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What does it mean to be human? An analysis of humanness depicted through relationships with technology in Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

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'A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self' (Mauss)

Do you believe in the human heart? This question encapsulates the central concern of *Klara and the Sun*, an acclaimed science fiction novel by Nobel Laureate Kazuo Ishiguro, published in 2021. It is written from the perspective of Klara, an 'Artificial Friend' (or AF) who is purchased to act as a companion for a sick teenager, Josie. The novel follows Klara's developing relationships with Josie's family and acquaintances, and her experiences in a near-future characterised by society-defining technologies. This paper aims to critically analyse the portrayal of humanness in the novel as witnessed in characters' interactions with technology. In addition to the human-like robot invention that enables Klara to exist, we are introduced to various other technologies in this somewhat dystopian setting, such as gene-editing systems that produce 'lifted' children, and machinery which creates environmental damage. As the novel progresses, we understand through Klara's eyes the divided opinions expressed towards technology. *Klara and the Sun* presents a thought-provoking, complex picture of what it is to be human in an age of rapidly advancing technology. As such, this paper will analyse Ishiguro's portrayal of humanness shown through the characters' interaction with technologies such as AI robots, gene editing and industrial machinery. Overall, Ishiguro presents a grim depiction of humanness in the face of technological developments, expressed in his concerns throughout the novel that contemporary technology challenges what it is to be human.

Ishiguro's portrayal of humanness is captured most strikingly through how the characters in the novel interact with Klara herself. Hence, Ishiguro's design choice here offers a unique insight into what it is to be human, from the perspective of a non-human. This is a clever narrative tool because it 'allows Ishiguro to move beyond many of the standard ontological and epistemic questions around artificial intelligence,' (Meija and Nikolaidis 304). Throughout the story, we are presented with the disparity between those who perceive Klara as humanlike and deserving of respect and those who view Klara as nothing more than

a technological object which serves a purpose and should therefore not be afforded human kindness. When Klara is excluded from social interaction and bullied by other lifted children at Josie's peer meeting in Part 2, one cannot help but feel saddened as certain children even discuss throwing her across the room, purely because she is 'designed to deal with it' (Ishiguro 75). In line with the precedent established at the start of the book that Klara should only speak to humans when spoken to, there is a discomforting power dynamic witnessed in how Klara is treated. Additionally, while Klara seems to possess human capacities such as thinking and feeling, she is often misunderstood. Hence, while Klara is at times treated like a human, it is evident that Klara is considered not quite human enough to be considered equal. This inconsistent treatment is reminiscent of various anthropological concepts utilised in understanding human relationships. One of these is of boundary kin (Chelcea 131), whereby some individuals are not considered kin enough to be granted the same inclusion as other family members and friends. Another relevant concept is disposable kin (Amrith and Coe 307), wherein caregivers such as housekeepers are perceived as family at times, but are ultimately always disposable. In summary, Ishiguro's portrayal of how artificial robots such as Klara are made into boundary kin speaks to human tendency towards hierarchy construction.

The first interaction that Klara has with Josie's Mother is a prime demonstration of the demeaning treatment that Klara experiences because she is not considered sufficiently human-like to warrant respect. In this scene in Part 1 of the novel, Josie's Mother immediately evaluates Klara's abilities, testing her memory recall about Josie's appearance and condition, even going so far as to ask: 'Will you please reproduce for me Josie's walk?' (Ishiguro 44). One could argue that not only does this test act as a capacity evaluation of Klara, but the test is plausibly used to test her subservience. Notably, Josie's Mother does not ask Klara any conversational questions, but rather simply orders her to do the aforementioned

tasks. This authoritative approach towards Klara is not just witnessed once – Josie's Mother continuously puts Klara in her place throughout the novel. Whilst some characters progressively soften towards Klara, such as Melania, the housekeeper who tells Klara towards the end of the book that 'we are same side' (Ishiguro 160), ultimately Josie's Mother demeans Klara by asking her for the ultimate act of servitude in Part 4 – becoming Josie upon her death. Taken together, Klara's interactions with Josie's mother represent how humans deal with agents we neither understand nor respect by stripping them of their agency.

However, there is a disparity captured between how Josie's Mother treats Klara compared to Josie's Father. The juxtaposition between the two parents represents the varied societal attitudes towards Klara, which may go as far as to divide families. As witnessed in the argument between the parents in Part 4, it is evident that Josie's Mother's decisions regarding technology are a source of disagreement between them. Despite Josie's Father being seemingly unsettled by Klara's presence at the beginning of Part 4, barely acknowledging her presence when they first meet, Klara and Josie's Father later form a bond together as a result of their collaboration on Klara's plan to destroy the Cootings Machine, the pollutant machine which Klara believes harms the Sun. At moments, Josie's Father does engage with Klara in meaningful conversation, such as the scene where he asks Klara about how an artificial agent could learn not just Josie's mannerisms 'but what's deeply inside' (Ishiguro 195); hence, Ishiguro seemingly uses the inconsistency of Josie's Father's attitude towards Klara to represent how, at times we consider artificial agents as human, and at times not.

