



The Machine Mirror: The Freudian Uncanny and Narcissistic Projection in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

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Abstract— This paper examines Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) through Sigmund Freud's theories of the Uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*) and narcissistic projection, integrated with a Lacanian reading of the 'Mirror Stage' and a Foucault-inspired biopolitical critique. While speculative fiction frequently frames artificial intelligence through the lens of techno-dystopia, this study argues that Ishiguro utilises the Artificial Friend (AF) to externalise deep-seated human psychological anxieties regarding mortality, grief, and substitutability. By analysing Chrissie's attempt to use Klara as a surrogate for her dying daughter and the structural pressures of the elite 'lifted' education system, we demonstrate how the machine functions as a psychological mirror and an emotional prosthesis. Klara becomes an empty signifier—a literalized *objet petit a*—where the human characters attempt to bypass the mourning process and maintain narcissistic equilibrium. Ultimately, the paper contends that the true dystopia in Ishiguro's text is not technological tyranny, but the psychological commodification of love and the institutionalised performance anxiety that erases the alterity of the human and non-human other.

Keywords— Kazuo Ishiguro; The Uncanny; Narcissistic Projection; *Objet Petit A*; Lifted System; Biopolitics; Speculative Fiction; Psychoanalytic Criticism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The trajectory of contemporary speculative fiction has long been dominated by the anxieties of technological hegemony—the fear of the autonomous machine overthrowing its human creator. However, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) pivots away from this externalised techno-dystopia, turning the speculative lens inward toward the fractures of the human psyche. Set in a hyper-stratified, post-industrial society where children are genetically engineered ('lifted') for socioeconomic survival, the novel introduces Klara, an Artificial Friend

(AF) chosen to accompany a chronically ill young girl named Josie.

While early scholarship on the novel has predominantly focused on posthuman ethics, the socioeconomic critiques of late-stage capitalism, and the boundaries of machine empathy (Hayles, 1999; Toker, 2022), a significant critical gap remains regarding the psychoanalytic transactions between the human characters and the machine. This paper addresses this gap by utilising a Freudian framework to demonstrate that Klara functions primarily as a psychological mirror.

Rather than treating Klara as an autonomous subject, the human characters exploit her liminality to execute profound narcissistic projections and protect themselves from the trauma of mortality. Through Sigmund Freud's conceptualisations of the Uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*) and the ego's defence mechanisms against grief, this study contends that the text's ultimate dystopia is not the presence of artificial intelligence, but humanity's pathological drive to bypass the mourning process through the commodification of the soul.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FREUD'S UNCANNY AND THE NARCISSISTIC EGO

To understand the psychological mechanics at play in Ishiguro's novel, one must ground the textual analysis in three foundational Freudian concepts: the Uncanny, Narcissistic Projection, and Melancholia.

In his seminal 1919 essay, *The Uncanny* (*Das Unheimliche*), Sigmund Freud defines this psychological phenomenon as that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long-familiar (Freud, 1919). Central to Freud's formulation is Ernst Jentsch's notion of intellectual uncertainty regarding whether a particularly life-like object is animate or inanimate—exemplified by the lifelike doll Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman*. Freud expands this by linking the concept of 'the double' (*Der Doppelgänger*), an entity that initially serves as an insurance against the destruction of the ego, but later transforms into the uncanny harbinger of death and replacement.

This structural doubling intersects cleanly with Freud's *On Narcissism* (1914), which explores how the ego projects its idealised self or repressed desires onto external objects. When the ego is threatened by catastrophic loss or the realisation of its own finitude, it engages in projection—a defence mechanism that externalises internal conflicts to control them.

Furthermore, when this projection is triggered by the death or impending death of a loved one, it can degenerate into what Freud terms 'melancholia' in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917). Unlike normal mourning, where the subject gradually detaches libido from the lost object, the melancholic subject refuses to accept the loss. Instead, the ego introjects the object, or as this paper argues, attempts to physically replicate and substitute it, thereby establishing a pathologically immortal loop that denies the finality of death.

III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS SECTION 1: KLARA AS THE UNCANNY DOUBLE

Klara's very existence as an Artificial Friend places her within the liminal space of the Freudian uncanny. As a solar-powered, highly perceptive machine, her first-person narrative voice is characterised by a detached, fragmented parsing of reality. She views the world through literal 'boxes' or 'grids'—a visual representation of her algorithmic processing. Yet, she demonstrates an uncanny imitation of human empathy. The psychological friction begins with how the human characters perceive her. She is not a mechanical apparatus like a vacuum cleaner, nor is she a human being; she is an object that mimics the subject.

