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Part II

Jarmila Mildorf

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005)

Kazuo Ishiguro's latest novel *Never Let Me Go*, published in 2005, appeals on various levels as teaching material for English language learners, whether in upper secondary school classes or university seminars. The different contexts will of course occasionally require modifications as far as teaching approaches are concerned, and I refer to these intermittently in my outline. Generally speaking, teaching an English novel to German students of English can be a challenge since students may not have easy linguistic access to the foreign text. And even if the vocabulary is not too difficult, students may find that the cultural background knowledge that is provided by the text or is often even expected of readers prior to reading the text is somewhat alien (see Multhaup 1997). *Never Let Me Go* counters such difficulties by facilitating cultural transfers. In the novel, 31-year-old Kathy tries to come to terms with her past and remembers her childhood and adolescence in a very special boarding school, Hailsham, and on an old farm. At the centre of Kathy's memories are her friendship with Ruth and Tommy and their gradual discovery of their origin and function in life. While the novel refers hardly anywhere in the text explicitly to medical practice, the power of medicine and its implications for society loom large in a world where, it turns out, some people are cloned and raised for the sole aim of becoming donors for organ transplants. Kathy and her friends grow up at Hailsham believing they are special. Their guardians make every effort to protect them from the outside world, and they encourage them to be creative and to indulge in reading, writing poetry, doing artistic crafts and sports. As the reader learns in the end, the purpose of these creative activities is to prove that the cloned children also possess a soul and are therefore like ordinary humans. It is only later as adults that Kathy and the others discover that their real purpose in life is to be carers for other "students" who donate organs, and then to become donors themselves until they "complete", i.e. die. More importantly, Kathy and Tommy also find out that society rejects them and that people do not consider them equal human beings but are in fact scared of them.

Although the novel is set in England in the 1970s to 1990s, the events described soon render the setting an imaginary place which is more reminiscent of the settings of utopias/dystopias or science fiction. Nevertheless, it is also a "possible" place in the sense of possible-worlds theory (see Ryan 1991), one that readers can easily extrapolate from their current

cultural contexts in which medicine and gene technology play such a significant role. The problems presented in the novel are global problems and thus should not pose any cognitive difficulty in the foreign language classroom. I will concentrate in this article on three major areas: the novel's language, its overall structure and formal features, and aspects of the story world such as topics and themes or characters, which can be extended to and incorporated in pre-reading activities, student projects, and so on. I will then provide a close reading of one chapter that is central to the novel both thematically and in terms of its structural position and that can therefore be considered a key chapter for analysis. First, however, let me contextualise the novel by mentioning other literary texts dealing with similar or related issues and by writing a few words about Ishiguro.

The topics of creating and modifying life obviously have famous predecessors in, for example, the myth of Prometheus, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896). In the twentieth and early twenty-first century, novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Kobo Abe's *Inter Ice Age 4* (1970) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), to name but a few, deal more specifically with potential problems of genetic engineering, which has brought the possibility of creating life closer to us than we may have imagined, say, a hundred years ago. A novel that is currently already used for teaching at intermediate to upper secondary school level is Carol Matas' *Cloning Miranda* (2004). Ishiguro's novel can thus be placed within a long literary tradition about technological advances that enable humans to refashion themselves and about the moral implications thereof. The novel also has to be considered within the larger context of especially contemporary films that deal with genetic engineering, notably, *Gattaca* (1997), *The Sixth Day* (2000), *Godsend* (2004), and *The Island* (2005). Like some of these films, *Never Let Me Go* is quite innovative in that it adopts the perspective of a clone, thereby inviting the reader to regard the clone as a fellow human being and to feel sympathetic towards her. The realistic mode adopted for the presentation of Kathy's life also contributes to a greater sense of identification with the heroine than, say, a science fiction novel or a dystopia would probably achieve. While the novel deals with a topical and highly ethical issue, it is also replete with the sorrows and heartaches of puberty, with love and relationship problems, and with the challenges of growing up in a parentless and somewhat strange environment. It is not least for this varied range of topics that the novel is suitable for teaching purposes even at the upper secondary school level.

Ever since the publication of his Booker Prize winning novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989), if not before, Kazuo Ishiguro has been part of