

書評

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*
(London: Faber & Faber, 2021, pp. 1–307)

“Do you believe in the human heart? (...) Do you think there is such a thing? Something that makes each of us special and individual?”.

Rie Kido Askew*

In a 2008 interview, Ishiguro talks about his *Never let Me Go* (2005), a story about human clones, saying “One of the attractions about using clones is that it makes people ask immediately, What does it mean to be a human being? It’s a secular route to the Dostoyevskian question, What is a soul?”.¹

In his new book, *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Ishiguro poses similar questions, using this time an AI android called AF (Artificial Friend). Klara, the heroine narrator and an AF, is very observant and is well equipped with human emotions. Though she still has much to learn, she is optimistic about mastering the human heart. She thinks the human heart, however complex it may be, is not limitless and can be mastered. Yet, is it so? Can the human heart be fully learned and copied by an android? The more the boundary between human intelligence and artificial intelligence, between human and android, is blurred, the more serious the question becomes. What does it mean to be human? What is a soul?

Ishiguro’s story is set in an America of the near future in which androids have replaced workers in many areas. Society is divided into two, and those who occupy elite positions with a high social status often happily co-exist with AFs. They in fact buy AFs to work as companions for their children. The first duty of the AFs is to become the best friends of lonely children, as the education for the children of this class is provided online (“home tutoring” by “screen professors”) and they have very few opportunities to socialize with one another (p. 147). Klara is purchased by the mother of a high ranking household to provide company for her fourteen-year-old daughter, Josie who is happy with Klara.

Not everyone, however, is happy with AFs. Some people including those who are deprived of their jobs are “scared and resentful” towards them (p. 297). (Josie’s father, who is divorced from her mother

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and who used to be an engineer of high rank, also seems to have lost his job due to AFs.) They are afraid because AFs “become too clever” and “they can’t follow what’s going on inside [AFs] any more” (p. 297). This sentiment is seen when Klara was one evening standing in front of a theater with Josie and was mistaken to be someone who intends to enter the theater and occupy a much “sought-after” seat (p. 242). One lady approached Klara and says with indignation. “First they [AFs] take the jobs. Then they take the seats in the theater?” (p. 242).

Though AFs are already intelligent, new versions keep on appearing to replace older models. At the beginning of the story, a new B3 model emerges and is put on the market. This new model surpasses the older B2 model in terms of “cognition and recall” and “had all sorts of improvements” such as the ability to smell (pp. 40, 33). Klara is an older B2 model and when she was still in the AF shop, waiting for someone to buy her, she shared the fear of other B2 AFs who worry that customers would no longer choose them. As is guessed by Klara, this is the same fear even older AFs once had about B2 AFs like Klara.

What is scary about this future society which constantly welcomes innovation and improvements is that people also try to upgrade their own children. Some children are in fact “lifted” which is “a Panglossian term for genetic editing, done to boost intelligence, or at least academic performance”.² These artificially intelligent children are destined to occupy high ranks, as is planned for Josie who is also “lifted”. Those children who are not “lifted”, on the other hand, have little chance to succeed in this society. Rick, Josie’s best friend and neighbour, is one such example. He is deprived of opportunities to enjoy a good education despite his natural intelligence.

The class struggle between the “lifted” and the “unlifted” is depicted in the meeting at Josie’s house. Invited by Josie, Rick reluctantly joined a meeting for “lifted” children. But unsurprisingly he is discriminated against, being told by one child that “you shouldn’t even be here” (p. 79). The lack of empathy and the elitism of “lifted” children may parallel that of the B3 AFs who are said to be “less empathetic” than B2 AFs (p. 40). Josie who is basically kind and sweet becomes somewhat mean when she is surrounded by other “lifted” children. This is why Rick says he wants to “save Josie from this lot” because “[i]f Josie hangs out with them [“lifted” children] much more, she soon won’t be Josie at all” (p. 82). The observant Klara is able to spot the truthfulness of Rick who plays the role of a moral beacon for Josie.

As is the case with the clones in *Never Let Me Go*, however close they get to humans, AFs are not treated as equal to humans. Sometimes people with no malicious intentions mistreat them, simply because they do not know how to interact them. Such is the case with Miss Helen, Rick’s mother. When she first meets Klara in her house, she says, “One never knows how to greet a guest like you. After all are you a guest at all? Or do I treat you like a vacuum cleaner?” (p. 143).

In the first chapter which depicts the scene in the AF shop, Klara and the other AFs are more clearly reminded of their places. When one girl comes to the shop and tries to buy Klara, she [Klara] shows reluctance, because she prefers Josie who came to the shop previously and promised Klara to come back for her. Josie is, compared to this new girl, more considerate of Klara's feelings, trying to make sure that Klara is happy to come with her. Understanding Klara's feeling, the manager of the shop steps in and recommends to the girl another AF. Unsurprisingly Klara is later reprimanded by the manager, who says: "I supported you this time. But I won't do it again. It's for the customer to choose the AF, never the other way around" (p. 32).

This plight of androids who are denied free will, is, of course, nothing new. It could in fact be said to be a coherent theme in the literature on AIs or Androids since Karel Čapek's "R.U.R" (1920). Yet what divorces *Klara and the Sun* together with *Never Let Me Go* from other AI novels is the absence of rebellion by the AIs (or clones), the absence of a demand for equal rights with humans. Like Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, Klara quietly accepts her fate and stoically devotes herself to her duty, that is, to take care of Josie.

