



ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND ETHICAL CHOICES IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *KLARA AND THE SUN*

HUI LIU¹, JIAOJIAO WANG²

¹Associate Professor and MA supervisor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China. Email:1491165683@qq.com.

²MA Candidate, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China. Email:Wangjiaojiao565@163.com.



Article info

Article Received:04/10/2023

Article Accepted:28/10/2023

Published online:31/10/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.4.40](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.4.40)

Abstract

Klara and the Sun, is narrated in the first person by Klara, an AI robot, and focuses on the numerous ethical issues confronting humanity in the age of artificial intelligence. The ultimate goal of portraying Klara is not only to understand human beings, but also to touch upon the urgent proposition of whether robots can replace human beings. This paper analyzes the phenomenon of human machinization and robots humanization, and dissects the ethical dilemmas and choices of different characters from the lens of ethical literary criticism. At the same time, it explores the imbalance of human ethics as well as the emptiness of spirituality in the context of artificial intelligence, and appeals for the return of the normal ethical order.

Keywords: *Klara and the Sun*, ethical literary criticism, ethical dilemmas, ethical choices

1. Introduction

Sir Kazuo Ishiguro (1954-) is a Japanese-born British novelist, screenwriter, and short-story writer who is widely regarded as one of the most acclaimed contemporary fiction writers in the English-speaking world. Kazuo Ishiguro has produced eight novels, one collection of short stories, numerous screenplays and short stories. *Klara and the Sun* is a brand-new novel, released in March of 2021. It is a dystopian science fiction novel that received the Booker Prize nomination in the same year. The novel is set in the not-too-distant future in the United States and is narrated by the protagonist Klara, an android designed to provide companionship for children. The whole plot chronicles her adventures as a "Artificial Friend" (AF) to a young, unwell girl

whose genetics have been modified for improved academic achievement.

Noteworthy is the fact that Ishiguro is recognized for his explorations of technology development and human ethical ideals. In *A Pale View of Hills*, he constructs the characters' ethical identities and ethical choices through memories, implying a deep meditation on war and individual ethical responsibility. Then in *Never Let Me Go*, he emphasizes on the identity creation of clones, expressing humanistic concern for the life strength of the marginalized people. What's more, he uses Klara's existential predicament as the main thread in *Klara and the Sun* to prompt readers' thought on the ethical orientation of the contemporary biotechnology research.

Independent of his cultural background and immigration status, Ishiguro is able to ponder sensitively and calmly on the ethical quandaries that humans face, and to use his works to bridge the link between imagination and reality, the past and the future. From the initial introduction of the works to the succeeding thematic study, narrative approaches, post-humanism, psychology, defamiliarization, space creation, and spiritual ecology, the research perspectives have likewise evolved with the times. Simonetti argues that “the novel articulates a complex disciplinary system in which the technological Other is constantly reified by both the human gaze and internalized practices of self-discipline (1). Santiago and Dominique investigate human worries in the face of new technologies from the perspective of transhumanism and attempt to critique the problems such as human nature and existence in the novel. Shang Biwu addresses the central topic: Can machines replace humans? He emphasizes that “its solution is not just a scientific choice, but rather an ethical one” (Can machines replace humans, 29). According to Zhou Wenjing, the novel “helps readers deepen the understanding of the importance of keeping our body and mind intact in a post-human world” (152).

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) in recent years has led some to believe that AI would eventually replace humans, prompting widespread concern. Kazuo Ishiguro then focuses on this social hotspot, exaggerating the complex emotions of humans who love and fear artificial intelligence, debating the benefits and drawbacks of scientific, technological, and medical advancements, and revealing the relationship between human and robot ethics, thus reflecting the many challenges that humans face in the age of artificial intelligence.

One of the main concerns of ethical literary criticism is how to reconcile the interaction between technology and human ethics in the process of the current high development of society. From the perspective of ethical literary critics, this paper seeks to investigate the ethical dilemmas generated by the chaos of ethical order and to assess the many ethical choices made by humans and robots. It urges

humans to reconsider the ethical relationship between humans and robots, to resolve the ethical quandaries, and to make ethical decisions that are consistent with societal evolution.

