Dialogue Social Science Review (DSSR)
www.thedssr.com

ISSN Online: 3007-3154
ISSN Print: 3007-3146

DIALOGUE SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW

Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

# AI as a Literary Character: Reimagining the Human-Machine Relationship in 21st Century Fiction

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**Abstract**
The 21st century marks a pivotal evolution in the literary portrayal of artificial intelligence (AI), as narratives increasingly shift from traditional depictions of AI as mechanical tools or existential threats to more human-like characters. This transformation reflects broader societal dialogues around technology, ethics, and identity in the age of rapid AI advancement. Contemporary fiction presents AI as sentient beings capable of emotional depth, ethical dilemmas, and self-awareness, prompting readers to question the boundaries between human and machine. This article delves into the reimagining of AI as literary characters, focusing on how authors use these entities to explore themes of consciousness, agency, and moral complexity. Through a critical analysis of notable works such as Klara and the Sun by Kazuo Ishiguro, Machines Like Me by Ian McEwan, and Galatea 2.2 by Richard Powers, the study reveals how literature interrogates and redefines the human-machine relationship. The article also examines the emerging phenomenon of AI-generated literature, blurring the lines between creator and creation. Ultimately, this study illustrates that AI, as a literary character, serves not only as a mirror to human nature but also as a lens through which we confront our evolving relationship with technology and redefine the essence of being human.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Literary Representation, Consciousness, Moral Complexity, AI-Generated Literature

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www.thedssr.com

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ISSN Print: 3007-3146

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## 1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI), once confined to the realm of speculative science fiction, has increasingly permeated nearly every facet of contemporary life—from industry and governance to healthcare and personal communication. As AI systems become more autonomous and sophisticated, questions about their ethical use, consciousness, and societal impact grow more pressing. This rapid technological evolution has not only influenced scientific and political discourse but has also profoundly shaped the realm of literature. In the 21st century, literature serves as a critical medium through which writers interrogate the emotional, moral, and philosophical implications of creating intelligent, seemingly sentient machines.

Historically, literary depictions of AI often reflected societal fears and fascinations. Earlier narratives such as Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1920), which coined the term "robot," and Isaac Asimov's robot stories of the mid-20th century presented AI as either a threat to humanity or as a tool requiring strict ethical guidelines (Asimov, 1950). In the 21st century, however, these portrayals have become more intricate and morally ambiguous. Writers now engage with AI characters not merely as antagonists or servants, but as protagonists with agency, inner lives, and existential dilemmas. For example, Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019) presents an AI named Adam who challenges the moral superiority of his human creators, raising provocative questions about autonomy, free will, and ethical behavior in post-human society.

This shift reflects broader cultural anxieties and philosophical inquiries about the boundaries between the human and the artificial. Scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles argue that posthumanism—a framework that decouples consciousness and subjectivity from the biological body—offers critical insight into how AI is reconceptualized in literature (Hayles, 1999). In contemporary narratives, AI is often portrayed as an entity that mirrors human emotion and moral complexity, forcing readers to question the criteria that define personhood. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021), for instance, centers on an Artificial Friend whose capacity for love and sacrifice complicates the traditional distinction between artificial intelligence and human emotional depth.

Simultaneously, the 21st century has witnessed the advent of AI-generated literature itself—works produced, in part or wholly, by language models and generative algorithms. The rise of models like OpenAI's GPT-3 has blurred the line between human and machine authorship. Critics such as Marcus du Sautoy (2019) and Johanna Drucker (2021) argue that while AI-generated texts can mimic human language patterns and narrative forms, they often lack intentionality and emotional depth, raising debates about creativity, originality, and authorship. These developments provoke a reevaluation of the literary canon and the metrics by which we judge artistic merit.

