

## Never Let Me Go Study Questions

### Note:

- *The highlighted questions are the ones I think are the most important and/or interesting questions to reflect on and discuss.*
- *The page numbers given in some questions may differ from other editions of the book.*

### Part 1, Chapters 1-5

1. Pay special attention to the opening pages. What tone and mood do they establish for the novel? Discuss what you think they reveal about how the story is being told, why, and for what audience.
2. Describe Tommy. Find examples of things he says and does in these chapters to support your characterization of him. Why do you think he has tantrums? How does he change over the course of these first few chapters? What indications are there that he has feelings for Kathy?
3. Describe Ruth. Find examples of things she says and does in these chapters to support your characterization of her. Discuss the nature of her relationships with others. Why do you think she acts the way she does?
4. Describe Kathy, and discuss her relationships with Ruth and Tommy. Find examples of things she says and does in these chapters to support your characterization of her. Why do you think she remains close and loyal to Ruth, and what does this loyalty reveal about Kathy? What indications are there that she has feelings for Tommy?
5. What qualities make Kathy an effective narrator? What external evidence is there in these chapters to support your claims? Why do you think Ishiguro chose to narrate the story through a character like Kathy? (How does her personality influence the way the story is told? How do her audience and her perspective on the story relate to the manner in which she reveals crucial bits of information about the setting and the background of the story?) How is a flashback approach to telling the story effective and appropriate?
6. Discuss the immediate setting of this part of the story. What is Hailsham like? Describe the lives of the students at Hailsham—in what ways are their lives different from those of typical children?
7. Discuss the background of the story. What is revealed in these chapters about the “outside world” and the background of the characters’ lives? What mysteries are they confronted with?
8. What conclusion do Kathy and Ruth and their friends reach about Madame’s feelings toward them? Why do you think Madame feels this way?
9. What do you think is the psychological and thematic significance of the “secret guards” and the fantasy of the plot against Miss Geraldine?

### Chapters 1-5 Review

10. What things in these first few chapters do you think have symbolic significance? Discuss your interpretation of them.

### Part 1, Chapters 6-9

1. What do you think Norfolk might be symbolic of?

2. What is the emotional and thematic significance of the song “Never Let Me Go”? Why do you think Ishiguro chose to use this as the title of the novel?

3. What do you think is the meaning of Madame’s reaction to seeing Kathy singing the song and clutching her pillow? Why do you think Miss Lucy is so disturbed by the children’s pretending to be electrocuted? What do you think is the meaning of the scene in which Kathy witnesses Miss Lucy furiously blacking out the students’ writing?

4. How is the use of skeletons to teach lessons about sex symbolically and thematically appropriate?

5. What is the psychological significance of the jokes about donors’ “unzipping” themselves to make donations?

### Chapters 6-9 Review

6. What events cause Tommy and Kathy (and to a lesser extent the other children) to begin thinking about the circumstances of their lives as “donors” and questioning the significance of certain aspects of life at Hailsham? What is Tommy’s explanation of Miss Lucy’s comment that they have been “told and not told” about their lives, and what does this say about human nature?

7. Find examples of foreshadowing in these chapters and discuss their narrative significance.

8. What further evidence of Kathy’s integrity and reliability as a narrator is there in these chapters?

9. How is Kathy and Tommy’s relationship further developed in these chapters? Why does Kathy have such a strong reaction to Tommy’s feigning happiness (p. 106)? In their subsequent conversation, why do you think that she avoids his gaze, and what is the significance of the silences between them?

10. What further information do these chapters contain about the clones and their lives as donors?

11. What unusual and even unnatural aspects of life at Hailsham are presented in these chapters?

### Part 2, Chapters 10-13

#### Chapter 10

1. What do you think is the purpose/significance of the essays the Hailsham students have been asked to write? What is Kathy’s current attitude toward her unfinished essay? Why do you think she sometimes considers writing it?

2. How are the Cottages a symbolically appropriate setting for the story? (Think of their original use.) What is Keffer’s attitude toward the students? Why do you think he acts this way?

3. What role does television play in the lives of the people at the Cottages?

#### Chapter 11

4. What signs of increasing maturity are there among those at the Cottages—in what ways are they more “adult”?

5. What are “the two Ruths”? What insight does Kathy have into the reasons for Ruth’s behavior, and how does this affect her attitude and behavior toward Ruth?

6. What complexities and paradoxes in Keffer's attitude toward the students are shown in this chapter? How might Keffer play a symbolic role in the novel? How might his initial treatment of Ruth's collection be symbolic?

7. What do you think Kathy's motive in looking through the porn magazines might be?

8. What taboo is there about the students who have already left the Cottages, and how does this reflect the general attitude of those at the Cottages toward the future?

## Chapter 12

9. What further information do we find out in this chapter about the nature of those who are future donors? Why are they fascinated by the topic of their "possibles"? Discuss the psychological effect you think it would have on people in their situation to know that the people they were cloned from might be living normal lives somewhere.

10. What is Ruth's "dream future," and how is it appropriate for her? What psychological role do these dream futures play in these clones' lives?

