Giving Form to Life: Cloning and Narrative Expectations of the Human

Mark Jerng

Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas, Volume 6, Number 2, June 2008, pp. 369-393 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/pan.0.0014

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pan/summary/v006/6.2.jerng.html
Narrating the Life of a Clone

Fictional narratives of human cloning often represent clones as somewhere between singular individuals and a threatening mass or aggregate, manifesting anxieties around clones as de-individuated persons. For example, Ira Levin’s *The Boys from Brazil* (1976) details the plot of the Nazi scientist Mengele to produce ninety-four boys each cloned from one of Hitler’s cells. The story revolves around Mengele’s efforts to engineer the same environmental conditions so as to “make” these boys Hitler. In the novel, the scientist, Nurnberger, describes cloning to the Nazi-hunter Liebermann, highlighting this problem of individuation: “Instead of a new and unique individual, we have an existing one repeated” (188). The question of whether or not these cloned boys are particular, unique individuals or potentially an aggregate of Hitlers remains unanswered. Though the cloned boys are not killed at the end because of the argument that social conditions will mold them in unpredictable ways (thus putting forth the view that they will become discrete individuals), the novel ends with a vision of one of the boys painting and imagining himself in front of a large mass of spectators “sort of like in those old Hitler movies” (280). This ending evokes a specter of the mass, using the de-individuated, mesmerized spectators as a reminder of the threat of a mass of replica Hitlers.

Similarly, in Kate Wilhelm’s 1976 novel *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* the question of individuation is used to distinguish clones from humans: clones are depicted as beings who are unable to individuate. This work contrasts the clones’ lack of spontaneity and dependence on others with the humans’ independence and capacity to separate. The efforts to salvage material from outside the clone community are perfect examples of this distinction. Mark, born through human procreation and raised

---

1 An interesting early manifestation of this anxiety can be seen in Thomas and Wilhelm’s *The Clone* (1965), in which the “clone” is depicted both as a single, individual thing that acts, moves and eats, and as a formless, shapeless, aggregate of organisms that is not human.
by his mother, is able to successfully adapt to life and be independent, whereas the clones are so dependent on each other that they are unable to think creatively and spontaneously (see, in particular, 208). The humans are distinguished by these traits because they are reared within the parent-child relationship, which provides a site for this form of maturation and separation. In this narrative’s terms, it is individuation as separation that makes us human, something that the clone can never achieve. Crucially, the clone is deprived of “human” traits in this sense not because it has the same genetic make-up as someone else but because it lacks the proper narrative of socialization, of being raised by a parent. Dystopian scenarios like the Hitler plot in *The Boys from Brazil* or the end of the human race in *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sing* posit clones as shells of persons devoid of identity, individuality, and personality.

These anxieties around individuation and distinguishing clones from humans in cloning fictions raise larger questions concerning the kind of life that counts as life, the kind of form that is sufficient or necessary to make one a human, and the forms of individuation that are possible for “clones.” Indeed, imagining clones provides an exemplary site through which one can think about how narrative modes and ways of putting together a life condition what it means to be human. While the dystopian fictions noted above tend to see clones as less than human because of a lack of a normative narrative of individuation, another set of narratives see clones as human, but only in terms of a familiar, normative script of individuation based around the family. Hilary Crew surveys a set of clone narratives including C. J. Cherryh’s *Cyteen*, Mildred Ames’ *Anna to the Infinite Power*, and Marilyn Kaye’s *Replica* series, among others, observing that these young adult novels “emphasize the individual’s uniqueness and value as a separate human being. Writers use character development to demonstrate how cloned teenage protagonists possess unique personalities and identities. Teenagers are shown breaking away from the expectation that they follow in the footsteps of their originals” (208). Crew’s analysis suggests that these principles of imagining a clone as human repeat familiar conventions of individuation as a process of separation, “breaking away,” and familial conflict through which young people assert their own unique identities.2

For a fuller account of the process of imagining clones in science and in the public sphere, see Kolata 1998; for an analysis of the imaginative literature on cloning that highlights the anxieties around the interchangeability, uniformity, and repetitive sameness of clones, see Ferreira (2005: 145–73).
Whether depicting clones as less than human or as fully human, narratives of cloning rely on normative narratives of individuation based on separation and familial conflict. This bears out Paul John Eakin’s concern that “normative models of personhood” will be used to judge others as “lacking in the very nature of [their] being (2001: 119). Eakin argues that narrative is central to the construction of the self; it is integral to the construction of persons as whole and continuous beings. The question then becomes how someone maintains or gains a sense of personhood when he does not “enjoy the safety net of a sense of himself as a ‘human being taken as a whole’” (185). The conventions of cloning narratives raise the question what modes of narrativity are available for constructing a sense of personhood outside certain normative narratives of individuation and developmental unity.

In this article, I argue that a normative narrative of individuation operates within the imagination of cloning in order to prescribe the proper form for life. I analyze how clones are imagined within debates on the ethics of cloning, and then take a closer look at the anxieties around defining humanness in three distinct arguments against cloning. Within these debates, the trope of the clone used for organ donations becomes a privileged example that creates assumptions around the human being “taken as a whole,” thus codifying a normative narrative of individuation and prescribing what it means to be human. I then turn to two contemporary representations of human cloning that take up precisely the privileged example of clones used for organ donation in contrasting ways — the movie *The Island* (2005) and Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005). In each of these works narrative conventions are intertwined with privileging certain forms of humanness. *The Island* constructs the clones as human through an emancipation narrative that ultimately fits normative narratives of individuation. *Never Let Me Go*, on the other hand, expands our notions of the human by reflecting on the narrative modes that shape what it means to be human.

