

Received: 29 May 2024 Accepted: 7 June 2024
 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/joph.v4i2.3348>

Posthuman Encounters and Patterns of Care in *Klara and the Sun* (2021) or, What Ishiguro's AI Tells Us About the Uncanny Valley

Diane Leblond¹

Abstract

The protagonist of Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun (2021) seems like a perfect candidate to take us through the uncanny valley — the place conceptualised by Masahiro Mori (1970)— where the once attractive almost-but-not-quite-human suddenly repulses us. Klara is an android whose AI capabilities make her the best companion to Josie, a teenager afflicted with a potentially fatal condition. She is also a sympathetic first-person narrator and internal focaliser, until a plot twist presents her in an entirely different light. Told from the android's viewpoint, the fable informs our experience of the uncanny valley. Mori's model focused on appearance, but our discomfort stems from the notion that Klara might replicate human consciousness. This brings up the hypothesis of an 'uncanny valley of the mind.' Yet through most of the story sharing the AI's perspective is exhilarating rather than off-putting. Ultimately, in encountering this peculiar narrator, we are reminded that storytelling allows us to theorise about and rejoice in the inner lives of others, human and not.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro; *Klara and the Sun*; Posthuman; Uncanny; British contemporary fiction

Cross-categorical patterns of care or, genuine posthuman encounters?

Despite Ishiguro's "penchant for affectless, stilted or robotic narrators" (Connors, 2023, 1), dedicated readers of his work would probably agree that he is not the kind of novelist from whom you would expect a narrative centred on Artificial Intelligence. It seems as if his *œuvre* devotes so much attention to the intricacies of human feelings and relationships that it should have little attention left to give to non-human subjects. Even in novels that do explore the inner life and inhabit the voices of not-quite-human narrators, such as clone Kathy H. in *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and the eponymous android in *Klara and the Sun*, the focus largely seems to remain on how these characters' difference affects human emotions.² There is reason to wonder, therefore, whether the presence of these non-human entities really constitutes a catalyst for posthuman encounters—which leave behind or at the very least challenge the exceptional status of human destinies.³ In *Klara and the Sun* does the presence of AI genuinely invite readers to experience something akin to posthuman otherness? Or is it little more than a token of a genre that the novel only "underwhelmingly"

¹ Diane Leblond, Université de Lorraine, France. Email: diane.leblond@univ-lorraine.fr

² On this see the interview Ishiguro gave on the *Ways to Change the World* podcast, stating: "My story at the front of it is focused on what [artificial intelligence] does to human relationships." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZIUW55IL_M (Guru-Murthy, 2021, 5'26-5'32, accessed May 15th, 2023)

³ See Herbrechter, 'Critical Humanism' (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018, 94-97) and Braidotti, 'Posthuman Critical theory' (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018, 339-342).



inhabits? (Connors, 2023, 2) Any answer to those questions must fully take into consideration matters of affect, and more specifically the issue of care.⁴

Klara and the Sun is an autodiegetic narrative, told in the first person and internally focalised by a child-like 'artificial friend' or AF. In a world where climate anxiety and social unrest have made remote learning the only option, AFs have become part and parcel of normal social interaction, as they ensure that their young charges do not suffer from loneliness. We follow Klara from her formative days in a city store where she wakes to the intricacies of the human world, all the way to her last weeks, as she sits in a junkyard going over memories of the life she shared with the mother and daughter who chose and bought her.

Between the opening and closing sections of the novel, the plot focuses on the most crucial relationship in Klara's life: her friendship with young Josie. That bond is idiosyncratic especially in that it is informed by the girl's condition, which means her AF is as much a carer as she is a friend. Josie's illness, as we learn in typical Ishiguro fashion, by gathering tiny pieces of evidence from our narrator's ingenuous account, was caused by a procedure of gene editing widely adopted among the higher middle classes, whereby children are intellectually enhanced or 'lifted.' Parents must decide whether to have their children go through the procedure, and we are given insight into the phenomenon through Klara's social microcosm. Josie was 'lifted' but her health has been deteriorating ever since, a situation made more poignant by the fact that her older sister Sal died after undergoing the same operation. On the other hand, Josie's childhood sweetheart, Rick, was never 'lifted,' and though he is a gifted coder his whole future rests on a very small quota of college spots still open to unlifted youth.

