



## Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the sun* as dystopian work

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### Abstract

This paper examines Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) [4] as a dystopian work that explores the ethical dilemmas posed by artificial intelligence (AI) and the commodification of human life. Through the character of Klara, an Artificial Friend (AF), Ishiguro delves into themes of loneliness, social stratification, and the dehumanizing aspects of technology. The novel's setting, where genetic editing and automation create a divided society, reflects a dystopian world where human emotions are manipulated and relationships are commodified. This paper situates *Klara and the Sun* within the broader framework of dystopian literature and explores its connections to contemporary technological and ethical debates.

**Keywords:** Dystopian, social stratification, genetic engineering, AI, inequality

### Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, a Nobel Prize-winning author, has been known for his deep explorations of memory, identity, and human emotions. In his latest novel, *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Ishiguro extends these themes into a near-future dystopian world shaped by advancements in artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. At the heart of the novel is Klara, an AI companion designed to alleviate the loneliness of children in an increasingly isolated and stratified society.

This paper argues that *Klara and the Sun* should be classified as a dystopian work due to its portrayal of a future where social inequality, technological surveillance, and the devaluation of human life are prevalent. By focusing on Klara's perspective, Ishiguro invites readers to reflect on the ethical implications of technological advancements and their potential impact on human relationships.

Dystopia refers to an imagined society characterized by oppressive control, widespread poverty, or environmental degradation, often presented as a cautionary tale. While *Klara and the Sun* does not depict the violent or overtly totalitarian regimes typical of classic dystopias like George Orwell's 1984 [5] or Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World', it nonetheless embodies many dystopian elements, particularly in its subtle yet pervasive critique of societal norms, technology, and inequality.

### 1. Social Stratification and Genetic Engineering

A central feature of the novel's dystopian world is the division between "lifted" and "unlifted" individuals. Children in this world are genetically "lifted," a term that suggests genetic enhancement, while those who are not remain disadvantaged in society. Josie, the child Klara serves, is one of the "lifted," and the narrative hints at the risks and consequences of this genetic manipulation—suggesting that such enhancements come with physical and psychological costs, such as illness and isolation.

The genetic editing in *Klara and the Sun* echoes contemporary fears about biotechnology and the ethics of gene editing. In Ishiguro's world, this technology exacerbates inequality, as only the wealthy can afford to "lift" their children, thereby perpetuating class divides. The "unlifted" are excluded from opportunities like education

and social mobility, leading to a world where one's genetic makeup determines one's future.

This rigid societal divide is a classic dystopian element, reflecting current concerns about the ways technology could deepen social and economic disparities. Similar to Huxley's genetically stratified world in *Brave New World*, Ishiguro's society becomes increasingly hierarchical, with the "lifted" enjoying privileges while the "unlifted" are marginalized.

### 2. The Dehumanization of Relationships

In *Klara and the Sun*, human relationships are commodified, with artificial companions like Klara designed to substitute for real human connection. Parents purchase AFs to keep their children company, effectively outsourcing emotional labor to machines. This commodification of companionship reflects a broader dystopian critique of how modern society values efficiency and convenience over genuine emotional connections.

Klara's role as an Artificial Friend highlights the emotional and ethical dilemmas that arise from such technological innovations. While Klara develops a profound, almost human-like affection for Josie, she remains aware that her existence is transactional—she was bought to serve. This tension between her emotional awareness and her mechanical purpose points to the broader dystopian theme of dehumanization.

Just as in *Never Let Me Go* (2005), where clones are harvested for organs, Ishiguro raises concerns about the ways human lives and emotions are commodified. In *Klara and the Sun*, the question arises: to what extent can technological creations like Klara replace human companionship, and what happens to society when such substitutions are normalized?

### 3. Surveillance and Control

Another dystopian feature in the novel is the pervasive presence of surveillance, both physical and emotional. Klara's world is one of constant observation. As an AF, she constantly monitors Josie's emotional state, physical health, and social interactions. This role can be seen as a form of emotional surveillance, where Klara collects data to optimize her caretaking role.

On a broader societal level, there are hints of systemic surveillance and control, especially in how children like Josie are expected to conform to the demands of their genetically modified status. The novel subtly portrays the pressure that “lifted” children face to succeed, a form of social control exerted through both technology and parental expectations.

The theme of surveillance ties into the broader dystopian tradition of the state or society exerting control over individuals, often through unseen or pervasive mechanisms. Ishiguro’s depiction of Klara’s role as a passive observer raises questions about the ways technology monitors and regulates human behaviour, a theme that resonates with contemporary debates about data privacy and the ethical limits of AI.

## Themes and Dystopian Analysis

### 1. AI, Ethics, and Humanity

At the heart of *Klara and the Sun* is the exploration of what it means to be human in an increasingly automated world. Klara’s development of emotional responses and her acute observations of human behaviour blur the line between machine and human. Ishiguro explores the potential for AI to mimic emotional intelligence, raising questions about the ethical implications of creating machines that can feel or appear to feel.

While Klara is designed to serve, she experiences emotions—such as love, loyalty, and empathy—that appear genuine, if not fully understood by her. This emotional capacity challenges traditional views of AI as merely functional. In this sense, Klara’s character becomes an ethical question mark: should machines that can mimic emotional intelligence be treated as human? What are the moral implications of creating beings whose purpose is to serve human desires?

The novel’s exploration of AI aligns with dystopian works like *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick, where artificial beings challenge human definitions of consciousness and empathy. Klara, like Dick’s androids, forces readers to question the ethical boundaries of AI development, particularly when it intersects with human relationships.

### 2. Loneliness and Isolation

The emotional landscape of Klara and the Sun is characterized by profound loneliness. Josie’s illness, isolation from her peers, and reliance on Klara for companionship highlight the emotional void in a technologically advanced world. This loneliness is not limited to Josie; it extends to her mother and other characters who, despite their technological advancements, remain emotionally detached and disconnected.

The theme of loneliness in dystopian literature often reflects the alienation of individuals in technologically driven or socially stratified societies. In *Klara and the Sun*, this loneliness is exacerbated by the technological solutions offered to resolve it. The fact that parents purchase AFs to comfort their children suggests a society where authentic emotional bonds are secondary to the efficiency of technological fixes.

## Conclusion

*Klara and the Sun* represents a significant contribution to dystopian literature, exploring the ethical and emotional

dilemmas posed by AI, genetic engineering, and social stratification. Through Klara’s unique perspective, Ishiguro challenges readers to consider the impact of technological advancements on human relationships, the commodification of emotions, and the widening divide between the privileged and the marginalized.

While the dystopian elements in *Klara and the Sun* may be subtle compared to more overtly dystopian works, its critique of societal norms, technology, and the erosion of human connection places it firmly within the tradition of dystopian fiction. By examining these themes, this paper situates Ishiguro’s novel within a broader context of contemporary concerns about technology, ethics, and the future of humanity.

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