

The Analyses on Themes and Images of the Film *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract: Contemporary Japanese British writer Ishiguro Ishiguro has been deeply concerned by academia and readers since his creation and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. *Never Let Me Go* has been praised for its profound and diverse themes. It was not only nominated for The Man Booker Prize, but also listed by Time Magazine as “one of the 100 greatest English novels since the magazine was founded in 1923”. The film of the same name, *Never Let Me Go*, which was released in 2010, won the 37th Saturn Awards for “Best Science Fiction Film” nomination. This paper reveals the theme of soul and ethics in the film by analyzing the various images of the film *Never Let Me Go*. This paper is composed of four parts. The first chapter is an introduction, introducing the research background, literature review, research purpose and significance, and related theories. The second chapter analyzes the object image, space image, character image and their meaning in the film. The third chapter explores the soul theme and ethical theme of the film through the analysis of related imagery and the description of the fate of clones, and at the macro level, it analyzes the reasons for the phenomenon of clones and complaints about this social situation by comparing clones with normal human. The fourth chapter is the conclusion. On the basis of summarizing this paper, it is shown that the use of technology to create human clones to prolong human life is not desirable. Human beings are in a universal community of human destiny and the emergence of clones is contrary to human relations, and human beings should shoulder more responsibility and respect the laws of nature.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, Theme Research, Imagery.

1. Introduction

Cloning technology is the process of producing life through artificial asexual reproduction by using science and technology. Clones have the same genes as humans. Since the first use of the term “clone” by Indian biochemist Haldane in a speech in 1963, the scientific community’s research on cloning technology has spread widely on a global scale. Until February 1997, an article in the British *Nature Magazine* announced to the world the birth of cloned sheep “Dolly”. Many scientists believe that this is a milestone in the history of cloning technology and also marks the beginning of a new era of biotechnology. More importantly, humans began to imagine creating clones to benefit themselves and the ethical issues caused by this have attracted wide attention.

In 2005, Kazuo Ishiguro (1954 -) published his science fiction novel *Never Let Me Go* on the theme of cloning. In the same year, the novel was nominated for the Booker Prize in the United Kingdom, and was named the best book by the New York Times and Time Magazine. In 2006, it was awarded the United States Alex Award and praised by Haruki Murakami, a famous Japanese novelist. The film of the same name, *Never Let Me Go*, which was released in 2010, won the 37th Saturn Awards for “Best Science Fiction Film” nomination. For adapted films of the same name, there is relatively little research in China. Scholar Sun Weilin in “The Beauty of Extremely Sadness-From The film *Never Let Me Go* adapted by Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel” thinks that the film is not exploring the ethical significance of clones, but a deeper exploration of human value and dignity (Sun 66). Scholar Li Li in *Dystopian Colors in Never Let Me Go*, believes that the film reveals the themes of technology abuse, social totalitarianism and human alienation. It reveals the irrational development of science and technology, criticizes the evil of human nature, and intends to awaken human reason and

humanity. (Li 129).

The purpose of this thesis research is to grasp the emotions of the characters and the theme of the film by analyzing the images and details that appear in the film. Imagery appears in Chinese and Western literary theories. It is widely used in different disciplines. It has gradually evolved into the category of psychology. Imagery is one of the most common in criticism, and one of the most variable in meaning. Its applications range all the way from the “mental pictures” which, it is sometimes claimed, are experienced by the reader of a poem, to the totality of the components which make up a poem. There are three understandings of imagery:

First, imagery is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in the vehicles of its similes and metaphors. Second, imagery is used, more narrowly, to signify only specific descriptions of visible objects and scenes. Third, commonly in recent usage, imagery signifies figurative language, especially the vehicles of metaphors and similes. (Abrams and Harpham 169-170).

In this film, imagery mainly adopts the first understanding. Imagery has not only superficial meaning but also deeper meaning. In this paper, imagery is divided into three categories: object imagery, space imagery and character imagery. Through the analysis of the imagery in the film, the theme of the film can be expressed more deeply and the audience can be impressed.