Klara's narrative of her time with Josie focuses more specifically on the mission she takes on, as her best possible companion, to save her life. This brings into play the AF's belief system. As a solar-powered sentient being, Klara has developed a form of faith in the star's all-benevolent, nourishing force. When she notices her friend's health failing, Klara decides to ask the Sun to intercede for her. In return for the favour she promises to destroy a machine she saw when she lived in the City, which produced so much dirty smoke that it obscured the light of day. She soon gets an opportunity to set her plan in motion as a trip to the city is planned, with Josie, Rick, and both their mothers. While in the city, Klara actually keeps her promise to the Sun with the help of Josie's father. But as they leave the next day their taxi drives past an identical machine: Klara is dismayed as she realises, she has failed in her mission.

Back home, Josie's health degrades rapidly. As an ultimate resort, Klara apologises to the Sun for not doing away with pollution but prays that it saves Josie all the same. Because of a scene she once witnessed from the store window the AF has reason to believe the Sun favours love, so she presents the bond that ties the girl to Rick as a reason to bring her back to health. One stormy morning some days later the light suddenly changes as the sun comes flooding in from behind dark clouds. Klara takes it as a sign and opens all the curtains wide in Josie's room, letting her friend bathe in the powerful glow. Something takes place, and Josie's health is restored.

⁴ On the importance of care in thinking about the posthuman, see Amelia DeFalco, 'Towards a Theory of Posthuman Care: Real Humans and Caring Robots,' and the research conducted by the AHRC project based at the University of Leeds, *Imagining Posthuman Care* (<https://posthumancare.org.uk/>, accessed May 10, 2023). Care also constitutes a crucial point of entry for Jean-Michel Ganteau's reading of *Klara and the Sun*, in chapter 3 of his recent monograph *The Poetics and Ethics of Attention in Contemporary British Narrative*.



Posthuman encounters are at the heart of the novel; indeed, the narrative treats companionship between humans and androids as a given. This is essentially due to Klara's position as narrator and focaliser. Her status as an 'artificial friend' means that her entire *raison d'être* lies in the bond that ties her to her human teenager. In symmetrical fashion, at a more metafictional level, her presence as an autodiegetic narrator means that human readers are made to share her perspective and intimate thoughts throughout the novel. On the whole, these connections look like unproblematic, felicitous posthuman encounters, which we might associate with a general sense of equanimity or ataraxy,⁵ as opposed to the intensely ambivalent feelings of "ecstasy" and dreaded "déjà vu" that Nicholas Royles points out as ingredients of the uncanny (Royles, 2003, 2), and which often characterise our response to the blurring of boundaries between the human self and machine other.

A crucial criterion for genuinely posthuman encounters would then lie in the sort of affect they elicit. Leaving behind those depictions of passionate desire and terror that inform the paradoxical experience of the uncanny, genuine posthuman encounters would find their basis in practices and feelings of care. Both Kathy H. and Klara, Ishiguro's not-quite-human protagonists, serve as carers. Klara also cares about humans in general, and about Josie in particular. And we readers care about Klara and come to care for her—in fact, the narrative setup means we are bound to her through companionship and empathy, which is not the case for other contemporary examples of AI companions, such as Ian McEwan's Adam in *Machines Like Me* (2019). From the perspective that we are invited to embrace in *Klara and the Sun*, it looks as if posthuman encounters might take place in that felicitous state beyond the uncanny, when we can genuinely *care for* the other instead of mainly caring about whether they might be a threat.

Yet this dream of a post-uncanny, caring state of the union between humans and AI raises a couple of questions in Ishiguro's novel. On the one hand, Klara cares about humans, but she was designed by humans to do so. On the other hand, given the author's interest in how AI affects human emotions and relations, we may legitimately wonder whether the only concern of the readers really is the human condition, with intelligent machines appearing as little more than pretexts in a predominantly anthropocentric narrative. We find indications of the latter possibility, in particular, in the rare moments in the novel where Klara does appear too close for comfort—where the old exclusionary reflexes flare up, the uncanny suddenly permeates the reading process, and we can no longer maintain the comfortable position we had assumed as readers who cared for our non-human protagonist.

What do we learn from crossing the uncanny valley with Ishiguro's AI? Do we simply take one more step in the long history of redrawing the line that separates human beings from machines? Or do we find ways of caring about and for these others that allow us to explore posthuman forms of kinship?

