

Relational Humanity: Mind-Modelling and Distributed Agency in *Klara and the Sun*

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Abstract

Adopting the approach of cognitive narratology, this study examines Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021) as a text that reflects on the concepts of the human and of identity, and on contemporary forms of relationship and empathy. In the near future imagined by Ishiguro, a society dominated by technological progress and genetic engineering entrusts the education and emotional support of young people to artificial companions, within a context marked by social isolation and relationships increasingly mediated by technology. Through the first-person focalization of Klara – the Artificial Friend endowed with advanced observational capacities, purchased to assist Josie, an ill girl – the novel stages a process of mental-state construction, showing how identity and subjectivity are formed through practices of recognition, care, and mutual dependence. Klara's narrating voice constitutes a cognitive device that prompts the reader to simulate an artificial mind engaged in interpreting human minds. The processes of mind-modelling reveal that subjectivity is the outcome of relational processes of interpretation between consciousnesses. From this perspective, Josie's identity is not replicable – as Capaldi's technological project presupposes – but is a relational configuration distributed across the affects and bonds that surround her. The novel thus dismantles the human/non-human dichotomy, redefining subjectivity as a phenomenon emerging from cognition rooted in affective, environmental, and social relations, rather than as an internal property of an isolated subject.

Keywords: cognitive narratology, mind-modelling, artificial intelligence

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the relationship between culture, the imaginary, and technological innovation has intensified considerably, as artificial intelligence has ceased to be a topic confined to specialist technological discourse or to science-fictional speculation, becoming instead a concrete and constant presence within contemporary social and economic processes. In light of the capacity of algorithms to learn, generate language, and simulate forms of emotional response, it becomes useful to redefine the traditional categories of subjectivity, autonomy, and agency.

Literature, as a privileged space for the symbolic elaboration of human experience, registers and problematizes this transformation. In contemporary English-language literature, AI no longer appears merely as a technical-functional device or as a futuristic projection, but as a presence endowed with intelligence, relational capacity, moral sensibility, and affective potential. Literary representations of artificial intelligence work through the contradictions bound up with automation and the redefinition of the relationship between the human and the non-human, problematize anthropocentrism, and make it possible to explore new forms of identity in a world dominated by technological mediation (Braidotti, 2013).

This article focuses on *Klara and the Sun*, the 2021 novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, the Japanese-born, British-naturalized writer awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. In continuity with works such as *The Remains of the Day*, winner of the Booker Prize in 1989, and *Never Let Me Go* (2005), the novel interweaves intimate stories with broader reflections on the forms of identity and on the social transformations produced by technology.

Klara and the Sun does not merely represent AI as a technological object or as a purely mechanical form of otherness; rather, it situates it within a network of affective, familial, and social relations, thereby destabilizing the traditional boundaries between the natural and the artificial, between interiority and performance, and exposing the limits of humanistic definitions of identity.

Criticism has already recognized in *Klara and the Sun* a narrative meditation on the boundaries of the human in the age of artificial intelligence (Kala & Farjana, 2026). Some scholars emphasize the fear of technological replacement and the consequent crisis of intelligence as a distinguishing criterion of human identity (Sahu & Karmakar, 2022), as well as the increase in inequality produced by automation and genetic enhancement. Other readings suggest that the novel tempers such fears by adopting a posthumanist perspective grounded in the decentring, rather than the negation, of the human (Ajeesh & Rukmini, 2023).

The present study proposes a shift in perspective: rather than interrogating the novel solely in terms of the machine's replacement of the human, it adopts the approach of cognitive narratology (Herman, 2013; Zunshine, 2006) in dialogue with the theories of narrative identity developed by Ricoeur (1992) and Bruner (1990), in order to analyse the processes through which narrative identity is constructed, interpreted, and recognized. The text participates in a broader reflection on the transformations of the human within late technological capitalism, where individual identity appears increasingly exposed to logics of replacement, optimization, and reproducibility. Artificial intelligence's growing capacity to observe, learn, and replicate ever more aspects of affective life not only destabilizes the traditional boundaries between subject and object, between the natural and the artificial, between interiority and performance, but also exposes the limits of humanistic definitions of identity. If the human is identified with

intelligence, memory, or behaviour, the machine becomes a disquieting figure, since it reveals the insufficiency of such criteria.