3 This is part of Eakin’s argument against Galen Strawson (2004), who critiques the narrative identity thesis — that our lives are in some profound sense stories, and that we live our lives as narratives. Eakin suggests that Strawson is able to dismiss the centrality of narrative for living a life and assert his own life as discontinuous only because he “enjoys the safety net of a sense of himself as a ‘human being taken as a whole.’” I agree with Eakin that Strawson takes for granted a sense of unity on which his personhood rests — sometimes referred to as “biological unity” and sometimes as “historical-characteral developmental unity” (Strawson 440–41). Eakin’s examples are those persons who suffer from memory loss or dementia in which “failures of narrative competence . . . may entail institutional confinement” (Eakin 2006: 182): his point is that we should not diminish their personhood at the same time that we acknowledge that they do not have a sense of themselves as a whole.
Cloning and the Defense of the Human

The cloning of Dolly in 1997 and the 2001 announcement that a private firm, Advanced Cell Technologies, had sustained a cloned embryo to the six-cell stage of development fueled already bubbling public outcries against the possibilities of human cloning. Nightmare scenarios drew on the fear of mass-production and totalitarian control famous from Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* — fear of “the possibility of mass production of human beings with large numbers of look-alikes, compromised in their individuality,” fear of “the Frankensteinian hubris to create human life and increasingly to control its destiny” (Kass 1999: 43). One description of cloning in the *Sunday Mail* warns: “Imagine a million-strong army of Hitlers!” During U.S. Congressional debates this research was called “monstrous science” and “industrial exploitation of human life” (Dunn 32). The scenario most often conjured up is that of “growing human beings for spare body parts, or creating life for our convenience” (President George W. Bush, quoted in Dunn 32–33). In the wake of U.S. Congressional hearings on the subject, two commissions were created to study the ethical and scientific arguments for and against cloning. The National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC), created in 1995 under President Bill Clinton, issued its report in August 2001; the President’s Council on Bioethics (PCBE) was created under Bush in 2002. The NBAC recommended continuing the legislative prohibition on the use of federal funding for support of the creation of a child through somatic cell nuclear transfer (i.e., cloning). The PCBE issued a report that stepped up this prohibition, holding that “cloning to produce children is unethical, ought not to be attempted, and should be indefinitely banned by federal law, regardless of who performs the act or whether federal funds are involved” (2002a: x).

A discussion of the arguments for and against cloning in general is beyond the scope of this paper — except for the question why the privi-
legend examples tend to focus on cloning as a problem or a benefit for the family. The fear of using clones for “spare body parts” voiced by George W. Bush belongs to the argument against cloning as an improper use of the innocent child. At the same time, the example of cloning to replace a lost child or to save a child is often viewed with greater sympathy. Even for someone like the political philosopher Francis Fukuyama, who argues against cloning, the familial example is the most understandable and compelling. Fukuyama responds to the lack of enthusiasm for reproductive cloning by conjuring up the familial scenario:

I have a friend that e-mails me constantly because he wants to be able to clone, you know, his son. He wants a back-up copy of his son in case his son gets killed. He gets horribly indignant at the idea that anyone is going to restrict this, you know, ability of his to create this back-up copy. You know, I have run into quite a few people that are really, really extremely. . . . And you can come up with reasonably sympathetic scenarios where it would be in someone’s interest. (PCBE 2002b)

Four of the five reasons that the PCBE report lists as possible arguments in favor of reproductive cloning have to do with the preservation and construction of the biological family. One of the scenarios conjured up is similar to Fukuyama’s:

Human cloning would allow parents to “replicate” a dead or dying child or relative. For example, one can imagine a case in which a family — mother, father, and child — is involved in a terrible car accident in which the father dies instantly and the child is critically injured. The mother, told that her child will soon die, decides that the best way to redeem the tragedy is to clone her dying child. This would allow her to preserve a connection with both her dead husband and her dying child, to create new life as a partial human answer to the grievous misfortune of her child’s untimely death, and to continue the name and biological lineage. (79–80)

“To continue the name and biological lineage” of the family (traditionally defined) seems to be of the utmost importance among the reasons for cloning.

One can easily make the political point that the debates on cloning have become merely a smoke-screen for defending the normative family. Certainly the Chairman of the Bioethics Council, Leon Kass, is open
to this criticism when he states: “Thanks to the prominence and the acceptability of divorce and out-of-wedlock births, stable, monogamous marriage as the ideal home for procreation is no longer the agreed-upon cultural norm. For that new dispensation, the clone is the ideal emblem: the ultimate ‘single-parent child.’ . . . Asexual reproduction, which produces ‘single-parent’ offspring, is a radical departure from the natural human way, confounding all normal understandings of father, mother, sibling, and grandparent and all moral relations tied thereto” (Kass and Wilson 9, 26). But there is a more theoretical point to be made here, one which considers these comments in relation to the idea of cloning more generally: the emphasis on the traditional family installs a normative narrative of individuation that closes off models of what it means to be human. The Bioethics Report warns:

We must consider what kind of a society we wish to be, and, in particular, what forms of bringing children into the world we want to encourage and what sorts of relations between the generations we want to preserve. Cloning-to-produce children could distort the way we raise and view children, by carrying to full expression many regrettable tendencies already present in our culture. . . . A society that clones human beings thinks about human beings (and especially children) differently than does a society that refuses to do so. (2002a: 114)

The emphasis here is clearly on the relations between generations and how cloning might affect the sanctity of these relations.

Leon Kass’s and Michael Sandel’s arguments show us ultimately not that the clone is evil but that cloning disfigures human relations, most often the relationship between generations. By focusing their energy on the distortion of human relations, they can prescribe a certain normative narrative of individuation into which the clone does not fit. For example, the bioethicist Leon Kass writes: “I regard cloning to be in itself a form of child abuse, even if no one complains, and a deep violation of our given nature as gendered and engendering beings” (Kass and Wilson 78). It is a form of child abuse, Kass suggests, because the clone will be unable to separate himself from his parents — he will not be able to carry out the expectation of separation that is part of our normative narrative expectation of being human. Kass writes: “Virtually no parent is going to be able to treat a clone of himself or herself as one does a child generated by the lottery of sex. The new life will constantly be scrutinized in relation to that of the older copy. . . . the child is likely to be ever a curiosity, ever a potential source of déjà vu” (84). A cloned life can never fulfill the
expectations of individuation because it will never be seen as separate but only “in relation to . . . the older copy.”

