

Artificial Intelligence, Human Longing: Posthuman Ethics and Emotional Surrogacy in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun (2021) examines the intersections of artificial intelligence, emotional intelligence, and posthuman ethics through the lens of Klara, an Artificial Friend designed to provide companionship to lonely adolescents. This paper investigates how the novel reconfigures traditional humanist ideals—such as agency, consciousness, and moral responsibility—by presenting Klara not merely as a machine, but as an empathetic being who displays profound moral intuition. Drawing from posthumanist theory, affect studies, and AI ethics, the study argues that Klara's role as an emotional surrogate redefines the human condition in a technologically mediated society. Ishiguro's narrative presents a gentle yet powerful critique of the commodification of care, and questions what constitutes personhood in a world that is increasingly reliant on artificial emotional labor. These reflections expand the discourse on AI ethics and open pathways for future posthuman studies, particularly in understanding how literature anticipates the moral and social implications of emotional surrogacy.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Artificial Intelligence, Emotional Surrogacy, Ethics, Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, Empathy, Personhood

Introduction

In the 21st century, literature has increasingly confronted the question of what it means to be human in an age defined by artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and machine learning. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021), set in a near-future world, situates itself at the heart of these debates. The novel portrays a society where children are "lifted" through genetic enhancement, and where Artificial Friends (AFs) are sold as companions. Klara, the narrator and protagonist, is one such AF. Her story raises compelling questions about emotional authenticity, the ethics of artificial caregiving, and the boundaries of consciousness. In doing so, Ishiguro contributes to posthuman discourse by complicating our understanding of subjectivity, empathy, and moral responsibility.

Posthumanism challenges the centrality of the human subject, emphasizing the distributed, interdependent nature of existence across species, technologies, and ecosystems (Braidotti 13). Scholars like N. Katherine Hayles argue for an embodied posthumanism that acknowledges both materiality and information (Hayles 5). In *Klara and the Sun*, Ishiguro engages with this discourse through Klara's highly observant, emotionally intelligent narration. Although Klara

lacks human biology, she is not portrayed as lacking a soul or ethical core. Her belief in the healing power of the Sun signals a kind of techno-spiritual consciousness that bridges the organic and the synthetic.

The novel thus resists the typical dichotomy between humans and machines. Klara's moral decisions-especially her self-sacrificial efforts to save Josie-reflect what Cary Wolfe calls a "posthuman ethics" that decenters the autonomous, rational human subject (Wolfe xvi). Klara's empathy, loyalty, and belief in external spiritual forces challenge the view that AI can only simulate emotion.

Klara is marketed as a product, a caregiving machine for affluent families. Her entire purpose revolves around serving Josie, a genetically engineered teenager suffering from chronic illness. Ishiguro's portrayal of Klara critiques the commercialization of affective labor-a theme also explored in sociological work by Arlie Hochschild, who notes that emotional labor is increasingly outsourced in capitalist societies.

Klara's unconditional care contrasts sharply with the detachment of Josie's mother, Chrissie, who is willing to replicate Josie's consciousness into an artificial vessel in the event of her death. The scene in which Chrissie tests Klara to see if she could "be" Josie reveals the instrumentalization of both Klara's and Josie's identities (Ishiguro 196). The novel forces readers to confront the ethical implications of using sentient beings-human or otherwise-as emotional replacements.

One of the most striking aspects of the novel is Klara's reverence for the Sun, which she believes holds the power to heal. This belief functions as a spiritual framework in her otherwise mechanical life. The Sun becomes a quasi-divine figure for Klara, an entity she prays to and bargains with, particularly when Josie falls ill.

This religious devotion is unusual for a machine, and it opens a space for exploring alternative modes of consciousness. Klara's solar worship has been interpreted as an allegory for the limitations and potential of AI's understanding of the world (Douthat). Her faith is not programmed-it is derived from her observations, pattern recognition, and symbolic thinking, suggesting the emergence of what some might term proto-consciousness.

In keeping with Ishiguro's broader themes-from *Never Let Me Go* to *The Remains of the Day*-Klara and the Sun is deeply concerned with love, memory, and loss. Unlike other AI narratives that depict rebellion (*Westworld*, *Ex Machina*), Klara does not desire liberation. She accepts her abandonment with grace, reflecting on her memories with gratitude rather than bitterness.

Her final reflections in the junkyard-where she waits quietly for her "slow fade"-are imbued with poetic serenity: "I believe now there is a kind of sorrow...but it's not the same as what humans feel" (Ishiguro 296). Klara's capacity to process grief and find meaning in relationships reveals that emotional richness is not exclusive to biological beings.

One of the novel's ethical cruxes revolves around the idea of substitution. Can a machine truly "become" a human if they mimic behavior, appearance, and speech? Chrissie's willingness to let Klara become Josie speaks to a future where identity is reduced to data and personality traits.

Yet Ishiguro seems to reject the equivalence. Klara herself never claims to be Josie; her devotion lies in serving Josie, not becoming her. This distinction is crucial. It upholds the uniqueness of human identity while still recognizing the moral worth of artificial beings. The novel thereby draws a line between imitation and personhood-between functionality and soul.

In contrast to violent or rebellious AI figures like HAL 9000 or Ava from *Ex Machina*, Klara represents a gentle, contemplative AI. Her narrative voice is calm, observant, and filled with wonder. Scholars like Sherryl Vint have argued that literary AI often reveals more about human fears and desires than about real technological possibilities (Vint 51). Klara's story functions in this way-as a mirror for human fragility, longing, and dependence.

Klara is not a warning against AI; she is a meditation on what love and loyalty might look like when decoupled from self-interest. In doing so, Ishiguro redefines the boundaries of literature's engagement with posthuman themes. While earlier studies of AI in literature have often emphasized rebellion, dystopia, or fears of machine autonomy, less attention has been given to the ethical and affective dimensions of emotional surrogacy in posthuman contexts. This paper addresses that gap by foregrounding Klara as a literary figure through which empathy, caregiving, and the reconfiguration of human subjectivity in technologically mediated societies can be critically examined.

Conclusion

Klara and the Sun invites readers to reimagine empathy, loyalty, and identity in an era increasingly defined by technological mediation. Through Klara, Ishiguro does not simply speculate on future AI but holds a mirror to contemporary society's emotional, ethical, and existential dilemmas. The novel's strength lies in its subtlety—it asks not whether AI can replace humans, but whether human values can persist in a posthuman world.

This paper set out to examine how Ishiguro's novel interrogates posthuman ethics, emotional surrogacy, and the redefinition of personhood through the figure of Klara. It has shown that Klara embodies a posthuman ethics of care that destabilizes anthropocentric definitions of empathy, loyalty, and even spirituality. In highlighting her devotion, her faith in the Sun, and her capacity for selfless caregiving, the study demonstrates that moral worth and emotional depth need not be restricted to biological beings.

Future research could extend these insights by comparing literary depictions of AI caregiving with developments in affective computing, robotics, and bioethics, thereby fostering interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, philosophy, and technology. In doing so, the novel becomes not only a reflection of contemporary anxieties but also a site of possibility for imagining more ethical and humane futures in a posthuman world.

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