The Complexity of Love and Friendship in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*: An Actantial Analysis

Kärlekens och vänskapens komplexitet i Kazuo Ishiguros *Never Let Me Go*: en aktantanalys

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Abstract

The present essay undertakes a structuralist analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go*, drawing upon the actantial analysis of plot developed by A. J. Greimas, as developed by Louis Hébert. My central claim is that the plot revolves around the protagonist’s contradictory desire to find love with her childhood friend Tommy, while at the same time retaining her friendship with another childhood friend, Ruth. The essay suggests that this contradiction contributes to the complex plot where the characters’ actantial functions shift frequently. Furthermore, the essay makes a distinction between two different perspectives, namely Kathy’s as protagonist, and Kathy’s as narrator. This distinction elucidates how narration in *Never Let Me Go* affects the plot.
Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* reads almost as a realistic autobiographical novel, yet its realism is subtly offset by elements of science fiction. Indeed, as one reviewer puts it, at first glance the novel “could easily be mistaken for a political novel or a futuristic thriller, but at its dark heart it’s an existential fable about people trying to wring some happiness out of life before the lights go out” (Grossman). The story is told by Kathy, who is also its protagonist. Kathy relates her story and describes everything up to the point she is in right now, concentrating on the life she had in her earlier years with the guardians, Tommy and her best friend Ruth. In their earlier years, they all live in Hailsham, an establishment that resembles a boarding school. Over the course of the narrative, however, it becomes clear that it is really an institution for clones, and that Kathy and her friends live in a dystopian society: they already have their paths set out for them, and are brought up to think that the only reason for their existence is that they will donate all their vital organs, until they complete (die).

Commenting on the film version of the novel, Ishiguro himself states that the story is “A kind of a metaphor if you like for human existence/ human condition – the fact that our existence is limited. …the sci-fi speculative surface of the story was the last piece…almost like a device…” (Film Independent Interview). At heart, *Never Let Me Go* is “about how we face that knowledge, that time is limited; what we do when we realize we haven’t got that much longer, what are the things that get very important to finish properly, and when we look back, what are the things that seem to be the really worthwhile things?” (Faber & Faber). These statements by the author will be of significance in Figure 1.3.

In the following, I will perform a structuralist analysis of the novel, most immediately based on the terms and theoretical framework of the actantial model of Louis Hébert, who in turn draws on the work of A. J. Greimas. My main claim in this essay is that *Never Let Me Go* explores the tensions between love and friendship, or to put it more directly: that Kathy wants to be romantically involved with Tommy yet retain her friendship with Ruth, who also has a romantic interest in him. As will be seen, this contradiction between love and friendship in the story manifests itself at the level of plot, causing the structural function of characters within the narrative to frequently change. On a thematic level, meanwhile, the contradiction between love and friendship is echoed in that Ruth and Kathy as characters represent respectively fantasy and reality, which in this case could perhaps also be interpreted as the deep structure of the story that is, the underlying meaning of the text (S.G Moto). The present essay,
however, will not focus on that aspect. Instead, I will use the actantical model to demonstrate more simply that the structural quest of the narrative can be seen from two perspectives, namely from that of Kathy as *protagonist* of the story, and from that of Kathy as the *narrator* of the same story. My actantial analysis explores how Kathy’s initial desire for finding love with Tommy, in the novel’s later chapters is transformed into a desire to get more time together through “deferral”, which would allow both of them to refrain from donating their vital organs for a limited time. These two desires might at first glance seem like two different goals, but from a structural perspective can be seen as one and the same quest for happiness, divided into two phases. In both phases, the Object of Kathy, the Subject, is to be romantically involved with Tommy. While the quest is never realized, the narrator can be seen to turn this failure to realize her quest as protagonist, into a different kind of quest as narrator. Whereas as protagonist, Kathy could be said to be on a quest for happiness, as narrator she is on a quest for understanding. From a structural point of view, in other words the narrative contains not one but two quests: the protagonist’s quest for happiness, and the narrator’s quest for understanding.