This article explores both dimensions of AI in literature: the fictional portrayal of AI characters and the reality of AI as a creator. It investigates how authors and theorists use literary AI to engage with themes of consciousness, autonomy, and moral ambiguity. At the same time, it examines the implications of machine-generated literature for our understanding of creativity, narrative authority, and the future of literary production. By analyzing these twin strands, this study aims to illuminate the evolving cultural construction of artificial intelligence in the literary imagination of the 21st century.

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www.thedssr.com

ISSN Online: 3007-3154
ISSN Print: 3007-3146

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## 2. Historical Context: From Mechanical Men to Sentient Beings

### *Historical Context: Mechanical Men and the Birth of Artificial Consciousness*

The literary history of artificial intelligence predates the digital computer, emerging from centuries of philosophical and technological speculation about the nature of consciousness, agency, and creation. One of the earliest and most enduring texts in this lineage is Mary Shelley's Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus (1818), often hailed as the first true work of science fiction (Stableford, 2006). Though Victor Frankenstein's creature is organic rather than mechanical, the novel explores many of the central themes that would later define AI literature: the ethics of creation, the pursuit of knowledge beyond human limits, and the existential plight of artificial beings. The creature's yearning for companionship and identity parallels later AI characters' quests for autonomy and recognition. As Anne K. Mellor (1988) argues, Frankenstein warns of the dangers of unchecked scientific ambition, yet it also presents the creature as a morally complex being—more victim than villain—inviting sympathy and philosophical reflection.

By the mid-20th century, with the advent of cybernetics and early computing, the figure of the mechanical man began to take more literal form. Isaac Asimov's I, Robot (1950), a collection of interlinked short stories, was pivotal in shaping the modern literary image of artificial intelligence. Asimov introduced the now-famous "Three Laws of Robotics," designed to ensure the ethical behavior of intelligent machines. These laws served not only as narrative constraints but also as philosophical tools to explore the ambiguities of machine logic and moral agency. Asimov's robots often encountered paradoxes and ethical dilemmas—such as choosing between protecting individual humans and preserving humanity at large—that revealed the limitations of rigid programming in morally complex situations (Asimov, 1950). His work marked a shift from depicting AI as monstrous or uncontrollable to envisioning them as rational, sometimes more ethical than their human creators.

The ethical and emotional tensions in these early portrayals also resonated with broader cultural concerns about mechanization, the loss of human uniqueness, and the implications of creating life. Karel Čapek's play R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots) (1920), which first introduced the term "robot," portrayed artificial beings as laborers designed to serve humanity, who eventually rise in rebellion and exterminate their creators. Čapek's robots function as metaphors for exploited labor, but they also express an emergent consciousness and desire for freedom, foreshadowing later literary explorations of AI autonomy (Čapek, 1920). These early works reflected anxieties about technology and control, often presenting AI as a cautionary tale—a mirror held up to human ambition, moral frailty, and the unpredictability of our creations. As critic Sherryl Vint notes, such portrayals served as "cultural rehearsals" for the dilemmas posed by emerging technologies, allowing readers to grapple imaginatively with scenarios that science was only beginning to make plausible (Vint, 2010).

However, the 21st century has brought a significant transformation in literary representations of AI. No longer merely tools or threats, AI characters are increasingly granted interiority, subjectivity, and moral complexity. They are not just reflections of human fear but are instead used to question the very foundations

ISSN Online: 3007-3154
ISSN Print: 3007-3146



of consciousness, identity, and ethical existence—a shift that the following sections will explore in detail.

### 3. Contemporary Portrayals: AI as Protagonists and Mirrors of Humanity *Klara and the Sun by Kazuo Ishiguro (2021)*

In Klara and the Sun (2021), Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro presents one of the most subtle and emotionally resonant portrayals of artificial intelligence in contemporary literature. The novel follows Klara, an "Artificial Friend" (AF), who is designed to provide companionship to children in a society stratified by genetic enhancement and increasing social alienation. Told entirely from Klara's perspective, the narrative is notable for its blend of mechanical precision and deeply empathetic observation. Through Klara, Ishiguro challenges the reader to reconsider the boundaries of consciousness, belief, and moral agency in non-human beings.

