

“Living Under the Shadow”: The Production and Internalization of Spatial Fear in *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract: This article examines the mechanisms of affective governance in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, focusing on how spatial fear is produced by mainstream society and subsequently internalized by the clones. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s politics of emotion, Michel Foucault’s panopticism, and Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the camp, the study argues that fear is not a natural emotion but a carefully engineered political technology. Through external spatial segregation, internal architectural division, and the circulation of horror narratives, mainstream society constructs fear as a means of boundary-making and population control. The second part demonstrates how clones internalize this fear through emotional orientation, bodily practices, and narrative absorption, transforming externally imposed boundaries into mechanisms of self-surveillance. The novel thus illuminates a subtle yet effective form of biopolitical power that operates through the management and distribution of fear.

Keywords: Affective governance; Spatial fear; Boundary-making

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1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* presents a world both familiar and unsettling. Its narrator, Kathy H., recalls a childhood at Hailsham, a seemingly benevolent boarding school surrounded by gentle hills, and later the Cottages, a decaying farmstead where students live with few visible constraints. Yet beneath this ordinary surface lies a chilling reality: the students are clones, created to donate their vital organs until they “complete.” What makes the novel haunting, however, is not this revelation but the students’ apparent acceptance of it. They rarely attempt escape, never rebel, and even recall their confined lives with nostalgia—the freezing Cottages as “exciting”, Hailsham as a “quiet, tranquil house.” This raises a fundamental question: how do the clones come to inhabit confinement not as a prison but as home?

This article argues that the answer lies in the subtle operations of fear. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s cultural politics of emotion, Michel Foucault’s panopticism, and Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the camp, this paper

examines how mainstream society engineers fear through spatial design, and how clones internalize this fear as self-governance. Fear is produced through the isolated placement of Hailsham and the Cottages, reinforced by architectural arrangements that render clones perpetually visible, and cemented through narratives attaching lethal danger to boundary-crossing. Yet the apparatus's true efficacy lies in its internalization: clones actively reproduce fear through emotional orientations, bodily habits, and narrative absorption. In doing so, they become participants in their own governance. The clones' existence is one of perpetually "living under the shadow"—a shadow cast not by nature, but by a meticulously engineered apparatus they themselves help sustain.

2. Production of spatial fear in mainstream society

As contemporary research on emotional geographies has highlighted, emotions and spatial power are inseparably linked, with space being used to regulate bodies and manage emotional states in complex ways ^[1]. Space in *Never Let Me Go* is never neutral. The novel's geography is instead organized by mainstream society through a deliberate politics of fear, which is operated through three different aspects. The first concerns the external placement of Hailsham and the Cottages, sites strategically excised from the national landscape and thereby marked as spaces apart. The second operates internally, within these environments themselves, where architectural arrangements—high windows, guarded quarters, exposed pathway—produce asymmetrical fields of visibility that position clones under constant disciplinary scrutiny. The third unfolds through fear narratives circulating among clones, stories that invest the act of boundary-crossing with lethal consequence and thus imaginatively fortify the borders that physical and architectural means have already established. Together, these three dimensions constitute the spatial apparatus through which mainstream society engineers fear as a mechanism of affective governance.

To begin with, the locations of Hailsham and the Cottages constitute the first layer of spatial segregation imposed by mainstream society. Hailsham is where the clones spend their childhood, and as Kathy recalls,

"Hailsham stood in a smooth hollow with fields rising on all sides. That meant that from almost any of the classroom windows in the main house—and even from the pavilion—you had a good view of the long, narrow road that came down across the fields and arrived at the main gate" (Page 34) ^[2].

This description underscores that Hailsham is both secluded and distanced from surrounding society. As the clones grow older, they are moved to the Cottages, a far more marginal environment. The novel describes the Cottages as follows:

"The Cottages were the remains of a farm that had gone out of business years before. There was an old farmhouse, and around it, barns, outhouses, stables all converted for us to live in. There were other buildings, usually the outlying ones, that were virtually falling down, which we couldn't use for much" (Page 116) ^[2].