I will argue my case by using the actantial model, developed by French structuralist A. J. Greimas, which is a structuralist tool that helps us investigate plots and relations between characters. More specifically, it allows the critic to break down the big construction of the narrative into smaller parts and to find connections between them, thus demonstrating how the smaller parts are important and crucial to the narrative as a whole (Tyson 209-213). The first and second part of the essay will focus on the novel’s plot and show that the structural functions of the characters shift. The last part of my analysis will look deeper into how the narration affects the plot.

**Structuralism and the Actantial Model**

Structuralists argue that the possibility of perceiving the smaller units of structure, or a structure at all, is due to our way of experiencing differences. One of their arguments is that a lack of ability to describe difference might disable our ability to compare and distinguish differences at all. The need for two different words for female and male would, for instance, not exist if we perceived these genders to be the same. According to structuralists, binary oppositions are thus very useful, since the human mind perceives differences best when binaries are involved (Tyson 213). Furthermore, Tyson explains, “structuralism isn’t interested in what a text means, but in *how* a text means what it means” (Tyson 220).
While structuralism allows for a great variety of focuses and approaches, the critical framework for the present analysis, as mentioned, is the actantial model of Greimas, as explicated by Hébert, which focuses on revealing the structural patterns informing the plots. The model assumes that any plot can be analyzed by the means of three pairs of binary oppositions, set on three different axes: Subject – Object (the axis of desire), Sender – Receiver (the axis of power), and Helper – Opponent (the axis of transmission). The first pair represents the Hero and what the Hero wishes to obtain, which could be either an item or state of being. The second pair is a representation of who sends the Subject for the Object and who benefits from the subject succeeding in obtaining the object. The last pair could be described as the one helping the Subject to actually acquire the Object, whilst the Opponent opposes the Subject. In other words, the Opponent hinders the Subject/Hero from obtaining the Object. These pairs reflect functions that character and/or things play in certain plots and those acting out the functions in question are referred to as actants (Bonnycastle 159).

Analysis

The Different Structural Functions of Characters – Parts A, B & C of the Novel
The actantial model is a tool to investigate the plot and the relations of the characters in novels, as I will now proceed to do in Never Let Me Go. Kathy is the main character and narrator in the Never Let Me Go. The novel starts off in the present time and she recounts what she has been through. She presents herself as a ‘carer’ and later on reveals that she and her friends are clones. The purpose for their existence is simply to be assets for providing non-clones with their vital organs; they donate all organs until they die. The protagonist basically tells a story about her life and the people she has been closest to.

The structure of the novel is separated quite neatly into three parts. The first part, which I call A in this essay, comprises chapters 1 to 9 of the novel and reflects the characters’ time at Hailsham and their age from infants to sixteen. Hailsham is the name of the institution for clones where Kathy grows up with her best friends. The second part, B (chapters 10-17), takes place at the Cottages and the students who live there are from 16 years old. The narrator does not mention if there is a limit to how long one can stay at the Cottages, but leaves herself at age 19. Kathy simply tells Keffers, an adult non-clone person attending them at the Cottages, that she wants to move to the next stage which is to become a Carer. The last part of the book, C (chapters 20-23), is about Kathy being a carer. More precisely, it covers the 11
years she has been working as a carer, concentrating on the last part of that time. It deals with the reunion of the three friends and unsolved questions in the past.

The first part of the plot is depicted early on in the novel. In this part the protagonist functions as the Subject, and her desires are seen mainly from an internal perspective. Throughout the plot, the ultimate goal of Kathy would seem to be to enter a romantic relationship with Tommy, something she ultimately succeeds in doing in the beginning of part C, chapter 20. For this reason, I refer to this outcome as the Subject’s main Object.

The Subject obtains her Object in part C, chapter twenty. The below figure maps how the characters fill different actantial roles in this story.

![Figure 1.1](image)

**Figure 1.1**

My claim is that the most significant part of the plot is shown in Figure 1.1, which as mentioned maps the main set-up for the Subject to obtain the Object. This analysis notably aligns the characters with different actantial categories. In other words, their structural roles shift and change over the course of the narrative. In what follows, I will illustrate when such changes occur, but figure 1.1 provides a brief exposé that reflects the plot in the novel without describing the shifts or relations between the actants. This figure could be looked upon as the final description of all the characters’ positions. That Subject and Opponent occupy the same actantial category is not that uncommon, but described as a “distinctive features of this genre of self-narratives” (Wang & W.Roberts). A possible explanation for such a result seems to be that in such narratives the Hero is also the narrator.