Overall, Ishiguro uses the dialogue around Klara to expose and critique a flaw in human nature: the instinct to establish boundaries and other what is unfamiliar. The unstable approach that characters embody towards Klara signifies the unease felt towards something different, yet simultaneously remarkably similar to human beings. Furthermore, this reiterates

the impulse of human prejudice towards what we do not fully comprehend or empathise with. Returning to the anthropology of human relationships, it is clear that Klara is perceived at times by the characters as both boundary-kin and disposable-kin alike.

Secondly, Ishiguro's depiction of humanness is captured through the presence of gene-editing technology in the novel. Although it is never discussed directly how this technology has been developed, it is explicitly acknowledged in Part 4 that the term 'lifted' refers to children who have undergone gene-editing, such as Josie. In contrast, 'unlifted' refers to those who have not received genetic enhancement, such as Rick. Ishiguro's inclusion of such technology encourages the reader to confront how we should define humanness in a society engaging with human DNA-altering practices. This portrayal is reminiscent of another relevant anthropological area utilised in understanding humanness – personhood. Personhood is a heavily contested term, which means that one's interpretation of the concept shapes whether Klara or Josie, in their technologically altered forms, possess personhood. This is demonstrated in Mauss' seminal work, 'A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self', which argues that personhood is socially constructed by specific historical contexts (3-4). Therefore, we may understand gene-edited children as having a higher form of personhood, because societal values have recognised lifted children as improved persons. However, an understanding of personhood that defines the concept as solely biological – such as Kass' conceptualisation, where genetic enhancement is perceived as threatening human essence – would understand Josie as possessing less personhood. By embedding gene-editing practices into the novel, the reader is forced to contend with whether personhood and humanness still remain after genetic engineering. Furthermore, this leads one to question if the gene-edited protagonist can be deemed as human, and stimulates debate as to where we draw the line between gene-edited human and artificial agent.

Ishiguro appears to be deliberately vague about the gene-editing technology in the novel. As such, we only learn about the practice through snippets of hushed conversations and the fears of Josie's Mother. Furthermore, the lack of open dialogue around gene-editing arguably creates more tension than addressing it directly. It is also made apparent that the reason for Josie's condition is a product of faulty gene-editing, for which Josie's mother feels guilt. Hence, the obscurity with which gene-editing is referred creates an uncomfortable feeling that the adults in the novel make decisions which have lasting impacts on their children's health, despite being unaware of the limitations of the technology. The advantage of gene-editing is marketed to the parents through the promise of further education for their children. We become aware of this in Part 3 when we discover that Rick has limited prospects of being accepted into college because of his status as an unlifted child, who has not 'benefited from gene-editing' (Ishiguro 220). Overall, it would seem that Ishiguro depicts humanness as compromised by market logic, whereby companies promote human-altering technology for profit-based incentives, as opposed to improving children's health. This perspective reflects why Meija and Nikolaidis argue that business ethicists will find the novel rewarding (303). Furthermore, this depiction of parents' desire for opportunities for their children does not criticise the parents, but rather the guilt expressed by Josie's Mother causes the reader to feel sympathy instead. Humanness is ultimately depicted as the prioritisation of those we care for, as with Klara's intention to maximise Josie's happiness – reiterating how Klara possesses shared qualities with humans in the novel.

Ishiguro examines humanness further as a result of the gene-editing practices through the contrast between lifted children and Klara. For instance, lifted children such as Josie are portrayed as socially isolated and unstable, which runs seemingly in contrast to the intended behavioural impacts that gene-editing would have. This behaviour appears in contrast to Klara, who, as discussed above, is quietly confident compared to the somewhat socially inept

lifted children. It is evident then that the human experience, when understood as constructed through relations, is not enhanced by gene-editing technology, but rather diminished. The juxtaposition between the social capabilities of the artificial Klara compared to gene-edited Josie provokes the reader to question who possesses more qualities of personhood.

Perhaps more concerningly, we learn in Part 4 of the novel that the very nature of personhood and humanness is thrown into even greater question by the advent of technology created by the eccentric engineer Mr Capaldi. The technology grants that, if Josie dies, Klara could 'inhabit' (Ishiguro 187) Josie's body. It is again depicted that this technology is not without imperfections, where we understand that an earlier version of this invention, a so-called bereavement doll, 'didn't work with Sal' (Ishiguro 185) – Josie's deceased sister. Despite being aware of what happened to Sal, Josie's Mother, regardless of some doubts, is ultimately convinced that this technology will work to preserve Josie's personhood in another agent. On the one hand, we could interpret this as the extreme lengths a mother would go to out of love for her children, exploited by business promises; on the other, we could interpret this as human hubris in trying to conquer death. Ultimately, Ishiguro leaves much of this interpretation open to the reader.

