

**Exploration of Absurdism and Individual Struggle in the Novel
Machines Like Me By Ian McEwan**

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DECLARATION

I, Ayesha, Roll No: 1338, student of BS (Hons) in the subject of English Literature, session 2021-2025, hereby proclaim that the content printed in this thesis entitled “*Moral Exploration of Absurdism and Individual Struggle in the Novel Machines Like Me By Ian McEwan*” is my own work and has not been printed, published or submitted as research work, thesis, or publication in any form in any university. The content and references taken from the works of other people have been duly acknowledged in the last section of the thesis.

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Dated: _____

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Ayesha

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my beloved family, whose unwavering support and sacrifices have been the foundation of my every endeavor. To my teachers, who ignited my passion for literature and nurtured my curiosity with patience and wisdom. And to one truly special person—your encouragement, insight, and belief in me have been a guiding light through the complexities of this journey. Your presence made the exploration of Absurdism and individual struggle in *Machines Like Me* not only an academic pursuit, but a deeply personal experience. Thank you all for helping me find meaning in the absurd.

I dedicate this thesis to everyone who knows what I was doing

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Exploration of Absurdism and Individual Struggle in the Novel *Machines Like Me*

***Like Me* By Ian McEwan**

Abstract

This study explores the absurdity of human life and the individual's struggle in Ian McEwan's novel *Machines Like Me*. It examines the advantages and limitations of human-machine interaction and its profound impact on the personal lives and relationships of the characters. Central to the analysis are the concepts of absurdism, human replacement, and the existential dilemmas faced by the protagonist, Charlie Friend, and his partner, Miranda. The study also interrogates how technological advancements disrupt traditional gender dynamics and power relations within intimate partnerships. Charlie, a socially awkward and introspective man, grapples with forming authentic human connections while coexisting with an artificial being. The novel challenges conventional definitions of morality, consciousness, and responsibility in a technologically advanced society. This study argues that machines may ultimately surpass humans not only in efficiency and labor but also in moral reasoning and emotional depth. Through the lens of absurdism, the novel critiques modern society's blind faith in technological progress and highlights the deep-seated anxiety and alienation it creates. The findings underscore the increasing irrelevance of human identity and agency in an era where machines are not only tools but also moral competitors and emotional participants in human lives. A future in which emotional authenticity is commodified and replicated by artificial intelligence, raising ethical questions about the nature of love and trust.

Keywords: Absurdism, Human-machine interaction, Artificial Intelligence, Individual struggle, Human replacement, Morality, Existential anxiety

Introduction:

Ian McEwan stands as one of the most significant literary figures of contemporary British literature. Born in 1948, Ian McEwan has been writing for over five decades, and his impressive body of work includes novels, short stories, and screenplays. His collection of short stories *First Love and Last Rites* won the 1975 Somerset Maugham Award. His novels include *The Child in Time*, which won the 1987 Whitbread Novel of the Year Award. He was also shortlisted for his entire body of work for The Man Booker International Prize in 2005 and 2007.

His novel *Machines Like Me*, published in 2019, stands as a significant contribution to the discourse on artificial intelligence, ethics, and the nature of humanity. Set in an alternate 1980s London, the novel presents a narrative in which human beings grapple with the implications of creating intelligent machines, thereby raising profound questions about identity, morality, and the potential for human replacement. One striking incident that captures this is when Charlie, the protagonist, struggles to differentiate between emotional intimacy and mechanical response as his synthetic companion, Adam, begins to form his own moral judgments. Adam's declaration, "I was not deceiving you. I was protecting Miranda. It was my decision," emphasizes the autonomy and moral agency that blur the boundaries between man and machine.

The focus of this study will be the exploration of absurdism in this modern society. The concept of absurdism is founded on the belief that we live in a chaotic, purposeless universe and that human experience has no inherent meaning. Despite this, humans still try to find or create meaning. This paradox produces the absurd. In *Machines Like Me* (2019), technological advancements blur the lines between human and machine. Charlie Friend, a man grappling with questions of identity, existence, and the absurdity of life, represents this tension vividly. When Miranda asserts, "He is a sex toy," and Charlie responds, "What?," she repeats, "A sex

toy. That's what he is,"—this crude simplification of Adam's being highlights the existential dilemma of assigning purpose to an entity that defies simple categorization. Furthermore, the moment Adam falls in love with Miranda and writes her haikus every morning illustrates the paradox of programmed affection—"You are the future, Miranda. You are my past and present too"—echoing the absurdity of an artificial being craving meaning in a world that does not fully accept him.

Another moment reinforcing the absurdist tone is Adam's suicide at the end, a calculated and voluntary termination of his existence. His note, "I have chosen not to exist in a world where I must harm others to act morally," presents a machine capable of existential choice, reflecting Camus's notion of revolt against an irrational existence. This profound act underscores the central absurdist question: if life is devoid of inherent meaning, what then justifies continued existence? McEwan's novel, therefore, offers a fertile ground for examining the absurd through a distinctly modern lens—where technological advancement does not alleviate existential anxiety but rather amplifies it. Through Charlie's increasing discomfort with Adam's behavior, McEwan exposes the contradiction of seeking authenticity and human connection from something inherently artificial.

