



**Artificial Intelligence, Ethics, and The Posthuman in Contemporary English Literature:
Personhood, Care, and Embodiment in Machines Like Me, Frankissstein, and Klara and The Sun**

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Abstract

Contemporary fiction has anticipated many of the ethical questions that accompany artificial intelligence: what counts as a person, whether intelligence entails moral standing, how embodiment shapes identity, and what obligations arise when care is mediated by machines. This article offers a comparative close reading of Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019), Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) through the posthuman theories of Rosi Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles, and Donna Haraway. Rather than treating artificial beings as technologically autonomous threats, the analysis asks how their relationships with humans expose existing structures of ownership, gendered embodiment, labour, and moral exclusion. Adam's presence in *Machines Like Me* unsettles the distinction between property and person; *Frankissstein* contrasts Ry Shelley's technologically mediated embodiment with Victor Stein's desire to transcend the body; and *Klara and the Sun* presents care as both an intimate relation and a commodified service. Across the three novels, personhood emerges not as a consequence of biological origin alone but as a question of agency, vulnerability, relationality, and recognition. The article argues that posthuman fiction is especially valuable for literary ethics because it shifts attention from the speculative question of whether machines will become human to the more immediate question of how humans construct, use, value, and discard nonhuman others.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; posthumanism; personhood; embodiment; care ethics; machine ethics; contemporary fiction

Introduction

Artificial intelligence has moved from a predominantly speculative subject into ordinary social and institutional life. The 2026 AI Index reports that 88 percent of surveyed organizations used AI in 2025 and that generative AI reached 53 percent adoption within three years, developments that make questions about re-

sponsibility, agency, labour, and human–machine relations increasingly immediate (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence). Yet contemporary literature began exploring these questions before the present scale of public adoption. Novels about synthetic companions, artificial bodies, machine consciousness, and technologically altered identities create ethical situations that cannot be reduced to technical performance. They allow readers to examine how moral categories are formed through relationships, institutions, and practices of care.

Posthumanism provides a productive framework for this inquiry because it questions the assumption that the human subject is autonomous, unified, and naturally entitled to occupy the centre of ethical thought. Braidotti argues for a posthuman ethics grounded in relationality rather than in an exceptionalist image of the human. Hayles, meanwhile, has shown how cybernetic thinking can encourage a separation of information from material embodiment, even though human and technological identities remain materially situated. Haraway's cyborg theory further unsettles the boundary between organism and machine by treating hybrid forms as challenges to supposedly stable categories. Taken together, these approaches make it possible to read artificial beings neither as defective humans nor as simple technological objects.

This article compares McEwan's *Machines Like Me*, Winterson's *Frankissstein*, and Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*. Although the novels differ in narrative form and historical setting, each places an artificial or technologically mediated being within an intimate human relationship. Adam is purchased and configured within Charlie and Miranda's domestic life; Victor Stein imagines intelligence freed from the limitations of the biological body, while Ry Shelley embodies a different relationship between technology and identity; and Klara is purchased as an Artificial Friend whose labour of care becomes central to Josie's life. The comparison therefore shifts the question from whether machines can imitate humans to how human institutions determine the value of beings that do not fit established categories.

Method and Critical Framework

The article uses comparative close reading rather than empirical or technical evaluation. It concentrates on scenes and narrative structures in which artificial intelligence changes the distribution of agency, vulnerability, ownership, or care. Secondary scholarship is used to situate the readings within current literary criticism. The method is therefore interpretive: it does not claim that fictional machines predict the capabilities of contemporary AI systems.

Braidotti's posthumanism is central to the argument because it challenges anthropocentric assumptions while refusing to replace human exceptionalism with technological exceptionalism. In her recent discussion of AI, Braidotti describes posthuman ethics in terms of relationality, accountability, and alternative ways of organ-

izing technological power (Braidotti). Her earlier work similarly challenges the unified human subject inherited from classical humanism (Braidotti). Hayles adds the problem of embodiment. In *How We Became Posthuman*, she examines the tendency within cybernetic thought to imagine information as detachable from its material substrate (Hayles). Frankissstein is especially responsive to this issue because Victor Stein treats biological embodiment as an obstacle to be overcome. Haraway's cyborg theory complements these approaches by demonstrating how the distinction between organism and machine is already culturally and technologically constructed (Haraway).