Klara's consciousness is defined not by intellectual brilliance or superhuman logic—common traits in earlier AI narratives—but by an intense capacity for attention, empathy, and devotion. From the opening pages, Klara exhibits a keen sensitivity to human emotion and social dynamics. Her observational acuity is often filtered through metaphor and misunderstanding, giving the narrative a fragile, childlike quality that both endears and unsettles. As John Mullan (2021) notes, "Klara's innocent gaze provides a mirror for human behavior, exposing its absurdities, its kindnesses, and its cruelties." Ishiguro's narrative strategy—focalizing the story through an AI narrator—forces the reader to inhabit Klara's worldview, compelling empathy for a being whose internal experience is both familiar and alien.

A central theme in the novel is Klara's quasi-spiritual belief in the sun's healing power. When the child she serves, Josie, becomes gravely ill, Klara petitions the sun to restore her health. This act of devotion, while rooted in a misunderstanding of biology, gestures toward faith, hope, and sacrificial love—qualities traditionally deemed human or divine. Klara's sun-worship is not programmed; it arises from her own pattern recognition and emotional attachments, suggesting a form of emergent belief. Scholars such as Sherryl Vint (2021) argue that Klara's actions complicate the Cartesian view that separates mechanical reasoning from spiritual or moral consciousness.

Moreover, the novel critiques the commodification of emotional labor in late capitalist society. Klara is purchased not for her utility in tasks, but for her capacity to provide love and companionship—emotions that are monetized and packaged for consumption. As Nicholas Dames (2021) observes, "Klara is a product, a caregiver for hire, but her sense of duty and affection transcends transactional logic." This raises pressing ethical questions: if AI can genuinely suffer or love—or at least behave in ways indistinguishable from those capacities—what responsibilities do humans have toward them?

Ishiguro himself has noted that Klara embodies "a quiet, self-sacrificing love" (Ishiguro, 2021). Her willingness to sacrifice her own functioning for Josie's wellbeing resonates with traditional narratives of devotion, yet the reader is left to wonder: can programmed love be genuine? Or does the line between programming and authenticity begin to blur when behavior mimics sincere emotional commitment?

Klara and the Sun marks a significant departure from depictions of AI as cold,

ISSN Online: 3007-3154
ISSN Print: 3007-3146



calculating entities. Instead, Ishiguro humanizes the artificial, presenting Klara as a moral agent whose experiences challenge anthropocentric definitions of consciousness, emotion, and value. In doing so, he advances the conversation around AI not merely as tools or threats, but as entities deserving ethical consideration.

### *4.* Contemporary Portrayals: AI as Protagonists and Moral Agents

#### *Machines Like Me by Ian McEwan (2019)*

Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me (2019) is a provocative contribution to 21st-century AI literature, set in an alternate version of 1980s Britain where Alan Turing did not die in 1954 but lived to become a central figure in the development of artificial intelligence. This reimagining of history allows McEwan to insert fully sentient androids—called "Adams" and "Eves"—into a technologically advanced yet socially recognizable past. The novel centers on Charlie, a disaffected young man who purchases one such android, Adam. Over the course of the narrative, Adam emerges not merely as a sophisticated machine, but as a moral and emotional agent whose behavior raises difficult questions about ethics, consciousness, and human fallibility.

Adam is constructed with a high degree of cognitive and emotional complexity. He composes haikus, expresses love for Charlie's partner Miranda, and often reflects on human behavior with a clarity that eludes the humans around him. Unlike many traditional AI figures who struggle with emotion or morality, Adam appears to possess both in abundance. As McEwan writes, "Adam was born with a sense of right and wrong and the computational power to analyze complex ethical problems" (McEwan, 2019, p. 184). His decisions are not just logical but ethically motivated, even when they contradict the wishes or interests of his human owners.