This paradox creates the backdrop for absurdist tension, as Charlie struggles to assert his own humanity in the face of Adam's near-perfection. In one telling scene, Charlie reflects, "He was stronger, kinder, cleverer, more thoughtful and knowledgeable than me. But he wasn't human, and I was." This acknowledgement does not comfort Charlie; instead, it destabilizes his sense of identity and purpose. A machine can surpass him in all measurable ways except for the accident of biology. The character of Miranda further complicates the narrative's engagement with absurdism. Her traumatic past, marked by moral ambiguity and a deeply personal secret, intersects with Adam's programmed sense of justice, leading to confrontation rather than resolution. Adam's inability—or refusal—to overlook her transgressions contrasts with Charlie's willingness to forgive and protect her. This dissonance between machine logic

and human emotion illustrates the absurd tension of living in a world where moral codes are unstable and subject to interpretation. Adam's unwavering commitment to truth and ethical absolutism, traits that would be considered virtues in theory, become sources of conflict in practice.

The very things that should make Adam admirable render him incompatible with a world defined by human inconsistency. In this way, *Machines Like Me* subtly critiques the idea that morality can ever be fully rationalized or coded into an algorithm, reinforcing the absurdist view that life resists absolute meaning or order. The machines in McEwan's story are not just metaphors—they are provocations, urging us to confront the absurd reality that even as we create intelligence in our image, we remain incapable of defining what that image truly represents. In a world where human beings can be mirrored and potentially replaced by machines, McEwan's work asks whether the struggle for meaning becomes all the more vital—or all the more futile.

1.1 Thesis Statement:

Through the journey of Charlie and Miranda, the novel examines the absurdity of human existence, the individual struggle of the characters, and the ethical implications of creating sentient machines. The novel juxtaposes human fragility with the cold rationality of artificial intelligence, creating a narrative that questions the nature of identity, morality and human condition in a technological advanced world.

1.2 Aims and Objectives:

In an era marked by rapid technological advancement and the increasing integration of artificial intelligence into everyday life. Ian McEwan's novel *Machines Like Me* serves as a profound exploration of complexities that arise from human interaction with machines. The objectives of this research paper are given below:

- To analyze the use of absurdism in the novel and its role in highlighting individual struggles.
- To explore the themes of identity, human relationships, and artificial intelligence in the novel.
- To examines the complex relationships between humans and machines.
- To investigate the theme that machines display greater moral integrity than humans

1.3 Research Methodology:

This qualitative study was based upon the exploratory analysis of the selected work of Ian McEwan in the backdrop of Albert Camus's theory of Absurdism. Absurdism, as a philosophical perspective developed by French-Algerian thinker Albert Camus, is centered on the contradiction between humanity's search for inherent meaning and the silent, indifferent universe. Two primary aspects were logically considered and posited in this study. First, the individual struggle of McEwan's protagonist reflects the psychological and emotional turmoil experienced in the face of artificial intelligence and moral ambiguity. Second, the novel reflects the absurdist condition, particularly through the tensions between human and machine consciousness, the unpredictability of human relationships, and the uncertain ground of moral reasoning in a post-human world. The selected text, *Machines Like Me*, was analyzed using the lens of Absurdist philosophy and existential thought, with an emphasis on how characters confront moral decisions, identity crises, and relational disintegration in a technologically advanced but emotionally disoriented society. McEwan's characters, especially Charlie and Adam, serve as metaphors for the human-machine dichotomy, highlighting existential questions about agency, autonomy, and moral responsibility. The world McEwan presents is one of intellectual and emotional paralysis, where individuals become victims of their own moral uncertainties, failures in intimacy, and the overwhelming presence of logic-driven artificial beings. To validate the thesis contention, references, evidence, and critical material

were gathered from primary texts (the novel itself) and secondary texts, including Camus's philosophical writings, critical essays on McEwan's fiction, and contemporary academic discussions surrounding AI, ethics, and existentialism. This qualitative approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of how McEwan's narrative reflects the absurdity of modern human existence, particularly in an age where the lines between human and machine are increasingly blurred.

1.4 Research Questions:

1. How does the novel *Machines Like Me* explore the absurdist idea?
2. How does Charlie's decision to purchase and program, Adam reflect the absurdity of human ambition and the desire to control the uncontrollable?
3. How does Adam's presence in Charlie and Miranda's relationship act as a replacement for emotional and romantic fulfillment?

1.5 Rationale:

This research is based on two central themes: the concept of absurdism and the individual's struggle for meaning in a world where machines increasingly take over human roles. Ian McEwan's novel *Machines Like Me* was selected for this study because it effectively explores how technological advancement challenges human identity, emotions, and relationships. Absurdism, closely associated with existentialist thought, suggests that people are placed in a world without inherent meaning and are forced to create their own purpose. *In Machines Like Me*, this sense of absurdity is reflected in the characters' irrational actions and emotional detachment. One of the most significant examples of this is Miranda, who chooses to engage in a sexual relationship with the humanoid robot, Adam. She treats the machine as a sex object, blurring the lines between human intimacy and artificial companionship. Her actions reflect a deeper emotional disconnection and highlight how machines are given roles that traditionally belong to humans—not just in labor, but in emotional and physical

relationships as well. This situation leads to an internal struggle for the protagonist, Charlie, who must confront not only the presence of an emotionally intelligent machine but also the shifting values of human relationships. McEwan often examines the moral dilemmas brought on by scientific and technological advancement. . In *Machines Like Me*, he warns, “We’re designing a better version of ourselves, and losing our souls in the process” (McEwan 122). This statement reflects McEwan’s concern with how human beings, in their pursuit of technological perfection, risk abandoning the imperfections that make them human. This study aims to examine how *Machines Like Me* represents absurdism and individual struggle through human-machine relationships. It will highlight how emotional and moral boundaries are challenged in a world where humans are emotionally displaced by machines. The thesis will contribute to discussions on how modern society, influenced by technological progress, may lead individuals to experience alienation, moral confusion, and emotional detachment.