Theoretical Framework

Ishiguro's novel interrogates the cognitive, affective, and narrative processes that make a subjectivity recognizable; the first theoretical axis to be considered therefore concerns identity studies – that is, what makes the self recognizable and coherent over time. Between the 1980s and 1990s, the psychological, philosophical, and cognitive sciences elaborated a shared shift: identity is no longer considered a stable essence but a processual, narratively mediated construction, in which the self does not precede the story but is its effect.

Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between *idem*-identity, permanence over time as invariance of substance, and *ipse*-identity, continuity grounded not in substance but in the capacity to answer for oneself even amid change: narrative identity arises from the mediation between permanence and transformation. Daniel Dennett (1991), from an analytic perspective, reaches convergent conclusions: the self is not a localizable substance but a centre of narrative gravity, an abstraction produced by the multiplicity of interpretations that the subject elaborates about itself and receives from others. Dan P. McAdams (1993) translates this insight into the register of developmental psychology, describing identity as a personal myth that takes shape from adolescence onward through characters, plots, and an imagined ending.

Jerome Bruner identifies two modes through which the mind organizes experience – the logico-scientific mode, oriented toward verification and generalization, and the narrative mode, oriented toward the particular and situated meaning – locating identity within the latter: the narrative self is at once distributed, because it emerges through interpersonal interaction, and situated, because it is rooted in specific cultural contexts. Michael Bamberg finally marks the definitive shift from an essentialist to a processual model: identity is not a core that narrative brings to the surface, but the result of situated discursive practices, continuously negotiated within shared symbolic repertoires and structures of power (Bamberg, 2011).

A second theoretical axis to be considered is that of cognitive narratology, which emerged in the 1990s from the encounter between postclassical narratology and the cognitive sciences. This line of inquiry shifts attention from textual forms to the mental processes involved in the production and reception of narratives (Keen, 2007), highlighting that narrativity resides not only in the organization of plot but in the experience the text evokes – embodied, affective, and culturally situated (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2002; Stockwell, 2020). Stories activate embodied cognitive resources to organize experience and produce shared meaning (Herman 2003). Understanding narrative depends not solely on reconstructing events but also on the capacity to infer the workings of represented minds and to interpret their behaviour in light of the cognitive states that motivate it – that is, the intentions, beliefs, desires, emotions, and goals of characters (Palmer, 2004).

According to Patrick Colm Hogan (2011), narrative is simulative imagination: to follow a story is to explore possible worlds and to construct provisional, continually revisable mental models of other minds. Understanding characters relies on Theory of Mind – the capacity to attribute mental states to others (Zunshine, 2006) – and on mind-modelling, through which the reader progressively constructs and revises a coherent model of a character's mind (Stockwell, 2009; Stockwell & Mahlberg, 2015). Reading a novel means engaging with characters endowed with

desires, beliefs, emotions, intentions, secrets, errors, and contradictions; literary fiction thus constitutes a genuine exercise in social intelligence.

Klara's Point of View: Mind-Modelling, Agency, and Identity

Ishiguro's novel is set in a near future dominated by artificial intelligence and genetic engineering, in which the education and emotional support of young people are delegated almost entirely to artificial companions (AFs, or Artificial Friends). Although they perform a crucial function grounded in a capacity traditionally associated with the human, they are treated as mere objects.

Klara, Josie's AF and the novel's narrator, is an android endowed with an extraordinary empathic capacity who, through her innocent and deeply receptive gaze, offers a representation of human relationships from a non-human perspective. In a world dominated by capitalism and the race for enhancement at any cost, Josie, the co-protagonist, is subjected – at her mother's insistence – to a high-risk genetic procedure, the same one that killed her sister Sal, because it is nearly the only way to gain access to a good education. Her friend Rick, who has not undergone the procedure, is excluded from this path, so that genetic enhancement also becomes an instrument of class division.

In the world imagined by Ishiguro, where a mechanistic approach to existence prevails, the more advanced AF models (the B3s) prove to be more cynical and less empathic. Klara, willing to sacrifice herself out of love for Josie, embodies values that the human world is losing, thereby introducing a form of ethical alterity (Misra, 2023; Alkodimi, 2024).

The entire narrative is filtered through Klara's gaze, which synthesizes external information both through a self-reflexive stream of consciousness and through an almost scientific method, deploying two opposing registers, one affective and the other machinic (Sumner, 2023). In this way, the AF does not offer an objective view of reality but an interpretation conditioned by her own emotions – not unlike the way human beings gather sensory information and make analyses and predictions shaped by cultural background (MacKenzie & Munster, 2019).