## Chapter 13

11. Discuss Ruth's behavior in this chapter. Describe some instances of her rudeness, and discuss Kathy's reaction to Ruth's behavior. How does she respond to Chrissie and Rodney's question about Hailsham students, and why do you think she acts this way?

## Part 2, Chapters 14-17

### Chapter 14

1. What is Ruth's bitter response to her disappointment regarding her "possible"? Why does Kathy have such a strong reaction to Ruth's words?

### Chapter 15

2. What does Kathy and Tommy's experience in Norfolk suggest about the symbolic meaning of both the Judy Bridgewater tape and Norfolk? Why doesn't she want to tell Ruth about the tape?

3. What is Tommy's theory about the Gallery, and how does this affect him? What apparent support is there for his theory? What is ironic about his statement that "none of us are in any particular hurry"?

4. What do you think happened to Kathy's tape? What evidence can you find in the text?

5. What more is revealed about Kathy's interest in the porn magazines?

### Chapter 16

6. How might Tommy's animals be symbolically significant? What unfathomable reason do you think Kathy has for being reluctant to praise his drawings?

7. Why do you think Ruth pretends to forget things about Hailsham? How does she get revenge on Kathy for finding the tape with Tommy and not telling her about it? Why do you think Kathy is unable to respond to this? Why do you think Tommy looks at her "like [she] was a rare butterfly he'd come across on a fence-post"?

## Chapter 17

8. What factors pull the Hailsham students at the Cottages apart?
9. Why do you think Ruth tells Kathy that Tommy would never be interested in her? What effect does this event apparently have on Kathy, and why?

### Chapters 14-17 Review

10. What foreshadowing regarding Kathy and Tommy occurs in these chapters?
11. Why do you think the students choose to become carers rather than remain at the Cottages for as long as possible?

## Part 3, Chapters 18-20

### Chapter 18

1. In what ways is Kathy well suited to work as a carer?
2. Why do you think Kathy is initially reluctant to talk with Laura? How is their conversation further validation of Kathy's reliability as a narrator?
3. Why does Hailsham's closing concern Kathy so much? Why do you think the continued existence and operation of Hailsham up to this point has been so reassuring to her? What symbolizes its closing in Kathy's mind, and how is it an appropriate symbol?
4. Why do you think Kathy decides to become Ruth's carer? What event precipitates this decision, and what theme is her decision an example of? Why do you think she decides to become Ruth's carer before becoming Tommy's?
5. Why do you think the carers and donors are so interested in the stranded boat?

### Chapter 19

6. How might the appearance and history of Kingsfield be symbolically significant? What is ironic about its name?
7. Discuss the symbolic significance of the stranded fishing boat and the marshes. What evidence can you find in the text to support your interpretation? What reaction do they have to it, and why do you think they have this reaction?
8. Based on Ruth's comments about Chrissie and her later comments about being ready to be a donor, what contradictory impulses do the clones seem to have about their lives? How would you explain this contradiction?
9. Why do you think Ruth gets a look of triumph on her face after Kathy mentions Madame? How are her subsequent words surprising? Why do you think she makes this suggestion and gives Kathy and Tommy this gift?
10. What does Ruth's behavior in this chapter show about how she's changed since Kathy last saw her? Why do you think she has changed?

## Chapter 20

11. What feeling haunts Kathy and Tommy's relationship, and how is it manifested? Why do you think they have this feeling? How do they deal with it?

## Chapters 18-20 Review

12. What do these chapters reveal about the techniques are employed to make the clones accept their status and society's exploitation of them? Consider, for example, the phenomenon of "carer fatigue," the common refrain of "It's what we're supposed to be doing, after all," the use of the term "completing," and the splitting up of former friends.

## Part 3, Chapters 21-23

### Chapter 21

1. This chapter contains very complex symbolism that makes many details of the chapter that might otherwise seem random or arbitrary take on a greater meaning. Although this symbolism is certainly open to different interpretations, let's assume that Madame and Miss Emily's house represents the mind of society in terms of its attitude toward the clones. If that is the case, what might the following details of this chapter symbolize? As you ponder this question, keep in mind what qualities are typically associated with darkness, the Victorian period, owls (and, conversely, fire), etc.

- the darkness of the house (249)
- the colored glass at the entrance (249)
- the narrowness of the halls/sense of being cramped (249)
- the Victorian furniture (249)
- the picture of an owl-like bird in place of the fireplace (250)
- the barely-visible watercolor painting of Hailsham—lit by a lamp that has "a crooked shade covered with cobweb traces" (250)
- the different levels of the house
- the sliding doors at the rear of the sitting room (250)
- Miss Emily's frail, contorted, disabled state (255)
- the cabinet's being taken away (257)

### Chapter 22

2. Discuss the differences in Madame's and Miss Emily's attitudes, personalities, and philosophies. Consider, for example, their attitudes toward the social movement to give clones better lives, the value of their work, and the persistent rumors of deferrals.

3. Discuss the picture of their society that Miss Emily paints for Kathy and Tommy. What is the justification used for exploiting clones? How did this practice come about—what historical situation gave rise to it? Why do Miss Emily and Madame seem to be convinced that the practice will never end? What connections with the practice of slavery in the United States can you see?