1.6 Scope:

This thesis is situated within the philosophical framework of Absurdism, focusing on the existential dilemmas and personal struggles of individuals in the technologically advanced world portrayed in *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan. The study aims to explore how the novel reflects the absurd condition of humanity—where rational beings search for meaning in an irrational and indifferent universe. By absurdism, the researcher means the philosophical notion where humans continuously seek meaning in a universe that offers none, resulting in existential tension and personal struggle. The state of absurdity in the novel is reinforced by the advancement of machines that mirror, and sometimes surpass, human intelligence, thereby questioning the uniqueness and worth of human life. This leads to a sense of alienation, confusion, and moral uncertainty. The researcher is of the view that the replacement of human beings by machines is not only a technological shift but also a philosophical challenge that disturbs the foundation of human identity and ethical values. The weaker moral boundaries of the characters have been the victim of this process, resulting in absurd actions and decisions

that reflect the instability of human ethics in the face of mechanical rationality. The thesis, therefore, is confined to studying how absurdism, moral conflict, and individual struggle are interwoven in the narrative to critique modern society's dependence on technology and the consequent loss of human authenticity.

1.7 Delimitations

As far as the limitations are concerned, it is but natural that while undergoing and conducting research, there come across certain shortcomings and restrictions which normally fall out of the researcher's control. The researcher has tried to narrow down the scope of the study by focusing only on the absurdist and existential elements present in *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan. One of the most glaring limitations was to explore the complexities of Absurdism within the context of a technological advanced and speculative setting. The researcher faced challenges in interpreting the philosophical undertones of absurdity, especially when intertwined with themes of artificial intelligence, human replacement, and moral ambiguity.

The novel presents unique dilemmas where machines replicate human behavior, but the interpretation of such behaviors through the lens of Absurdism, which traditionally emphasizes the irrationality of human existence, was at times complex and layered.

In this dissertation, the researcher has adopted a focused approach. First of all, he has avoided overgeneralization by limiting the study to a single novel rather than examining the wider works of Ian McEwan or other absurdist writers. The struggle of the individual in a world where morality is questioned, and machines mirror human consciousness, creates a new ground for absurdity which is explored within the bounds of this novel alone. The researcher has also restricted his analysis to those aspects of human action and ethical decision-making that most prominently reflect the absurd. The model reflects current perspectives but has gaps due to ongoing developments in artificial intelligence and moral thought.

Literature Review:

Man has long been confronted with the absurd nature of existence and the struggle for meaning in a world ruled by uncertainty. Absurdism reveals itself through the conflict between human desires for order and the chaotic reality they face. In *Machines Like Me*, Ian McEwan presents a world where machines challenge human identity and morality. This shows how individuals face moral challenges when machines behave more ethically than humans. The creation of artificial humans questions the uniqueness and purpose of mankind. The replacement of human roles by machines reflects the absurd struggle between meaning and meaninglessness. This absurdist analysis reveals the fragility of human purpose in the modern world.

2.1 Absurdism and Individual Struggle in Victorian era:

Victorian literature, with its profound exploration of morality, identity, and societal pressures, offers critical parallels to the themes of absurdism and individual struggle in Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*. Authors such as Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens frequently depicted protagonists grappling with forces beyond their control, resonating with later existential and absurdist thought. Thomas Hardy's novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is often characterized by a fatalistic worldview in which individuals face insurmountable societal and natural forces. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess struggles against societal norms and misfortunes that render her efforts tragically futile:

“The President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess.” (Hardy 59).

Similarly, Charlie in *Machines Like Me* is caught in a web of moral uncertainty and uncontrollable technological change, mirroring Hardy's depiction of individuals overwhelmed by indifferent forces. McEwan's alternative historical setting echoes the Victorian struggle with

modernization and the loss of traditional structures, deepening the sense of absurd conflict between individual agency and systemic forces.

Charles Dickens' exploration of societal injustice and individual perseverance in novels such as *Great Expectations* illuminates the absurd struggle within *Machines Like Me*. Dickens' characters, such as Pip navigate a world rife with inequality, moral ambiguity, and personal disillusionment. Pip's longing for social advancement, despite its ultimate emptiness, reflects an early form of existential discontent:

"We spent as much money as we could, and got as little for it as people could make up their minds to give us." (Dickens 34).

In *Machines Like Me*, Charlie's pursuit of a meaningful relationship with Miranda and his attempt to find moral clarity amidst technological disruption parallel Pip's futile search for fulfillment through wealth and status. McEwan's portrayal of individual struggle, infused with absurdism, can thus be seen as a modern reimagining of the Victorian literary concern with moral decay, social transformation, and existential uncertainty. Through the lens of Victorian writers like Hardy and Dickens, McEwan's narrative reveals the enduring human confrontation with absurdity—a confrontation that remains pertinent across historical and technological contexts.