Firstly, the axis of desire reflects the structural Subject of the plot wanting an Object, which in the present case translates into Kathy wanting Tommy. The relationship between these two characters is strong throughout the novel. Kathy’s desire for engaging a romantic
relationship with Tommy is portrayed several times through different episodes. These two characters are linked by love and their feelings seem to be mutual. At two different occasions, the novel suggests that her desire to establish a romantic relationship with Tommy always existed. Kathy plans to have sex with Harry to get rid of her virginity but then suddenly changes her mind: “By then, I was even feeling reasonably confident about it, and began dropping hints to Harry. Everything was going fine and according to plan when Ruth and Tommy split up and it all got confused” (97). Losing her virginity by means of Harry is clearly Kathy’s goal, until she suddenly realizes that she might have a chance to establish a romantic relationship with Tommy. Other students at Hailsham also claim different things, for instance that Kathy is Ruth’s natural successor, implying that Kathy somehow belongs with Tommy. The second incident occurs when the relationship between Ruth and Tommy gets rocky. They are at the verge of breaking up, and Kathy clearly seems to desire to establish a romantic relationship with Tommy. At this point, however, Ruth tells Kathy that Tommy would never consider being with girls that have had sex with others, and Kathy storms off and gives up the Object and her desire vanishes. Structurally speaking, Ruth thus functions as an Opponent to the Subject (Kathy), who is prevented from obtaining her Object once again. Her desire re-establishes itself only when she meets her friends again in part C of the novel when working as a carer.

The second aspect of an actantial analysis of a story is the establishment of the axis of transmission, which involves the Sender and the Receiver and needs some explanation. The axis of desire is in a sense linked to the axis of transmission. The Senders persuade the Subject to desire the Object. There are many incidents in the novel that hint at possible Senders of various kinds. The first Sender, to my mind, initiates or triggers the desire of the Subject. This first Sender is not an actual character, but Kathy’s own guilty consciousness. This can be seen in part A – chapter 1, not at the very beginning of the novel, but very early on. A group of girls – including Kathy – observe and laugh at Tommy getting bullied and this eventually leads to Kathy initiating a conversation with him. Her concerns about him also indicate that she already cares for Tommy at this point since she notices that his favorite shirt is at risk of becoming dirty as a result of him stomping in anger: “maybe I did feel a little stab of pain. What I do remember is that I notice Tommy was wearing the light blue polo shirt he’d got in the Sales… – the one he was so proud of” (8). This memory indicates that the Sender at this point supposedly is the protagonist’s own guilty consciousness. She sees that Tommy’s polo shirt is all covered with mud and initiates a conversation in an attempt to
comfort him: “I started to drift over towards him. I knew this would puzzle the others, but I kept going – even when I heard Ruth’s urgent whisper to me to come back” (11). It is strongly implied that Kathy wants Tommy to feel better and somehow calm him down, as there would be no reason for her to approach him if she did not care for him.

Another way of interpreting the Sender can also be found in part A. The event takes place at Hailsham and Kathy retells the story. Tommy could be interpreted as the Sender since the love between the Subject and the Object is implied to be mutual several times. Through a series of different events Tommy does eventually provide us with some clues about his feelings for Kathy. This is what he says to the protagonist a day after accidently hitting her in the face: “I wouldn’t dream of hitting a girl, and even if I did, I’d never want to hit you” (14). His utterance not only shows how much he regrets it but also indicates that she means something special to him. There are many incidents that prove that Tommy actually confines secrets to Kathy, and he often emphasizes that she is the only one he confides in. These incidents take place in part A and B of the novel. There are a total of three or more such secret-sharing incidents. The first of these is portrayed in chapter 2. The protagonist notices that Tommy is no longer being bullied, and wants to know the reason why. When she finds the right moment to ask Tommy about it, he responds:

’Kath, you’re so nosy. Okay, I suppose there is something. Something that happened. If you want, I’ll tell you.’
‘Well go on then.’
‘I’ll tell you, Kath, but you mustn’t spread it, all right? (Ishiguro 23)

The above passage suggests that Tommy is willing to share his secret about why the bullying stopped if Kathy promises to not spread it or share it with someone else. The second incident that supports the idea of Kathy being special to him occurs in chapter 7, part A. Tommy is scared that he will ‘unzip’, and for that reason says:’”I don’t trust any of the others […] They might deliberately do it so it comes undone in the night”’ (85). Tommy, in other words, only trusts Kathy, and shares his secrets with her. Tommy reveals his theories of the gallery in part B of the novel to her, and when she asks Tommy: “Have you said any of this to Ruth?” He shook his head and went on walking” (175). He confirms that Kathy is the only one who knows about his theory which in turn is his ‘little secret’. These incidents, where Tommy tries to show affection by sharing secrets with Kathy and insisting that she is the only one he trusts, are evidence that support the idea of Tommy possibly functioning as the Sender actant, since
Tommy is in a sense encouraging the Subject to take an interest in the Object, by showing his affection for the Subject. The Sender is usually seen as the one who ultimately benefits from the Subject wanting the Object.

The last Sender is the most important one and it can be inferred towards the end of the novel, where Ruth encourages Kathy strongly to become Tommy's carer during the time Kathy is Ruth’s carer. “She’d come out with something like:/ ‘Have you thought any more about becoming Tommy’s carer? You know you could arrange it, if you wanted to’” (231). Her efforts at bringing Tommy and Kathy together are visible in another instance as well, when Ruth tells Kathy that “‘You and Tommy, you’ve got to try and get a deferral. If it’s you two, there’s got to be a chance. A real chance” (228). It is thus obvious that Ruth plays a significant role in persuading Kathy to try and pursue Tommy in a romantic sense, or to put it in the terms of this structural analysis, that she fills the function of Sender setting the Subject off on her course to achieve her Object.

The axis of power, thirdly, is the one reflecting the relationship between Helper and Opponent. The first Opponent is created by the loyalty the Subject feels towards her best friend. In other words, her biggest opponent is her own willingness to retain her friendship with Ruth. The protagonist admits at one point, “that it was just to do with me and Ruth, and the sort of loyalty she inspired in me in those days” (55). One thing that seems remarkably important to Kathy is that she stays friends with Ruth. Tommy and Ruth’s break-up leaves an opening for Kathy and there is a ‘golden opportunity’ for her as Subject to obtain the Object. However, a request from her best friend Ruth requires the Subject to put her Opponent before her own desire since Kathy wants to continue being friends with Ruth. Kathy tries to persuade Tommy to stay in a relationship with Ruth and she thinks that her persuasiveness is not helping. The couple does reconcile but not due to Kathy’s efforts of bringing them back together again. The Subject’s chances of actually obtaining the Object depend on her relations to Opponent and Helper, and on their relations to each other, as is shown in figure 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3. The reader might acknowledge the fact that Ruth is the biggest obstacle because of the way she is portrayed by the narrator – with very authoritative and dominating traits. But in a deeper sense, the biggest obstacle to Kathy achieving her Object is that she is not willing or able to betray Ruth and thus lose her position as Ruth’s best friend. In other words, the main conflict is internal to the Subject herself. This claim is supported by the incidents where the Subject chooses to side with Ruth instead of Tommy. One of these incidents occurs when Ruth tries to convince Chrissie and Rodney (two veterans at the Cottages) that she knows a
guy from Hailsham who works as a park-keeper. Kathy covers up for Ruth and agrees to lie in order to keep up the façade. ““Someone we knew?”

‘Tommy let’s not go through this again,’ I said. ‘You’ll have your brain tested”” (150). This small excerpt from their conversation proves that Kathy values Ruth’s friendship more than her own desire for the Object, since being mean to Tommy certainly will not help her to establish a romantic relationship with him. The Subject wants both to be romantically involved with Tommy and to maintain her friendship with Ruth, but as the latter is already involved with Tommy, Kathy’s desire thus contains a seemingly irresolvable contradiction.