Though Klara is outwardly purchased to provide company for Josie, Josie's mother has another reason to keep her. Careful readers may suspect that something is going on behind the scenes because Josie's mother sometimes asks Klara to imitate her daughter. The reason is revealed later in the story.

Josie is a sickly child and quite often ill in bed. Her elder sister Sal was also sick and died when Josie was very little. Their illness originated in their mother's good intention to ensure her children with "a good life" (p. 213). That is, they got sick due to the operation of being "lifted". (Josie's father obviously did not wish to take the risk after his first daughter's death, and this could have been one of the reasons for the divorce.) Josie's mother could barely handle the grief over the loss of her first daughter, and she is not likely to manage the death of a second child. So she thought of making a replica of Josie out of Klara, to prepare for the day when Josie dies. She asks Klara to "continue Josie", that is to become "the exact same" as Josie inside out (pp. 213, 210). She plans to do this with the help of Mr. Capaldi, who is one of a line of mad scientists such as Dr. Moreau.

While Josie's mother is unsure about the possibility of her plan, Mr. Capaldi is confident. He says:

"Our generation still carries the old feelings. A part of us refuses to let go. The part that wants to keep believing there's something unreachable inside each of us. Something unique and won't transfer. But there is nothing like that, we know that now" (p. 210).

Luckily for Josie and her mother (and perhaps for Klara too), the plan "to continue Josie" turns out to be unnecessary. Josie overcomes her illness and grows up to be an able young adult as expected for a

member of the “lifted” elite. Klara certainly makes an effort to secure Josie’s recovery when others have almost given up. Since AFs are solar powered, Klara worships the sun like God. She knows that the sun dislikes the pollution produced by what Klara calls the Cooting Machine, and thinks it crucial to destroy it in order to please the sun and save Josie. With the help of Josie’s father, Klara destroys the machine, sacrificing parts of herself in doing so.

(It is a mystery why Klara thinks destroying one machine is so important in order to save her friend, and why she thinks she cannot talk about her mission. Here we can understand a much-discussed problem with AI. That is, we “do not understand how AFs think” and how they arrive at certain decisions (p. 297).)

We do not know if it is indeed *because of* this act – although Klara believes it is – but nevertheless it is only *after* this act that Josie makes a drastic recovery. The last part of the novel resembles Wilde’s “A Happy Prince”(1888). Klara fades away in the waste yard to be disposed, expecting nothing in return from humans and reflecting on her “life” as having been a happy one.

Klara and the Sun is often described as a “dystopian novel”.³ Surely in a sense, it is. The novel has many elements of dystopia such as a totalitarianism based on scientism and a [scientific] meritocracy. AFs are treated as commodities who are denied free will. Human beings do not exactly enjoy their freedoms, either. While those who conform to the system like the “lifted” children flourish, and those who do not, like Rick and Josie’s father, however gifted they may be, do not. Josie’s father’s remark “if another group won’t respect us [people like him], and what we have, they need to know they’ll have a fight on their hands”, suggests that there may be a serious collision in the future (p. 232).

In other sense, however, the novel is not dystopian. Ishiguro does not treat the AFs as a threat. They do not rebel, however badly treated they may be. They accept that they are not equal to humans. Moreover, they are mostly decent, being basically free from the negative side of human emotions such as selfishness or pettiness (Though B3, the newly innovated version, may have some meanness). Klara demonstrates the supreme ability of love, when she sacrifices herself for the sake of her friend. In this sense, humans have much to learn from Klara.

Then, is Klara more human than human? Not necessarily. Despite all of her humane abilities, Klara still remains somewhat robotic. This may be to do with the fact that her cognition is often intellectual, not emotional. When Josie insulted Klara at the meeting for “lifted” children, saying she should have bought the superior model B3, Klara finds the incident “very interesting” instead of getting hurt or angry (p. 81). For her, the hurtful incident is also an object of observation and analysis.

This intellectual cognition may be the reason why Klara fails to understand that when Josie becomes frightened about death and needs to be with her mother in the middle of the night, it has got to be her mother. Klara does not understand why she cannot replace Josie’s mother.

When Klara first learns about the plan “to continue Josie”, she is optimistic about fulfilling it. But later in the story, Klara decides against it, since she comes to understand that there “remains something beyond my reach” (p. 306).

Klara and the Sun is a masterly novel which makes us think about what this “something” is, and what we should do so as not to lose it in the age of Artificial Intelligence.

Notes

- 1 Kazuo Ishiguro, interviewed by Susannah Hunnewell, “Kazuo Ishiguro: The Art of Fiction No. 196”, *Paris Review*, issue 184, spring 2008, available at www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5829/the-art-of-fiction-no-196-kazuo-ishiguro.
- 2 Judith Shulevitz, “The Radiant Inner Life of a Robot”, *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2021. Available at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/kazuo-ishiguro-klara-and-the-sun/618083/.
- 3 See, for instance, Isabelle Senechal, “Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* is a Haunting Tale of Love, Loss and ... a Robot”, *America Magazine*, April 30, 2021, available at www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2021/04/30/kazuo-ishiguro-novel-review-klara-sun-robot-dystopia-240564., and Ed Meek, “*Klara and the Sun*, Dystopia , Yes, but There Is Hope”, *The Art Fuse*, April 2, 2021, available at artsfuse.org/225860/book-review-klara-and-the-sun-dystopia-yes-but-theres-hope/.

