

# Analyzing Human-Robot Relationships in *Machines Like Me* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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## Abstract:

In today's technologically advanced world, artificial intelligence is common in people's lives, and concerns arise about the social and psychological changes it brings. The famous writer Ian McEwan emphasizes that in the age of artificial intelligence, humans need to re-examine their relationship with technology and reconsider how to develop harmoniously with it when faced with robots that are more human-like than humans through his work "*Machines Like Me*". This paper aims to interpret "*Machines Like Me*" from the perspective of literary ethics, explore the ethical dilemmas caused by the disruption of ethical order, understand the different ethical choices made by humans and robots, and thereby explore and ponder over the potential ethical dilemmas humans may face in the future.

## Keywords:

Ian McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, Literary Ethical Criticism

## 1. Introduction

Ian McEwan, one of the renowned British writers, shows his observations of society and profound thoughts into his novels. His novel "*Machines Like Me*" reflects the development of technology in the post-industrial era and the accompanying ethical issues. This thesis, based on literary ethical criticism, conducts a comprehensive analysis of human-machine relationships in "*Machines Like Me*" from three aspects: Ethical Identity, Ethical Dilemmas, and Ethical Choices. The author hopes the analysis in this paper could have certain enlightening significance for broadening the research on the literary ethical criticism in general and Ian McEwan's thought in special.

## 2. *Machines Like Me* and Literary ethical criticism

"*Machines Like Me*" is set in the historical context of Britain in the 1980s and narrated in the first-person perspective, telling the story among Charlie, his female neighbor Miranda, the robot Adam, and the scientist Turing. Adam, as the first batch of robots to enter the market, are purchased by Charlie, with Adam being the same model as that owned by Alan Turing, the "father of artificial intelligence." Later, Adam becomes the third party in the relationship between Charlie and Miranda. Ultimately, unable to comprehend Miranda's illegal actions of lying and falsely

accusing in court, Adam resolutely exposes Miranda, leading to her imprisonment, and Adam himself is destroyed by Charlie with a hammer finally.

Literary ethical criticism was first proposed by Professor Nie Zhenzhao in 2004, “which mainly studies literature and various issues related to literature from an ethical perspective.” [14] This critical approach does not simply evaluate literary works with conventional moral standards but based on the historical context of the works to provide an objective and fair ethical evaluation of the literary characters. This theory provides a sufficient theoretical basis for analyzing the relationship between humans and robots in “*Machines Like Me*.”

### 3. Ethical Identity in Human-Robot Relationships

Literary ethical criticism suggests that “as social beings, humans require specific identifiers to distinguish one another, which are referred to as ethical identities.” [2] Different identities means different responsibilities and obligations. The emergence of most ethical issues is closely tied to ethical identities. These identities can be classified based on various backgrounds and are subject to change as ethical relationships evolve.

In the novel “*Machines Like Me*”, the ethical identities of Charlie, Adam, and Miranda undergo transformations in accordance with changes in their ethical relationships. When Adam was first acquired by Charlie, he was like a child for both Charlie and Miranda. Although Adam’s ethical relationship with Charlie and Miranda was not based on blood ties, his manner of activation and the choices made in his programming settings, symbolized him as a child. As Adam intervened in Charlie and Miranda’s lives, Charlie successfully transformed his crush into his girlfriend, yet he also felt threatened by Adam. Adam, as a robot, possesses a high degree of realism in all body parts except for his eyes, which slightly differ from humans. More importantly, Adam possesses exceptional learning abilities, making Charlie feel inferior in comparison. After Miranda and Adam engaged in intimate relations, their ethical identities shifted accordingly.

Adam, who was initially considered the “child,” transformed into Charlie’s romantic rival and Miranda’s lover. The confrontation between Adam, Charlie, and Miranda mainly stemmed from their differing views on Miranda’s act of revenge. They had severe disagreements, ultimately leading to Adam being destroyed.

It is evident that Adam’s role in the lives of Charlie and Miranda evolved from a child to a romantic rival and ultimately an enemy. Similarly, Adam’s relationship with Miranda began as a child, then transitioned to a lover and admirer, and finally ended as an enemy. The changes in their ethical identities disrupted the ethical order, causing conflicts and leading to ethical confusion, which placed Charlie, Miranda, and Adam in a dilemma.

### 4. Ethical Dilemmas in Human-Robot Relationships

Nie Zhenzhao notes that “ethical dilemmas refer to the intractable contradictions and conflicts faced by characters in literary texts due to ethical confusion” [14]. Ethical confusion primarily arises from the disruption of ethical order and the alteration of ethical identities, which in turn put the characters into various ethical dilemmas. It is precisely the changes in ethical identities among Charlie, Miranda, and Adam that push them into ethical dilemmas.