Similarly, Michael Sandel argues against cloning and bioengineering not because of the usual defenses of enlightenment humanism which treat these technologies as destroying autonomy and agency but by positing an ethic of “giftedness” which, Sandel contends, is under siege by these technologies: “To appreciate children as gifts is to accept them as they come, not as objects of our design or products of our will or instruments of our ambition” (55). But even as Sandel warns against cloning as a drive for mastery, he continues to describe the given-ness of the child as something that must be cultivated, a process of becoming that parents have an obligation to guide:

The problem is not that parents usurp the autonomy of a child they design. The problem lies in the hubris of the designing parents, in their drive to master the mystery of birth. Even if this disposition did not make parents tyrants to their children, it would disfigure the relation between parent and child. . . . Nor does the sense of life as a gift mean that parents must shrink from shaping and directing the development of their child . . . parents have an obligation to cultivate their children, to help them discover and develop their talents and gifts. (56)

Sandel in effect rests his argument against cloning on a set of norms that is becoming increasingly familiar: the relation between parent and child as one that puts into place a narrative of cultivation and becoming — a process of becoming that is open to the future and to the possibilities and potentialities inherent in the child as given. But in detailing this obligation of parents to “cultivate their children,” Sandel constructs his argument against cloning by installing a normative narrative by which the child can properly individuate. It is, in other words, not coincidental (nor simply a form of political conservatism) that arguments against cloning hinge on a narrative that centers on the process of making a “child” rather than a “human” within the terms of the parent-child relation: cloning as a form of child abuse for Kass; cloning as a violation of the givenness of the child for Sandel. The narrative expectations for the child — that they become human through processes of separation and individuation, that they have an inherent human dignity, however vulnerable — undergirds our larger sense of what counts as human.

Indeed, Fukuyama argues against cloning by specifically taking up this logic of individuation in order to construct some kind of built-in, given, or inherent sense of human nature and dignity. Finding himself
unable to stand behind any single explanation of what makes humans human, Fukuyama grounds human dignity on the wholeness of humans and a process of becoming:

Factor X [i.e. that which makes us human] cannot be reduced to the possession of moral choice, or reason, or language, or sociability, or sentience, or emotions, or consciousness, or any other quality that has been put forth as a ground for human dignity. It is all of these qualities coming together in a human whole that make up Factor X. Every member of the human species possesses a genetic endowment that allows him or her to become a whole human being, an endowment that distinguishes a human in essence from other types of creatures. (171)

These sentences encapsulate Fukuyama’s dance around the problem of defining the “human.” Moving back and forth between the inability to define the essential ground for the human species and the need to define the human in terms of something specific, distinct, and irreplaceable, Fukuyama rests his argument on the ideal of wholeness and the process of becoming whole. This “becoming whole” in Fukuyama’s argument invokes a narrative of individuation that entails the process of becoming a discrete, separate, individuated whole out of an initial state that is incomplete and dependent.9

Within these anxieties concerning the definition of the human in terms of a narrative of individuation, we can see more clearly why the family has been held up as a primary site for debates on cloning and why the fear of using clones for organ donation has emerged as a powerful example for both proponents and critics of cloning. For proponents, cloning can, on the one hand, preserve biological continuity and be used to save one’s own children in ways that maintain our normative narratives of family. For critics, cloning violates precisely this same sanctified space of the family because it represents the use of children for “convenience,” for “spare body parts,” which is inimical to the construction of the person as a whole as codified within traditional family forms of “cultivation.” Both Sandel and Kass center on cloning as a violation of human relationality in a way that limits the clone’s ability to fit into the privileged norma-

9Cf. Gilbert Simondon’s critique of this circularity of the individuation narrative: “In order to account for the genesis of the individual and its defining characteristics one must assume the existence of a first term, a principle, which would provide a sufficient explanation of how the individual had come to be individual and account for its singularity. . . . Yet a term is itself already an individual, or at least something capable of being individualized, something that can be the cause of an absolutely specific existence” (298).
GIVING FORM TO LIFE: CLONING AND NARRATIVE EXPECTATIONS OF THE HUMAN

The movie *The Island* shows how the narrative of individuation is used to re-assert the distinction between human and clone even as it shows the clone achieving humanity. The plot of *The Island* centers on two clones (Ewan McGregor as “Lincoln Six Echo” and Scarlett Johansson as “Jordan Two Delta”) who escape from an organ-harvesting factory in order to survive and be free. In the factory, the clones are undifferentiated — they all wear the same uniforms — but are highly individualized in that their health, diet, labor, and activities are managed, organized, and disciplined within a regimen that Michel Foucault would call “biopower”: “the right to intervene in the making of life, in the manner of living, in ‘how’ to live” (46). The clones are a manufactured and instrumentalized form of life in which life itself is brought under the complete purview of administrative power. *The Island* rescues human nature from this instrumentalized form of life by telling a story of emancipation which retroactively posits the clone’s dignity as both latent and given through the clone’s assertion of individual agency and freedom. In other words, it recapitulates the trajectory of individuation (on which Sandel, Kass, and Fukuyama rely to imagine human dignity): the singularity of the person is achieved over time as the outcome of some internal, given potentiality.