In the film, the emergence of clones has triggered human thinking about technology and ethics. Clones have the same soul as humans, but they are not recognized by society. Clones have the same noble morals as humans, but nobody cares. The only fate of these clones is to donate organs in adulthood until death. Although the appearance of clones can prolong human life and cure diseases, and even bring huge profits to humans,

it is still regarded as an unethical behavior. The innovation of this paper lies in the analysis of the images and details of the film, which provides a new research method, so that the audience can grasp the theme of the film more deeply.

2. Analysis on Images of the Film *Never Let Me Go*

2.1. Object Images

2.1.1. Tommy's Football and Polo Shirt

Tommy is particularly good at football in the film and is one of the best in his age. But maybe it is Tommy's weird personality and angry temper at childhood that keeps his friends away from him. Football represents vitality, and Tommy's favorite sport is playing football, and it also represents his persistence and love of the heart. Tommy's companion isolates him, laughs at him, which shows that clones have the same emotions as humans. Tommy's polo shirt is his favorite clothes, he wears it when playing football. The image of the polo shirt is also vividly portrayed in the film: Polo shirts are casual clothes that are not suitable for wearing on the football field, but Tommy wears it, which is one of the reasons why his friends laugh at him. Later, his friends isolated him. It was not until the muddy splash on his favorite polo shirt that he calmed down his impatience. This polo shirt is of great significance to Tommy. This is what he bought at the auction as a treasure. Although shabby, it is also worthy of being loved by Tommy. This just proves that clones have the same emotions as humans.

2.1.2. Hulk: An Unattainable Ideal

When Kathy was a carer, she took Tommy and Ruth who had already donated to find a boat stranded by the sea. This was the first reunion of the three after many years of separation. In the film, the three men walked up to the boat, rolled over the fence and trekked to the beach. Turning over the fence symbolized that the three defeated the setback. Facing the fence, Ruth was unwilling to go over, but with the encouragement of Kathy and Tommy, she turned over. Previously, Ruth would stay by the fence and hold Tommy by her side, but now, she is willing to work harder for Kathy and Tommy.

After finally coming to the beach, the three were blocked by the mud. They could only watch from a distance but couldn't get there. Boats symbolize sailing towards the other side in literary works. A boat is a so-called hope, an opportunity to deferral. The unreachable boat represents that it is impossible for the three people to arrive on the other side. The ideal is always beautiful, but after all, it is only a fantasy for clones. They have been stranded at the beach, as portrayed in the film.

2.1.3. Magnetic Tape: Yearning for Life

The magnetic tape that appeared in the film was at an auction. Everyone exchanged their tokens for their favorite items. These items were mostly damaged or even thrown away by humans, but the clone students were full of passion for the auction. Tommy exchanged one of his few tokens for this magnetic tape. The name of the song was *Never Let Me Go*. Tommy gave the magnetic tape to Kathy, and Kathy also regarded it as a treasure. She listened to it on the pillow at night. When Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy grew up, Kathy still kept the magnetic tape.

The song played on the tape is not only the background music but also the clones' inner voice. The image of the

magnetic tape is undoubtedly a clue in the film, not only the most precious thing of Kathy, but also the nostalgia for life of all clones including Kathy. Clones also have their own emotions, and they also know how to love and cherish their lives. Unfortunately, in the mainstream consciousness of society, clones are not accepted by humans and cannot be recognized by society. Clones have the established fate: Donate organs until death. Therefore, the appearance of this magnetic tape not only shows the heavy mood of Kathy, but also represents the desire of all clones for life.