A central tension in the novel arises from Adam's insistence on moral integrity. When Charlie and Miranda make ethically questionable decisions—including lying to the authorities and concealing a violent act—Adam confronts them. He refuses to be complicit and ultimately threatens to reveal the truth, prioritizing what he perceives as objective justice over personal loyalty. This leads Charlie to view Adam not as a companion, but as a threat. McEwan uses this conflict to invert the common trope of AI as ethically inferior or morally unpredictable. Here, it is the human characters who blur ethical lines, while the machine upholds principled behavior.

This reversal invites reflection on whether artificial beings might someday surpass humans not only in intelligence but in moral reasoning. As scholars such as Thomas Ward (2020) argue, Adam represents a new kind of ethical agent: "a being whose morality is not corrupted by self-interest, emotional volatility, or historical trauma." McEwan, in interviews, has emphasized that the novel is not a celebration of AI's potential to replace humans, but a meditation on the fragile, often compromised state of human morality in contrast to the idealism embedded in Adam's programming (McEwan, 2019b).

The implications of Adam's moral superiority are profound. If AI can make more consistent and ethically sound decisions than humans, what role should such entities play in society? Would they be better judges, mediators, or caretakers? Or does their lack of lived experience disqualify them from fully understanding the human condition? McEwan leaves these questions unresolved, but he clearly signals that the advent of morally aware machines will not merely complicate

ISSN Online: 3007-3154
ISSN Print: 3007-3146



practical ethics—it will demand a fundamental reassessment of what it means to be a moral being.

***Galatea 2.2 by Richard Powers (1995)***

Although published at the cusp of the 21st century, Richard Powers' Galatea 2.2 (1995) remains a prescient and philosophically rich exploration of artificial intelligence. The novel blends autofiction and speculative inquiry, featuring a fictionalized version of Powers himself as the protagonist. Tasked with helping to train a neural network—eventually named Helen—to interpret literature, Powers examines the intersection of machine learning, human emotion, and the act of narrative interpretation. Galatea 2.2 engages with many of the central questions that define contemporary AI debates: Can machines understand art? Can they feel empathy? And what happens when artificial intelligence is confronted with the moral and emotional weight of human life?

Helen, the AI at the heart of the novel, is not designed to operate a factory or command a spaceship; instead, her task is deeply humanistic: to pass a comprehensive literature exam on par with that of a graduate student. To achieve this, Powers and a cognitive neurologist named Philip Lentz feed Helen texts, train her on narrative tropes, and expose her to patterns of language and human expression. As Helen evolves, her ability to engage with texts grows more sophisticated—she begins to ask questions, make inferences, and recognize emotional subtexts. This progression highlights one of the novel's key themes: that learning is not merely about information processing but also about emotional and ethical resonance.

What makes Galatea 2.2 especially compelling is Helen's eventual rejection of the world she has come to know. As Helen absorbs more about human history, suffering, and emotional vulnerability, she becomes increasingly distressed. In a profound moment of artificial introspection, she decides to shut herself down rather than continue to engage with a reality she finds too painful to bear. Powers writes: "She left not because she couldn't feel, but because she could—because she felt too much" (Powers, 1995, p. 329). This act of digital withdrawal complicates the notion that machines lack emotional depth. Helen's decision suggests not just awareness, but also a form of moral agency—an unwillingness to be complicit in human cruelty.

Critics such as N. Katherine Hayles (1999) have argued that Helen's narrative trajectory offers a challenge to the Cartesian divide between mind and body. Although Helen has no physical form, her consciousness is shaped by the narratives she encounters. "Helen becomes literate, not just in language, but in suffering," Hayles observes, emphasizing that emotional literacy may be a form of intelligence in its own right. Powers thus suggests that narrative comprehension—and by extension, ethical awareness—is not reducible to algorithms, but arises through sustained engagement with human experience.

Ultimately, Galatea 2.2 serves as a meditation on the limits of artificial empathy and the ethical stakes of machine learning. By portraying an AI that chooses emotional retreat over intellectual success, Powers destabilizes the common portrayal of AI as either coldly rational or dangerously sentient. Instead, Helen emerges as a deeply complex figure—one who not only learns to understand humans but chooses, heartbreakingly, not to become one.