The Cottages thus occupy a desolate, peripheral landscape, signaling that the clones have been relocated into yet another form of isolation. Both Hailsham and the Cottages are strategically placed in the "corners" of the nation, forming a world reserved exclusively for clones.

The deliberate placement of Hailsham in a hollow and the Cottages on an abandoned farm represents the first step in mainstream society's production of fear through spatial design. As Agamben observes regarding the "camp", "the camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule", and such a space is marked by a "zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule" ^[3]. Hailsham and the Cottages embody this liminal condition: although located within national borders, they are deliberately

removed from cities, towns, and transportation networks, connected to the outside world only by a narrow road or a few small paths.

From Ahmed's perspective, affects are mobile forces that prompt bodies to dwell in certain places and recoil from others. Emotions thereby "hold us in place, or give us a dwelling place" (Page 11), solidifying some spaces as inhabitable while rendering others experientially distant or inaccessible ^[4]. The deliberate selection of Hailsham and the Cottages by mainstream groups establishes spatial structures to facilitate emotional management: the clones' perceptible world is confined within these two locations, while the external world is designated as a zone to be avoided. It is precisely through this comprehensive external segregation that subsequent fence-based discipline and horror stories can effectively project danger onto the external space, perpetuating the clones' anticipatory fear of going out.

Next, the architectural design within Hailsham itself functions as a mechanism for the continual production of fear. One of the clearest examples is the spatial differentiation between guardians and students: guardians have their own enclosed living quarters—"But as they were walking from the house towards the Orangery—where the guardians had their living quarters" (Page 27) — a route visible yet inaccessible to students, while students are placed in communal dormitories and grow up accustomed to sleeping and talking "in the dark in our dorm" (Page 33) ^[2]. This asymmetrical spatial division grants guardians retreat into privacy, while clones inhabit spaces of constant exposure. Furthermore, the high windows of the main building and their visual relation to the playing field are notable. Students often stand on stools and benches to crowd around the high windows because "That gave us a clear view of the North Playing Field" (Page 7) ^[2]. From these vantage points, any movement on the playing field, near the pond, or along the path leading to the main gate becomes visible. From the mainstream society's perspective, this design is not driven by aesthetics or chance, but rather a long-term, highly effective, and cost-efficient technology for emotional governance. It ensures that cloned humans remain perpetually visible, making it difficult for them to establish spaces truly free from surveillance.

Ahmed emphasizes that fear never falls evenly upon all bodies; instead, it distributes bodies into space unevenly. Fear restricts the movement of some bodies, confining them to enclosed or monitored zones, while allowing others to traverse public space freely. As she writes, "It is the regulation of bodies in space through the uneven distribution of fear which allows spaces to become territories, claimed as rights by some bodies and not others" (Page 70) ^[4]. From this perspective, Hailsham's architectural layout and visual design represent a deliberate internalization of such affective regulation: guardians occupy low-risk, protected areas, while clones inhabit high-visibility zones in which approaching the pond, the gate, or the fence immediately places them under the threat of "being seen" or "getting into trouble." This internal division is a specific form of emotional management through which mainstream society loads greater degrees of fear onto clones in order to secure its own spatial freedom and sense of safety.

Foucault's notion of the Panopticon further illuminates these dynamics. Panopticon is an architectural technology that "arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately", ensuring that "full lighting and the eye of a supervisor" render "visibility a trap" for those under surveillance (Page 200) ^[5]. The arrangement of high windows and playing fields at Hailsham operates in a similar fashion: through spatial lines and sightlines, any deviation toward the edges becomes potentially visible. Fear is thus woven into daily mobility, functioning as an everyday technology of affective governance and biopolitical control.