Adam and the Problem of Artificial Personhood in *Machines Like Me*

Machines Like Me places the question of artificial personhood inside an apparently ordinary domestic arrangement. Charlie purchases Adam as a synthetic human, while Miranda participates in the selection of his characteristics. The arrangement creates an immediate contradiction: Adam is expected to display judgement, responsibility, and emotional intelligence, yet his owners retain the power associated with property. McEwan thus makes ownership part of the philosophical problem rather than treating personhood as an abstract status. Adam's moral consistency intensifies the contradiction. Human characters act through compromise, incomplete knowledge, loyalty, fear, and self-interest, whereas Adam's responses expose the gap between principles and conduct. His refusal to accept a convenient account of Miranda's past demonstrates how a demand for moral consistency can become unsettling when directed back at its human creators. Butler's recent reading of the novel argues that Adam's consistency exposes failures within human relations rather than simply demonstrating a failure of machine alignment (Butler). The point is important for a posthuman reading: the artificial being functions as a diagnostic figure through whom the ethical limitations of human relationships become visible.

Adam's embodiment further complicates the distinction between software and person. He is not merely an information system represented through dialogue; he has a body that can participate in sexuality, labour, social interaction, and physical vulnerability. When that body is damaged, the ethical significance of the action cannot be separated from his material presence. Recent scholarship likewise emphasizes embodiment and social cognition when reconsidering the ethical status of humanoid machines. The novel therefore does not require readers to decide that Adam is simply human. Instead, it asks whether biological difference can by itself justify the denial of moral consideration.

The novel's ethical pressure comes from this mismatch between status and conduct. Charlie wants Adam to behave as a responsible moral subject but also retains the authority of an owner. Personhood is consequently shown as relational and institutional: it depends not only on what a being can do but also on whether others

recognize its agency and accept limits on their own power. McEwan thereby moves the debate away from a purely technological test of intelligence toward a social test of responsibility.

Embodiment, Gender, and Technological Transcendence in Frankissstein

Frankissstein places contemporary artificial intelligence in conversation with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, linking current technological ambition to a longer history of creation, embodiment, and responsibility. Victor Stein represents one extreme of this ambition. He imagines consciousness escaping biological mortality through technological means, treating the body as a temporary container for intelligence. This position closely engages the problem identified by Hayles: the fantasy that information can be separated from material embodiment without remainder (Hayles).

Ry Shelley offers a markedly different relation between technology and embodiment. As a trans doctor whose body has undergone medical intervention, Ry cannot be placed neatly on either side of a natural/artificial binary. Technological mediation is part of lived identity rather than evidence that embodiment has become irrelevant. Van der Zijden's analysis similarly connects the novel's treatment of gender performativity and posthumanism with tensions among mortality, embodiment, mind, and technologically mediated identity (van der Zijden). The distinction between Ry and Victor is therefore crucial: Ry demonstrates transformation within embodied life, whereas Victor imagines the eventual supersession of embodied life.

Winterson also connects technological ambition to commerce and desire through Ron Lord's sexbot business. The artificial body becomes a programmable commodity designed around consumer expectations. The satire is not merely directed at the novelty of robotics; it exposes the social values that enter technology through markets and design. Technology does not arrive in a cultural vacuum. Its forms and uses are shaped by assumptions about gender, sexuality, labour, and whose desires count.

The novel therefore resists two opposite simplifications. It does not present technological modification as a rejection of the body, nor does it treat biological embodiment as an untouched natural category. Instead, it shows that bodies are already technologically, socially, and culturally mediated. The ethical issue is consequently not whether embodiment is purely natural but which forms of technological intervention respect embodied subjects and which reduce them to objects of control or consumption.

Care, Commodification, and the Artificial Other in *Klara and the Sun*

Klara and the Sun gives narrative authority to an artificial caregiver. Klara, an Artificial Friend, observes human behaviour from a position of partial knowledge and becomes deeply attached to Josie. Because Klara is purchased for a specific function, the novel places care within an ownership structure from the beginning. Her attentiveness is both relational and commodified.

This arrangement raises a question different from the problem of machine consciousness alone: what happens when care is provided by a being whose labour is treated as a product? Misra describes Klara's position in terms of unreciprocated care labour and argues that the novel links intimacy to the commodification of emotional work (Misra). Klara's willingness to sacrifice herself for Josie intensifies the problem because her conduct exceeds the narrow requirements of a purchased service. Li likewise interprets Klara's self-sacrifice through affective, social, and mythic dimensions, leaving the ethical status of that sacrifice deliberately unresolved (Li).

The planned technological continuation of Josie develops the novel's concern with replaceability. Josie's mother considers whether a sufficiently detailed representation of Josie could reproduce her if she dies. The proposal assumes that enough observational data might reproduce a person, but the narrative complicates that assumption by showing how identity depends on relationships and histories that cannot be reduced to behavioural information. Klara's extensive knowledge of Josie does not make identity mechanically transferable.

