resisting overt rebellion while preserving psychological and emotional stability.

### **Compliance through Perceived Stability**

Never Let Me Go is a significant work that portrays the characters' compliance with their fate in the dystopian system. This compliance is crucially attributed to the sense of order manufactured by Hailsham and other institutions. The Hailsham community's illusion of order and stability delays the existential horror, allowing inmates to form meaningful interpersonal bonds and engage in personal activities. The characters find solace in traditional customs and rituals, such as caring for donors, recalling nostalgic memories, and collecting keepsakes. They conform to their social roles without hesitation.

The paper emphasises the absence of harsh rebellion in the narrative. The central figures, such as Ruth, Kathy, and Tommy, fulfill this role by preserving emotional continuity through interpersonal relationships rather than resisting the system. The

perceived stability provided by Hailsham's daily routine thus enables compliance by offering emotionally resonant, if ultimately hollow, forms of agency.

### Conclusion

This research suggests that ontological security prevails through structured social practices, institutional regulations, and cultural narratives that provide a sense of normalcy and order. Moreover, the social relevance to the present generation is where the theoretical ground of ontological security meets literary and cinematic dystopias. In the selected text, *Never Let Me Go*, the social setting artificially constructs stability and predictability through intense control practices, suppression of existential questioning, and the normalisation of mortality. The existence of clones in the narrative, organised through institutional routines and controlled social interactions, exemplifies how this can be maintained and weaponized in a dystopian world.

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