This narrative of individuation as emancipation is staged by highlighting other conventional narratives of asserting one’s freedom in the face of oppression, in particular the legacy of slavery. For example, when
the character played by Ewan McGregor is addressed as “Six Echo,” his retort — “My name is Lincoln” — echoes Sidney Poitier’s famous line in *In the Heat of the Night*: “My name is Mister Tibbs.” Taking up Mr. Tibbs/Sidney Poitier’s assertion of agency and self-definition, Lincoln becomes the subject of civil rights fighting for independence. This link to an emancipation narrative defined by violence performed on black subjects is made explicit when the black character (Djimon Hounsou as the hit-man “Albert Laurent”), hired to pursue and kill the clones, reveals the brand on his hand and his own history of enslavement, dehumanization, and rebellion. This character goes on to help the clones escape, linking the plight of the victims of neo-slavery to the clones. The film thus indexes both U.S. and international histories of slavery and emancipation that interpret the clone in terms of narratives of agency and resistance. In this scenario, one becomes human through the assertion of agency and resistance, thus preserving a model of individuation while narrating the clone’s capacity to become human. This analogy between the conventions of slave narrative and cloning was not lost on the President’s Council on Bioethics: an excerpt from Frederick Douglass’s autobiography is included in its anthology *Being Human*.10

If *The Island* draws on the conventional narratives associated with the legacy of slavery in order to shape the life of the clone as achieving human dignity, it also follows the narrative trajectory of a child emerging into adulthood in order to adhere to a conventional narrative of individuation. Curiously, despite being adults, the Ewan McGregor and Scarlett Johansson characters play out a certain child-like naiveté. When they escape from the island, they first navigate the world much as an innocent child would and only later begin to assert their humanness through the expression of mature emotions such as love. Their emergence into adulthood is characterized by two main conventions of the action genre: 1) the obligatory sex scene; and 2) the construction of the action heroes themselves as living through extremely dangerous circumstances.

10The editors of the PCBE comment: “Our final reading is the story of one specific human being who resolves to live no more under the thumb of a tyrant. In this excerpt from his Autobiography, we learn that the self-liberation of former American slave Frederick R. Douglass must occur in mind and in body both, and by his own agency and effort. It results in a human being who has suffered and overcome suffering, and who stands resolved to suffer further, even to the point of death, if that is what it takes for him to live as a man, and not as a beast. It is a fitting end to our chapter on human dignity, and our volume about bioethics. It is a rich bioethics indeed that celebrates the birth into full humanity of such an individual” (2003).
and situations. The act of sex in the movie occurs at a telling moment in the construction of Lincoln and Jordan as human — when Lincoln meets Jordan after having his “original” (the person from whom he was cloned) killed, as if to assert Lincoln’s singularity. While Jordan herself is uncertain if Lincoln is the clone (like herself) or the “original,” the viewers know and her uncertainty is quickly dispelled: Jordan examines his face, approaches him intimately, and simply says “It’s you.” Dispelling the audience’s anxieties around the clone as copy, Lincoln becomes human by becoming singular and unique, as manifested in the “adult” expression of love.

The topos of surviving extraordinary circumstances further serves the narrative’s capacity to project an idea of the human. Long chase episodes in which everyone else is killed and disposed of as if their lives meant nothing are used to heighten and emphasize the clone’s humanity, uniqueness, and will to survive as the epitome of what it means to be human. The clones as protagonists become persons who survive, whereas everyone else around them becomes disposable. After just having his “original” killed, Lincoln states: “The only thing that you can count on is that people will do anything to survive. I just want to live. I don’t care how.”

Lincoln here asserts himself as human over and against his “original.” By being the action hero who survives against all odds, he projects himself as human by taking up a generalized narrative of emancipation against the violation of life. While this form individualizes Lincoln’s life, it still does not resolve the clone/human binary: the clone in and of itself cannot be imagined as human. The distinction between human and clone is preserved in Lincoln’s name — “Lincoln Six Echo.” The name “Echo,” given to a whole generation of clones, alludes to the device of prosopopeia, the act of giving voice to another. Lincoln Six Echo ironically asserts himself and taps into the narrative of the human by echoing the human, by reclaiming the voice given to him as his own. This projection of his life as human occurs through the construction of a set of expectations that allows one to fulfill or “realize” his humanity by positing the proper form of human life in advance.

Narrative conventions, then, are not just the instruments by which a life is told as a story. They provide a mold for what counts as human

---

11 Squier (2004) provides a useful model for analyzing how literature is an “active agent in social formation” in her analysis of the changes wrought by biotechnology and how they reshape the human body.
life. As several recent commentators have noted, the Greeks did not have a single word for what we now call “life” (see Kass 2002 and Agamben 1998 [1995]). They had two — zoos and bios — the former meaning life in its concrete and material specificity (life as such, animal life) and the latter meaning a “way of life,” a “plan of life.” The Island’s narrative mechanisms, like the rhetorical constructions of various arguments against cloning, reconstruct a narrative expectation for what counts as a human life and limit humanness to a certain form or “way of life.” This is why attention to the ways in which genre creates reader expectations is so important. It constructs implicit rules that codify assumptions about the proper form for life. What Foucault called biopolitics is carried out in part by the work of narrative in shaping what counts as a human life.

One listener’s response to arguments about cloning on a National Public Radio program reveals the assumption that clones would not be individuals and therefore would not have a life: “What’s going to happen to those clones? I mean, do they just live in a closet their whole life?” (quoted in Dunn 33). Critics of cloning speculate that the clone’s knowledge of itself as a clone would close off the possibilities of life being lived according to human nature, because it puts the clone face to face with his nature as a completely instrumentalized being, violating a “human nature” that we, as humans, must preserve. As Andreas Kuhlmann puts it, “Of course, parents have always been given to wishful thinking as to what is going to become of their offspring. Still, this is different from children being confronted with prefabricated visions which, all in all, they owe their existence to” (quoted in Habermas 53). For commentators like Sandel and like Kass, this prefabricated vision of the cloned child is a violation of human relations and thus a reason for banning cloning. But this emphasis on the parent-child relation as the primary relation of humanness privileges a certain narrative arc — that of separation and individuation — that prescribes what counts as human. Cloning violates relationality if one imagines that the clone’s life is completely totalized by the mastery of the parent (Sandel) or the “older copy” person (Kass and Wilson 84). In these terms, the clone has no individuating narrative. What remains to be pursued is narrative as a relational and communicative practice between persons that does not so much impose a certain form for individuation but rather provides a space for its negotiation. 12 What Sandel and Kass preclude is the clone’s own negotiation of how she is addressed by others.

