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What Klara Cannot See: Artificial Perception and Narrative Blind Spots in Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun

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Abstract

What happens when a narrator sees accurately but draws a conclusion her observations cannot establish? This article examines three episodes in Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun: the disappearing patch of sunlight on the shop floor, the apparent recovery of a man and his dog, and Klara's final conversation about whether she could have replaced Josie. A stylistic close reading distinguishes what Klara reports from what she infers and from what she feels obliged to do. In the shop, she entertains coincidence even while apologising for an event she doubts she caused. At the window, she corrects one mistaken inference but presents her new causal explanation with the confidence of an eyewitness. In the final conversation, that pattern changes: Klara can imagine reproducing Josie's behaviour accurately while recognising that accuracy would leave other people's attachments unaccounted for. The novel gives readers good reasons to dispute particular explanations without granting them a consistently superior understanding. Its artificial narrator is most discerning when she recognises that some questions cannot be answered by improving the accuracy of a description.

Keywords: *Kazuo Ishiguro; literary stylistics; focalization; epistemic modality; nonhuman narration; narrative reliability*

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1. Introduction

A patch of sunlight disappears as Klara touches the floor. Rex accuses her of consuming the light that the other Artificial Friends need. A reader can readily think of another explanation. What is easier to miss is that Klara thinks of one too. If the episode merely asked readers to recognise a mistake that a machine cannot recognise, it would end with the accusation. Instead, Ishiguro gives Klara both a reasonable doubt and an apology. Why should she apologise when she has already distinguished coincidence from cause?

This small difficulty opens a larger question about the relation between knowledge and care in the novel. Klara must judge what others need without direct access to their feelings; she must also decide how to act before she can know whether her judgement is right. That predicament belongs as much to the people who acquire her as to the artificial companion they buy. The difference is that only Klara has to narrate the steps between a perception and a decision. A human reader can quietly assume an explanation where the artificial narrator risks saying hers aloud.

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The research question is therefore stylistic: how does Ishiguro mark the distance between what Klara observes, what she believes follows from it, and what the reader has grounds to infer? Three episodes offer different answers. The first separates responsibility from belief; the second makes an explanation sound like a perception; the third turns an apparent limit on artificial perception into a criticism of a human observer. Read together, they suggest that the distribution of error changes across the novel. The reader who reasonably doubts Klara's account of sunlight has acquired no special authority to dismiss her account of love.

2. Machine Vision and the Problem of Narrative Authority

Research on Klara has already established the importance of how she sees. Sumner (2023) examines the novel's treatment of machine vision and face recognition, particularly the capacity of literary description to register hesitation and affect. Torres-Romero (2025) places the technical narrator within a network of human and nonhuman cognition. These accounts caution against treating Klara as an isolated processor who retrieves meanings already present in the world. The shop floor offers a small but telling example: Rex supplies the initial explanation of the light, Rosa's face offers no useful corroboration, and the layout determines which changes Klara can observe.

What readers learn about the shop depends on what its inhabitants call things. Mammadova (2026) shows how naming and register make social relations legible in Tolkien's The Hobbit. Ishiguro gives naming a different task. Manager is intelligible first as an office; Beggar Man is identifiable to Klara before she knows anything about his history. Such names let readers find their bearings quickly, yet their very usefulness can conceal how little either observer knows about the person named. The shop window grants the man a fixed place in Klara's vocabulary while denying her the access needed to explain his condition.

The present argument begins one step after perception. Even when nobody disputes what the scene looks like, who gets to say what happened? The distinction matters because grammatical continuity can conceal a change in the kind of evidence being offered. The same first-person voice can report a movement, infer an intention, and accept an obligation within a few sentences. A discussion of machine optics alone would miss the difference between these acts. Equally, a discussion of whether Klara possesses empathy would leave unexplained how a reader comes to trust one of her judgements while doubting another.

Genette's (1980) distinction between voice and focalization helps specify the difficulty. Klara both speaks and supplies the perspective, but the two functions need not yield identical knowledge. The speaker who remembers the shop can qualify the conclusions of the figure who stood in it. Cohn (1978) identifies precisely this flexibility within retrospective first-person narration. Nor does a mistake on one matter license rejection of the account as a whole: Phelan (2005) distinguishes a narrator's reporting from interpreting and evaluating. A dependable report may be the reader's best evidence against the interpretation attached to it.