The second Opponent is Ruth since she also wants her own romantic relationship with Tommy to remain. Ruth’s desire is partly why the internal conflict is created for Kathy, which is a contradiction between love and friendship. Ruth also admits that she tried to get in between Kathy and Ruth. The Opponent prevents the Subject from achieving her Object which is shown in part B of the novel. Ruth tells Kathy that Tommy does not want to be with Kathy since she has slept with others. When the three friends reunite in part C of the novel it is clear that Ruth lies to Kathy in part B: “…even though I was with Tommy, I couldn’t resist doing it with other people sometimes. At least three others when we were at the Cottages” (227). Ruth’s later confession supports the idea of her being an Opponent.

The third Opponent could be interpreted as Tommy since he is in a way preventing Kathy from entering a romantic relationship with him. There are no signs of a concrete no on his side, but just by being in a romantic relationship with Ruth he makes Kathy back off. Tommy resumes the relationship he had with Ruth before their break-up: “That very evening, Tommy and Ruth got back together again…” (109).

There are three different helpers that assist the Subject in obtaining the object. The case is ambiguous here as well, since the Senders are also in a way portrayed as Helpers even though it is only one of the Helpers that actually succeeds and is strong enough to dismantle the Opponent. Kathy tries to persuade Tommy to resume his relationship with Ruth but Tommy strongly indicates that he rather wants to be in a relationship with Kathy. He is, however, quite vague with his wish.

‘I do realise that, Kath. That's exactly why I can't rush back into it with Ruth. We've got to think about the next move really carefully.’ Then he sighed and looked right at me. ‘Like you say, Kath. We're going to be leaving here soon. It's not like a game any more. We've got to think carefully.’
I was suddenly lost for what to say and just sat there tugging away at the clovers. I could feel his eyes on me, but I didn't look up. We might have gone on that way for a while longer, except we were interrupted. (108)

In this instance, then, Tommy tries to help the Subject (Kathy) obtain her Object, but fails due to the resistance of a strong Opponent, a role here enacted by the protagonist herself. She once again values the friendship she has with Ruth more than obtaining the apparent Object of her desire. This indicates that entering into a romantic relationship with Tommy is not the ultimate Object of Kathy as Subject, but that doing so could at the most be seen as a step towards fulfilling her true Object, which – as she and the reader gradually discovers – consists of resolving the contradiction that lies at the heart of the story of her life, namely, that she wants to make love to Tommy and remain best friends with Ruth, even though she is her greatest competitor for his love.

The second possible Helper is Ruth who eventually tries to persuade Kathy to become Tommy’s carer. The three friends reunite after several years apart. They sense that something is different and Ruth apologizes for keeping Tommy and Kathy from becoming a couple. This suggests that she does not just try to help her two friends become a couple, but also openly admits that she had actively prevented their love from flourishing. In other words, it is plainly suggested that before they all left the Cottages she functioned as an Opponent to Kathy’s desire. That she does so only at the point when she is dying could be seen as Ishiguro’s way of dramatizing the novel’s overall message, if you will: to find love, we must also accept the inevitability of death.

The third helper is one that actually succeeds in assisting the Subject with obtaining its Object towards the end of novel. The third Helper is not a specific character, but quite simply time. Time brings the three friends together and sets the course of all their destinies. It is due to time that Ruth passes away and leaves the Subject completely free to persuade her Object.