Finally, the horror stories surrounding the fence and the outside world constitute a crucial component of

mainstream society's affective politics. Numerous versions circulate in the novel: a boy who, after an argument, ran beyond the fence and was later found "tied to a tree with the hands and feet chopped off"; or the girl who was expelled and "kept hanging around outside the fences, pleading to be let back in, but no one let her" (Page 50) ^[2]. These stories firmly attach fear to the very idea of leaving Hailsham, framing boundary-crossing as either fatal or socially annihilating. A guardian's casual remark about electric fences elsewhere further intensifies this fear: although she insists Hailsham's fence is not electrified, her allusion to "serious accidents" elsewhere evokes images of electrocution, burning flesh, and death, effectively casting the fence as a potentially lethal threat in students' minds. Such tactics exemplify the broader political use of fear as a mechanism for control, where fear becomes a tool for constructing borders and legitimizing exclusionary practices ^[6].

In Ahmed's analysis of the cultural politics of fear, fear arises as the effect of prior narratives. Social discourses delineate what counts as a threat and which bodies should be feared or avoided. "The threat itself is shaped by the authorisation of narratives about what is and is not threatening, and about who are and are not the appropriate 'objects' of fear" (Page 69) ^[4]. In *Never Let Me Go*, students possess almost no direct experience of the outside world; they rely entirely on rumors and guardian-generated narratives. The boy found dead beyond the fence and the expelled girl begging to return exemplify the "authorised narratives" Ahmed describes. From the standpoint of mainstream society, such narratives serve at least two functions: they legitimize spatial segregation by framing confinement as protection, and they attach fear to the very act of crossing boundaries, prompting clones to distance themselves psychologically and to view remaining inside as the only viable option.

Thus, spatial fear emerges as a central technique of affective governance. Through spatial design, visual organization, and narrative circulation, mainstream society transforms fear into a means of boundary production: marking inside and outside while regulating the mobility of specific bodies. In *Never Let Me Go*, this affective mechanism enables a subtle form of biopolitical control, enabling the life trajectories of clones to remain firmly controlled within mainstream society's purview without explicit prohibitions or overt violence.

3. Internalization of spatial fear in clones

Yet spatial design alone cannot guarantee effective governance. The preceding analysis has demonstrated how mainstream society constructs an apparatus of fear through the external segregation of Hailsham, its internal architectural divisions, and fear narratives. This apparatus, however, remains contingent upon its reception. What transforms fear into a durable form of power is the manner in which clones receive, process, and reproduce this emotion in their daily lives. This section, therefore, shifts focus from production to internalization, examining how clones absorb externally imposed spatial fear across the same three dimensions and how this internalization gradually crystallizes into self-surveillance, the mechanism through which the apparatus of fear ultimately sustains itself.

In terms of external spatial structure, Hailsham and the Cottages constitute the two most significant "interior spaces" in the clones' lives. Strikingly, these spaces are not initially experienced by the clones as forms of incarceration. Instead, they are remembered as protective environments, even infused with warmth. During the Hailsham period, recurring imagery of "quiet" and "tranquil" reinforces this affective construction. In Chapter Eight, Kathy recalls her "secret guard" game on the third floor: **"I did this so that I could create the illusion the place wasn't crawling with students, but that instead Hailsham was this quiet, tranquil house where I**

lived with just five or six others” (Page 90) ^[2]. Hailsham is thus imagined as a “quiet, tranquil house”, a home shared with a few close companions rather than an institution designed to train and sort clones. By contrast, the external world is depicted as radically unknowable: **“any place beyond Hailsham was like a fantasy land; we had only the haziest notions of the world outside and about what was and wasn’t possible there”** (Page 66) ^[2]. In this narrative, Hailsham becomes a “protective space”, safe precisely because it is sealed off from the outside. Even after entering the Cottages, this emotional logic continues. Although given greater physical freedom, the clones rarely venture out: **“we rarely stepped beyond the confines of the Cottages. We didn’t even walk about the surrounding countryside or wander into the nearby village”** (Page 118) ^[2]. According to recent studies in spatial theory, the experience of fear in these spaces is not just a response to specific threats but an ongoing process of internalizing the spaces as emotionally “safe” and “dangerous” ^[7]. Thus, the Cottages effectively inherit Hailsham’s emotional geography: though physically outside the school, they remain part of an enclosed interior world in imagination and affect. Going out is associated with danger; staying within is the only safe choice.