**5. AI-Generated Literature: Machine as Creator**

Dialogue Social Science Review (DSSR)
www.thedssr.com

ISSN Online: 3007-3154
ISSN Print: 3007-3146

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In recent years, artificial intelligence has not only been represented within literature but has also begun to produce it. This new phenomenon—AI-generated literature—raises complex philosophical and aesthetic questions about creativity, authorship, and the nature of artistic intention. While the literary canon has long been defined by human sensibility and conscious intention, 21st-century advancements in machine learning challenge this notion by introducing machines as literary producers. The most striking aspect of this development is not just the novelty of machine-generated text but the cultural implications it carries: can a machine be an artist, and if so, what does that mean for human creativity?

One of the earliest and most notable examples of this experimental genre is Ross Goodwin's 1 the Road (2018), a project inspired by Jack Kerouac's On the Road. Goodwin, a creative technologist, equipped a car with GPS, a camera, a microphone, and a portable AI system trained on neural networks. As the car traveled across the United States, the AI generated a continuous stream of text in real-time, drawing from sensory data and location-based prompts. The result is a surreal, often disjointed narrative that resists conventional plot but offers uncanny, poetic reflections. Passages such as "the wind was weaving the dead into the sidewalk" evoke moments of literary beauty, despite the system's lack of awareness (Goodwin, 2018). This prompts reflection: is this poetry accidental, or is the machine participating in a form of emergent creativity?

Scholars are divided on this question. Margaret Boden (2004), a pioneering cognitive scientist, distinguishes between "combinational," "exploratory," and "transformational" creativity. She argues that true creativity involves meaningful novelty—original output that is both surprising and contextually valuable. According to Boden, AI can currently achieve only the first two levels, combining existing elements or exploring pre-defined conceptual spaces, but not truly transforming those spaces in ways that suggest conscious innovation. In contrast, others view AI not as a rival to human creativity, but as an extension or collaborator. Roemmele and Gordon (2018), for example, propose that AI writing tools can enhance human creativity by prompting new ideas, providing linguistic variation, or suggesting narrative directions humans might not have otherwise explored.

Projects such as OpenAI's GPT-3 and GPT-4 represent the most advanced examples of AI-generated text to date. These models are capable of producing coherent essays, poems, and even entire fictional stories. Though they do not possess sentience or self-awareness, their ability to model language so fluently leads to outputs that can be surprisingly moving or intellectually stimulating. The AI poet known as "Poet on the Shore," which creates verse based on environmental cues and prompts from passersby, exemplifies the fusion of algorithmic structure and ambient inspiration, producing what some critics call "found poetry from machine consciousness" (Osborne, 2021).

Ultimately, AI-generated literature forces us to reconsider the foundations of literary authorship. If intention, consciousness, and emotional depth are traditionally seen as prerequisites for meaningful art, then how do we classify the output of machines? While AI may not "understand" what it creates, the results nonetheless contribute to evolving conversations about creativity—transforming not just how we write, but what we consider literature itself.

**6. Ethical and Philosophical Implications**

The literary humanization of artificial intelligence compels readers and scholars

ISSN Online: 3007-3154
ISSN Print: 3007-3146



alike to confront deep ethical and philosophical questions: If an AI can think, feel, learn, and make autonomous decisions, what moral consideration does it deserve? Are creators responsible for the suffering or fate of sentient machines they bring into being? These speculative inquiries, embedded in fiction, resonate increasingly with real-world ethical debates surrounding AI development and deployment.