Above, the actants and the axes of transmission, desire and power have been described. The plot is ongoing until Kathy and Tommy actually end up together. As the events are not presented in the order they occurred in Kathy’s life, her narrative can be confusing, so below I have attempted to clarify the events by sorting them chronologically. The focus in the below figure is on where roles shift. The way the structural function of the characters shifts throughout the story is easier to distinguish when one takes note of where the positions are established in the novel. *Never Let Me Go* is structured in three larger parts,
corresponding to Hailsham (childhood), The Cottages (adolescence), and life as carer/donor (adulthood and death).

| Sender (1/Kathy) | chapter 1 (childhood, Hailsham) |
| Sender (2/Tommy) | chapter 2 (childhood, Hailsham) |
| Sender (3/Ruth) | chapter 18 & 19 (When Kathy is Ruth’s carer and on verge of completing.) |
| Helper (1/Tommy) | chapter 2 (childhood, Hailsham) |
| Helper (2/Ruth) | chapter 18 & 19 (When Kathy is Ruth’s carer and on verge of completing) |
| Helper (3/Time) | throughout the novel |
| Opponent (1/Ruth) | (Starts at Hailsham, up to years after the Cottages) |
| Opponent (2/Kathy) | Shown in chapter 8 & 9 (Starts at Hailsham and lasts until Kathy becomes a carer) |

The incidents portrayed in the novel do not necessarily happen in chronological order. The chart above is an attempt to clarify when certain incidents take place. When the events occur is an important aspect since this allows the reader to identify when and where the structural function of characters change. As I have already suggested above, the different Helpers in the novel do not have so much power. The exception is Ruth, who manages to help the Subject obtain the Object. This could be interpreted in two ways:
1) Ruth encourages Kathy to become Tommy’s carer and become a couple with him.
2) Time limits Ruth’s time and she completes and leaves the world. Kathy’s strongest opponent is wiped out.

The second interpretation is the most accurate one in terms of what happens. Kathy never leaves Ruth the moment Ruth suggests the idea – specifically the idea of Kathy and Tommy getting together as a couple. She considers becoming Tommy’s carer but does not act until Ruth has passed away. The way the structural function of the characters change over the course of the story is shown when the three friends enter early adulthood. The moment Ruth admits her fault she automatically removes herself as an Opponent and her structural role shifts to Helper and Sender instead. The other Opponent – Kathy herself – also dissolves when Ruth passes away, since Kathy becomes an Opponent to her own desire for Tommy as a consequence of her conflicting desire to retain her friendship with Ruth.
The Consequence of an Obtained Object in *Never Let Me Go* – Part C of the Novel

The second part of the plot also reflects the protagonist’s quest, and could thus be seen as – an extended version of *Figure 1.1*. The below figure, however, maps the actantial relations of at a late stage of the plot, when Kathy has already entered into a relation with Tommy. As mentioned in the introduction, her desire to obtain a deferral with Tommy in the later chapters could at first glance be interpreted as a new quest. Structurally, however, Kathy’s desire remains the same: her Object remains happiness through a romantic relationship with Tommy.

This mapping of what characters belong to what actant category is based on my interpretation of the story, but it is also supported by Patrick Query, who phrases it this way: “Now that they are older, this provisional order of Tommy’s – art reveals your soul, your soul reveals real love, real love can get you deferral – keeps him and Kathy on track for the story’s later stages” (163).

The axis of transmission is established after a conversation with Ruth, who is also considered as the Sender in this part of the plot, where the quest, as mentioned, is transformed into remaining a couple with Tommy. The Sender is introduced in that position at a much later point of the novel. A re-union of the three best friends, Ruth, Tommy and Kathy, occurs when they meet as friends for the first time since the relationship between Ruth and Tommy ended. Both the protagonist’s friends are donors while she herself remains a carer. Ruth wants Kathy and Tommy to remain a couple since she feels guilt over preventing them from being with each other in both part A and B of the novel. This is the reason she
encourages them to pursue a deferral since this would supposedly give the couple more time.
One of the conversations leads to Ruth apologizing to both Tommy and Kathy:

’That was the worst thing I did,’ she said again. ‘I’m not even asking you to forgive me about that. God, I’ve said all this in my head so many times, I can’t believe I’m really doing it. It should have been you two. I’m not pretending I didn’t always see that. Of course I did, as far back as I can remember. But I kept you apart. I’m not asking you to forgive me for that. That’s not what I’m after just now. What I want is for you to put it right. Put right what I messed up for you.’ … ‘Kathy, listen,’ Ruth said. ‘You and Tommy, you’ve got to try and get a deferral. If it’s you two, there’s got to be a chance. A real chance.’ (228)

This passage also suggests that Ruth wants her friends to pursue a deferral. This conversation also depicts Ruth (the Sender and Helper) giving Kathy (the Subject) an address where they supposedly can apply for a deferral. The receiver is the Subject (Kathy) who could thus continue being romantically involved with Tommy.

