

Childhood in Action: A Study of Natality's Relationship to Societal Change in *Never Let Me Go*

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Introduction

“Children are our future.” This phrase is used so often that it is generally considered to be a cliché, devoid of any insight. If taken seriously, however, it points to the stakes involved in raising and educating society's youngest members. In her theorizing on the political realm, Hannah Arendt posits that children hold the key to renewing the common human world because of their newness, an idea she explains through her concept of natality. Arendt's understanding of political renewal through the actions of new humans places tremendous importance on children. At the same time, the idea that children will inherit stewardship of the political realm can be threatening to adults, which is another of Arendt's insights. These new humans, strangers to the world, require high levels of care and attention because of their dependency and vulnerability, but as they grow up they will make claims on the common human world and will act to change it. Here is a reminder to adults of both their fallibility and their mortality. Given these dynamics, then, it is unsurprising that so many debates and controversies rage over the best ways to raise and educate children. Hanging in the balance is nothing less than the future of the political world itself.

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To explore these dynamics, I turn to Arendt's writings on the functioning of the political sphere. I ask how children's initial vulnerability and dependency on adults for survival affects their role in society. I highlight Arendt's view, as formulated in *The Human Condition* and *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, that natality, the fact that humans are born as radically new creatures, is what gives them the ability to do something new in the common world. However, Arendt also cautions that the child is not yet in a position to put this natality to use in the public sphere; she must be protected from the harsh judgments of that realm and in turn the public realm must be protected from the disruptive newness of the child.¹ I also draw on Deborah Britzman's interpretation of natality in her text *The Very Thought of Education: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Professions*. Britzman highlights the relationality of natality: the infant is formed by her first experiences of life through her relationship with her first other (usually her mother) and this sets the stage for her future modes of relating with the world.

In order to delve into the implications of natality for society, its unsettling power, and its incredible fragility, I turn to the sketch of human clone children in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. This novel is a particularly interesting literary object for the study of natality because it depicts a world that will likely seem familiar in some basic ways, with one key difference that is both subtle and striking: the existence of human clones. The uncanny world of the novel thus provides an opportunity for the reader to reflect on the significance of natality because it conjures up characters who live in a similar world to ours but who lack the straightforward relationship to natality that comes from being born to human parents and having experienced the intimate first relationship necessitated by the helplessness of the infant. Technology may change the ways humans arrive in our world in the future, but for now all humans have entered the world as infants from the wombs of human mothers. Thus the novel provides a scenario that can be used as a test case, one whose fictionality can nonetheless illuminate the significance of natality in the world outside the novel. After all, these characters are not some radically new type of creature, completely unrelated to human beings as we understand them. Rather, they are exact genetic copies of humans; they appear to be basically the same kind of beings as the people who live in the cities and towns outside of Hailsham

¹ I have chosen to use female pronouns when I write about a child or the child in general. In these cases, I am not writing about the female child specifically. The English language does not offer me an ungendered pronoun that is widely accepted, so for the sake of readability I have chosen one set of pronouns to use.

and those who exist in the world the reader inhabits. At its most basic and most literal, natality can simply be considered to name the fact that humans are born—to another human and as a helpless infant. Can a child who has no birth, no parents, and no claim to genetic uniqueness still have a chance at the new?

A search for natality in *Never Let Me Go* reveals the importance of relationality, political recognition, and education in the development and actualization of this potential for creative action. In the first part of my essay, I lay out the theory that I bring to bear on my analysis of the novel. I sketch a picture of the concept of natality and its implications for the relational, the developmental, the pedagogical, and the political by drawing on the writings of Arendt and Britzman. The second part of the essay draws on this theoretical framework to explore workings and limits of natality in the novel.

The Fact of Natality

The concept of natality has a central place in Hannah Arendt's theories on the functioning of human society. In *The Human Condition*, she discusses three kinds of human activity—labour, work, and action—and the roles they play in building, maintaining, and changing the human community (5). Arendt claims that “[a]ll three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality” (8). However, out of the three she specifies action, the “engag[ing] in founding and preserving political bodies, [which] creates the condition for remembrance ... [and] history,” as being the most closely connected to natality (8–9). Natality may at first glance seem to be a simple idea, but it is deceptively complex. Natality refers to the human condition of newness, to the “givenness” of being born into a world that already exists, in a state of radical dependency on others. The link that Arendt makes between natality and action is important, because it gives new humans, who enter the world as children, a key role in the political world. In Arendt's words: “[T]he new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities” (9). In fact, it is this action that intervenes on the otherwise inevitable decay of humanity's common world and renews it through change and new actions (Arendt, *The Human Condition* 246–47).