2. Human Mechanization -- Disordered Ethical Relations

According to ethical literary criticism, all ethical dilemmas in literary texts tend to originate in connection to ethical identity (Nie 26). There are numerous categories of ethical identity, such as blood relatives identity, ethical ties identity, moral code identity, collective and social relations identity, and professional identity. The person has an ethical identity as a result of the linkage of social relations, and is constrained by multiple identities, which also affect his responsibilities, obligations, and ability to make ethical choices. If a person attempts to break free from the constraints of the ethical identity, he will disrupt the initial equilibrium and fall into an ethical dilemma, resulting in the disorder of the ethical relations and eventually, an ethical tragedy.

2.1 Genetic Lifting Program

Ishiguro addresses the challenges brought on by the quick advancements in science and technology in the novel. Due to the rapid growth of medical research and technology, all elite class families will not hesitate to subject their children to AGE genetic lifting. A type of genetic modification known as “lifting” is a made-up phrase that describes a procedure carried out in infancy that purports to make children smarter but has major potential adverse effects, such as chronic sickness and even death. For instance, the genetic lifting program caused the death of Chrissy’s elder daughter, Sal, and her second daughter, Josie, became unwell as well. Even still, the elite -- represented by Chrissy -- remain fixated on giving their kids an advantage so they can gain an increase in intelligence and access to universities. Lifting was possibly inspired by a real-life procedure known as “Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats” (CRISPR) gene editing, which raises ethical concerns regarding the prospect of altering human embryos.

The precise mechanisms of lifting are never fully explained, but probably the most crucial fact is that the majority of universities only admit kids who have been lifted, giving the lifted Josie far more possibilities than the unlifted Rick, despite the latter's intelligence and potential as a gifted engineer. Rick from a single parent family, grew up with Josie as a childhood friend. "I don't belong here. This is a meeting for lifted kids" (77), says Rick. He is looked down upon by the other parents and marginalized from the promoted kids due to his unlifted condition.

In addition, Rick, who has not been lifted, also has little hope of attending university, with the exception of Atlas Brookings, the only institution that will take him. "You're super-intelligent and I'm an idiot kid who hasn't even been lifted" (130). The difference between lifted children and those who are unlifted is not only intelligence, but also the fact that the genetic lifting program tightly separates the children into class to which they belong, separating the elite from the underclass. It is also unethical for a bright youngster like Rick to be denied the same social position and educational chances as lifted children, and to constantly feel inferior and unable to enter the upper class.

Rick has always been hostile to lifting. However, his mother, Miss Helen, has always been committed to his lifting, even going so far as to track down her former lover Vance, who ends up holding a powerful position at the college Atlas Brookings. Actually, he is still stuck in the past and usually utilizes their encounters to air old complaints with Miss Helen. The scientific human is his scientific option. The ethical human who is unable to optimize science is doomed to obsolescence, which might exacerbate modern human's fears about himself and science.

2.2 Mr. Capaldi's AF Portrait

The Mother has hired Mr. Capaldi, a man who resides in the large city, to create a "portrait" of Josie. The portrait is actually a lifelike Artificial Friend, called as Klara, who will learn how to be Josie so that she may take over the body in the event of Josie's death.

Although Mr. Capaldi views himself as a rationalist, his pursuit of the continuity plan is irrational. According to him, the human kernel is not unique, thus anything, including the heart, is transferrable and reproducible. Many characters, including Father Paul and Melania Housekeeper, suspect Mr. Capaldi of being a pervert. In the end, Mr. Capaldi does not appear to be a pervert. However, in his effort to advance Artificial Friend technology, he may have disregarded a number of crucial ethical issues that arise when attempting to create an artificial version of a living individual.

According to Nie Zhenzhao, an ethical question is the inducement of ethical conflicts and the premise of ethical choices (266). Ethical questions such as the genetic lifting program and Mr. Capaldi's AF Portrait, both of which are practiced by people in the novel, break ethical taboos. Human beings, who should be the most "humane", are becoming increasingly mechanical and apathetic as technology advances.

