



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 11. Issue.4. 2024 (Oct-Dec)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

## Ethical Dilemma in *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro

Hui Liu<sup>1</sup>, Meixu Yan<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup>MA Candidate, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.11.4.38](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.11.4.38)



Article information

Article Received:29/09/2024  
Article Accepted:22/10/2024  
Published online:30/10/2024

### ABSTRACT

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* explores the intricate interplay between technological advancement and human ethics. Set in a future where humanity grapples with the profound implications of gene editing and artificial intelligence, the novel tells the story of Klara, a robot with evolving consciousness, and Josie, the young girl whose life the former is destined to influence. This paper examines the ethical dilemmas that emerge from the interstices of human and artificial life, questioning the morality of gene "upgrading" and the replacement of human relationships with robotic counterparts. As science and technology revolutionize our lives, this novel raises critical questions about the erosion of human confidence and the descent into self-deception. It reflects contemporary concerns, urging a collective exploration of the challenges posed by rapid technological progress. The novel beckons readers to ponder the essence of humanity and the ethical ramifications of our burgeoning relationship with the non-human entities we create.

**Key words:** *Klara and the Sun*, ethical dilemma, AI, robot

### 1.1 Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, a British novelist of Japanese descent, was honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. There was a surge of academic interest in his works, with his novels being translated into many languages, exerting a wide-ranging influence.

*Klara and the Sun* was published in 2021, being shortlisted for the Booker Prize in the UK that year and included in "Top Ten Books of 2021" of *The Washington Post*. It won the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction in the next year. The novel ponders the intrinsic nature of humanity in the crucible of advancing technology and has swiftly become a critical focus since its release, fueling a growing academic interest in Kazuo Ishiguro's narrative craft. Scholarship is shifting to encompass plot as well as technique and theme, recognizing Ishiguro's nuanced style and innovative genre subversion.

---

While previous studies have focused on select works, *Klara and the Sun* is drawing attention to defamiliarization and estrangement, with notable critics like Wood and Self dissecting its unique narrative approach.

*Klara and the Sun* transports us to a future that is both familiar and transformed, where the demarcation between the natural and the synthetic intellects has become increasingly ambiguous. We accompany Klara, an AF (Artificial Friend), on her journey as she navigates the world through a lens that is both alien and profound, offering insights into the intricacies of human connections, the ethical dilemmas posed by genetic enhancement, and the enduring pursuit of genuineness in an era steeped in technological sophistication.

The novel's significance transcends its narrative, serving as a mirror to the ethical dilemmas that resonate through the fabric of our society. It extends an invitation to readers to engage with the profound implications that the relentless march of technological innovation has on the very core of our values, interpersonal dynamics, and sense of self. *Klara and the Sun* is not merely a work of fiction; it is a philosophical inquiry that prompts us to reflect on the ethical contours of our shared technological future and the evolving definition of what it means to be human.

This paper delves into Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* through the lens of literary ethics, examining the novel's portrayal of moral choices and dilemmas in a futuristic setting.

## 1.2 Ethical Literary Criticism

Ethical literary criticism constitutes a specialized method within the broader field of literary studies, concentrating on the moral and ethical aspects inherent in literary creations. This critical approach delves into the intricate web of ethical choices, values, and dilemmas represented by the characters, themes, and the narrative structure of a text. Its primary objective is to discern how literature serves as a mirror, shaper, and challenger of the moral and ethical standards prevalent within a society or cultural context. Although ethical literary criticism has gained prominence as a distinct academic discipline in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the integration of ethical analysis into literary discourse predates this period. The foundation of this criticism lies in the conviction that literature transcends mere aesthetic appeal, functioning also as a medium for the exploration and confrontation of moral questions.

Ethical literary criticism has evolved over time, becoming a significant approach in the study of literature. It focuses on the moral and ethical dimensions of literary works, examining the choices made by characters and their implications in the real world. The development of this field has been marked by an increasing recognition of the importance of ethics in understanding and interpreting literature.

In his work *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* (2010), Nie Zhenzhao delves into the heart of ethical literary criticism by explaining the concepts of ethical dilemma and choice. He posits that an ethical dilemma is fundamentally composed of two moral propositions. When characters are faced with such a dilemma, they must make a judgment about each proposition. Interestingly, each choice may appear to be correct and in harmony with moral principles when considered in isolation. However, the crux of the dilemma lies in the fact that selecting one option inevitably means rejecting the other, thereby going against the ethics of the alternative (Nie 263).

The interplay between ethical choices and our perception of the world is intricate. The distinctions we draw between beauty and ugliness, good and bad, right and wrong, are not only the outcomes of our ethical choices but also serve as beacons that guide our future decisions. This reflects the recursive nature of ethics, where choices influence our perspectives, which in turn inform our subsequent choices.