However, this does not mean that Arendt thinks children should be out taking action in the political realm right away. In her essay “The Crisis in Education” in *Between Past and Future*, she insists that children need to be kept in the private sphere for their own protection so that they are not harmed by the world (186). Likewise, the world needs to be protected from children, so that it is not “destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation” (186). Arendt’s child is one who is at once in need of protection but also capable of resistance by virtue of her strangeness of birth. Thus Arendt’s theories set up a conflict at the heart of natality and childhood: the newness and potential for change inherent in children is both a saving grace for the political realm of human action and a potential destroyer of that realm. The clone children in *Never Let Me Go* have been created literally to save the lives of so-called normal humans by providing a source of healthy organs, but their very existence is also viewed as threatening and even repulsive by the rest of the population.² How is natality operational in this relationship between the clones and the common human world in which they live?

Arendt articulates another related conflict inherent in childhood. Of the child, Arendt writes, “[H]e is a new human being and he is a becoming human being. This double aspect is by no means self-evident and ... it corresponds to a double relationship, the relationship to the world on the one hand and to life on the other” (*Past and Future* 182). This coupling of newness and becoming makes the educational responsibility of the parent and the teacher extremely important, because the child needs to be guided in becoming human while having her newness protected from the harsh exposure of the political realm. Specifically, Arendt sees parents as having a responsibility to teach the child about the world as it is, so she can have sufficient understanding to act someday in a way that will change the present state of the world (182). Here, the adult’s relationship to the child is once again flagged as significant. Arendt locates the origin of this relationship in the circumstances of birth, which produces an infant who (initially at least) has no regard for the normal. So Arendt’s adult-child relationship serves not just to protect the world from the child’s non-normativity but also to preserve the disruptive newness that the infant possesses, because the very survival of the human world depends on the

² In this essay, I use the word “normal” not to indicate a normative judgment of my own but, rather, as a reflection of the language the clone characters use in the novel to differentiate themselves from non-clone humans. This term also refers to the normative assumptions that underpin the society portrayed in the novel, where the clones are demarcated as anomalous.

protection of this newness. Does the approach to education taken at the school in the Ishiguro's novel live up to Arendt's ideas of the role of education in preserving natality? Do the teachers exercise the authority they possess in ways that protect and welcome any potential inherent in the newness of their students?

Arendt variously refers to natality as a "fact" and as a "human condition." So, if not natural, natality has a kind of facticity that makes it ontologically prior to whatever cultural, social, and political milieu any given child inhabits. In spite of this commonality all humans share, however, there is a clear conceptual limit between adults and children. Arendt's discussions of natality shed light on why childhood gets othered in the way it does. In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt describes natality as the process "through which the human world is constantly invaded by strangers, newcomers whose actions and reactions cannot be foreseen by those who are already there and are going to leave in a short while" (61). This invasion of newcomers is disruptive, because their newness gives them the potential to act in unprecedented ways, ways that will change human society and will signal the mortality of those who precede them. Although Arendt argues that this capacity for new action is essential for keeping the common world from becoming stagnant and irrelevant, children nonetheless constitute a kind of threat, an "invasion," of what adults understand their world to be. This disruptive potential partially explains children's status as other to adults. The students of Ishiguro's text are othered in their own ways relating to their circumstances of birth. How does the threat inherent in natality figure into this marginalization?

Arendt's concept of natality has been taken up in contemporary considerations of childhood and of adults' responsibilities to protect children while introducing them to the world as it is. Writing specifically about the educational context, Deborah Britzman's psychoanalytic reading of Arendtian natality strengthens this focus on relationships. Britzman defines natality as the fact "that we are born and enlivened by our first other's readings, which leave in [their] wake our capacity for the transference, nascent interpretations telegraphing our needs, demands, and desires" (2). In other words, natality is a reminder of our human condition: the fact that we are born into the world leaves behind emotional impressions that return in our relations with others, in ways that transcend and sometimes resist our conscious decisions. Our thoughts always contain traces of others, and this condition of needing the other is the paradoxical ground for becoming an independent subject of the world. For Britzman, natality depends on the other who calls subjectivity into the world and into "readings" of it. In