3. Robots Humanization -- Ethical Anxieties

Ishiguro examines our fast changing society through the eyes of a singular narrator, Klara, in order to answer the fundamental question: what does it mean to love? Klara, who has no human flaws, has the purest and most sincere goodwill while being more human than human beings. Her experience serves as a wake-up call for future bioscience trends, encouraging humanity to carefully examine the variety of ethical challenges that come with technology.

3.1 Strained Human-Machine Relationships

Klara was overcome with longing for the outside world, the RPO building, and everyone wandering outside the store window. The store manager compliments Klara on her intelligence as a B2 type droid. "Klara, you're quite remarkable...You notice and absorb so much" (14). In comparison to her partner Rosa, she constantly wished to see more of the outside world, in all its glory. Finally, she awaited the arrival of Josie, hoping that she would drive her home. "I will come back soon. We will talk more...you will not go away, right?" (18). Despite Josie's repeated assurances that she will take Klara

home, the latter is still lost inside after the former's departure. She eagerly anticipates going to Josie's house and being with her while she waits in silence for the girl to return.

Despite her desire for the outside world, Klara harbors an inner fear of human beings. She worries that Josie will never come back and that she will be abandoned and cast out by them. The housekeeper, Melania, is skeptical of Klara when she first arrives at home and fears that Klara may replace her. What's more, Melania also refers to her as "AF", which seems to remind Klara that she is nothing more than a cold robot and that she will never be human or fit into the human circle. For Josie's mother, Klara is the future replacement for her daughter if she passes away. There is no doubt that Klara is destined to be rejected if Josie survives for she was regarded as a bionic human without feelings and the latter's successor from the start. While for Josie, Klara is solely an AI buddy in her eyes. Rick is her only friend. "You're my AF. That's different. But Rick, well, we're going to spend our lives together" (54). Josie, however, is all Klara has.

Her mother, for a change, mainly invites Klara out on the trip to Morgan's Falls. Klara is glad that they are treating her like a human being and accepting her gradually. However, Josie starts to distance Klara and treats her significantly colder following the excursion to Morgan's Falls. Klara's nervousness is exacerbated by the family's indifference, and the human-machine relationship becomes more tense, undermining Klara's resolution to fit in with the family.

Klara's identity has fluctuated, whether she is the regular B2 robot working at the store, Josie's AF friend, or Josie's continuation. Nevertheless, she has never been able to integrate into human society or get into the heart of Josie's family. The tension between humans and robots has significantly increased as a result of how she has been treated, which has been more likened to a sensitive and intelligent robot than a family member. Klara never understands why she cannot get into the family's hearts, and she fears being abandoned by humans even more, which heightens her ethical anxiety.

3.2 Passive Substitution

Klara is a B2 droid that possesses all the positive traits of a human, including the ability to reason and judge with a strong awareness of her surroundings. The human world's apathy does not make her lonely and resentful; on the contrary, she is a highly ethically evolved robot figure. She takes care of Josie's emotional needs, and aspires to remain a constant member of the family. However, Klara is ultimately a robot and will never succeed in gaining the favor of Josie's family. What's worse, she is constantly faced with the dilemma of being replaced and abandoned.

On the one hand, a B2 kind of robot cannot be compared to a B3 robot due to the rapid turnover of robotics. B2 robots will eventually be forgotten as B3 robots take their place. Besides, "But more often than not, the child never comes back. Or worse, the child comes back and ignores the poor AF who's waited, and instead chooses another" (35). The store manager's remarks cause Klara, who is waiting for Josie to drive her home, to realize that she will most certainly never return and that any AF may take her place. On the other hand, her mother's selfish and suffocating love forces Klara to learn as much as she can about Josie and try imitating her sometimes. She goes from being a companion and imitator to being Josie's replacement. And the companion robot, dedicated to removing loneliness, does not want Josie to die. Additionally, the mother had urged Josie to purchase the B3 robot rather than Klara at first. Any B3 could have taken Klara's position if it were not for Josie's insistence and her extraordinary ability to emulate insights.