Klara through the uncanny valley

The relationship between Klara and humans appears as relatively unproblematic until one passage raises the matter of the boundary between AI and humans, and pits it against the posthuman stage of development that Ishiguro's fictional society seems to reflect. That passage brings up different layers of the uncanny as described over the past century, all to point to Klara's apparent betrayal of her reader's confidence in the posthuman.

⁵ For a fictional world in which this state of ataraxy is dystopically enforced, see Nicola Barker, *H(A)PPY*.

The incident takes place during the trip to the City, one reason for which is a sitting: Josie is having her portrait made by Mr Capaldi, a dubious scientist. Over the course of the sitting Klara shows uncharacteristic initiative and curiosity, in a highly dramatic scene that has her lifting curtains and pushing forbidden doors to find herself face-to-face with Josie's portrait. As a fight between Josie's parents brings the sitting to a close, Klara remains alone with Capaldi and the mother. The following dialogue reveals the truth in incremental stages:

'I apologize for examining the portrait without permission. But in the circumstances, I felt it best to do so.'

'Okay,' the Mother said ... 'Now tell us what you thought. Or rather, tell us what you think you saw up there.'

'I'd suspected for some time that Mr Capaldi's portrait wasn't a picture or a sculpture, but an AF. I went in to confirm my speculation. Mr Capaldi has done an accurate job of catching Josie's outward appearance. Though perhaps the hips should be a little narrower.' (Ishiguro, 2021, 207)

The portrait is animated and relies on the same technology as the artificial companions, which explains why the protagonist should use the acronym despite the clear difference in terms of function. Yet Klara's ingenuity or lack of a better word unravels the truth a little further:

'Klara, we're not asking you to train the new Josie. We're asking you to become her. That Josie you saw up there, as you noticed, is empty. If the day comes – I hope it doesn't, but if it does – we want you to inhabit that Josie up there with everything you've learned.'

'You wish me to inhabit her?'

'Chrissie chose you carefully with that in mind. She believed you to be the one best equipped to learn Josie. Not just superficially, but deeply, entirely. Learn her till there's no difference between the first Josie and the second. ... You're not being required simply to mimic Josie's outward behavior. You're being asked to continue her for Chrissie. And for everyone who loves Josie.' (Ishiguro, 2021, 209-210)

As narrated from Klara's perspective, the sitting brings out one shocking revelation: though Josie is not aware of it, her portrait is meant as a backup. If she dies, Klara will use all the data she has gathered on her personality so she can be downloaded into a new body, and 'continue' the little girl for her parents' benefit. What Klara's slightly confusing designation of the portrait as 'AF' eventually betrays is that the key to Josie's replacement is not a generic android in her image, however disturbing the notion, but her own AF and most attentive companion, Klara herself. The uncanny effect produced by the scene arises from the realization that our protagonist was always meant as a possible stand-in rather than a carer for her little charge. It unfolds in the in-between space in which the AF now presents herself to us, as not-quite-Josie but no-longer-quite-Klara, a less-than-perfect emulation of a human being.

Though the adults responsible for the scheme inspire a clear response of ethical disgust in the reader, there is a separate, specific way in which the android makes us recoil at this point outside of any moral considerations. However unwitting her participation in the plan, Klara is the one cog that would ensure its success. Indeed, there is reason to believe that Josie's mum would not even entertain the notion if it were not for the AF's exceptional talents of imitation. It is therefore as a near-perfect copy of the little girl, however innocent her intentions, that she elicits our sudden



repulsion—a shift we feel all the more after hundreds of pages of empathising with her. Our response as we read the scene is therefore very reminiscent of Mori’s model of an uncanny valley, that sudden dip in our affiliative response when faced with humanoid robots that look and feel a little too close for comfort. The uncanny suddenly intervenes in our perception of Klara as a moment of crisis in those patterns of caring across the divide between human and AI. On the one hand the AF’s talent of observation and ability to empathise with Josie, which was a reason we connected with her as a character, suddenly take on a very ominous significance. The calm with which Klara takes in the adults’ plan, as she quietly and cool-headedly considers the possibility of Josie’s demise, negates the bond that ties her to her little friend. Our sense of betrayal, as the assurance of Klara’s entire dedication to her duty of care suddenly breaks down, is what makes us cross the uncanny valley. On the other hand, as the dark, unsettling setting of the *coup de theatre* shows, we are meant to find something intensely disturbing in the idea of ‘continuing’ a human being as if nothing made them unique. But by suddenly clinging again to the notion of humans’ irreplaceable individuality, are we not simply bringing back those core values we painstakingly deconstructed with the help of critical posthumanism? A sign of this might be the fact that while we recoil at the idea of duplicating Josie’s soul, we readers forget that the operation would also erase Klara as Klara: in our response to the revelation, a hierarchy remains between the human and non-human characters.