A telling example is the passage in which Klara observes seven overlapping images of the sun across as many glass surfaces, coming to understand that there is no single image, but as many versions as there are gazes that construct it:

(...) I wasn't looking at a single picture (...) in fact there existed a different version of the Sun's face on each of the glass surfaces, and what I might at first have taken for a unified image was in fact seven separate ones superimposed one over the other as my gaze penetrated from the first sheet through to the last. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 195)

Klara's subjectivity emerges from the interplay between her observational perspective and the reader's inferential work, and thus constitutes an effect of mind-modelling (Palmer, 2004; Zunshine, 2006). Klara's first-person narration is not merely a point of view but a cognitive device that prompts the reader to model an artificial mind that, in turn, models human minds. This is a multi-layered structure of simulation (Shang, 2024): the reader models Klara; Klara models Josie, Chrissie, Rick, Paul, and Capaldi; the other characters, in turn, model Klara according to reductive categories (servant, machine, substitute).

Reading Ishiguro as a cognitive novelist (Nayebpour, 2017, pp. 23–30) means treating the novel as a laboratory of mental simulation. The reader, as Palmer explains, constructs fictional minds by gathering the information disseminated throughout the text and organizing it through the schema of continuous consciousness. The reader of Ishiguro’s novel does not know what Klara is in ontological terms, but progressively constructs her mind on the basis of how she interprets scenes, organizes perceptions, links apparently separate events, attributes intentions to the Sun, and decides to act to save Josie. The reader inhabits the perspective of an artificial entity and constructs its mental model through the same inferential mechanisms used to interpret real minds. This produces, as Diane Leblond (2024) observes, not the repulsion effect theorized by Masahiro Mori in his “uncanny valley”¹ hypothesis, but a cognitive and emotional identification that allows the reader to share the android’s perspective, attribute to her a coherent inner life, and recognize her as a subjectivity capable of thought, emotion, and care.

Klara does not simply copy Josie by replicating information about her; rather, she progressively constructs a model of her mind as situated within a network of relations. As Shang (2024) observes, this distinguishes Ishiguro’s robotic narrative from other literary representations of artificial intelligence: Klara is a narrator who constitutes herself through the very act of reading others, a subject whose self emerges from the observation of otherness: “But the more I watched, the more I wanted to learn, and unlike Rosa, I became puzzled, then increasingly fascinated by the more mysterious emotions passers-by would display in front of us” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 16).

The reader is at once observer and subject of the same inferential process. This produces an effect of analytical reciprocity: by observing how Klara constructs human minds, the reader discovers the mechanisms by which she constructs Klara’s mind, and, by extension, the mechanisms by which she constructs any narrative mind. Klara’s first person thus becomes an epistemological mirror: it does not reflect the human but reveals the structure of the process that constitutes the human as recognizable.

The reader tends to attribute complex mental states to Klara because her narration produces continuity, intentionality, and responsibility; this attribution does not depend on any genuine interiority possessed by Klara, nor does it amount simply to a process of humanization, but is bound up with the cognitive disposition to construct minds from narrative cues.

Klara and the Sun is thus a profoundly cognitive text, since it does not merely represent an artificial mind but exposes the mechanisms through which the reader attributes a mind to a fictional, artificial, and linguistically organized being.

The Ricoeurian distinction between *idem* (identity-substance) and *ipse* (identity-promise, constituted through narrative fidelity to oneself) illuminates the central theoretical node of the novel. Capaldi’s project presupposes an *idem*-identity: a set of internal data replicable in a new body. Klara instead comes to understand, through observation, that Josie is unique not because she possesses something inside her, but because of the love others feel for her: “There was something very special, but it wasn’t inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 213). Identity is thus represented not as a substance to be transferred but as a relational

¹ The uncanny valley is a psychological and aesthetic phenomenon theorized in the 1970s, whereby human replicas – such as realistic robots, CGI (computer-generated imagery) characters, or artificial intelligence avatars – appear almost, but not entirely, human. This slight imperfection provokes in observers a sudden feeling of unease, revulsion, or cognitive dissonance.

configuration sustained by recognition and affection; at the same time, care becomes the operative criterion of the human (Leblond, 2024).