The well-known "Three Laws of Robotics" by Isaac Asimov state that "a robot may not injure a human being or allow a human being to come to harm, that a robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law, and that a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws" (27). Klara has gone beyond these three laws by purposefully making ethical choices that maximize altruism. Unfortunately, she has to become Josie's continuation of the plan of Josie's mother and Mr.

Capaldi. Klara explains her perspective of love at the end of her life: "There was something very special, but it wasn't inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her" (269).

4. The Sphinx Factor and Ethical Choice

In ancient Greek mythology, there was a monster known as the Sphinx, whose gorgeous face concealed a lion's body. As a result, it became a symbol of evil -- a demonic monster sent by God to destroy humanity. Nie, on the other hand, has given it a fresh meaning in the realm of ethical literary criticism, which he calls the "Sphinx Factor". Despite having the face of human and the body of an animal, the Sphinx is a beast by nature. The Sphinx Factor, which comprises of the "human factor" and the "animal factor", is then utilized to distinguish between humans and animals. Humans developed from apes to humans via natural selection and survival of the fittest, resulting in a higher "animal factor". What is formed through ethical choice is the "human factor". Thus, the organic synthesis of the two achieves a true sense of man. They compete with each other, and when the proportion of "human factor" is large, humans are decent and righteous. Otherwise, humans are dreadful and cruel.

According to Nie's description in *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, natural choice and ethical choice are the theoretical basis of ethical literary criticism (1). Ethical choice, in general, refers to a method of problem solving when human is confronted with ethical perplexity, ethical conflict, or ethical dilemma. It ethically resolves the dilemma of human's identity, not only by separating humans from animals, but also by identifying their identity in terms of values such as responsibility, duty, and morality. Thus it is believed that the ethical choice progressively transforms the savage into a moral man ruled by reason. Chrissy, Mr. Capaldi, Father Paul, and Klara each have their own ethical choices in the narrative, from which we can see love and selfishness, reason and impulse entwined inside each character.

4.1 Kinship Ethics and Technological Continuity

The Swedish Academy holds that three themes -- time, memory, and self-delusion -- are intertwined in Kazuo Ishiguro's literary works. After the death of her oldest daughter, Sal, due to a genetic modification, Chrissy is no longer able to handle the trauma of Josie's approaching death. The mother has been leading a delusional life, attempting to make Klara a continuation of Josie. She is the one who is most deeply entangled in the ethical minefield, and ends up having to make a total of four agonizing and difficult moral choices. In the first place, she chooses genetic enhancement twice in the social environment of scientific hegemony at the risk of losing her daughter for the benefit of social standing and educational opportunities. Thus, when Sal and Josie become unwell as a result of gene augmentation, she chooses to carry out the continuation program twice, with "Sal doll" continuing Sal and Klara continuing Josie. These four choices are clearly against the ethical order. Nie Zhenzhao points out that the formation of ethical taboos is the product of human ethical choices (89). Her four ethical choices not only violate the ethical taboo of "daughterslaying", as she sacrifices her two daughters to the god of death, but also touches the ethical taboo of the human-machine relationship, intensifying the conflict and anxiety between humans and robots.

In each ethical decision, the mother's "animal factor" triumphs over the "human factor", killing her daughter and robbing Klara of her right to freedom while displaying an undying love for her daughter. However, in the fourth ethical choice, she is morally and ethically judged, and the "human factor" is assaulted. "Maybe Paul's right. Maybe this whole thing's been a mistake...It didn't work with Sal, why will it work with Josie" (185)? She doubts about Mr. Capaldi's assurances and the continuation program's ability to keep Josie with her indefinitely. While arguing with Josie's father, Paul, she realizes she is acting unethically. "There are always ethical choices around any work. That's true, whether we get paid for it or we don't" (181). She wrestles with moral conundrums, and ultimately, spurred by the "animal factor". She opts for the immoral continuation procedure, hoping to clone her daughter and keep her as a companion for all time.

Her maternal love is hence intense and self-centered.

Mr. Capaldi is the archetypal transhumanist and ardent seeker of technical improvement. He sees human heart as nothing more than a superstition ready to be destroyed by science and arithmetic, completely trusting in the boundless possibilities given by technological and genetic enhancements. "The new Josie won't be an imitation. She really will be Josie. A continuation of Josie...I do believe it. With everything I'm worth, I believe it" (185). Nothing in Josie's kernel is unique, and technical progress has demonstrated that everything in the world is replaceable and transferable. Technology has demonstrated that everything in the world is interchangeable and transferable; even Josie's kernel can be duplicated.