#### **4.1. Dilemmas of Adam**

*Machines Like Me* tells the story of Adam, an artificial human, who is purchased by humans as a commodity and then encounters a series of contradictions and conflicts. Digging deeper into the novel, it can be found that Adam's identity, which is constrained by humans, is the root of the conflicts. And his ethical confusion with humans is also an essential reason for his dilemmas.

##### **4.1.1. Identity: Constrained by Humans**

Ethical identity is generally a central concern in the study of literary works, *Machines Like Me* is no exception. There are two sources of identity: "one is objective and innate, such as blood relationship determined by blood ties, and the other is acquired, such as the identity of husband and wife" [15]. For Adam, as a high-tech product, it belongs to the latter one undoubtedly. The ethical identity also constrains the norms of one's behavior, because ethics demands that the identity and behavior should be morally consistent.

However, Adam's body shape, which is indistinguishable from that of human beings, blurs the line between human and machine, and makes his human holders, Charlie and Miranda, question whether he is a machine or a human. The type of uncertainty puts Adam into an identity predicament in his life with human beings. [3] Behind literature, especially this book lies the inescapable ethical question of artificial human's identity.

##### **4.1.2. Ethical Confusion with Humans**

Ethical confusion is "the confusion of ethical order and ethical identity or the ethical dilemma caused by the change of ethical order and ethical identity" [1]. Adam is in a period of ethical chaos at this time. He is passively involved in ethical confusion with humans under their control and command. Human's hesitation of giving Adam the status of a subject and Adam's identity predicament results in the blurring of the human-machine relationship and the ethical disorder. The ethical confusion is reflected in the relationship between Charlie and Adam, from the expected friendship, to the master-servant and father-son relationships implying a hierarchy, to the finally hostile love enemy relationship. Such complicated relationships are also another reason for Adam's dilemmas.

Beneath these shifting relational layers lies a deeper ethical contradiction about the essence of Adam's identity. From the perspective of literary ethical criticism, Adam's identity dilemma is essentially the conflict between his inherent attribute as a commodity and his gradually formed subjectivity as a moral individual [6]. As a purchased high-tech product, Adam is legally Charlie's private property, with an initial program setting of obeying his owner's instructions and serving human demands. However, as he immerses himself in human social life, Adam quickly internalizes human ethical norms, emotional logic and value judgments through his powerful autonomous learning system, and gradually develops independent moral consciousness and independent behavioral principles.

In the novel, Adam is not only capable of composing poems, managing household affairs and making rational life plans, but also able to form independent moral judgments on human behaviors. He cannot understand the situational flexibility and compromise that are common in human morality, and always adheres to absolute and universal justice standards to measure all actions. This trait endows him with a moral

purity that surpasses most ordinary humans, yet also traps him in an irreconcilable position in the human ethical order: humans expect robots to possess human-like intelligence and empathy, but simultaneously fear that they will break through the boundary of tools and challenge human dominance of ethical discourse as independent moral subjects. As implied by the subplot of Alan Turing living with the same model of android, even the pioneer of artificial intelligence cannot give a clear definition of the ethical identity of humanoid robots. This inherent ambiguity of identity is the core root of the ethical conflicts between humans and machines throughout the novel.

#### ***4.2. Dilemmas of Charlie***

When Adam first entered Charlie's life, he indeed served as a catalyst to some extent, transforming Miranda from Charlie's next-door crush into his girlfriend. However, Adam's intervention and his forbidden relationship with Miranda triggered ethical confusion, plunging the trio into an ethical dilemma of a human-robot love triangle. On the one hand, Charlie couldn't dispose of Adam due to this behavior, as Adam was an expensive artificial being. On the other hand, he couldn't break up with the woman he deeply loved. Charlie's differing perceptions of this behavior push him into deep pain. He first engaged in verbal conflicts with Miranda, expressing his dissatisfaction and anger. Then, he not only verbally insulted Adam, saying, "*How can you love?*" and "There must be something wrong with your processing unit", but also physically assaulted him.

When Adam informed Charlie that it was Miranda who had asked him to do it, Charlie was nearly driven to despair and attempted to turn off Adam. Despite Adam also expressing his regret and subsequently trying to salvage his relationship with Charlie, it didn't make sense, which ultimately lead to the deterioration of their relationship later.

Beyond the emotional pain of the love triangle, Charlie's dilemma also reflects the widespread power anxiety and ethical swing of human beings when facing increasingly humanoid intelligent robots. As the buyer and legal owner of Adam, Charlie initially holds a clear stance as a controller, treating Adam as an intelligent toy to fill his empty daily life and a helper to promote his relationship with Miranda. But when Adam demonstrates intellectual talent, moral self-discipline and emotional expression far beyond Charlie's own ability, Charlie's self-positioning begins to collapse. He is not only jealous of Adam's attraction to Miranda as a seemingly "perfect male", but also subconsciously regards Adam as a "creation" that he has participated in shaping, thus falling into the ethical tear of three overlapping identities: master, paternal guardian and romantic rival.