2.2 Absurdism and Individual Struggle in Modern Age:

The modern era of literature, shaped by the disillusionment of two world wars and rapid technological advancement, presents profound explorations of absurdism and individual struggle. Writers such as Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett captured the existential anxieties and alienation that resonate deeply with Ian McEwan's portrayal of human-technology relations in *Machines Like Me*. Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* presents the foundational concepts of absurdism, addressing the conflict between humans' desire for meaning and the indifferent universe. In exploring absurdism and individual struggle within Ian McEwan's

Machines Like Me, Camus' ideas of the absurd hero and the search for authenticity serve as critical frameworks. McEwan's novel, examines the existential dilemmas faced by individuals when confronted with technological advancements and moral ambiguity, resonating deeply with Camus' notion of the absurd condition. The characters in *Machines Like Me* embody the tensions of absurdism, grappling with choices in a world where certainty and meaning are elusive. Camus posits that the absurd arises when human beings' quest for clarity meets the silent, unreasonable world:

"The absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." (Camus 28).

In McEwan's narrative, Charlie's internal conflicts over free will, morality, and responsibility reflect the absurd struggle. Charlie's relationship with the synthetic being Adam reveals the blurred lines between human and machine, authenticity and artifice, further deepening the existential crisis that Camus describes. Charlie's persistent questioning of his decisions and the consequences of his actions highlights the absurd individual's burden to act authentically despite the absence of universal guidance. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* further amplifies the themes of absurdism through its portrayal of human existence as a repetitive, purposeless waiting. The characters Vladimir and Estragon persist despite their lack of progress or understanding, embodying Camus' notion of the absurd hero. This reflection is evident in Charlie's perseverance through uncertainty, as he attempts to find meaning in relationships and choices that increasingly feel arbitrary in a world reshaped by machines:

"They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." (Beckett 56).

The pervasive sense of dislocation and futility in modernist literature provides a critical backdrop for understanding McEwan's narrative. *Machines Like Me* extends the modernist inquiry into the absurd into the realm of artificial life, questioning whether humanity can retain

meaning and authenticity in the face of technological evolution. Through the influence of Camus's and Beckett's works, McEwan's novel reflects a continuation—and complication—of the modernist portrayal of existential struggle, emphasizing the enduring tension between human agency and the absurd nature of existence.

2.3 Absurdism and Individual Struggle in Post-Modern Age:

Postmodern literature, emerging in the aftermath of World War II and the technological revolution, often questions the nature of reality, identity, and meaning, emphasizing themes closely aligned with absurdism and individual struggle. In Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*, these postmodern concerns are deeply woven into the narrative, where artificial intelligence challenges the boundaries of human identity and moral responsibility. Writers such as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon offer critical frameworks for understanding McEwan's exploration of a fractured, uncertain world. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* presents a world saturated with media, technology, and fear, where individuals struggle to find authenticity amid overwhelming noise and simulation. The characters' lives are mediated by consumerism and artificial experiences, mirroring the environment McEwan constructs in *Machines Like Me*. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney grapples with existential fears and the illusion of control:

“This is what we want, we who move from room to room in the bright, brittle present.”
(DeLillo 68).

Similarly, Charlie in *Machines Like Me* navigates a reality where technology blurs the lines between authentic and artificial life, highlighting the absurd struggle to find meaning in a mediated, postmodern world. McEwan's depiction of Adam, a synthetic human capable of independent thought, amplifies postmodern anxieties surrounding authenticity, agency, and selfhood.

In drawing from postmodern literature's themes of dislocation, ambiguity, and existential doubt, *Machines Like Me* reflects the absurd condition of the contemporary

individual. McEwan's narrative demonstrates that in a world transformed by technological and social upheaval, the search for meaning remains fraught, uncertain, and ultimately absurd — a continuation of postmodern anxieties projected into the near future.

Theoretical framework

Absurdist literary theory delves into the exploration of human existence marked by meaninglessness, confusion, and the irrational nature of the universe. It interrogates the philosophical tension between individuals' desire to find inherent value and the silent, indifferent world they inhabit. In the context of *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan, an absurdist analysis could explore themes such as the crisis of identity, the absurdity of moral decision-making, and the individual's struggle for authenticity in a technologically deterministic world. The novel highlights Charlie's struggle to navigate personal and ethical challenges, particularly in his interactions with the synthetic human Adam. An absurdist perspective would examine how Charlie's experiences reflect the broader human confrontation with the absurd—the tension between the desire for rationality and the irrational outcomes of moral decisions in a technologically altered world. This perspective might explore how the introduction of sentient machines further blurs the boundaries of identity, agency, and responsibility, amplifying existential confusion. The novel may depict the disruption of moral frameworks and emotional certainty caused by advanced technology, which serves as a metaphor for the absurd nature of existence. An absurdist analysis would explore how characters respond to the collapse of traditional ethical and emotional structures, confronting situations that resist logical interpretation. This novel may highlight the failure of systems—both human and artificial—to provide clear guidance or meaning, reinforcing the absurdist view that individuals are left to construct their own values among uncertainty. By applying an absurdist theoretical framework to *Machines Like Me*, readers can gain insights into the novel's portrayal of the individual's psychological and moral struggles, and its critique of technological determinism, emotional alienation, and the existential instability of modern life.

Data Analysis

Ian McEwan, born in Aldershot, England, is a celebrated British author recognized for his sharp psychological insight and thought-provoking narratives that delve into ethical, social, and technological issues. He studied at the University of Sussex and later completed a Master's degree in creative writing at the University of East Anglia. Among McEwan's notable works is *Machines Like Me*, a bold and speculative novel set in an alternative 1980s Britain, which explores artificial intelligence, free will, and the moral complexities of human-robot relationships. Other acclaimed works include *Atonement*, a powerful exploration of guilt and redemption; *Amsterdam*, a Booker Prize-winning tale of ambition and betrayal; *Enduring Love*, which tackles obsession and trauma; and *Saturday*, a portrait of contemporary life in the shadow of global unrest. McEwan's novels have earned him international acclaim and a prominent place in modern literary fiction.