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other words, the relationality of natality structures our ways of being in the world. Because of natality, we continually seek the first other—our mother or equivalent first caregiver—and the relationship of radical dependence and intimacy that is now lost to us. Furthermore, for Britzman, this makes education a question of “impression” rather than cognitive understanding. She writes: “This impressive education registers our drama of dependency, helplessness, and love, all lost and found in the transference: in hopes for what language, knowledge, and the other can bring” (2). It is this archive of impressions that structures later relations with the world: impressions of hopes, language, knowledge, others. Yet it is not merely that we repeat these early experiences and emotions. The fact is, with Britzman, as with Arendt, we need authority to usher in—to welcome—the child’s newness. Furthermore, Britzman also follows Arendt in positing natality as something that is not just possessed by the child. As a human condition, these first impressions and transferences are still carried by the adult. A second layer of natality—the fact of growing up—emphasizes a sense of loss of those early relationships and impressions. Drawing on Britzman, then, a question that can be asked of Ishiguro’s text is what kind of legacy the clone students’ lack of a first relationship has for their lives, given they are not born to a mother like the other humans in the novel? How does this loss figure into the development of the clones, given that they had no first other to begin with?

The child is, indeed, shaped by her cultural, political, social, and familial contexts. Yet there is still the experience of being born as a helpless infant into the world of humans—an experience that is fundamentally different for the clone children in *Never Let Me Go*. Britzman’s take on natality hints at the subjective experience of being a child and at the need for the other on the way to becoming a subject of the world, while Arendt’s version illuminates the volatility of newness—its potential as well as its threat. Ishiguro’s child offers up a case of a childhood that starts without the typical human circumstances of birth and gives the reader the opportunity to consider what natality could mean in such a situation.

Never Let Me Go

Kazuo Ishiguro engages his readers in a thought experiment that imagines what a human childhood would be like if the circumstances that typically set natality in motion were absent. *Never Let Me Go* reads like an autobiographical account of a cloned woman named Kathy H. who grows up at a boarding school called Hailsham. The school houses child clones who have been created for the exclusive purpose of having their organs harvested

when they are older to give the medical system the healthy human materials it needs to cure the ailments of normal people. These clone students have no mothers, no families, no last names, and no standing or rights in society at large. And yet—other than the fact that they are infertile—they are biologically identical to other humans.

The question of if the students have natality themselves is a complicated one. Like other humans in the novel, they come into the world as new, radically dependent infants, and they are subject to mortality. However, as scientifically created clones, they are not born in the typical human sense (from the womb of a mother). The novel does not describe the way these babies are made; however, Kathy does make reference to a category of students called the “Infants” (19), indicating that their first environment is Hailsham. While these children might indeed be considered as strangers, they do not enter life in a formative relationship with a first other, an aspect of the development of natality that is so key for Britzman. Some of their earliest relationships, however, are with the school’s guardians. Kathy’s stories about growing up at Hailsham indicate that the guardians often showed the students kindness and consideration, but they nonetheless cannot be considered as equivalent to a mother or first other. It is not only because of the failure of intimacy so often attached to institutionalized settings but also the absence of the maternal body. The term guardian itself indicates a lack of intimacy: it denotes a legal responsibility, but the connotations do not necessarily include affective ties.

It is significant, then, that the children of Hailsham look for a kind of special, singular attachment that resembles one with a mother or first other. Kathy notes the wish to be loved by guardians, especially Miss Geraldine, who comes across as particularly motherly: “She was gentle, soft-spoken, and always comforted you when you needed it, even when you’d done something bad, or been told off by another guardian” (18). Kathy expresses the wish in this way: “Didn’t we all dream from time to time about one guardian or other bending the rules and doing something special for us? A spontaneous hug, a secret letter, a gift?” (55). This secret longing for a singular relationship with an adult caregiver points not only to the absence of a first relationship for these children but also to the difficulty of finding new objects of desire. Kathy states, “We didn’t do things like hug each other much at Hailsham” (69), suggesting a repetition of the lack of an intimate first relationship. Indeed, the children at Hailsham would have grown up with very little physical affection, either from the guardians or, in turn, from each other. Once she is an adult, Kathy views the former students of Hailsham as sharing a special bond based on their

affiliation with the school and their shared experiences there (193). Perhaps, however, her longing is simply another repetition—to never let go—of the search for the love of a first other that cannot be re-found because it never existed. This longing is evident in Kathy’s recounting of her reunion with Ruth, her friend from Hailsham, when Kathy becomes her Carer, a palliative caregiving role the clones are given before they start their own donations:

