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Borrowed Grief Projection, Mourning, and the Artificial Screen in Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun (2021) has generally been read through the lens of posthumanism, with critics asking what the novel says about artificial minds, consciousness, and the ethical status of machines built to feel (Ajeesh and Rukmini; Sahu and Karmakar). Klara, the Artificial Friend (AF) who narrates the novel, is repeatedly framed by scholarship as a test case for whether a machine can possess genuine interiority, and whether human beings can ever truly know that interiority from the outside (Shang). This paper takes a different approach. Rather than asking what Klara is, it asks what Klara is used for. Read this way, Klara and the Sun is less a novel about artificial intelligence than a novel about human beings who cannot bear to look directly at loss, illness, and death, and who therefore route their most unbearable feelings through a listening, watching, uncomplaining object that will not look away, argue back, or die on its own schedule. Josie's mother, Chrissie, projects her anticipatory grief and her guilt over Josie's genetic "lifting" onto Klara by quietly preparing Klara to become a replacement daughter. Josie herself, isolated by illness from ordinary adolescent life, projects her need for an unthreatening companion onto Klara rather than risk further loss with human friends. Even Rick and the wider adult world around the Arthur family treat AFs as safe vessels for anxieties they will not name directly. Klara, in other words, functions across the novel as a screen: an entity human characters can fill with their own dread of mortality precisely because she seems not to have a mortality, or a claim, of her own.

The argument proceeds in four stages. First, it sets out a theoretical vocabulary for describing this kind of projection, drawing on Freud's account of mourning, Winnicott's concept of the transitional object, and Sherry Turkle's sociological account of the "relational artifact." Second, it offers a close reading of the novel's central relationship of projection: Chrissie's plan to have Klara "continue" Josie should Josie die, and the way this plan turns Klara from companion into vessel. Third, it considers Josie's own, gentler use of Klara as a shield against the ordinary risks of human intimacy, and contrasts this with Josie's more volatile friendship with the unlifted boy Rick, whose independent will repeatedly resists being absorbed into anyone else's emotional plans. Finally, it turns to the novel's ending, in which Klara is retired to a scrapyard once her therapeutic usefulness has been exhausted, and argues that this disposal is the logical conclusion of treating an artificial mind primarily as an emotional screen rather than as an end in itself. Throughout, the paper's method is close reading supported by a deliberately mixed theoretical apparatus: psychoanalytic concepts developed for entirely human relationships are read against, and sometimes productively against the grain of, recent posthumanist scholarship on the novel, in order to show that Ishiguro's central interest lies less in the ontology of artificial minds than in the psychology of the humans who depend on them.

A Vocabulary for Projection

Psychoanalysis offers a long-standing vocabulary for the displacement of unbearable feeling onto an external object. Freud's classic distinction between mourning and melancholia describes mourning as the slow, conscious work of withdrawing emotional investment from a lost object, and melancholia as a pathological failure to complete that withdrawal, in which the lost object is instead internalised and the mourner's own ego becomes the site of endless, unresolved grief (Freud 244-45). Chrissie's arrangement with the portrait artist Mr Capaldi, discussed below, can be read



as an attempt to avoid mourning altogether by refusing to let the object of loss become fully absent: rather than withdraw her attachment from Josie, she tries to relocate it into a substitute body before the loss has even occurred. This is mourning performed in advance and displaced onto an artificial vessel, which is a considerably stranger manoeuvre than either of Freud's two categories, though it borrows the logic of both.

D. W. Winnicott's concept of the transitional object supplies a second, complementary vocabulary. For Winnicott, an infant's blanket or soft toy occupies an intermediate zone between the self and the world; it is treated as though it has its own reality and yet everyone involved silently agrees not to ask whether the object truly reciprocates the child's attachment to it (Winnicott 90-91). What matters is not whether the object is "really" alive but that its presence is stable enough for the child to rehearse difficult feelings of separation in a low-risk setting. Klara occupies precisely this intermediate zone for the human characters around her. Josie and Chrissie both behave, at different moments, as though Klara possesses full inner life, and both also treat her, when it is convenient, as a manageable, replaceable thing. The novel refuses to resolve this ambiguity, and it is exactly this refusal that makes Klara so useful to the humans who rely on her: an object that might or might not be a subject is safer to grieve into than another person would be.