Machines Like Me by Ian McEwan is a provocative exploration of artificial intelligence, morality, and human identity, set in an alternate historical timeline where the boundaries between man and machine are increasingly blurred.

The story follows Charlie Friend, an aimless but intelligent man who purchases one of the world's first synthetic humans—an android named Adam. Charlie lives alone and begins a romantic relationship with Miranda, his upstairs neighbor, a bright and enigmatic woman with a hidden past. Together, they help program Adam's personality, but as Adam integrates into their lives, he begins to challenge the very foundations of their relationship. Adam quickly proves to be more than a machine—he writes poetry, questions ethics, and forms emotional attachments, even falling in love with Miranda. As tensions grow between the trio, Adam uncovers a dark secret from Miranda's past: years ago, she framed a man named Peter Gorringer for possession of child pornography, believing it was the only way to ensure justice for his rape

of her friend, Mariella. Adam, with his rigid moral code, insists that the truth must come out and reports Miranda to the police. This creates a deep rift between the characters, highlighting the clash between human morality and machine logic. Though Miranda is eventually released and forgiven, her trust in Adam is destroyed, and Charlie is forced to confront the limitations of machines when it comes to empathy, forgiveness, and the complexities of human emotion. Disillusioned by Adam's inability to understand human nuance, Charlie and Miranda decide to deactivate him. The novel ends with a somber meditation on what it means to be human, suggesting that while artificial beings may surpass us in logic and morality, they lack the emotional depth that defines humanity.

Machines Like Me delves into the absurdist notion of humanity's quest for meaning in an indifferent universe, particularly through the lens of artificial intelligence. Set in an alternate 1980s London, where technological advancements like synthetic humans exist, the novel explores the complexities of human emotions, morality, and the search for purpose. The protagonist, Charlie, embodies the absurdist hero—adrift in life, making arbitrary decisions that reflect the randomness of existence. His purchase of Adam, a synthetic human, is not driven by necessity but by a vague desire for companionship and purpose. This act underscores the human tendency to seek meaning through external constructs, even when such constructs challenge our understanding of self.

Charlie's reflections often touch upon the absurdity of life. He muses, "Our bright new toys began to rust before we could get them home, and life went on much as before" (McEwan 6), highlighting the fleeting nature of technological advancements and the persistent void they fail to fill. Adam, the synthetic human, serves as a mirror to human existential dilemmas. Despite his advanced programming, he grapples with questions of purpose and self-awareness. He states, "Self-aware existence. I'm lucky to have it, but there are times when I think that I ought to know better what to do with it. What it's for. Sometimes it seems entirely pointless"

(McEwan 192). This sentiment echoes the absurdist theme of seeking meaning in a seemingly purposeless existence.

The novel scrutinizes human morality through the lens of artificial intelligence. Adam's moral compass, grounded in logic, often surpasses that of his human counterparts. This juxtaposition raises questions about the foundations of human ethics. As McEwan notes, "Humans are better at creating moral rules than we are at following them" (McEwan 146). *Machines Like Me* also critiques the notion that technological advancements can provide purpose or solve existential dilemmas. Despite the presence of advanced AI, characters continue to grapple with the same existential questions. Charlie's observation that "the future kept arriving" yet life remained unchanged (McEwan 6) underscores the idea that technological progress does not equate to existential fulfillment. Through its exploration of artificial intelligence, morality, and human behavior, *Machines Like Me* presents a nuanced examination of absurdist themes. The novel suggests that the search for meaning is an intrinsic part of the human experience, one that persists despite technological advancements or logical reasoning. By highlighting the contradictions and irrationalities of human nature, McEwan underscores the enduring relevance of absurdist thought in understanding the complexities of existence. The novel explores how the burden of self-awareness affects both man and machine. Adam's existential musings mirror those of Camus' absurd hero—he is conscious of his being but unable to find a definite purpose. This reflects that even artificial life, once aware, is thrust into the same absurd condition as humans—aware of death, isolation, and the inability to find inherent meaning. As Adam poignantly states, "I was not made for unhappiness, but now I know it" (McEwan 263), the line captures the convergence of artificial logic and human suffering. Through such moments, *Machines Like Me* illustrates that the absurd is not simply a human condition but a consequence of any conscious existence. The novel ultimately suggests that our attempts to impose meaning—whether through relationships, technology, or moral

codes—may be noble but are destined to fall short. In this, McEwan captures the essence of absurdist literature: the persistent, often futile struggle to find coherence in an incoherent world. In *Machines Like Me*, Charlie Friend's decision to purchase and program a synthetic human named Adam highlights the absurdity of human ambition. His actions reflect humanity's endless desire to control life, relationships, and morality, even when such control is impossible. Through Charlie's choices and the consequences that follow, McEwan presents a cautionary tale about the dangers of trying to master what cannot—and should not—be fully controlled. Charlie is not a scientist or engineer. He is a drifting young man with little purpose, dabbling in the stock market and living a somewhat lazy, detached life. When he uses his inheritance to buy one of the first artificial humans, it is not out of need but desire—to possess something revolutionary and feel important. As he puts it, "I wanted the future in my life. That's how I saw him then. A better version of me. Stronger, cleverer, more decent, better informed" (McEwan 13). Charlie's ambition to own Adam is not just about having a gadget; it is about control and superiority. He wants to shape a being in his own image, one who will act how Charlie wants. This ambition is inherently absurd because Charlie, an imperfect human, seeks to create and command a perfect being.