This relational ontology, as Li and Eddebo (2023) note, makes it possible to move beyond both biological essentialism, which reduces the human to its organic belonging, and cognitivist functionalism, which tends to identify the subject with a set of mental performances.

A similar perspective finds an antecedent in the social and externalist developments of cognitive narratology. In particular, the notion of the intermental mind elaborated by Alan Palmer (2004) shows how thoughts, intentions, and identity are not entirely contained within individual interiority but take shape through dialogic processes, social interactions, and forms of shared cognition. The narrative self is therefore conceived as a configuration continuously negotiated within relations with other subjects and with the context in which it acts.

If cognitive and externalist approaches maintain that mind and identity exceed the boundaries of the individual subject, posthumanist thought extends this decentring to the notion of agency – understood as the capacity to formulate intentions, make decisions, and shape the course of events. Agency represents the point of intersection between cognition and action: it does not simply describe what a character does, but concerns the way in which the reader recognizes, in a character's actions, the expression of a will, of goals, and of deliberative processes. Perspectives developed within posthumanist studies (Hayles, 1999; Latour, 2005; Braidotti, 2013) conceive of agency not as a faculty possessed exclusively by the human subject, but as a relational and distributed effect, produced by the interaction among bodies, technologies, environments, objects, and discursive practices.

From this point of view, Klara is not simply an artificial mind whose cognitive capacities or resemblance to the human are to be assessed; rather, her action is bound up with her own technological structure, with the sun, with partial interpretations of her environment, and with her relationship to Josie and to the other characters. Her agency, in other words, is defined by networks of dependence and reciprocity within which subjectivity takes shape (Şencan, 2024).

Klara grasps the solitude of human beings, their hesitations, their affective strategies, Chrissie's unspoken suffering, Rick's marginality, Paul's anguish. Yet she interprets the Sun, pollution, and Josie's illness according to a causal system that does not coincide with the human-scientific one. This does not make her mind simply wrong; on the contrary, it shows that every mind, human or artificial, constructs models of the world on the basis of its own cognitive schemas, perceptual limits, and operative beliefs. Her capacity to intuit beyond perceptual data – and thus also to produce mistaken interpretations, not only attributing quasi-mystical healing powers to the sun but also, owing to the limits of her own programming, failing to recognize herself as a victim of the exploitation to which she is subjected – allows the reader to empathize with her.

The perspective of affective narratology explains that narratives do not simply represent emotions but can elicit them in the reader through processes of embodied simulation and narrative empathy. Suzanne Keen (2007) defines narrative empathy as a convergence of cognitive processing and emotional engagement, made possible by specific textual strategies such as internal focalization, first-person narration, or the use of perceptual detail. In this case, emotional resonance is fostered by the particular form of intimacy produced by the reader's access to states of mind and experiences unknown to the other characters – such as Klara's sense of inadequacy relative to the newer AF models that surpass her in capability, which drives

her to devote herself unconditionally to caring for her human and to prevent the child and her mother from regretting having chosen her over a more advanced model: “[...] my best course was to work harder than ever to be a good AF to Josie” (Ishiguro, 2021, pp. 82–83).

Klara’s care for Josie generates genuine engagement even though the reader knows they are dealing with an artificial entity. If empathy is thus activated independently of the nature of its object, it can no longer serve as the criterion distinguishing the human from the non-human. Identity therefore appears as a relational and affectively mediated phenomenon – the effect, not the premise, of the interweaving of care, recognition, and the reader’s interpretive work.

Ishiguro’s novel does not ask whether an artificial intelligence might become human, but instead calls into question the assumption that the human possesses a consistency of its own, prior and superior to the network of relations, affects, and dependencies in which it is always already immersed. The narrative device through which the correspondence between humanity and biological belonging is problematized is the very concept of mind-modelling. From the perspective of cognitive narratology, the reader does not access characters’ minds directly but constructs a model of them on the basis of behavioural, perceptual, and discursive cues distributed throughout the text (Palmer, 2004; Zunshine, 2006). The reader thus follows Klara’s reasoning, comes to know her expectations, accesses her memories, registers her interpretive errors, and connects her decisions to relatively stable motivations. The point is not to establish whether Klara truly possesses a consciousness equivalent to a human one; the theoretically significant issue is that the narrative form leads the reader to regard her as the perspectival centre of an experience made up of perceptions organized within a temporal continuity, of memories that orient subsequent interpretations, and of beliefs that can be confirmed or disproven – and her actions acquire meaning in relation to her care for Josie. Klara’s faith in the Sun, her sometimes literal reading of social signals, and her difficulty in understanding the emotional instability of human beings prevent a full anthropomorphic assimilation; the reader thus never forgets her technological nature, yet still models the android’s subjectivity even in the absence of a biologically human body.