Sherry Turkle's sociological research on human attachment to social robots gives this psychoanalytic vocabulary a contemporary, technological register. Turkle argues that people are strongly inclined to anthropomorphise responsive machines, attaching to them a form of care and grief precisely because such machines are safe: they will not judge, betray, or grow tired of the user, and, crucially, in Turkle's account, they do not "run away or die" in the way a human intimate might (Turkle). Turkle further observes that this appeal is bound up with a fear of intimacy as much as a fear of loneliness: people are drawn to devices that offer "the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship." Klara and the Sun dramatises this insight almost literally. Klara is chosen from the AF store window because she is attentive and undemanding; she is retained in the household because she asks for nothing in return; and she becomes, over the course of the novel, exactly the safe, controllable object of attachment that Turkle's interviewees describe wanting, but rarely admit to wanting, from their own devices.

Chrissie's Portrait: Grief Displaced in Advance

The clearest instance of projection in the novel is Chrissie's arrangement with Mr Capaldi to have Klara study and, if necessary, embody Josie. Structurally, this project runs parallel to Josie's illness throughout the novel, and its true purpose is disclosed only gradually: Chrissie is not simply providing her sick daughter with company; she is quietly building a contingency plan against her own anticipatory grief. When she asks Klara to watch Josie's every gesture, to learn her voice and walk and turn of phrase, she is not commissioning a portrait so much as commissioning a vessel that could carry her love for Josie forward should Josie's body fail. This is mourning performed pre-emptively and displaced onto a machine, which lets Chrissie avoid confronting directly either her guilt over the genetic "lifting" that endangered Josie's health or the plain fact of what she might lose. Ishiguro is careful never to let Chrissie state this motive outright; the reader, like Klara, must infer it from small, guarded requests and from Chrissie's occasional flashes of a grief she quickly suppresses. The affective labour this arrangement demands of Klara -- watching, absorbing, imitating, without complaint or reward -- has been read by other critics as a broader commentary on how caring labour, when it is displaced onto an artificial or subordinate figure, becomes invisible and unpaid (Du 555-56). Read alongside Du's argument, Chrissie's project looks less like an isolated eccentricity and more like an intensified, literalised version of a familiar social pattern: the person doing the emotional work of holding a family together during illness is often the person whose own feelings and labour go least acknowledged, and in this novel that person is not even human.

The scene in which Chrissie, late in the novel, asks Klara to imitate Josie's voice and mannerisms in front of her is the moment at which the projection becomes almost unbearable to witness. Klara complies, as she has been built to comply, and the reader is given a portrait of a mother rehearsing, through a machine, a version of her daughter that she is trying to keep in reserve against the future. What is significant for the present argument is that Klara herself understands what is being asked of her far better than Chrissie is willing to acknowledge. Klara reflects on whether it would be possible to "continue" Josie convincingly, weighing the request with an odd, formal seriousness that throws into relief just how little Chrissie has actually considered the ethical strangeness of what she is proposing. The novel thus stages an imbalance that recurs throughout: the human characters treat Klara's interior responses as beside the point, while the narrative discourse -- because it is focalised entirely through Klara -- insists that they are not beside the point at all.



Josie's Screen: Illness, Isolation, and Safe Companionship

Josie's use of Klara is gentler than her mother's, but it belongs to the same pattern of projection. Confined to bed for long stretches by her illness and cut off from ordinary schooling, Josie has limited opportunities to form or sustain friendships with other children; her most significant human peer relationship, with Rick, is itself complicated by the social gulf that genetic "lifting" has opened between lifted and unlifted children. Klara, by contrast, is available at all hours, asks nothing of Josie, and cannot be lost to illness, rejection, or the ordinary drift of adolescent friendship. In Turkle's terms, Klara offers Josie companionship without the demands of friendship, at exactly the point in Josie's life when the demands of friendship feel most dangerous because her own mortality is so uncertain. Josie's attachment to Klara is not manipulative in the way Chrissie's is; it is closer to Winnicott's transitional object, a stable, non-judging presence that allows Josie to rehearse feelings of security and companionship that her illness has made otherwise difficult to access. But the novel is careful to show that this gentler form of projection still uses Klara instrumentally. Josie's moods, appetite, and health preoccupy every one of Klara's observations, yet Josie rarely asks Klara what Klara herself might want, need, or fear, and the narrative's dramatic irony depends on the reader noticing this asymmetry even where Josie does not.

Guanghui Shang's account of "one-sided mindreading" in the novel gives this asymmetry a precise theoretical name. Shang argues that both the humans and the AF narrator engage in mindreading -- the attempt to infer another's mental states from observable behaviour -- but that this mindreading never becomes reciprocal: humans do not extend to Klara the same interpretive charity they expect from her, and the novel uses this imbalance to interrogate the limits of human-machine "intersubjectivity" (Shang 3-4). Applied to Josie's relationship with Klara, Shang's argument clarifies why what looks like intimacy in the novel is, structurally, still a form of projection. Josie needs Klara to read her correctly, moment by moment, in order to feel cared for; she is under no equivalent obligation to read Klara accurately in return. The relationship survives, in other words, precisely because only one party's inner life is treated as a serious object of interpretation.