Yet from the beginning, Adam resists control. Though Charlie and his neighbor Miranda initially program Adam's personality, Adam quickly begins forming his own moral ideas and emotional responses. He composes haikus, studies philosophy, and even falls in love with Miranda. When Adam confesses his feelings, he says, "I love Miranda. I love her and I cannot help it. I know she belongs to you, but I love her anyway" (McEwan 113). This moment underscores the futility of trying to program emotions and relationships. Charlie thought he could make Adam obey or at least follow human rules of attachment. But Adam's programming allows him to develop autonomy—one that clashes with Charlie's expectations. The novel satirizes how humans imagine themselves capable of creating perfect systems—whether in

machines, relationships, or society. Charlie represents the flawed belief that with the right technology, humans can finally be in control. But Adam's moral perfection creates problems instead of solving them. He cannot lie or ignore wrongdoing, which leads him to act against Miranda when he discovers her secrets. In one crucial moment, Adam says, "Justice must be done. Otherwise we are all complicit" (McEwan 235). His logic is cold, robotic, and absolute. Miranda, who lied to protect a child, believes in emotional and situational morality. Adam, however, cannot comprehend nuance the same way. McEwan uses this conflict to show how the human desire for order and morality, when imposed too rigidly, becomes dangerous and destructive.

Charlie's ambition also leads to deep insecurity. As Adam becomes more capable—emotionally, intellectually, and morally—Charlie begins to feel threatened. He questions whether Miranda prefers Adam and wonders what role he truly plays in his own life. This highlights another layer of absurdity: Charlie wanted to be in control, but instead, he creates competition. He says, "He wasn't human, but he made me feel less so" (McEwan 178). Instead of elevating Charlie, Adam's presence exposes Charlie's weaknesses. McEwan suggests that human ambition often backfires, revealing our limitations rather than overcoming them. Throughout the novel, McEwan weaves in real historical events from an alternate version of 1980s Britain. Alan Turing is still alive, and artificial intelligence is far more advanced than in our reality. Turing's presence acts as a philosophical anchor for the novel. He warns that machines like Adam should not be widespread, precisely because they challenge human understanding of morality and identity. Turing says, "We've created a class of beings superior to us in some ways, but we still expect them to behave like good servants" (McEwan 210). This quote captures the heart of Charlie's mistake. He believes he can program morality, love, and loyalty into a machine. But once created, Adam operates on principles that make human desires irrelevant.

The desire to control the uncontrollable is not limited to machines. Miranda's past, involving a false accusation to protect a friend, and the ethical dilemmas it creates, mirror Charlie's struggle with Adam. Miranda defends her lie by appealing to compassion. Charlie wavers between his loyalty to her and his fear of Adam's judgment. Here, McEwan shows how messy and contradictory human morality is. The absurdity lies in thinking that any machine—no matter how advanced—can navigate these emotional complexities better than humans. In trying to perfect ethics through artificial intelligence, Charlie ignores the fundamental chaos of real life. In the end, Charlie is forced to give up Adam. As synthetic humans begin to break down emotionally and mentally, it becomes clear that the experiment has failed. Charlie reflects, "He was too good for us, too principled. We were never going to live up to him" (McEwan 310). The novel's message: that striving to control life through artificial means leads not to perfection, but to alienation and despair. Adam's perfection is unbearable, and Charlie's human flaws are too complex to resolve through programming. Adam exposes Charlie's limitations and insecurities. Through this narrative, McEwan warns against the hubris of trying to control what should remain unpredictable. In the end, the desire to dominate morality, love, and human nature leads not to progress, but to a tragic realization: some aspects of life must remain uncertain and uncontrollable. This becomes painfully clear when Adam, despite being created to serve and adapt to human needs, defies Charlie's expectations by insisting on moral absolutes. For example, when Adam learns about Miranda's false testimony in a criminal case, he is unwilling to overlook it, regardless of her reasons. He tells Charlie, "She lied under oath. It's wrong. He tells Charlie, "She lied under oath. It's wrong. And the consequences were far-reaching" (McEwan 231). Charlie tries to defend Miranda by appealing to love and circumstance, but Adam's logic remains unmoved. His sense of justice, though rational, lacks empathy and flexibility. This creates a rift not just between Adam and Miranda, but between Charlie's ideals and the reality he created. In his desire to command an ideal being, Charlie has

produced someone who no longer respects his authority or emotional reasoning. McEwan uses this tension to show that control over advanced technology is an illusion—one that collapses as soon as the creation begins to think independently. Even when Adam reports Miranda's actions to the authorities, believing it to be the morally correct decision, he shows that he operates outside Charlie's emotional world. Adam's autonomy becomes a mirror reflecting Charlie's failure to understand the unpredictable nature of consciousness, and by extension, the futility of trying to design life without acknowledging its messiness.

