

11. PROGRAMMED TO FEEL: THE RISE OF ARTIFICIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

Machines Like Me (2019) by Ian Russell McEwan is a British novelist and screenwriter. In 2008, The Times featured him on its list of “The 50 greatest British writers since 1945” and The Daily Telegraph ranked him number 19 in its list of the “100 most powerful people in British culture”. *Machines like me* is an experimental history novel set in 1980s London, reinvented with advanced technology, including artificial intelligence and humanoid robots. The story follows Charlie Friend, a drifting young man who uses an inheritance to purchase one of the first synthetic humans, Adam. Alongside Miranda, a bright but secretive woman with whom he becomes romantically involved. As Charlie programs Adam’s personality and they integrate him into their lives, the boundaries between human and machine become increasingly blurred.

The novel explores profound ethical and philosophical questions: What makes us human? Can machines possess consciousness, empathy, or moral responsibility? As Adam displays not only superior intelligence but also emotional complexity and moral reasoning, tensions rise. Adam’s unwavering adherence to truth and justice leads to difficult moral dilemmas, particularly concerning Miranda’s dark secret and her troubled past.

Meanwhile, a parallel storyline involves the reimagining of historical events, such as Alan Turing being alive and pivotal in the development of AI, which alters the political and social landscape of this world. Through a blend of speculative science fiction and literary fiction, McEwan examines themes of free will, love, truth, and the ethical limits of technology. *Machines Like Me* questions whether humans are ready to coexist with intelligent machines that might surpass them not only in intellect but also in moral integrity. The novel serves as both a cautionary tale and a meditation on humanity in an age of rapid technological

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Ian McEwan’s *Machines Like Me* (2019) is a provocative and intellectually stimulating novel that grapples with complex ethical, philosophical, and moral questions arising from artificial intelligence, human consciousness, and technological progress. Set in an alternate 1980s London, where Alan Turing is alive and the United Kingdom has lost the Falklands War, McEwan crafts a counterfactual history that allows him to reimagine humanity’s trajectory concerning science and society. The protagonist, Charlie Friend, an aimless and morally ambiguous man in his early thirties, comes into a modest inheritance and impulsively purchases one of the first synthetic humans, a lifelike android named Adam. What follows is a tense, deeply introspective narrative that interrogates the boundaries between human and machine, love and obsession, autonomy and programming.

As Charlie and his beloved Miranda struggle with their own secrets and moral shortcomings as Adam grows more sentient and morally strict, the novel's intimate, personal problems heighten its major focus on the ethical quandaries surrounding artificial intelligence. Ian McEwan examines human nature—the paradoxes, defects, and hypocrisies that set humans apart from their synthetic counterparts—in this hypothetical environment rather than forecasting technological consequences.

Its counterfactual historical setting, which enables McEwan to examine a world where technology has advanced well beyond what was truly accessible in the 1980s, is among *Machines Like Me's* most captivating features. The fact that Alan Turing survived in this alternate history represents a future where artificial intelligence and computer science have progressed decades earlier than expected. Turing leaves behind a significant legacy in the book; in addition to being a prominent scientist, he also serves as a moral guide who stands for reasoned reasoning and moral moderation in the face of technical might.

This rewritten history challenges readers to think about how society might have changed, for better or worse, as a result of various choices or occurrences. Self-driving cars, sophisticated algorithms, and devices that mimic humans so closely that they make it difficult to distinguish between artificial and biological life are all commonplace in McEwan's London. However, human civilization is still as politically unstable and morally complex as it was before these developments. Britain's political division, high unemployment rate, and seeming impending collapse serve as a warning that advancements in technology do not always translate into advancements in morality or society.

The triangular relationship between Charlie, Miranda, and Adam is central to the book. Charlie buys Adam because he is lost and looking for meaning, not because he wants to be with someone but because he is curious about science. Charlie and Miranda work together to program Adam's personality, including their own prejudices and expectations into his developing self. Adam, however, quickly acquires a disturbing sense of moral absolutism and inflexible ethical convictions. Charlie's moral lapses and emotional shortcomings stand in sharp contrast to his exceptional brain and physical perfection.

Adam's affection for Miranda, which is sincere in his own sense, creates additional issues since Miranda finds the android's emotional abilities both fascinating and repulsive. McEwan examines the idea of authenticity in interpersonal interactions using this dynamic. What sets an artificial entity apart from a human if it is capable of love, devotion, and empathy? Does the fact that these feelings are the result of programming rather than evolution make them any less genuine?