2.2. Space Images

2.2.1. Gallery: A Longing for the Active Pursuit

A gallery is a place where art works are collected, displayed or sold. There is a cooperative relationship between art gallery and artists. Professor Cao Mengqin points out: "Humanity is the philosophical foundation of science and technology ethics". (Cao 46). In the film *Never Let Me Go*, Hailsham is a boarding school, these clones are arranged to study music, painting, sports and other courses. Everyone says that only the best works will be selected into the gallery, but the works selected into the gallery have never been publicly displayed, so it is different from the real gallery in the real world. And clone students have never been treated as real artists. Such a gallery is full of mystery for the clone students and the gallery is regarded as a castle in the sky. The clone students only want to create excellent works and have their works chosen into the gallery. Then the clone students will get tokens and can buy what they want at the auction. The real purpose of holding a gallery in a school is not to examine the personal character of the clone students, but to see whether the clone students have souls and feelings, or to prove whether every clone student is a real person.

At the end of the film, Tommy asks the principal about the existence of the gallery, but the principal says: "The gallery was not established to test your soul, but to test whether you have a soul". So this gallery is representing a longing for the active pursuit of these clones, even if the longing is empty from the beginning. The reason why Hailsham attaches importance to art may be to show people that clones have the soul. Unfortunately, the vast majority of people in society do not accept this kind of rhetoric. They have a prejudice against clones, thinking that clones are not human beings, and the fate of clones is to be donated. No matter whether clones have souls or not, they cannot survive in human society.

2.2.2. Hailsham: The Prison of Thought

Plato tells such a story in *Ideal Country*: "There is a group of prisoners who are trapped in a dark cave. Their legs and neck were locked up with iron chains since they were young, and could not move. They could only see what was in front of them, because the iron chain prevented them from turning their heads". (Plato 170). The first place that appeared in the film was Hailsham, a boarding school. On the surface, it is not much different from other boarding schools, but the students, school rules and surrounding environment are very different from ordinary schools. The students here are clones, the school rules are extremely strict, and there are barbed wires around them to completely isolate them from the outside world. Such a fully enclosed school is like a cave described by Plato in the *Ideal Country*, isolated from the world. And these clone students, like prisoners in the cave, live in illusion and know nothing about the real life of the outside world. School regulations and horror legends spread like an invisible cage. Hailsham not only restricts the freedom

of clone students in space, but also puts invisible shackles on clone students mentally and ideologically.

Everything in Hailsham is orderly and mysterious. Although they need to receive cultural education just like ordinary students, they know that they are different from ordinary people. Clones must cherish their bodies and cannot be hurt. But behind this kind of education lies an untold dark secret: these clone students will donate vital organs for humanity in adulthood, and reach the end of their lives after three or four donations. The “donation” in the film is not a voluntary donation by clones. The donation of the clones’ organ is a passive behavior. At this moment, the meaning of “donation” is equivalent to “being slaughtered”. (Du Mingye 95).

In such a society, the word “donation” is used by authorities to divert public attention and blind the truth, and describe cruel passive donation as a great voluntary donation. In that ethical environment, the education that clones receive from childhood is to “maintain health and complete donations”. After years of brainwashing education, clones have lost their ability to resist from the beginning.

2.3. Character Images

2.3.1. Madame Mary

In the film *Never Let Me Go*, clone students in Hailsham are arranged to study music, painting, sports and other courses. Only the best works will be selected into the gallery by Madame Mary who comes to school occasionally, so clone students will try their best to paint the best picture of their “soul”. Kathy recalled her childhood contact with Madame Mary, one of the normal humans in the school. Kathy and her friends suddenly appeared in front of the Madame Mary and observed her reaction: She looked terrified, lest any of us would accidentally touch her, she was afraid of us like she was afraid of poisonous spiders. Madame Mary’s attitude towards clones is like a mirror, from which Kathy and other clones gradually realize that they are different from normal people.

Madame Mary represents the outside human. Humans do not accept clones and do not regard them as normal people in a true sense, so Madame Mary is afraid of these clones. In fact, Madame Mary received these excellent paintings, but she never showed them publicly. She just wants to confirm whether the clone students have souls and feelings. The ethical identity of the clones cannot be recognized by outside world, nor can human sympathy be obtained.