12 For emphasis on narrative not as a shaping force of one’s life but as a relational practice, see Cavarero 2000 [1997] and Butler 2005.
and how she might relate to others. Ishiguro takes up this problem by giving us a story about how a clone might account for herself to others and relate to the world: how might a life lived with the knowledge that one is a clone challenge the circular narratives of individuation upon which notions of the human often rest? As Habermas notes, opening up the totalizing framework a crack: “Who knows, after all, whether knowledge of the fact that the makeup of my genome was designed by someone else need be of any significance at all for my life?” (54).

Unsettling Narrative Expectations of the Human

*Never Let Me Go* is particularly useful in this context because it is a work that calls into question its own generic expectations and thus some of our expectations of the human. The genre confusions with which reviewers greeted Ishiguro’s novel is a symptom of this problem of giving form to life. Several reviewers took pains to distinguish between the heavy-handed, overdetermined conventions of a popular genre like science fiction — its mechanistic and thus non-human quality — and Ishiguro’s interest in the complex, non-conventional world of the human, in “profound emotions” and “individuality” (James 22). For example, in a review subtitled “Ishiguro’s Quasi-Science-Fiction Novel” Louis Menand notes that the novel takes up science fiction but that “this is not, at heart, where it seems to want to be.” Caryn James writes: “Far from creating genre fiction, these artists use cloning as a way to get at profound emotions of love and loss, and to address a mechanized culture in which individuality itself sometimes seems threatened” (22). These reviewers preserve a notion of the human individual as non-mechanized, unique, and spontaneous by imagining humanity as only emerging against generic conventions. But this constructed opposition misses Ishiguro’s highlighting of the ways in which our notions of the human rely on generic and narrative expectations that give form to life.

Ishiguro upsets the opposition between science fiction as “genre fiction” and the non-mechanistic value of the human by creating science-fiction without the technological. Indeed, the novel seems almost to be technology-phobic in its lack of reference to technology, especially

---

13While I agree with Sandel’s resistance to the liberal humanist critique of defense of cloning that would valorize the autonomy, and that the question of cloning raises the issue of relationality, I believe he privileges the parent-child relation to stand for all modes of relationality in ways that preclude imaging the life of a clone.
bio-technology. Despite the fact that the students’ lives are lived in and through medical and bio-medical technologies, these technologies only hover in the background even as they structure their life possibilities. In other words, by not foregrounding a “mechanized culture,” Ishiguro brings together instrumentalization and life, reduction to body parts and the ‘wholeness’ of life, thus disrupting the assumption that a life must never be thought of as a means to something else. Indeed, the characters in this novel struggle to live through their instrumentalized bodies.

If Ishiguro resists the conception of the human that undergirds the opposition of “banal” science fiction and the “profound emotions” seen to be the province of “high” literature, he further upsets expectations by giving us a cloning story in which the clones do not fight or struggle to be recognized as human. Indeed, an online discussion of the text centers on the problem of why these clones do not simply run away, resist, or protest. One comment, posted by “Sandy J,” reads:

Throughout the novel, I kept wondering why somebody doesn’t . . . just run away. Or challenge the authorities . . . Rebellion and questioning authority are a part of the human experience. By not . . . giving anybody in the novel (cloned or otherwise) a counter-point opinion, it rings false as a human, contentious, viable alternative future (Knit One Read Too).

As another commentator puts it, “I think that by having the characters accept their lot and not consider running away, Ishiguro was trying to show that they AREN’T fully realized people.” I draw on these examples in order to foreground the desire to define humanness in terms of agency and separation, and thus to judge these students to be inhuman because they do not resist. This notion of a “fully realized person” carries with it certain narrative expectations that re-inscribe the division between the form of humanity and formless clones. That the definition of the human that these readers resort to is so obviously a culturally or nationally specific convention of what people expect of the human (humans are people who rebel) highlights how certain socially held narrative expectations codify definitions of the human in advance.

It is not that Ishiguro fails to portray these clones as human; rather, he writes a story that reverses the narrative trajectory of individuation. Ishiguro does not reveal the human as unfolding and developing from a given inert potentiality. This is a much more disturbing story because it withholds the reader’s desire for emancipation: the clones do not rebel and thus “become human.” Rather, they learn to make sense of their lives as clones. In this way, Never Let Me Go disrupts the narrative of individuation and the values placed on the mysteriousness of birth, the
“giftedness” of life, and wholeness. The novel takes up the question that challenges our privileged narratives of humanness: how is a life that is not “born” in the usual sense given form and dignity? By disrupting the narrative trajectory of individuation, Ishiguro gives us the imaginative potential of shifting our expectations of the form of humanity.

Ishiguro begins to restructure our definitions of the human by emphasizing the tensions between the narrative expectations of humanness when “taken as a whole” and narrative as a relational, communicative practice between persons. A central narrative strategy that Ishiguro uses is to highlight narrative from the perspective not of the ‘whole’ person but of the partial person. The latter notion may be explained with the help of psychoanalyst Adam Phillips’s rejection of the idea that we can trace a sense of continuity from childhood to adulthood: “It is as though there is childhood, but not for us; that much of our so-called childhood was the experience of our parents, of the adults who looked after us. They, as it were, told us about it in their own way, as it was going on, but it was like a commentary on a programme we ourselves couldn’t see” (2002: 153). Phillips points to a sharp discontinuity between our childhood as it is experienced and our childhood as always being the product of others’ stories. In other words, what is often taken as the starting point of one’s individual story — one’s childhood — is never simply one’s own, but is partial: we are never fully ourselves without someone else telling our story. This notion of partiality introduces a dimension of personhood that is always dependent and attached to others, thus questioning the assumption and narrative arc of the ‘fully realized’ person that governs what counts as human.