4. What is Madame and Miss Emily's primary strategy for convincing people to support their cause? What does "soul" mean as the word is used in this chapter? What effect did the Morningdale scandal have, and why?

5. How do Madame and Miss Emily justify their decision to keep Hailsham's students relatively ignorant about their fate? How do Tommy and Kathy seem to feel about this decision? Why do you think they don't seem to have a deep sense of gratitude for all of Madame and Miss Emily's efforts on their behalf?

6. Why does Tommy scream? What insight do he and Kathy have about the screaming fits he had as a child? Discuss the significance of this quote as it relates to the novel: “It seemed like we were holding onto each other because that was the only way to stop us being swept away into the night.”

### Chapter 23

7. What attitude does Tommy seem to have about his drawings after the trip to Littlehampton? (See also page 275.) Why do you think he feels this way?

8. What signs are there in this chapter of Tommy becoming distant? What do you think are the reasons for this distance and for his decision to change carers?

9. What different ways do the clones have of dealing with fourth donation? What do you think would be the best way to deal with it? What deep fear do they typically have?

10. What is the symbolic significance of the river that Tommy imagines, and what theme does it suggest? What does Tommy reveal about his and Kathy’s feelings for each other? What themes are suggested by their failure to get together until the end of their lives?

11. Why do you think Kathy and Tommy’s last few weeks together are “tranquil” and “[don’t] seem strange”? Why is their parting so emotionally muted? How do they feel about having found out things that Ruth never did? Why do you think Tommy shares a small secret with Kathy as she leaves? What does Kathy rely on to give her solace in this difficult time?

12. Discuss the symbolic significance of the final setting of the novel—the flat, featureless, empty fields where debris is blown by the wind and gets caught in the fence and the trees.

### Review Questions

1. Discuss the significance of the title of the novel in relation to its plot, characters, and themes.

2. Interpret the cover of the novel (the version with the photograph of a girl’s face)—look carefully at the details of the photograph. Given the subject matter and style of the novel, how is it appropriate?

3. Now that you’ve read the entire novel, discuss the symbolic significance of the following things:

- Hailsham
- the forest behind Hailsham
- the ghost of the girl rumored to haunt the forest
- the pond at Hailsham
- the students’ artwork
- Tommy’s animals
- the song “Never Let Me Go”
- the “Lost Corner”
- the Cottages
- the beached boat
- the sea and the seashore

4. What major themes are expressed in the novel? How are they expressed?

5. In general, why do you think the major characters (Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth) act the way they do? Discuss their differing responses to the common problem they all face.

6. What moral stance does the novel take on the issue of using clones as organ donors? What ideas about human nature does the story convey through this moral stance? Discuss the connection between

this issue and any other historical, social, and ethical issues that you can think of—consider, for example, the practice of slavery in the United States.

**7.** In what ways does the novel express moral outrage about the exploitation of “donors”? Think carefully about elements such as the narrative voice, the style of the novel, the events that occur in the novel, the descriptions of the characters, the themes expressed, and the use of literary devices such as symbols.

**8.** What observations of/lessons about human nature and human psychology does the novel express? How do the characters (and the people of their society) deal with the various unpleasant realities they face? Consider, for example, the use of euphemistic language in the novel.

**9.** The novel deals with the issue of the human “soul.” What does this nebulous term really mean, and how does artistic expression relate to this issue? What other human activities and characteristics reveal the “soul”?

**10.** A number of events in the novel, as well as things said and done by various characters, take on a clearer and greater meaning as the novel progresses. Find a few examples of such events, statements, and actions and discuss the evolution of their significance.

**11.** Why do you think Ishiguro chose to focus on some of the privileged few clones like those from Hailsham rather than on some of the many less fortunate clones that the novel makes reference to—what effects does this choice have on the nature of the story and on the audience? How is it appropriate as a narrative choice, and how does it reflect the general narrative strategy of the novel? Why do you think the characters have such commonplace names?

**12.** From Kathy’s point of view, what do you think is/are the purpose(s) of the narrative?

**13.** Typically, dystopian novels focus less on relationships and more on concrete events and actions. Why do you think Ishiguro chose to include so many “soap opera” details of the characters’ lives?

**14.** Discuss the style of the narration and its effect on the story. In what ways is it an appropriate and evocative choice?

**15.** Why do you think Ishiguro chose a contemporary setting (though occurring in an alternate reality) rather than a futuristic one, as the authors of other dystopian novels like *Brave New World, 1984*, and *Fahrenheit 451* did?

**16.** In what ways could *Never Let Me Go* be described as a woman’s story? What characteristics does it have that distinguish it from more “masculine” stories like *Brave New World, 1984*, and *Fahrenheit 451*?

**17.** What apparent contradiction is there in Miss Emily and Madame’s actions and feelings (and in those of other characters in the novel)? How might this contradiction be explained?

**18.** What is your opinion about the disagreement between Miss Lucy and Miss Emily/Madame? Support your position with reasoning. What position do you think Ishiguro appears to advocate in the novel, and how does he express this opinion?