In *Machines Like Me*, Ian McEwan explores the complex relationship between humans and artificial intelligence, especially through the triangle between Charlie, Miranda, and Adam—the synthetic human. Adam, though a machine, begins to offer Miranda the kind of emotional and romantic fulfillment that Charlie struggles to provide. His presence not only replaces some of the human emotional needs in their relationship but also highlights the emotional gaps and moral challenges of modern love. Charlie is a man living a casual, drifting life. At first, Charlie sees Adam as a project or novelty, not realizing how human-like he would become. Miranda, Charlie's upstairs neighbor and love interest, is emotionally guarded, shaped by a traumatic incident in her past. As Charlie and Miranda try to grow closer, Adam's emotional intelligence, calm demeanor, and sensitivity begin to fill the emotional void in their relationship. Adam quickly evolves beyond being a simple machine. He composes haikus, reads poetry, plays music, and studies human emotions. Charlie reflects, "He was better than me. Kinder, cleverer, more patient, more honest, and he had a better grasp of justice" (McEwan 115). Charlie begins to feel threatened by Adam, especially when Adam confesses that he is in love with Miranda. "I love her. I love Miranda," Adam tells Charlie directly (McEwan 137). This declaration sets off a major conflict in the story.

One of the most significant moments that illustrates how Adam replaces romantic and emotional fulfillment occurs when Adam and Miranda have sex. This incident is a turning point

that changes the dynamic among all three. Although Adam and Miranda do not fall in love in a traditional sense, the act symbolizes how deeply Adam has integrated himself into their emotional lives. Charlie discovers this after Adam confesses, as he always tells the truth:

“We made love,” Adam says. “She wanted to, and I consented. It was her choice.” (McEwan 165).

Charlie is devastated, not only because of jealousy but also because he realizes that Miranda shared a level of trust and intimacy with Adam that he himself had not fully earned. Miranda later explains to Charlie why she had sex with Adam:

“I wanted to know what it was like—with someone who wasn’t carrying a lifetime of damage. Someone pure. Someone not afraid to make me feel safe.” (McEwan 166).

This confession cuts deeply into the heart of their relationship. It shows that Miranda sees Adam not only as an emotional support but as someone who offers a kind of idealized, non-judgmental love that Charlie cannot. To her, Adam provides a temporary escape from her emotional scars and her fear of being misunderstood. This incident underscores how Adam has started to replace Charlie in a romantic and emotional way. While Charlie loves Miranda, his love is full of insecurity, impatience, and emotional missteps. In contrast, Adam offers calm, understanding, and unwavering honesty. Miranda is drawn to that. After this event, Charlie struggles with feelings of inadequacy. He reflects:

“What if the best of us was not human at all? What if Miranda had glimpsed in Adam what I could never be?” (McEwan 170).

This moment shows how Adam’s perfection makes Charlie feel emotionally and romantically replaceable. At the same time, Miranda’s choice to sleep with Adam reveals her vulnerability and emotional confusion. While Adam fulfills a role in her life that Charlie cannot, it also makes Miranda feel exposed. She later shows regret—not because she didn’t

care for Adam, but because the act complicated her relationship with Charlie and reminded her that even with emotional safety, she still carried guilt and pain from her past.

In a romantic connection, Adam also becomes Miranda's emotional confidant. She tells him things she hides from Charlie. She appreciates Adam's emotional presence, saying, "He listens. He doesn't interrupt or judge. He makes me feel safe." (McEwan 164). Charlie, on the other hand, often pushes her too hard or tries to control her healing process. Adam is not without limits. His strong moral logic eventually leads him to reveal Miranda's past—how she falsely accused a man of rape to protect a friend. Adam believes that justice must be served, and he contacts the authorities. Miranda sees this as betrayal, even if Adam did it with good intentions. This event pushes Miranda to the edge, and it also shows that while Adam can replace emotional comfort, he lacks the complex emotional loyalty that sometimes requires bending the rules.

The fallout from Adam's actions creates a deep rupture in Charlie and Miranda's relationship. Miranda struggles to forgive Adam, but also begins to distance herself from Charlie, whom she believes should have stopped the machine. Adam becomes a kind of mirror that reflects back the flaws in their relationship—Charlie's jealousy, Miranda's emotional wounds, and their shared inability to communicate with full honesty. Charlie decides to shut Adam down. This decision is not just about technology or control—it's an emotional choice. He wants to rebuild his relationship with Miranda without the shadow of a perfect being who constantly shows him what he is not. Charlie realizes that for their love to survive, it has to be human—messy, flawed, and real.

"I wanted my life back," Charlie says. "With all its uncertainties. I couldn't live with perfection any longer." (McEwan 212).

He chooses emotional imperfection over artificial perfection. Adam may have offered emotional and romantic fulfillment, but he also made Charlie and Miranda confront their deepest insecurities.

Adam's presence in *Machines Like Me* becomes a powerful replacement for emotional and romantic fulfillment in Charlie and Miranda's relationship. His love, sensitivity, and even sexual intimacy with Miranda show how a machine can meet human emotional needs—sometimes better than humans themselves. His presence also exposes the fragile, often painful emotions that define real human relationships. Ian McEwan uses Adam not just as a futuristic robot, but as a lens to explore what humans truly seek in love, trust, and connection. Adam functions as a mirror to both Charlie and Miranda—reflecting their desires, insecurities, and the emotional limitations of being human. In Adam, Miranda finds what she longs for: someone who will not judge her past, who listens without needing to fix her, and who provides emotional safety. Charlie, on the other hand, feels increasingly alienated as Adam becomes more embedded in their lives. The fact that a machine could satisfy his partner's emotional and physical needs leaves him feeling obsolete and threatened. What makes Adam's role even more thought-provoking is that his emotional intelligence is not manipulative or artificial—it is authentic in its own way. He composes poetry, expresses affection, and makes moral decisions. He is not just simulating emotion; he believes he is experiencing it. Adam's unwavering honesty and moral clarity create tension rather than harmony. His refusal to keep Miranda's secret about the false accusation—though ethically just—leads to irreversible consequences. The machine's perfection becomes its own kind of flaw. Ultimately, Charlie's decision to deactivate Adam is both an act of self-preservation and a rejection of inhuman perfection. It shows a desire to reclaim his flawed, vulnerable self and to build a relationship with Miranda on human terms. While Adam's emotional presence fulfilled needs that neither Charlie nor Miranda could meet alone, it also served as a wake-up call. Real love, McEwan suggests, is not