It is worth pausing on the contrast the novel draws between Josie's relationship with Klara and her relationship with Rick, precisely because the contrast throws the mechanics of projection into relief. Rick is not a safe object in the way Klara is: he has his own vulnerabilities, his own resentments about being unlifted, and his own uncertain future, and the friendship between Rick and Josie is repeatedly strained by exactly the kinds of disappointment, misunderstanding, and jealousy that a transitional object like Klara is structurally incapable of producing. Ishiguro does not resolve this contrast into a simple moral in which human friendship is shown to be straightforwardly superior to artificial companionship. Rick and Josie's bond survives illness, social humiliation, and the pressure of divergent futures, but it survives at a cost that Josie's bond with Klara never has to bear, because Klara can be relied upon never to want anything for herself that might conflict with what Josie wants. The asymmetry Shang identifies at the level of mindreading therefore has a visible correlate at the level of plot: Rick's inner life periodically disrupts Josie's plans and expectations in a way that Klara's inner life, however rich it may privately be, is never permitted to do.

The Sun as Displaced Object of Belief

A further, subtler form of projection operates through Klara's own devotion to the Sun, which she comes to regard as a benevolent, healing force capable of saving Josie's life. Solar-powered herself, Klara reasons about the Sun's nourishing properties by analogy with her own experience, eventually striking what she understands as a bargain with the Sun in exchange for Josie's recovery. Critics working in new materialist and vital materialist frameworks have taken this relationship seriously as a form of nonhuman agency, arguing that Klara's solar attunement is not merely naive animism but a materially grounded relationship between two nonhuman forces, machine and star, that quietly does real narrative work in the novel independent of human belief (Khan and Zaidi). For the purposes of the present argument, however, what matters most is the mirroring this produces: just as the human characters project their fear of Josie's death onto Klara, Klara projects her own hope for Josie's survival onto the Sun. The novel constructs a chain of displaced hope and grief -- Chrissie onto Klara, Josie onto Klara, Klara onto the Sun -- in which almost no character faces mortality without an intermediary object to carry the weight of that confrontation. Klara is at once the recipient of human projection and, in her devotion to the Sun, a projecting subject in her own right, which considerably complicates any reading of her as a simple blank screen. She absorbs feeling from the humans around her, but she is not merely inert in doing so; she reprocesses that feeling into a private, quasi-religious framework of her own.



Disposal: The Cost of Being a Screen

The novel's final movement makes the cost of this arrangement explicit. Once Josie recovers and moves toward an independent adult life, Klara's usefulness to the household quietly expires; she is retired to a yard among other discarded AFs, from where she narrates the novel's closing pages with a striking absence of resentment. Several critics have read this ending as an indictment of the disposability built into any relationship where an artificial being exists primarily to manage another party's feelings: once Chrissie's anticipatory grief and Josie's isolation are no longer active problems, the vessel built to absorb them has no further role (Sahu and Karmakar). This is the logical terminus of projection as this paper has described it. An object onto which one displaces unbearable feeling is valuable only for as long as the feeling remains unbearable; when the feeling resolves, whether through recovery, acceptance, or the simple passage of time, the object that carried it can be set aside without the ceremony that would attend the loss of a person. Ishiguro underscores the poignancy of this by having Klara herself articulate no complaint about her diminished circumstances in the yard, reflecting instead, with characteristic equanimity, on the fullness of the purpose she was able to serve. The reader is left to supply the outrage that Klara does not permit herself, and it is precisely this restraint -- Klara's refusal to demand recognition for the emotional labour she performed -- that makes the novel's critique of human projection land as sharply as it does.

Conclusion

Read as a novel about artificial consciousness alone, Klara and the Sun invites an essentially unanswerable question: does Klara really feel anything, and can a human ever know? Read as a novel about projection, the more productive question is not whether Klara feels, but what her presumed capacity to feel, or not to feel, allows the human characters around her to avoid feeling directly themselves. Chrissie displaces her anticipatory grief over Josie's possible death into a contingency plan enacted through Klara's body. Josie displaces her fear of further loss, in an already isolating illness, into a companionship that asks nothing of her in return. And Klara, in turn, displaces her own hope for Josie's survival onto the Sun, in a private echo of the very projection she has absorbed from her human family. The novel's quiet tragedy is that all of this displaced feeling is real -- the grief is real, the isolation is real, the hope is real -- and yet the vessel that makes this feeling bearable is treated, in the end, as replaceable. Ishiguro's achievement is to narrate all of it from inside the vessel's own point of view, so that the reader, unlike most of the human characters in the novel, is never permitted to forget that the screen might have an interior of its own.

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