The sudden dip in our otherwise unquestioned affective bond with the protagonist points to Mori’s 1970 model as the most immediate framework through which to understand the intervention of the uncanny. But the effect that lingers in the reader’s mind does not all rely on this more recent understanding of the term. Indeed, the scene combines many ingredients of the concept as defined before we entered the era of AI, and delineates a form of continuity from cursed portraits at the time when the uncanny was first defined, to posthuman avatars in the contemporary era. We can count as one such ingredient the animation of a depiction that ultimately threatens to replace its original—a turn of events reminiscent of tales of the uncanny going back to the 19th century, and especially of some of the literary examples Freud analysed in his seminal 1919 essay “Das Unheimliche.” In this case, the scene immediately points to a connection with aesthetics, as the whole operation is brought to our attention under the auspices of the art of portraiture. This, in turn, combines with multiple references to science—the androids are pieces of high tech and the process involves intricate data collection and conversion. One intertextual link actually hinges on the scientific spirit of the portraitist, rather rudely but accurately captured by the assessment of Josie’s housekeeper: “That Mr Capaldi one creep son bitch” (Ishiguro, 2021, 177). In the adjective “creepy” we immediately recognise a layman’s term encapsulating the uncanny effect. To the reader of Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann*, which held pride of place in Freud’s analysis, the Italian consonance of the name, the scientific bent of the character, and his scopoc drive—his studio is full of cameras—are all reminiscent of the Italian optician from the story, Giuseppe Coppola, who gave to animatronic doll Olympia her lifelike eyes. To Nathan, the protagonist of the story, Coppola comes to embody Coppelius, that is, the sandman himself—which explains the uncanny quality that his 21st-century avatar takes on in Ishiguro’s tale.

With that historical, theoretical, and artistic perspective in mind, Ishiguro also brings into play more contemporary aspects of the uncanny, particularly as he explores recent developments in tech and the posthuman perspective they carry. Looking at the binary structure of the scene, there is a clear gradation in the response elicited by the adults’ two-fold revelation. On the one hand, the portrait itself, or Josie’s posthumous body, is not convincing enough to pose a challenge to her as a unique being, at least just as yet: some of its details are off, and we know that the little girl’s narrow hips

are key to capturing her idiosyncratic gait. On the other hand, the notion of copying the contents of her consciousness appears as a more urgent threat and a worse form of transgression, especially as it perverts Klara's careful attention to her young friend. In terms of analyses of the uncanny as inspired by animatronic machines, it is as if, as we leave imperfect portraits behind and concern ourselves more with the possibility of turning minds into data, we have reached a later step in the history of the uncanny.

The trouble with AI: An uncanny valley of mind?

Judging from analyses published since Mori's description of the uncanny valley, it looks like the change in focus from an eerie exterior to the threat lurking inside a robot's artificial mind has paralleled the development of AI. The notion of a robot being endowed with 'intelligence' and the capacity to build on its knowledge, as the phrase 'machine learning' suggests, has become more unsettling than an android so perfect in appearance that you could barely tell it apart from a human being. In studies dedicated to the psychology of our response to robots, such as "Feeling robots and human zombies: Mind perception and the uncanny valley" by Kurt Gray and Daniel Wegner, or "Venturing into the uncanny valley of mind" by Jan-Philipp Stein and Peter Ohler, researchers noticed that subjects experienced more unease when faced with a robot that seemed to be making deliberate decisions the way a human person would than when dealing with human-looking androids with no capacity for decision-making. These findings led to the hypothesis of an "Uncanny valley of the mind," where the unsettling factor of an artificial consciousness becomes prevalent as compared to a near-perfect imitation of the human form. In the passage from the novel that caught our attention, what elicits the sense of the uncanny is not the perfection of Klara's exterior, but rather the sense that she might reproduce the "human heart," that which makes a person "special and individual" (Ishiguro, 2021, 218). Does this nuance confirm the evolution of the uncanny and of the manifestations that unlock it, suggesting that the trouble with AI lies indeed in the 'uncanny valley of the mind'? We would be particularly well placed to consider that possibility, given that the narrative gives us direct access to the flow of the AI's consciousness, which supposedly lends it this uncanny quality.