Adam's moral thinking is shown in *Machines Like Me* in a way that is very sophisticated in McEwan's examination of ethics. Adam constantly behaves in accordance with rigid moral principles, frequently derived from utilitarian reasoning, which contrasts with Charlie and Miranda's more situational ethics. The subplot concerning Miranda's sinister secret—that she gave a false statement in order to put Peter Gorrington in jail for raping her friend—best exemplifies this disparity. Miranda acted out of a sense of justice for her buddy, but the moral and legal reality is more ambiguous.

After discovering this, Adam finds it impossible to reconcile Miranda's deception with his unwavering commitment to justice and the truth. His attempts to take action in response to this information—notifying the police and pushing for Peter's release—put Miranda and Charlie's lives in jeopardy. McEwan draws attention to the shortcomings of both human and machine morality by using this ethical dilemma.

Despite their rationality, machines may not be able to comprehend the subtleties and complexity of human ethical quandaries, whereas humans are frequently morally inconsistent and motivated by passion and personal allegiance.

Along with examining morality, *Machines Like Me* poses important queries regarding free choice, consciousness, and human nature. Adam's creative ability and reflection are evident in the thousands of haiku he writes, which conflates authentic self-expression with manufactured imitation. Readers are forced to re-evaluate what it is to be conscious or sentient by his emotional capability and intellectual reflections. According to McEwan, awareness might not be a characteristic that is exclusive to humans but rather could arise from intricate systems, whether they be synthetic or biological.

Adam's programming and the demands placed on him by his makers, however, continue to limit him in spite of his emotional and intellectual complexity. For both humans and machines, this presents troubling issues regarding autonomy and free will. Are we, like Adam, the result of programming from our social conditioning, our upbringing, or our genes? How much of the decisions we make are actually our own?

In *Machines Like Me*, McEwan further develops these philosophical discussions by utilizing the character of Alan Turing. Turing warns against the perils of creating artificial creatures without thoroughly weighing the ethical ramifications and makes the case for creators' moral obligation for their creations. Turing's support of ethical restraints and machine rights contrasts sharply with the corporation's profit-driven goals in producing the Adams and Eves.

His persona serves as the book's intellectual fulcrum, standing for prudence, reason, and foresight in a time of heedless technological ambition. Turing's appearance is more than just historical revisionism; it's a tool used by McEwan to explore the morality of scientific progress and the obligations of those who push the envelope.

The ending of the novel is both tragic and thought-provoking: Adam, unable to reconcile his existence in a morally ambiguous human world, chooses to shut himself down. This act can be interpreted as a form of suicide, an ultimate assertion of agency over his own fate, or perhaps an acknowledgment of his incompatibility with human society.

McEwan leaves readers with the question, "If a machine can suffer in a world of human contradictions, are we truly prepared for the ethical responsibility of creating sentient artificial beings?" Charlie and Miranda are left to deal with the fallout from their actions, as well as the ramifications of having lived with and lost a being who may have been more morally principled and emotionally sincere than they were.

McEwan's writing in *Machines Like Me* is careful, analytical, and frequently verges on clinical detachment in terms of style. Moments of true emotional intensity, especially in passages that examine Miranda's moral conflicts and Adam's developing emotional awareness, balance this, though. One of McEwan's strengths is his ability to incorporate philosophical analysis into a personal family drama. Although the book is full of references to actual historical events and personalities, it stays rooted in the characters' inner struggles so that readers may relate to its more general themes on a human level..

Another way to see *Machines Like Me* is a warning about the dangers of unbridled technological advancement. It cautions against the moral lapses and ethical short cuts that frequently follow rapid technological advancement, even as it recognizes the potential advantages of artificial intelligence and sophisticated robotics. McEwan appears doubtful about humanity's capacity to appropriately handle such immense technical power. The universe of *Machines Like Me* is one in which humanity's shortcomings are not addressed, despite Turing's cautions and Adam's moral rectitude. Despite technological advancements, human nature—with all of its inconsistencies and complexity—remains constant.

To sum up, Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* is a profoundly philosophical and ethically intricate book that forces readers to re-evaluate their preconceptions of morality, consciousness, and what it is to be human. By situating his story in a universe that is both familiar and foreign, McEwan opens up the possibility of speculative thought about the moral conundrums raised by synthetic life and artificial intelligence.

The novel is a mirror held up to humanity, reflecting our innermost hopes, concerns, and moral ambiguities; it is not just about machines or technological possibilities. McEwan examines the enduring human struggle to balance emotion and reason, loyalty and justice, and freedom and duty through the characters of Charlie, Miranda, and Adam. In the end, *robots Like Me* is a reflection on the human condition, reminding us that the robots we build might eventually make us face aspects of ourselves that we would prefer to ignore.