Accounts of nonhuman narration explain why the temptation to make a global judgement is nevertheless strong. Readers bring habits of human attribution to speakers whose bodies and interests unsettle those habits (Bernaerts et al., 2014; Caracciolo, 2016). Sunlight is a case in point. To a person looking through a shop window, a bright patch may signify little more than the weather. To an Artificial Friend dependent on light, the same patch is sustenance. Readers who discount Klara's theory of the Sun can easily discount her bodily interest in it as well. The first inference may be justified; the second would be a failure to read the conditions of her life.

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3. Text and Method

The primary text is Ishiguro's 2021 novel. References below give the numbered part and a distinctive scene so that readers can locate passages across print and electronic editions. The three episodes were chosen because each supplies an observation, an explanation of it and an identifiable alternative. Two occur in Part One, permitting comparison within the same setting; the conversation in Part Six tests whether the opening pattern survives when the object of knowledge changes. This selection supports a comparison of narrative procedures rather than a count of features across the novel.

The method treats narrated consciousness as an effect of mediation: a novel gives readers a verbal arrangement of experience, not independent access to the mind it depicts (Ghosal, 2021). Following Herman (2009), each episode is read in terms of what changes in the storyworld and for whom that change matters. The distinction supplies a check on interpretation. If removing a causal gloss leaves the physical sequence intelligible, the gloss requires an argument of its own. If replacing a character's name with a neutral description changes the apparent cause, the name itself has been doing interpretive work.

The reading attends to temporal conjunctions, verbs of perception and belief, modal expressions, reported speech and shifts between the experiencing and remembering self. Following Simpson (1993), modality is understood as the speaker's positioning towards a proposition: saying that an explanation is possible differs from endorsing it as known. Leech and Short (2007) supply a related methodological principle: the significance of a feature depends on what another available wording would have done. Where an analytical paraphrase separates steps that the narration joins, the paraphrase is a comparison, not an alternative quotation. Reader effects below are interpretive possibilities licensed by the prose; no claim is made about measured responses.

4. The Shop Floor: Doubting a Cause and Accepting Responsibility

The crucial expression in the floor episode is "as soon as" (Ishiguro, 2021, Part One, shop floor). It places contact and disappearance in immediate succession. It does not say that the first produced the second. Rex converts the temporal relation into a moral accusation: Klara has taken a shared resource for herself. He has an advantage in making this conversion. He was the one who invited her to touch the light, so his charge arrives in the voice of the apparent expert whose advice she followed. What resembles a test of artificial intelligence is also an encounter between a newcomer and someone who knows how to exploit the authority of experience.

Klara's counterproposal is expressed through "might" and "by chance" (Part One). Both belong to the remembered moment: the older narrator explicitly credits her younger self with considering coincidence immediately. Yet even that alternative retains the Sun as an agent capable of withdrawing the pattern. Her reasoning is discriminating without being identical to a human reader's. She questions whether her touch made the difference; she does not have to abandon the possibility that the Sun acts. The passage thus separates two beliefs that an impatient reading might collapse into a single instance of naïveté.

A judgement about what Klara believes must also allow for where the judgement is made. Hayles (2017) locates cognition across interactions among technical systems, bodies and environments. Here the glass, the arrangement of the merchandise and Rex's standing as a more experienced companion distribute access to evidence unevenly. Yet they do not settle the matter on Klara's behalf. She can consult the street sign; she cannot step outside the shop to test her explanation. It is the unevenness of

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that access, rather than a general deficiency of machine intelligence, that the prose makes available for inspection.

The exterior sign matters because it offers an independent observation. The light has changed beyond the spot Klara touched. That detail makes an ordinary change in illumination plausible. It also makes Rex's story more frightening: if he were right, the consequences would extend far beyond her hands. The available evidence can therefore lower the intellectual credibility of the accusation while increasing its emotional force. Rosa's expression does not settle the dispute. Klara apologises to both companions without first resolving what caused the darkness. The apology is intelligible as a response to the possibility of depriving them, even if one cannot read it as a settled confession of guilt.