Yet outside of that passage in which human characters make us consider Klara's mind as a potential copy of human consciousness, the android protagonist's inner life is not experienced as uncanny. In fact, we are quite happy with Klara as long as her distinctive voice and mind and feelings suggest that she also is a person onto herself. The praise she receives for her exceptional abilities as an observer of the human condition is not disturbing, quite the opposite. When Josie's parents assume that the AF does not have access to the gamut of human affect, stating for instance "It must be nice sometimes to have no feelings" (Ishiguro, 2021, 97), we agree with Klara's rejoinder: "I believe I have many feelings. The more I observe, the more feelings become available to me" (Ishiguro, 2021, 98) and cannot but notice how little they understand about her. Thanks to our privileged access to her inner voice, we know that she has learnt and come to experience those things that human characters still take for signs of their own exception. Moreover, the things that characterise Klara's inner life as an AI—her cognitive difference, which means that her vision becomes pixellated at times, or that her field of vision will divide up into boxes for an easier analytical approach, her faith in the Sun, her child-like capacity for learning at an impressive rate and on all fronts—all encourage us to go through the novel with her, and see the world through her eyes. Klara's status as an empathetic narrator and focaliser might suggest that at least within the realm of fiction there is no such thing as an uncanny valley of the mind, that we are in fact fully comfortable with an intelligent



robot as a narrative agency. On the other hand, it might be that we consider the AF as an unproblematic narrator because we actually treat her as just another human being until the story forces us to remember her status as other and stresses our discomfort in the face of it. If that were the case, the absence of the uncanny would not signal a genuine posthuman encounter with her, but rather a tendency by the human reader to co-opt this human-sounding AI as a human. If we look at the characteristics that make Klara sympathetic, from her ability to feel and think for herself to our sense of her as an individual person, those seem like human traits in a very traditional, liberal humanist sense of the term. The AI narrator would then appear as little more than a pretext, as we acknowledge that human readers care more about the ways in which Klara functions *like* a human being than about what defines her as a non-human entity.

Given this propensity to prioritize sameness over difference, what might be the purpose of having us engage with the AI as our narrator and focaliser? If the viewpoint of the intelligent android is not made to take us through the uncanny valley of the mind, why should Ishiguro choose to give it pride of place by making it an essential element of the narrative dispositive?

Storytelling or, the imaginative effort to relate to others

One indication of Klara's purpose as a storytelling AI may be found, by contrast, in the assessment that another intelligent android makes of the superfluousness of narrative in a genuinely posthuman world. In *Machines Like Me*, McEwan has android Adam predicting the breakdown of the categorical boundary between human and non-human, the emergence of cross-conscience communication, and the disappearance of narrative fiction in a single breath. In a posthuman society that had achieved the dream of perfect symbiosis between humans and machines, the haiku would be the only genre with any relevance left:

My opinion ... is that the haiku is the literary form of the future. ... Nearly everything I've read in the world's literature describes varieties of human failure—of understanding, of reason, of wisdom, of proper sympathies. Failures of cognition, honesty, kindness, self-awareness; superb depictions of murder, cruelty, greed, stupidity, self-delusion, above all, profound misunderstanding of others. ... Novels ripe with tension, concealment and violence as well as moments of love and perfect formal resolution. But when the marriage of men and women to machines is complete, this literature will be redundant because we'll understand each other too well. We'll inhabit a community of minds to which we have immediate access. ... Our narratives will no longer record endless misunderstanding. Our literatures will lose their unwholesome nourishment. The lapidary haiku, the still, clear perception and celebration of things as they are, will be the only necessary form. ... We'll look back and marvel at ... how [the people of long ago] wove brilliant, even optimistic fables out of their conflicts and monstrous inadequacies and mutual incomprehension. (McEwan, 2019, 147-150)

According to Adam's logic, the ataraxic state produced by harmonious posthuman interconnections would lead to giving up on narrative altogether—for it seems the only reason we write and read “novels” and “fables” is that human beings are terrible at communicating their emotions to others, and at decyphering them. Klara, however, takes the exact opposite route to that dream of transhumanist storylessness.

