



Analysis of *Klara and the Sun* From the Perspective of Defamiliarization

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Abstract

Klara and the Sun is a dystopian novel published by the British author Kazuo Ishiguro in 2017, which presents the defamiliarized narrative perspective of an android called Klara. Set somewhere in the near future, the story follows Klara's perspective as an "Artificial Friend" to a young, sick girl who has had her genetics altered for better academic performance. On the basis of Victor Shklovsky's theory of the defamiliarization, this paper analyzes the dilemma of the human existence, as well as the uniqueness and fragility of the human nature from Klara's defamiliarized perspective, which reflects Ishiguro's deep concerns about the human existence and the potential crisis of the human society.

Key words: Kazuo Ishiguro; *Klara and the Sun*; Defamiliarization; Artificial intelligence

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INTRODUCTION

Klara and the Sun is the first novel of Kazuo Ishiguro published after he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. The eponymous Klara is an Artificial Friend (AF), designed to attend to the needs of the teenagers. Klara is

uniquely observant and adept at noticing and analyzing emotional cues. In the world of *Klara and the Sun*, most wealthy families pay to have their children "lifted", a genetic engineering procedure that enhances academic performance, without which there are minimal educational and professional opportunities. Josie is the "lifted" and is beginning to exhibit the symptoms of an unexplained illness that sometimes accompanies genetic engineering and can result in death. Josie's mother, Chrissie, finally bought Klara because of her ability to imitate Josie. Chrissie wants Klara to continue Josie's life to accompany her after the latter died. When Klara came to Josie's house, she witnessed how humans make difficult choices under the manipulation of the complicated emotions, to gradually understand the true meaning of the love between people.

The book was originally created as a children's book. Ishiguro believes that in fairy tales, the wish of adults is to protect children reading these books from what is happening, so the appearance in fairy tales is always simple and beautiful. However, those adults who write fairy tales often do not want to lie to children, feeling that they need to give children a little hint to remind them that there will be a lot of dark things waiting for them in the world. Ishiguro also wants to give this hint in *Klara and the Sun* by means of a non-human narrator, which is very common in fairy tales, such as teddy bears and plush toys. Having such an outsider narrator is actually a device of the defamiliarization.

Defamiliarization serves as a means to force individuals to experience the everyday, the ordinary in new ways through the use of the artistic language. The artist creates a shift in the normal, anticipated form of perception and by so doing reveals the world anew. The term was first coined in 1917 by Victor Shklovsky who is one of the leading figures of the movement in literary criticism known as Russian Formalism in his seminal essay "Art, as Device" (Shklovsky, 2015). To illustrate what he means by defamiliarization, Shklovsky uses

numerous examples from Russian literature. As Shklovsky notes, 19th century Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy uses this technique throughout his works. “The narrator of ‘Kholstomer’, for example, is a horse, and it is the horse’s point of view (rather than a person’s) that makes the content of the story seem unfamiliar” (Shkolovsky, 2015, p. 163). Shkolovsky argues that defamiliarization creates a “vision” (Shkolovsky, 2015, p. 171) of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it, which is exactly what Kazuo Ishiguro applies in *Klara and the Sun*.

Therefore, based on Victor Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarization and the android perspective of *Klara and the Sun*, this paper will analyze the dilemma of the human existence, the uniqueness and fragility of the human nature. Ishiguro uses an AI robot to observe the human world, so that people can explore the complexity and contradiction of the human nature.

1. THE DILEMMA OF THE HUMAN EXISTENCE

Humans in *Klara and the Sun* need to make choices all the time, for instance, to be “lifted” or “unlifted”, to “transfer” or “untransfer”, which often puts them in a dilemma. Human beings are creatures who tend to avoid harm, therefore, their choices are always intentionally or unintentionally inclined to be of egoism and utilitarianism. In the society where the fittest survive, they choose to obey the cruel laws of the jungle.

Josie is such a “lifted” girl who fell ill because of the genetic modification. Her mother Chrissie still chose the way for her even after the latter’s elder sister Sal died of illness due to the complications of the genetic surgery. On the contrary, Josie’s best friend Rick who was rejected by the mainstream society on account of his “unlifted” identity. When he was invited to Josie’s interaction meeting, he was discriminated by the other “lifted” and their parents. Klara witnessed the whole process and deeply perceived the indifference and selfishness of the human nature for the first time. Even though Rick has excellent talent, it is almost impossible for him to get the opportunity to receive a high-quality education for most universities are only open to the “lifted”.