Ishiguro explores the theme of partial personhood by showing the struggle of the narrator, Kathy, to stage her life in terms of the usual parameters of an innocent childhood and a mature adulthood. While the narrative follows a life from childhood up to the age of thirty-one more or less chronologically, the life-story that unfolds does not move from immaturity to maturity, from dependence to separation, or from childhood to adulthood, a narrative arc implicit in the construction of the enlightenment individual. Indeed, there seems to be very little difference in tone between the awkward moments that mark the interactions between Kathy and Tommy at Hailsham and those that occur when they are older. Near the end of the novel, their interactions are not particularly “adult”: “Maybe Tommy and I were making a special effort to be nice to each other, but the time seemed to slip by in an almost carefree way . . . Once or twice, Tommy even brought out his notebook and doodled away for new animal ideas while I read from the bed” (283). Even as Kathy posits a division between innocence and experience, she specifically blurs the two.
As Kathy looks back at the halcyon days of Hailsham (the seemingly idyllic boarding school environment that conjures up the innocence of youth) from her present knowledge of her fate as a clone, the distinction between innocence and experience does not hold. The reader learns very early on that the students were “told and not told.” Kathy attempts to disentangle the knowledge that she had in the past from the knowledge that she now has, but cannot keep one from bleeding into the other: “Certainly, it feels like I always knew about donations in some vague way, even as early as six or seven. And it’s curious, when we were older and the guardians were giving us those talks, nothing came as a complete surprise. It was like we’d heard everything somewhere before” (83). Both italicized words in this passage have to do with time, suggesting precisely this problem of continuity between past and present. There is no trajectory from innocence to knowledge because they were always being “told and not told”; they always both knew and didn’t know. Knowledge always exceeds the frame of understanding, and they never fully understand the way in which they are being taken in, impinged upon, and used by others. Without this staging of innocence and experience as a kind of continuity, Kathy finds it difficult to give form to her life in terms of self-realization.

In this way the novel displaces the usual tropes that trace a form of continuity and development from childhood to adulthood. Instead, the life trajectory is governed by the functionality of being a clone, moving from childhood to “carer,” to donor, and finally to “completion.” Rather than being defined by internal states of development, the clones are defined through the status of their functionality. Furthermore, this emphasis on being “told and not told” means that there is no way of coming to terms with one’s life either through a reckoning with one’s origins or through a retrospective view from a completely knowledgeable position. The narrative style plays out this discontinuity between knowledge and understanding that makes a telos of continuity and complete self-knowledge — conventional preconditions for a “fully realized life” — impossible. For example, the narrator has a penchant for commenting first, and then narrating, not the other way around.

14 This structure of being “told and not told” holds true for both the characters in the novel and the reader (see Toker and Chertoff 2007). James Wood notes that, far from being a deep secret, “the question of who these children are and what their function is in modern society is never very deeply withheld [from the reader].”

15 Toker and Chertoff similarly note how an “expectation is often raised in one chapter to be only partly fulfilled in the next, often leaving a temporary gap” (Toker and Chertoff 169).
this novel gets to the fear that these students are by nature something different, Kathy prefaced it with an explanation about how “[w]e still didn’t discuss the donations and all that went with them . . . it became something we made jokes about . . . now it was okay, almost required, every now and then, to make some jokey allusion to these things that lay in front of us. A good example is what happened the time Tommy got the gash on his elbow” (84). By anticipating the episode of Tommy’s gash before telling it, Kathy diverts the horror of the organ donations by explaining it away prior to an illustrative story. Instead of giving us a model of development and self-realization based on an end-point as the culmination of a life, Ishiguro’s narration more carefully imitates a life that only half-understands the significance of certain events and that creates ways of understanding — like the joke — that disavow knowledge. In other words, there is no total, whole experience or memory that provides the end-point for constituting personhood.

In this sense Kathy is not simply an unreliable narrator (one of Ishiguro’s calling cards as a writer) because she wishes to repress memories. She is unreliable because she is unable to traverse the gap between what she knew and understood in the past and what she knows and understands in the present. She does not know how to perceive or interpret past events, because her present understandings have already clouded any ability to access what she felt in the past. Discussing the whole mystery of why the clones’ art-work was collected into a “Gallery,” Kathy questions her earlier presumptions: “But did we really believe in the Gallery? Today, I’m not sure” (32). She goes on to try and reconstruct what she might have felt back then, but it was always hazy, and she is not able to connect. This problem of discontinuity is not unusual in autobiographical narration, but is all the more crucial because she cannot take her life lived “as a whole” for granted. She needs to seek corroboration for her existence and experience elsewhere and through different narrative modes.

In the arguments against cloning detailed earlier, the knowledge that one is a clone relegates the clone to being a product of another’s will, a totally instrumentalized body. This knowledge “disfigures” human relations and the human itself. But this way of understanding the impact of this knowledge on the clone presumes a totalizing effect on the life story taken as a whole. The clone would never, so the argument goes, be able to construct himself as a developmental unity because its life would

---

16 A classic formulation of disavowal is Octave Mannoni’s “I know very well, but still” (derived from Freud’s essay “Fetishism”), which nicely describes what the narration of the joke does in the novel.
already have been pre-fabricated and determined from without. Ishiguro exposes this tension between the desire to take up one’s life as a whole as a process of individuation and other narrative modalities by which a life can be counted. The principle of individuation gives form to life in ways that ensure features of personhood such as uniqueness and singularity. This is because it locates the grounds for a full realization of the human as properties within the individual. Whereas the moment of separation — from parents, from school, from immaturity — is often used to mark the individuality and form-giving agency of the singular life, this novel’s resistance to an arc of separation (succinctly captured in the title, *Never Let Me Go*) marks the clone’s personhood as real and realized only through the relationships in which it is held.