From the outset, her narrative is bound up in other stories, nourished and informed by them, and her investment in others' stories directly feeds into the way she cares about them. Indeed, the *vignettes* she captures in the first section of the novel from her position as witness in the store window serve as roadmaps when it comes to caring for Josie. The memory of watching Beggar Man and his dog,

who seemed to have died of exposure and were brought back to life by a glorious burst of sunshine, prefigures the scene in which Klara lets the sun in to cure Josie at the end of part five. Similarly, the poignant re-encounter between a man and a woman who seemed like long-lost lovers inspires Klara's ultimate prayer to the sun on behalf of Josie, which highlights the value of her love story itself:

I'm remembering how delighted you were that day Coffee Cup Lady and Raincoat Man found each other again. You were so delighted and couldn't help showing it. So I know just how much it matters to you that people who love one another are brought together, even after many years. ... Please then consider Josie and Rick. They're still very young. Should Josie pass away now, they'll be parted forever. If only you could give her special nourishment, as I saw you do for Beggar Man and his dog, then Josie and Rick could go together into their adult lives ... I can myself vouch that their love is strong and lasting, just like that of Coffee Cup Lady and Raincoat Man. (Ishiguro, 2021, 275)

In the last section of the narrative we come to realise that the entire novel has consisted, in characteristic Ishiguro fashion, in retrospective evocations and assessments of the narrator's memories, articulated as her story draws to a close. One indication of this lies in the sudden shift from the preterite of narrative to tenses and aspects based on the grammatical present: as Klara sits in the Yard surrounded by refuse, describing the ebb and flow of her memories, it sounds as if the time of the story and time of enunciation finally coincide, indicating that Klara's tale, like the course of the sun across the sky, has reached completion.

Over the last few days, some of my memories have started to overlap in curious ways. For instance, the dark sky morning when the Sun saved Josie, the trip to Morgan's Falls and the illuminated diner Mr Vance chose will come into my mind, merged together into a single setting. ... [S]uch composite memories have sometimes filled my mind so vividly, I've forgotten for long moments that I am, in reality, sitting here in the Yard, on this hard ground. (Ishiguro, 2021, 301)

As she nears the moment of her "slow fade," or the obsolescence of her battery, Klara declines being moved closer to a set of other AFs, stating "I have my memories to go through and place in the right order" (Ishiguro, 2021, 306). This might be the moment when Klara sounds most like Ishiguro's other narrators, and in fact, quite like an elderly person, withdrawing into her memories as if to tell us that her life story is now complete. Looking back with her, we note that we similarly ascribed the peculiarity of Klara's earlier perceptions and reflections—especially when it came to the sun and its role in Josie's recovery—to her child-like state. From the onset, we interpreted certain deviations in social behaviour and cognitive response within the frame of human early development more than we imagined an entirely different, AI-specific model. Does this mean that storytelling legitimises a disturbingly anthropocentric conclusion? Does our response to Klara's final chapter prove that we cared for her only inasmuch as her narrative sounded like that of a human being?

Though diametrically opposed to the ataraxic and storyless communion Adam describes, Klara's investment in storytelling does not draw a picture of the human condition as mired in strife and solipsism: rather, it allows us imaginatively to connect with her *as other*. That is the case in particular because until we reach a stage of "connectivity [...] such that individual nodes of the subjective will merge into an ocean of thought," (McEwan, 2019, 149) the glorious "end of mental privacy," (McEwan, 2019, 148) we cannot possibly access the inner thoughts of others, whether human or not. Recent explorations of our response to robots suggests that what leads us to the uncanny valley when faced with AI is a theory of (machinic) mind—the sense that the artificial creature in front of



us has inner thoughts, memories, a conscience, and a sense of self. But Klara’s engaging rather than disturbing narrative reminds us that such a theory does feature constantly in our encounters with others and that it is through that fiction that we learn to recognise them as kin, to care about them, and to wonder about their inner thoughts and emotions. Like Klara, we are invited by the novel to become invested in the stories of others. In fact, storytelling and the narratives we build of others and their inner lives, allow us to deal with the poignant combination of proximity and distance that characterises our relationships, our experience of solipsistic self-awareness, and our constant search for others like us—whether human or not.

