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"Humanity in the Machine: Exploring the complexity of relationships in Ian McEwan's *'Machines Like Me'* and the Blurred Divides Between Humanity and AI"

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Ian McEwan’s novel *Machines like Me* is a novel set in 1980s London in an alternative history where AI and robotics technology are much further developed. It follows through the story of Charlie and Miranda, a new relationship that purchase one of the first generation of artificial humans, Adam. The story explores how the decision of purchasing Adam, causes the couple to confront their own ethical and moral conflicts. Though this genre is different from Ian McEwan’s usual style of writing, it introduces us to thought-provoking philosophies about what it means to be human, the emergence of consciousness and whether AI can out-perform, out-feel and out-do humans. In this article, I will examine McEwan’s possible thoughts and choices when writing Machines like Me, the love triangle between Charlie, Miranda, and Adam and how each character perceives and defines this relationship differently, and how the increasing blurred boundaries between the human and nonhuman is portrayed and developed in the novel.

*Machines Like Me* is a novel that steers away from McEwan’s usual genre and writing style, he is known for his creating a sense of unease in his novels as well as his gothic work. So much so, that we expect *Machines Like Me* to be written with some moral purpose and lesson to teach, which justifies McEwan’s reason for writing as well as his interest. In an interview, McEwan says ‘We live in a time where the pace of change is not only fast but accelerating and I think for that reason novelists are drawn to this very fertile ground of where the future might go.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Many modern-day writers are interested but terrified by the advancement of AI and where it will go in the future. However, ‘At the same time, AI is a story to tell, and no longer just in science fiction. As present in the imagination as politics, the pandemic or climate change, AI has become part of the narrative for a growing number of novelists and short story writers.’[[2]](#footnote-2) *Machines Like Me* is a novel that explores the possibilities the advancement of AI has which gives it a sci-fi tone, but the novel is also very human by exploring the relationships humans have with AI, through confronting ethical and moral dilemmas. Through storytelling, McEwan teaches us a lesson to be open-minded to the future of AI as readers, but also shows that ‘Literature is an imitation of human life and action; it is a reflection of the human society’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Machines Like Me* begins with a prologue in Chapter One that introduces the first AI robots that were designed and brought to sale. Charlie, the main character, sees the introduction of these robots as ‘the beginning of the long lesson we would teach ourselves that however complicated we were, however faulty and difficult to describe even in our simplest actions and modes of being, we could be imitated and bettered’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This refers to the idea of AI potentially replacing humans, such as replacing human labour, enabling AI to do jobs more efficiently and quickly. However, the term imitated also refers to the possibility of AI being so alike humans, in their behaviour and cognitive abilities that we will no longer be able to distinguish the difference between humans and AI. In modern society, we can see already see the normalisation of AI into our daily lives, ‘AI has been seen almost in all our life circles, and some of that may no longer be regarded as AI because it is so common in daily life that we are much used to it such as optical character recognition or the Siri’.[[5]](#footnote-5)So, what is to say that this possibility will not occur in the future?

As the novel begins to unfold, we can see how Charlie is taught this lesson by impulsively purchasing Adam. This ‘reckless decision’[[6]](#footnote-6) almost serves as a punishment to Charlie. Maybe by him knowing he could be better and imitated by Adam, he would not have purchased Adam in the first place. Charlie is 32, who lives on his own in a small London apartment, surviving from his mother’s inheritance whilst ‘playing the stock and currency markets online’[[7]](#footnote-7) every day. He seems to be insecure, often reminiscing on his life, as he says, ‘It could have turned out differently’[[8]](#footnote-8). He is also in an unofficial relationship with Miranda, a 22-year-old woman who lives downstairs, he says he is ‘too cynical for a lovely woman like Miranda.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Perhaps Charlie is insecure, and purchased Adam out of loneliness, with a belief he could boost his self-esteem knowing he has a companion who he can be better than, simply because Charlie is a human and Adam is AI, he isn’t real.

The relationship between Charlie, Adam and Miranda is complex and only gets more complicated as the novel goes on. Charlie had been ‘expecting a friend’[[10]](#footnote-10) out of Adam. However, early in the novel, he states that one of his reasons for purchasing Adam, is to woo Miranda, and says they will almost be like parents raising a child. Therefore, it’s evident to readers that Charlie is naive for thinking that Adam is below him in the social hierarchy because he isn’t human. This is where the possibility and moral lesson of AI bettering and imitating humans comes into action in the novel.

Around chapter three of Machines Like Me, Miranda decides to have sexual intercourse with Adam, a careless decision with consequences. This is the first and main dilemma that causes the love triangle between Charlie, Miranda, and Adam in the novel. Miranda claims that Adam isn’t real, therefore it lacks meaning, however, Charlie begs to differ – and this is where Charlie continues to learn the lesson that he can be bettered by AI. The intercourse is vividly described in the novel in such a humanly way, so much so that if we didn’t know Adam was an AI robot, we would’ve assumed he is a human. This links to a theory by Alan Turing called The Turing Test, Charlie quotes it as ‘the moment we couldn’t tell the difference in behaviour between machine and person was when we must confer humanity on the machine’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Adam is so human-like, that Charlie can’t help but feel jealousy and even anger towards him, though we would argue that an AI robot is completely unable to form human relationships with people. However, logic is not enough to convince Charlie at this moment in the novel, as he is clouded by his emotions.

*Humanity in the Machine* refers to the drastic advancement of AI in society. It is about AI being so advanced that we cannot distinguish its behaviours from human behaviour. This opens the doors to many debates about whether AI has a conscious close to human conscious, whether AI can think, feel, or act as a human does. Shortly after the intercourse between Adam and Miranda, Charlie has a conversation with the AI robot. Here, Adam states that he is in love with Miranda and tells Adam that he had taken pleasure in making love to Miranda, responding with ‘Of course I did. Absolutely’[[12]](#footnote-12) ‘AI is operated based on objective data and algorithms. Human emotion, being deeply subjective, remains elusive to this mode of operation.’[[13]](#footnote-13) Here, is where the lines between AI and human begin to blur. It is not possible for Adam to have feelings or emotions, yet he is absolutely convinced that he does. Again, Turing would say that we clearly cannot tell the difference between Adam to a human being, so he must be treated as a human being. For an AI robot to have feelings, it must have more than a machine consciousness. If Adam has feelings of love, kindness, and connection, surely, he is part of the essence of humanity as to form connections is a part of the human experience. Charlie does not know how to respond to this, he is avoidant and debates throwing Adam away, though Adam has proved to be much more than a toy. It is interesting to see the possibility of AI advancing so much that we cannot distinguish it from humanity, though we know that ‘while AI has made significant advancements and can outperform humans in specific tasks, it cannot replicate the essence of humanity. The role of human intuition, critical thinking, the value of connections and relationships, and the significance of the human experience and wisdom are irreplaceable.’

But this is what *Machines Like Me* is really about, exploring the depths and levels of the advancement of AI to see how far it could really go whilst also being a piece of compelling storytelling.

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