[T]he instant I saw [Ruth] again, at that recovery centre in Dover, all our differences—while they didn’t exactly vanish—seemed not nearly as important as all the other things: like the fact that we’d grown up together at Hailsham, the fact that we knew and remembered things no one else did. It’s ever since then, I suppose, I started seeking out for my donors people from the past, and whenever I could, people from Hailsham.
(4)

This sense of connection and belonging resembles the familial in its focus on a common origin, Hailsham being the only place of origin these students know. When Kathy hears that Hailsham is closing, she wonders what will happen to the connection between all the former students who are now spread out in different locations (193). Kathy describes this feeling in the following way:

I thought about Hailsham closing, and how it was like someone coming along with a pair of shears and snipping the balloon strings just where they entwined above the man’s fist. Once that happened, there’d be no real sense in which those balloons belonged with each other any more ... it was unnerving, to think things weren’t still going on back there, just as always. (194–95)

This image of severing the bonds that link the students together shows how important Hailsham is to them, despite its deadening agenda, and how fragile a place of connection it is. The cord that connects these children to the world has as its source not the softness of a womb, but a fist.

Another example of cut ties can be found in Kathy’s inability to maintain close relationships with fellow students once she has left the school. After experiencing some conflicts with her closest childhood friends, she chooses to leave abruptly the post–Hailsham collective home of the Cottages without much consideration of how that would affect her relationships. It is only later that Kathy reflects:

It never occurred to me that our lives, until then so closely interwoven, could unravel and separate over a thing like that. But the fact was, I suppose, there were powerful tides tugging us apart by then, and it only needed something like that to finish the task. If we'd understood that back then—who knows?—maybe we'd have kept a tighter hold of one another. (180)

Hailsham's importance to its students is evident, but it does not replace the role of a natal tie, a stable sense of origin situated in a first relation. Kathy's lack of this key feature of and starting point for natality repeats itself in a difficulty maintaining subsequent relationships.

Interestingly, and despite their longing for a first relationship whose time has already passed, none of the students ever say that they wish they came from a normal family. Even so, the idea of families and family members comes up a number of times in the text. For example, Kathy describes couples she meets at the Cottages, her home after she leaves Hailsham, in this way: "The veteran couples never did anything showy in public, going about in a sensible sort of way, like a mother and father might do in a normal family" (110). Kathy has never come into contact with a normal family, but it nonetheless becomes a standard reference point for her. She describes the look on Ruth's face after seeing a woman who might be her genetic model in this way: "She had on a half-smile, the sort a mother might have in an ordinary family, weighing things up while the children jumped and screamed around her asking her to say, yes, they could do whatever" (146). Here, on Ruth's face, Kathy sees the image of an ordinary, devoted mother. It is not only Kathy who makes references to families. In a heated conflict, Ruth makes Kathy into her baby sister: "So that's it, that's what's upsetting poor little Kathy. Ruth isn't paying enough attention to her. Ruth's got big new friends and baby sister isn't getting played with so often" (113). When Kathy responds by saying that that doesn't happen in actual families, Ruth sarcastically questions Kathy's expertise about "real families" (113). Ruth's comment directly references the fact that Kathy never had a family of her own. Again, the preoccupation with normal families arises. Even the repeated use of the word "normal" implies that a family is something a typical person should have. The students' construction and deconstruction of the idea of a real family is another indication of a longing for something that is missing, something that never was.

Further evidence of the students' "re-searches" can be found in their interest in "possibles," a term that refers to a theory the students have about where they came from. Kathy describes their idea of possibles: "Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for

each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life” (127). The students look for these possibles when they go out into the world of normal humans, because they hope that if they see their possible they will learn something about their origins, their identity, and what their future life might look like (127). Some of the students believe their possible is likely to be about two or three decades older than they are: as Kathy puts it, “the sort of age a normal parent would be” (127). There is no logical reason to assume this age difference between a clone and her model (and Kathy herself points this out). It seems that in their theories of possibles, the students are looking for a lost parent. Unconsciously, or at least intuitively, Hailsham students experience some kind of lack from not having a natal relation of any kind and no possible memory of that relation. Although many children in the real world grow up not knowing or consciously remembering anything about their mother or their family, what these children *do* know is that another person gave birth to them: they have a relational, human origin, even if they know nothing about the circumstances. The relationship they have with their first other, even if it was just in the womb, helps to shape them. The clones, however, have no such guarantee of a relational origin, no fact of natality, and this results in a palpable sense of loss that is evident in their actions and desires.