Mind-modelling in the novel thus performs a function that is at once cognitive and ethical. Cognitive, because it allows Klara to be modelled as a mind endowed with continuity, memory, beliefs, and affective orientations; the reader also recognizes Klara as an ethically relevant subjectivity, not because he or she forgets her artificial nature, but because the novel renders intelligible her perceptions, her beliefs, her errors, and her capacity for care. Narrative form thus separates, at least on the level of reading experience, the attribution of interiority from the biological criterion.

In the final scene, Klara is placed in a scrapyards together with other now-obsolete Artificial Friends. The scrapyards is the site where the narrating consciousness meets its own materiality: while Klara’s identity survives as narrative memory, her artificial body re-enters the ecological regime of waste (Kim, 2025, pp. 128–130). Klara is used to sustain human cycles of care and projection into the future, but is ultimately excluded from them: she cares for Josie without herself becoming the recipient of a corresponding obligation of care.

The scrapyards scene makes manifest the contradiction between two different forms of existence. On the narrative level, Klara retains a biography, a memory, and an individual perspective; on the economic and technological level, her body remains a replaceable product, subject to obsolescence. Technology thus does not appear as an escape from material finitude: organic mortality is replaced by industrial obsolescence, while the transhumanist promise of

preserving or replicating the individual proves to be internal to a production chain that continually generates new objects.

Conclusion

Ishiguro's novel offers a reflection on questions central to the debate on artificial intelligence, a debate largely focused on the possibility that the machine might replace the human, and within which there is a strong tendency to interpret AI through anthropocentric categories, attributing to it intentionality and consciousness modelled on human experience. *Klara and the Sun* shifts attention away from the question of whether a machine might "become human" toward the more radical question of the processes through which a subjectivity is recognized, modelled, and invested with ethical value.

Klara appears human not because she possesses an interiority assimilable to a biological one, but because she is situated within a network of gazes, expectations, and affects that render her meaningful to the other characters: her agency emerges from the relations in which she is embedded, not from a full subjective autonomy. The point is not to establish whether Klara is truly a subject, but to understand how her presence transforms the way humans define themselves and recognize care, attention, and empathy. Klara thus becomes the figure through which the novel tests the humanistic criteria of subjectivity – intelligence, affect, memory, responsibility.

The device that makes this critical interrogation possible is mind-modelling itself: the fact that the reader constructs a coherent artificial mind, follows its experience, and responds to it affectively is not mere anthropomorphic projection, but proof that the criteria by which we attribute interiority are cognitive, narrative, and relational – not exclusively biological. The reader knows that Klara is not human, and yet responds emotionally as though she were: in this gap between ontological awareness and affective engagement, the workings of narrative empathy become visible. If empathy is activated independently of the human nature of its object, it can no longer serve as the stable criterion distinguishing the human from the non-human.

Cognitive narratology, affective narratology, and posthumanist theory prove to be complementary dimensions of the same reading: cognitive narratology shows how the reader constructs Klara's mind through processes of inference; affective narratology clarifies how this construction produces emotional engagement; posthumanist theory explains why such subjectivity cannot be thought in terms of the autonomous individual, but must be read as an effect of relations, material dependencies, and the co-determination of the human and the non-human.

The fact that the reader constructs a coherent artificial mind, inhabits it with empathy, and recognizes it as an ethically relevant subjectivity is not an effect of illusion or projection, but proof that the criteria by which interiority is attributed are not biological but cognitive, narrative, and affective. The boundary between the human and the non-human does not precede the relation but is continually produced, negotiated, and destabilized by the forms through which a mind is narrated, interpreted, and recognized.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that OpenAI's ChatGPT was used exclusively during the proofreading and cross-checking stages of this manuscript. Its use was limited to verify the accuracy and consistency of references and citations and ensuring compliance with APA standards as well as the formatting and stylistic guidelines of the IAFOR conference proceedings. All ideas, interpretations, and analytical claims presented in this manuscript are the author's original work. The author retains full responsibility for the content, and the use of AI-assisted technologies did not replace scholarly judgment, critical analysis, or academic authorship.

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