Nie Zhenzhao further elaborates on the nature of ethical choices, asserting that they are made within a specific social and moral framework. These choices are influenced by the prevailing ethical

---

environment and context and are aligned with the moral aspirations of individuals. In the realm of literary creation, writers often navigate the ethical choices of their characters through a blend of reason and sensibility, which is a manifestation of their accumulated experiences. These choices are frequently made on the spur of the moment, driven by intuition rather than by deliberate rational thought (Nie 82).

Moreover, ethical choices are not only confined to the realm of literature but are also integral to the process of teaching and learning. Nie introduces the concept of “biological selection” as the initial step in human development, which defines our biological identity. However, what truly distinguishes humans from animals is the subsequent step – ethical selection. This concept is particularly relevant in the analysis of literary works, as they often serve as a commentary on the series of choices that shape human lives.

Nie’s theory strengthens the topic of ethical choice and dilemma by asserting its central role in the interpretation and appreciation of literary art. The characters’ navigation of complex moral landscapes, as depicted in the novel, reinforces the idea that ethical choices are not merely intellectual exercises but profound reflections of one’s moral character. This, in turn, situates the analysis of the novel within the context of discrete ethical decisions, highlighting the educational significance of studying these choices for a deeper understanding of morality and human nature.

### **2.1. Chrissie’s dilemma**

Chrissie’s ethical dilemma revolves around the decision to lift Josie for a better future life and to solidify their middle-class status. On one hand, lifting Josie would entail using advanced genetic engineering techniques to enhance her abilities and opportunities, ensuring that she has the best chance to succeed and maintain a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle. This path could provide Josie with an easier life, free from the struggles that might come with not being genetically enhanced in a society where such enhancements are the norm for upward mobility.

On the other hand, Chrissie is confronted with the ethical concerns surrounding genetic enhancement. The process of lifting Josie could have unforeseen consequences on her overall well-being. Moreover, by choosing to enhance their child, Chrissie is contributing to a societal structure that values genetic modification over natural human development, potentially perpetuating inequality and reinforcing a system where non-enhanced individuals are marginalized.

In contrast, Rick’s mother, Helen, out of an aversion to risking her child’s life, foregoes gene enhancement for Rick, thereby inscribing a divergent fate for him. Unenhanced children are deemed unfit for prestigious schools and illustrious mentors, seemingly resigning them to a life of mediocrity. Despite his prodigious talents, Rick is consigned to the abyss of the forsaken masses, a fate that fills Helen with bitter regret, as she witnesses the world’s rapid transformation and the exacerbation of societal division by the very science and technology intended to unite people in it. What Helen and Rick suffer makes Chrissie hard to stand this marginalized life.

Chrissie’s dilemma is thus a complex interplay between the desire to secure a prosperous future for Josie and the moral responsibility to consider the broader implications of their decision on society and their children’s humanity. This internal conflict highlights the difficult choices parents face in a world where technology and social status are inextricably linked.

### **2.2 Klara’s dilemma**

Klara finds herself in a dilemma posed by Chrissie. Chrissie asks Klara to imitate Josie without revealing the truth to the former. If Klara agrees to this request, it could damage the trust and bond she has built with Josie, potentially leading to a broken relationship. On the other hand, if Klara disobeys Chrissie’s wish, it might create a serious and tense atmosphere within the family.

---

Klara's choice is a delicate one, as she must weigh the importance of honesty and loyalty to Josie against the desire to maintain peace and harmony in the household. This situation highlights the complex moral choices that Klara, as an Artificial Friend, must navigate in her quest to fulfill her role while preserving the integrity of her relationships.

Josie's mom tries hard to persuade Klara to be another Josie, thereby continuing Josie's existence after her death. "Okay, Klara. Since Josie isn't here, I want you to be Josie. Just for a little while. Since we're up her" (82). This request plunges Klara into another difficult ethical dilemma: should she comply with the human instruction to carry out a task that may conceal this fact from his good friend Josie. It turns out to be a tense relationship between Klara and Josie. "But there was no smile in her voice. It was clear she wished to be alone to get on with her sketching, so I left the room, to stand outside on the landing" (87).