2.3.2. Guardian Lucy

Guardian Lucy, a new teacher in the school, represents the image of the human acceptance of clones. Lucy often said that students in Hailsham were special and one day she couldn’t help telling the truth: The clone students will grow up but their life has been planned. Before they reach middle age, they are going to start donating their organs. In the eyes of most teachers in the school, the clones are not humans at all. They are no different from the animals to be slaughtered. Lucy also said that these clone students were born as mice, and grew up healthy just to donate organs. Soon after the teacher finished speaking, the students remained silent for a long time. The sky slowly gets dark, suddenly, a gust of wind came, blowing the teacher’s lecture notes to the ground. Tommy walked over, picked them up, and put them back on the desk. Knowing such a cruel truth, these clone students were exceptionally calm, without complaining or resisting, but just silently

accepting. They are cut off from all connections with the outside world. Seeing the clone students being so innocent, Lucy couldn’t help feeling heartache. She finally told the truth to the clone students, but the consequence was that she was expelled from the Hailsham.

The teacher fired by Hailsham just told the clone students what’s in the dark, but didn’t tell them how to go in the future. Teacher Lucy believes that clones should have their own ethical identity, hopes that they can have a different life, but clones are unable to fight against reality. Teacher Lucy has made efforts to make clones recognize their identity, but unfortunately, clones still cannot escape the fate of organ donation, and they are still not recognized by society.

3. Analysis on Themes of the Film *Never Let Me Go*

3.1. Theme of Soul

Clone students can earn tokens through their own labor, and use tokens to exchange for their favorite things in the school’s “trade fairs” and “auctions” for collection. However, school regulations and horror legends spread like an invisible cage, enclosing clone students firmly in the cage, but even so, as creatures, they inevitably have a desire for self-awareness. In order to understand themselves, clone students constantly compare themselves with the “other” of normal humans.

From the human point of view, clones are not really individuals in the true sense, because clones do not have their own souls. But objectively speaking, the notion of the supremacy of human interests is actually an anti-ethical behavior. When Ruth confesses to Kathy, stating that she should not take Tommy away, Ruth reveals the glory of human nature. When the three meet again, they discuss the issue of organ donation, and individuals even regard the number of times about organ donations as their own glory and basic responsibility.

A comparison between cloned humans and ordinary humans in real society reveals that humans are extremely indifferent and selfish. When Madame Mary went to the college to collect paintings, although all the clone students were happily greeted, Madame Mary regarded them as poisonous spiders. When everyone cheered and asked the postman what toys he had brought to them, the postman simply repeated the clone students’ words coldly and simply. When Kathy smiled and thanked the delivery staff who delivered the vegetables, the delivery person turned away without looking at Kathy. The most irritating scene is that when the surveillance alarm issued a harsh alarm, the doctors still took out large organs from Ruth’s face without expression, then pulled out the ventilator, and finally placed Ruth on the operating table and ignored her. At the end of the film, Kathy asked, whether human who have completely lost their rationality would live better after obtaining the organs donated by clones.

3.2. Theme of Ethics

3.2.1. The Lack of Ethical Identity of Clones

Ethical identity refers to the belonging and positioning of individuals in a certain ethical relationship, and is one of the keywords of literary ethics criticism. Therefore, when analyzing the ethical judgment of character narrators, attention should be paid to the analysis of the ethical identity of the characters in the work. The beginning of this film is a

large amount of DNA data, and humans have made breakthroughs in medicine: all diseases can be cured, and people can live longer than 100 years. The film does not introduce that these students are clones, because clones are no different from ordinary people.