He is the maniac of continuity program, who constructed a bionic human who looks exactly like Josie in order to complete her continuity. His "animal factor" outweighs his "human factor"; hence his infatuation with AI technology causes him to nearly lose his human temperature. While it is appropriate to revere technology, he ignores the ethical questions that arise from the usage of AI and violates the ethical taboo of bionic humans attempting to supplant normal humans. Human existence is no longer natural; rather, it is a product of biotechnology and artificial intelligence technology. Genetic modification technology enables life's evolution to diverge from the course of natural evolution, which also causes us to consider the uniqueness and distinctiveness of our human being in the midst of biotechnology and artificial intelligence development.

4.2 Ethical Reflection and Human Subjectivity

Paul, Josie's father, makes sporadic appearances in the novel but should not be disregarded. His adamant objection is what makes Mr. Capaldi's continuing program have to be cut short. Although artificial intelligence has supplanted him as an engineer, he is upbeat. Despite his helplessness, he dares to confront modern society and technological advancements. Paul interrupts Mr. Capaldi's experiment and touches his heart with an ethical reflection on a series of occurrences. Paul

regards Josie as one-of-a-kind and unrepeatable. No matter how much Josie's appearance and movements Klara imitated, the heart can never be learned. The heart is like a set of dolls, seemingly simple but complex on account of how many dolls contained inside cannot be predicted. Even though Mr. Capaldi transforms Klara into another Josie through technological modifications, there is always a place inside that is unreachable. It is uniquely Josie's own, containing her own memories and perceptions of the world.

The father is driven by the "animal factor" and extracts the "P-E-G Nine solution" from Klara, assisting her in destroying the Cootings Machine. Nevertheless, as a sensible man, Paul has more "human factor", believing that Klara can save Josie. Despite his disbelief, he chooses to support Klara out of love for his daughter. As a result, despite the fact that Klara is AF, he continues to pay attention to her physical state and provides moral care to her. In reality, when confronted with Klara, Paul's and Chirssy's ethical identity is chaotic. Do they multiply or delude themselves in their actual love for Klara? Is it fair to Klara, and how should Klara live ethically? The basic standpoint of Paul is that Josie is the only one for him. Klara and Josie will never be able to properly coexist. In consequence, he and Chirssy will never be able to truly accept a robot as their daughter.

"I think I hate Capaldi because deep down I suspect he may be right. That what he claims is true. That science has now proved beyond doubt there's nothing so unique about my daughter, nothing there our modern tools can't excavate, copy, transfer"(200). In the face of opposing ethical viewpoints, Paul's heart has likewise wrestled and questioned whether Mr. Capaldi is correct. His ethical reflection also maps out the heart's confusion and anxiety. The advancement of science and technology forces humans to consider: will the human subject be supplanted as the boundaries between the human and post-human subjects continue to blur?

The novel is recounted in the first-person narrative point-of-view of Klara, who, as she nears the end of her life, and reflects on her existence with

humans. Klara, as a robot designed to accompany mankind, is a completely altruistic being. She discreetly follows Josie and makes an effort to satisfy her mother, thus it can be said that every choice she makes is based on whether or not it will be 100% favorable to Josie. When Josie's health is getting worse and worse, and when everyone chooses to give up, she sacrifices the "P-E-G Nine solution" in her body, destroying the Cootings Machine and delighting the sun.

The sun plays a god-like role in the novel, symbolizing both the fact that people have lost touch with nature and the emotional power of having faith in something bigger than oneself. Klara is solar-powered, so the sun actually does provide nourishment to her—she is sluggish when she does not get enough sunlight. She gives the sun a divine kind of authority; it is a deity that can read her thoughts. Thanks to Klara's efforts, Josie miraculously got better. Josie miraculously recovered as a result of Klara's efforts. She went from being a companion and a substitute to a determined doer.