Care has a cost here even if no light has been lost. Dodds (2014) distinguishes the vulnerabilities that arise in relations of dependence; Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) asks what it takes to sustain care in more-than-human worlds. Rex makes use of precisely the dependence that he and Klara share. He can turn his alleged weakness into an obligation for her without having to demonstrate that she caused it. The reader who treats her apology as proof of credulity unwittingly accepts his premise: that one owes concern only for an injury one can prove one caused.

Rex's performance then complicates the apparent victory of common sense. Klara eventually judges that he was teasing, yet retrospectively hears anxiety underneath the joke. Dependence on light gives the joke its force; nothing in its falsity as an accusation makes that dependence imaginary. At the beginning of the scene, the reader may enjoy knowing more about shadows than the narrator does. By its end, knowing the physics of a shadow has proved a poor qualification for judging what one vulnerable shop companion can make another fear. The narrative does not cancel the reader's superior inference. It specifies how little that inference explains.

5. The Shop Window: When an Explanation Inherits the Authority of Sight

The episode of the man and his dog also juxtaposes sunlight with a change in a body, but removes the teasing instructor (Ishiguro, 2021, Part One, the morning after the pair lie motionless). Klara has taken their immobility to mean that they are dead. When she later sees them active in the sunlight, she revises that judgement. A reader need not choose between trusting everything Klara says and trusting nothing: renewed movement gives her excellent grounds to say that the pair are alive. It gives her much poorer grounds to say what condition they were in earlier, or what the Sun did for them.

The narration makes this difference unusually easy to overlook. A verb of seeing introduces the discovery; the sentence then moves through a dash to an account of rescue. The continuation inherits the momentum of the visual report. An analytical paraphrase would require two predicates: she sees movement; she understands it as evidence of solar intervention. Ishiguro makes the second feel almost as immediate as the first. Where the shop-floor sequence invited several explanations, the window scene puts the inference in the grammatical position where a reader might expect a clarification of something just seen.

The change is more interesting than a simple failure to learn. In the earlier incident, the question was whether Klara had caused harm. Here the possibility she embraces is that someone has provided help. Her dependence on sunlight supplies a bodily analogy: what restores an Artificial Friend might restore another vulnerable creature. The weakness lies in transferring the explanation across bodies without independent evidence. Its imaginative strength lies in noticing a possible kinship across those bodies at all. From behind glass, Klara cannot check the man's earlier condition. Neither can the reader. One

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may prefer the ordinary explanation that he and the dog were resting or sleeping; the novel does not promote the reader into a witness who examined them.

The dog sharpens the problem of perspective. An animal lying beside a man offers the observer a second body to interpret, not a second witness who can correct the first. Herman (2018) makes the representation of animal life a question of narrative viewpoint; Nagel (1974) distinguishes knowledge about a creature from access to its experience. Klara is entitled to notice a physical resemblance between still bodies. Neither she nor the reader can infer from that resemblance that their two experiences were identical. The pair enter her account as companions and emerge from her explanation almost as a single patient.

That difference bears on the later illness of Josie. The window supplies Klara with a precedent for seeking the Sun's help. If readers regard that precedent simply as foolish, they lose sight of what makes it persuasive to her: it organises a remembered transition from apparent helplessness to activity into a story about aid. What the window cannot provide is a comparison with what would have happened in the Sun's absence. The narrative preserves a distinction between the truth of a causal account and the power of that account to sustain care. Klara's attention to Josie does not become less real if her explanation of recovery is unprovable.

6. The Yard: Looking for Josie in the Wrong Place

In the final conversation with Manager, the direction of criticism reverses. Mr Capaldi believes that sufficiently accurate knowledge of Josie would make it possible for Klara to continue her life in her place. The older Klara does not contest the possibility of accuracy. She grants it for the sake of argument. That concession is essential: if her complaint were merely that Josie had too many traits to copy, better observation might eventually meet the objection. Instead, Klara changes the location in which the answer would have to be sought (Ishiguro, 2021, Part Six, conversation with Manager).

The decisive word is "inside." Klara first uses the spatial language associated with Capaldi's investigation and then gives it a different complement: "inside those who loved her" (Part Six). The preposition stays put while its object changes from an individual to a plurality. A search for something hidden in one person becomes a question about several people's attachments. No mysterious inner substance needs to be discovered inside Josie for her loss to be irreplaceable. What a replacement would have to reproduce includes the history through which other people came to love this particular child. It is difficult even to specify whose features would have to be copied to accomplish that.