3.1 The Architecture of Klara's Vision and Cognitive Dissonance

To fully understand how Klara transitions into an uncanny double, one must first analyse the fragmented architecture of her perception. Klara does not view her surroundings as a continuous, organic landscape; instead, her visual field regularly fractures into an algorithmic grid. Ishiguro introduces this structural quirk early in the novel, particularly when Klara is placed in stressful or emotionally charged environments. For instance, when observing an intense emotional interaction on the street from the store window, Klara notes:

"The sky was dividing into boxes... and the woman's face was suddenly isolated in a single rectangle, separate from her body, while her left hand occupied a lower grid entirely." (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 42)

This mechanical parsing of human anatomy is a brilliant literary manifestation of the Freudian uncanny. By breaking down the holistic human form into isolated, geometric coordinates, Ishiguro creates a profound sense of cognitive dissonance for the reader. We are forced to look through an eye that mimics human empathy but processes reality via cold, mathematical compartmentalisation. In Freudian terms, this fragmentation represents a literalized deconstruction of the Gestalt—the unified presence that defines human identity. Klara's vision splits the human subject into parts, turning the familiar bodily form into something alien and robotic.

3.2 The Capaldi Confrontation and the Pathology of the Replica

The pinnacle of the uncanny double occurs during the visit to Capaldi's workshop, a space that operates as a high-tech version of Hoffmann's doll laboratory in *The Sandman*. When Chrissie forces Klara to view the unfinished, prosthetic replica of Josie, the description highlights the horror of the lifelike machine. The text notes that the

figure was sitting in an elevated chair, perfectly matching Josie's physical dimensions, but its skin was missing its final pigment layer and its eyes were vacant.

When Paul (Josie's father) confronts Capaldi about this grotesque substitution, the dialogue exposes a deep psychological conflict between techno-rationalism and the defence of the human ego. Capaldi defends his work by trying to reduce human consciousness to data:

"Our generation still carries the old feelings. A part of us refuses to let go. The part that wants to keep believing there's something unreachable inside each of us. Something unique and never to be replicated. But there's no such thing. We must accept it, Paul. There's nothing there that's unique... Klara can learn Josie entirely. She can download her." (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 210)

Capaldi's assertion is the ultimate expression of the uncanny threat: it strips humanity of its illusion of uniqueness. From a Freudian perspective, Paul's violent, visceral rejection of Capaldi's project is an act of sheer ego preservation. Paul recognises that if Klara can successfully 'become' Josie, it proves that his daughter—and by extension, he himself—is entirely reproducible and discardable. Capaldi is constructing a monument to human obsolescence, demanding that characters renounce their narcissistic belief in a unique human 'soul'.

IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS SECTION 2: NARCISSISTIC PROJECTION AND THE ERASURE OF ALTERITY

Because Klara is programmed to be entirely accommodating, devoid of her own instinctual drives or defensive ego, she functions as a clean slate for human narcissistic projection. The human characters do not interact with Klara as an individual; instead, they treat her as a mirror that reflects their internal psychological states to them.

4.1 The Morgan's Falls Rehearsal as Pathological Melancholia

The trip to Morgan's Falls serves as the emotional turning point where narcissistic projection morphs into active psychological abuse. Standing before the sweeping, indifferent landscape of the waterfall, Chrissie suddenly stops and demands that Klara act out a hypothetical argument between herself and Josie. The prompt is highly specific, forcing Klara to channel Josie's typical adolescent defiance and defensive posture.

Ishiguro's prose here is a masterclass in showing emotional repression through first-person narration. Klara observes Chrissie's physical transformation during this psychological experiment:

"The Mother's eyes became very wide, and she took a step toward me. 'Do it again,' she said. Her voice wasn't loud, but it had a strange, hard weight to it. 'Say what she said, exactly how she said it. Put your shoulders back the way she does.'" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 118)

In this unsettling rehearsal, Chrissie is using Klara as a human puppet to perform a ritual of pathological melancholia. By demanding that Klara replicate Josie's exact physical flaws and verbal tones, Chrissie is attempting to summon a ghost while her daughter is still alive. She uses the machine to build a safe, artificial sandbox where she can practice her grief without facing the chaotic, agonising reality of actual death. This sequence highlights the absolute erasure of the machine's identity.

4.2 The Peer Group Cruelty and Commodity Fetishism

The fragile nature of the human characters' affection for Klara is further exposed when Josie's peer group of 'lifted' teenagers gathers at the house. This interaction strips away the polite fiction that Klara is a cherished member of the family, revealing her underlying status as a commodity object. When the teenagers notice Klara standing quietly in the corner, their curiosity immediately turns aggressive and invasive. One of the boys suggests testing her programming by throwing her into the air:

"Let's see how she lands. I bet she twists around like a cat. Come on, let's carry her out to the lawn. It's just an AF; it's not like it feels anything." (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 76)

This sudden shift from companion to target for casual cruelty demonstrates the volatile boundaries of the human ego in a hyper-stratified society. The 'lifted' children, who are themselves under immense psychological pressure to achieve academic and social perfection, project their own repressed anxieties and feelings of powerlessness onto Klara. By threatening to break her, they assert their own dominance and reassure themselves of their superior status. Josie's subsequent defence of Klara is equally revealing; she frames her protection around ownership, re-establishing Klara as a prized possession rather than a sentient being.