Then is Klara endowed with a "human heart"? Does she have an ethical identity and, as a result, makes ethical decisions? To begin with, the "human heart" is an irreplaceable being. Klara contains all of the positive characteristics of a human being, such as compassion, consideration, and intelligence, yet she lacks self-interest and selfishness. Every decision she makes is for the benefit of others, and she never thinks about her own fate. In addition, according to ethical literary criticism, "in the process of ethical choice, a person's ethical consciousness begins to emerge, and the concepts of good and evil are gradually formed, all as a result of the action of the brain text" (Nie 330). Klara lacks the human ethical conscience and conceptions of good and evil required to make ethical decisions. Some academics contend that Klara still has robotic traits, making her more human than real human beings. Her willingness to save Josie even at the cost of her own life, despite her programming forcing her to do so, is a testament to how well she understands humanity.

Kazuo Ishiguro expands on the theme of "human heart" through the existence of Klara, an intelligent robot, in a modern civilization where artificial intelligence is fast expanding. Klara possesses the precision of a machine as well as the brilliance of humanity. What's more, it is worth noting that she is capable of loving and courageous in the face of death, and then embraces her own demise. As an artificially intelligent companion, who is set up to eliminate human loneliness, but unable to receive human love, Klara ends up in a yard with all the other intelligent robots. "But I believe now he (Mr Capaldi) was searching in the wrong place. There was something very special, but it wasn't inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her" (269). She finally grasped the uniqueness and irreplaceability of human beings at the end of her life.

It is impossible for the reader to objectively determine who is good or evil, or whose ethical choice is correct or incorrect. The diverse positions of the characters, as well as the differing ethical nature of the choices, necessarily add to the complexity of the decision-making process. However, literary ethical criticism contends that the objective of choice is for human self-survival, improvement, optimization, and reproduction, regardless of whether it is natural selection, ethical selection, or scientific selection (Nie 57).

5. Conclusion

Ishiguro's careful portrayal of clones and sentient robots in *Klara and the Sun* illustrates his concern for the ethical interaction between human and machine. *Klara and the Sun* poses an important question whether humans can be supplanted by machines. Artificial intelligence and robots deliver incredible, life-saving benefits, while they also raise ethical concerns like the abuse of technology and the tyranny of a brutal elite over society. In order to elicit ethical consideration and humanistic reflection on the age of artificial intelligence, Kazuo Ishiguro presents the first-person narrative point-of-view of a bionic human being. What mankind will confront in the future is not the fear of clones and artificial intelligence, but rather how to deal with human anxieties, to maintain a healthy human-machine relationship, to get out of the ethical quandaries,

and to make ethical choices consistent with the evolution of society.

Works Cited

Asimov, Isaac. *I, Robot*. Greenwich: A Fawcett Crest Book, 1950.

Huang, Kaihong. "On Ethical Literary Criticism: An Interview with Professor Nie Zhenzhao." *Study and Exploration* 5 (2006): 117-19.

Liu, Hongwei. "An Ethical Interpretation of Extramarital Love in Pinter's *Betrayal*." *Foreign Literature Studies* 6 (2013): 26-33.

Mejia, Santiago, and Dominique Nikolaidis. "Through New Eyes: Artificial Intelligence, Technological Unemployment and Transhumanism in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*." *Journal of Business Ethics* 178 (2022):303-306.

Nie, Zhenzhao. "Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundamentals and Terms." *Foreign Literature Studies* 1 (2010): 12-22.

_____. *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Beijing: Peking UP, 2014.

Shang, Biwu. "Ethical Choice, Ethical Identity, and Ethical Consciousness: An Exploration of *AMercy* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism." *Foreign Literature Studies* 6 (2011): 14-23.

_____. "Can Machines Replace Humans?: Robotic Narrative and Ethical Choice in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*." *Foreign Literature Studies* 44.1 (2022): 28-45.

Simonetti, Nicola. "Mastering Otherness with a Look: On the Politics of the Gaze and Technological Possibility in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 64.4 (2023):1-12.

Zhou Wenjing. "Robotic Narrative and Effect in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*." *World Literature Studies* 11.2(2023):152-158.