Read beside Babazadə and Qənbərov's (2025) account of immortality as a literary motif, Capaldi's proposal raises a precise question: who would have to survive for his promise to be fulfilled? An imitation might preserve Josie's recognisable habits and spare a witness the shock of an empty room. Neither achievement would establish that Josie had outlived her illness. Calling the project a continuation moves too easily between the persistence of a recognisable performance and the persistence of the person performing it. Klara's counterfactual grants the first possibility so that she can ask what the second would entail.

Notice also how Klara arrives at this insight. She names members of Josie's circle before offering the general formulation. The enumeration resists an easy abstraction: a parent, a friend and a housekeeper do not stand in the same relation to her. A sufficiently convincing imitation might satisfy one observer on one occasion without restoring what another has lost. Where the man and the dog had prompted Klara to generalise from her own bodily needs, her recollection of Josie now prompts her to

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differentiate other people's experiences. This is a change in the scale and direction of inference, not a sentimental revelation that the machine has become human.

The difference is especially striking beside Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go (2005). There, art is collected in the hope that an audience will recognise an inner life; here, scrutiny of an inner life is meant to make a person reproducible. The two projects give observation almost opposite ethical functions. Hayles (2023) places the status of human distinctiveness within a crisis of representation. Klara's answer is more specific than a defence of human uniqueness: representation may succeed on its own terms while failing the people for whose sake it was undertaken. An indistinguishable copy could still be the wrong answer to grief.

Klara marks the conclusion as something she believes now. The retrospective qualification is appropriate because the proposed substitution never took place. She cannot report its failure as an observed event. Her strongest ethical judgement is consequently one of her most carefully limited knowledge claims. Manager's reply offers a final complication. She receives Klara's account chiefly as reassurance that her former charge has no regrets. Her kindness is genuine, but it does not require her to engage with the objection Klara has made to Capaldi. Here the artificial speaker articulates a distinction that her human interlocutor can hear without quite taking up. The asymmetry of the shop window has been reversed without granting either species a monopoly on insight.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Across the three scenes, Ishiguro changes the grammatical relation between a report and its explanation. At the shop floor a temporal conjunction invites a causal inference that a modal expression promptly qualifies. At the window an explanation follows a report of sight so closely that the two seem to possess the same authority. In the Yard a repeated preposition exposes the limits of Capaldi's premise. The variation matters more than the frequency of any word. A reading that collected errors would miss the apology; a reading that collected instances of personification would miss the evidential work of the dash; a reading that celebrated empathy alone would miss why Klara concedes the possibility of an accurate copy.

The comparison also places a limit on what a posthuman reading can claim. Colombino and Childs (2022) connect nonhuman narration with questions of ecology and consciousness. The Sun in this novel is an energy source, an object of address and a possible benefactor, but those roles do not have equal evidential standing. To insist that only the first counts would discard Klara's lived dependence; to endorse all three would repeat her most questionable inference. The grammatical distinction between perceiving and explaining gives criticism a way to attend to the relationship while reserving judgement about the miracle.

One objection is that these scenes illustrate nothing peculiar to artificial perception. Human narrators also confuse succession with cause and reassess childhood convictions. That objection identifies part of the novel's achievement. As Caracciolo (2016) suggests of strange narrators more generally, the reader must negotiate both distance and familiarity. Ishiguro makes that negotiation concrete by giving the observer a material dependence on light, positioning her behind a commercial display and making her capacity to observe a reason for purchasing her. No abstract opposition between human and machine explains all three conditions. Her perspective is artificial in the particular sense that a body has been designed and placed so that its attention will be useful to somebody else.

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What, then, can Klara not see? She cannot see a cause merely by witnessing a sequence. Neither can her reader. She cannot inspect other people's love as a feature inside Josie, but by the end she understands why the inspection could never answer the question. Her development consists less in seeing more than in recognising when more seeing would make no difference. Ishiguro's final irony is that the observer trained to reproduce a person can explain the limits of reproduction more precisely than the person who commissioned it.

Declarations

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