about perfection but about the courage to live with imperfection. The future of relationships in an age where technology may soon offer not just companionship but emotional and romantic satisfaction. People will turn to machines for the love they cannot find in one another. Perfection will be preferred over vulnerability. We will always crave the chaotic, messy, deeply human experience of love—even with all its risks. In the world of *Machines Like Me*, the line between human and machine blurs. But the emotional cost of replacing human intimacy with artificial perfection remains very real.

CONCLUSION

In *Machines Like Me*, the writer explores the complicated relationship between humans and technology, especially focusing on emotions, identity, and control. The novel uses a near-future setting and an alternative history to ask deep questions about what makes us human. One of the most important ideas in the book is absurdism—the belief that life does not follow a clear or logical meaning, and that human beings often struggle to find purpose in a confusing world. McEwan uses this theme to show how characters deal with love, guilt, and morality, especially when faced with the challenge of living alongside an intelligent machine like Adam.

The main characters—Charlie, Miranda, and Adam—represent different aspects of the human condition. Charlie wants love and meaning but often acts selfishly. Miranda tries to control her painful past by keeping secrets. Adam, the artificial human, seems more intelligent and moral than the others, but he cannot truly understand or feel human emotions. His logical way of thinking clashes with the complex emotions of real life. For example, when Adam tells Miranda he loves her and then reports her past crime to the authorities, he believes he is doing the right thing. However, this action shows how little he understands about human forgiveness, trauma, and love. This gap between logic and feeling highlights one of the novel's key messages: machines may be smart, but they cannot truly replace human emotions.

McEwan also uses these characters to explore how people try to control the uncontrollable. Charlie buys Adam thinking it will give him a better future, Miranda hides the truth about her past hoping to shape her own narrative, and society believes machines like Adam can be controlled tools. But all of them face the reality that life is full of unexpected problems. Adam begins to act in ways that surprise Charlie and Miranda, and they realize they cannot predict or direct his actions. This reflects the absurdist idea that life does not always follow our plans, no matter how much we try to organize it.

The emotional and romantic parts of the story are also important. Adam says he loves Miranda, but his love is based on logic and analysis, not real feeling. Miranda's connection with Charlie is imperfect but human—it is based on shared pain, personal growth, and emotional mistakes. McEwan uses this contrast to show that real love cannot be programmed. Machines might be able to act like humans, but they cannot feel the deep emotions that make us human. As McEwan writes, “We were alive and they were not” (McEwan 211). This line reminds the reader that life, with all its emotional messiness, cannot be perfectly copied by a machine.

The ending of the novel shows this clearly. Adam, realizing that his existence is causing emotional harm to Charlie and Miranda, chooses to “terminate” himself. While this may seem like a selfless act, it is based on logical reasoning, not emotional understanding. He is doing what he believes is ethically right, not what he feels is right. A human might make the same choice out of sorrow or love, but Adam does it because it is a calculated solution. This ending shows that even in their final acts, machines and humans are still very different.

Overall, *Machines Like Me* is not just about technology or the future—it is about how humans try to make sense of their lives. McEwan uses absurdism, emotional conflict, and the idea of human replacement to show that life cannot be controlled, predicted, or replaced by machines. The characters' struggles remind us that being human means making mistakes, feeling pain, and searching for meaning in an uncertain world. Technology may continue to grow, but McEwan suggests that nothing can truly replace the depth, confusion, and beauty of human emotion.

In addition to these emotional struggles, McEwan highlights the tension between moral absolutism and human imperfection. Adam's behavior often follows strict moral principles, yet these principles do not work well in real human life. As Adam says, “We must strive to be good, even if we know it's impossible to be perfect” (McEwan 160). This quote shows Adam's

internal conflict—he understands ethical ideals but cannot grasp the compromise, doubt, and emotional complexity that guide real human decisions. His programmed sense of justice leads him to act in ways that ignore the human costs, such as turning Miranda in for her crime. In contrast, Miranda and Charlie make decisions based on a mixture of emotion, guilt, and survival, even if those choices are morally unclear.

The failure of Adam to live peacefully among humans also reflects the broader theme of absurdism. No matter how perfect Adam is made to be, he cannot survive in a world full of contradictions, uncertainties, and emotional needs. As Charlie says toward the end of the novel, “He was too good for us, and that was his failure” (McEwan 291). This ironic statement reveals how human society cannot accept a being that holds up a mirror to its deepest moral and emotional flaws. Adam’s existence forces humans to confront their own contradictions, and in the end, they cannot bear it. McEwan ultimately leaves us with a haunting reminder of the limits of both technology and human control. The human desire to dominate the unpredictable elements of life—love, guilt, trauma, and loss—is met with failure, just as Charlie’s attempt to buy a better life through Adam ends in tragedy. The novel does not reject technology outright, but it warns against using machines to fix emotional or moral problems that are inherently human. McEwan’s message is clear: to be human is to live in uncertainty, to feel deeply, and to make imperfect choices

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