Ishiguro stresses these narrative modes of relationality by focusing on the awkward transitional time of adolescence. Adolescents are, as Ishiguro points out, full of urges and jealousies that are on the surface despite themselves; they are unable to “package” their emotions, thus suggesting how permeable they are (quoted in Onstad 2005). Adam Phillips similarly notes a conjunction of adolescence and cloning when he notes the desire that underlies cloning: the desire to have someone else who is like us: “we can only work out what or who we are like from the foundational belief — the unconscious assumption — that there is someone else that we are exactly like. For the adolescent the question is: If I’m not the same as someone else, what will I be like?” (1998: 92). Phillips argues that cloning provides something telling about sameness — that we work out who we are through a deep fear that we are not identical to someone else. Ishiguro’s version of this is given in the episode about the “possibles” — the “normal” people from whom the children have been cloned. Kathy specifically notes that a relationship to the “possible” need not follow a parent-child relation. “Some students thought you should be looking for a person twenty to thirty years older than yourself — the sort of age a normal parent would be. But others claimed this was sentimental. Why would there be a ‘natural’ generation between us and our models” (139). Displacing the scenario most favored by the President’s Council of Bioethics, Kathy emphasizes not that the possible is like a parent or a point of genealogical origin — by seeking the possible they are not searching for their origins, i.e. where they came from or their background.17 Rather, it is, as Phillips puts it, a working out of who they are through the belief

---

17The search for roots or origins is often undertaken in order to determine one’s cultural, racial, or class background — their “stock” or “pedigree” as it were.
that there is someone else who they are like. Kathy looks through pornographic magazines to find her "possible" in order to explain her own inexplicable sexual urges: "It would just, you know, kind of explain why I am the way I am" (181). The possible is not looked at as a point of origin or parent who imposes a prefabricated vision on the clone, but as a point of sameness who helps the clone negotiate who she is.

It is in this way that narrative as a relational practice shifts our perspective from life "taken as a whole" toward personhood as the capacity to relate. Whereas Madame and Miss Emily impose on the clones a narrative of individuation and the need to show their unique inner selves, Kathy registers the need to relate to others as a way to confirm her own experience. This is why the inability to coordinate one’s own sense of the world with that of another character is such a moment of crisis in the novel. For example, while Kathy is caring for Ruth, she attempts to convey how strange and inexplicable some of the things that they did at Hailsham were, but Ruth avoids Kathy’s suggestions. At a poignant moment Kathy interrupts the presentation of this dialogue by a comment: “But Ruth didn’t get my point — or maybe she was deliberately avoiding it. Maybe she was determined to remember us all as more sophisticated than we were. Or maybe she could sense where my talk was leading, and didn’t want us to go that way” (18). Ruth goes on to contradict Kathy’s suggestion. This is not simply an example of miscommunication. Both Kathy and Ruth need their specific versions of the past, but their versions disrupt each other’s. Their difficult relationship as “carer” and donor hinges on this inability to find an uninterrupted life, a version of the past uninterrupted by the suggestions of another, each calling into question the reality of their experience and the extension of their persons out into the world.

The crisis raised in the dialogue between Ruth and Kathy is that of being unable to hold on to the versions of the past that make their lives shareable and co-terminous. This need to hold on to other people, objects, and memories indexes a form of personhood that is about finding a part of oneself in another. The specific status of the pond at Hailsham, for example, becomes a mysterious referent throughout the novel, questioning not only the perceptions, memories, and realities of each of the characters, but also that of the reader. After they move to the Cottages, Kathy is struck by how Ruth “pretends” not to remember things about Hailsham: “I’d referred, just in passing, to the fact that at Hailsham, the short-cut down to the pond through the rhubarb patch was out of bounds. When she put on her puzzled look, I abandoned whatever point I’d been
trying to make and said: ‘Ruth, there’s no way you’ve forgotten. So don’t give me that’” (190). Kathy interprets Ruth’s reaction as a performance for the veterans, but what causes her anxiety is that her own experience is not mirrored in someone else and so her sense of reality gains no support.

Ironically, this question of the pond occurs again later in the novel, only this time it is Kathy who does not remember. Kathy and Tommy look at a watercolor painting in Miss Emily’s house, and while Tommy thinks it is a picture of Hailsham, Kathy is not sure:

“It’s the bit round the back of the duck pond,” Tommy said.
“What do you mean?” I whispered back. “There’s no pond. It’s just a bit of countryside.”
“No, the pond’s behind you.” Tommy seemed surprisingly irritated.
“You must be able to remember. If you’re round the back with the pond behind you, and you’re looking over towards the North Playing Field.” (250)