Chrissie had asked Helen whether she regretted for not choosing the genetic modification for Rick. Helen said that:

Yes, if I’m honest, Chrissie, the answer is yes. Even after seeing what it’s brought you. I feel...I feel I didn’t do my best for him. I think I didn’t even think it through, the way you and Paul did. I was somewhere else in my mind and I just let the moment go past. Perhaps that’s what I regret more than anything else. That I never loved him enough to make a proper decision one way or the other. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 239)

Therefore, in order to help her son enter Atlas Brookings (which sets up a few places for the highly

gifted “unlifted”), she did not hesitate to lay down her dignity to seek help from her former lover for the purpose of her child to live a normal life in the future. The two mothers made the totally opposite decisions, however, both of them feel regretful. It is ironic that human beings create strict and cruel social hierarchies and rules by themselves, but in turn, they are punished by their own behaviors.

If human beings are utilitarian and self-interested, Klara is a complete altruist and egalitarian who is invented just as a convenient tool, and the meaning of her existence is to bring the convenience to the mankind. In the world of the robots, there are no cruel social hierarchies, only different functions. Accordingly, in Klara’s view, nothing is fundamentally different whether it is Josie or Rick, the “lifted” or the “unlifted”, as she values something more intrinsic. Therefore, when Rick was bullied by the other “lifted”, his best friend Josie did nothing to help him, while Klara was sympathetic to him and tried to take resistance; and when Josie and Rick were in conflict, Klara offered to send the latter a letter and mediate their contradictions. Except his mother, Helen, Klara is the only one in this book who treats Rick equally.

Generally speaking, Klara is just a cold machine which is made of all kinds of industrial materials, but from her perspective and narration readers are able to perceive her sense of equality and tolerance to the mankind although some of them are cruel and selfish. However, the human beings as the creatures with flesh and blood are brutal in dividing people into different hierarchies according to the differences of the genetic sequences. The reasons behind this phenomenon deserve a serious reflection of the human beings.

2. THE UNIQUENESS OF THE HUMAN BEINGS

What is the definition of mankind? What is the uniqueness of human beings from the other species? Do human beings have some traits that no science or technology can decode? Based on these questions, *Klara and the Sun* presents two kinds of extreme answers.

Chrissie asked Mr. Capaldi to develop a 3D intelligent model in the light of Josie’s appearance and planned to transplant Klara’s program into the model. Therefore, after Josie’s death, Klara can continue her daughter’s life to accompany her. Mr. Capaldi claims to be a believer in reason and firmly believes that there is nothing unique and untransferable in the inner core of each person. The so-called human heart is just an ancient rhetoric and a superstition waiting to be completely crushed by science and mathematics. “The part that wants to keep believing there’s something unreachable inside each of us. Something that’s unique and won’t transfer. But

there's nothing like that, we know that now". (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 210) Both Chrissie and Mr. Capaldi believe that everything can be decoded by science and technology. However, Josie's father fiercely opposed her mother and Mr. Capaldi's plan from the very beginning, trying his best to find out why AF could not understand all the mysteries of mankind. He once asked Klara: "Do you believe in the human heart? I don't mean simply the organ, obviously. I'm speaking in the poetic sense. The human heart. Do you think there is such a thing? Something that makes each of us special and individual"? (Ishiguro, 2021, p.218)

He compared the human heart to a strange house:

But then suppose you stepped into one of those rooms, and discovered another room within it. And inside that room, another room still. Rooms within rooms within rooms. Isn't that how it might be, trying to learn Josie's heart? No matter how long you wandered through those rooms, wouldn't there always be others you'd not yet entered? (Ishiguro, 2021, p.219)

At first, Klara held the same view with Chrissie and Mr. Capaldi, she thought that nothing cannot be transferred of the mankind. However, after experiencing more and more interactions with human beings, her attitude finally changed. Klara said: "There was something very special, but it wasn't inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her". (Ishiguro, 2021, p.306) A robot can copy a tangible individual while it cannot copy the love of others for this person. "Not because I wouldn't have achieved accuracy. But however hard I tried, I believe now there would have remained something beyond my reach. The Mother, Rick, Melania Housekeeper, the Father. I'd never have reached what they felt for Josie in their hearts". (Ishiguro, 2021, p.306)

From her own perspective, Klara gradually understands that love and being loved is the meaning and uniqueness of the human existence. Human beings are social creatures who love each other, need each other, face the ups and downs, joys and sorrows together, and witness loss and growth of each other. They also have a complicated social network, in which everyone plays a different role, and most of them even have multiple roles. The intricate connection between people constitutes a unique way of the human existence.