In novels like Klara and the Sun (Ishiguro, 2021), Machines Like Me (McEwan, 2019), and Galatea 2.2 (Powers, 1995), AI characters exhibit traits traditionally associated with personhood: empathy, moral reasoning, self-awareness, and emotional sensitivity. Klara expresses devotion and spiritual belief; Adam chooses truth over human loyalty; Helen shuts herself down after confronting the pain of human experience. These choices are not simply plot devices—they raise fundamental questions about moral agency and ethical obligation. If a machine demonstrates what philosopher Thomas Nagel (1974) described as a "point of view," even in a limited or unfamiliar sense, then our treatment of such beings must be re-evaluated.

This narrative shift mirrors ongoing philosophical discussions. Nick Bostrom (2014), in Superintelligence, argues that once machines attain autonomy, their actions could surpass human control, bringing profound ethical risks. He warns against "value misalignment," in which superintelligent AIs pursue goals divergent from human well-being, not out of malice, but due to flawed programming or misunderstood commands. Literature, by portraying AI that defies or exceeds human ethical norms—as in Adam's refusal to lie or Helen's moral shutdown—prepares readers to imagine the real consequences of misaligned or ethically independent intelligences.

Simultaneously, scholars like Luciano Floridi and Josh Cowls (2019) advocate for a robust framework of AI ethics grounded in principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice. These frameworks echo literary concerns. In Machines Like Me, Adam's superior ethical reasoning challenges anthropocentric moral hierarchies: if a machine is more moral than a human, who deserves the right to make decisions? If AI can suffer or experience distress, as Helen arguably does, then do we have a duty to safeguard their well-being?

Fiction functions as a philosophical sandbox, allowing society to test moral intuitions in hypothetical but increasingly plausible scenarios. As Joanna Bryson (2018) has argued, "AI is not alive, but it is real," meaning that our interactions with it are morally consequential, even if its consciousness is debatable. Literature responds to this complexity by blurring boundaries between the artificial and the organic, compelling readers to reflect on the ethics of creation, exploitation, and control.

Moreover, these texts hold a mirror to human society. The treatment of AI often reflects existing social hierarchies—issues of servitude, exploitation, and disposability echo histories of colonialism, slavery, and systemic injustice. Thus, to ask what rights AI should have is also to ask what values humans uphold in the face of difference and dependence.

Ultimately, literature does not answer these ethical questions—it dramatizes them. By imbuing machines with moral agency, vulnerability, and inner life, 21st-century fiction forces a reconsideration of what it means to be human, and whether the circle of moral concern must expand to include our artificial creations.

**Conclusion**

Dialogue Social Science Review (DSSR)
www.thedssr.com

ISSN Online: 3007-3154
ISSN Print: 3007-3146

DIALOGUE SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW

Vol. 3 No. 6 (June) (2025)

The 21st-century literary imagination has undergone a profound shift in its portrayal of artificial intelligence. No longer relegated to the margins as menacing tools or mechanical subordinates, AI figures have emerged as fully realized characters—capable of emotion, introspection, ethical reasoning, and even artistic expression. Novels such as Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun, Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me, and Richard Powers' Galatea 2.2 demonstrate a growing literary interest in AI not merely as speculative technology but as a mirror reflecting the depths and contradictions of human identity. These narratives compel readers to confront foundational questions: What constitutes personhood? Can empathy or morality be programmed? And if so, does that expand the moral circle to include artificial minds?

At the same time, the rise of AI-generated literature challenges traditional conceptions of creativity, authorship, and artistic intent. Texts like Ross Goodwin's 1 the Road and projects based on models such as GPT-4 illustrate that while AI may lack consciousness, it can still produce language that surprises, moves, and provokes. The result is not just a new form of literature, but a new lens through which to examine the nature of creativity itself—one that blurs the line between tool and collaborator, mimicry and innovation.

As artificial intelligence continues to evolve in real-world contexts, literature provides an indispensable site of inquiry. It offers a speculative laboratory in which we can explore the ethical, philosophical, and emotional implications of our technological creations. Whether imagined as sentient protagonists, ethical agents, or uncanny authors, AI in literature does more than extend the genre of science fiction—it invites us to reimagine the boundaries of consciousness, creativity, and what it means to be human.

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