The conversation ends without resolution, and the source of their miscommunication is unclear. Are they miscommunicating because Kathy is referring to the watercolor painting and Tommy is referring to his memory, or is it because Kathy does not remember the pond at Hailsham? Is this just Kathy misremembering or denying? Is Hailsham itself a fictional place, if no one can agree as to its topographical features? Is Ishiguro telling us that nobody’s memory of Hailsham can be trusted, or that Kathy’s narration itself is a revised version of itself that cannot bridge the gaps in its own recounting? The pond in question is referred to earlier in the novel as a place where Kathy and Tommy have one of their conversations about the guardians (25). But its focus as a constant point of misremembering questions not only the memories and experience of the characters but also the reader’s experience of the novel. The reader is put in the same position as one of the characters, for he or she also needs to hold on to something in order for the status of the novel itself to remain stable. What is most crucial in these episodes is how the need to have someone else corroborate one’s memory of a place begins to undermine one’s own memory of it. Memories are not simply one’s own; they are filtered through others, so we begin to remember through others. And that is why Kathy gets so irritated with Ruth, and later Tommy with Kathy — this misremembering calls the very reality of their existence into question. Ishiguro draws attention to the narrative instabilities within a conception of personhood in which we are human to the extent that our memories overlap and are shared with others, in which “oneself” is never complete without another.
This tension between narrating the individual as a whole and narrating the capacity to relate as dual measures of the human culminates in the meeting of Kathy, Tommy, Madame and Miss Emily near the end of the novel. For Madame and Miss Emily provide the narrative of the individual as a whole with all of its tropes of development and individual uniqueness. Miss Emily tells Kathy and Tommy: “we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods . . . I’m so proud to see you both. 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, you wouldn’t have lost yourselves in your art and your writing” (268). Miss Emily speaks like a true parent, proud of her children’s accomplishments, proud, in the novel’s terms, that her children became people with meaningful lives. But when Kathy and Tommy offer their own theories about the Gallery, their own stories of self-realization, they run Miss Emily’s narrative through its full course. This way of making a life count leaves Tommy with the despairing retort, “There was nothing more to it than that?” (266). It leaves the young people with the feeling that they do not count as human after all — and ultimately, in the eyes of Miss Emily and Madame, they do not count as human: “We’re all afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you all almost every day I was at Hailsham” (269). But this conversation ends with a discussion of Madame’s having caught Kathy listening to her favorite song, a fictional song titled “Never Let Me Go.” The song, as Kathy explains it, tells the story of a woman who finally has a baby after being told that she could not have one, and then because of her fear of losing the baby, says to the baby, “Never Let Me Go.” Madame saw her listening, holding a pillow as a baby, and reacted to this sight with tears; Kathy does not understand why Madame did not reprimand her. The dialogue between Kathy and Madame is recounted by Kathy and emphasizes the possibility of shared experience:

I could see her studying me in the fading light. Then she said:

“Kathy H. I remember you. Yes, I remember.” She fell silent, but went on looking at me.

My focus has been on the struggle for narrative modes of individuation manifested in the students’ predicament and the impact of this struggle on how we measure the human. This line could also be read in terms of Bruce Robbins’ analysis of the role of institutions in managing the emotional lives of the students in which he compares the dystopian scenario of the novel to the workings of the welfare state and the function of class in invisibly limiting the expectations of certain persons (199–210).
“I think I know what you’re thinking about,” I said, in the end. “I think I can guess.”

“Very well.” Her voice was dreamy and her gaze had slightly lost focus.

“Very well. You are a mind-reader. Tell me.”

“There was a time you saw me once, one afternoon, in the dormitories. There was no one else around, and I was playing this tape, this music. I was sort of dancing with my eyes closed and you saw me.”

“That’s very good. A mind-reader. You should be on the stage. I only recognized you just now. But yes, I remember that occasion. I still think about it from time to time.”

“That’s funny. So do I.”

“I see.”

The dialogue prior to this moment is constantly being interrupted within the scene itself (by furniture movers) and by various narrative interventions and re-descriptions. Here, though, the narrative interruptions tend to stop, placing the characters’ words together in a rare moment of transparency — of “mind-reading.” This narrative mode of relating to another surfaces in the represented speech, positing a shared and exchangeable experience that corroborates the existence of one person in the other. The passage goes on to show the difference between Kathy’s interpretation of Madame’s crying and Madame’s own thoughts, thus reinstating the inability of human and clone to relate. When explaining to Kathy why she was crying, Madame states: “That is what I saw. It wasn’t really you, what you were doing, I know that. But I saw you and it broke my heart” (272). The reversal of “That is what I saw. It wasn’t really you” into “I saw you and it broke my heart” reasserts the distance between Madame and Kathy: Madame can only see her in feeling pity for her, but cannot relate to her and share this experience with her as part of the same world.

To think of Ishiguro’s novel in terms of the capacity to relate ultimately disrupts the opposition between clone and human on which narratives of clones’ individuation rely. This can be seen at the level of narrative address. For Kathy’s narrative starts as an apology for her conduct and position, as if her life were to be judged in terms of some normative horizon represented by the reader: “Okay, maybe I am boasting now. But it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well” (3). But what exactly is this normative horizon — who is being addressed? The “you” addressed is sometimes a generalized “you” that partakes of a universal, shared experience. The “you” suggests that the narrator is experiencing things that anyone could know. It brings the reader into alignment and identification
with the narrator, so that they seem to be in conversation and sharing: “If you think about it, being dependent on each other to produce the stuff that might become your private treasures — that’s bound to do things to your relationships” (16). But the “you” addressed is also other clones: “I don’t know if you had ‘collections’ where you were” (38). The assumption behind this statement is that “you” were in some other place — not Hailsham — that also raised clones. This particular double mode of address interrupts the easy divide between the implicit reader as human and the “you” as clone. Indeed, the structure of address places being a human and being a clone side-by-side, as “you” are made to shuttle in-between the universal condition of being human and the universal condition of being a clone.19

The narrative of individuation responds to the project of cloning by asking the question: what is the human, and how is human life affected by the possibilities of clones. It looks for the answer within the internal development of the individual, thus separating human life from cloned life from the start. But Ishiguro’s reworking of the form of life asks a different question: how might human life and cloned persons share a space and context, how might they respond to one another? In other words, instead of foregrounding the epistemological desire to find out what the clone is, it foregrounds an ethical project to discover how cloning might change how we relate to each other. It is a question that begins with a different orientation of the human, locating it not in an idea of independence or emancipation from the world, but rather on the ethical bonds between people when they do not have equal relationships to each other or to the world. Through emphasizing narrative modes of relatedness by which one’s existence begins to “count” in the minds of others within and against normative ways of giving form to life (continuity, teleology, immanent development), Ishiguro begins to expand the narrative parameters of the human. The notion of the human that emerges from this narrative is one that takes away the end-point as the culmination of a “fully realized” life, and directs us to other, more unlikely places, around which to seek the dignity and form of human life.

19 Wood similarly comments how Never Let Me Go tends to blur the differences between a human and a clone.
Works Cited