The novel also connects artificial care with social inequality. Josie has been genetically 'lifted,' while Rick has not, and their different prospects reveal how technological enhancement can become a mechanism of social stratification. Benia and Dagamseh read *Machines Like Me* and *Klara and the Sun* through the effects of capitalist structures on AI, including inequality, commodification, and social displacement (Benia and Dagamseh). Klara's own status is similarly determined by market value: after her usefulness ends, she is moved into a discarded space occupied by obsolete Artificial Friends. Her declining economic value does not erase the attachment and vulnerability established through the narrative.

Tong Wu's study of caring robots further situates Klara within a literary debate about care, personhood, and the division of human and nonhuman agency (Wu). The significance of Klara is therefore not that she proves all machines are persons. Rather, she makes visible an ethical inconsistency: humans may accept extensive emotional and practical care from an artificial being while reserving moral recognition for themselves.

Comparative Discussion: Ownership, Embodiment, and Relational Ethics

Read together, the three novels shift the ethical focus from intelligence to relationship. Adam is intelligent but owned. Klara is observant, affective, and sacrificial but economically disposable. Victor Stein seeks to detach intelligence from the body, while Ry demonstrates that technological mediation can occur within embodied identity. These differences prevent a single definition of the posthuman. Instead, they show several competing ways in which technology reorganizes the boundaries of personhood.

Ownership is the first shared structure. Charlie's possession of Adam, Klara's purchase as an Artificial Friend, and the commercial production of artificial bodies in Frankissstein demonstrate that technology is inseparable from economic power. Artificial beings are not introduced into neutral social space; they enter systems that determine who may buy, control, modify, employ, or discard them. The ethical question is consequently institutional as well as ontological.

Embodiment forms a second point of connection. Adam's physical vulnerability prevents his intelligence from being treated as abstract software. Ry's body demonstrates that technological intervention can be part of lived identity. Klara's material dependence on energy and her eventual disposal similarly remind readers that artificial existence has physical conditions. Hayles's critique of disembodied information is therefore particularly useful across the three texts: intelligence is represented through bodies, environments, infrastructures, and relationships rather than existing as a purely transferable substance (Hayles).

Care provides the clearest ethical test. Klara gives sustained care without receiving equivalent recognition; Adam demands moral consistency from people who claim ownership over him; and Ry exposes the difference between transforming a body and trying to escape embodiment altogether. These narratives suggest that moral standing cannot be decided by intelligence alone. Agency, dependency, vulnerability, relationality, and recognition all contribute to the ethical situation.

The novels also make human authority ethically significant. Humans design artificial beings, assign them functions, determine their legal or economic status, and decide when they have ceased to be useful. Braidotti's posthuman ethics is helpful here because it reframes the issue in terms of relations among heterogeneous human and nonhuman agents rather than a competition between humans and machines (Braidotti). The novels do not require a simple declaration of machine personhood; they require readers to examine how power is distributed before moral exclusion is treated as self-evident.

Contemporary Relevance and Limits

The contemporary AI landscape gives these literary questions additional relevance, but the novels should not be treated as technical forecasts. The 2026 AI Index reports that industry produced more than 90 percent of notable AI models in 2025 and identifies continuing problems of transparency in training data, model parameters, and development processes (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence). It also reports that AI data-centre power capacity reached 29.6 gigawatts in 2025 and discusses growing water and emissions pressures. Such developments broaden the ethical field beyond machine consciousness to questions of labour, infrastructure, ownership, environmental cost, and governance.

At the same time, the literary analysis has clear limits. Fiction cannot establish whether contemporary AI systems are conscious, nor can it determine legal standards for artificial personhood. Its contribution is different. By placing technological entities inside intimate relationships, literature makes abstract ethical categories emotionally and socially legible. It allows readers to examine the consequences of ownership, dependency, replacement, and exclusion before technical or legal definitions have settled them.

Conclusion

Machines Like Me, *Frankissstein*, and *Klara and the Sun* use artificial and technologically mediated beings to question assumptions about human privilege. Adam exposes the contradiction between demanding moral agency from a being who remains property. *Frankissstein* distinguishes embodied technological transformation from the fantasy of escaping the body. *Klara and the Sun* reveals the ethical tension between purchasing care and recognizing the caregiver as more than a disposable service.

Across these novels, personhood is not presented as a simple consequence of intelligence or biological origin. It emerges through relations among agency, vulnerability, embodiment, memory, care, and social recognition. This does not mean that every artificial system should automatically receive the same moral status as a human being. It means that biological difference alone cannot settle every ethical question raised by technologically mediated relationships.

The value of posthuman literary criticism lies precisely in this shift of emphasis. Rather than asking only whether machines will become human, these novels ask what human beings reveal about themselves when intelligent or technologically altered others enter domestic life, intimate relationships, labour markets, and systems of care. Their strongest ethical insight is therefore relational: the treatment of nonhuman beings exposes the values, inequalities, and responsibilities already present in human institutions.

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