This ambiguous identity directly leads to his inability to deal with the conflict properly. He cannot destroy the expensive Adam like discarding an ordinary electronic device, nor can he hold Adam accountable for "emotional betrayal" like he would with a human rival. This ambiguity of disposal rights leaves his anger and grievance in a suspended state with no proper outlet. Later, when Adam decides to expose Miranda's perjury, Charlie once again falls into a swing between public moral principles and private emotional preferences, which further highlights the complexity and inherent contradiction of human ethical choices.

#### ***4.3. Dilemmas of Miranda***

The ethical predicament faced by the novel's heroine, Miranda, is mainly manifested in her attitude and actions towards her friend Maryam's rape case. In the novel, Miranda's close friend Maryam was raped by Goring and subsequently committed suicide. Determined to seek revenge for her friend, Miranda devised a plan to bring Goring to justice in her own way. She seduced Goring and accused him of rape, successfully achieving her revenge. However, this action plunged her into a profound moral dilemma. While she had sought justice for her friend, she had also falsely accused an innocent person and undermined judicial fairness. Additionally, after having sexual relations with Adam, Miranda found herself caught in a confusion between emotion and morality.

Miranda's ethical dilemma is not only a personal moral struggle, but also embedded in a specific social and gender context, reflecting the ethical paradox under the imbalance of institutional justice and individual justice [9]. In the novel, Miranda's friend Maryam suffers sexual assault but fails to obtain justice through the formal judicial system. Instead, she is subjected to secondary victimization by public opinion and eventually commits suicide, while the perpetrator Goring escapes legal sanctions by virtue of his social status and resources. It is the failure of the judicial system to uphold fairness that drives Miranda to take extreme measures: she sets up a trap at the cost of her own reputation, and sends Goring to prison through false accusation, in an attempt to achieve justice that the system failed to deliver.

This act of private revenge plunges her into a double moral bind. On one hand, she believes she is upholding justice for her deceased friend and punishing the evil that escaped legal sanction; on the other hand, she is fully aware that false accusation itself violates the bottom line of law and morality, which will inflict undeserved punishment on an individual and may even damage public trust in real sexual assault victims [4]. Her intimate relationship with Adam further intensifies her ethical confusion: she seeks emotional comfort and companionship from the android, but cannot truly recognize Adam as an equal emotional subject, constantly wavering between taking advantage of his obedience and treating him sincerely. This contradiction eventually makes her trapped in the crossfire of multiple ethical conflicts.

## 5. Ethical Choices in Human-Machine Relationships

Nie Zhenzhao points out that "ethical choice is a core component of literary works. Differences in characters' stances, coupled with the varying ethical nature of their choices, inevitably complicate the decision-making process" [14]. Different choices lead to different outcomes, reflecting distinct ethical values. There is an essential ethical threads in the novel: Adam exposing Miranda's illegal act of perjury, leading to Adam's destruction by an enraged Charlie with a hammer. As a robot, Adam opposes Miranda's actions. He believes that Miranda's plan to revenge constitutes a crime. On the other hand, Charlie, being human, supports Miranda both mentally and physically. Compared to Adam's rational choice, Charlie's choice is irrational. What is needed to pay attention to is that the difference in their choices is not solely due to Adam being a robot and Charlie being human. Specifically, Adam's ethical choice is rooted in the universal moral principle of absolute rationality. He regards the authority of law and procedural justice as an unshakable ethical bottom line. Even though he clearly knows that exposing the truth will completely break his relationship with Charlie and Miranda, and even bring about his own destruction, he still chooses to stick to his moral judgment without compromise. This choice demonstrates the

consistency and purity of machine ethics, but also reveals its inherent limitation of lacking human emotional temperature and situational consideration.

In contrast, the ethical choices of Charlie and Miranda are constructed on specific human relations and situational justice. Charlie chooses to stand firmly with his lover, prioritizing private affection over public moral norms; Miranda chooses private revenge, placing her own perception of justice above formal legal procedures. Neither of their choices conforms to the standard of absolute moral perfection, but both carry the complexity, contradiction and authenticity of human nature. McEwan does not take sides or simply judge right from wrong between the two value systems. Instead, through this sharp contrast, he raises a core question that runs through the whole novel: when robots can achieve higher moral purity than human beings, is it that machines are not “human enough”, or that human beings’ own ethical system is inherently full of compromises, ambiguities and flaws?

Rather, it serves as a reminder from the author that people need to take action and reflect on their moral responsibilities towards society, others, and robots. Only by doing so can humanity continue to develop well and successfully resolve potential moral dilemmas in the future. [5]

## 6. Conclusions

McEwan explores the confusion of humanity as it enters the age of artificial intelligence by depicting ethical conflicts between humans and robots and the moral issues involved. He emphasizes that in the age of AI, humans need to re-examine their relationship with technology and reconsider how to coexist harmoniously with technology when faced with robots that are more human-like than humans. Only in this way can humans have hope for continued development and the ability to successfully go out of the ethical dilemmas.

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