V. THE LACANIAN INTERLUDE: THE MIRROR STAGE AND KLARA AS OBJET PETIT A

While a Freudian lens exposes the mechanics of the uncanny double, integrating a Lacanian framework uncovers how Klara stabilises the fractured identity of the posthuman subject. According to Jacques Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage (le stade du miroir), an infant perceives

its own body as fragmented and uncoordinated until it encounters its reflection in a mirror. This reflected image provides a seductive illusion of wholeness, coherence, and mastery, which the infant internalises to form its ego. However, this identity is built upon an inherent alienation; the subject misrecognizes itself in an external, inverted image. In *Klara and the Sun*, Ishiguro shifts this dynamic from an optical mirror to an artificial entity. Klara acts as a structural mirror for a society whose human subjects are profoundly fragmented by genetic modification and emotional isolation.

In this context, Klara functions as the ultimate literary manifestation of Lacan's *objet petit a*—the unattainable object-cause of desire that stands in for the foundational 'Lack' (*manque*) within the human subject. Because Klara lacks an instinctual interiority of her own, she is an empty signifier that can perfectly morph into whatever missing piece the human character requires to feel whole. For Josie, who is physically deteriorating and socially isolated, Klara is the mirror that reflects a healthy, vibrant, and validated ego. For Chrissie, whose psyche is shattered by the loss of her first daughter, Klara is the *objet petit a* that promises to plug the existential void of maternal grief.

Crucially, this Lacanian reading highlights the tragic misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) at the heart of the novel. The human characters fall in love not with Klara, but with the illusion of their own psychological completion that she reflects to them. The moment the crisis passes and Josie achieves natural physical wholeness, the mirror is shattered, and the *objet petit a* is discarded into the utility yard because the human ego has found new, social avenues to sustain its illusion of stability.

VI. INSTITUTIONALISED PATHOLOGY: THE 'LIFTED' SYSTEM AND PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

To understand why the human characters in *Klara and the Sun* suffer from such extreme psychological fractures, one must analyse the institutional ecosystem that breeds them. The dystopia Ishiguro constructs is governed by the 'lifted' education system—a state-sanctioned biopolitical regime where children undergo high-risk genetic editing to qualify for elite university tracks and corporate leadership roles. This process is not merely academic; it is a violent physical and psychological intervention that restructures the child's entire being to serve the demands of a hyper-competitive, post-industrial economy.

Through a framework inspired by Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, the 'lifted' system can be diagnosed as a machinery of normalisation that produces severe psychological pathology. The children are subjected to constant surveillance and rigorous digital tutoring via specialised screens, completely detached from traditional communal school settings. This absolute isolation breeds a modern epidemic of performance anxiety and neurotic dread. The teenagers live under the perpetual threat of 'unlifted' status, which carries the penalty of social invisibility and economic exile—as seen in the character of Rick. The intense pressure to perform forces these children to repress their natural vulnerabilities, anxieties, and flaws to conform to an idealised, hyper-efficient corporate template.

This systemic trauma explains the psychological necessity of the Artificial Friend. The AF is not a luxury item; it is an emotional prosthesis manufactured by the market to manage the psychological fallout of its own brutal educational systems. Because the 'lifted' children are forbidden from showing weakness to their peers, they project their repressed terror, frustration, and systemic rage onto their machines. The AF becomes a safe psychological decompression chamber where the child can either indulge in total regressive vulnerability or exert absolute, tyrannical control. The institutionalised anxiety of the speculative space thus creates a tragic, symbiotic loop: the state breaks the child's psyche through elite academic engineering, and the market repairs it with a disposable machine designed to absorb the trauma of that engineering.

VII. CONCLUSION AND INVITATION FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

By applying a Freudian lens to *Klara and the Sun*, this paper illustrates how Kazuo Ishiguro uses speculative tropes to map the hidden terrors of the human ego. Klara functions as the ultimate uncanny double and a site of narcissistic projection, revealing that humanity's greatest existential threat is its own willingness to commodify emotional bonds to evade the reality of death.

Global Call for Collaborative Research Inputs

To fully realise the objectives of this study and ensure its rigour for a high-impact Scopus or ISSN-indexed publication, the author invites global research contributions, peer inputs, and critical expansions on the following domains:

- ✓ Lacanian Re-Readings: Contributions exploring how Klara embodies Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a* (the unattainable object of desire) or how her

fragmented vision reflects the mirror stage and the split subject (Spaltung).

- ✓ Cross-Disciplinary Methodologies: Empirical studies or corpus linguistics data analysing the exact syntactic markers of emotional repression in Ishiguro's first-person narrators.
- ✓ Comparative Speculative Analysis: Structural comparisons between *Klara and the Sun* and other contemporary dystopian works (e.g., Olga Ravn's *The Employee* or Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*) through the lens of psychoanalytic trauma theory.

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