This discussion of the Hailsham students has focused so far on the relational aspect of natality, the aspect highlighted and further developed by Britzman. Arendt’s characterization of natality has a different emphasis than Britzman, who focuses on the “impressive education” of a human’s first relationship (9). Arendt primarily focuses on how the “new beginning inherent in birth” informs the infant’s capacity to act on a social stage later in life, to become part of a political community, and to take new kinds of action in the world (*The Human Condition* 9). Arendt’s focus on the development of capacity for action offers us another set of criteria, then, against which the clone students’ relationship to natality can be considered. After all, the students may not be genetically new, but they are nonetheless born into the world as new beings. Moreover, they are not portrayed as automatons in the text: they have personalities and the capacity for agency. As children, they show curiosity about the world, including about topics that are taboo. Even as Kathy feels angry at a classmate for asking a forbidden question, she is also keen to hear the answer (37). Over the course of their time at Hailsham, Tommy and Kathy have periodic conversations about the strange things the adults at the school say and do and they make theories about what those things might tell them about themselves (27–28, 66–67). Ruth wonders if Madame, a woman who makes mysterious visits

to the school, is scared of the students, and she recruits her friends to participate in a plot that will help them find out (30–33). These clones can clearly think for themselves.

Although the Hailsham students demonstrate capacities for agency and creativity, key aspects of natality, they also display surprising acquiescence at certain moments. When Marge asks Miss Lucy, one of the guardians, if she has ever smoked and Miss Lucy tells the students that they must never smoke because they are “special,” Kathy later wonders why no one inquired further about why it would be so much worse for them to smoke than for normal humans (63). Perhaps the most striking example of this lack of inquisitiveness is when Miss Lucy speaks plainly to them about the fact that they will not be able to pursue a career of their choice because they will instead have to donate their organs to medicine (73). Afterward, Kathy notes that there is “surprisingly little discussion about what [Miss Lucy has] said” (74). Some of the students even recollect the event in ways that erase the conversation their teacher had with them, as Kathy recalls, “[T]here were even some who’d actually been there and who thought Miss Lucy had been telling us off for being too rowdy on the veranda” (74). This unwillingness to recognize the difficult knowledge Miss Lucy has given them calls their potential natality into question, as it indicates a resistance to confronting the world as it is, which must be done if one is to take action to change it.

That being said, Arendt is clear that the fruits of natality—the new actions that refresh the common world—are borne in new humans *once they are grown up*. According to Arendt, there is a time lapse between the moment of entering the world as a new human and the time when that newness should bring itself to bear on the world. The impact of newness is thus strangely belated. Children do have a disruptive potential that is already evident when (and because) they are very young, and Arendt does not disagree: it is why she thinks adults need to protect the world from the newness of children. Nonetheless, for Arendt, natality primarily instantiates itself afterward—and generally in a way that impacts society more directly—once those who possess it become adults. Thus it may be more telling to look for the mark of natality in the actions of the students once they are grown up. This transition from child to adult echoes Britzman’s formulation: that the fact of natality gives us the adult’s transferences, perceptible as traces of the past that impress themselves upon the present world.

We can catch a glimpse of the apparent absence of the belated timing of natality in the students’ lives when they leave Hailsham and are sent

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to live in other places, a time when they experience the transition from childhood to adulthood. Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy end up at the Cottages, a misleading name since the place is really just a decrepit and isolated set of former farm buildings (106). The living conditions there are quite poor, but Kathy insists, “[N]one of us minded the discomforts one bit—it was all part of the excitement of being at the Cottages” (107). Although they ask for more supplies and complain about the heat to the caretaker, none of the students takes any kind of significant action to protest the conditions of the place or attempts to change their living situation. Kathy states, “We certainly didn’t think much about our lives beyond the Cottages, or about who ran them, or how they fitted into the larger world. None of us thought like that in those days” (106). Even in their late teens, in a new place where they have to take much more responsibility for themselves, the students seem uninterested in their circumstances and are willing to acquiesce to the structures in place. At a time in their lives when they are given the opportunity to live more independently, a time when their natality might be expected to start showing in their actions, they remain disengaged from the society in which they live.