### 3.1 Chrissie's ethical choice

Chrissie chooses to lift Josie because she is adamant about not letting Josie live an ordinary life, driven by her desire to provide the best for her child especially in the middle-class context. It is mainly because of the middle-class values. For white-collar classes like Chrissie, doing everything possible to secure educational opportunities for their children aligns with the social ethics observed by the middle class at the time. In the success paradigm of white-collar workers, education has become the key determinant of one's professional fate and social status. The level of education one receives determines the threshold of the profession they can enter and the hope of promotion; hence, the social values of the middle class have turned into the belief that education is the source of wealth and a ladder to advancement, and has become the foundation for their social standing and success. Conversations at social gatherings among adults invariably revolve around their children's education: "Professor Kwan may be wonderful at teaching our children mathematical physics. That doesn't give him the right to be uncivil to us" (54). Therefore, Chrissie's decision to have Josie "enhanced" was the shortcut to secure educational opportunities for Josie under the ethical environment of the time.

Middle-class parents, gripped by the fear of descending social ranks, are driven to subject their children to gene enhancement in pursuit of superior educational opportunities, even at the risk of losing them. Josie's mother, for instance, despite the tragic loss of her elder daughter, Sarah, to an enhancement gone awry, still chooses to have Josie follow in her sister's footsteps. Tragically, Josie's enhancement also fails, afflicting her with an enigmatic illness that teeters on the brink of death. This outcome nearly shatters her mother, leading to her desperate plea for Klara to supplant Josie in her life.

From the very inception of life, and indeed from the moment of conception, we embark on a journey of ethical choices, entwined in a tapestry of self-selection and being selected by others. Thus, Chrissie's ethical decision to have Josie "lifted" is primarily influenced by the social ethics of her middle-class status.

#### 3.1.2 Klara's Ethical Choice

Klara gives up the opportunities to become a real person and live as Josie but makes great contributions to human life. Klara's ethical choice presents a profound sacrifice and a testament to her unwavering loyalty to Josie. Klara, an Artificial Friend designed to be a companion to humans, faces a pivotal decision that goes against her programming and the very essence of her existence. Her choice is to renounce her aspiration to become more human, a dream that is deeply ingrained in her being instead of remaining steadfastly loyal to Josie.

Klara's commitment to Josie leads her to seek the help of the Sun, a powerful and enigmatic entity in the story.

---

I estimated seven in all, propped up almost vertically – the Sun’s evening face. I stepped closer still, almost speaking the words out loud, “please show your special kindness to Josie” (210).

This decision is driven by her desire to rescue Josie from a life-threatening situation, demonstrating Klara’s deep emotional bond and her willingness to go to extraordinary lengths for her friend’s well-being. By appealing to the Sun, Klara is not only putting her trust in a higher power but also acknowledging the limitations of her own abilities as an Artificial Friend.

In making this choice, Klara prioritizes Josie’s life and happiness over her own desires, embodying an ethical framework that values love and loyalty above personal ambition. Her actions reflect her understanding of what it means to be human, as she sacrifices her dream of humanity to protect and care for another. Klara’s ethical choice thus underscores the novel’s exploration of the nature of consciousness, the depths of emotional connection, and the moral complexities that arise when the line between human and machine is blurred.

#### 4. Conclusion

In sum, Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel masterfully encapsulates the intricate web of ethical dilemmas faced by the characters, offering a profound exploration of the nature of ethical choices. His work serves as a timeless beacon for ethical contemplation, not only reflecting the choices of our past, but also illuminating the ethical dilemmas that confront us in the present and will continue to challenge us in the future. It is a narrative that inspires readers to ponder the consequences of their actions, to question the morality of their choices, and to seek wisdom in navigating the complex landscape of ethical decision-making. In this regard, the novel stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of Ishiguro’s writing in the realm of ethical discourse. This paper has traversed the terrain of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* through the prism of literary ethics, scrutinizing the novel’s vivid depiction of moral choices and the intricate dilemmas they entail within a visionary future.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is supported by the NCEPU “Double First-Class” Graduate Talent Cultivation Program (XM2412716).

#### Works Cited

- He, Weihua & Nie Zhenzhao. “Ethical Literary Criticism and Ethnic Literature: An Interview with Professor Nie Zhenzhao.” *Foreign Literature Studies*, 6.1(2020):1-10.
- Ishiguro, K. *Klara and the Sun*. London: Faber and Faber, 2021.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo and Kenzaburo Oe. “The Novelist in Today’s World: A Conversation.” *Boundary*,18.3(1991): 109-122.
- Nie, Zhenzhao. *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2014.
- . “Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundamentals and Terms.” *Foreign Literature Studies*, 1(2010): 12-22.
- . “Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A perspective”. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 5(2004):16-24.
- Lu, Yaodong. “Issues Concerning Ethical Literary Criticism”. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 1(2006): 32-35.
- Shang, Biwu. “From Alan Turing to Ian Mc Ewan: Artificial Intelligence, Lies and Ethics in Machines like Me.” *Foreign Language Education*, 3(2020): 28-45.