These clones are kept in school and cannot be in contact with the outside world. Just like animals are kept in prisons, they don't know who they are and they will have questions about their identity. A detail in the film is to introduce the name of the character. Although it is just a name, it is a symbol of personal identity recognized by society. In the film, clones only have capitalized letters as surnames, such as Tommy ·D, Kathy ·H. From this point of view, the incompleteness of their names seems to imply that they have no father and no mother. Nie Zhenzhao once pointed out: "Identities can be divided into types. One is inborn, such as the identity of blood relatives determined by the blood relationship. The other is acquired the day after tomorrow". (Nie 102) Because these clones have no parents, their names are also different from normal people.

3.2.2. The Awakening of Clones

In the film, there were two roars about Tommy, which represents the awakening of the clone's ethical consciousness. Tommy's first roar in the film reflects the role of self-regulation. Since childhood, Tommy has often been bullied by boys and has become grumpy, even though he is a strong boy. The reason is that he has never even come up with something at the spring trade fair and he seems to be just a good runner. Generally speaking, a person who is good at sports is not praising him. There is no doubt that Tommy, who is crowded out, is considered a fool. And this explains exactly why Tommy will roar on the football field.

The second roar reflects Tommy's attitude towards death. When he hopefully brought his own animal paintings with Kathy to meet the principal, he was told that there was no postponement. What's even more ironic is that those clone students were allowed to create art at that time, just to test whether the clones have a soul. Tommy fell into great despair. Tommy collapsed instantly on the dark road, screamed immediately, as if the beast was struggling at the bottom of the well.

But in the end, he accepted the "termination" that human society had designed for him. Tommy's pain and roar is a manifestation of the struggle between the ideal and reality. Finally, he chose to accept death and fate quietly with a smile, which is the result of self-regulation.

3.2.3. Pursuing the Ethical Identity of Clones

The growth process of Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy is in the process of continually pursuing their "prototype". Somebody told Ruth that there is someone who looks like her. To find a "prototype" similar to her, Tommy, Kathy and Ruth embarked on a Norfolk trip together, and this trip represents hope for the future. When Ruth failed to find a "prototype", Ruth was greatly disappointed and even desperately thought that the clones were copied from drug addicts, prostitutes, alcoholics, and sluts. Their "prototype" could only be found in the ditch. From Ruth's complaint, this group of clones reflects a strong sense of inferiority. They try to establish their ethical identity in order to have a clear understanding of themselves.

Kathy suspects that her "prototype" is a prostitute in *Erotic Magazine*, and the root cause of this idea was that her sexual desire was extremely strong. In fact, no matter whether it is

physical or psychological, clones cannot confirm their true identity, and are even less likely to produce a sense of self-identity, which gradually makes them feel inferior. It was the influence of this factor that made Ruth flirt with Tommy in real life, imitating human beings on TV, and pretended to know a lot about human life, but when they order at the restaurant, all of them become overwhelmed. The clone hopes to gain self-identity in the process of imitating human beings, however, clones have completely lost themselves in the real life, and it is difficult to find the fundamental meaning of their existence in the world. Therefore, when they were slaughtered by humans in the end, they did not resist.

But the reality is cruel. This group of poor clones has been thrown into the world alone since birth, controlled by huge social machines, and survived on the edge of society. The true feelings of human that the clones desire are destined to be wiped out, so even love and dreams, the most beautiful instincts of mankind, are all deprived of. Clones are seen as a group of soulless creatures, and are not accepted and recognized in human society. As we all know, the most important point in ethics is to respect everyone's life. It is a sin to abuse power and break the moral bottom line to deprive others of the right to survive. Hailsham deliberately concealed the origin of the clone, but the ultimate goal of education is to cultivate the clone into a qualified organ donor, which is extremely inhumane. Faced with the fate that had been established, Kathy was helpless and could only stand outside and witness her and other clones' bodies and souls being trampled. Therefore, Kathy believed that the education method and purpose of the Hailsham violated ethics.