The students do spend time imagining possible “dream futures” they could have (130). Yet imagination is not here an act of revolt but, rather, a way of bracing themselves by fending off the impending time when they will have to start their donations (another misleading term that defends against reality). This talk about the future happens primarily amongst those who are newer at the Cottages. Kathy remembers, “[J]ust for those few months, we somehow managed to live in this cosy state of suspension in which we could ponder our lives without all the usual boundaries” (130). Kathy’s associations are wishful: they link the holding pen of the Cottages with an illusion of freedom, but the students do not act on these wishes for self-determination. Rumours also circulate about Hailsham graduates getting normal jobs, but these seem based more in fantasy than in fact (139). An even more grand and appealing (235) fantasy is the rumour that couples who can prove they are in love are able to get their donations deferred by a few years (140–42). This rumour turns out to be baseless despite its persistence (236). Although the students dream outside the boundaries of the lives set out for them, they virtually never act on these dreams. A notable exception is Kathy and Tommy’s attempt to seek a deferral, an act that involves rule breaking and a capacity for hope and imagination. For a moment, it seems that they are demonstrating their natality by wanting to act on the political realm, by wanting to do something new. However, they immediately accept the answer they get from Hailsham’s headmis-

tress, Miss Emily, without protest: there is no such thing as a deferral of donations. They do not attempt to create their own deferral by running away together. Instead, they return to their prescribed societal roles and to their own inevitable premature deaths.

Ultimately, it appears that the clones act the way they do because they have no claim on society. They were not born into the human community but created to sustain it, even as they are barred from it. These are children created in a lab and “kept in the shadows” where normal people will not have to face up to their existence (240). Accordingly, they have internalized another rumour, this one much more plausible. Their genetic models, far from giving them a connection to mainstream, normative human society, are, as Ruth puts it, “*trash*. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren’t psychos” (152). The students are modeled from other socially marginalized people, seemingly the only people who would be desperate enough to allow their genes to be used for this cloning project (if their participation was consensual at all). This is why Kathy sifts through pornography magazines searching for a photograph that looks like her, based on the reasoning that her sexual urges may be a genetic clue about her origins (165–66). The idea that these marginalized people are humans with worthwhile traits, people who have been unfairly treated by society, never enters into the conversation. The students fear that they are one shameful step removed from what Ruth calls the trash of society, forever alienating them from the very community that created them.

This alienation is reinforced by the repulsion normal humans have for the clone children. Madame regularly recoils from them (32), and even Miss Emily later admits that she is afraid of them (246). What most prevents them from using whatever natality they have, then, is their society’s insistence that they have no right to belong to, or act on, the common human world. Kathy explains the impact of this alienation on her psyche:

[Y]ou’re waiting, even if you don’t quite know it, waiting for the moment when you realise that you really are different to them; that there are people out there, like Madame, who don’t hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you—of how you were brought into this world and why—and who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. The first time you glimpse yourself through the eyes of a person like that, it’s a cold moment. It’s like walking past a mirror you’ve walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange. (33)

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Kathy is deeply aware of the repulsion that normal members of society have for her, a constant reminder that she is not accepted as a legitimate member of humanity. The larger human community is not willing to give Hailsham's students room to affect the world they live in or even to control their own lives. After Tommy finds out that deferrals do not exist, there is nothing to do but let out a bloodcurdling scream that no one hears, except Kathy, who is as helpless as he (251). Immediately afterward, Kathy suggests that perhaps he has had these angry outbursts throughout his life because, in some way, he had an inkling of his terrible fate (252) as a human who has some potential for political action born of natality but whose status as a human actor has been refused by a society that regards him as abject, a repulsive being who exists only to provide a desired commodity.

Like Tommy's emotional state, Arendt's natality is something fragile. She places a great responsibility on adults to protect children's natality while they are growing up so that they can someday put that potential to use in society. Thus although the students at Hailsham seem to have an impoverished chance at natality to begin with, it is important to examine the way that their education fails to preserve their chance at the new. Ironically, Hailsham is billed as an ethical experiment among a broader culture of cloning that completely disregards internal life. It claims to provide some of the best available conditions in which a clone could grow up (236). This difference comes into view at the Cottages, where Hailsham students meet clones who did not enjoy the conditions of their own education. At Hailsham, guardians try to prepare students for future lives: they purport to care about their health and they teach them life skills. Furthermore, the school's effort to collect student art, we learn later, is part of an ethical mandate to prove that the students have souls (238). Yet, arguably, Hailsham students are worse off because they were taught to believe in a future that does not exist for them. Tommy sees the guardians' manipulation as careful and deliberate:

Tommy thought it possible the guardians had, throughout all our years at Hailsham, timed very carefully and deliberately everything they told us, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course we'd take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly. (75)

This roundabout and partial way of teaching the students does not meet Arendt's standard for the education of children. After all, Arendt argues

that education should teach children about the world as it is, instead of trying to create its own “world of children” that operates according to its own rules (*Past and Future* 182–83). Only Miss Lucy seems like a true Arendtian in this respect. Miss Emily describes Miss Lucy’s attitude in this way: “She thought you students had to be made more aware. More aware of what lay ahead of you, who you were, what you were for. She believed you should be given as full a picture as possible. That to do anything less would be somehow to cheat you” (244). Significantly, Miss Lucy eventually loses her teaching position at the school, suggesting her approach to education is not welcome at Hailsham.

At issue here is a question about the ethical value of knowledge: to know or not to know as the more ethical orientation to important and difficult facts of life in the education of children. Miss Emily says this in defence of her approach:

[W]e were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by *sheltering* you. Hailsham would not have been Hailsham if we hadn’t. Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. Yes, in many ways we *fooled* you. I suppose you could even call it that. But we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods ... You built your lives on what we gave you. You wouldn’t be who you are today if we’d not protected you. You wouldn’t have become absorbed in your lessons ... Why should you have done, knowing what lay in store for each of you? You would have told us it was all pointless, and how could we have argued with you? (245)

In this quotation, Miss Emily, the head of Hailsham herself, admits that the school sheltered its students, not just from the harshness of the political world but also from the truth. She says the teachers even lied to their pupils and fooled them into thinking the world was different than it is. These are hardly the hallmarks of an Arendtian education that preserves and nurtures natality. However, she also makes a compelling point: surely the students’ childhoods were happier because they did not fully understand what lay in store for them. In addition, Hailsham gives them one, albeit small, outlet for their imaginations, their creativity, and their newness: art. Even Miss Lucy eventually encourages reticent Tommy to put effort into his creative endeavours. She says to him, “Listen, Tommy, your art, it *is* important. And not just because it’s evidence. But for your own sake. You’ll get a lot from it, just for yourself” (99). Later, when Tommy is liv-

ing at the Cottages, he draws his “imaginary animals,” not just because he thinks he may need them for a deferral, but also for their own sake, because he enjoys making them and what they mean to him (172). This meaning-making through art looks more like the results of natality than most of the other acts of the students in the novel.

The catch, however, is that Tommy’s action through art does not have an impact on the wider world. It ultimately does not help him to get a deferral with Kathy, neither does it resist societal power relations in any significant way. Thus, Hailsham’s approach to education fails to cultivate in the students the potential to resist their terrible futures, to demand something better for themselves through acting to change their political environment. Nor does it even help students to cope with the fact of death. Instead, it encourages them to accept their destiny as it is quietly and deceptively revealed to them. After Miss Emily defends Hailsham’s approach to education and explains why Miss Lucy had to leave the school, Tommy tells Kathy that he thinks Miss Lucy’s approach was right, after all. If we listen to Tommy, and to Arendt, a Hailsham upbringing may be the best the clones can hope for, but it does not nurture whatever potential natality they have. A proper education—one that introduces children to the world they live in while protecting them from the dangers of political exposure to that very world—is an important part of helping nurture children’s future ability to bring their natality to bear on the renewal of the public realm.

Conclusion

The thought experiment contained in Ishiguro’s novel indicates the key yet complex role of natality in providing the grounds for human action in the political sphere. My analysis of the novel highlights the importance of three factors—early relationships, political recognition, and education—in helping natality along so it can have its political impact. By extending human life through harvesting the organs of clones, instead of allowing mortality to run its course and enabling all humans—including the clones—to change the political realm, the society portrayed in *Never Let Me Go* interrupts the opportunity to renew the common human world. Natality illuminates what makes children both important and threatening to adults. At the same, time, however, it highlights the complex relationships in which adults and children find themselves, by virtue of the circumstances of their birth. Adults carry their birth, and their childhood, with them throughout their lives as they finally get the chance to act out their natality just as they find they are no longer new. Against a background of disrup-

tion, belatedness, and loss, natality gives humans the means to refresh the common world, and the relational platform from which to participate in it.

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