The axis of desire, portrayed in Figure 1.2, is established as a result of Kathy (the Subject) already having obtained the Object. Figure 1.1 describes the Object as ‘to be romantically involved with Tommy’ and when this is achieved, it is transformed into ‘to prolong romantic involvement with Tommy.’ In other words, the Figure 1.2 is a consequence of the success in obtaining the Object in Figure 1.1.

Some specific incidents in Never Let Me Go strengthen this reading. “For the first few weeks after I arrived, we hardly brought up Madame or that conversation with Ruth in the car that day. But the very fact of my having become his carer served as a reminder that we weren’t there to mark time. And so too, of course, did Tommy’s animal drawings”(235). Mark time is a phrase that could be described as “to do nothing, or to make no progress, because you are waiting for something to happen” (Macmillan Dictionary 922). The protagonist’s desire is evident since she emphasizes that they are short on time. This is highlighted again a few pages after the previous quote, when Kathy says: “Perhaps we’d have been happy if things had stayed that way for a lot longer; if we could have whiled away more afternoons chatting, having sex, reading aloud and drawing. But with the summer drawing to an end, with Tommy getting stronger, and the possibility of notice for his fourth donation growing ever more distinct, we knew we couldn’t keep putting things off indefinitely” (238).
The axis of power which reflects the relation between Helper and Opponent is important since which of these two opposing functions is the stronger one determines whether there is a happy or tragic ending. As figure 1.2 shows, one may identify at least three possible Helpers, that is, means for Kathy to achieve her goal of prolonging her relationship with Tommy. The first Helper is a piece of information from Ruth, which is a means for Kathy and Tommy to apply for deferrals since it describes where Madame — a person who often went to Hailsham to collect the students’ art — lives.

The second Helper could be deferral — since this will supposedly provide Kathy and Tommy more time together as a couple. The whole idea of deferral originated from part B of the novel, when the three friends lived in the Cottages. A veteran says: "We heard something else, something about Hailsham students. What they were saying was that some Hailshams students in the past, in special circumstances, had managed to get a deferral. That this was something you could do if you were a Hailsham student. You could ask for your donations to be put back three, even four years (150). Deferral in turn is related to the third helper.

The third Helper is of two parts; Tommy’s theory of the Gallery and his art. The first part of the second Helper could be phrased as Tommy’s theory of the Gallery. Lucy (a guardian in Hailsham) tells Tommy that his art does actually matter, despite having told him in part A of the novel that it does not. However, Tommy in part B of the novel present his theory to Kathy: “Suppose it's true, what the veterans are saying. Suppose some special arrangement has been made for Hailsham students. Suppose two people say they're truly in love, and they want extra time to be together. Then you see, Kath, there has to be a way to judge if they're really telling the truth” (173). His theory, in other words, is that the art that has been put away actually is evidence of their love for one another. The other part of the second Helper is the pictures that Tommy has worked on in the Cottages, in part B of the novel. These pictures are Tommy’s evidence of his love for Kathy and he wants to bring the best ones to convince Madame (who is responsible for ‘The Gallery’) in part C of the novel.

‘If we're really going,” he said, “we'll have to decide about the animals. You know, choose the best ones to take along. Maybe six or seven. We'll have to do it quite carefully.’ (240)

The passage above shows that Tommy thinks of his art as evidence of his love for Kathy. As mentioned before, the power balance between Opponent and Helper determines if the Subject
obtains the Object. In the figure 1.2 above, I have categorized society as the Opponent, since society does not approve of clones getting deferrals.

**The Ongoing Quest, Subject Disguised As Narrator – Part A, B & C of the Novel**

In the figures of the actantial relations discussed above, I have shown the protagonist’s quest, which relates to Kathy as protagonist in her own story. Figure 1.3 below, in contrast, provides an actantial analysis of the novel from the perspective of Kathy as, narrator. As such, the figure no longer suggest what Kathy hoped to achieve when Ruth and Tommy were alive, but what she hopes to achieve by telling the story of her life – to get it straight, as she puts it.