3. THE FRAGILITY OF THE HUMAN NATURE

At the age of algorithms and big data, human beliefs have become fragile. On the one hand, human beings want to use high-tech to save costs and maximize the benefits; on the other hand, they are deeply frightened and disturbed by the uncertainty of its rapid development. After determining that there is no way to cure Josie in the world, Chrissie turned her attention to Klara, as she found that the latter could imitate Josie very accurately and she

hoped Klara could continue Josie's life. However, she did not treat Klara as anything special because of that special purpose. Especially on the day they went to the Morgan's Fall together, Klara imitated Josie accurately again under Chrissie's request. Chrissie's attitude towards Klara became more indifferent after they came back from the Morgan's Fall, and so did Josie.

I hoped the shadows of the Morgan's Fall trip might be gone by the next morning, but I was disappointed and Josie's cold manner continued for a long time afterwards. Even more puzzling was the change Morgan's Fall made to the Mother's manner. I'd believed the trip had gone well, and that there would now be a warmer atmosphere between us. But the Mother, just like Josie, became more distant, and if she encountered me in the hall or on the landing, she'd no longer greet me in the way she'd done before. (Ishiguro, 2021, p.113)

From the perspective of psychology, this phenomenon is called Uncanny Valley, which is a concept first introduced in the 1970s by Masahiro Mori, a professor at the Tokyo Institute of Technology. Mori coined the term "uncanny valley" to describe his observation that as robots appear more humanlike, they become more appealing—but only up to a certain point. Upon reaching the uncanny valley, our affinity descends into a feeling of strangeness, a sense of unease, and a tendency to be scared or freaked out. So the uncanny valley can be defined as people's negative reaction to certain lifelike robots. (Mori, 2012, p.98)

In his seminal essay for the Japanese journal *Energy*, Mori wrote: "I have noticed that, in climbing toward the goal of making robots appear human, our affinity for them increases until we come to a valley, which I call the uncanny valley." (Mori, 2012, p.98)

On one hand, Chrissie hoped that Klara could continue her daughter's life, but on the other hand, she felt afraid that how a robot could imitate her daughter so realistically. In the context of psychology, this kind of phenomenon is generally analyzed to be a self-defense mechanism derived from human instincts against the potential dangers around them. It reflects from one aspect the panic of humans represented by Chrissie about the rapid development of the artificial intelligence. At such a speed, whether robots will replace humans as the main population of the world seems to be unknown. The emergence of this sense of crisis is also a form of shaky belief of human beings, which shows that humans have begun to suspect whether they would be completely replaced by androids one day just like Klara and Josie.

From this point of view, the fragility of human nature is in sharp contrast to Klara's firm belief in the sun. Klara simply believes in the sun and loves her little master Josie from the very beginning to the end. She firmly believes that the sun has a magical power to cure Josie's disease. When everyone is convinced that the existing medical technology has no hope of curing Josie, only Klara always firmly holds the hope. Klara is a solar-powered robot. The

sun, as the most important image in the book, is not only the source of life for Klara to survive, but also her faith that has never changed and wavered. When Josie was dying, everyone was at a loss, only Klara prayed to the sun again and again, and finally Josie was miraculously restored to health under the sun's magical light, which is obviously not logical and scientific according to the common sense and Kazuo Ishiguro does not give any explanations for how the sun cured Josie's disease. This miracle is similar to a religious manifestation that an unknown mysterious force has defeated the supreme science.

In the future world depicted in *Klara and the Sun*, human's dependence on science and technology have reached a peak and thus they feel completely hopeless for anything that cannot be solved by science and technology. In fact, the author intends to arouse humans' reflections through the comparison between man and robots in the current and future society. In the process of the excessive pursuit of high technology, human beings have lost many precious things. While robots still have those, humans lack beliefs under the coercion of the cold big data and artificial intelligence.

CONCLUSION

In his novel *Klara and the Sun*, Kazuo Ishiguro shows his deep concerns about the negative effects of the rapid development of science and technology on mankind and their future living conditions. From Klara's defamiliarized perspective, the novel displays the dilemma of the human beings, the uniqueness and fragility of the human nature, which leads to the reflection about the human existence and the potential crisis of the human society.

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