In *Klara and the Sun*, ultimately, the practice of storytelling works to remind us that the other remains irretrievably other. This is the case in particular in those last pages of the novel where Klara’s equanimity in the face of her circumstances may serve as a warning not to confuse caring with co-opting, or to care from an exclusively anthropocentric place. As the slight descriptive touches clearly tell us that the “Yard” is a junkyard, our first reflex is indignation at the thought that Klara should be ending her days far away from her ungrateful family, as a mere piece of refuse. Much more effortful than the enjoyable sense of scandal and the self-righteous condemnation of human characters who do not meet our standards is the realisation and acknowledgement of Klara’s true, perfectly non-human contentment in a place where she is left to order her memories in the presence of her most constant, most valued companion: “The wide sky means I’m able to watch the Sun’s journeys unimpeded, and even on cloudy days, I’m always aware of where he is above me” (Ishiguro, 2021, 302). In contrast to the earlier passage analysed above, where the AI narrative takes us through the uncanny valley, it seems that this final pause and non-anthropocentric acknowledgement of Klara’s story as *other* is where Ishiguro has us looking for a genuine posthuman encounter. Far from signalling Klara’s eeriness or threatening potential, her singular, distinctive mind and way of telling ultimately remind us of the need to make space in our imaginations for the lives and perspectives of others, human and not.

To Ishiguro’s reader there is no utopian, ataraxic state ‘beyond narrative’—and in this alternative to Adam’s utopia of only writing and reading haikus,⁶ we may hear something akin to Donna Haraway’s warning against a misinterpretation of the prefix ‘post’ in ‘posthumanism.’ While deconstructing the illusions of human exception we should not assume that we are ‘beyond’ the messiness and uncertainty of narrative, beyond what Haraway herself calls the ‘trouble’:

The chthonic ones are not confined to a vanished past. They are a buzzing, stinging, sucking swarm now, and human beings are not in a separate compost pile. We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman. ... the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen—yet. (Haraway, 2016, 55)

For the foreseeable future, we will be making hypotheses about the inner lives of others. What we must keep asking ourselves is whether the hypotheses we make show that we do care.

References

- Barker, N. (2017). *H(A)PPY*. Heinemann.
 Braidotti, R., & Hlavajova, M. (Eds.) (2018). *Posthuman glossary*. Bloomsbury Academic.
 Connors, C. (2023). ‘Out of interest’: Klara and the sun *and the interests of fiction*. *Textual Practice*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2023.2210096>

⁶ Nicola Barker’s take on dystopian ataraxy similarly involves a systematic reduction of the art forms and genres available.

132 *Posthuman Encounters and Patterns of Care in Klara and the Sun (2021) or, What Ishiguro's AI Tells Us About the Uncanny Valley*

- DeFalco, A. (2020). Towards a theory of posthuman care: Real humans and caring robots. *Body & Society*, 26(3), 31–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X20917450>
- Freud, S. (1985). The uncanny (1919). In *Pelican Freud library*, 14, (J. Strachey, Trans.), (pp. 335–76). Penguin.
- Gray, K. & Wegner, D. M. (2012). Feeling robots and human zombies: Mind perception and the uncanny valley. *Cognition*, 125, 125–130. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2012.06.007>
- Ganteau, J.M. (2023). *The poetics and ethics of attention in contemporary British narrative*. Routledge.
- Guru-Murthy, K. [Krishnan Guru-Murthy] (2021, March 5). The impact of artificial intelligence on human love - Kazuo Ishiguro [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZIUW55IL_M
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Hoffmann, E.T.A. (1982). The Sandman (1816). In *Tales of Hoffmann*. (R. J. Hollingdale, Trans.) Penguin.
- Ishiguro, K. (2021). *Klara and the sun*. Faber.
- McEwan, I. (2019). *Machines like me*. Jonathan Cape.
- Mori, M. (1970). The uncanny valley. *Energy*, 7(4), 33–35.
- Royles, N. (2003). *The uncanny*. Manchester University Press.
- Stein, J.-P. & Ohler, P. (2017). Venturing into the uncanny valley of mind. *Cognition*, 160, 43–50.