![Figure 1.3](image)

In this version of the actantial model, the axis of transmission is established early on in the novel. The Sender is introduced in part A, chapter 1 of the novel. Kathy works as a carer for a donor who makes her recall the past. The donor wants Kathy to tell him about Hailsham, the memory of which she has tried to suppress over the years: “There have been times over the years when I’ve tried to leave Hailsham behind, when I’ve told myself I shouldn’t look back so much. But then came a point when I just stopped resisting. It had to do with this particular donor I had once, in my third year as carer…” (4-5). The donor’s hunger for information about Hailsham makes Kathy think back on her past. As narrator, Kathy seems aware of a reader and she hints that the audience she is writing to is that of other clones. The implied reader, it would seem, is in no other clones that are not from Hailsham. There are two examples in the novel that support this supposition. The first example is when she explains that: “I don’t know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we had to have some…” (Ishiguro 13). The second example makes it even clearer that the narrator directs her story to
other clones: “I’m sure somewhere in your childhood, you too had an experience like ours that day; similar if not in the actual details, then inside, in the feelings” (36). The second example is a representation of the narrator’s assumptions of how other clones feels when discovering that there are people that shiver of fear through the sheer existence of clones.

The axis of desire reflects Kathy’s wish to retell her life story with her friends: “What I really wanted, I suppose, was to get straight all the things that happened between me and Tommy and Ruth after we grew up and left Hailsham” (36). In other words, the quest as represented in figure 1.3 is quite different to the way it was represented in figures 1.1 and 1.2, but then, 1.3 depicts the narrator’s desire which is in a way the developed version of that of the protagonist. The previous figures (1.1 and 1.2) have examined Kathy as the protagonist of her own story whereas figure 1.3 models the point of view of the narrator. Figure 1.3 can thus be seen as a model of how the story is a means for Kathy to go through her life story. Her desire also reflects what the author intended the novel to be, as I mentioned briefly in the introduction: “what we do when we realize we haven’t got that much longer, what are the things that get very important to finish properly, and when we look back, what are the things that seem to be the really worthwhile things?” (Faber & Faber).

On the axis of power, the narrator’s memory, Ruth and Tommy function as Helpers, but these three actants notably are also included in the Opponent category. The Narrator is both considered as a Helper and Opponent because most of what she recalls helps her to retell her story, but some of her recollections are unreliable and may even be incorrect, as she herself makes plain: “This was all a long time ago so I might have some of it wrong; but my memory of it is that my approaching Tommy…” (13).

Kathy’s quest as narrator does affect the plot since she tries to understand what happened in her past with her friends. By retelling her own story, the Object of finding happiness with Tommy that she entertained as protagonist, is thus transformed into the Object of understanding and coming to terms with why things turned out the way they did. In other words, the novel has two levels that are significant to the narrative: the protagonist’s perspective and the narrator’s perspective.

**Conclusion**

I have in my analysis shown how the tension of love and friendship is portrayed by using the actantial model. Not only is Kathy unable to acquire her Object due to an actual rival (Ruth), that rival is also her best friend, which complicate her own desire to be romantically involved
with Tommy. This tension of love and friendship also contributes to the complexity of the novel and the structural functions of characters. As we have seen, the characters in consequence fill different actantial roles over the course of the story, and depending upon whether the story is seen from the perspective of Kathy’s as protagonist or narrator, as is shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 (Protagonist), or Figure 1.3 (Narrator). In other words, the desire is different from the narrator’s and protagonist’s perspective. The last finding is simply that an actantial analysis such as the one I have been using here, may perhaps also help us understand why Ishiguro’s novel reads like a realistic one, despite including science fiction elements. The actantial model highlights and emphasizes the realistic emotions and situations while the set-up is in fact unrealistic, as Ishiguro himself states: “the sci-fi speculative surface of the story was the last piece…almost like a device…” (Film Independent Interview).
Works cited