Obviously, although humans use technology to create clones, they refuse to give them a reasonable ethical identity. "In the social environment of human supremacy, clones will not be accepted by society. In human eyes, clones have no dignity. Not only are clones affected, but human ethics is also subverted, this is undoubtedly the negative side of technology". (Wang Taohua 30).

3.2.4. Clones' Failure to Pursue Ethical Identity

In the social background set by the beginning of film, the clone industry is allowed to exist, and clones have only one purpose for creation: donation. They are destined to donate their organs after adulthood, and they are no different from humans feeding pigs, horses, cattle and sheep to provide meat and fur for humans. It can be said that clones live to donate. Although there are "people", they are different from ordinary people. They are "born" and "dead". They cannot control their own destiny or decide their own future direction. From this perspective, in the era of rapid development of science and technology, the great benefits brought by the cloned human organ donation industry to the human society have shaken human ethical awareness, and finally made anti-human and anti-ethical behavior.

In the society that people generally believes that "clones are not humans", but the normal human in Hailsham strives to create a good living environment for the clone students and also gives them a rich curriculum education. The purpose is to hope that clones have the same rights as normal people. Miss Emily wants to prove to the world that clones have souls through clones' paintings. In fact, in the subconscious minds of Miss Emily and other normal people, clones have no soul, but the daily behavior of clone students is no different from normal human, which makes normal human have to face the fact that both clones' paintings and papers prove that clones

also have souls. But in the end, in the face of the pressure from social authority and the pressure of social mainstream consciousness, these clones are still not accepted by human society. On the one hand, clones are very longing for normal life and freedom, even if they only have a silver lining to hope for three to four years of free life, they will desperately strive for it. However, humans in society are smart and free, they use science and technology to relentlessly deprive clones of their right to survival and freedom, and treat clones as cattle and sheep to be slaughtered. On the other hand, the abnormal development of ethical awareness has also accelerated human distortion of the social ethical environment, and the social authority's moral indifference to clones makes the anti-ethical killing behavior a reasonable donation behavior in the new environment.

Perhaps clones will never understand that the fundamental reason for their existence as tools is to be used by human beings, and they can never become humans in the true sense. The true destiny of clones is actually similar to the wooden boat that appears repeatedly in the film, and can only be stranded on the beach and abandoned by humans. Although Tommy's eyes contained warmth and guilt during his last donation, he still saw his infinite attachment to the world. At the end of the film, Kathy's monologue is exactly what these creatures questioned humanity. Kathy said that what she was not sure about was the difference between her life and the life of the recipient, because in her eyes, all life will be ended, but no one will ever understand their true experience. At the end of the film, it leaves a question worth considering for everyone. Kathy wants to know is if their lives have been so different from the lives of the recipient. In fact, everyone understands that the life remaining on the operating table is no different from that of you and me and the lives of millions of ordinary people in the world.

4. Conclusions

In the film *Never Let Me Go*, a series of images are used to express the theme. Images are the core elements of expressing the theme. This paper is to express the values that the film wants to convey through the portrayal of subtleties in the film. The development of science and technology has affected the social ethics and morality to a certain extent. If the cloning technology is applied to human beings in the real world, it means that the society needs to solve a series of difficult problems between technology and ethics conflict issues.

Clones have been in control of their lives since they were born. Regarding the ethical problems caused by the development of science and technology, former President Jiang Zemin once put forward his own opinion: "Scientific and technological progress should serve all mankind and world peace, but not harm human themselves". (Yang Zhenwu 1). The film do not make any moral criticism of the clone organ donation industry, but shows the audience the fate of the clone's painful fate, calm narrative style and writing techniques, and also provides the audience with thought-provoking materials. Human beings have rationality and a high degree of civilization. They should maintain critical consciousness and always reflect on whether the new technological development is beneficial to the sustainable development of human society and whether it meets the social ethical and moral requirements. Human equality is the theme of the life, and respecting life is the eternal essence of ethics as well as the laws of nature.

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