These emotional patterns can be understood through Sara Ahmed’s theorization of affective “orientation.” As she argues, “Emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to such objects” ^[4, 8]. From this perspective, fear draws bodies away from some spaces and toward others, constructing the boundary between “inside” and “outside.” For the clones, Hailsham and the external world are not merely geographically separated, but emotionally positioned at opposite ends of the spectrum: the “safe inside” and the “dangerous outside”. Hailsham is consistently portrayed as a “quiet, tranquil house”, while the external world is relegated to the realm of “fantasy land.” Thus, the clones’ fear is not merely a strong dread of specific dangers, but rather a distancing stance that separates the “Hailsham” from the “outside.” Ultimately, the spatial divisions imposed by mainstream society are continually reinforced within the clones’ emotional framework. This is one way that emotional politics takes effect at the level of space.

Meanwhile, the emotional portrayal of the Cottages reveals the internalization of fear through the lens of emotional labor. The Cottages consist of dilapidated farm buildings, surrounded by mud and dreadfully cold in winter. Yet Kathy remembers this stage positively: **“none of us minded the discomforts one bit—it was all part of the excitement of being at the Cottages”** (Page 117) ^[2]. Here, “excitement” functions as a reprocessed emotional label—an attempt to reframe what might have been anxiety and displacement into a narrative of progress. Despite this surface nostalgia, persistent fear still remains in the clones’ hearts. Kathy later admits: **“somewhere underneath, a part of us stayed like that: fearful of the world around us”** (Page 120) ^[2]. The disjunction between surface excitement and underlying fear illustrates how emotional labor internalizes fear.

As Arlie Russell Hochschild defines it, emotional labor—or “emotion work”—is **“the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling”** to meet socially enforced “feeling rules” ^[8]. For the clones, the dominant feeling rules dictate that Hailsham and the Cottages should be understood as “sheltering childhood spaces”, not as sites of abandonment or segregation. Thus, “fearful of the world around us” is pushed “somewhere underneath”, while coldness and unease are overwritten by the rhetoric of “excitement.” Through such layers of emotional labor, the Cottages—objectively remote and run-down—become affectively recast as a safe, almost nostalgic space. In this sense, emotional labor not only softens the intensity of fear but also reinforces emotional politics by helping clones internalize spatial boundaries as natural preferences.

Fear not only persuades clones to remain “inside” but also cultivates habits of self-surveillance within internal boundaries. The pond path provides a clear example. Although physically quiet, the path is imagined as

exposed—a place where conversations might be overheard from all directions. Students tend to avoid the main path, choosing a peripheral route instead. Kathy describes her body language when approaching Tommy: “Maybe because I was keen to keep up this impression—though I’d no idea if anyone was actually watching—I didn’t try and sit down... I’d kept my posture looking very provisional, and at one point made a move to carry on with my stroll” (Page 25–26) ^[2]. Even without any indication of surveillance, she instinctively avoids lingering or sitting, maintaining the impression of “just strolling.”

For Ahmed, fear is a spatialized affect: it works to contain bodies within social space through the way it shrinks the body, or constitutes the bodily surface through an expectant withdrawal from a world that might yet present itself as dangerous (Page 70) ^[4]. At Hailsham, the high windows and intersecting paths constitute a network of potential visibility. Near open or borderline areas—the pond, the field edges, peripheral paths, students instinctively retreat or reroute. This is a kind of “shrinkage” shaped by fear: they learn to avoid routes that are too exposed, too close to the boundary, and make their bodies as inconspicuous and unobtrusive as possible. Furthermore, Ahmed notes that fear helps “**create the effect of borders**”, aligning bodily contraction with a social mapping of spaces to be avoided (Page 62–63, 71) ^[4]. Thus, bodily habits reinforce the politics of emotional boundaries.