In summary, the background presence of gene-editing technology in the novel has a stark impact on what we consider human. If the distance between genetically-engineered humans and artificial agents is reduced, this presents concerning implications for distinguishing between humans and non-humans. Ishiguro's choice to include the risks of this technology perhaps acts as a criticism of the human temptation to gamble with humanity without fully understanding the consequences of our actions; encapsulated in Klara's concern that 'humans, in their wish to avoid loneliness, made manoeuvres that were very complex and hard to fathom' (Ishiguro 104).

The final section of this essay will analyse how Ishiguro's portrayal of Klara's interaction with the Cootings Machine speaks to humanness. Whilst not a centrally discussed piece of machinery, it is interesting to juxtapose the human interaction with Klara, who is also a machine, with the Cootings Machine. The Cootings Machine, which, according to Klara 'saddens and angers the Sun' (Ishiguro 150), releases pollutants that damage the Sun and represents an obvious contrast to Klara, whose purpose is to improve the world around her.

Klara's initial approach towards the Cootings Machine reveals how Ishiguro again depicts Klara as in possession of human-like qualities. I mean this insofar as Klara's belief that the Cootings Machine itself is harming the Sun acts as an example of Klara humanising the Machine. Furthermore, Klara does not truly consider the human actors responsible for the Cootings Machine, but instead asserts that the Machine itself is accountable for its behaviour. Klara's method is reminiscent of conceptual work on animism, such as that of Descola whereby it is perceived that it is human instinct to treat non-humans such as animals and objects as moral agents. Ishiguro's decision for Klara to allocate responsibility and agency to a machine has a certain irony – whilst Klara enacts a human understanding of technology, the humans in the novel often do not consider Klara herself to be a moral agent. It is clear then that Klara continues to possess human qualities, perhaps in capacity beyond those of the human characters in the novel.

Additionally, Klara's emotional response to the Cootings Machine demonstrates another aspect of Ishiguro's design choices in presenting humanness in the interactions with technology. Ishiguro demonstrates that Klara is fearful of the environmental impact of the Machine. However, this fear is not at all conveyed by the humans in the novel. This concern that Klara expresses in Part 3, through her worries that the Cootings Machine hurts the Sun, and its powers of 'special nourishment' (Ishiguro 39) again lends itself to the depiction that

Klara possesses more humanlike qualities than the humans in the book. Of all the characters in the book, it is Klara who is fearful of the environmental impact of technology, which again signifies a certain irony because it is not Klara's concern. Rather, the lack of care of the human characters for the environmental impact of the Machine reveals Ishiguro's criticism of the lack of accountability taken by humans for the negative impact of their technological endeavours.

Ultimately, Ishiguro reflects on humanness through the approach that Klara takes towards the Cootings Machine. The depiction of Klara, the emotionally advanced robot, in possession of humanlike traits, exists in juxtaposition to the Machine, which is devoid of any humanlike depth. Through the inclusion of Klara's relationship with the Cootings Machine, Ishiguro captures the extent of Klara's humanness by contrasting her advanced capacity for feeling with a machine devoid of thought. As I have discussed, Ishiguro subtly conveys that Klara exhibits plausibly more humanlike qualities than the humans in the novel.

To conclude, this paper has carefully examined how the novel Klara and the Sun depicts humanness in the 21st century in interaction with technology, such as artificial companions, gene-editing platforms, and pollutant machines. The first section of this paper argues that, as evident through Klara's relationships with humans in the novel, Ishiguro points to how human nature is sadly characterised by othering and demeaning what we do not understand. Next, the presence of gene-editing technology in the novel signals Ishiguro's concern that humans create technology without consideration of how this threatens what makes us human. Finally, it is clear that interactions with the Cootings Machine signal concern that humans do not recognise the implications, in this case environmentally, of their technological creations, unlike Klara, who ironically empathises with the damage this machine does. Largely evident through Klara's interactions with other characters, Ishiguro utilises the problems which arise out of advanced technology to suggest that the nature of

humanness is thrown into doubt in a technologically saturated society. Consequently, Ishiguro's depiction of the qualities of artificial humans like Klara and gene-edited children such as Josie sheds a worrying light on how humanness is compromised by contemporary technology. Ultimately, Ishiguro's depictions challenge readers to consider their own relationships with technology, and how we may risk our human qualities in pursuit of technological advancement.

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