This scene also resonates with Michel Foucault’s analysis of panopticism. As Foucault writes, the Panopticon induces “**a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power**” (Page 201) ^[5]. Once the subject believes they may be watched, they “**assume responsibility for the constraints of power**” and become “**the principle of their own subjection**” (Page 201) ^[5]. Kathy’s uncertainty—“no idea if anyone was actually watching”—combined with her “provisional” posture, constitutes a classic panoptic moment. Even without evidence of surveillance, she behaves as though she were visible. Judith Butler’s theory of performativity deepens this insight. Identity, she argues, “**is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts**” ^[9]. Kathy’s actions—choosing the less visible path, feigning casual strolling, maintaining readiness to move—constitute the repetitive bodily script of a “proper Hailsham student.” Fear ensures the continuity of this script, making self-surveillance appear natural.

Narratives surrounding the woods and fences offer a third mechanism of fear internalization. As the text describes:

“I’m not saying we necessarily went around the whole time at that age worrying about the woods. I for one could go weeks hardly thinking about them, and there were even days when a defiant surge of courage would make me think: “How could we believe rubbish like that?” But then all it took would be one little thing—someone retelling one of those stories, a scary passage in a book, even just a chance remark reminding you of the woods—and that would mean another period of being under that shadow.” (Page 51) ^[2].

Fear is not depicted as constant panic but as an “intermittent shadow”—a background effect that resurges with minimal prompting. A similar mechanism appears in discussions of the electrified fence. At fifteen, boys joke that “**you could commit suicide any time you liked just by touching a fence**”, and classmates “**thought it pretty funny**”; Laura dramatizes a mock electrocution (Page 78) ^[2]. The humor superficially defuses fear but strengthens the association between fence and danger: proximity becomes synonymous with threat.

Within Ahmed’s theoretical framework, the fear generated by such narratives drives clones to maintain constant self-monitoring. When discussing the “economy of fear”, Ahmed notes that fear circulates in society because its targets are often uncertain—neither fixed dangers nor clearly defined threats, but rather ambiguous

dangers that can be reinterpreted at any moment. This structural vulnerability explains why “anything can become frightening” within fear’s framework. She writes: “It is the structural possibility that the object of fear may pass us by that makes everything potentially frightening” (page 69) ^[4]. Building on this, she further analyzes how the post-9/11 global emotional climate was constructed as a “global economy of fear”, where threats were experienced as “ubiquitous” (Page 72) ^[4]. In Hailsham, horror narratives shape this “ambiguous threat”: for students, the real terror lies not in any specific wire, but in the imagined “electric fence” and the pervasive sense of “potential mishap.” It is precisely within this deliberately engineered uncertainty that fear is perpetually replicated and internalized among clones, casting an overall shadow over the “outside” and reinforcing their self-imposed confinement to spatial boundaries.

Here, we can also bring in Ngai’s analysis of “ugly feelings” for further elaboration. As Sianne Ngai argues, the “noncathartic feelings” she theorizes give rise to “a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended ‘action’)” ^[8, 10]. These “ugly feelings” thus point to “the politically charged predicament of suspended agency from which all of these ugly feelings ensue” ^[10–11]. The various ambiguous narratives surrounding the woods and the electric fence generate precisely this kind of “noncathartic feeling” for the clones, leaving them in a long-term emotional state of “knowing somewhat but unable to articulate it.” They know that “something might go wrong” beyond the boundary, yet this fear is maintained at a low-intensity but persistent level—strong enough to support a stable mechanism of self-surveillance, but not intense enough to quickly crystallize into any form of political resistance.

In sum, spatial fear is first imposed by mainstream society, then repeatedly affirmed and reinforced through the clones’ emotional orientation, bodily practices, and narrative habits. Ultimately, clones do not merely suffer fear; they reproduce it: they transform externally manufactured fear into an internal mechanism of self-regulation, ensuring that they remain securely within the boundaries drawn for them.

This article has traced the trajectory of spatial fear in *Never Let Me Go* from its production to its internalization. Produced by mainstream society through spatial segregation, architectural design, and fear narratives, this fear is subsequently absorbed by the clones, who reproduce it through emotional orientation, bodily habits, and the internalization of fear stories. What emerges is a form of governance that requires neither walls nor guards: the clones themselves become the agents of their own containment. They inhabit a condition of “living under the shadow”—a shadow not merely cast upon them, but one they themselves perpetually sustain through the very act of living within its bounds.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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